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HOW IS FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR INTERPRETED? THE INFLUENCE OF FEEDBACK-SEEKING PATTERN AND FEEDBACK SOURCE'S CHARACTERISTICS ON IMPRESSION FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how feedback seekers' and targets' characteristics affect how feedback-seeking acts are evaluated. We studied how two aspects of the pattern of feedback seeking, the sign of the feedback sought (positive versus negative) and the frequency of seeking (frequent versus infrequent) interact with the performance history of the feedback seeker to affect impressions formed by feedback targets. In addition, we assessed how the target characteristic of implicit person theory affects feedback-seeking attributions and how this relationship is shaped by the pattern of seeking. Results indicate that the pattern of feedback seeking is a relevant moderator of the effects of the seeker's performance history and targets' implicit person theories on targets' impressions of feedback seeking. In addition, the results show that targets' attributions for feedback seeking are one of the underlying mechanisms explaining why feedback-seeking behavior affects important organizational outcomes.

Keywords: feedback-seeking behavior, impression management, implicit person theory, attributions

INTRODUCTION

In a work world with increasingly dynamic job demands where employees are expected to become more self-directed and proactive (Campbell, 2000; Grant & Ashford, in press), *feedback-seeking behavior* (FSB) is generally considered a desirable individual behavior (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). FSB enables people to adapt and respond to continuously changing goals and role expectations (Morrison & Weldon, 1990; Tsui & Ashford, 1994) and to improve their task performance (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007). Despite its instrumental and informational value, FSB is far from a straightforward process. Decisions about how frequently to seek, the tactics to use, from whom to seek and what type of feedback to focus on, all may be shaped not only by the seeker's perceptions of the feedback's value, but also by perceptions of how the seeking act itself will be interpreted by others (see Ashford et al., 2003; and Morrison & Bies, 1991 for a review). However, individuals' perceptions of possible image costs (or gains) in feedback seeking are of questionable accuracy. The meaning of an interpersonal act such as FSB is shaped by context factors, attributes of the observer and characteristics of the actor (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989). As a result, it is difficult for individuals to make adequate inferences about how this particular behavior is actually perceived by others (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Schneider, 1981).

To date, research has focused primarily on how image concerns affect individuals' willingness to seek feedback (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). We know less about about how feedback seeking is interpreted and whether and when feedback seekers actually incur image costs (or benefits) when asking for feedback (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Chau, Dahling, Swee, & Levy, 2008; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007). Yet, from a practical standpoint the latter question is important as others' reactions to workplace behaviors such as FSB affect outcomes as important as reward decisions, opportunities for development and even performance evaluations (e.g., Bachrach, Powell, Bendoly, & Richey, 2006; Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002).

Three empirical efforts have addressed how feedback seeking is actually interpreted. They found that (1) the seeker's performance history (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992); (2) the typical sign and the focus of the solicited feedback (Chau et al., 2008); and (3) the attributions that targets make for feedback seeking (Lam et al., 2007) affect how targets react to feedback seekers and their seeking.

While the extant research provides important insights, Chau et al. (2008) note that the field has yet to elucidate the joint impact of characteristics of the seeker, the target, and the seeking act itself. The prevailing perspective has been that these antecedents have straightforward (main) effects on impression formation (e.g., Lam et al., 2007). However, it is likely that they interact and provide the conditions under which particular impressions are formed. For example, as suggested by Ashford and Northcraft (1992), what the targets of FSB regard as an appropriate frequency of feedback seeking, is likely to be affected in part by the performance history of the seeker. For superior performers, frequent feedback seeking may yield impression-management benefits, while for average performers, frequently seeking feedback may be costly. To date, no research of this type has been conducted. The present investigation contributes to the literature on feedback seeking by testing a framework (Figure 1) that simultaneously incorporates characteristics of the feedback seeker (performance history), attributes of the feedback target (implicit person theory) and the pattern of feedback seeking (sign and frequency of seeking).

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Targets' Attributions for FSB

Using attribution theory, Lam and colleagues (2007) recently showed that targets' reactions to feedback seeking and feedback seekers are largely determined by the attributions they make for those behaviors (e.g., Green & Mitchell, 1979; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Martinko, 1995; Weiner, 1974).

Research suggests that targets interpret feedback seeking in two distinct ways: (1) as a sign of the seeker's achievement focus and willingness to correct ineffective work behaviors (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution); and (2) as an attempt by the seeker to manage the perceptions that others have of him or her (i.e., impression-management attribution) (Ashford et al., 2003; Chau et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2007; Morrison & Bies, 1991).

When the target perceives that the seeker is trying to obtain diagnostic information about his or her work performance by asking for feedback, this will result in a performance-enhancement attribution. However, targets may not always see the diagnostic value of feedback seeking, because individuals also use feedback seeking as a tactic to shape the view and image that others have of them (Morrison & Bies). When targets feel that the seeking is calculated and aimed at enhancing or managing the image that others have of the seeker, this will result in an impression-management attribution. Although research has shown that these two attributions affect targets' reactions to the feedback seeker (e.g., Lam et al., 2007), little is known about why targets make these attributions and how they are formed.

