

Working Relationships Appreciation

Collecting perceptions about working relationships and contrasting / comparing them to how managers perceive them ~ assisting individuals to make their best contribution.

WHAT IS A WRA?

Working Relationships Appreciation (WRA) is the name given to the process of collecting perceptions about a manager's working relationships, contrasting and comparing those perceptions with the 'manager in focus' (MIF) so that he or she understand working relationships more clearly and therefore are better able to manage them effectively.

Every organisation has to make decisions about what to do, when to spend money or when to save, which people to assign to what, and so on. For over forty years, BIOSS SA has looked at what makes organisations effective and one of the things we have been looking at is the way people are encouraged or held back.

We believe that organisations work best when people are asked to do what matches their ability. However, because managers try hard to avoid costly mistakes and to ensure that everyone does their job correctly, it is quite common to find people that are not allowed to use their judgement enough, or that controls and red tape are excessive; we call these conditions 'rigid'. Alternatively, we also find that people are sometimes not given enough information or guidance to allow them to know what to do; we call these conditions 'diffuse'.

The questions in the WRA are designed to see whether or not the ways in which your organisation currently works allows people to make their best contribution.

WHAT DOES THE WRA MEASURE?

Four WRA questionnaires look at 'The Working Context' of an individual manager. This is the working relationships that a specific individual manager has from four different perspectives:

- WRA 1: The perceptions of the team members (TM) who report directly to the MIF.
- WRA 2: The intentions the MIF has in his/her approach to his/her team.
- WRA 3: The senior manager's view of how the MIF deals with his/her team.
- WRA 4: The MIF says how he or she feels about the way the senior manager (MM) deals with him/her. This shows the link between what the MIF could do and what he or she is encouraged or allowed to do by their immediate manager.

It is always emphasized that this provides crude data which may contain multiple misunderstandings of terms etc, but experience has shown that:

- When former clients have investigated the hypotheses derived from the differences in responses between various groups, they have confirmed that important differences do indeed exist.
- The hypotheses formed from the data alone have usually been highly consistent with anecdotal evidence of respondent's attitudes and other findings
- However we always warn that the data is crude and can only be regarded as a very rough indication of prevailing opinion over specific periods of time in certain locations.

The WRA provides a system for each individual respondent to register 'gaps' between their current perception of their working context (or, in the case of the managers, the working context they are trying to create) and what they feel they would like to have happen.

Different respondents mean different things in their answers and different people require different conditions; the WRA displays these differences or similarities so that the MIF can make practical use of the information.

A PRA (Peer Relationship Appreciation) process follows the same steps and is often integrated with the WRA as one process. The PRA focuses on relationships within a particular level of work across the organization. It is important to ensure the PRA is only used with peers who have direct working relationships in the organization. Organization charts can be misleading, just because two individuals are peers and just because they *should* be working together, do not mean this is necessarily the case.

WHAT CAN I DO WITH IT?

- ✓ Help managers to see how their approach to their people is received by the individuals concerned, by their own immediate manager and the changes that each of these respondents would like them to make. This is useful for manager-development and the organizational diagnosis.
- ✓ Help senior managers to see what people two levels (or more) below them in the hierarchy feel about the organization and the way in which they are being managed. This helps them to check their own perceptions (and misconceptions!) about what people want and how they want things to change.
- ✓ A means to explore how effectively *three* management levels are interacting in a given department or across an organization.
- ✓ A skills audit for a manager, both as a pre- and post-training.
- ✓ A performance management diagnostic – (e.g. where problems may be occurring for a team or a manager, but the cause is not obvious or openly discussable).
- ✓ A precursor and pre-work for a team development workshop.
- ✓ When used with all the managers at a given work level - it provides a picture of how managers are using the capability of their people, giving clear evidence of where spare capability is felt to exist, or where people are already feeling over-stretched. Used in this way it provides clear evidence of what managerial skills deficiencies exist and what training support may be needed - or not needed.

