Promoting Supervisory Development in Child Welfare: Utilization of 360-Degree Evaluation

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Promoting Supervisory Development in Child Welfare: Utilization of 360-Degree Evaluation

Crystal E. Collins-Camargo, Dana J. Sullivan and April L. Murphy

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of a professional development initiative designed to improve casework supervision in one state's child welfare agency. Frontline supervision has been identified as an area of practice that has received little attention in the child welfare field. Little is known about effective supervision, yet it has been identified as an important part of the solution to many other problems, such as the quality of case assessment and the transfer of assessment data into targeted interventions with children and families (Bogo & McKnight, 2006; Collins-Camargo, 2002; Tsui, 1997). Frontline supervision in public child welfare is the lynchpin connecting the state agency, worker practice, and positive outcomes for children and families. It is a key vehicle for desired practice enhancement and organizational improvement (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998).

Unfortunately, current supervision practice in public child welfare has become focused on administrative aspects of supervision, due largely to the complexities of reporting and accountability. This comes at a great cost—in staff turnover, worker competence and skill, and potentially adverse outcomes for the families and children being served. Common supervision practice can often be characterized as triage—workers come to the supervisor with a crisis or complex casework problem, and the supervisor provides the solution (Collins-Camargo, 2002, 2007). This approach, along with many aspects of the traditional child welfare system, promotes a less clinical and less effective approach to child protection casework—

one that focuses on case management and the documentation of activities, not treatment outcomes. Conceptually, the literature has described the key role of the supervisor in the transfer of learning, organizational improvement, and practice change (Rushton & Nathan, 1996; Diwan, Berger, & Ivy, 1996; Gregoire, Propp, & Poertner, 1998).

One state attempted to change this focus to one of professionalized supervision focused on the promotion of clinical practice in the field. This was seen as one aspect of a multi-faceted professional development program to improve supervisory skill in three ways: (1) providing the supervisors with peer support and consultation to promote improved clinical skills, (2) involving them in a 360-degree evaluation (Organizational Excellence Group, 2008) and individualized learning planning to assist in professional development, and (3) teaching them to use an employee selection process that is designed to enable supervisors to select professional staff with the right characteristics to be successful in the field (Collins-Camargo et al., 2009). This article focuses specifically on the evaluation of the 360 process.

Literature Review

The 360-degree evaluation is a technique utilized both nationally and globally to obtain a holistic view of employee performance. By soliciting feedback from direct reports, supervisors, and peers, its aim is to obtain as accurate a representation of employee performance (Organizational Excellence Group, 2008) as possible. However, it

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is unclear whether 360-degree feedback results in positive leadership development among employees. Additionally, literature on 360-degree feedback systems is primarily focused on corporations and financial institutions. There is relatively little literature that examines the effectiveness of 360-degree performance evaluations in the social services sector.

Social services, especially child protective services, are characterized by high stress and a high turnover rate. This is one reason Kelly and Sundet (2007) suggest that 360-degree evaluations may be useful and effective in child protective service agencies. They report that high quality supervision is essential in organizations where employee turnover is high. The 360-degree evaluations enable supervisors to hear employee concerns and to address these concerns appropriately via individual development plans. Furthermore, Atwater and Brett (2006a) report that employee turnover is impacted by leader behavior following feedback. Their research indicates that when leaders are viewed by employees as making positive changes following feedback employees are less likely to seek other employment (Atwater & Brett, 2006a).

While additional research is needed in regards to the effectiveness of 360-degree evaluation in social services, there is a plethora of literature on 360-degree evaluation in other sectors highlighting concerns and offering suggestions for effective implementation. Before examining these, a definitional concern must first be addressed. Foster and Law (2006) state that the use of the term 360-degree feedback is inconsistent. They argue that the terms "multi-rater" and "360-degree feedback" are used interchangeably when in fact they are not synonymous. Multi-rater feedback includes two or more sources of feedback, while a true 360-degree feedback system should include only four sources. These four sources are self, superior, peer, and subordinates or those individuals reporting directly to the person being assessed. They argue that some customers should not be included in 360-degree feedback although they might be candidates for multi-rater feedback. Therefore, Foster and Law encourage researchers and users of 360-degree feedback to be consistent

and accurate in their use of the term (Foster & Law, 2006).

A major debate surrounding the use of 360-degree evaluation is whether to use results solely as a development tool or as part of the performance appraisal system as a decision tool. Results overwhelmingly suggest that using 360-degree evaluation solely as a development tool provides the best and most accurate results (Carson, 2006; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Ghorpade, 2000; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2003; Antonioni & Park, 2001). Additionally, once a 360-degree evaluation program is implemented as purely a developmental tool, it compromises trust and effectiveness if it is later used as part of decision making processes (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Furthermore, if one does wish to later use the evaluation as part of the appraisal and decision making process, Ghorpade (2000) recommends that it can only be effective if it is done gradually and only if employees perceive the process to be fair. Legality concerns must also be considered when deciding to use 360-degree evaluation as a decision-making tool due to some results that show ratings are biased as a result of likability factors (Antonioni & Park, 2001). Therefore, if the process has not been shown to be valid, there could be legal ramifications if the termination of an employee is based on the results of a 360-degree evaluation (Gillespie & Parry, 2006).

Even when 360-degree assessment is used solely for developmental purposes, the results regarding whether individuals improve their performance are ambiguous (Atwater & Brett, 2005). Feedback does not consistently result in favorable outcomes at follow-up (Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993). Atwater and Brett (2006a) report only 65% of the 145 leaders in their study improved over one year. DeNisi and Kluger (2000) suggest that 360-degree feedback can actually decrease performance over time. Therefore, the challenge becomes determining the most effective strategy in implementing 360-degree evaluation.

