

Case Study - Bucks New University

Harnessing the power of 360 degree feedback in higher education

Higher education is facing tough times. The ever-changing political and economic environment, cuts to funding, rising tuition fees, the expansion of market forces and greater international competition are all putting pressure on academic institutions.

Facing the future by investing in employees

Bucks New University recognises that central to its success in responding to these challenges, is a strong team of managers and leaders. In striving to foster a high-performance culture based on its values of clarity, openness, respect and delivery on commitments (CORD), the University decided to pilot a 360 degree feedback project and selected Talent for Growth as its external partner.

Why 360 degree feedback?

Annette Gimbert, People Engagement Director at Bucks New University, believed that a 360 degree feedback programme would achieve the following objectives:

- begin building a culture of feedback in an environment which has been traditionally very introspective and individualistic;
- raise the quality of relationships within the University (within, and across, faculties);
- provide senior managers with a tool to understand their own strengths and weaknesses;
- make a clear statement about the emphasis on developing leadership within the University;
- create a level of engagement that would enable a broader roll out of the programme across the management population.

Selecting the right partner

Annette Gimbert said: **“We decided to work with Talent for Growth because they offered the best report. I liked its simplicity in getting the key messages across. There are lots of 360 degree reports that are much too complicated and require a great deal of analysis to understand them.”**

The 360 degree feedback project

Annette and Caroline Lark, Managing Director of Talent for Growth, designed a pilot project that aimed to meet the stated objectives. The project consisted of introductory workshops, a bespoke questionnaire based on the University’s competency framework, followed by one-to-one feedback sessions.

Twenty volunteers signed up from across the University to be participants. These included the Vice-Chancellor, faculty heads and department managers. The high number of volunteers demonstrated receptiveness to the process from the outset and at the highest management level.

- **The introductory workshops**
Participants attended a 90 minute workshop to introduce them to the value of 360 degree feedback, guide them through the questionnaire and the process, and enable them to get the best from both. Talent for Growth also provided detailed guidelines, including how to give effective feedback and FAQs to respondents or those who would be providing feedback.
- **The questionnaire**
Talent for Growth created a bespoke questionnaire designed to evaluate behaviours based on the University’s competency framework and the CORD Values. Caroline Lark reflects: “Respondents took it very seriously and put a lot of thought and detail into the free format questions. They spent a significant amount of time completing them, which evidences the generally self-critical and academic nature of those involved as well as their continued buy-in to the process.
This resulted in very high quality feedback that people understood and appreciated. Annette Gimbert says: **“The feedback tool itself was easy to use and administer. We had very few queries and when the feedback reports were generated they were easy to read and understand.”**

Goals

Maximise the potential of higher education leadership using 360 degree feedback

Approach

Designed a pilot 360 degree feedback project including:

- introductory workshops
- bespoke questionnaire based on the University’s competency framework
- one-to-one feedback sessions
- management report identifying competencies and areas for improvement

Results

- 83% of participants rated their experience of 360 degree feedback as either “extremely valuable” or “very valuable”
- 92% of participants confirmed that they had taken actions on identified development areas
- 100% of managers said that their direct reports had made positive changes and described tangible benefits arising from these changes
- 100% of managers rated the 360 degree feedback programme as “extremely effective” or “very effective”
- 360 degree feedback tool embedded into leadership and development offering
- process being rolled out to other managers

About Bucks New University

Since it was founded in 1893 as a School of Science and Art, Bucks New University has aspired to be a leading professional and creative influence, shaping higher education for the benefit of people and employers. The University now offers high-quality education to around 9,000 students studying a range of courses linked to the creative and cultural industries, the management and information management sectors, and the public sector.

Within a caring and supportive environment, and with the student experience at the heart of all their plans, staff work with the very best partners to influence, inspire and nurture talent for professional and creative careers.

- **One-to-one feedback meetings**

Feedback sessions were arranged between Caroline and each participant to help them understand their report and discuss any issues. As Caroline points out: "When done well, 360 degree feedback can be an eye-opening and powerful experience. Some participants were very moved to read how much their colleagues valued them. However, there was also plenty of well-crafted, respectful but constructive feedback about areas for improvement. This was recognised as extremely valuable, and people responded well to the tougher feedback."

