Informal Performance Feedback:
Seeking and Giving

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Information concerning one's performance on a task or job is an important factor in the learning of a new task or job, in the maintenance of performance levels on a previously learned task or job, and in the motivation of the individual toward improved performance levels. Such feedback can be given by the manager to the individual in a formal performance appraisal interview setting. Dickinson (this volume) has discussed the research related to individual attitudes about performance appraisal. Feedback can also be communicated in an informal manner in the course of day-to-day interactions between the manager and the employee, between the individual and the customers or clients, and among co-workers. A consideration of issues related to the giving of informal feedback by the manager to an employee and to the seeking of such feedback by the employee is the primary focus of this chapter.

The giving and seeking of informal feedback about work performance may not, at first glance, be related to the focus of this volume, individual and organizational perspectives related to personnel selection and assessment. However, if we consider that the informal feedback that an individual receives is likely to color his or her reaction to such personnel decisions as promotions, then relevance to the individual perspective is more apparent. Further, as is discussed later in this chapter in more detail, the active seeking of performance feedback by the work performer may alter the nature or favorability of the informal feedback that the individual receives from others. Thus, feedback seeking may indirectly affect the individual's expectations about and reactions to formal organizational assessments of performance effectiveness and related personnel decisions.
In examining informal feedback, it is useful to consider the work setting as an information environment (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978). An information-environment framework implies that an individual not only receives performance-related information from various elements in the environment but also monitors the environment for such information and acts on the environment to create such information. This chapter begins with a more extended treatment of the information-environment approach to performance feedback. A consideration of the individual as an active seeker of feedback within this environment follows. Then, factors that affect the giving of feedback (primarily by the manager) to the individual performer are discussed. Finally, the implications of this perspective for feedback systems in organizations are examined.

FEEDBACK IN AN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Thinking about the work setting as an information environment recognizes that the individual at work faces daily a large array of information that may have relevance for the individual's learning about how well he or she is performing at work. A major task for the individual is to make sense of this environment, to create a personal meaning for the environment relevant to the goals and purposes of the individual. Within the work setting it has been argued (e.g., Ashford & Cummings, 1983) that important goals for many individuals include the correction of performance errors, the reduction of personal uncertainty about the appropriateness of various work behaviors and how others perceive and evaluate one's performance, and the attainment and maintenance of feelings of self-competence with regard to job performance. Thus, performance-related information in the work environment should have considerable salience, and the individual is likely to be motivated to gain access to such information.

It is important to note that these personal goals may only partially overlap with organizational goals related to feedback. Organizational goals are usually concerned almost exclusively with performance improvement.

Performance-related information (hereafter simply called feedback) can be categorized along several dimensions. Three such dimensions are type of information, source of information, and information acquisition mode.

Types of Informal Feedback

There are two broad types of feedback: informative and evaluative. Informative feedback tells the performer what behaviors are necessary for successful performance of the job, and evaluative feedback informs the performer about whether he or she is performing successfully on the job (Greller & Herold, 1975; Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978). Both types of feedback are likely to be necessary for the performer to meet his or her goals. Greller and Herold (1975) and Hanser
and Muchinsky (1978) have found that both informative and evaluative feedback are perceived by work performers, although the distinctiveness of the two types was not clear. Many feedback messages contain both informative and evaluative elements. Thus, it may be difficult for work performers to distinguish between them in actual work settings.

Other researchers have proposed different terms for the categorization of feedback that may be easier to distinguish than "informative" and "evaluative." For example, Earley, Northcraft, Lee, and Lituchy (1990) referred to outcome and process feedback. Outcome feedback is information concerning performance outcomes, whereas process feedback is information concerning the manner by which the work performer implements a work strategy. Process feedback is clearly more specific and informative with regard to how the individual might alter performance strategies, whereas outcome feedback primarily informs the individual about overall performance success and may impact more on motivation or effort level rather than on strategy.