Performance History of the Seeker Matters

We expect that targets' attributions for feedback seeking will be in part determined by the seeker's performance history. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that individuals who seek feedback are perceived as less confident and less competent when they have a history of average performance than when they have a history of superior performance. Thus, ironically, the very performers who could benefit most from feedback (those with an average performance history) may be most reluctant to seek it given how such seeking will be evaluated.

Ashford and Northcraft (1992) did not examine *why* feedback seekers with a history of average performance were evaluated less favorably than were non-seekers and seekers with a history of superior performance. It may be that individuals who have a reputation of being a superior performer suffer fewer image costs because their feedback seeking is interpreted in a way that corresponds to their performance history. For example, when targets are told that an individual performed well or poorly, they may interpret that individual's specific behavior (e.g., feedback seeking) in a way that corresponds to this general cue.

So, while targets may interpret a superior performer's feedback seeking as a sign of the performer's achievement focus (i.e., performance enhancement attribution), the same behavior by an average performer may be interpreted as a strategy of the seeker to demonstrate an achievement focus, with the aim of concealing average performance (i.e., impression management attribution). Accordingly, consistent with Ashford and Northcraft (1992), we believe that targets use the seeker's past performance as a cue in evaluating and interpreting FSB.

> *Hypothesis 1:* A feedback seeker's performance history will affect the attributions targets make to explain that seeking such that:

> *1a.*Targets are more likely to make impression-management attributions for a feedback seeker with a history of average performance and
> *1b.*Targets are more likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for a feedback seeker with a history of superior performance.

The moderating role of the pattern of seeking. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) also did not examine whether some patterns of feedback seeking might be less costly (or beneficial) for average and superior performers. As suggested, but not tested by these authors and Chau et al. (2008), the seeker's performance history likely interacts with the feedback-seeking pattern (e.g., typical sign of the feedback sought and frequency of seeking) in impacting the impressions formed by the feedback target.

One important pattern is the *typical sign* of the feedback sought: individuals can gather feedback about their weaknesses and their inadequacies (i.e., negative feedback seeking) or they can seek feedback about their strengths and successes (i.e., positive feedback seeking) (Ashford et al., 2003; VandeWalle, 2003). Research shows that observers of feedback-seeking acts may not always evaluate positive feedback seeking favorably. Seeking feedback about strengths might be interpreted as a form of seeking reassurance or as an attempt to divert attention from poor performance (i.e., impression management), especially when such seeking is done by an average performer. For example, examining the impact of the typical sign of the sought feedback, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that managers who sought negative feedback were evaluated more positively by their subordinates, while the seeking of positive feedback had a negative impact on subordinates' appraisals.

However, this study was inconclusive about *why* negative feedback seeking was evaluated more favorably: because managers actually improved their performance following negative feedback seeking or because it simply looked better to subordinates to see their manager so interested in faults and weaknesses. Indeed, Chau et al. (2008) found that targets tend to attribute positive seeking more to impression management motives than seeking feedback on weaknesses. However, their study did not consider the performance history of the feedback seekers, or other patterns of seeking.

We believe that targets may make different attributions for superior and average performers' feedback seeking, depending on the typical sign of the sought feedback. For example, while targets may react negatively when average performers seek feedback about their strengths (because positive feedback would not help them to correct their ineffective work behaviors), targets may still see the value of negative feedback seeking (because it gives average performers valuable information about how to improve).

In addition, we expect that how superior and average performers' positive and negative feedback seeking is interpreted, will depend on a second pattern of feedback seeking, the *frequency* of seeking. To date, research focusing on the outcomes of feedback seeking has implicitly assumed that FSB is always beneficial: the more feedback people seek, the better. For example, prior studies have shown that frequent feedback seeking leads to higher feelings of control (Ashford and Black, 1996) and helps employees to improve their performance (Renn & Fedor, 2001) and the quality of the relationship with their supervisor (Lam et al., 2007). The question of whether frequent feedback seeking can also have negative consequences or can be negatively evaluated remains unanswered.

Related research in other areas suggests that the relationship between feedback seeking and targets' evaluations may not always be positive. For example, exploring the dynamics of help-seeking behavior in organizations, Nadler, Ellis and Bar (2003) found that intermediate levels of help seeking were evaluated more positively than high levels of help seeking. These authors concluded from this finding that targets interpret excessive help seeking as a dysfunctional behavioral pattern that reflects the seeker's overreliance on the help of others (Nadler et al., 2003).

Earlier, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) suggested that a similar mechanism might be operating in the feedback-seeking process. While targets may interpret occasional feedback seeking as a sign of the seeker's achievement focus (i.e., performance enhancement attribution), frequent feedback requests may be interpreted very differently. For example, frequent seekers may be seen as insecure or as incompetent. As highlighted by Lam et al. (2007) feedback seeking may also be interpreted as a desire to manage impressions, because others may perceive it as a tactic of the seeker to get the attention of others.

Linking this logic regarding the influence of the feedback-seeking pattern to our hypotheses on the impact of the seeker's performance history on feedback-seeking attributions, we expect a three-way interaction between the typical sign of the sought feedback, the frequency of seeking and the performance history of the seeker. First consider the case of an average performer.

