

TURNING PROFESSIONALS INTO MANAGERS USING MULTISOURCE FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - The research aims to examine the impact of a multisource feedback (MSF) program on a group of partners and other senior professionals in a professional service firm providing accounting, finance and law services. It seeks to show how these people responded to the program and its feedback processes, and the contribution the program made to their development as managers. The purpose of the research was to assess the applicability of the use of the multisource feedback with this group of professionals in the light of literature which points to the unwillingness of many professionals to participate in management activities or cooperate with management systems.

Design/methodology/approach - This was case study research undertaken in a single organisation over a period of three years using qualitative methods incorporating multiple sources of data, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, the results of a survey, and the personal experiences of a researcher who was a participant observer.

Findings - The MSF program was an effective way of achieving change in the attitudes and behaviour of the professionals, and of improving their leadership and management skills. Research limitations/implications - This was a single-organisation case study. The study relies on qualitative approaches and issues of objectivity needed to be managed.

Practical implications - The findings contribute to knowledge concerning the nature of professionals in organisations and their response to management systems and to feedback processes. They contribute to understanding of the applicability of the use of MSF as a management system for professionals, as a means of achieving the development of management skills, and of achieving organisational improvement.

Originality/value - Previous research has not addressed the use of MSF for professionals in professional service

organisations, or the use of MSF as a management development tool for professionals.

INTRODUCTION

This case study examined the implementation of a multi source feedback (MSF) program for professional partners and other senior professionals (collectively referred to as "senior professionals") in a large professional service firm which provided accounting, finance and law services.

A key goal of the senior management was to create a high performance culture by assisting the senior professionals to acquire an interest in management and to develop ~ management and leadership skills. This meant that they needed to be accountable for managerial responsibilities as well as their professional roles with clients. Most of these people had staff supervision and associated managerial tasks as well as their client activities, but were inclined to focus on their client activities and their technical tasks to the neglect of their managerial role.

It was thought by senior management that a tool like MSF had the potential to assist them to develop as managers but they had a concern as to whether many of the senior professionals would choose to give priority to their professional pursuits, might have little inclination to engage in this program (which was voluntary), and might respond poorly to the management development opportunity it provided. This concern had developed out of their own experience with professionals and their understanding of literature relating to professionals, which pointed to the reluctance of many professionals to engage with management systems.

The research set out to address this concern and answer the question as to whether the senior professionals would accept and use the MSF program, and whether it would be useful in terms of the development of their managerial and organisational skills.

The organisation

The organisation in which this study took place is a global partnership providing a range of professional legal, financial and accounting services to many large commercial and government organisations. It is owned and managed by the partners, who have to balance their ownership responsibilities with their client service and staff management duties.

The research was undertaken in a number of specialised accounting areas of the organisation in Australia, with offices in a number of Australian cities and employing approximately 1,800 people. There were 350 senior professionals who were the group for whom the MSF program was introduced. Most of them had accounting backgrounds, some had legal qualifications and a small number had both.

Professionals in organisations

Research into the nature of professionals in organisations such as hospitals, law firms, universities and research institutions has pointed to differences in the nature of their work compared to that of managers. Often professionals are portrayed as carrying out the "core functions of the organisation", while management activity provides support for this, giving rise to the existence of conflict and what has often been presented as a "stark dichotomy between professionals and managers" (Golden et al., 2000).

Literature relating to professionals in organisations has pointed to the characteristic ways in which many of them work. They tend to focus on their own professional interests, sometimes to the detriment of the wider organisation, and a "clash of cultures" (Raelin, 1986) occurs; they are often in conflict with the administrative requirements of the organisation, so that a "manager-professional dichotomy" exists (Golden et al., 2000; Rundall et al, 2004), and they are frequently disinclined to engage in management activities and may have a reluctance to cooperate with management systems (Beneviste, 1987; Shapiro, 1985; Coxe, 1992; Maister, 1993).

However the extent to which this division between management and professionals actually occurs in organisations has not been well researched and much of the literature is anecdotal rather than research-based. Most of the research studies which - have been undertaken have related to the relationship between doctors and managers in hospital situations (Rundall et al, 2004). One recent study in

this area has suggested that the manager-professional dichotomy may not in some cases be as extreme as it has sometimes been portrayed, and consequently more research is required to examine the nature and extent of this phenomenon in different professional organisations (Golden et al, 2000).