**Sources of Informal Feedback**

Source refers to which element in the work environment supplies the feedback to the work performer. There are a variety of possible sources for informal feedback. These include: (a) higher hierarchical sources (immediate supervisor and higher management); (b) interpersonal sources not higher than the role performer in the formal organizational hierarchy (peers, subordinates, and customer-clients); and (c) the process of task-job performance itself (task-self).

Data obtained by Herold, Liden, and Leatherwood (1987) suggested strongly that feedback from the task and self is viewed most favorably by work performers with regard to personal usefulness. Feedback from supervisors was rated next most useful, followed by that from co-workers. Feedback that came from the formal organization was viewed as least useful by the work performers. The data of Herold et al. (1987) did not include an examination of the relationship of perceptions of the usefulness of feedback from different sources to actual job performance. A study by Becker and Klimoski (1989) did examine the relationship between the organizational feedback environment (as measured by the Job Feedback Survey of Herold and Parsons, 1985) and a composite performance measure developed from supervisory, peer, and self-ratings. Becker and Klimoski found that feedback from the supervisor and organization had the strongest relationship to performance. Higher frequencies of negative feedback from the supervisor and organization were associated with lower performance and more frequent positive feedback from these sources was associated with higher performance. Note that the correlational nature of these data preclude any statement about direction of causality.

Additional research that examines perceptions of usefulness of feedback from various sources, the amount of feedback provided from different sources, and
performance of the feedback recipients is needed to clarify the apparent inconsist-
sistency between the findings of Herold et al. (1987) and those of Becker and
Klimoski (1989). It should be noted that the Herold et al. study did obtain per-
ceptions of frequency as well as usefulness of feedback from various sources.
These perceptions had a median correlation of about .55 across the five sources
(i.e., the more frequent the feedback from a given source, the more useful it
was judged). This may represent a confound in the measurement of these vari-
ables that partially explains their differences from the results of Becker and
Klimoski.

Modes of Informal Feedback Information Acquisition

Recent theory and research (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983;
Farr, 1991; Larson, 1989) have suggested that individuals attempt to obtain
performance-related information via several modes. However, most research
concerned with performance feedback has looked at such information as a spe-
cial case of a one-way communication paradigm. From this perspective the work
performer is a relatively passive recipient of feedback information intentionally
transmitted by the source(s). The response of the recipient is generally evalu-
ated in terms of whether it represents a behavioral change in the direction that
was advocated by the feedback message, that is, whether the recipient’s per-
formance is improved (at least in the view of the source). Thus, much of this
research on feedback has been concerned with how feedback leads to perform-
ance improvements and with what message and source factors lead to the
greatest amount of improvement. Psychological models of feedback developed
within this perspective tend to be focused on the characteristics of the recipient
that mediate the perception and acceptance of feedback messages and the in-
tent to respond in accordance with feedback (e.g., Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

Feedback information can be intentionally transmitted to the role performer
by a number of sources, such as supervisors, co-workers, subordinates, and
customers. For example, the supervisor may do this on a formal basis in an
appraisal interview such as described by Dickinson (this volume). As noted by
Ashford and Cummings (1983), these sources may also unintentionally provide
feedback to a work performer. Ashford and Cummings argued that work per-
formers may actively seek more informal feedback about their performance via
two modes of information acquisition. First, the work environment may be mon-
tored for performance-relevant information. The monitoring mode requires the
work performer to observe the work environment and the behavior of others
in that environment for cues that may be useful as feedback. These cues must
then be integrated by the individual performer and meaning relevant to perform-
ance derived. Second, the work performer may attempt to increase the amount
of available performance-relevant information by “creating” such information.
This may be done by directly asking others in the work setting for their evalua-
tions about the individual’s performance (labeled as inquiry by Ashford and Cum-
mings). For example, former Mayor Edward Koch of New York City frequently
asked citizens on the street or at meetings: “How am I doing (as mayor)?”

