

Seeing Leadership Behaviour through the Employees' Glasses: Upward Feedback at the Federal Statistical Office of Germany

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1. Introduction

The second upward feedback at the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (Destatis) in 2011/2012 has its origin in the results of the staff satisfaction survey of 2009. Back then, leadership behaviour was identified as a main focus of attention for the future. Furthermore, the aim of establishing a comprehensive quality management has been pursued within the context of the EFQM-model¹ since the late 1990s. "Leadership" is one vital aspect of the corresponding nine EFQM-criteria and upward feedback is a suitable instrument to deliver relevant insights in how staff members perceive their superiors. Achieving high quality in statistical products and services (which all statistical offices in the European Union refer to within the Code of Practice²) depends not only on the commitment of all employees, but also of their superiors.

In public service, employees are the most important resource as well as cost factor. Therefore, the continuous efforts in increasing the organisational efficiency should focus intensively on improving interpersonal cooperation. As a first step, superiors need to know how staff members perceive their leadership behaviour – and staff members need a chance to communicate their individual perceptions from time to time. The upward feedback at Destatis was designed to offer both sides the formalised opportunity to broach the issue of cooperation in a constructive way and, as a consequence, to positively influence the working atmosphere.

The current paper describes the organisation, implementation and communication of upward feedback at Destatis as well as the comprehensive follow-up process which was set up to support all superiors in interpreting and handling their individual results gainfully for all involved parties, last but not least for the whole organisation.

2. Upward feedback at Destatis

2.1 History and context

The first upward feedback at Destatis was conducted by an external service provider from October 2001 until January 2003. Also in 2003, the first human resources development concept was developed. It was revised in 2011. From the outset, one of its modules comprised upward feedback as a tool to gain information on leadership behaviour.

¹ EFQM stands for European Foundation for Quality Management. Further information can be found on www.efqm.org.

² See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-32-11-955/EN/KS-32-11-955-EN.PDF.

However, due to constraints in resources, Destatis did not implement a second round for some years. In 2009, the President, the Vice-President and the Heads of Department reactivated and promoted the idea as a consequence of the staff satisfaction survey results that identified leadership behaviour as strategically important. It was also decided that in future, the staff satisfaction survey and the upward feedback should alternate every two years. Thus, the second upward feedback was scheduled to begin in 2011. This time, it was decided to conduct the upward feedback internally, realising that the core competences are all in-house. Except for the planning phase, external support was only required for the follow-up measures.

2.2 Developing an overall suitable questionnaire

From September 2011 to February 2012, all active and present staff members at Destatis³⁴ were asked to give their feedback to at least one superior anonymously by answering an online questionnaire. A paper-and-pencil form was made available on demand for (partly) visually disabled employees or employees without access to the internet in the office. The participation in the survey was voluntary.

With regard to the content of the upward feedback questionnaire, the initial point of development was the revised human resources development concept that contains an overview of relevant leadership skills. However, the basic assumption with regard to the wording of questions was not to start from scratch, but to resort to the former in-house staff surveys (2005, 2007, and 2009) that already included a list of questions concerning leadership behaviour. Soon the conclusion was drawn that this would be insufficient to reflect the range of what superiors at Destatis actually do during day-to-day routine. Therefore, Destatis referred to questionnaires that were confidentially provided by other agencies in German civil service. Then all available documents were checked systematically in order to get an overview of what a reasonable basic module of question topics could look like. With this background information, a draft was set up and afterwards discussed with an external consultant having long-lasting experience with implementing upward feedback in civil service.

Altogether, the final questionnaire consisted of approximately 60 questions covering the diversity of executive functions nowadays, namely: task-related cooperation, personal cooperation, mutual feedback, promoting professional development, team leadership, information and decisions. In the last section of the questionnaire, respondents had the opportunity to rate: “How important is it for you that your superior will tackle changes with regard to the [above mentioned] executive functions?” All items were related to observable behaviour (not to personal characteristics) and had to be answered on a downward five-point-scale (strongly agree / agree / partly agree, partly disagree / disagree / strongly disagree). Holding on the level of detail in information, results in the final reports were also presented according to these five categories that summed up to 100% of substantial answers. Additionally, “no statement possible” was offered as an alternative response option for respondents who had the feeling that they could not evaluate certain aspects from their own experience. This was especially important for employees who assessed the leadership behaviour not only of their direct superior but also of their superior on the next higher level.

³ Apprentices were excluded, because they are usually not clearly assigned to a certain superior.

⁴ Job tenure of at least three months was required.