While self ratings are useful in determining "blind spots" and "hidden strengths," they are generally the least accurate form of feedback (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2003). However, several

factors can be determined by self ratings. Eichinger and Lombardo (2003) report that the greater the disparity between self and other ratings, the more likely it is that the employee would be terminated within two years. Additionally, those that were more likely to be promoted within two years were those who tended to underestimate their performance (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2003). Thus, while self ratings can provide an organization with useful information, numerous studies suggest that boss ratings are the most accurate (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2003; Carson, 2006).

Another factor influencing 360-degree feedback effectiveness is the way in which feedback is given. Eichinger and Lombardo (2003) suggest that confidential feedback is the best way to guarantee more accurate results. There is also a differential between reactions depending on whether the feedback is given in text or numeric format. Atwater and Brett (2005) suggest that leaders who receive feedback in a text format tend to respond more negatively than those who receive feedback in numeric format, which ultimately impacts leader motivation to change. Atwater and Brett (2006b) report that those who react negatively to feedback tend to perform worse at follow-up, while those who react positively to feedback tend to improve. Additionally, those that receive negative feedback are less likely to improve at follow-up (Atwater & Brett, 2006b). In order to counter negative reactions to negative feedback, Brett and Atwater (2001) suggest one-on-one sessions with the ratee following feedback. Organizational support is an important factor in improving development over time. Those that receive more support following negative ratings put forth more effort into improving development (Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993). However, regardless of the nature of the feedback, Becton and Schraeder (2004) suggest that leaders are more likely to respond positively when results are seen as credible.

Literature outside the human services suggests the keys to successful implementation of a 360-degree evaluation system are planning and follow-up (Carson, 2006; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). If the implementation of a feedback system is not carefully planned, results could actually result in decreased performance of workers (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Some studies suggest that coaches be used to help leaders develop and implement goals to improve their performance over time (Carson, 2006). However, coaches are only effective when the 360-degree evaluation system is used consistently (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Additionally, raters should be trained in the areas for which they are being asked to rate leaders to ensure accurate and well-informed responses (Ghorpade, 2000). Furthermore, evaluation tools are also more accurate if "do not know" or "cannot rate" responses are an option. Without these options, raters are often forced to rate leaders on areas that they do not regularly observe (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004). Cultural considerations are also important. When measuring leadership constructs, results indicate that individuals from different cultural backgrounds have different definitions of constructs measured using 360-degree evaluations (Gillespie, 2005).

This literature on the use and effectiveness of 360-degree evaluation from outside the human services area provides the broader field with findings that have not yet been determined to be relevant in the social services. Given the growing evidence base regarding the role that frontline supervisors play in an array of desirable outcomes in the social services, evaluating implementation of such a professional development strategy within a public child welfare setting has the potential to contribute to the literature in an important way. In fact, this may be particularly relevant in child welfare where the stakes related to agency performance in their work with children and families are very high.

Methodology
The 360-Degree Evaluation Project

Given the relative paucity in the human services literature and the fact that the state's 360-degree evaluation project was in the first year of implementation, a primarily formative approach was used in the study. For the first year of the project, the 360-degree evaluation process was implemented across half of the state with plans to implement in the remaining regions the following

year pending results of the evaluation. Because use in a previous supervisory training pilot project had been successful (Kelly & Sundet, 2007), the state used a 360-degree evaluation process developed by the Organizational Excellence Group (2008).

In this process, supervisors and middle managers were evaluated by direct reports, peers, managers, and themselves. Those conducting the evaluation received a standardized assessment packet explaining the process along with an access code enabling them to complete a standardized assessment online that was designed to yield individual strengths and areas which could benefit from improvement across five supervisory roles: communicator, leader, manager, facilitator, and professional. The individual assessments were analyzed together by the Organizational Excellence Group, and participants were provided with a detailed report during an individual consultation with Professional Development Consultants, referred to as a "debriefer."

The debriefers were consultants from outside the child welfare agency who were trained to assist the supervisors in processing the information they received and to synthesize it into positive action. Based on analysis of these data, the supervisor was encouraged to formulate two-year Employee Development Plans, after which another round of evaluation was to be conducted to gauge progress, guide future professional development, and improve overall individual and organizational performance. During the year that was the subject of this study, 151 supervisors and middle managers received 360-degree evaluations and subsequent debriefings. The evaluation was designed to assess the implementation of the project as well as staff perceptions of its effectiveness in promoting professional development, positive practice change, and improved agency services. A mixed-methods design was selected incorporating both an electronic survey and focus groups consisting of supervisors and middle managers who had participated in the project.

Surveys. In spring 2009, an electronic survey invitation was sent to all 148 supervisors, circuit managers, program managers, and executive team members in three regions of one Midwestern state who had received a 360-degree evaluation. A follow-up reminder was sent two weeks after the initial email. Three emails were returned as "undeliverable," while 100 completed the survey, for a response rate of 69%.

In addition to demographic characteristics of respondents, several questions were asked related to the extent staff felt that they had received the information necessary to participate effectively in the 360-degree process, the extent that confidentiality was assured during the process, and the usefulness of the results. They assessed the skills and appropriateness of the individuals who conducted their debriefings, the linkage of the process to their performance evaluation system, and the extent to which they believed the process had a positive impact on their supervisory practice, their relationship to staff, their leadership, client outcomes, worker practice, and their own professional advancement. Participants rated each area on a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much.

Focus groups. A series of focus groups were also conducted to identify the effectiveness of the 360-degree evaluations and debriefings in each of the three intervention regions using a convenience sample of the original project participants. Participants were separated by role into three separate focus groups -- supervisors, circuit managers/ program managers, and executive staff. Regional directors were asked to invite up to 30 supervisors to participate in each region to be split into 2 groups of no more than 15 individuals per focus group. However, only in one region did enough supervisors attend to warrant two groups. In Region 3, executive staff were unable to participate in a focus group. Therefore, a total of 9 focus groups were conducted, each lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours in which 88 individuals participated. The group meetings were digitally recorded and transcribed. Notes were taken on flipcharts to supplement the audio recordings.