Feedback may also be created (or stimulated) by performing in novel or in-
novative ways (at least in reference to the performer’s past behavior; Farr,
1991). Changes in performance levels or styles are more likely than static lev-
els or styles to elicit overt feedback information as well as behavioral cues that
can be monitored and interpreted. A form of active seeking of informal feed-
back similar to inquiry, but less direct, has been labeled as prompting (Starnes &
Farr, 1991). Prompting refers to the solicitation of informal feedback through
behaviors that cue the source to provide feedback but do not directly ask for it.

Thus, four modes of feedback seeking have been suggested: inquiry, monitor-
ing, innovative acts, and prompting. Miller and Jablin (1991) described some
related tactics that organizational newcomers may use to seek information use-
ful to them during their period of entry and assimilation into the organization.
Most of the information-seeking tactics noted by Miller and Jablin fall under one
of the four modes described earlier, although their terminology differs.

The several modes of actively seeking feedback can be arrayed in terms of
their likely effort and cost to the individual performer (Ashford & Cummings,
1983). For example, monitoring typically requires less physical effort than in-
novation, prompting, or inquiry but may require more cognitive processing of
many cues and more attentional effort if clear cues are not present in the work
environment.

Three major types of costs exist: loss-of-face (or social costs in the termi-
nology of Miller & Jablin, 1991; or desire to maintain a favorable self-presentation
as noted by Northcraft & Ashford, 1990); negative impact on one’s self-concept;
and inferential. Loss-of-face refers to the fact that it may be embarrassing to
ask others for feedback or to be known as desirous of feedback. Others may
judge the work performer to be insecure, ingratiating, and so forth (Ashford &
Cummings, 1983). The likelihood of face loss is clearly greatest for the in-
quiry mode and least for the monitoring mode with innovation and prompting
in between.

Negative impact on self-concept is possible if negative feedback is received
(Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Because most individuals are motivated to en-
hance or maintain favorable views of themselves, any potential threat to such
views will be perceived as very costly by the individual. Here, individual differ-
ences are likely to moderate the degree of cost associated with various modes
of feedback seeking. Those with low self-concepts or performance expectations
are likely to perceive greater costs with all modes of feedback seeking than those
with strong self-concepts or high performance expectations (Northcraft & As-
ford, 1990). Individuals with a learning goal orientation may view the potential
of receiving negative feedback as less costly than those with a performance goal
orientation (Dweck, 1986). Those with a learning goal orientation consider
errors or negative feedback to be useful information about how to master a task or develop a skill and, consequently, do not react defensively to such feedback.

Inference costs refer to possible errors the work performer can make concerning the feedback information obtained. The less direct mode of monitoring is more likely to result in inferential errors about the meaning of a manager’s smile or a co-worker’s invitation to lunch than is the more direct mode of asking a supervisor or co-worker about one’s work performance (i.e., inquiry). Prompting and innovation are likely to fall in between monitoring and inquiry in terms of inferential costs. For the individual performer there is generally a trade-off between face loss and inferential error costs. Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggested that the individual will actively seek feedback information only when the perceived anticipated value of the information to be obtained exceeds the negative aspects of effort and cost.

Feedback seeking is highly consistent with a view of work as an information environment and emphasizes the active, rather than the passive, role that the individual takes in the feedback process. It also suggests that a social information-processing or social-comparison component (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Weiss & Shaw, 1979; Zalesny & Ford, 1990) is likely to be important to the understanding of how the role performer develops and interprets feedback information.

Although absolute standards of performance may exist for certain aspects of jobs, it would be unusual for job performance to be thoroughly, or even adequately, covered by such measures for the great majority of jobs. Instead, the assessment of performance level (by self and others) is done on a relative basis, that is, comparing the work performer’s behavior with that of others in the same or similar jobs. Also, it is likely that the interpretation of indirect performance cues (obtained via monitoring, for example) is in part based on comparisons of such cues that other work performers have received.