Targets may interpret average performers' occasional requests for negative feedback positively and see them as an effort by the seeker to correct weak performance (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution). On the other hand, Ashford and Northcraft's finding that seekers with an average performance history were seen as weaker and having less potential suggests that frequent requests for negative feedback should be more costly for such performers. Frequent requests in the face of a history of weak performance may lead targets to question the value of frequently asking for negative feedback. Also, seeking feedback typically means that a target conveys a feedback message in response. When an average performer frequently seeks feedback, the target gives more negative feedback more often, thereby reinforcing a negative view of the performer (Larson, 1989). Likewise, targets may interpret the average performers' requests for positive feedback as an attempt to conceal their average performance; as an attempt to manage and enhance the image that others have of them (Morrison & Bies, 1991).

In sum:

Hypothesis 2: A feedback seeker's performance history will interact with the typical sign of the sought feedback and the frequency of seeking such that:

2a. For seekers with a history of average performance, targets will be less likely to make impression-management attributions for the infrequent seeking of positive or negative feedback, than for the frequent seeking of positive or negative feedback.

2b. For seekers with a history of average performance, targets will be more likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for the infrequent seeking of negative feedback compared to the infrequent seeking of positive feedback, or the frequent seeking of positive or negative feedback.

To further clarify the proposed three-way interaction, not all FSB undertaken by superior performers may be perceived in an equally positive manner. For example, targets may interpret superior performers' frequent requests for positive feedback as an attempt to highlight their performance history (i.e., as impression management) instead of as a behavior that will contribute to superior performance in the future. On the other hand, targets may interpret a superior performer's frequent or occasional requests for negative feedback more positively. Their view of these behaviors may be colored by this performance history, i.e., they see such seeking as a behavior that contributed to the superior performance of the seeker.

Thus:

2c.

For seekers with a history of superior performance, targets will be more likely to make impression-management attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the frequent and infrequent seeking of negative feedback and for the infrequent seeking of positive feedback.

2d. For seekers with a history of superior performance, targets will be less likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the frequent and infrequent seeking of negative feedback, and for the infrequent seeking of positive feedback.

Characteristics of the Feedback Target

While the interpretation of seeking may be driven by the seeker's characteristics (e.g., performance history), we expect that also *attributes of the target* will affect how the act of feedback seeking is interpreted. As demonstrated by Dweck and colleagues (1999; 1995a; 1995b), people tend to have one of two implicit assumptions or theories about the "changeability" of people: entity theory versus incremental theory. Individuals with an entity theory believe that people's personal characteristics and abilities are largely fixed, whereas those holding incremental theories assume that people can grow and develop their abilities. These implicit person theories (IPT) have been found to affect both what people do, for instance whether they will seek feedback (VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), and how people judge others' behaviors and performance (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005; McConnell, 2001; and see VandeWalle, 2001 for a review). We propose that implicit theories will affect how one evaluates others' feedback seeking behaviors.

IPT theory suggests that targets endorsing an entity theory will see little instrumental value in engaging in a behavior aimed at developing capabilities that are largely fixed to begin with. It is therefore unlikely that they would interpret behavior such as FSB as an achievement-oriented behavior. Instead, they may see it as aimed at impressing the target of the behavior.

In contrast, we expect that incremental theorists will be more likely to recognize the instrumental value of feedback seeking for enhancing performance and correcting deficiencies, as incrementalists believe in the growth potential of individuals. As suggested by VandeWalle (2001), incrementalists are more likely to see the utility of diagnostic feedback because it can help individuals to improve their performance. We therefore expect that incrementalists will consider FSB as a tactic that people can use to obtain diagnostic feedback and as a behavior that is achievement-oriented rather than impression management oriented.

Thus:

Hypothesis 3: Targets' implicit person theories will affect their attributions regarding feedback seeking such that:

3a. The lower the target scores on implicit person theory (i.e., the more the entity oriented the target is), the greater the impression-management attributions for feedback seeking.

3b. The higher the target scores on implicit person theory (i.e., the more incrementally oriented the target is), the greater the performance-enhancement attributions for feedback seeking.

These effects should occur regardless of the seeker's performance history. That is, entity theorists and incrementalists should not differentiate between the FSB of an average performer or a superior performer. Based on their implicit theory, an incrementalitist should consider feedback seeking as instrumental for both. In contrast, because entity theorists attribute both poor and good performance to fixed abilities, they may not see why any performer (average or superior) should engage in this behavior. For parallel reasons, we do not expect the sign of the feedback sought to impact how entity theorists and incremental theorists interpret FSB. That is, whereas incrementalists are likely to see the instrumentality of both negative and positive feedback, entity theorists may question the benefits of seeking, either negative or positive feedback (VandeWalle, 2001).

However, we do expect that the impact of IPT on feedback seeking attributions will be contingent on the *frequency* of feedback seeking. Specifically, entity theorists' tendency to discount the instrumental value of feedback seeking would only be enhanced when the seeker has a habit of frequent feedback seeking.

