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SOURCE ATTRIBUTES AND FEEDBACK SEEKING: A FIELD STUDY

Michelle R. Tuckey
Neil Brewer
Kylie Barnes

ABSTRACT

This study examined relationships between feedback inquiry, performance, individual difference variables, and attributes of the feedback source in two Australian organizational settings. Although performance (above or below average) was a significant predictor, the study failed to find any support for the importance of source characteristics in the feedback seeking process, despite predictions being firmly grounded in contemporary theory. A review of the unexpected findings suggested that the opportunity to select from a variety of sources may be an important determinant of how source attributes influence feedback seeking. Important implications for the dependent variables used in feedback seeking research were also highlighted.

Keywords: feedback seeking, source attributes, source characteristics, performance

INTRODUCTION

Performance feedback is an important organizational and individual resource (Ashford & Cummings 1983). Proactive feedback seeking can be a valuable mechanism for obtaining useful information about work performance, with empirical evidence confirming that people are sometimes reluctant to deliver feedback (Levy, Albright, Cawley & Williams 1995; Northcraft & Ashford 1990), especially when it is negative (Larson 1984; Levy et al. 1995). Ashford and Cummings (1983) outlined two methods for seeking feedback: (1) by monitoring the situation and the behaviour of others, or (2) by asking someone directly. The focus of the present research was the direct method of feedback seeking, in the form of inquiry.

It has long been acknowledged that the characteristics of a feedback source can influence how the recipient responds to feedback (Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor 1979). Research has also revealed that source attributes can play a significant role in the decision regarding whether or not to seek feedback and from whom (Levy, Cober & Miller 2002; Vancouver & Morrison 1995). Due to the limited amount of research in this area, however, further investigation is required to enhance our understanding of the influence of source characteristics on the feedback seeking process. The principal aim of the present research was, therefore, to investigate situational determinants of feedback seeking (specifically, attributes of the feedback source) in a field setting.

The integrated model of feedback seeking proposed by VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla and Brown (2000) incorporates dispositional, contextual, and cognitive antecedents. Cognitions regarding the cost and value of seeking feedback are regarded as the direct antecedents, with contextual and dispositional factors having direct and indirect influences on the perceived cost and value of seeking. The role of perceived value of feedback in promoting feedback seeking has received good support. Evidence for the deterrent influence of perceived cost being has been less conclusive. This model provides a suitable theoretical framework to guide predictions of the present study. Hypotheses regarding contextual factors (source

Michelle Tuckey is a lecturer in the School of Psychology, University of South Australia (email: michelle.tuckey@unisa.edu.au); Neil Brewer and Kylie Barnes are with the School of Psychology, Flinders University.

attributes), dispositional variables (need for achievement and self-esteem), and feedback seeking are outlined below in accordance with this integrated framework.

Source Attributes

Research and literature on feedback seeking and acceptance has revealed four source attributes likely to be involved in the decision to seek feedback through direct inquiry: (1) expertise, (2) accessibility, (3) reward power, and (4) the relationship quality between the source and seeker. These source attributes are discussed in turn below.

Source expertise refers to the source's level of technical knowledge and skill (Klitch & Feldman 1992) with respect to the dimension of performance under consideration (Ilgen et al. 1979). In other words, expertise is an indication of a source's ability to evaluate and provide constructive information about performance. In terms of VandeWalle et al's (2000) integrated model, source expertise should enhance the perceived value of feedback and thereby promote feedback seeking. Given that people are generally motivated to seek accurate and reliable information about their performance (Ashford & Cummings 1983), we predicted that source expertise should be positively related to the likelihood of seeking feedback (Hypothesis 1 [H1]). Source expertise may be particularly important to employees who have a high need for achievement because such individuals tend to place more value on accurate and diagnostic feedback (Trope 1975). Accordingly, we predicted an interaction between the influence of expertise and need for achievement on the likelihood of seeking feedback (H2).

Negative feedback is considered more diagnostic than positive feedback (Ashford & Tsui 1991). In other words, constructive criticism about employee performance is regarded as having high informational value, and is therefore likely to be instrumental for the attainment of work-related goals (Ashford & Tsui 1991). Overall then, feedback seeking should be greater after poor performance than good performance (cf., Ashford 1986; Tuckey, Brewer & Williamson 2002) (H3). Clearly, however, situational and dispositional variables will interact with performance to influence feedback seeking. For example, expertise may be particularly salient after poor performance. When an employee initiates feedback seeking after poor performance in an attempt to improve, expert sources are most likely to have information useful for development. This suggests that performance should interact with expertise to influence the likelihood of seeking feedback (H4).