Inferring the Meaning of Informal Feedback

Drawing on conceptual and empirical developments in attribution theory (e.g., Kelley & Michela, 1980), it seems reasonable that a work performer would use certain pieces of information about the feedback to draw inferences about its possible meaning. This information includes the dimensions of consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness. In the context of drawing inferences about possible performance cues, consensus can refer to two comparisons. First, consensus refers to whether a single source provides similar or identical feedback to other role performers when they perform in a way comparable to the target work performer. Second, consensus can refer to whether multiple sources provide similar feedback to the individual about job performance. Consistency refers to whether the cue is provided to the target role performer each time the individual
performs in a similar way. Distinctiveness refers to whether the cue is not provided to the target performer when he or she performs in a manner quantitatively or qualitatively different from the initial performance.

If a cue is perceived to be contingently related to performance, then the cue would be seen as being consistent and distinctive. Thus, its perceived information value should be high. Further, if the cue is contingently provided to other work performers (that is, has consensus), then its perceived information value would be still higher. Finally, if different sources provide similar feedback to the individual, then its information value would be perceived as even higher. The most salient cue dimensions should be those related to one's own performance, not those concerned with the relation of cues to the behavior of other work performers. Consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus related to multiple feedback sources are only concerned with the relation of the possible performance cue to one's own behavior or performance. Consensus related to other work performers is concerned with the linkage of cues to the behavior of others and is less likely to affect perceived information value (Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981).

However, consensus related to other work performers should have more impact on the perceived information value of feedback to the extent that the job duties of other performers are similar to those of the target performer, the physical proximity of other performers, and the observability of others' work outcomes. These factors should facilitate the ease of comparisons of the links between feedback and the performance of others.

Liden and Mitchell (1985) found that recipients of feedback preferred feedback that contained attributional information to feedback without such information. In general, they also preferred feedback that implied an external attribution for poor performance rather than an internal one.

It should be noted that research suggests that there is a bias toward seeing more covariation between events in our environment than objectively exists (e.g., Jennings, Amabile, & Ross, 1982). Individuals often have an "implicit theory" that predicts that elements in our environment are linked together in predictable ways. It is likely that most work performers would have a personal theory (implicitly even if not articulated) about the relationships between one's performance and the behaviors of others (that is, possible feedback cues). Thus, the tendency to believe that certain behaviors are diagnostic of others' evaluations of one's job performance may be widespread.

Use of Feedback Seeking in Work Settings

Studies by Ashford and Cummings (1985) and Herold and Parsons (1985) report data consistent with the view that proactive feedback seeking is a common and important method for obtaining performance-related information in work settings. Herold and Parsons conducted a series of factor analyses of responses
to a feedback questionnaire. The resulting factors suggest that work performers use a variety of cues, both direct and indirect, when attempting to determine how well they are performing their jobs. Their data indicate that individuals do use self-generated feedback for obtaining both favorable and unfavorable information about performance.

Ashford and Cummings (1985) examined the relationship between feedback-seeking behavior and a variety of individual and situational characteristics. They found that those work performers with relatively short tenure in the organization were more likely to seek feedback than longer term employees (a finding compatible with the discussion of the information seeking of organizational newcomers by Miller & Jabi, 1991). Individuals who indicated higher levels of job involvement sought feedback to a greater extent than those with lower levels of involvement. Tolerance for ambiguity operated as a moderator of the effects of role ambiguity and contingency on feedback seeking. Only individuals who were relatively intolerant of ambiguity sought more feedback when their jobs were ambiguous in terms of behavioral requirements; those who could tolerate such ambiguity did not seek more feedback even if their jobs were ambiguous.

A similar effect was found for contingency uncertainty (defined as the individual's experienced uncertainty about the relationship between evaluations of current performance and the attainment of second-order rewards such as promotions and pay increases). Those individuals relatively intolerant of ambiguity sought more feedback when experienced contingency uncertainty was high, but those relatively tolerant of ambiguity did not. These findings support the argument that feedback should be treated as a resource for the individual work performer. Those individuals who should place greater value on feedback (that is, have a greater need for it) were more likely to seek it actively. Essentially, the data suggest that people seek feedback about their performance to the extent that they do not already possess internal standards of comparison and to the extent that such information is not forthcoming from external sources. There are likely to be individual differences (for example, intolerance for ambiguity) that affect the total amount of performance-related information that an individual desires or requires. These findings require replication before too much is made of them as such interactions are often unreliable.

