



ACTION STEP

UPWARD REVIEWS:

BUILDING CULTURES OF ACCOUNTABILITY, TRUST & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Organizations spend significant time evaluating employee performance, yet many overlook one of the most powerful sources of leadership insight: the people being led.

Upward reviews create a structured opportunity for employees to provide feedback to managers, leaders, and other senior professionals about their leadership, communication, delegation, coaching, and relationship-building practices. Done well, upward reviews are a reflection of an organization's commitment to accountability, trust, and continuous improvement.

As workplace expectations continue to evolve, organizations can no longer assume that leadership effectiveness is measured only by business results or top-down evaluations. Employees experience leadership every day. They see how decisions are communicated, how feedback is delivered, how work is delegated, and whether leaders create conditions where people can do their best work.

Upward reviews help organizations capture those experiences in a meaningful and actionable way.

Importantly, the purpose of upward reviews is not to create a punitive process or a "gotcha" moment for leaders. Their greatest value lies in development. They provide leaders with insights they may not otherwise receive, reinforce organizational values, and signal that growth and learning are expected at every level of the organization.

When thoughtfully designed and supported, upward reviews can strengthen trust, improve leadership effectiveness, and help organizations close the gap between the culture they aspire to create and the culture employees actually experience.

WHAT UPWARD REVIEWS ARE MEASURING

When organizations think about performance, the focus is often on outcomes. Did we hit the goal? Did we serve the client? Did we deliver the project?

The challenge is that performance data can tell us what happened without telling us how it happened.

Increasingly, organizations are recognizing that how results are achieved matters just as much as the results themselves. The way leaders communicate, delegate, mentor, provide feedback, manage pressure, and create opportunities for others has a direct impact on engagement, development, retention, and performance.

This is where upward reviews become powerful.

At their core, upward reviews help organizations understand the day-to-day experience of leadership.

Do employees feel informed and supported? Do they have opportunities to learn and grow? Do leaders create clarity during periods of uncertainty? Do they model the behaviors the organization says it values?

These questions move beyond individual performance and into culture.

In many organizations, leadership feedback flows primarily in one direction: Leaders evaluate employees, organizations assess teams, and performance is measured against goals and competencies.

Upward reviews create a feedback loop that allows organizations to learn from the people experiencing leadership most directly.

That perspective is valuable because it often reveals the gap between intention and impact. A leader may believe they are communicating clearly, delegating effectively, or supporting their team. Employees may experience something very different. Neither perspective is inherently wrong, but understanding the difference creates an opportunity for learning and growth.

This is why the most effective organizations view upward reviews as a mechanism for continuous improvement. When employees are invited to share their experiences, leaders gain insight they may not otherwise receive. When leaders receive and act on that feedback, trust grows. And when organizations consistently create opportunities for feedback in every direction, accountability becomes part of the culture rather than something reserved for annual reviews.

THREE CONDITIONS THAT MAKE UPWARD REVIEWS SUCCESSFUL

1 Psychological Safety

Employees must trust that they can provide honest feedback without fear of retaliation or damage to their careers. If employees believe their feedback can be traced back to them, they are less likely to engage honestly.

Psychological safety doesn't happen automatically because a survey is anonymous. It's built through consistent communication, transparency about the process, and leadership behaviors that demonstrate feedback is welcomed.

The strongest safeguard is the design of the process. Rather than asking people to merely trust that the upward review process protects their anonymity, show them how the process itself actually works. Walk them through each stage, laying out the process from start to finish, including what the people running the process can see and what the final report looks like. When employees understand how the process actually works, they can feel more comfortable sharing their authentic feedback.

Set a minimum number of reviewers before any individual feedback is released. A common threshold is three. This protects the people giving feedback and assures leaders that what they receive reflects a pattern rather than a single voice. For very small teams, group-level feedback can serve the same purpose without exposing anyone.

2 A Development Mindset

Upward reviews are most effective when they are framed as tools for growth rather than judgment. The goal is not to identify "good" leaders and "bad" leaders.

When organizations position upward reviews as part of a broader leadership development strategy, feedback becomes an opportunity for learning, reflection, and improvement rather than a source of anxiety or defensiveness.

Pairing the upward review with a leader self-assessment strengthens this further. When leaders answer the same questions about themselves, the gap between how they see their leadership and how their teams experience it becomes the heart of the development conversation. It also signals that reflection is expected of everyone.