Focus group participants were asked for their perceptions regarding the experience, both positive and negative, as well as how the process had impacted their supervision and case outcomes,

their suggestions for changes in how the program is implemented, and their overall assessment of its effectiveness. Constant comparative analysis was conducted using the transcriptions to identify key themes, illustrative quotations, and unique responses from the focus groups. Following the identification of key themes across the groups, differences between the groups were examined.

Results
Demographics
Surveys. Data were collected in three different regions of the state. The majority of the participants indicated they were front-line supervisors (61%), 29% were middle managers, and 10% were from the administrative team. The educational background of the sample was as follows: 48% had a bachelor's degree in a field other than social work; 12% had a bachelor's degree in social work; 12% had a master's degree in a field other than social work; and 28% had a master's degree in social work. The majority of the sample (97%, $n = 97$) were Caucasian. Ninety percent were female.

Focus groups. Across groups, 64% were frontline supervisors, 28% middle managers, and 8% were administrative staff, including positions such as regional directors. Further demographic data were not collected from participating individuals.

360-Degree Process
A portion of the survey focused on the implementation process that had been deemed important by the state in terms of preparation for the process, perceptions of confidentiality, and usefulness of the report received. When rating the extent to which the participants felt they and their staff received the necessary information to understand and participate in the 360-degree process, 49% ($n = 49$) indicated "very much," while 40% ($n = 40$) indicated "some," with only 4% ($n = 4$) saying "not very." When rating the extent that the participants believed their staff felt confidentiality was assured, 34% ($n = 34$) said "very much," 48% ($n = 48$) indicated "some," and 12% ($n = 12$) "not very." Similarly, when rating if

they themselves believed their confidentiality was assured during the process, 35% ($n = 35$) said "very much," almost half (49%, $n = 49$) said "some," and 9% ($n = 9$) indicated they thought confidentiality was not assured. Almost half of the sample (43%, $n = 43$) said that the report was very useful in providing a comprehensive assessment of their strengths.

360 Consultants
Participants were asked to indicate the consultant with whom they had worked, and the results indicated that there were staff who had worked with each of those who responded to the survey. A series of questions asked the participants to rate the consultants who conducted the debriefing of the 360-evaluation process. Virtually all participants indicated the debriefers were knowledgeable of the process and that in interpreting the results the debriefers were respectful, sensitive to their feelings, and professional. The majority indicated the debriefer was active in helping to work out an individual development plan.

360 Linked to Performance Evaluation
The 360-degree evaluation report was confidential and not formally tied to the performance evaluation process; however, participants were encouraged to share the report with their supervisor if they deemed it appropriate to do so, and to use the information they received when creating their annual individual development plan, which is a part of the performance appraisal process. When asked if the 360-evaluation and the state's performance evaluation system were linked, 26% indicated they were "very much" linked, 40% said only "some" linked, 23% indicated they were "not very" or "not at all" linked. By position type, the middle managers who directly supervise the frontline supervisors were most likely to rate the two has highly linked ($M = 4.3$, $SD = .87$).

Impact of the 360-Degree Evaluation
A series of questions asked the participants to rate the extent to which the overall 360- Supervisory Professional Development Process had a

Table 1. Impact of 360-Degree Evaluation on Participants

The extent to which the 360 had a positive impact on. . .	Combined Ratings of "Some" and "Very Much"
Supervisory Practice	80%
Behavior Change	78%
Relationship with Staff	69%
Leadership in the Agency	55%
Overall Impact on Outcomes for Clients	46%
Workers' Practice with Families	41%

positive impact on various aspects of supervision. Respondents were most likely to report a positive impact of the process on their supervisory practice and relationship with their staff, and least likely to see it as effecting their professional advancement in the agency. The following table (Table 1) shows the results of these questions.

Focus Group Findings

Care was taken to avoid collecting or using any data that could be used to identify individuals. The majority of themes were noted across all regions. Some group differences by role or region were identified, many of which are logical differences based on the level of responsibility of the group. In the findings that follow, such differences will be noted.

Focus group data have a number of characteristics that should be noted. One of the strengths of this methodology is that group dynamics facilitate the generation of a range of ideas and perceptions. However, each group process is different, and sometimes those same dynamics impact the emphasis on individual topics or themes. Just because a theme was not identified in particular groups it should not be assumed that members of the group would not agree with it, but only that the particular response was not made at the time. An analysis of themes was conducted to identify the range of ideas expressed. Counts of the number of responses demonstrating the number of times each theme was mentioned are offered, but

this does not necessarily indicate the number of separate individuals making a particular response. Sometimes individuals feeling strongly about a particular topic raise it more than once in a group. On the other hand, as facilitation of the groups was focused on eliciting a range of ideas, it can be assumed that other members of the group may agree with some of the themes but did not verbalize agreement because the idea had already been mentioned.

Participants' Overall Experience with the 360-Evaluation Process. The themes listed below were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.

- **Timing was problematic** (n = 23). (Supervisors and program/circuit managers only.) For the most part this theme involved concern by respondents that the ratings received during the 360 process were negatively impacted by the circumstances affecting their unit at the time, such as disciplinary actions or staff turnover.

- **Positive experience/good to receive feedback** (n = 21). A strong theme was that for most individuals the 360 process was a useful, positive experience. Some noted that it was good to receive reinforcement for what they were doing well. Others found that feedback regarding how they were perceived and

what could be improved was particularly useful.