Bennett, Herold, and Ashford (1990) reported a reanalysis of the Ashford and Cummings (1985) data that separated job-related and problem-solving tolerance for ambiguity; these two forms of tolerance for ambiguity had been aggregated in the earlier article. Further, Bennett et al. assessed the relationship of these two forms of tolerance for ambiguity with several specific forms of feedback seeking, namely: (a) inquiry from manager, (b) inquiry from co-worker, and (c) monitoring the feedback environment, for two different types of information, information regarding current performance and information regarding advancement potential. Results indicated that individuals with low job-related tolerance for ambiguity queried managers and monitored the environment more
for feedback about both current performance and advancement than those high in such tolerance. There was no relationship between job-related tolerance for ambiguity and feedback queries to co-workers. Neither did problem-solving tolerance for ambiguity correlate with feedback seeking, except for an unexpected finding that those with low tolerance for such ambiguity sought less feedback from supervisors about advancement potential than those with high tolerance. This study also suggests that the delineation of modes of feedback seeking is desirable in research, at least until more is known about the relationships among the various modes.

Additional data consistent with the view that feedback seeking is related to its relative costs and benefits were obtained by Ashford (1986). She found that longer tenure employees sought less feedback than those with shorter time in the organization or in their current position. Employees in the organization for a longer period saw greater risk in feedback seeking and those in their current job for a longer time placed less value on feedback than those with less tenure.

Morrison and Weldon (1990) reported that individuals with assigned performance goals sought more feedback than those without such goals. Further, among the individuals who were assigned goals, those who sought feedback were more likely to achieve their goals. Morrison and Weldon suggested that the assigned goal increased feedback seeking because those individuals with goals valued attainment of the goals and could use the feedback to accomplish that. This reasoning is consistent with the view of Ashford and Cummings (1983) that feedback can be a resource for the individual work performer.

The impact of additional characteristics of individuals and feedback systems on feedback seeking were studied by Northcraft and Ashford (1990). They obtained results that varied due to the type of feedback being sought. For feedback about one’s personal performance (based on objective and absolute measures), it was found that individuals engaged in less feedback inquiry when performance expectations were low, when self-esteem was low, and when the feedback was to be delivered publicly (especially for those with low performance expectations). For social-comparison feedback (which compared the individual’s performance to that of others), performance expectations had no effect on inquiry. Public feedback delivery decreased feedback inquiry in comparison to private delivery. Northcraft and Ashford speculated that the differences between personal performance and social-comparison information might be due to the perception of most subjects that the seeking of personal performance information would be viewed as appropriate (these were lab subjects performing a fairly novel task), but that seeking social-comparison information might be construed as excessively competitive. In any event, the results suggest that the calculation of costs and benefits of feedback information are likely to be complex and situationally dependent. They also indicate that individuals who may need (at least in terms of performance improvement) feedback the most, those with low performance expectations, are least likely to request it and, thus, less likely to improve.
In summary, the various studies that have looked at factors influencing feedback seeking offer general support to the propositions originally put forth by Ashford and Cummings (1983). Feedback seeking, both in terms of amount and mode, seems to be moderated by the individual's perceptions of the various costs and benefits to be derived from the information that might be obtained. However, we still do not have a complete picture of all the factors affecting those judgments nor how the individual combines these perceptions to make decisions regarding feedback seeking. Nonetheless, the data do suggest that individuals who are being formally assessed (e.g., in a selection or promotion situation) will be motivated to learn how well they have performed, whether on selection instruments (in the case of selection candidates) or on the current job (in the case of promotion candidates). Thus, the impact of feedback seeking on reactions to selection and assessment devices seems quite probable.

