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Benefiting from negative feedback

Pino G. Audia^{a,*}, Edwin A. Locke^{b,1}

^a*Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1900, USA*

^b*Department of Management and Organization, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA*

Abstract

This article discusses why it is so hard for people to benefit from negative feedback. We examine factors involved in the effective use of negative feedback. Our analysis suggests that the main obstacles to the effective use of negative feedback stem from the failure to obtain it and the failure to conduct an accurate appraisal of it. This is in contrast to research indicating that the main obstacle to the effective use of positive feedback lies more in avoiding its detrimental consequences after repeated exposure to it than in obtaining it or appraising it.

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1. Introduction

Feedback research is a mature field of inquiry that offers excellent literature reviews of specific stages of the feedback process. However, although the feedback literature considers sign to be one of the most important characteristics of the feedback message, theoretical models give little attention to the specific issues raised by positive versus negative feedback (Fedor, 1991; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Larson, 1989; Morrison & Bies, 1991). Yet, empirical evidence suggests that positive and negative feedback affect people quite differently. For example, research shows that the sign of the message affects the availability of feedback in that negative feedback is less sought after and less readily provided than positive feedback (Fisher, 1978). Other work indicates that individuals are generally receptive to

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-510-643-5435; fax: +1-510-642-4700.

E-mail addresses: audia@haas.berkeley.edu (P.G. Audia), ELocke@rhsmith.umd.edu (E.A. Locke).

¹ Tel.: +1-301-405-2238; fax: +1-301-314-8787.

positive feedback but tend to discredit negative feedback concerning their performance (Baron, 1993).

Acknowledging the importance of feedback sign in the feedback process, this paper focuses on factors that prevent people from benefiting from negative feedback. We develop a three-step model of the processes underlying the effective use of negative feedback and identify some of the critical contingencies affecting such processes. Our theoretical analysis revolves around the three following aspects: (1) the search for negative feedback; (2) the appraisal of negative feedback; and (3) the action taken in response to negative feedback.

To anticipate our conclusion, our theoretical analysis suggests that the main obstacles to the effective use of negative feedback stem from the first two factors, the failure to obtain it and the failure to conduct an accurate appraisal of it. This is in contrast to the research which indicates that the main problem in effectively using positive feedback lies primarily in avoiding the detrimental consequences resulting from repeated exposure to it (for a review, see Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). It must be noted that our review of previous work is selective rather than exhaustive. We limit our task to identify some of the unique problems posed by negative feedback.

We begin by reviewing previous work on the search for negative feedback. We then move the analysis to the other two steps, appraisal of and the action response to negative feedback. We conclude with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications and directions for future research.

2. Seeking negative feedback

The first obstacle faced by people who might benefit from negative feedback is the scarcity problem. Negative feedback is not as readily available as positive feedback. It is not hard to figure out why. First, most people do not want it and; second, most people do not like giving it to others (Fisher, 1978; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Most people do not want it because it threatens their self-esteem and sense of competence. People do not want to give it because they know how painful it is to get it and because they have learned through unpleasant experiences that giving negative feedback to others leads to anger and conflict and often to worse subsequent performance by the recipient (Baron, 1988).

Based on the above, two questions seem particularly important: (1) Under what conditions will individuals choose to seek negative feedback rather than avoid it? (2) And from whom will they seek it?

2.1. *Negative feedback seeking and avoiding*

The first question to ask is, why would people seek any negative feedback at all, in that individuals in general prefer to avoid pain and approach pleasure, both physical and psychological? The answer is that people are not preprogrammed to be mindless hedonists. Through reason, they have the power to accept short-term unpleasantness for the purpose of long-run benefit (Elster, 1979)—the benefit here being future performance improvement. In

the case of negative feedback, the issue of time perspective is critical—refusing to see that one is not doing well can cause much more pain in the long run than acknowledging the problem and fixing it.

With respect to research findings, we know that the greater the perceived uncertainty about how one is performing, the more likely people are to seek feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; March & Simon, 1958), although the sign cannot necessarily be known in advance. One factor that influences perceptions of uncertainty is an individual's performance history. Individuals who have mastered their job and have a substantial record of positive performance may not believe that they need any more feedback. In contrast, people who have experienced some unsatisfactory performances may perceive greater uncertainty and thus a greater need to know how they did on their last attempt, that is, if they are improving.

