



# TAKING THE ANXIETY OUT OF 360° FEEDBACK



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In recent years there has been renewed interest in the value of 360° feedback.

**Benefits.** As a learning and development tool, it has many benefits:

- Allows learners to get high quality feedback about their skills and performance
- Allows learners to test out their self assessments against those of others
- Is useful in identifying individual and group development needs
- Is useful as a post development evaluation tool.

**Anxiety.** Unfortunately, for most people, the idea of getting structured feedback (either through 360° feedback, or even in a Performance Appraisal discussion) is anxiety provoking. Their concerns centre on the following issues:

- What is going to be said of me?
- Am I going to be criticised?
- How is this information going to be used?
- Who will see it?
- Is this a threat?

**Resistance.** When people feel anxious or fearful, these feelings are manifested in a number of predictable ways, especially in resistance. The following types of resistance are common:

- Resistance to participate in the process
- Resistance to accept the results
- Resistance to do anything useful with the results
- General bad mouthing of the process to others

**Removing Anxiety.** How can 360° feedback be constructed and delivered, so it delivers the benefits while the fear is kept to a minimum? How can we take the anxiety out of the process?

Psychologists, Eve Ash and Peter Quarry (of Ash.Quarry Productions), have designed a 360° feedback system that is hitting the mark in

countries around the world. Their range of paper and internet based **Skill Indicators**:

- Minimize fear and anxiety
- Minimize time and effort to complete the process
- Minimize cost
- Maximize learner and organisational benefits.

## DESIGN TO MINIMIZE ANXIETY

How do the Ash.Quarry Skill Indicators work and why does their design minimize fear and anxiety? The answer lies in the three core design principles followed:

1. Keep It Short & Simple ('KISS')
2. Keep the process RELEVANT
3. Hand back CONTROL to the learner

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 1: KEEP IT SHORT & SIMPLE ('KISS')

Many, if not most, 360° feedback systems are cumbersome and time consuming. Learners usually have to answer a large number of questions. The analysis and interpretations are so complex that, often, the selling organization does this part of the process (which increases the cost). The eventual report, although detailed and scientific-looking, is difficult to digest (that is if the learner has the time to wade through endless pages of data analysis). One has to ask if the time, effort and cost are worth the result.

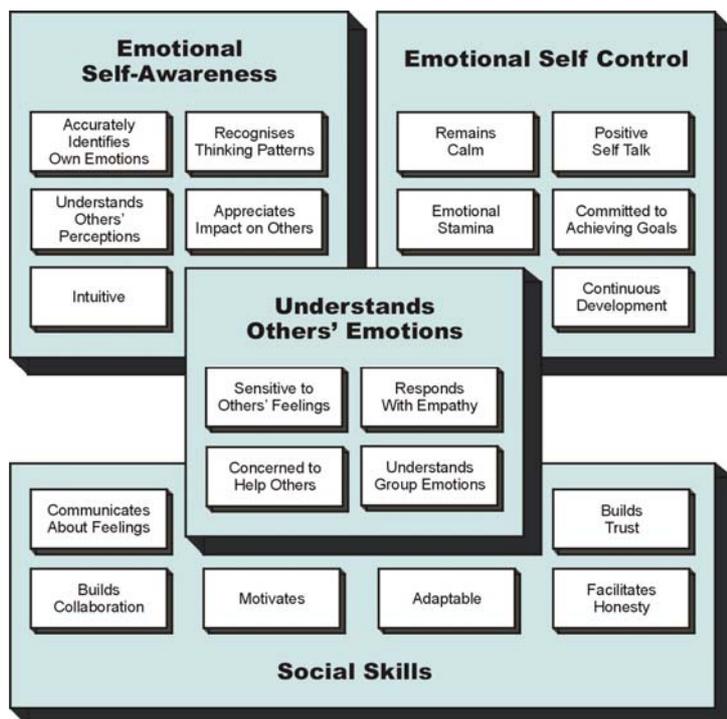
The Ash.Quarry approach is much simpler.

The learner answers 40 simple questions about how they rate their skills on a 5-point scale. This 'Self Assessment Questionnaire' takes about 15 minutes to complete.

The learner then asks for feedback from others (typically 3 people who know the learner's work). This step takes a few minutes only.

In the paper-based version, the collection and collation of the feedback data takes about another 15 minutes. And the results are presented in a one-page summary, which allows quick and easy prioritising of development needs. Any discrepancies between self-assessment scores and feedback from others can also be quickly identified. The internet version calculates all score automatically.

*Each Skill Indicator covers a set of 20 skills. The Emotional Competence Indicator for example covers the following:*



The emphasis is on making the process the means to an end...not an end in itself.

