

The Handbook of Multisource Feedback

The Comprehensive Resource for Designing and Implementing MSF Processes

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Preface

Large-scale change occurs when a lot of people change just a little.

Unknown

A reference volume of this sort represents both a major undertaking and a significant contribution to the practice and research of feedback. No project of any worth, however, can be successfully completed without a vision of some sort. Our vision for a "handbook" of multisource feedback (MSF) originated from a number of observations of the field:

- Rapid proliferation of MSF processes is occurring amid a relative void of systematic research and discussion (Church and Bracken, 1997; Waldman, Atwater, and Antonioni, 1998).

- MSF processes are rarely evaluated from a systems perspective regarding success factors (Timmreck and Bracken, 1997).

- Other than two special journal issues (Church and Bracken, 1997; and Tornow, 1993) that focused primarily on research-related results, the literature is lacking a comprehensive review from multiple contributors engaging in feedback interventions and research that adequately captures the breadth of MSF practices, tools, and methods. The closest attempt to date has been the Tornow and London book (1998), which was authored exclusively by individuals associated with the Center for Creative Leadership—a valid but admittedly somewhat narrow perspective (Bracken, 1999).

For *The Handbook of Multisource Feedback*, we are very pleased to say that we have recruited and gained the support of a wide ranging group of contributors from diverse backgrounds, including academics, practitioners, applied researchers, consultants, and some with backgrounds so broad as to defy classification. A primary criterion in seeking out contributors for this project was the extent to which each has made a substantive contribution to the MSF field through research, publication, or implementation. We believe strongly in the results of our efforts, and the list of contributors here clearly includes the thought leaders in the current and future practice of MSF.

Purpose

Despite its length and comprehensiveness, we must recognize that this handbook has its limitations in scope. We cannot address all approaches and issues found in processes that attempt to provide feedback to individuals from multiple feedback providers. In fact, we can envision an almost infinite number of permutations of methods by which that can be accomplished. Having said this, our biases are toward multiple source feedback systems

applied across large segments of organizations, horizontally (for example, with supervisors), vertically (across a division or department), or some combination of each, including full-scale company-wide implementations.

With this perspective in mind, our intent here is to focus on the issues surrounding designing and implementing MSF processes and, in turn, to minimize our coverage of potentially important determinants of successful feedback (however defined) determined by less systemic factors such as individual differences. We acknowledge and welcome, however, the large volume of research addressing characteristics of the rater and ratee in the feedback dyad that affect the quality and acceptance of feedback, such as personality, cultural background, race, gender, and so on. For good or bad, we view these factors as givens in large-scale MSF systems—that is, variables that we can and should acknowledge but that cannot be manipulated, changed, or even addressed in the sense of independent variables. In more individualized feedback settings (such as a one-on-one coaching or counseling situation), the implementer would probably find individual differences very useful, such as assessing the self-esteem of the recipient as an indicator of receptiveness to feedback. Such an approach is much less feasible when hundreds or thousands of feedback recipients are involved.

The purpose of this handbook is to address those variables or factors that we can manipulate (make informed decisions about) in designing and implementing large-scale MSF processes. Our objective, then, is to create a knowledge base for determining the consequences of these decisions, and hopefully identify best practices that increase the probability of success.

Given this broader "systems" perspective for MSF, for the purposes of the Handbook we have adopted as a definition of success "focused, sustained behavior change and/or skill improvement in a sufficient number of individuals so as to lead to increased organization effectiveness" (Bracken and Timmreck, 1999; Bracken, Timmreck, Fleenor and Summers, forthcoming). This definition is important because it helps to define the scope and purpose of the contents of this handbook by

- Implying that "focused" change is consistent with organizationally (as opposed to individually) defined objectives
- Assuming that the process is not an "event" but requires ongoing sustainability and integration to be effective (Tornow and London, 1998)
- Allowing for skill development in areas not necessarily measured by the instrument itself
- Requiring that feedback and behavior change occur within an organizational setting

Although we have not imposed any particular overriding philosophy on how such success is best accomplished (say, through using MSF for developmental rather than decision-making purposes), we have encouraged each of our contributors to provide a balanced treatment of his or her topic areas. The result, we feel, offers enough information that the reader can make his or her own conclusions about how best to use MSF tools and techniques.