Accessibility refers to the ease with which information can be obtained from a source (O'Reilly 1982), representing one of the potential costs of seeking (cf. Ashford 1986; Ashford & Cummings 1983; VandeWalle et al. 2000). Specifically, low accessibility should elicit time and effort costs associated with seeking feedback, thereby decreasing the likelihood that feedback inquiry will occur. In other words, there should be a positive relationship between accessibility and feedback seeking (H5). In addition, individuals with a higher need to achieve should be more motivated to overcome barriers to accessibility (feedback seeking costs) because they value feedback more than individuals with a lower need for achievement (Trope, 1975). Hence, as need for achievement increases (and so too the perception of feedback value), the effect of accessibility on the likelihood of seeking feedback should decrease (H6).

Source reward power is the extent to which the source is perceived to be in a position to determine desirable and adverse consequences for the seeker (Porter, Allen & Angle 1981). Seeking feedback from high power sources should be regarded as more valuable when it will alert the source to performance that is likely to be rewarded. In other words, when the

expectation exists that good work performance leads to favourable consequences, employees should be more likely to seek feedback from high power sources (who determine consequences) after good performance. Thus, we expected an interaction between the influence of performance and reward power on the likelihood of seeking feedback (H7).

Finally, relationship quality is hypothesized to influence feedback seeking because it may impact on the extent to which the seeker perceives the presence of personal and social costs in the act of seeking (Vancouver & Morrison 1995). For example, an employee who has a good relationship with his/her supervisor should be less worried about the potential costs of seeking feedback. Hence, relationship quality should be positively associated with the likelihood of seeking feedback (H8). Following from this argument, a high quality relationship may be particularly important to individuals with low self-esteem who are concerned with protecting their ego (e.g., Vancouver & Morrison 1995) meaning that, as self-esteem increases, relationship quality should become less influential on the likelihood of seeking feedback (H9).

Vancouver and Morrison (1995) provided the only comprehensive investigation of the effects of source attributes on feedback inquiry. Sixty-four first-year students responded to 32 hypothetical scenarios in which they were told they had either performed 'pretty good' or 'not very good'. Following each scenario the students read four statements describing the feedback source (the supervisor in the scenario). These statements were designed to manipulate the source attributes. For example, relationship quality was manipulated through use of the statement, 'You do not get along well with the supervisor'. After reading each statement, participants rated their likelihood of seeking feedback in that scenario.

Vancouver and Morrison's (1995) results helped to clarify the relationship between the source attributes and feedback seeking. Consistent with the hypotheses presented above, all four source attributes were positively related to the likelihood of seeking feedback. In addition, (a) self-esteem interacted with relationship quality such that relationship quality became less important to the likelihood of seeking feedback as self-esteem increased, and (b) need for achievement interacted with source expertise such that source expertise became more important to the likelihood of seeking feedback as need for achievement increased.

In sum, the research of Vancouver and Morrison (1995) supports the idea that source attributes play an important role in the feedback inquiry process. However, the salience of situational variables, such as characteristics of various feedback sources, is likely to be much greater for employees in a 'real world' setting than for undergraduates responding to scenarios. Therefore, the present research represents an important step towards understanding how source attributes affect feedback seeking by examining their influence in actual organizational settings.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were located in two organizational settings. In both samples, the feedback source was the employee's immediate supervisor within the organization. One sample consisted of 149 employees (65 males, 80 females, 4 did not indicate gender) from the Adelaide and Sydney offices of an Australian general insurance company. The employees were aged from 19-57 years ($M = 30.0$, $SD = 10.3$) and employed in upper (17%), middle (23%), and lower (47%) level positions. The other sample consisted of 149 employees (104 male, 42 female, 3 did not indicate gender) of an Australian police organization, who were aged from 22-58

years ($M = 38.14$, $SD = 8.73$) and spread across upper (2%), middle (29%), and lower (69%) organizational levels.

Design

A mixed-model design, with four between-subjects factors (source attributes: expertise, accessibility, relationship quality, and reward power) and one within-subjects factor (self-assessed performance: above- and below-average) was used. The dependent variable was likelihood of seeking feedback.

Measures¹

Source attributes. Four, 4-item scales were developed by the authors to measure the source attributes (see Appendix), with the 16 items randomly ordered in one questionnaire section. All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely true*; 7 = *extremely untrue*). The final measures used all four items for the expertise ($\alpha = .85$), accessibility ($\alpha = .78$), and relationship quality scales ($\alpha = .84$), but only items 1 and 3 for the reward power scale ($\alpha = .71$).