After analysing the open text field intended for remarks at the end of the survey, two main areas of further development are to be considered for future upward feedbacks at Destatis:

- In the last section of the questionnaire, respondents had the opportunity to rate the importance of changes with regard to the executive functions. Many superiors perceived this kind of information as quite useful for establishing priorities in improving their leadership behaviour. However, this part of the questionnaire has proven to be difficult to reply to for some respondents. Firstly, it was sometimes not clear that the point of reference was the importance of changes and not the importance of the executive functions themselves. Secondly, the respondents were confused what to answer when they were completely satisfied with their superiors fulfilling the given aspect. In these cases, it was often not intuitive to answer “[changes] not at all important”. More intensive pretesting in future will probably reduce initial comprehension problems.
- In order to enable comparisons between executive levels in the reporting system, a single version of the questionnaire was prepared that should more or less suit all hierarchies. Moving from top to lower management, this included the President of Destatis⁵ as well as the 8 heads of department, the 37 heads of division and the 154 heads of section. Moreover, due to delegation of assigning performance-related pay, it was favoured to consider 61 team leaders, another (rather informal) executive level below heads of section. Formulating the final items required to keep the specific management structure in mind. From this point of view, buying a questionnaire ready-made is not recommendable. Nevertheless, it was difficult to integrate all these different superiors into one instrument for evaluation, because the demands on good leadership behaviour differ from level to level. This impression was confirmed by later remarks of the respondents. Some noted that the questionnaire did not exactly fit to the relationship with their superior. For example, the cooperation was regarded to be not close enough to deliver an extensive assessment (e. g. due to the size of the organisational unit or because of the assessment of the superior on the next higher level). Prepared for being confronted with this issue, an alternative response option (“no statement possible”) was included right from the beginning. However, it was not satisfying for respondents to select this category too often. A level-specific questionnaire might be a welcome idea for further development. Yet, the decision to go for this approach is a balancing act between resources and the achievement of objectives. Finally, even in a level-specific questionnaire, it might be hard to reflect all possible constellations in staff/superior-relationship, since the working conditions are varied within a large organisation. Moreover, the great advantage of being able to compare aggregated results between executive levels, even within one department, would then no longer exist.

Prior to receiving their individual results, superiors were given the opportunity to fill in a paper-and-pencil self-assessment questionnaire that was in content identical with the survey questionnaire. Thereby, superiors were enabled to estimate the results of their upward feedback in advance and to compare their own expectations concerning strengths and weaknesses in leadership behaviour with the perception of their staff during coaching (see section 3).

⁵ The position of Vice President was vacant during fieldwork and therefore not included into the evaluation process.

2.3 Communication and the challenge of data protection

Communication plays a major role in processes of change within large organisations. This also applies to preparing, conducting and utilising upward feedback that, in the long run, aims at enhancing individual as well as collective leadership behaviour and at supporting the further dialogue between staff and superiors. Transparency, trust and acceptance have to be created in advance and deepened during the process itself.

Following this line of argumentation, all relevant decision makers have to be informed and involved before implementing upward feedback. For this reason, a project team to discuss critical points was founded, consisting of employees from different backgrounds, functions, departments and interest groups (e.g. staff council, equal opportunity commissioner, representative body for disabled employees, and data protection commissioner). The project team also decided on the organisational details of the process, the key visual and the slogan that were printed on information flyers, posters and give-aways: Since the basic idea behind upward feedback consists in identifying shortcomings in leadership by revealing the different views of the employees, a woman wearing several glasses shows metaphorically that Destatis on the one hand aims at “keeping an eye on leadership”. On the other hand, it promotes the idea of “seeing leadership behaviour through the employees’ glasses”.

Especially before the first round, many concerns have to be addressed. At Destatis, the appropriate forum was a series of one-hour informative meetings held prior to the survey at various office locations. On the whole, the success of implementing upward feedback essentially depends on taking the sensitivity of the collected information seriously. On the one hand, employees would rather not to be identified in their individual feedback, since they review the specific leadership behaviour of their superiors with whom they have to cooperate day to day, also after the survey. Gaining their trust in remaining anonymous is important when great store is set by the informative value of the survey data. The pre-conditions for achieving this goal are honest answers and high survey participation. On the other hand, superiors should be convinced to regard upward feedback as an instrument of support, not of control. They need to be assured of receiving their individual results for their own, so that they are able to focus on improvement without the need for explaining themselves in front of their superiors. In turn, all executive levels are important multiplier groups to motivate employees to take part in the survey.

To sum up, the experience at Destatis was that assuring confidential handling of individual data for all sides was to be addressed even more intensively than in the previous staff surveys concerning satisfaction with working conditions in general. Different measures that are highlighted in the following served the significant purpose of data protection:

- For logging in the online questionnaire, each staff member received a user name and a password, which were distributed randomly and connected neither to the name nor the organisational unit of the employee or the superior respectively. The access data were released merely for evaluating a certain executive level, so that the heads of office, for example, could not be evaluated by each and every staff member. Within the specific executive level, any superior could be selected for upward feedback. This means inversely that the clear assignment to the formal superior was in the employee’s own responsibility at the beginning of the

questionnaire. Thus, respondents could be assured of actual anonymity. Before sending off the completed online questionnaire, they were reminded of checking the selected superior for correctness in order to avoid unintended misassignment.