This leaves more time for the learner to focus on the ACTION that arises out of the 360° process. This action flows from the answers to these questions:

- What are my strengths?
- What are areas I need to work on?
- What are discrepancies between my self-assessment and the assessments of others that I need to explore more fully?

So, the key Adult Learning Principle of 'Immediate Application' has been followed in the design of the Ash.Quarry 360° feedback process!

Ash.Quarry had also kept the instructions as simple as possible, so that the level of literacy and numeracy skills required to use the Skill Indicators is as low as possible. This increases the

possible range of people who can use the process. And, at around \$20 per use, the cost is low!

## ASH.QUARRY SKILL INDICATORS GO GLOBAL

The original paper based Skill Indicators have been translated into numerous languages. The new internet version is available in English, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Swedish, Icelandic, Czech, Slovenian, Norwegian and Hungarian. This means a truly global process where a learner can complete their Self Assessment in, say, English, but ask for feedback from colleagues in any other language(s).

For information about the internet version go to [www.skillsindicator.com](http://www.skillsindicator.com)

## DESIGN PRINCIPLE 2: KEEP THE PROCESS RELEVANT

In the previous section, the Adult Learning principle of 'Immediate Application' was mentioned. Another Adult Learning Principle is 'Relevance'. Any learning experience has to be relevant, otherwise learners will switch off.

This is where so many other 360° feedback processes fall down. In many of them, the attributes or qualities that are assessed are often vague or ambiguous. So the results obtained are difficult to relate back to the learner's job. As a result, the relevance of the exercise is questionable.

The Ash.Quarry Skill Indicators focus on real life behaviours and skills that are needed in today's fast paced workplace.

Each separate Skill Indicator covers a different set of 20 skills. Currently, 25 Skill Indicators are available, covering these skill sets:

Assertiveness Skills	Mentoring Effectiveness
Call Skills	Negotiation Skills
Client Relations	Passion at Work
Communication Skills	Performance Management
Conflict Management	Presentation Effectiveness
Consulting Effectiveness	Professional Performance
Emotional Competence	Sales Performance
Interviewing Skills	Service Skills
Listening Skills	Stress Management
Management Skills	Team Skills
Managing Change	Time Management
Managing Projects	Work Effectiveness
Meeting Facilitation	

Learners can complete a Skill Indicator depending on their particular job, or their specific area of enquiry.

### DIFFERENT USES OF ASH.QUARRY SKILL INDICATORS

- Prior to a leadership or management development program, each participant completes the Management Skills Indicator to identify their individual strengths and weaknesses, in order to establish their personal learning goals. The trainer/facilitator can collect summary data from each participant to identify the group's needs and plan and prioritise the program's content.
- A training program designer builds a Skill Indicator into a new program as a pre- and post-test way of evaluating the behavioural outcomes
- A team leader or manager offers a team member a Skill Indicator (eg: Time Management Indicator, Listening Skills Indicator), as part of a Personal Development Plan.
- At a Performance Appraisal discussion, an employee receives feedback about a particular area of his/her job that needs developing (eg: sales, presentation, time management, conflict resolution, etc). The employee, though, is unclear about the problem and/or unsure if the feedback is accurate. The manager and employee agree that the employee will complete a Skill Indicator (eg: Sales Effectiveness Indicator, Presentation Effectiveness Indicator). This will give the employee an opportunity to get more specific and useful information.
- A mentor suggests that a protégée completes a Skill Indicator (eg: Work Effectiveness Indicator, Emotional Competence Indicator, etc) to assist in getting a more accurate understanding of strengths and weaknesses.
- An employee may be interested in his/her own development and request that they complete a Skill Indicator (eg: Team Skills Indicator, Service Skills Indicator) as part of a self directed learning effort.

### DESIGN PRINCIPLE 3: HAND BACK CONTROL TO THE LEARNER

Both common sense, and psychological theory and practice, tell us how to minimize anxiety. That is to give as much control back to the learner as possible.

Most 360° feedback processes take control away from the learner, but the Ash.Quarry approach has been specifically designed to maximize learner control.