Given that they see little value in engaging in a behavior that they don't believe can help people, they may see frequent seeking as even more time consuming and dysfunctional. In contrast, because incrementalists believe that people can grow and develop themselves continuously, they will more likely see the instrumentality of developing a habit of seeking feedback frequently. We thus expect that because entity theorists see less instrumental value in feedback seeking, they will attribute this behavior to other motives, such as impression management. In contrast, incremental theorists should be more likely to interpret frequent feedback seeking as a sign of strength and as an effort to grow.

Thus:

Hypothesis 4: The frequency of seeking will interact with targets' implicit person theories in impacting feedback-seeking attributions, such that:
4a. The more entity oriented the theory, the greater the impression-management attributions for frequent feedback seeking.
4b. The more incrementally oriented the theory, the greater the performance enhancement attribution for an individual's more frequent feedback seeking.

Attributions as a mediating mechanism between feedback seeking and outcomes

Attribution theory posits that targets' attributions for behaviors shape their overall attitudes to the performers of those behaviors (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko, 1995; VandeWalle, 2001). This suggests that targets' attributions for FSB should also shape what targets think of the seeker. To remain consistent with previous research (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992) and given their relevance for organizations, we focus on targets' appraisals of the seeker's performance potential and personal characteristics (e.g., their level of insecurity, confidence).

Empirical work investigating how feedback seekers are evaluated shows that when targets attribute feedback seeking to performance-enhancement motives, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards the seeker. For example, Chau et al. (2008) showed in the lab that when supervisors made performance-enhancement attributions, they perceived the seeker as more motivated and committed than when they thought the feedback seeking was driven by impression-management motives.

In the same vein, Lam et al. (2007) found that when supervisors made performance-enhancement attributions for their subordinate's feedback seeking, their relationship with their subordinates was of higher quality compared to when the supervisor made impression-management attributions. What past research has not examined is how these attributions affect performance evaluations. Based on Chau et al. (2008) and Lam et al.'s (2007) findings, it is likely that performance-enhancement attributions will result in positive performance evaluations, whereas impression-management attributions should produce less favorable performance evaluations.

Hypothesis 5: Targets' impression-management attributions will relate negatively to the targets' perceptions of the seeker's personal characteristics and performance potential.

Hypothesis 6: Targets' performance-enhancement attributions will relate positively to targets' perceptions of the seeker's personal strengths and characteristics performance potential.

Finally, we expect that targets' attributions for FSB will mediate the relationship between feedback seeking and targets' appraisals of the seeker's performance potential and personal characteristics. This logic is consistent with empirical work rooted in attribution theory that has demonstrated that targets' attributions for behaviors mediate the relationship between those behaviors and targets' general evaluations of the performers of those behaviors (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko, 1995; VandeWalle, 2001).

For example, Johnson et al. (2002) showed that targets' attributions for helping behaviors mediated the link between those helping behaviors and subsequent reward decisions. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

> *Hypothesis 7:* Targets' attributions for feedback seeking mediate the relationship between feedback seeking and target's general appraisal of the seeker.

METHOD

Participants

Hypotheses were tested by having 319 current and former MBA students from a Southwestern university respond to an online survey. The subjects were recruited via a mass e-mailing to 1,885 individuals, for a response rate of 17%. The mean age of the sample was 33 years; 69% were male, 78% Caucasian, 18% African American and 4% other.

Procedure

The methodology replicated that of Ashford and Northcraft (1992). We described the study as one on impression formation in organizations. Respondents read a one-paragraph vignette that described a feedback seeking act performed by an employee named Robert. In the vignette, which was adapted from Ashford and Northcraft (1992), respondents were asked to assume the role of Robert's manager and to imagine that the situation described, occurred in their own workplace. The vignettes provided the independent variables for the study by varying the feedback seekers' past performance (average versus superior), the frequency of seeking (frequently versus infrequently), and the typical sign of the sought feedback (focused on strengths versus weaknesses). Hence, the overall design was a fully crossed 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design. Respondents were randomly presented with one of the eight vignettes. A sample of one of the vignettes can be found in Appendix A.

Measures

Respondents then completed an anonymous questionnaire assessing reactions to the feedback seeker. First, based on advice from Fedor, Eder, and Buckley (1989) we asked the respondents to indicate on a five-point scale how easily they could *imagine* that the scenario described in the vignette could actually take place in their own workplace. With a mean-ease-of-imaging of 3.97 on a five-point scale, subjects found the vignettes relatively easy to imagine. Ease-of-imagining was unrelated to the independent variables, but to remain consistent with previous research, we controlled for this variable, age and gender in all subsequent analyses (Ashford et al., 1992).

We then asked subjects to rate their perceptions of the feedback seeker's *personal characteristics*, using a four-item seven-point Likert scale developed by Ashford and Northcraft (1992) (α = .83). Sample items from the scale include "I suspect that Robert is insecure" and "I suspect that Robert is unconfident." Items were coded so that high scores corresponded to positive ratings of Robert's personal characteristics.

Next, using Ashford and Nortchraft's (1992) two-item measure for assessing *performance potential*, we asked respondents to assess Robert's ability to perform in his current job and his advancement potential. The items from the scale are "What is your impression of Robert's potential to advance" and "What is your impression of Robert's performance potential." Because Cronbach's alpha is an inappropriate reliability indicator for two-item scales, we calculated the Spearman Brown coefficient to estimate the scale's reliability (Hulin & Cudeck, 2001). The Spearman-Brown coefficient was .89, indicating substantial internal consistency.