Audience

Based on this perspective, it should be apparent that our intended audience is primarily practitioners: those who are charged with making decisions regarding designing and implementing MSF processes in organizational settings. We hope to extend assistance in the difficult task of weighing the pros and cons of each decision that must be made in such a complex process.

Given this primary audience, it should come as no surprise, then, that several chapters in this handbook come from internal practitioners themselves, among them offerings from Sears (Chapter Twenty-Four), Kaiser Permanente (Chapter Twenty-Five), and Shell (Chapter Ten). These chapters give us insight into the inevitable trade-offs that are inherent in MSF design and implementation. The experiences of those who are actively involved with MSF applications in their own organizations are clearly invaluable, but all too often inaccessible for a variety of reasons. Although this situation has led to formation of such consortia as the Multisource Feedback Forum (Timmreck and Bracken, 1997), where some individuals are able to share their experiences with others, we feel very fortunate to be able to offer the perspectives of these practitioners to others in the field in the context of the Handbook.

This type of information and shared experience is in turn supplemented by researchers in the field who provide systematic treatments of various methodological and instrumentation aspects of MSF that should be generalizable across multiple settings with the foundation of science and rigor. With these contributions in mind, we see the applied research community as another important audience for the Handbook. We hope that it serves as both a vehicle for sharing state-of-the-art thinking and an impetus for continued evolution of the future of the field in terms of practice and applied research.

A third and no less important audience for this book comprises those consultants who are in a position to make recommendations to their clients regarding design and implementation of MSF processes, or consultants who themselves engage in designing and delivering such tools and techniques for the benefit of their client organizations. As with many of the other chapters, these external practitioners are also well represented among the contributors, both as primary authors and in partnership with others (for example, academics).

Finally, we also hope that organizational clients-including the feedback sponsors and champions across leadership, management, and staff positions-are also able to make use of the contents of the Handbook to select, evaluate, and facilitate their work with their internal and external practitioners to better evaluate the capabilities advertised and advice being offered.

In short, this is a handbook for everyone involved in designing and implementing MSF tools, systems, and processes. One audience for which this book is not intended is the feedback participants themselves-the raters and the ratees. Specifically, we do not see this volume as a resource for recipients of feedback to help them get the most out of the process. This handbook recommends, however, how those resources can be best obtained through other sources.

MSF Terminology

Many terms have been used over the relatively short history of feedback methodology to refer to MSF processes. Perhaps most common among these is 360-degree feedback. Although many people continue to use the term, relatively few are aware that it was actually trademarked by TEAMS International more than a decade ago. Other popular terms that have since emerged in the United States include multirater assessment,

multirater feedback, multisource assessment, full-circle feedback, upward feedback, and various trademarked derivatives of these phrases.

In the interest of consistency, we have chosen to use the term multisource feedback throughout this handbook and have asked our contributors to do the same. We prefer this term multisource feedback because we feel it most accurately captures the process we are describing—that is, obtaining feedback (in whatever format) from more than one source. We prefer not to use other terms that imply inclusion of all possible feedback sources in a circle (since this is often not the case), or those connoting an evaluative rather than descriptive component (such as assessment). For ease of reference, we have also standardized on a pair of additional terms: raters as the providers of feedback, and ratees as the recipients of feedback efforts.