A development mindset also means looking for strengths. Upward reviews surface the leaders who mentor well, communicate clearly, and bring others into the work. Naming and rewarding those behaviors, through recognition, visible roles, and a place in leadership development, reinforces what the organization values and makes the process something leaders want rather than fear.

3 Closing the Feedback Loop

Employees are more likely to participate when they believe their feedback will lead to meaningful action. While organizations may not be able to share every outcome, they can demonstrate how feedback is shaping leadership development, coaching, training, and broader organizational decisions.

When people see that feedback leads to action, trust in the process grows. When feedback disappears into a black box, participation declines.

In cases where feedback leads to personnel matters that cannot be shared, the loop can still be closed at the aggregate level. Share the themes that emerged, the changes being made, and any resources being provided. What matters is that people see the process producing action, even when the specifics stay private.

DESIGNING THE QUESTIONS

The conditions above shape whether people will answer honestly, while the questions shape whether their answers are useful. When designing the questions, keep the following in mind:

- Ask about specific, observable behaviors rather than general impressions. Whether a leader communicated expectations clearly produces more usable feedback than a broad rating of communication skill, which tends to reward those who are simply well liked.

- Use questions that look forward. Asking whether someone would seek a leader out again, or feel comfortable going to them with a problem, reveals the real nature of the working relationship.
- Cover both halves of leadership. Some questions should address how work is managed, including delegation, communication, and clarity. Others should address how people are treated, including mentorship, responsiveness, and concern for wellbeing. Both shape the experience of being led.
- Keep open-ended sections focused. A narrow prompt asking for the single most important thing a leader should know tends to draw out more specific feedback.

Decide who will run the process. Some organizations administer upward reviews internally through a small, trusted team. Others use an outside party. Both can protect confidentiality. The right choice depends on where your people will feel safest being honest and on the resources you can commit.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR CANDOR

Before introducing or redesigning an upward review process, take time to assess whether your organization has created the conditions for honest feedback.

Gather a small group of stakeholders and discuss the following questions:

How would employees describe the current level of psychological safety in our organization?

- Do employees feel comfortable sharing concerns, ideas, and feedback?
- Are there existing channels where employees can speak candidly?

How is feedback currently viewed within our culture?

- Is feedback seen as an opportunity for growth or as a performance judgment?
- How do leaders typically respond when difficult feedback is shared?

What message would an upward review process send about leadership in our organization?

- Would it reinforce our stated values?
- Would it support the type of culture we are trying to create?

How will we ensure confidentiality and build trust in the process?

- What safeguards would employees need to feel comfortable participating?
- How will we communicate those safeguards clearly and consistently?

What will happen after the feedback is collected?

- How will leaders receive and use the information?
- What development resources, coaching, or support will be available?
- How will we demonstrate that employee feedback is being taken seriously?
- How will we structure the output so that patterns are clear and easy to act on?

How will leaders model their own participation in feedback?

- Will senior leaders complete a self-assessment alongside the review?
- How will leadership signal, in words and actions, that the process is taken seriously?

The answers to these questions will shape not just the design of your upward review process, but whether it succeeds. There are no perfect answers and that is precisely the point. The conversation itself is the first act of the very culture you are trying to build. Use what surfaces to identify the gaps, prioritize the conditions that need strengthening, and let those insights guide your design.

WANT SUPPORT PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE?

Upward reviews can provide valuable insights, but the process itself is only one piece of the puzzle. The real work is creating a culture where people feel safe sharing feedback, leaders are open to receiving it, and the organization is prepared to act on what it learns. DFA can help.

- **Strategy Session:** Each member organization receives an annual one-hour strategy session. You might use this time to assess your organization's readiness for upward reviews, evaluate existing feedback and performance management processes, identify opportunities to strengthen psychological safety, or explore how feedback can better support leadership development and organizational culture.
- **Policy Review:** Members can submit one policy, framework, or initiative each year for feedback. This may include upward review programs, performance management processes, leadership development frameworks, associate or employee feedback mechanisms, mentoring initiatives, or broader culture and accountability efforts.

- **Advisory Sessions:** Champion and Leader members also have access to 8, 30-minute and 4, 30-minute advisory sessions for ongoing support, respectively. These sessions provide space to think through implementation challenges, review feedback themes and trends, strengthen communication strategies, build leader readiness, and explore ways to increase participation, trust, and impact within your feedback processes.

We're here to work alongside you as you create cultures where feedback supports growth, accountability, and continuous improvement at every level of the organization.