The target's attributed motives for feedback-seeking were measured with two Likert scales adapted from Lam et al. (2007). Respondents were asked to rate to what extent they thought that Robert's feedback seeking was motivated by performance-enhancement motives and by impression-management motives. A sample item from the six-item *performance-enhancement* attribution scale is "To what extent do you perceive Robert's feedback-seeking behavior is motivated by a desire to perform better?" (α = .77).

A sample item from the eight-item *impression-management* attribution scale is "To what extent do you perceive Robert's feedback-seeking behavior is motivated by a desire to create a good impression?" ($\alpha = .91$). Subjects rated their impressions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Finally, *implicit person theory* (IPT) was assessed with an eight-item Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) developed by Levy and Dweck (1997). A sample entity-worded item is "The kind of person someone is, is something very basic and cannot be changed very much"; a sample of an incremental item is "People can always substantially change the kind of person they are". Following Heslin et al. (2005), responses to the entity-worded items were reverse coded and a mean IPT score for each subject was calculated ($\alpha = .91$), with high scores corresponding to an incremental IPT.

RESULTS

Overview Data Analysis Plan

To test the hypotheses, we performed a series of regressions and General Linear Models (GLM). There were no univariate or multivariate within-cell outliers at $\alpha = .05$. The assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, linearity and absence of multicollinearity were satisfied. Because this study sought to combine mediation and moderation, we followed the prevailing three-step approach recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). However, to isolate the moderated direct, indirect and total effects, we supplemented Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step approach with Edwards and Lambert's (2007) integrative approach for estimating the path coefficients of First Stage Moderation Models. Such models include moderating effects (e.g., IPT x frequency) that impact mediator variables (e.g., attributions), which in turn influence the dependent variables (e.g., evaluation of personal characteristics).

We utilized weighted effect coding to represent the three factors (frequency, sign and performance history) and to correct for unequal cell sample sizes in the eight conditions (Aiken & West, 1991; Darlington, 1990). To deal with multicollinearity resulting from the inclusion of the interaction terms, we centered the continuous variables by extracting the grand means of those variables from the subject's original score. The interactions between the continuous and categorical variables were formed by multiplying the continuous variables with each of the effect-coded categorical variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

Results

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations reliabilities and correlations among the variables of interest.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Feedback sign and target's attributions. Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that the seeker's performance history would independently and interactively (i.e., in interaction with the frequency of seeking and the sign of the sought feedback) impact target's attributions. As Table 2 shows, these hypotheses were partially supported.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Contrary to Hypothesis 1a, targets did not attribute average performers' feedback seeking significantly more to impression-management motives than they did superior performers' seeking ($\beta = -.042$, *ns*). However, we did find support for Hypothesis 1b, which stated that targets would attribute superior performers' feedback seeking significantly more to performance-enhancement motives than average performers' seeking ($\beta = .144$, $p < .05$).

Hypothesis 2, predicting a three-way interaction between the seeker's performance history, the sign of the feedback sought and the frequency of seeking in impacting impression-management attributions, was partially supported (β = .147, $p <$ .05). To probe the interaction, we formulated a series of planned contrasts.[2] We found that, in partial support of Hypothesis 2a, when average performers *in*frequently sought feedback about their weaknesses, this act was less attributed to impression-management motives than the other three patterns of seeking ($t(68)$ = -2.54, $p < .05$).

Contrary to what hypothesis 2a predicted, however the infrequent seeking of positive feedback did not result in significantly less impression-management attributions than the frequent seeking of positive and negative feedback. Rather than finding that targets made more impression-management attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the other patterns of seeking (hypothesis 2c), we found that targets made significantly less impression-management attributions when superior performers frequently sought feedback about weaknesses (t = 2.56, $p < .05$). So, when a superior performer frequently sought negative feedback, the seeker incurred less image costs compared to the other forms of feedback seeking.

We found partial support for the hypotheses predicting that the target's IPT would independently and interactively (i.e., in interaction with the frequency of seeking) affect target's attributions. Disconfirming hypothesis 3, we found no relationship between the target's IPT and attributions for feedback seeking (β = -.046, ns for performance-enhancement attributions and β = -.111, ns for impression-management attributions).

In support of hypothesis 4a, we found that the target's IPT interacted with the frequency of seeking in impacting impression-management attributions (β =-.145, p <.05). As table 3 shows, when we probed these interactions (Aiken et al., 1991), we found support for hypothesis 4a.

Insert Table 3 About Here

The more targets held an entity theory, the more they attributed frequent seeking to impression-management motives[3]. The target's IPT x frequency interaction was unrelated to performance-enhancement attributions (β =-.036, ns), thereby disconfirming hypothesis 4b.

Summarizing hypotheses 1 to 4, we conclude that contrary to what was expected, feedback targets' performance-enhancement attributions were only directly influenced by the feedback seeker's performance history. The formation of impression-management attributions is more complex. Rather than having main effects, a seeker's performance history interacted with the sign and frequency of feedback seeking in impacting the target's impression-management attributions.