Self-esteem. Self esteem was measured using the Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston (1978) version of the Rosenberg (1965) self esteem scale. The scale contains 10 items rated from *almost always true* to *never true*. In order to maximize internal consistency, item 6 was not used in the final measure ($\alpha = .87$).

Need for achievement. Need for achievement was measured using the achievement sub-scale (5 items) of the Manifest Needs Questionnaire (Steers & Braunstein, 1976). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *always*; 7 = *never*) ($\alpha = .68$).

Feedback seeking. Feedback seeking was assessed using a 14-item instrument (following Tuckey et al., 2002) in which participants were asked to think back to situations when they had approached and asked their current supervisor for feedback about their work performance. Participants were required to indicate how likely they had been in the past to seek feedback in seven different work situations: (a) global likelihood of seeking feedback, and when the task was (b) familiar, (c) performed on one's own, (d) easy, (e) not familiar, (f) difficult, and (g) performed in a group. Employees gave separate ratings of feedback seeking in the seven situations when their work performance had been good (above-average) and poor (below-average), with all participants completing the above-average performance ratings followed by the below-average performance ratings. Responses were indicated on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely likely to ask*; 7 = *extremely unlikely to ask*). Cronbach's alpha for the 14-item instrument was .92, with alpha values of .89 and .93 for the above- and below-average sub-sections.

Procedure

The insurance company appointed an employee to coordinate questionnaire distribution to 300 employees in two of its offices. The employees received the questionnaire with instructions to complete it anonymously and return it to a collection box. A total of 149 questionnaires were returned (response rate = 50%). In addition, a number of work groups within the police organization were visited by the researchers at their place of work and invited to participate in the study. The police employees completed and returned the questionnaire within the same session (response rate = 100%).

RESULTS

Data from the two samples were initially analysed separately. Patterns of findings from the correlations and regression analyses were almost identical across the two samples. Accordingly, results for the two samples combined are presented. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for measures of the source attributes, individual difference variables, and likelihood of seeking feedback are shown in Table 1. Responses on the source attribute scales spanned the full range of values. As reflected by the mean scores in Table 1, employees in both samples reported having a good relationship with supervisors, and generally considered supervisors to be relatively expert, accessible, and high power sources.

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations for Measures of the Source Attributes, Individual Difference Variables, and Feedback Seeking for the Insurance Company Employee Sample (and the Police Employee Sample in Parentheses)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Expertise	5.47 (4.94)	1.05 (1.38)	.41*** (.63***)	.50*** (.74***)	.40*** (.55***)	.10 (.02)	.24*** (-.01)	.15 (.11)
2. Accessibility	5.48 (5.53)	1.16 (1.08)		.45*** (.66***)	.14 (.29***)	.14 (.01)	.21** (.04)	.16 (-.01)
3. Relationship quality	5.63 (5.51)	1.07 (1.10)			.38*** (.43***)	.18* (-.01)	.31*** (.09)	.05 (.01)
4. Reward power	4.82 (3.72)	0.12 (0.13)				.02 (.08)	.30*** (.10)	-.04 (.08)
5. Need for achievement	5.34 (4.99)	0.72 (0.72)					.38*** (.30***)	.21* (.14)
6. Self-esteem	4.27 (4.41)	0.54 (0.47)						.03 (-.16)
7. Likelihood of seeking feedback	3.92 (3.52)	1.14 (1.21)						

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

First, correlations were used to assess the hypothesized relationships between the source attributes and feedback seeking (H1, H5, H8). Scores on three source attributes (expertise, accessibility, relationship quality) and one individual difference variable (self-esteem) were transformed for use in the correlation and regression analyses using the reflect and square root method.² Surprisingly, as shown in Table 1, the correlations failed to support the hypothesized relationships between the source attributes and feedback seeking, indicating that the source attributes were not associated with the likelihood of seeking feedback.