Lessons from Other Measurement Processes

The contributors to this handbook typically are industrial organizational psychologists or those who have a related background by formal training or practice. This level of consistency is not by coincidence; in fact it reflects our strong bias that MSF, whether used for development or decision-making purposes, should be based on strong measurement principles. Moreover, without attention to measurement principles and concerns, such approaches are not "valid" in our opinion and are unlikely to result in success as defined above. Although the field of MSF—if it can even be called a field unto itself—is still struggling to accumulate enough research and experience to guide decision making in large-scale applications (Church and Bracken, 1997), the good news is that the applied organizational science community (including practitioners and researchers in industrial-organizational psychology, organization development, and organization behavior to name just a few of these areas) has a wealth of information in other areas that we can bring to bear on MSF processes.

As shown in Figure P.1, MSF can be viewed as having characteristics shared with three major areas of practice: assessment (for example, testing, assessment centers), performance management, and employee surveys. Each of these practice areas has considerable research and experience that can be applied to MSF, as shown in Table P.1.

Table P.1. Lessons Applied to MSF

Design and Implementation.

Assessment

How to establish validity

Standardization

Observer training

Rating scales

Legal issues (for example, assessing adverse impact)

Need for controlled assessment settings

Performance

Management

Aligning objectives

How to observe performance

How to document performance

Rating scales

Legal issues (for example, equal treatment, assessing adverse impact)

Standardization

Accountability

Employee Surveys

Item development

Collection and reporting of write-in comments

Large-scale data collection and reporting

Response scales

Report formats

Using data feedback for organizational change

Unfortunately, many MSF processes are saddled with some of the greatest challenges drawn from these three practice areas. This often results in an uncontrolled environment with a large number of feedback providers (of questionable skill and motivation) using instruments of marginal quality and spurious linkages to existing initiatives, under conditions of large-scale data collection that require 100 percent accuracy! We present this perspective on MSF as a reminder that it is not just "a test," or just "a survey," or just "feedback"; it is a complex combination of all these elements operating in a real-time environment in uncontrolled settings. We therefore expect that the reader will find the Handbook of most value over time after having read all or at least a cross section of the various chapters herein and having gotten a better understanding of how MSF works as a total system.

Customers of MSF

We have encouraged our contributors to make recommendations regarding MSF design and implementation, and in turn we encourage you, the reader, to make your decisions based on these recommendations, your experience, and your situation. Amid all of this, we also strongly suggest that you consciously and deliberately consider your customers in each decision. We acknowledge that any business process ultimately has to serve constituencies such as stockholders and customers. But we also believe that a successful

MSF process dutifully serves those purposes, and that success is best achieved through considering the impact and reactions of the raters, ratees, and management (and the organization as a whole as well). Bracken, Timmreck, Fleenor, and Summers (forthcoming) provide a systematic treatment of how each of these customers might differentially define success and the desirable characteristics of the process, and many of these characteristics are in direct conflict.

Let's take an example. One of the decisions in an MSF process is the length of the instrument, a decision that can be based on both science and philosophy. Part of the philosophy is a direct result of who we define as our primary customer. A short instrument explicitly identifies the rater (and secondarily the organization) as the primary customer by stating that we are willing to sacrifice feedback richness in the interest of keeping the raters "happy" by making the task easy. Short also potentially equates to less time and expense. On the other hand, if the participant (ratee) is our primary customer, we should be inclined to provide feedback that is clear, specific, and comprehensive, characteristics that usually translate into longer instruments. Moreover, if the customer in this case is the senior leadership of the organization, its interest in tracking culture change over time, differentiating among higher and lower performers, or diagnosing various group differences, likely requires that certain demographic or background level data also be collected. Though common enough in practice, including such additional information can raise anxiety and suspicion regarding confidentiality of the process among raters and ratees.

In sum, we are suggesting that although you should try not to ignore any single customer group or stakeholder in a decision, usually one set of customer needs does take precedence over another. As you make decisions based on what you read here, we suggest that you try to clearly and succinctly articulate to yourself the reason behind the MSF-related implementation and process decisions made, and the impact they have on each customer group, with the resulting effects on the success and sustainability of the total effort.