Attributions for feedback seeking and outcomes. In support of Hypothesis 5, targets who tended to make performance-enhancement attributions evaluated the seeker more positively in terms of their personal characteristics (β =.259, *p*<.01) and their performance potential (β =.259, p<.01). Attributed impression-management motives related negatively to target's evaluations of the seeker's personal characteristics (β = -.113, *p*<.05) and to evaluations of the seeker's performance potential (β =-.152, *p*<.01), supporting Hypothesis 6.

Mediation analyses. Finally, we tested whether targets' attributions mediated the effects of the independent variables (performance history, feedback sign, frequency of seeking and IPT) on the targets' evaluations of the seeker's personal characteristics and performance potential (Hypothesis 7). To test for statistical mediation against the criteria established by Baron and Kenny (1986), we performed a Performance x Frequency x Sign x IPT GLM on the two dependent variables in our study: personal characteristics and performance potential. We found a performance main effect (β =.463, *p* <.01), a frequency x IPT interaction effect (β = -.120, *p* < .05) and a frequency x performance x sign interaction effect (β = .126, *p* <.05) on personal characteristics. For performance potential, we only found a significant main effect of the seeker's performance history (β = .624, *p* < .01).

We then entered the full factor model and the attributions simultaneously into the regression. As recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007), these regression equations also included the interaction terms of the mediator with the independent variables. Performance history remained a significant predictor of personal characteristics (β = .421, $p < .01$) and performance potential evaluations (β =.580, $p < .01$), thereby excluding full mediation (Baron et al., 1986). To test for partial mediation, we performed Sobel tests and found that performance-enhancement attributions partially mediate the main effect of performance history on personal characteristics and performance potential (Sobel $z = 2.04$, $p<.05$ and Sobel $z = 4.71$, $p <.01$ respectively).

We then tested whether impression-management attributions mediated the interaction effects of frequency x IPT and frequency x performance x sign on personal characteristics (note that these interactions did not affect performance potential evaluations). When we entered the full factor model and impression-management attributions simultaneously into the regression, the interaction effects were reduced to insignificance (β = - .093, *ns* and β = .095 respectively), thereby providing support for full mediation.

DISCUSSION

Finding partial support for our initial model, this study complements and extends feedback-seeking literature in several ways. First, by studying targets' implicit person theories (Hypotheses 3 and 4) and targets' attributions for feedback seeking, this study provides additional insight into attributions as one of the underlying mechanisms for *why* FSB affects important organizational outcomes (Hypotheses 5 to 7) and into the patterns of feedback seeking (sign and frequency) as relevant moderators of these effects (Hypothesis 2).

Second, our results add to those reported in prior work (e.g., Chau et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2007) by providing an initial test of *why* targets make particular attributions. Specifically, we found that rather than exerting the main effects that were found in previous work, the sign and frequency of feedback seeking interacted with the performance history of the seeker. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that among the variables they tested, only the seeker's performance history shaped outcomes.

We also found that it interacts with the two feedback seeking patterns (frequency and sign) to shape attributions for seeking (Hypothesis 2) and through those attributions, shaped outcomes (Hypothesis 1). For superior performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to be viewed positively, except when they frequently seek positive feedback. For average performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to entail impression-management costs, except when they occasionally seek negative feedback. It may be that when evaluating the frequency and type of sought feedback, targets adopt different tipping points for superior performers than for average performers. For those with a history of superior performance, feedback seeking seems to convey as positive an impression when it occurs both frequently and infrequently; however, for average performers, the benefits of feedback seeking seem to become costs the more often it occurs. While our operationalization of feedback-seeking frequency as a categorical variable (feedback was either sought frequently or infrequently) makes it impossible to test a tipping point hypothesis, it is an attractive avenue for future research.

Third, this study was the first to show that characteristics of the target affect how they interpret FSB. Specifically, we showed that the target's *implicit person theory* affects attributed impression-management motives through an interaction with the frequency of seeking (Hypotheses 4). Targets with an entity theory attribute frequent feedback seeking significantly more to impression-management motives than do targets endorsing an incremental theory. Thus, the appropriate frequency of feedback seeking is not only determined by the seeker's performance history and the sign of the feedback sought (Hypothesis 2), but also by characteristics of the feedback target. Future research should examine other target individual differences such as the targets' attributional complexity (Fletcher, Danilovacs, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986). Researchers may also fruitfully investigate how context factors impact interpretations of feedback seeking. For example, feedback seeking may elicit different reactions depending on the level of task interdependence in the organization (Van der Vegt & Van de Vliert, 2005). Additionally, the contextual factor of uncertainty may impact target behavior. Research reveals a curvilinear relationship between uncertainty and desire for feedback, where people show more interest at high and low levels of uncertainty, as opposed to moderate levels of uncertainty (Anseel and Lievens, 2007)