A particular area of study relating to professionals, which is of relevance to a study of MSF, has concerned the way they are said to respond to feedback. (Argyris 1991, p. 100) Suggests that they often have an unwillingness to listen to and learn from feedback given to them:

Put simply, because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure.

Professionals may be found in many organisations, and professional service firms - such as the one in this study - are usually characterised by having a large percentage of professional staff. According to (Maister, 1993), such firms have been experiencing accelerating change largely due to growing uncertainty, and unpredictable global movements in finance, economics, technology and people. These changes have led to an increased demand for effective management, leadership and interpersonal skills among senior members of professional service firms.

However, senior professionals usually require a significant specialist education and training to provide them with the necessary technical expertise to carry out their profession. Because this expertise receives such strong emphasis in professional services, the development of management, people management and interpersonal skills and the performance of management-related activities frequently does not receive priority.

Moreover, these professionals are primarily interested in their own personal challenge and growth, autonomy, and personal rewards, and they focus on external client contact and "billable time" (Maister, 1997). This can leave them with little inclination to be involved in management activities and scepticism towards management systems, of which multisource feedback programs are frequently a part.

Multisource feedback

MSF (also known as 360.degree or multi-rater feedback) is a process of gathering and feeding back useful and relevant information on an individual from a

number of different sources. The individuals usually evaluate themselves as well as receiving feedback from a number of potential sources within and external to the organisation - superiors, peers, subordinates and in some cases, clients or customers. Each source of feedback provides a particular feedback emphasis depending on the type of relationship that exists.

(Goleman et al. 2002a) describe the 360-degree method as offering the fuller picture - it offers a consensual view of a person's profile of competencies. They recommend 360-degree feedback because it helps people identify their blind spots by receiving feedback from different perspectives. (Waldman et al 1998) summarise the potential benefits of MSF as being management development, employee involvement, communication and cultural change. Other literature has set out the possible conditions under which multisource feedback might be most successful (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000). The use of MSF is growing and some writers suggest that it will be included as a routine part of many future appraisal systems in organisations (Waldman and Bowen, 1998).

MSF has been used at various levels in organisations, but its overwhelming use has been in relation to managers (Callender, 1996). Although some study has occurred relating to the relative usefulness of MSF in different types of industry (Brutus et al. 1998), there has been no research which focuses on the use of MSF with different occupational groups or the sub-culture of professionals in organisations, and the particular responses that such people might have to MSF. Consequently the question remains as to whether a MSF program is applicable to such a group. Will it be accepted by them? Will it be useful? Will it work?

The research methodology

The research was undertaken through a case study over a period of three years (1997-2000) and focused on the impact of MSF on the 350 senior professionals who were the recipients of feedback. Of these, 129 (37 per cent) participated in the research activities. In addition, there were 900 staff members who provided feedback to the senior professionals, although they were not themselves recipients of feedback. A total of 289 (32 per cent) of these participated in the research.

The research approach was qualitative. The approach involved focus group interviews, in-depth individual

interviews and a survey. This addressed the way in which participants responded to the program and feedback processes, their acceptance of it, the way in which they used it, and the aspects of it they found to be useful or unhelpful.

In addition, the researcher, who was a senior professional in the organisation, was involved as a participant-observer. He was present at many meetings and informal discussions and was a participant in the MSF program. He was able to monitor at first hand the opinions, emotions, attitudes and reactions elicited by MSF and recorded his findings in a personal research diary. During his direct personal encounter with MSF he used techniques advocated by Moustakas (1990) including "self search", "self-dialogue", and "self-discovery", which assisted him to discover the meaning and nature of the MSF experience as it related to him.

The analysis of the data involved the use of coding techniques proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for use in qualitative studies. This involved analysing and coding the raw data (in the form of notes and interview transcripts), into concepts and categories, comparing and connecting categories, and generating themes.

The study has two particular limitations. First, it is a single organisation case study and has the limitation of all single organisation studies. Consequently, the question of generalisability of the findings arises. The researchers took the view proposed by Gummesson (1991) that a single case study can enable the examination of data in depth and reveal phenomena which "one suspects will also exist in other companies" (p. 79).

Second, being essentially a qualitative study, it focused on the experience and perceptions of the participants, including a participant-observer researcher.' Its aim 1 was to explore MSF from the standpoint of those engaging in it. Consequently, it faced issues around objectivity which had to be carefully managed (Yin, 1994).

To read about the findings of this case study, please visit:
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