THE GIVING OF FEEDBACK

The previous material covered in this chapter has been concerned with feedback from the perspective of the work performer. Feedback can also be viewed from the standpoint of the potential feedback provider. As noted earlier, there are several different possible sources of feedback information; however, in this section only the manager as a source of informal feedback is considered. Larson (1984, 1989) has suggested a model of informal feedback giving that is quite compatible with the general orientation of this chapter. It examines the cognitive, affective, and situational antecedents that are likely to influence the manager's decision to give feedback to a work performer and also considers the cognitive and affective consequences that giving informal performance feedback can have for the manager. Larson (1989) has discussed the interplay between the employee's feedback-seeking behavior and the subsequent giving of feedback by the manager with focus on the case of the poor-performing employee. Of less interest to Larson are the effects of such feedback on the work performer's performance, although the employee's response to feedback is a part of the model. Figure 11.1 presents a simplified version of Larson's (1984) model of informal feedback giving; Fig. 11.1 also includes Larson's (1989) addition of employee feedback seeking to his earlier model. Larson's model is based on concepts of attribution theory that have already been discussed in some detail earlier in this chapter.

Antecedents of Feedback Giving

Rather than discuss in detail the rationale for the antecedents of feedback giving shown in Fig. 11.1, a summary of the major predictions of the model is given next (see Larson, 1984, 1989, for more details.) Additional references that support the predictions are provided where appropriate.
To summarize the antecedents of feedback giving shown in Fig. 11.1, a manager is more likely to give informal feedback to an employee following a particular behavior or performance if: (a) The manager views the behavior as important; (b) the performance level deviates from the typical one, especially if below standard (Hobson, 1986; Larson, 1986; Quinn & Farr, 1989); (c) the employee is viewed as being personally responsible for performance (and effort plays a major role in determining performance level); (d) the manager's own performance and rewards are dependent on the performance of the employee (Larson, 1986); (e) the organizational norms and particular role held by the manager encourage the transmittal of performance information; (f) the employee is well liked by the manager and the feedback is favorable; (g) the manager anticipates positive affect resulting from the giving of feedback; and (h) the manager believes that employees will respond in a positive manner to feedback.

Larson (1989) hypothesized that employees who believe that they are performing poorly often will initiate the inquiry mode of feedback seeking, directing the query at the manager. The prompting mode (Starnes & Farr, 1991) might be utilized also. The value to the employee of such inquiries or prompts is based on the well-established tendency of managers to distort feedback to poor performers in a positive direction (i.e., to provide feedback indicating that performance is better than it objectively is; Benedict & Levine, 1988; Fisher, 1979;
Larson, 1986; Longenecker, Sims, & Gioia, 1987). A direct query or prompt by a poor performer, prior to the giving of "spontaneous" feedback by the manager to the performer, may result in the manager indicating that the performance is adequate or involves only minor problems. (Such feedback seeking can be thought of a specific instance of impression management or influence tactics; see, for example, Schriesheim & Hinkin, 1990; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991.) Thus, the seeking of feedback may prevent the giving of more negative feedback. Supporting this prediction, Quinn and Farr (1989) found that high feedback seekers were given more total positive feedback than low feedback seekers, controlling for the actual performance level of the performer.

Following the provision of feedback to the feedback seeker, the manager may also remember the feedback and not the actual, more negative, performance, leading to a more positive performance "record" for that employee in the mind of the manager. Thus, feedback seeking by the relatively poor employee may have both short- and long-term effects. The long-term effects may include better chances for positive assessments and subsequent promotions for those who more frequently inquire about and prompt performance feedback.

Consequences of Giving Feedback

As indicated in Fig. 11.1, a manager's giving informal feedback to an employee has several direct consequences that can also indirectly influence some antecedent variables. The giving of feedback may itself more directly influence certain other antecedent variables. Figure 11.1 denotes the dynamic nature of the feedback-giving process over time.