Finally, we showed that the formation of *performance-enhancement impressions* happens in a relatively straightforward manner. Contrary to our expectations, feedback targets' performance-enhancement attributions only seem to be influenced by the feedback seeker's performance history. Though unexpected, this pattern is reminiscent of Ashford & Northcraft's (1992) pattern of results in which for three suggested determinants of target impressions, only performance history mattered. These results are also consistent with those reported by Chau and colleagues (2008) who found no relationship between the sign of the sought feedback and attributed performance-enhancement motives. This suggests either that performance history swamps all other effects or that other causes and explanations need to be explored. One possible explanation is that respondents were responding in a socially desirable manner, an important methodological issue in scenario research. Although our vignettes gave no hints regarding the most appropriate response, targets may have assumed that it is appropriate to attribute FSB to performance-enhancement motives. If such a social desirability mechanism was operating, though, this does not explain why targets differentiated between superior performers' and average performers' seeking, shown by the support for Hypothesis 1b. However, given the pervasiveness of social desirability in social research (see Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996 for a review), future work nonetheless needs to investigate this possibility.

It may also be that targets tend to give feedback seekers the benefit of the doubt when making attributions. That is, feedback targets may assume implicitly that all FSB is to some extent driven by a desire to improve performance. Further theoretical guidance and research is needed to test the possibility that targets' performance-enhancement and impression-management attributions are formed in divergent ways. To some extent, intrepretation may be driven by culture. It has been theoretically argued (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000) and empirically shown (MacDonald, Brown, & Sulsky, 2008) that cultural differences affect the propensity of individuals to seek feedback from different sources. Although this body of work has primarily centered on feedback seekers, implications for feedback targets could be specified.

Implications

Our study provides some important insights for management practice. First, from an organizational perspective, our results highlight the need to develop work contexts that reduce the impression-management costs of feedback seeking. For example, organizations might implement training interventions on the importance of feedback in organizations. These training interventions may particularly be relevant for entity theorists who do not fully appreciate the diagnostic value of feedback and FSB. As shown by Heslin, VandeWalle and Latham (2006) training entity theorists to become more incremental may have important positive consequences for coaching behaviors at work. Similarly, such training may help entity-theory leaders (and other feedback targets) to see the benefits of feedback and feedback seeking, especially for average performers who need it the most.

Second, our results indicate that it is important for feedback seekers to have some insight into their own performance history as this determines the most appropriate pattern of seeking for creating positive attributions and outcomes. For superior performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to yield impression-management benefits, except when they frequently seek feedback about their strengths. For average performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to be costly, except when they occasionally seek feedback about their weaknesses. Thus, before initiating feedback seeking, it is important for feedback seekers to have a sense of how they are perceived to be performing. This is a somewhat paradoxal recommendation, of course, because the act of feedback seeking may be what is needed for individuals to gain this insight. Instead of employees of average performance (determined through performance appraisals) seeking feedback through direct inquiry, it may be recommended that these individuals develop a broader repertoire of seeking strategies such as monitoring (Ashford & Cummings, 1983) and indirect inquiry (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000).

Finally, our results indicate that it is important for seekers to know a bit about how the target of their feedback seeking defines natural ability. If the target does not believe that feedback will help the individual to grow (i.e., when the target endorses an entity theory), frequently seeking feedback may be very costly.

However, when the target believes in the diagnostic value of feedback in enhancing performance (i.e., when the target is an incrementalist), then frequently asking feedback may yield impression-management benefits.

Limitations

In considering our results and their practical implications, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study.

First, our use of a scenario research design limits the generalizability of our results as it lacks contextual realism. To partially assess this, we asked respondents how easy it was to imagine the scenario happening in their organization. The 3.97 mean of this variable is consistent with that found in prior scenario research (e.g., Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Fedor et al., 1989) and suggests that respondents found the scenarios easy to imagine. Moreover, scenario studies have the advantage of increased experimental control. As such, they are suitable for drawing causal inferences, as it is more likely than in field studies that changes in the dependent variable occurred due to the manipulation of the independent variables (Singleton & Straits, 1999). Nevertheless, future research should test the findings for our research in real-life settings.

Another limitation of this study is that we only found partial support for our hypotheses, especially those pertaining to targets' performance-enhancement attributions. We note however that both statistically significant findings and non-findings have important implications for examining theoretically derived hypotheses. For example, the fact that targets did not use the frequency of the feedback sought as a cue when attributing FSB to performance-enhancement motives shows that impressions of feedback seeking are formed in more complex ways than previously assumed. However, as mentioned, it is unclear whether our lack of findings for performance-enhancement attributions are due to methodological issues (e.g., because respondents were responding in a socially desirable manner or because of the relatively small sample size) or because of the underlying processes through which such attributions are formed. As stated, it may be that targets' performance-enhancement and impression-management attributions are formed in divergent ways. Further theoretical guidance is needed to explore this possibility.

The constraints aside, the results of this study advance our understanding of the impression management costs and benefits of FSB in organizations and extend the existing feedback seeking literature by focusing on the boundary conditions that shape the "effective" inquiry for feedback.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Today is a day like any other. You work for a large southwestern organization. You have several immediate co-workers, you report to a single superior, and you have a small staff reporting to you. You are sitting comfortably at your desk working on final preparations for your year-end area review when you hear a knock on your office door. You look up to find Robert, one of your subordinates, standing in the doorway. Robert has a history of <u>superior performance</u>. You and Robert were involved in an important staff meeting yesterday. The meeting was long and covered a variety of topics. One of the topics of the meeting was a project that Robert is working on. Robert gave a prepared presentation that lasted about 15 minutes, and then he spent about 5 minutes answering questions about the project. Robert asks if you are free for a few minutes. After the two of you exchange greetings, Robert asks you, as he has done <u>only a few times before</u>, to comment on the <u>weaknesses</u> of his presentation.