- **Comments were more helpful than scores** (n = 12). (Supervisors and middle managers only.)

- **Question confidentiality/concerned they could be identified by the code used or email account** (n = 12). (Supervisors only.) Despite the information provided to them in orientation, a number of individuals indicated they did not trust that their ratings were confidential.

- **Believe management has information on supervisor results/question what will be done with the information** (n = 9). (Supervisors only.)

- **Feedback was conflicting/scoring was inconsistent across individuals because of different learning styles or preferences** (n = 9).

- **Some people were upset over comments/process caused problems** (n = 8). (Middle managers and administrators only.) Some individuals indicated that the process created problems within specific units due to the personality of the participant or the type of comments received. In some cases these comments were linked to concern that there was no follow up to the process other than the debriefing.

- **Selection of individuals to complete rating was stressful/it was hard to know who to pick** (n = 7). A range of responses fell into this category, ranging from those who tended to "cherry pick" individuals to rate them to those who indicated they were hoping certain individuals would not ask them to be raters because of fear of what they would have to say.

- **Feedback from their own staff was most useful** (n = 7). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) A number of respondents indicated that they were most interested in the feedback they received from their "subordinates" rather than from peers or their supervisor.

- **Some comments were too vague/respondents would have liked to have behavioral examples of comments made** (n = 7). (Supervisors and administrators only.)

- **Shouldn't have to learn about what your boss thinks through this process** (n = 6). (Supervisors only.)

- **People may have tended to be overly negative or positive** (n = 5). (Supervisors and administrators only.) These comments seemed to suggest that staff might not have taken the process seriously as a professional development initiative so that they either took this opportunity to make very negative comments or to just gloss over their assessment.

I also felt it was like getting looked at in a moment in time … and I almost felt like … the staff were killing the messenger and so they really were taking it out on the supervisor that the agency had issues and this looked like the only way they could address them in the survey and maybe they were missing the point, and honestly they were but I think they still did it.—middle manager
You know you give your life to it and you work overtime and you are available 24/7 and you never get a good word. Well at least in this evaluation, I did get some things that made me feel like, well maybe I have been worth being around here all this time.—supervisor
I almost wish there also had not been scores, that there would have just been an overall assessment and comments maybe instead of a scoring thing. I think the scoring thing may have caused conflict and issues in the peers.—middle manager

Positive aspects of the process. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.

- **Respondents shared their results with their respective supervisor** (n = 17). Although it was left up to them to determine

who to share the results with, it was common that when asked about positive aspects of the process, many noted that they had chosen to share it with their supervisor.

- **The process opened the door for dialogue with staff** (n = 14). Many respondents indicated that the process provided the opportunity for discussions with staff, whether initiated purposefully by the supervisor or by the workers themselves.
- **Participant's decision who to share report with** (n = 11). A theme related to the one mentioned above is that the participants valued the fact that the decision of whether or not to share the information received was left up to each individual.
- **It was a growth process/identified areas for improvement** (n = 10).
- **Participants still refer to it** (n = 10). Although the process was completed for most individuals nearly six months prior, a number of people noted that they kept the report handy and have re-read it numerous times.
- **Made it easy to write their Employee Development Plan** (n = 9). Some individuals indicated that the feedback they received prepared them for the preparation of their employee development plan within the performance evaluation process.
- **Report was professional/useful document** (n = 8). (Middle managers and supervisors only.) Some people commented on the report itself, describing it as professional, easy to read, and useful.
- **Impressed with the instrument** (n = 7). Participants commented positively on the instrument and the computerized system itself, describing it as easy and not time-consuming.
- **It gave staff a voice/opportunity to provide feedback** (n = 7). The very opportunity for frontline staff to provide feedback was noted by a number of individuals.
- **Provided insight into staff perceptions** (n = 7). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) Some individuals commented that it was positive to receive insight into how their behav-

ior was perceived by staff that they have no other way of knowing.

- **Good to have feedback from people in different roles** (n = 5.) (Supervisors and middle managers only.) The fact that the process solicited feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors was mentioned.
- **Individuals could select raters whom they respected and whom they thought knew their work** (n = 5). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) The ability to be purposeful in selecting who would provide feedback for each individual was named as a positive by some.
- **It identified or affirmed strengths** (n = 5.) (Supervisors and middle managers only.)

When I talked about it with my supervisors, asked them how it went, they whipped everything out. Well, that says something about their comfort level.—middle manager
It made me a little more mindful to remember to say "hey I am trying too. Here is my overall plan and here is what I think is going to happen but if you all see me getting off track let me know, so I can get back on and I guess I ask for their feedback more than I had been. And they are sooo willing to give it.—supervisor
Because I think, the beauty of it is that you can either share it or keep it to yourself. It was for me and that is the way I would like to see it stay. —supervisor
The morale and attitude in our . . .office has turned around. Because I mean, we did take it seriously ... so their opinion like really mattered to me and so when I see these things coming across that were just like ugly and you are like, you know, you really start looking at yourself, well maybe there is something here and so when I talked to those couple of people you know, they really gave me some good ideas on, you know, the way I come across sometimes that I do not necessarily realize that I am doing.—middle manager

 Negative aspects. Participants were also asked to identify barriers or negative aspects of the process as it was imple-

mented. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified in all regions and by participants of all roles.

- **Don't necessarily know peers well enough to evaluate them/unsure how to define peer group** (n = 28). This theme was closely related to the one that follows. Most individuals selected peers within the agency, and although they work in the same agency and know each other, they often stated that they did not have enough information to objectively rate their peers on the questions asked.