The questionnaires are not simply about what the manager does well or badly (i.e. not about managers' behavioural criteria) but about *the relationship* between this manager and specific people (peers, direct reports and direct manager). For example, conversations typically start specifically with what direct reports are willing to admit and if that is less than fully candid, then the process will reflect the absence of openness. This process does not change the relationship, it reflects the maturity of relationships and creates a trusted space where the conversations that need to occur are surfaced and facilitated.

In addition we ask the MIF to select 3-5 Peers who will be willing to answer and to discuss their answers (if this is deemed to be appropriate).

WHY WRA IS NOT A 360°

Although there are many common features between a WRA and a 360° process, such as the gathering of multi-rater feedback, reports that show differences in perception, focus on specific behavioural

requirements and how well these are or are not being met, there are a number of differences between a WRA and 360°.

The most notable is the focus of the approach. Our view is that 360° processes create some value but they are generally flawed because the process itself sends an underlying message of distrust. Most 360°s aggregate data in a manner that allows participants to rationalize the feedback or it fails to reflect the context within which an individual is operating.

The data from a WRA reveals the results of what the Manager is doing/not doing in a format that relates also to the nature of the work that is being done/omitted at 3 management levels; i.e. it shows the way the *links* between roles are working as well as what the individual managers are doing as individuals.

This allows the review of each manager in their actual **working context**, not in isolation, and it shows how the organization is working as well. *For example, a 360° feedback shows the Manager what he/she is doing or not doing well, and this is helpful for their development, but the WRA can show in addition how what the manager is doing is influenced by the requirements of their people and the conditions provided by their immediate manager as well.* Some of this is related to what the manager is good / not good at, but some of it may not be, because it is related to the manager's working **context**; a standard 360° system is not designed to pick this up. This could leave a gap in analyzing what is really going on in a specific situation. In other words, traditional 360°s protect the immediate manager or worse, pass 'noise' into the feedback of their direct reports. We feel this makes 360° processes unreliable and why we would prefer to use the WRA process.

The WRA data allows the four perspectives to be considered separately, every time, and allows these perspectives to be aggregated by level/department across the organization. Some 360° systems may allow that to be done with additional bespoke programming, but the WRA provides it as standard. *(In one project, that allowed us to show that virtually all Level 2 managers felt they were severely over-restricted, while their managers were being pressed from above to restrict them still further.)*

The WRA functions from the perceptions of each individual respondent as at now and what they would **prefer in order to work better in the future**. This difference has two important effects: firstly, it means that the MIF can see what each of the individual respondents wants to see changed and secondly, it is tailored to the real people, not a theoretical model of how 'good managers' behave. For example, we have seen a significant number of cases where individual respondents have required *less of* an apparently desirable activity; while a typical 360° question asks 'can the manager do 'x' well?' might just get a "yes he can" without the (under their breath) "...but I wish he wouldn't!"

The first 21 of the 48 questions ask respondents both 'How things Are' and 'How I would like things to be'. Analysis of the second answer will allow the organization to get a clear picture of what their managers (by level) think *ought* to be happening if and when they get it right. We have seen that some of these perceptions vary quite a bit, by level, but more particularly, they allow the organization to see whether the targets the managers are setting themselves are actually 'on message'.

The dynamic nature of the WRA process and questionnaires gives 'indications' of where spare capacity (wasted potential and costs of being out of flow) exists in the organization - and therefore where attention should be focused for getting creating more empowerment, better utilization of capabilities and attend to potential morale and motivation issues.

We have often seen the implications of organization re-structuring in the WRA responses - post hoc - and it has to be a priority for us to demonstrate its use as a diagnostic for structural change as well as a means of evaluating the effectiveness - or otherwise - of earlier organizational changes. A 360° is not designed to and therefore cannot provide this type of depth.

Contact us for more information or visit our website on www.bioSS.co.za