360-Degree Evaluations: A New Tool in Extension Programming

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Abstract: Evaluation is an important component of Extension programs. To elicit the most effective data, 360-degree evaluations have emerged, where multiple individuals are surveyed to evaluate the performance of volunteers and their programs. These tools should be used to assist the volunteer to perform closer to potential and to help Extension accomplish its goals and more effectively involve volunteers. Extension professionals can utilize 360-degree evaluations to evaluate camp staff, campers, agents, and volunteers. 4-H club leaders can be evaluated in the same manner. These evaluations allow agents to improve the program and to perfect volunteer position descriptions.

Introduction

Evaluation is an important component of Extension and volunteer programs. Historically, volunteers have only received feedback from their direct supervisor. This method of feedback does not always prove to be beneficial enough to catalyze real change within an organization. This is because the evaluation only takes into account one person's opinion, that of the direct supervisor, when evaluating the volunteer or staff member.

In order to elicit the most effective data possible, a trend towards 360-degree evaluations has emerged. A 360-degree evaluation is unique in that multiple individuals are queried to evaluate volunteers and the effectiveness of their programs. In Extension, these individuals involve self, peer, client, 4-H member, and agent evaluations of individual volunteer leaders. The data included has a greater potential for developmental value for the volunteer leader and agent than other evaluation methods.

According to a study of the 360-degree feedback process conducted at Ford Motor Company (Belec, 1998), this process enhances evaluation, because the data relative to an individual's performance is collected in a structured, constructive way, utilizing multiple sources of feedback from people who work closely with the individual. There must also be a clear purpose for the evaluation (Wimer & Nowak, 1998), and this purpose must be evident from the beginning.

Organizations that derive the most benefit from the 360-degree feedback process use it for individual development planning, coaching, and feedback. It is an effective method of evaluation used in Kentucky 4-H Camping programs. The 360-degree Kentucky 4-H Camp instruments (Fox, 2007) measure the performance of adult volunteers, teen volunteers, agents, and camp staff at 4-H camp. 4-H Club Leaders could be effectively evaluated utilizing the same format and stakeholder groups. When the results are gathered, agents are able to implement program improvements where needed and may accordingly revise and improve the volunteer position descriptions.

The purpose should be to help the volunteer develop and more fully realize his or her potential and to help the organization more effectively involve its volunteers (McCurley, 1995). There are many benefits that can be gained according to the needs of the organization. Some of these may include:

- The ability to enhance communication between volunteers and Extension.

- Volunteers gaining a clearer understanding of their roles.

- A stronger program.

- More effective use of leader and agent skills.

- Increased prestige of volunteer leaders.

- Improve retention of 4-H members and volunteer leaders.

The turnaround time from program to feedback is usually very short. Therefore, the evaluation instrument must be simple enough to require little orientation, so that individuals will easily understand how to complete it. Otherwise, if individuals complete the evaluations incorrectly, the data will be skewed, and be less meaningful to evaluation efforts (Leidheiser, 1993).

Implementing a 360-Degree Evaluation

The steps for implementing 360-degree evaluations (Nowack, Hartley, & Bradley, 1999) include:

Step 1: Defining what to Evaluate and Measure

- Define what you hope to accomplish with the program or activity

Step 2: Designing the Instrument Tool

- Develop a well-constructed instrument tool that targets a specific audience.

- Construct more than one evaluation instrument with specific questions on areas to measure.

- Generate questions written specifically to the evaluation level being assessed.

- Create appropriate response scales according to what you are trying to measure.

- Pilot test the instrument beforehand to get feedback on clarity of instructions, questions asked and administrative procedures.

- Review and finalize the tool to make sure that it is easy to read and complete.

Step 3: Gathering Data

- In order to have a high rate of participation, offer the instrument tool in several different formats, such as newsletters, e-mail, and Internet. The instrument should include some open-ended questions to ensure that it is brief, yet comprehensive.

Step 4: Analyzing Data and Summarizing Results

- Results can be evaluated using a simple excel spreadsheet or a commercial statistical software package. The evaluator should be able to generate basic data analyses needed to measure the results of the assessment.

The level of participation of the client (4-H member) in the evaluation is very important to the success of the 360-degree feedback process. Involving 4-H members requires them to provide feedback about the volunteer, which results in a team approach to program delivery and evaluation. It is also important to share the results of the feedback with volunteers. This should entail enough time to thoroughly go over the results and data interpretation, as well as time to make recommendations for future endeavors.

Conclusion

It is easy to derive that while 360-degree evaluations are helpful in program and volunteer development, they are also time-consuming and, therefore, expensive. Extension programs that use this method must be fully committed to the process, contributing the necessary time and resources needed to make it a worthwhile endeavor. Communication is a must when surveying, processing, and distributing information to individuals. Although good communication is key, some feedback can seem threatening (Wimer & Nowack, 1998).

To avoid potential misunderstandings, it is essential to communicate clearly about the processes as well as confidentiality issues that may arise. It is also essential to clearly define what the feedback is being used for-whether it has developmental or evaluative purposes. Feedback providers should also understand that there is no pressure for them to be anything other than honest and candid that no one should fear retribution. This way, data collected is more likely to be accurate rather than false information given to retaliate against or enhance an individual's performance.

There are commonalities in the success stories and in the failures. Make sure that potential problems are identified before beginning the process. Thoroughly investigate the needs of your organization, and go to great lengths to avoid potential problems. The successful implementation depends on whether it truly addresses important performance issues in the organization and whether potential mistakes can be avoided. When executed well, 360-degree evaluation feedback systems can lead to enormous positive change and enhance effectiveness at the individual, team and organizational levels (Wimer & Nowack, 1998).

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