- **Use of neutral when "don't know" reduced scores** (n = 27). Given that they did not often know their peers very enough, many individuals indicated that they rated them at "3" which they considered to be "neutral" only to find out that this served to pull down the score that individuals received. Some stated that debriefers considered a "3" a negative that needed improvement rather than an "average" or "neutral" score.

- **Roles/structure of agency hierarchy negates confidentiality and may skew results** (n = 22). Because of the staffing of some areas, many people indicated that they have only one or two supervisors above them, making it easy to identify the person who rated them from this category. Because of this, some participants went on to say that they were not comfortable providing objective ratings or comments.

- **Respondents could be identified by quotes listed in the comments section** (n = 21). Providing direct quotes rather than paraphrased comments was problematic to many participants. Some indicated that they did not believe that staff knew that this would be the case. Others said that because sources could be identified in this way, the focus was shifted away from professional development. On the other hand, a few people indicated that summarized comments might be too general to be helpful or without useful context.

- **Shouldn't be able to select respondents/ selection skews results** (n = 20). A lot of people found that being allowed to select who would rate you as problematic, either because individuals were likely to "cherry-pick" or that the feedback was not random enough.

- **Personnel/accreditation/other agencies issues with staff impact responses** (n =17). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) Similar to the "timing is problematic" theme identified in response to the question of participants' overall experience with the process, many individuals felt that it was unfair to include issues outside of their control and/or disciplinary actions on the ratings received by individuals and a negative aspect of the system.

- **Turnaround time was too short** (n = 10). The deadline for completion of the process was noted as problematic by several individuals, and may have impacted the seriousness with which staff approached the process.

- **If the middle managers do not know the results, they cannot understand strengths/ weaknesses of supervisors** (n = 10). (Middle managers and administrators only.) In direct contrast to the earlier mentioned strength of the supervisor deciding with whom to share results, some individuals in management roles saw this as a downside, in that they could not take the feedback into account during performance evaluation, or as they developed other efforts to improve practice.

- **Staff were concerned/hesitant about confidentiality** (n = 9). A number of respondents indicated that they did not believe that frontline staff trusted that their ratings would be anonymous.

- **Roles selected when instrument was completed may have been inaccurate** (n = 8). Based on the number of responses received from particular roles, some individuals believed that the selection of role was some-

times inaccurate, negatively impacting the ability to interpret the findings.

- **Criticized unfairly for things they can't control** (n = 8). Some participants felt that they were unfairly rated because of things staff do not have information about or ones which are even outside their control. This is very closely linked to the more common theme of external forces negatively impacting ratings, but seemed distinct because of the emphasis on lack of fairness of the criticism.
- **Problems with the process for delivery/ distribution of packets** (n = 7.) (Middle managers and supervisors only.) Some felt the distribution of packets raised questions that could have been avoided, and some even suggested the individual was not trustworthy.
- **Rating is susceptible to timing rather than an overtime evaluation** (n = 7). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) Similar to another theme, some individuals complained that the process really did not promote the assessment of their skills over time, but the rating could easily be impacted by recent events.
- **Unclear who you could ask to rate you** (n = 6). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) A few participants said it was very unclear which type of individuals you were permitted to solicit feedback from, particularly in regards to whether the feedback should be kept within the agency or could be solicited from peers in the community.

Even though we are peers we do not know what each other does day to day and how we are doing day to day and what our supervision is really like here. So it really was not evaluating our peers.— middle manager

If someone from a different office gave me something... to do theirs .. and I couldn't really answer do they talk to all their employees every day? Heck, I don't know, and instead of putting NAs, I would put three. And, I think that that had a, probably, an adverse effect on their overall score, so I felt kind of bad about that.—supervisor

I also did not think it was maybe as confidential as I perceived that it was going to be because when we got our scores, if I only gave 2 to my peers and they all said that I was a horrible person that I am going to know that it was those two people. That is what has caused problems in our office.— middle manager

The debriefing process. Participants were specifically asked to reflect on the debriefing process itself. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.

- **Comments regarding the debriefer's assistance with the development of the Employee Development Plan** (n = 37). There appears to have been extensive inconsistency as to whether the debriefer assisted with the employee professional development plan and in what way. Ten responses suggested no assistance was given. Nine indicated that assistance was given. Nine noted that the debriefer mentioned but did not assist in writing the plan. Three stated that the debriefer wrote their plan without their input. An additional six—largely in response to colleagues making the above comments—indicated that the debriefing was not the appropriate time to work on the plan.
- **Generally positive characteristics of debriefers were described** (n = 20). Participants used a wide range of terms to describe what they liked about the individuals who conducted their debriefing, such as gentle, engaging, comforting, and trustworthy. Some suggested that it appeared the debriefers were carefully selected and/or well-trained.
- **Comments on the selection of the debriefers** (n = 16). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) Perhaps because some individuals knew their debriefer prior to the experience and others did not, participants made a wide range of comments regarding whether it was

helpful to have such a prior relationship. Nine stated it was positive to have known the individual prior, while five stated they had a good experience despite not having a prior relationship. Two individuals noted it was good to have had input into the selection of the debriefer.

- **Debriefing helped interpretation/putting feedback into perspective** (n = 13). A number of individuals remarked that having the debriefing provided a critical component of the process, as the objectivity of the debriefer helped them understand the balance of the ratings and comments.
- **General statements that it was a positive experience** (n = 13). (Supervisors and middle managers only.)
- **The debriefing could have been more helpful/did not need debriefing/general negative comments** (n = 12). This theme is based on a conglomeration of statements regarding the debriefing not having been as positive an experience as it could have been. A couple of individuals felt it was an unnecessary step, but others described it as emotionally exhausting or more time-consuming than was needed.