- Contrary to the staff survey and due to more wide-spread concerns over de-anonymisation risks (especially in small organisational units), there was no statistical information collected from the respondents in the questionnaire (e.g. office location, working time model, hierarchical level, gender). During analysis, it was thus not possible to determine their identity based on the answers provided.
- Prior to the survey, some employees worried about remaining anonymous in their feedback in case that all of their team answered items absolutely identically (e.g. 100% strongly disagreeing with the statement that their superior admits own mistakes). It was decided in favour of “ex post anonymisation”. More precisely, the “protective shield” was to relocate one of these identical answers to the alternative response option (“no statement possible”). However, this case occurred only rarely. Interestingly, the later data analysis showed that it concerned nearly exclusively positive evaluations (e.g. 100% strongly agreeing with the given item).
- The open text field at the end of the survey (originally intended for remarks to improve the process of in-house upward feedback) was sometimes misused to give individually verbalised feedback to the superior. After thinking through the consequences, it was abstained from forwarding these comments to the person concerned, since the risk of de-anonymisation was too high to run. In their feedback, respondents often provided additional information facilitating identifying individuals (e.g. working time model, job tenure, medical conditions). Manual “censorship” within these comments would have been theoretically possible, but unreasonably time-intensive and far from being 100% safe.
- All final reports aggregated answers. Data were only published for reference groups of at least five respondents per superior and item. Moreover, the percentage per response option was displayed only if at least three respondents answered within the five-point scale (except “no statement possible”). To reach these limits, most employees were asked to evaluate both of their superiors in hierarchy (e.g. head of division and head of department), even if the cooperation was not close enough to rate all aspects of leadership behaviour (see section 2.2). This complex system of evaluation required expanding the field phase to six months, all in all. Each of the five executive levels was assessed separately to avoid misunderstandings who to select for evaluation and to decrease halo-effects in the feedback towards different superiors. In the end, splitting the survey phase was also beneficial for reducing the time between receiving individual reports and the starting of the follow-up measures. However, one of the main points of criticism was the long duration of the whole (survey) process.
- All superiors were able to download the reports on their individual results via online log-in. The external coaches could also access the feedback of those superiors who were coached by them (see section 3). The human resources division at Destatis could neither access individual data nor individual reports.
- For aggregated reports (e.g. all superiors in the same department or on the same executive level), results for at least three superiors had to be available. All employees were to be informed via intranet about the available results for each executive level at Destatis on the whole. Within the organisational units, the

heads also received aggregated reports within their area of responsibility in order to discuss common strengths and weaknesses.

Due to the long survey phase, it seemed essential to maintain the attention of the staff to the ongoing upward feedback or at least to reactivate it regularly. For this purpose, an own website on the intranet was established that could be reached during the whole project (from announcing the upcoming survey to the very end of the follow-up processes). Intranet in general serves as the central source of information for the staff at Destatis and it enables to flexibly post realtime news on what is going on. This potential was used to full capacity. At the beginning of the survey phase, for instance, interviews with the President and the Chairman of the Staff Council were published. Both of them emphasised the benefits of upward feedback for the entire office. Another example during data collection was to display and up-date preliminary response rates for the assessment of each executive level in order to raise survey participation.

3. Designing a comprehensive follow-up process

Follow-up-measures are the core element of upward feedback. The individual reports for the superiors serve as the basis for an improved communication within the organisational units about leadership behaviour and cooperation. Furthermore, they give fresh impetus to a permanent discussion about leadership culture within the whole office. From this perspective, committing all executive levels to participate in the follow-up process is advisable.

The follow-up process at Destatis was set up by the project team (see section 2.3) to create maximum acceptance and organised by the human resources development section. In order to make the best of their results, superiors were required to pass through different follow-up stages. Most of these stages were accompanied by external advisors. All in all, there were nine coaches over a period of approximately eight months. Making use of the follow-up measures was controlled by the human resources development section.

Once the upward feedback process will be finalised, an evaluation will be conducted in order to improve the process and minimise its complexity, if necessary.

3.1. The four follow-up stages in detail

Four follow-up stages were installed that aimed at preparing superiors to deal with their results most effectively and to train them to communicate with those who evaluated them most constructively.

- Stage 1: Workshops for preparation

Before receiving their results, all superiors with at least five staff members were required to participate in this workshop. Within four hours, an external advisor instructed a group of up to twenty persons. The main goals were to illustrate the structure of the individual reports, to assist in interpreting individual results by using exemplary reports, and in preparing their team-workshops (see stage 3).