Second, the effect of self-assessed performance (H3) and the hypothesized interactions of self-assessed performance with the source characteristics and individual difference variables (H4, H7) were examined through the use of linear regression. Since performance was operationalized as a within-subjects factor in the present study, the total variance was partitioned into the proportion of within-subjects and between-subjects variance. Accordingly, within each regression, the variance accounted for by the within-subjects factor (self-assessed performance) was calculated as a proportion of the *within-subjects* variance, rather than as a proportion of the *total* variance (cf. Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Results of the within-subjects regression analyses indicated a small main effect for performance on the likelihood of seeking feedback. Specifically, as predicted by H3, participants reported that they had been more likely to seek feedback in situations where self-assessed work performance was poor (below-

average) than when it was good (above-average), $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$, $\Delta F(1, 296) = 16.77$, $p < .001$, $f^2 = .06$.³ Contrary to H4 and H7, however, there were no significant interactions between self-assessed performance and any of the source characteristics or individual difference variables [ΔR^2 values ranged from 0.00 to 0.01; $\Delta F(1, 296)$ values from 0.00 to 3.64; and f^2 values from .00 to .01].⁴

Finally, linear regression was used to assess the hypothesized interactions of source attributes and individual difference variables on the likelihood of seeking feedback (H2, H6, H9). Again, contrary to the hypotheses, no significant effects were detected, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\Delta F(3, 287) = 0.67$, $p > .05$, $f^2 = .01$.⁵

DISCUSSION

In two organizational settings we found no evidence that feedback source attributes (source expertise, accessibility, reward power, and relationship quality) were significantly related to feedback seeking likelihood. Nor did self-esteem, need for achievement, or performance interact with the source attributes to influence feedback seeking. In sum, hypotheses regarding these variables were not supported, despite the predictions being firmly grounded in contemporary feedback seeking theory and sampling individuals at different organizational levels across organizations.

The findings contrast sharply with Vancouver and Morrison (1995) who demonstrated, via the use of scenarios, that undergraduate students' likelihood of seeking feedback was influenced by the four source attributes, and that the impact of the attributes varied as a function of both individual differences and performance. The obvious question raised by this disparity is why the present study failed to find evidence for the importance of source attributes in the feedback seeking process. A discussion of two general issues is relevant to this question. First, it is possible that the relationships found by Vancouver and Morrison (1995) were unique to their study. Second, a range of methodological factors may have influenced the findings obtained here.

As indicated above, Vancouver and Morrison (1995) used scenarios to test relationships between the source attributes, performance, individual differences, and feedback seeking. The scenarios contained all possible combinations of the four source attributes, presented at each of two performance levels. The scenarios therefore required the students to indicate how likely it was that they would choose to ask for feedback from a *wide selection* of hypothetical sources (32 in total). Patterns of change in the likelihood of asking for feedback as a function of changes in the four source attributes were then observed for each of the 64 participants, and meta-analysis was used to allow for generalizations across persons. Vancouver and Morrison's results may thus be best interpreted as shedding light on undergraduate students' choice of feedback source from amongst a variety of possible options, each with varying attributes.

Employees in actual organizations, however, are less likely to be able to select from a broad range of sources when seeking feedback about their work performance. If the feedback source is fixed for an employee, source attributes may be effectively removed from the equation, with other contextual and dispositional factors being the major influences on feedback seeking. Alternatively, in situations where source choice is limited but source attributes create unfavourable (high cost and/or low value; cf. VandeWalle et al. 2000) conditions for feedback inquiry, monitoring may instead be used to gather feedback and/or feedback seeking efforts

may be targeted towards gathering certain types of information over others (e.g., information for self-improvement vs. self-enhancement; VandeWalle 2003).

The present results therefore have important implications for the dependent variables used in feedback seeking research. To date, there has been a narrow focus on the *frequency* of feedback *inquiry*. Other possible dependent variables such as *method* of seeking, choice of *source*, *type of information* sought, and the *timing* of feedback seeking have largely been ignored. In relation to the present study, for example, it is possible that source attributes determine the choice of feedback source, rather than the likelihood of seeking feedback from a fixed source. If so, source choice (rather than likelihood of inquiry) may be the most appropriate dependent variable. Future research should use multiple dependent variables to disentangle the complex patterns of relationships between cognitions, dispositional variables, contextual factors, and aspects of feedback seeking. Such research will be essential for a comprehensive theory of feedback seeking behaviour, and should be a priority for future empirical investigation.

In addition to influencing source choice, it is possible that source attributes influence the likelihood of seeking feedback, but only in situations where choice from amongst a variety of sources is possible. Examples of such situations are the university context, where students can choose to approach one or more of a number of tutors for feedback, and a range of hypothetical work and non-work environments created by quasi-experimental scenarios, in which a multitude of source options are presented (both features of the Vancouver & Morrison study). In this way, opportunity for source choice may operate as a moderating variable and would need to be measured and analysed as such. In order to test this possibility, it will be essential to assess opportunity for source choice (perhaps using an index of the number of potential feedback sources) as well as measuring the likelihood of seeking feedback from multiple sources, the attributes of those sources, and final source choice.