My impression was that the facilitator was going to help the employee make a plan and I do not know if that happened with anybody else but that did not really happen with me...that person did not offer me suggestions on what to do about that or…. That should be a formalized part of the process.—administrator
I thought that the person was very strength based, shared, you know, some things that maybe I need to enhance, and I was looking for that and was real thankful to get that information, but also, ended on a positive note. So I think whatever education that they had on being a debriefer, I felt that it was really used effectively—middle manager
I saw some value with having someone from outside the agency, not knowing, the other debriefer I am sure was wonderful but having someone from outside the agency, you know, can give you

that fresh objective approach.—middle manager

Impact of the 360 process on supervision. *Participants were specifically asked to what extent and in what ways the process may have impacted their supervision. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.*

- **Have changed their supervisory practice based on the feedback received** (n = 38). Clearly, most participants saw a direct connection between the process and their practice. Five general comments were made about this connection. In addition, specific examples of changes included the following: have been providing more positive feedback to staff (8); trying to be more accessible to supervisors/give them more time (5); have changed approach to communication (5); and am trying to talk things through with staff rather than giving them answers (3).
- **More aware of perceptions and approach** (n = 20). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) Similar to the theme related to overall experience regarding insight into staff perceptions, many respondents said that the process has developed in them a greater awareness of how their behavior is perceived by those they supervise.
- **Participants are looking for ways to improve/have used results** (n = 19). Many respondents agreed that they have used the feedback in their daily work and are actively working to improve.

One of the comments was like give more positive rewards and I have told my staff that I am sorry I am bad about that, I forget to do that, it is not that you are not doing a good job … But some of them like stickers and I do not understand how an adult can get so giddy over stickers so I have been putting stickers on good court reports and like, I give them a high five

so that is the new thing. I photocopy my hand and say high five for, so I try, even though it is a small thing I have been trying to do that.—supervisor

I …felt, when they had something positive to say, sometimes I was just like "oh wow, that is really cool." A few things like "oh I did not know they felt that way, maybe I am doing that." You take a close look at how I am doing things, like where I am standing with my workers…So it helped me to kind of to assess myself and my interaction in that perspective.—supervisor

On a personal note the items that I viewed through this process that I needed to work on were not a huge surprise to me but because it came about through this process I took that opportunity to reach out to someone that I trust and ask for their help on that and that has been good for me.—administrator

Potential client impact. *Focus group participants were asked for their opinions on the extent to which the initiative may have a positive impact on clients. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.*

- **Should reduce staff turnover** (n = 15). The most common response to this question was that the 360 process and subsequent professional development should reduce turnover, and through that vehicle will have a positive impact on services.
- **Supervisor's attitude/approach impacts workers' attitudes which impact clients/ modeling** (n = 7).
- **Overall culture of improvement is being established** (n = 6).
- **If you improve on a deficit, practice improves** (n = 5).

I think that anytime we retain staff that keeps staff working with families, it benefits the fami-

lies and this is something that we can do with staff in our agency—middle manager

I have one county in particular that had a very negative attitude and you would go in and there would all the time be these conversations going on, pessimistic kind of talk and over the year that has changed and now it is much more positive environment and you do not hear those negative pessimistic discussions going on anymore. They are not taking their anger out on their families, as horrible as that sounds, I think that is absolutely true.—middle manager

I think it ties back into the culture that we're trying to create to provide the services that we do, and I think just by giving the staff a voice, and we take that seriously and look inward, then hopefully we can improve and flourish our working relationship with our staff, and I think that will [benefit] us, if staff feels engaged and they feel supported and they still like to have a voice, then they are going to be more empowered to do their thing.—supervisor

Overall effectiveness of the 360 Supervisor Development Project. *After responding to the other questions regarding specific aspects of the project, focus group participants were asked to discuss the effectiveness of the process. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.*

- **To make the project effective it should be a two-step process** (n = 17). Following up on other themes regarding other questions, many respondents felt that in order for it to be effective there must be some follow up to the 360 process. This may come in the form of a structured action/planning process, or a closer linkage to the Employee Development Plan should be established, or having some subsequent meeting with debriefers or other facilitators regarding action taken.

- **How effective the process is depends on the individual** (n = 15). Many recognized that because it is up to each supervisor whether or not to use the feedback received to improve their practice, effectiveness is an individual matter. To some respondents, this was linked to the lack of structured follow-up in the process that might promote positive change.
- **Cost of the process might not be justified by the benefit in the current budget situation** (n = 12). A group of individuals knew that the agency had undergone significant budget cuts and felt that it may not be able to afford this type of professional development process. Five responses suggested it could be done as an internal process without the cost.
- **Question benefit of the process/did not promote improvement** (n=10). Some responses called into question whether the process as implemented was successful in promoting professional development.
- **Was a useful process/provided valuable information** (n = 9). Alternatively, a similar number of responses indicated the process was effective in a general way.
- **Gave staff a voice** (n = 7). (Middle managers and supervisors only.) Similar to themes in response to other questions, the opportunity for staff to provide feedback to their supervisors was seen as an effective aspect of the process.

I would like to see some more follow up after they came and did the development plan and maybe even some 90 days or six months later follow up or why could they not come and do a focus group with folks in the county, different focus groups, kind of like this, with the front line staff managers and then say, what has changed, what is different because of this 360 and what can you identify as growth within these people.—middle manager
If some people take it and just shove it in their drawer and said you know what, my staff's got issues, I ain't doing nothing with it. ... because

I'm thinking maybe that's what's happening. Then, you know, there was no purpose in it. – middle manager
What people were saying...we need to put so much money towards this to help our supervisors to understand how better supervisors they can be? I guess I do not understand the whole reasoning behind the whole process that would make somebody want to spend that much money on a process like this.— supervisor

Recommendations for improving the process. Participants were asked for their ideas on what would make the process better. The following themes were most frequently mentioned in the focus groups. Recommendations that were openly made in response to other questions were also included here, which allowed us to offer the widest and most comprehensive picture of what could be done to improve the process. Perceptions were not considered a theme unless mentioned a minimum of five times. Unless otherwise noted, the theme was identified by participants of all roles.