- Stage 2: One-to-one coachings

Shortly after receiving their individual reports, all superiors with at least five staff members were requested to make use of a one-to-one coaching of approximately ninety minutes.

This stage had its focus on the interpretation of and the reflection on the individual results. The starting point was usually to match the superior's self-perception with the view of his or her staff members. For this reason, superiors were requested beforehand to complete and bring their self-assessment questionnaires (see section 2.2) to the scheduled appointment. Furthermore, one-to-one coachings offered the opportunity to account for individual aspects in the work relationship with the supervised staff. Everything that was said was treated confidentially by the external coaches.

- Stage 3: Team-workshops

No matter how many staff members were assigned at the time of the survey, every superior had to organise and to lead a team-workshop (time frame: up to four hours) with all staff members of the respective organisational unit. The staff members were not obliged to participate in this meeting. They were, however, strongly advised to attend as progress in leadership behaviour can only be made when both sides take an active part in the process. The aim of the team-workshop was to develop common measures to improve work relationships, based on the individual results of the upward feedback. Since leadership is not to be seen as a "one-way street", superiors cannot improve on their own, they need the support of their staff members. It turned out to be that the most important benefit of the team-workshop was to talk about the individual results of the superior in order to understand the real meaning behind the answers given by the staff.

Superiors were offered on enquiry that the assigned external advisor could accompany the team-workshop and moderate the discussion. In general, the external advisor was the same person who conducted the workshop for preparation and the one-to-one coaching with the particular superior.

- Stage 4: Meetings within the departments

After the stages 1 to 3, meetings within the departments as the largest organisational units were recommended to the Heads of Department for their areas of responsibility. All executives within the same department should spare some time within the day-to-day business in order to talk about the leadership culture within their department.

The human resources development section did neither offer guidelines regarding the way of organising these meetings (e. g. one-level versus multi-level talks) nor regarding its contents. Ideally, the topics were related to all divisions within the department, such as the discussion of best practices in leadership behaviour or the evaluation of the upward feedback process from the point of view of the whole department.

3.2. Controlling participation of the superiors

Upward feedback at Destatis was primarily determined for supporting all executive levels. Elaborate follow-up measures were designed in order to improve the work relationships within the organisational units. For this reason, controlling participation in the obligatory follow-up measures was introduced. However, the success of the follow-up measures could not be monitored, of course, but the Heads of Department received the names of superiors who did not take part by the human resources development section. In this way, the Heads of Department were enabled to intervene where they considered it as necessary. There was, however, no instruction for the handling of these cases. The Heads of Department could decide by themselves whether, how and with which consequences to address the concerned superiors.

3.3. Evaluating the process for further development

An evaluation of the upward feedback process is necessary in order to create a knowledge transfer for future rounds and to learn from the mistakes made.

At the moment, upward feedback at Destatis reaches the finish line and the evaluation process is just about to start. A first conclusion that can be drawn is that the whole process – as described above – was very comprehensive, time- and resource-consuming. The measures undertaken proved to develop rather successful; however, it is most likely that for future rounds, the complexity of the process and its follow-ups might need to be reduced due to tight resources and in the light of the repetition effects.

4. Lessons learnt

When starting to prepare the first round of upward feedback, external support should be drawn upon – either by an expert consultant or by colleagues of other similar organisations who went through the whole process at least once. Exchange of experience is useful in order to avoid the major pitfalls of implementing this tool. Thus, the current paper aims at sharing insights into the approach of Destatis.

To begin with, the content of the questionnaire and the build-up of the evaluation system (who will assess whom?) need to suit the specific management structure and therefore should rather not be bought ready-made. Moreover, continuous and comprehensive communication (e. g. via intranet) is vital to dedicate both sides (employees and superiors) to the process. In doing so, concerns with regard to the risk of de-anonymisation and the sufficient extent of data protection must be anticipated and addressed. Communicating fixed rules of data handling helps to create transparency and trust. All of these efforts are justified in the context of ensuring long-time acceptance for the instrument from round to round.

The follow-up-measures before and after the publication of the results also contribute to the good reputation of in-house upward feedback. Once asked for their opinion, staff members expect that they can witness measures for improving leadership behaviour and work relationships where necessary. If the survey results are not taken seriously by their superiors and the organisation on the whole, employees will lose their trust in the instrument itself which might finally not only be penalised by decreasing response rates but also by demotivation and frustration.

All in all, upward feedback requires a high amount of preparation in order to achieve the established goals in the intended time frame. However, it offers a great deal of potential with regard to human resources development. Once weaknesses in leadership behaviour are identified, they can be overcome stepwise by developing and implementing purposive measures.