One participant commented: **"I found the session tiring but highly valuable - you were definitely able to help me see things that I hadn't seen or realised myself previously. I will be starting to address some of the things we discussed this week in fact."**

Annette Gimbert adds: **"Caroline received excellent feedback from my colleagues on her approach to the sessions; colleagues felt supported and guided through the process, when for many, this was their introduction to 360 degree feedback."**

- **Follow up**

After their one-to-one session, each participant was given a summary of their discussion and some 'thinking points', centred on what had made the biggest impression on them about themselves. It also included suggestions for what should be their priorities and next steps. Most participants wanted to take their report to their manager - which was by no means mandatory - in order to move forward and create development plans. Some participants even shared their reports with colleagues. As Caroline says: "Participants' willingness to share their personal reports was remarkable and truly demonstrates the value they invested in this project."

- **Evaluation of results**

Twelve months later, two surveys were initiated: one to understand the impact and value gained from the 360 degree pilot among participants, the second to get their line managers' perspectives on whether the process produced tangible benefits. The results of both would also inform future 360 degree roll-outs.

Of the participants, 83% rated their experience of 360 degree feedback as either "extremely valuable" or "very valuable" and 92% confirmed that they had taken actions on identified development areas. 100% rated themselves either "very successful" or "quite successful" in improving in identified development areas. In a question asking simply for comments about the 360 degree feedback process, 70% of participants specifically suggested extending the programme to other leaders and managers.

Of the managers, 100% said that their direct reports had made positive changes, and described tangible benefits arising from these changes. All of the managers also rated the 360 degree feedback programme as "extremely effective" or "very effective".

The power of 360 degree feedback

One participant describes the effect the 360 degree feedback process can have, saying: **"At a subsequent meeting, I was asked to tell the other 50 managers about how I had improved something. With my new confidence-boosted hat on, I managed it with ease and did not allow myself any negative thoughts, which was all down to the session I had had with you."**

As well as senior managers receiving clarity on their own performance, Talent for Growth provided a management report using anonymised, aggregate data. This provided very useful information, of where competences and behaviours were seen to be strengths, and where there were gaps and areas for development within a large element of the senior / middle management team. Furthermore, 50% of the initial participants volunteered as mentors to new participants when the project is rolled out across the whole of University.

As Caroline says: "Higher education institutions can benefit from creating a stronger feedback culture. 360 degree feedback is a collaborative process which can help break down isolation from faculty to faculty and enable cross department and function feedback. 360 degree feedback will also assist with managing and monitoring performance and can also accelerate leadership capability."

"Talent for Growth helped me implement a very successful pilot for 360 degree feedback for manager and leadership development across the University. This was a very quick and constructive process. On the success of the pilot, we have embedded the tool into our leadership and development offering and we have started to extend the process to other managers with a good take-up. I am very happy with the service offered by Talent for Growth and would recommend this approach to others."

Annette Gimbert, People Engagement Director, Bucks New University



To hear Annette Gimbert talk about the 360 project, visit talentforgrowth.co.uk/aboutus/testimonials/

About TalentBuilder 360

Talent for Growth's online 360 degree feedback tool:

- is easy to use and intuitive
- enables participants to track progress of their respondents and chase if necessary
- ensures responses and data are kept confidential and can only be accessed by Talent for Growth
- provides reports containing crucial, in-depth performance data and clarity about where to focus development efforts and resources
- provides communication materials, guidelines and other resources to help maximise the value gained from the process

"I think it is a very valuable exercise and would recommend that all managers at all levels participate in this."

Participant comment

"It has enabled me to achieve the desired change and reflection in my direct report more rapidly because of the uniformity of the feedback and because it was a 360 degree review."

Manager comment

About Talent for Growth

Talent for Growth is a global, flexible and innovative consultancy focused on developing leaders and teams to optimise business performance. We are development experts, but we are also pragmatic, business driven individuals – everything we do ties back to supporting the strategy of the organisation.

We offer:

- depth and breadth of knowledge and expertise in leadership development and team effectiveness
- a focus on collaboration and sustainable solutions
- international experience
- absolute adherence to our commitments

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