A number of limitations of the present study should also be acknowledged. First, the use of self-report data is potentially problematic. In particular, the use of a single self-report measurement instrument raises a possible concern over common method bias. Common method bias has the potential to deflate observed relationships if the correlation between measurement methods is lower than the observed correlation between the variables with method effects removed (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff 2003). Other limitations relate to the measure of feedback seeking employed, which tapped only the likelihood of direct inquiry. Although not considered here, monitoring the environment for information about performance is an alternative method of seeking feedback and other dimensions of feedback seeking are likely to be important, as outlined above. Finally, the self-report measure used here may be more akin to a behavioural intention than actual feedback seeking behaviour. Behaviourally-based measures (such as diary keeping) are likely to provide a more accurate assessment of a range of aspects of feedback seeking. All of these factors may have influenced the patterns of relationships detected and thus qualify the interpretation of the present findings.

Finally, performance was the only factor to have a significant influence on the likelihood of seeking feedback. As hypothesized, employees in two very different occupations indicated that they were more likely to seek feedback from their supervisor when performance was below-average than when it was above-average. This finding is consistent with other *field* studies of feedback inquiry (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Tuckey et al., 2002) that together contradict the suggestion that individuals avoid seeking feedback after poor performance so as to avoid

the associated negative feedback (e.g., Northcraft & Ashford 1990). It is important to note, however, that this result was obtained in a context where employees reported having good relationships with their supervisors, which should lessen the perceived costs of seeking feedback after poor performance. Seeking feedback after poor performance has three potential advantages. First, as suggested earlier, negative feedback may be regarded as more useful than positive feedback for improving performance (Ashford & Tsui 1991). Second, seeking feedback through inquiry may moderate the negativity of feedback received relative to unsolicited criticism delivered by the supervisor (Larson, 1989). Third, the act of seeking feedback after poor performance may be viewed in a positive light as a proactive attempt to improve (Ashford & Tsui 1991).

In conclusion, a review of our unexpected findings highlighted important empirical questions that remain unanswered. In order to increase our understanding of the role of source characteristics in the feedback seeking process, research should be directed at clarifying the potential moderating role of opportunity for source choice, the likelihood of seeking feedback from multiple sources, and the attributes of those sources. Re-evaluation of the dependent measures used to assess feedback seeking is also warranted; the inclusion of multiple dependent measures will best capture the complex and diverse nature of feedback seeking behaviour, and ensure continued progress towards a theory of feedback seeking. Finally, other important considerations in future research will include minimizing common method variance as well as improving the measurement of feedback seeking through the use of behaviourally-based instruments.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ All measures were recoded so that higher scores represented higher levels of the relevant construct.

² Correlations calculated using the untransformed variables were almost identical in magnitude.

³ The measure of effect size used for all regression analyses was f^2 , as described by Cohen (1992), with small, medium, and large values equal to .02, .15, and .35 respectively.

⁴ Separate regression analyses were conducted where the relevant source attributes/individual different variables were entered on the first step, performance was introduced at the second step, and the relevant interaction term was entered on the third step. A full summary of all regression results is available from the authors.

⁵ The four source attributes and two individual different variables were entered at Step 1, with the three hypothesized interaction terms entered at Step 2.

APPENDIX: SOURCE ATTRIBUTE SCALE ITEMS

Expertise

1. Your supervisor is highly competent.
2. You think that your supervisor is able to judge your performance accurately.
3. You believe your supervisor to be knowledgeable with respect to your field of work.
4. You think your supervisor is an expert in your field of work.

Accessibility

1. Your supervisor is readily available to answer work related questions.
2. It is not very easy for you to locate your supervisor during the work day.
3. It would be easy for you to reach your supervisor if you wanted to ask them a work related question.
4. It takes a lot of effort (e.g., in time) to make an appointment to see your supervisor about work related issues.

Reward power

1. Your supervisor has the capacity to reward you for good performance.
2. Your supervisor has little influence over your employment status (e.g., the ability to have you fired).
3. Your supervisor has a lot of status within the organization.
4. You think of your supervisor as having the power to make your work day either 'pleasant' or 'miserable'.

Relationship quality

1. You feel that you get along well with your supervisor.
2. You feel as though you do not really know your supervisor that well.
3. You believe that your supervisor does not really like you.
4. You think that you have a good working relationship with your supervisor.