

RESEARCH | 360 Feedback

# DESIGNING RATING SCALES



Indu Bilaney and Mohak Jhaveri



## 360 Feedback | Designing Rating Scales

The rating scale is a key determinant of the quality of responses from a 360 degree survey – be it feedback or evaluation. Listed below are 5 tips that can help you design an effective rating scale – one that will generate feedback that is differentiating as well as well-calibrated.

### Highlights

- A 5-point scale works best
- Use an ODD numbered scale
- Ensure equidistance between all rating scale points
- Use a single scale for all questions
- Provide a 'Not Applicable' or 'Don't know' option

### 1 | A 5-point rating scale works best

A Rating scale having fewer than 5 points can lead to non-differentiating feedback. For instance, a 360 degree survey with a 4 point scale is likely to result in most aggregated scores falling between 2 and 3 making the results non-differentiating. This is because raters tend to avoid extreme points on a scale. On the other hand, too many points can blur the scale in the minds of the raters impacting the reliability of the responses.

### 2 | Use an ODD numbered scale

A scale with EVEN number of points can force raters to take a stand, even if they do not wish. For instance, consider the statement 'Meets deadlines', and you have to rate a person who has shown equal positive & negative behaviours in this area. If we have an even numbered scale with 'Never', 'Sometimes', 'Usually' & 'Always', you would be forced to choose between

'Sometimes' & 'Usually'. In addition, either of these will not accurately describe the person's behaviour. An ODD numbered scale, on the other hand, provides a midpoint which acts as an anchor and facilitates the rater in giving a more calibrated response.

### 3 | Ensure equidistance between rating scale points

A linear scale is one where the difference between any two consecutive rating points is the same. While it is difficult to ensure perfect linearity, a linear scale should be aimed for. This not only improves the quality of responses collected, it also ensures that when the ratings are converted to numerical scores, the results are representative of the original qualitative scores.

A Likert scale is a popular type of linear rating scale deployed in surveys. A common 5-pt Likert scale is - 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree', 'strongly agree'.

### 4 | Use a single scale for all questions

It is advisable to use a common scale across questions. This facilitates generating feedback of uniform quality from raters and also reduces rater fatigue.

In 360 degree surveys, while it is possible to deploy different scales for each question, it may not be the best thing to do. Let's see an example of this. Consider this question - 'How is her listening?' If we were to define a unique Behaviourally anchored rating scale [BARS] for this question, it would look like this:

- Often Interrupts others
- Is inattentive and disconnected
- Listens well, but distracted at times
- Listens attentively
- Listens actively with empathy (paraphrases, asks clarificatory questions)

However, deploying such a scale makes evaluation harder for the raters as they have to think through and understand each dimension for every question.

In addition, it is also likely that the focus person's behaviour may not fully be described by any particular point on the scale and may have an overlap with multiple descriptors on the scale. For instance, consider the earlier question 'How is her listening?'. Using the BARS above, how would you rate a person who interrupts others but also listens fairly attentively? How would you rate a person who listens empathetically but often misses the details?

### 5 | Provide a 'Not Applicable' or 'Don't know' option

Most importantly, do not forget to include a 'Not applicable' or 'Don't know' as an additional rating descriptor along with your scale. This will provide a valid alternative to raters who have no opinion on certain behaviours of the focus person. It will also improve the quality of the responses by eliminating junk responses and thereby avoiding skewed averages.

Refer Part 2 of our papers on Rating scales titled 'Commonly used Rating Scales' to familiarise yourself with some common rating scales and how they can be used.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Indu Bilaney, 44, is a Senior Consultant at Vernalis. She heads Vernalis' Organisation Diagnostics practice.

E: [indu.bilaney@vernalis.in](mailto:indu.bilaney@vernalis.in)  
M: +91 97680 74455



Mohak Jhaveri, 26, an engineer & MBA from IIM Trichy is a Consultant at Vernalis.

E: [mohak.jhaveri@vernalis.in](mailto:mohak.jhaveri@vernalis.in)  
M: +91 98333 61124

### Contact Us

Vernalis India Private Ltd.  
6C3 Gundecha Enclave, Kherani Road,  
Saki Naka, Andheri East,  
Mumbai - 400 072.

E: [service@vernalis.in](mailto:service@vernalis.in)  
T: +91 22 6725 8000

### Vernalis

Vernalis is an Indian management consulting firm that helps build high performance organisations. It has worked with more than 40 leading organisations on long term assignments ranging from Talent Strategy to Change & Transformation. More details on services, clients, project case lets, testimonials and team profile are available at [www.vernalis.org](http://www.vernalis.org)

### TrueSphere 360

TrueSphere 360 is an end-to-end 360 feedback solution by Vernalis. It's not just a 360 software, but also runs the 360 as a developmental program. Value adding services include questionnaire design, rater training, monitoring response quality, personal development dialogues, development plans and more. More details available at [www.truesphere.in](http://www.truesphere.in)