The very act of giving feedback influences the salience of the employee's performance by focusing attention on the behavior and by demanding the processing of information about the behavior. Particularly for less than adequate performance, the manager is more likely to pay attention to the employee's future performance if feedback has been given in the past, especially if the feedback has included performance goals or specific corrective actions to be taken by the employee.

In a related vein, giving feedback is likely to facilitate the manager's memory for past performance information through increased processing of performance-relevant information or through the increased availability of performance information (Larson, 1984). Memory-based judgments about the employee's performance may also influence future attributions. If the manager gives feedback only about poor performance, the manager's recall of performance information for the employee will be biased in the direction of greater unfavorability. These may lead to a judgment of consistently poor information and, thus, an internal and stable attribution regarding the causes of the employee's behavior (e.g., I remember only poor performance; therefore, this employee must not have
the ability to do the job). As noted earlier, feedback seeking by the employee is likely to result in positively distorted feedback from the manager that, in turn, may similarly bias the recall of the employee’s performance history. Also, Farr, Schwartz, Quinn, and Bittner (1989) found that high feedback seekers were rated as more highly task motivated than low feedback seekers. Such evaluations may influence later behavior and decisions of the manager concerning the employee.

The employee’s subsequent performance and attitudinal responses to feedback are affected by the feedback given by the manager, but in potentially complex ways (e.g., Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984). Of greater interest to Larson’s (1984) model are the effects that such consequences have on prior variables. Employee responses to feedback impact on the manager’s implicit theories about the effects of feedback by providing data relevant to such theories. These implicit theories are presumed to change rather slowly, although a particularly vivid single event could trigger a major change (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Affect toward giving feedback and toward the employee are both influenced by the employee’s reactions to the feedback. Employees who respond in line with the feedback and accept the feedback without defensive or negatively emotional responses are likely to be better liked. Favorable reactions will also tend to make more positive the anticipated effect resulting from the giving of feedback in the future.

Recent research on reactions to informal feedback suggest that the potentially destructive responses to negative feedback can be lessened. Baron (1988, 1990) has demonstrated that negative feedback that is harsh in tone, nonspecific, and focuses on the employee as the sole cause of the poor performance leads to greater employee anger and tension, lowered self-efficacy, and less willingness to collaborate or compromise. Baron has also found that if criticism is paired with apologies by the feedback giver concerning the feedback (e.g., ‘I’m sorry to have made you angry’; ‘I’m sorry that I had to be so harsh in evaluating your performance.’) or if the giver indicates that there were no harmful intentions of the negative feedback, that many of the undesirable reactions of the work performer are minimized. Fedor, Eder, and Buckley (1989) also found that, if the intentions of the feedback giver were viewed as constructive and supportive of the employee, then negative feedback was reacted to in a more positive manner than if less favorable intentions were perceived.

**Importance of the Feedback Giving Model**

There has long been interest in developing better ways of presenting formal performance feedback, such as in performance appraisal interviews (e.g., Kay, Meyer, & French, 1965; Meyer, Kay, & French, 1965). However, prior to the work of Larson (1984), there has not been an attempt to develop a comprehensive model of giving feedback on an informal basis as a part of the daily process of supervising and managing others at work. The subsequent integration (Larson,
1989) of the feedback-seeking literature with the feedback-giving model adds to our understanding of these dynamic processes. It also suggests how the individual may influence assessment outcomes (and subsequent personnel decisions) that rely on judgments made by others in the work setting.