There are various ways in which the Skill Indicators hand back control to the learner:

1. **The learner can choose which Skill Indicator to complete.** The learner has (at the time of writing) 22 Skill Indicators to choose from. In some situations, this choice may not be there (such as a needs analysis prior to a specific development program). But in other situations, the learner can choose from the menu of possible skill sets and choose which Skill Indicator most matches his/her needs or interests.
2. **The learner takes control of his or her own results.** A major concern for 360° feedback users is anxiety about who will see the results and how they will be used. Once again, the best way to minimize anxiety is by handing control back to the learner. Let them retain control of the results of their 360° feedback experience! The Ash.Quarry approach does exactly that! Learners 'own' their data and can choose to share or not share it. If a manager, team leader or HRD specialist wants to pool the data of a group, there is a summary of strengths and weaknesses that can be given. But the individual self-assessments and the feedback from others can remain where it belongs...with the learner. The key issue is respect for the ownership of a learner's information!
3. **The learner can choose who gives feedback.** The issue of the selection of feedback givers is an area of controversy in 360° feedback. Many argue that the feedback givers should be chosen by some other person (eg: the learner's manager) and that their identity should remain hidden from the learner (ie: anonymous feedback). This supposedly increases the chance that the feedback will be honest, as there is no fear of

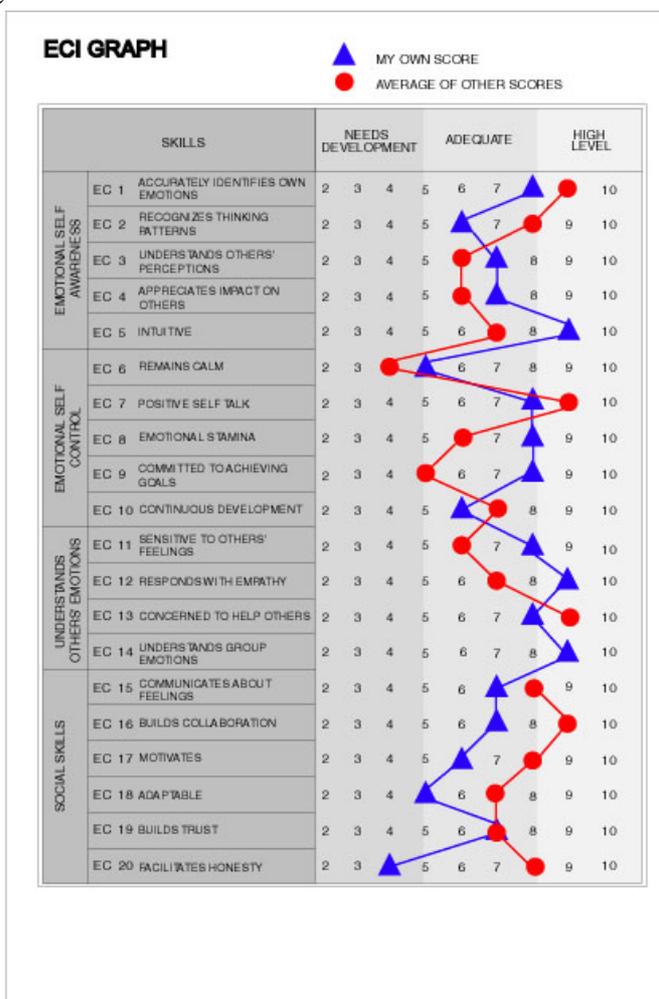
retribution. Ash.Quarry believes the opposite ...that the learner should choose the feedback givers, for the following reasons:

- **Giving control to the learner is a key Adult Learning Principle** and will minimize learner anxiety.
- **Learner choice of feedback giver mirrors the real world**, where, if I want feedback, I choose someone and ask them for it. I may need training in how to receive feedback (see the award winning Ash.Quarry series, Feedback Solutions which covers all the skills needed to both give and receive feedback). But, repeated use of the Skill Indicators helps to create a 'Feedback Culture', where asking for, and getting feedback, is a normal part of the way things are done. Conversely, requiring feedback to be anonymous reinforces a culture of secrecy and discomfort with feedback.
- One of the extraordinary benefits of 360° feedback is that **discrepancies between self-assessment and the assessments of others can be identified**. In other words, I may believe I have high level of a particular skill...while others may believe that skill needs developing. Or the other way around! When this happens, it is desirable that the learner seeks further information, by going to the feedback giver and asking questions to clarify the situation. If the feedback givers are anonymous, the learner cannot access them for this information, so that this avenue for development is limited.

But, where anonymity is desired, the Ash.Quarry Skill Indicators can accommodate this requirement.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK THE FEEDBACK GIVER(S) WHEN ASSESSMENT DISCREPANCIES OCCUR

- *I scored low in this skill area. Can you give me some examples of when I haven't done that well?*
- *Give me some specific examples of when I used these skills well/poorly.*
- *Why do you think I need to develop this skill further?*



### WORKING WITH 360° FEEDBACK

In conclusion, 360° feedback allows wonderful opportunities for increasing insight and awareness, improving communication, identifying learning and development needs, prioritising learning activities, motivating, building confidence and program evaluation.

In choosing a 360° feedback system, consider the question of RoI. Does the system you choose deliver practical, flexible and meaningful results, in a cost and time effective manner? And does it do this while maximising learner interest and relevance, while minimising anxiety, fear and resistance?

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