- **Structure selection/enable 360 respondents from outside the program area** (n = 28). The most common recommendation was to clearly articulate a vast array of options for individuals who could be selected to do ratings. The emphasis was on individuals who actually were familiar with the supervisors' work, and therefore might include community professionals and others outside the agency who are seen as peers of the supervisors. A few individuals indicated they thought selection of respondents should be random to reduce positive skew.
- **Needs to be an ongoing process** (n = 25). A large number of responses emphasized that this should not be a one-time experience for individuals but that it should be undertaken on a rotating basis with each individual being rated periodically to measure progress. The majority of these responses were general in nature but three indicated it should be done

every six months, and two that it should be done annually.

- **There needs to be a follow up system/ training to promote improvement in needed areas** (n = 23). A significant theme was that the process would be most effective if there were a structured process for following up to improve upon areas of need that are identified. Respondents indicated that often individuals do not know what they need to do to improve in certain areas.

- **Alternative to quoting or rating system** (n = 18). (Middle managers and administrators only.) Because of concerns related to identifying respondents through quotes, or problems with the development of scores, a number of alternative approaches were offered, such as paraphrasing comments, summarizing, scrambling the order of comments, or assigning individual categories such as "average" rather than a score.

- **Engage/inform frontline staff more effectively regarding the purpose of the process and how it works** (n = 16). Many respondents felt that staff were not adequately informed about the process, which hampered its success. Recommendations included a more concerted effort to clarify the purpose and intent of the process, the establishment of safeguards for confidentiality, and an emphasis on the seriousness of the initiative, perhaps through an orientation process similar to that received by supervisors.

- **Provide a summary of strengths and identify areas in need of improvement by region to allow for targeted training/follow up skill development within units** (n = 15). A group of respondents noted that currently all opportunity for improvement rested with individuals. Therefore, they felt that when units had areas in need of improvement that were common across multiple individuals this should be summarized for use by managers and administrators, which would promote organizational improvement. Many individuals emphasized that this should not be done

in such a way to jeopardize the confidentiality of individual results.

- **Allow more turnaround time for the process** (n = 14). (Supervisors and middle managers only.)

- **The entire process needs clarification/ information provided to everyone** (n = 10). Respondents gave a number of specific examples of areas needing clarification, such as what questions would be included, that the process should be considered an overall evaluation not simply one that deals with the immediate point in time, that direct quotes would be used, and what to expect in the debriefing process.

- **Workers need to be able to evaluate other managers that are not their direct supervisor** (n = 10). (Supervisors and middle managers only.)

- **Need to be clearer on instructions for selecting respondent role within the instrument** (n = 10).

- **Workers should do 360 on each other** (n = 10). (Supervisors and middle managers only.) It should be noted that while this group of individuals felt a 360 process would be useful for frontline workers, six responses indicated it would not be productive.

- **Should be a supervisor for six months or a year before participating in the 360** (n = 9).

- **Need a "not applicable" or "not enough information" option for questions** (n = 9). In response to the issue of peers not being able to rate each other on all questions and the problems with selecting a 3 as "neutral," this group of responses suggested that each question should allow a "N/A" response.

- **Process needs to take into account the office situation/context** (n = 6). (Middle managers and supervisors only.) This theme involves some structured way of accounting for the impact of staff turnover, disciplinary actions, or other circumstances in the ratings.

  I think it also needs to be somewhat structured and based on real knowledge of my

work. I appreciate feedback from anybody, but I would be more interested to hear any feedback that sees me operate more on a regular basis –supervisor
I would like to do it again in about a year or something. Just to kind of reevaluate things and see where things are at right then. To see if there is change or anything. – supervisor
It may be something that we know we need to change, but I mean if we knew how to change it we would do so— supervisor

Discussion

Most of the survey respondents indicated that key aspects of the process were implemented as planned: the process went smoothly, the report was helpful, and the debriefers got high ratings. The debriefers were rated lowest on linking the 360 to facilitating a learning development plan; therefore, if this program is intended to be implemented as an ongoing developmental tool, the development plan should be emphasized. There was some concern with preservation of confidentiality, which would seem to be an important area of emphasis for a program such as this which intends to promote open and honest assessment. In terms of changes in supervisory practice, 72% said that it has led to "some change" and 6% rated the change as "very much." When rating the impact of the 360-degree evaluation on various aspects of supervision, the greatest influence was believed to be on supervisory practice, relationship with staff, leadership in the agency, and overall impact on outcomes for clients. The two lowest rated areas were workers' practice with families and professional advancement in the agency. Many positive comments were made about the helpfulness and benefits derived from this process and concerns noted were especially related to confidentiality. Several expressed the belief that the 360 completed more than annually and over time could produce positive change in supervision within the agency.

Findings from the focus groups were generally consistent with those of the survey, but they provide a richness that general questions on a short survey cannot. They suggest a wide variety of experiences with and perceptions of the process. Many positive comments about the process support the use of such a 360-degree evaluation system in a child welfare agency. But if such a system is to be effective, a number of important lessons learned will need to be addressed, such as the structure of the assessment process, the organizational preparation for the process, and the importance of this being seen as an ongoing professional development process with follow-up. Some of the variance may be associated with two additional factors: personal inclination toward evaluation processes, and the fact that this program is in an early stage of implementation. Use of the 360-degree evaluation in another project demonstrated that the process was better accepted the second time it was implemented because supervisors learned they could trust that their confidentiality would be maintained and that this was intended to be a professional development process (Kelly & Sundet, 2007).