Handbook Themes

As the vision for this handbook took shape, we began with an outline of topics to cover and then identified leaders in the field to write the chapters. We were pleasantly surprised to find that, almost without exception, our authors were willing to take on our assigned topic. At the same time, we gave them considerable latitude when it came to crafting their contributions. Even though we did give each author some suggested topics to address and made suggestions during the editing phases, we purposely refrained from overtly imposing our views (and biases) on the content through editing or censoring; as a result, the Handbook does not have a cohesive point of view but instead presents a variety of often conflicting opinions for the reader to consider.

Given the freedom of the contributors, it is interesting to see what themes have emerged across the chapters. From our viewpoint, we suggest these are the most important themes emerging from the Handbook:

- MSF is a process, not an event. This is certainly not a new thought (Bracken and Timmreck, 1999; Church and Waclawski, 1998; Timmreck and Bracken, 1997; Tornow and London, 1998), but it is a theme taken from the abstract (Chapters One, Four, and Twenty-Two, and the Appendix) to very concrete examples regarding organizational realities (Chapters Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five), logistical challenges (Chapter Ten), user reactions (Chapter Fifteen), and organization development and change (Chapter Nineteen). Lurking within this theme is the notion of sustainability

(Chapters Twenty-Two, Twenty-Six, Twenty-Nine, and Thirty), one of the differentiators of a process versus an event.

- MSF is not a stand-alone process. This theme is related to the first one; an MSF process is far more likely to be sustained if it is viewed as a business priority and integrated with other systems. This is the central purpose of Chapter Twenty-Six, but it is also an important point in Chapters Four and Sixteen and all of Part Two.

- Behavior change is the primary goal. Perhaps stating this as a theme is stating the obvious, but we sense that this goal is lost in some applications of MSF. Again related to the belief that successful MSF processes are not events, some MSF processes make little or no provision for measuring behavior change. The need for behavior change is the central idea in our definition of success and further offered as the key to sustainability in Chapter Thirty. We also see behavior change addressed in terms of tools for creating and sustaining it (Chapters Fourteen and Twenty-Five) and then measuring it (Chapter Sixteen).

- MSF as a tool for decision making. Despite lingering resistance to using MSF in decision making (Bracken and others, 1997), many of our authors have expressed opinions as to when it is appropriate to use MSF for decisions and under what circumstances (Chapters Twenty, Twenty-One, and Twenty-Six, and the Appendix). This of course culminates in discussion of the "great debate" (Chapter Twenty-Three) and the increasingly accepted view that developmental and decision-making MSF processes can and probably should coexist.

- The importance of rater training. We highlight this activity as a theme because we see a substantial gap between the stated importance of rater training and its relatively rare implementation. As pointed out in the Appendix, we see rater training as an essential part of an MSF process used for decision making, closely followed by our opinion that those same guidelines improve development-only processes as well. The promise of rater training is central to Chapter Eight's treatment of improving rater performance. It is mentioned in many chapters as a desirable feature of successful MSF processes (Chapters One, Six, Seven, Eleven, Twenty, Twenty-One, Twenty-Three, Twenty-Nine, and Thirty) and arguably a legal requirement when used for decision making (Chapter Twenty-Eight).

- MSF is grounded in measurement. The types of MSF processes we have chosen to include in this handbook are based on data collected by questionnaires and are ultimately quantified, usually in terms of mean scores (Chapter Twelve). This quantification permits users to assess performance and skill gaps, track progress in behavior change, and make comparisons between individuals when decisions must be made. Such measurement places severe (and appropriate) pressure on the measurement process itself, a topic we asked Murphy, Cleveland, and Mohler to address directly in Chapter Nine. But measurement issues lurk in almost every phase of the process, from instrument design (Chapter Six) to rater performance (Chapter Eight), processing accuracy (Chapter Ten), the effect of technology (Chapter Eleven), and assessing impact (Chapter Sixteen). Ultimately, the measurement is no better than the quality of its use and the "decisions" made (even if only "developmental"), the subject of Part Two. Certainly there are legal issues that compel us to strive for sound measurement (Chapter Twenty-Eight), but more important, good measurement helps sustain the MSF process by generating data to support its value and creating fair and accepted decisions that users (including participants) will continue to support.