It seems clear that informal feedback by its potential frequency and temporal closeness to behavioral acts should be far more powerful as a mechanism for effecting change than formal performance-appraisal methods that typically occur once or twice per year. Larson (1984, 1989) has given us a good start in understanding informal feedback giving. However, there is still much to learn. We do not know if it is important whether feedback has been given spontaneously by the supervisor or has resulted from a query or prompt from the performer. In addition, Larson has only considered the supervisor or manager as the source of informal feedback, but co-workers certainly represent another source with great potential for providing such feedback. We need to examine factors likely to influence the decision of peers to give feedback or not to their colleagues. Also, Larson’s model is concerned with the individual employee as the recipient of feedback. As work groups with interdependent roles and tasks become more prevalent in work organizations (see the chapter by Prieto, this volume), we need to be more concerned with giving feedback to groups (Nadler, 1979; Varca & Levy, 1984).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

In the previous sections of this chapter the concern has been primarily in terms of theory and research related to performance feedback. In this section the focus is on the implications of recent research and theory for practice, that is, how performance feedback can be more effectively given and received. Space does not permit a thorough discussion of all such implications; the following is a selective number of those highlighted by the material presented in this chapter:

1. Generally in work situations, individuals desire more feedback than they are currently receiving about their work performance. Although not a surprising conclusion, recent research on feedback seeking highlights an important consequence of a less than desired amount of feedback. In the absence of sufficient feedback, many work performers will search for or create feedback for themselves. They may interpret various actions and messages from managers, peers, and others as having performance-relevant information, even if such is not intended by the other person(s). This may lead to errors by the work performer in his or her understanding of how others evaluate his or her work performance. Research evidence suggests that individuals seek less feedback when their work role is not ambiguous, when the manager provides information about the relationships between performance and organizational rewards, and when the in-
individual has been employed for a relatively long period of time (Ashford & Cummings, 1985). Thus, managers should be especially careful to provide feedback to organizational and work group newcomers (Miller & Jablin, 1991) and to those in positions that are not well defined or do not result in readily observable outcomes.

2. Several findings point to the importance of the type of information that is communicated to the work performer. Nadler (1977) and Baron (1988, 1990) noted that feedback should be relatively specific, based on particular behavioral events, and constructive in nature, that is, indicating ways in which the performance can be improved. Future performance goals should also be specified, and employee input into the setting of these goals is often useful for their acceptance and accomplishment (Igen et al., 1979; Latham & Wexley, 1981; Nadler, 1979). The specificity of goals serves well both the directing and motivating purposes of feedback. Research concerned with the role of attributions in motivating work performance suggests that managers should include feedback statements that encourage employees to make appropriate internal attributions (Parsons, Herold, & Leatherwood, 1985); for example, employees should be told that poor performance may be overcome by working harder, or that a task can be learned and performed well only after practice and early errors. Similarly, managers should indicate to employees after successful performance that their success was due to ability and effort. Feedback needs to include not only information about the outcomes of performance (that is, the overall or final success or failure), but also information about the effectiveness of process variables leading to the outcome (Jacoby, Mazursky, Troutman, & Kuss, 1984). Jacoby et al. found that better performers sought feedback of a cognitive, diagnostic nature and not outcome feedback (see also the work of Earley et al., 1990).

3. Informal or day-to-day feedback is more important than feedback that occurs during the annual or semianual performance-appraisal session in terms of its impacts on work performance and attitudes. However, managerial training tends to focus on the formal feedback process. More organizations need to be concerned about developing the manager's ability and willingness to give informal feedback. Attention also needs to be given to the topic of training work performers to receive feedback in a nondefensive constructive manner.

4. Organizations must be concerned about the perceptions of employees concerning the fairness and accuracy of feedback and appraisal mechanisms (see Dickinson, this volume). The performance standards of the organization and manager must be reasonable, and there should be reasonable congruence between organizational and personal standards for effective performance (Taylor et al., 1984). Periodic attitude surveys concerning both performance evaluation methods and feedback processes are needed to monitor employee opinion and to identify problems before they become severe.
5. Individual differences among work performers require the provider of feedback to be sensitive to variations in interpretation of and reaction to performance information. Not enough is known about the specific links between individual characteristics and feedback-related behaviors and attitudes to be able to identify how certain types of individuals will respond to various kinds of feedback messages. What is important for the manager to understand is that one should not expect all employees to respond in the same way.

REFERENCES