Although detailed findings related to variance in perceptions across regions of the state were not included here, it is clear that experiences with the process differed geographically. Some of these differences may be due to pre-existing features, such as circumstances affecting the region at the time, leadership style, and organizational culture, awareness of the importance of infrastructure, and centralized organizational support.

These evaluation results strongly suggest many of the findings reported in the professional literature outside the human services area hold true in social service settings as well. The current project used a process that is consistent with 360-degree feedback as defined by Foster and Law (2006). Much of the literature recommends that these evaluations remain separate from performance evaluation (e.g., Carson, 2006; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Most respondents in the current study did not see this process as linked to their performance appraisal process, and felt it should remain this way. However, there was some disagreement on this point, particularly for middle managers as opposed to frontline supervisors. This finding seems directly linked to the perception of this as an individual professional development process rather than formal performance ap-

praisal. Individual respondents clearly valued the confidentiality of the report and their ability to share it as they saw fit, which is consistent with findings reported by Eichinger and Lombardo (2003). Some bureaucratic human service agencies may be tempted to make this a part of the formal appraisal process, thereby risking loss of some of the more positive aspects of the opportunity for individually-driven change.

Findings also supported the literature suggesting that this feedback strategy should be implemented as an ongoing process with follow-up, such as connection to an individual development plan and opportunities for individualized learning (Hazuda, Hezlet & Schneider, 1993). It is inherent in the 360 process that each professional will make of it what they will. As many of the focus group respondents indicated, some people took the opportunity to initiate behavior change, while others chose to ignore the results. This is a necessary feature of implementing this process as an individual professional development process. However, over time it is possible that more people will use the results proactively if the process is integrated into the organization's overall culture. This may be especially true if there are organizational supports, such as coaching (Carson, 2006) and system-wide consistency (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000).

Respondents' recommendations for improvement also echoed the broader literature. Training raters on the process and the roles and skills they will be assessing (Ghorpede, 2000) was advised, as was an overall call for more transparency and information-sharing at the beginning of the process, which was evident in the focus group data, although the majority responding to the survey reported having adequate information. Participants also offered another feature that had been recommended in the literature: provide the opportunity for raters to respond that they do not have enough information to rate individuals on certain items (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004). For the current sample, this was most often an issue for peers rating each other, as they often had not directly observed their colleagues in some of the roles they were asked to assess.

Implications

While collecting some data on perceived outcomes associated with the project, this study was primarily formative in nature. Although the results suggest there is a potential use of such processes to promote professional development in social service agencies, further research is needed to determine if the perceived impact of the process is realized in actual behavioral change. Further, findings from this study conducted within one state's public child welfare agency cannot be generalized to other agencies or state systems. The strategy may be considered promising but additional research is needed.

Practice implications of this study fall into two categories. First, this project highlights the challenges of implementation of individually driven professional development initiatives within large bureaucratic environments, and its lessons learned suggest related strategies for responding to these challenges. Second, it represents a first step in documenting the potential use of processes like 360-degree evaluation to promote both practice change and systematic improvement as a part of the development of learning in organizations in the human services sector.

Public child welfare agencies, like the subject of this study, are by nature bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature. The Federal Child and Family Services Reviews have led to widespread organizational change initiatives in pursuit of improved client outcomes. Courtney, Needell, and Wulczyn (2004) note that child welfare agencies must develop a capacity to effectively use the information generated through this process, but most states have not put adequate emphasis on human resources development to promote this capacity. This study examines a state that has put some emphasis in this direction through the 360-degree evaluation, which could in turn be used in a more systematic way through an overall organizational initiative to promote such knowledge application. However, the results emphasize two areas that may be challenging for traditional hierarchical bureaucracies. It is important to focus this work on individual professional development rather than on adding to or complementing a standardized performance appraisal. Second, the findings

note several ways implementation could have been improved, which is to be expected in a first-year pilot project. Some possible improvements include the critical selection of debriefers with the right qualifications to perform their role, providing more information and training on the specifics of the process, improving the administrative infrastructure and processes involved in the distribution of evaluation packets, and clarity in how the overall project fits with other initiatives and the agency's priorities. These lessons fit well with what has been learned from research into core components of implementation, including selection, consultation and coaching, facilitative administrative supports, and program evaluation (Fixsen et al., 2005).

In a study examining the perceptions that child welfare supervisors have of their own power and authority, it was reported that the power and authority of the supervisors are rarely discussed openly, yet these professionals recognize their role as messengers in the implementation of organizational change and in the interpretation of organizational culture. While workers believe they have power, supervisors often see this as illusionary (Bogo & Dill, 2008). It would seem that a 360-degree evaluation could serve a very useful purpose in alleviating this conflict and promoting more effective supervisory practice in creating a learning climate and facilitating organizational change through their relationships with frontline staff and middle management.

Use of 360-degree evaluation processes within the human service setting dovetails well with aspects of Senge's (1990) seminal description of the learning organization, and particularly the concepts of personal mastery, team learning, and systems thinking. If implemented correctly, this sort of strategy enhances the development of individual skills, an atmosphere of team learning, and a philosophical approach suggesting that professional growth relates to organizational improvement and outcome achievement with clients. The development of a true partnership between supervisors and staff is a key component of a learning organization (DeVilbiss and Leonard, 2000), and this sort of partnership is necessary for the sort of trust and commitment associated with a success-

ful 360-degree evaluation process.

Peter Senge said it best: "The fantasy that somehow organizations will change without personal change, and especially without change on the part of people in leadership positions, underlies many change efforts doomed from the start (2003, p. 48)." Human service organizations seeking positive change would do well to invest in professional development that is data-driven through processes such as the 360-degree evaluation that are integrated into the overall organizational improvement strategy.

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