FOOTNOTES

1. We use the terms seeking positive feedback and seeking feedback about strengths interchangeably. Similarly, we use negative feedback seeking and feedback seeking about weaknesses interchangeably?

2. We formulated and tested two series of contrasts: one for the superior performers and one for the average performers. For both groups, we tested whether there was a mean difference between frequent feedback seeking about weaknesses on the one hand and the average of the other three patterns of seeking on the other hand (frequent seeking about strengths, infrequent seeking about weaknesses and infrequent seeking about strengths). We repeated the same procedure for each feedback seeking pattern. The t-test that is reported in the paper, pertains to the contrast that was hypothesized.

3. *Table 3 shows the predicted values for impression-management motives for frequent and infrequent seeking when IPT was high (centered at two standard deviation units above the mean, i.e., more incremental) and when IPT was low (centered at two standard deviation units below the mean, i.e., more entity theory*

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TABLE 1

Means, standard deviations, reliabilties and intercorrelations for hypothesis testing

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Sign	0	1								
2 Freq.	0	1	.027							
3 Perf. Hist.	0	1	-.039	-.014						
4 Pers. Char.	3.4	1.15	.085	.048	.451**	(.83)				
5 Perf. Pot.	3.7	0.75	.028	.004	.620**	.184*	(.89)			
6 Perf. Enh. Att.	3.7	0.65	.037	-.055	.147*	.306**	.322**	(.77)		
7 Impr. Mgt. Att.	3.08	.81	-.056	-.005	-.029	-.132*	-.144*	.096	(.91)	
8 IPT	3.62	.90	-.040	-.041	-.024	-.021	-.059	-.050	-.078	(.91)
9 Ease of imagining	3.97	.98	-.013	-.033	.089	.044	.086	.114	-.103	.009

Notes. Sign = typical sign of sought feedback (-1: strengths, 1: weaknesses); Freq = frequency of seeking (-1 frequent, 1: infrequent); Perf. Hist. = Performance History (-1: average, 1: superior); Pers. Char. = personal characteristics (higher scores correspond to more positive evaluations); Perf. Pot. = Performance Potential (higher scores correspond to more positive evaluations); Perf. Enh. Att. = Performance-enhancement attributions; Impr. Mgt. Att. = Impression-management attributions; IPT = Implicit Person Theory (higher scores correspond to incremental theory)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.

TABLE 2

Coefficient Estimates[a]

	Personal Characteristics		Performance Potential		Performance Enhancement Attributions		Impression Management Attributions	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Step 1: Linking the Independent variables to the Dependent Variables[a]								
Performance History	.463**	.058	.624**	.035				
IPT	.039	.065	-.022	.039				
Performance History x Sign x Frequency	-.126*	.058	-.059	.035				
IPT x Frequency	-.120	.065	-.091	.039				
Step 2: Linking the Independent Variables to the Mediators								
Performance History					.144*	.039	-.042	.048
IPT					-.046	.043	-.111	.054
Performance History x Sign x Frequency					-.073	.039	.147*	.048
IPT x Frequency					-.036	.043	-.145*	.054
Step 3: Linking the Independent Variables & Mediators to the Dependent Variables								
Performance History	.421**	.056	.580**	.033				
IPT	.039	.063	-.027	.037				
Performance History x Sign x Frequency	-.090	.057	-.018	.033				
IPT x Frequency	-.094	.063	-.058	.037				
Performance Enhancement Attributions	.259**	.086	.259**	.051				
Impression Management Attributions	-.113*	.070	-.152**	.041				

Notes. Sign = typical sign of sought feedback (-1: strengths, 1: weaknesses); Frequency = frequency of seeking (-1 frequent, 1: infrequent); Performance History (-1: average, 1: superior); IPT = Implicit Person Theory (higher scores correspond to incremental theory).

a. All main terms and all first order, second order and higher order interactions were entered in the regression equations. The table only reports the hypothesized path coefficients. None of the other main effects of interactions were significant   * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

TABLE 3

Predicted values of impression-management attributions as a function of frequency of seeking and IPT

IPT	Frequency of Seeking	
	Frequent	Infrequent
Low [a] (entity theory)	3.60	3.09
High [b] (incremental theory)	3.16	2.97
Difference	0.44[*]	0.12

Note: IPT = Implicit Person Theory

a. Estimated values when IPT was two standard deviations below the mean

b. Estimated values when IPT was two standard deviations below the mean

* $p < .05$

FIGURE 1

Feedback-Seeking Pattern

Sign
Frequency

Feedback Seeker

Performance History

Target

Implicit Person
Theory

*Target's attributions for
feedback seeking*

Performance enhancement
Impression management

Evaluations of the seeker

Personal Characteristics
Performance Potential