Organization of the Handbook

The Handbook of Multisource Feedback is organized into three major sections. Part One, "The Methodology of Multisource Feedback," addresses the nuts and bolts of MSF, that is, how to design and implement the data collection and reporting. The fact that this takes sixteen chapters should by itself speak to the complexity of this topic. Part One begins with a process model that leads the reader through sequential consideration of the various steps in a model MSF system. The rest of the first part of the book likewise uses an ordering that basically follows the same sequence. The context for Part One comes from a treatment of the history of MSF in Chapter Two. (Note also that David Campbell's Foreword contains a personalized view of the evolution of MSF.)

Part Two, "Applications of Multisource Feedback," reinforces our view that MSF is nothing more than a parlor game unless it is used to create behavior change. Five of the chapters in this part look at various "uses" of MSF, both developmental and decision making, drawn together with a concluding chapter on the "great debate" between the development-only and decision-making forces.

Systems forces operating to influence MSF processes are covered in Part Three (as foreshadowed in Chapter Four's acknowledgment of the importance of context). Part Three begins with perspectives offered by internal consultants in Sears and Kaiser Permanente, case studies addressing the realities that organizations impose on MSF practitioners. The remaining chapters in this section consider topics that permeate the entire MSF process and therefore should be considered at every step and with every decision made in design and implementation.

The Handbook closes with "Guidelines for Multisource Feedback When Used for Decision Making." These guidelines were a product of the Multisource Feedback Forum, a consortium of organizations having ongoing MSF processes, and were published in an earlier form in the *Industrial-Organizational Psychologist* (Bracken and Timmreck, 1999). Since that publication, we have continued to receive feedback and suggestions, and the version here reflects this input. The guidelines present best practices based on research and experience and are offered as a source for decision making during design and implementation. For those readers interested in additional rationale behind the guidelines, we refer you to Bracken, Timmreck, Fleenor, and Summers (forthcoming).

Although the Handbook contains a great deal of information, as the editors of this rather large volume (thirty chapters) we would like to point out that perhaps one should not feel compelled to read the entire contents straight through. Rather, we expect many readers to turn to the specific chapters or groups of chapters that are most relevant to their concerns or areas of interest. Along with the Index and the Table of Contents, information in many chapters takes the form of cross-references that should facilitate this process as well.

On the other hand, as editors we would also feel remiss in not encouraging our readers to at least peruse the entire volume. Moreover, given that one of the major themes of the Handbook is that MSF is indeed a process (a system), we expect that the reader will find it difficult to get a full perspective on a given topic without reading multiple chapters, and ideally the entire Handbook.

Summary

One of our frustrations has been in getting this book published before the information becomes obsolete; such is the nature of the publication process. With the help of our contributors and publisher, we hope to give our audience a resource that reflects the most

up-to-date and progressive practices and thinking in this field.

This handbook is offered in the spirit of problem solving. Every MSF process has problems to be solved, but we believe that every problem has solutions. Part of what we offer here is a set of ways to diagnose your situation and choose from the many alternatives available to you, hopefully learning from the experience and expertise of others and applying it so that it works for your organization. As we have noted in other forums (Church and Bracken, 1997; Timmreck and Bracken, 1997), not every MSF process succeeds, and in some cases deservedly so. This has sometimes created a kind of pessimism whereby organizations are unwilling to venture into large-scale MSF implementations because of this fear of failure. We believe that MSF can succeed under the right conditions, and this book is dedicated to the proposition that it is possible to create those conditions and realize major benefits to the participants and the organization as a whole.

We hope that you the reader will find the contents of this handbook to be informative, stimulating, and helpful in your present and future work with MSF. Good luck; we hope to hear from you with your future experiences as we continue to learn how to make this powerful process even better.

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