There is also evidence that poor performance as such leads to more feedback seeking (Earley, Northcraft, Lee, & Lituchi, 1989; Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992; Hammond, Summers, & Deane, 1973). Probably poor performers do not really want additional negative feedback but rather are hoping that the feedback will start getting positive as they correct past errors; nevertheless, in seeking feedback following a specific failure, they know that it will still be negative. They may be driven to get it anyway because if they are an employee, they know that not correcting poor performance will lead to dismissal.

On the other side of this coin, good performance may lead to less feedback seeking. A study by Audia, Locke, and Smith (2000) yields suggestive results. In a laboratory investigation of the relationship between success and dysfunctional persistence in a strategic decision making task, these authors found that when participants in the study faced a drop in performance, greater past success decreased the extent to which individuals sought information from critics, a type of information analogous to negative performance feedback (Baron, 1993). This suggests that people with a history of success may be less likely than those with a history of failure to seek feedback that is likely to be negative. Presumably, such people are confident that any drop in performance is temporary and that they can turn it around.

Feedback seeking is not necessarily tied solely to the practical aspects of performance and the need for information about one's performance. People may evaluate feedback also for its perceived harm–benefit potential for the self (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Believing that one is pursuing the wrong strategy to obtain a certain goal may be taken as indirect evidence that one is inadequate or incompetent. If preserving one's self-image is one's main priority, then individuals will try to avoid negative feedback, not allowing themselves to find out that their performance is poor.

While there might be several personal characteristics that are associated with a negative feedback avoidance orientation (e.g., anxiety, impulsivity)—other than the desire to evade—previous research (e.g., Ashford, 1989; Ilgen et al., 1979) stresses self-esteem as a critical variable. Self-esteem refers to one's appraisal of oneself as worthy and/or efficacious (Coopersmith, 1967; Locke, McClear, & Knight, 1996).

Two competing theories address the relationship between self-esteem and negative feedback orientation. Self-consistency theory proposes that people are motivated to maintain consistent attitudes about themselves (Shrauger, 1975). According to this theory, individuals prefer feedback that confirms their self-image. Thus, people who hold a low opinion of

themselves should seek more negative feedback than those who hold themselves in high regard.

In contrast, self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) suggests that people like to see themselves in a positive light and avoid information that lowers their self-esteem. Both theories predict that high self-esteem people prefer positive feedback to negative feedback. Their predictions differ, however, with respect to low self-esteem people. Whereas self-consistency theory suggests that low self-esteem people are more accepting of negative feedback over positive feedback, self-affirmation theory maintains that low self-esteem people avoid negative feedback when compared to high self-esteem people. The evidence supports self-affirmation theory, showing that while a self-enhancement bias makes people generally more inclined to obtain positive feedback, low self-esteem people also try to avoid negative feedback (Blaine & Crocker, 1993; Spencer, Josephs, & Steele, 1993).

In addition to considerations regarding the information value and the harm–benefit potential for the self, the decision to seek negative feedback can also be influenced by concerns pertaining to the feedback seekers' public image (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). The act of seeking negative feedback may be interpreted in positive or negative terms. It may be seen as a sign of incompetence or as a sign of conscientiousness and willingness to improve. Individuals' perceptions of the consequences of the act of seeking negative feedback on their public image—if they consider their image to be important—may influence whether and from whom they will seek negative feedback (Morrison & Bies, 1991). One can predict that the more individuals perceive “face” loss costs, the less they will seek negative feedback.

A final point needs to be made here. To the degree that an individual systematically avoids seeking negative information, when such information provides objective and important information regarding one's performance (or character) in order to preserve one's self-image or save “face,” then one is putting one's self at war with reality (the facts). This is a war that one can never win in the long run.

2.2. Negative feedback from whom?

It goes without saying that people should be most likely to seek negative feedback from people whom they trust. But what is meant by trust? Trust in the person's knowledge is one aspect. It makes no sense to get feedback from a person who does not know how to evaluate performance correctly or to give useful feedback. Trust in honesty and integrity is another aspect. The desire for self-deception aside, one would not want feedback from a person who is biased or is motivated by considerations other than the truth. Trust in the person's goodwill is a third aspect. The issue here is, do they have your best interests at heart or do they have some other agenda?

Concerns about public image can also influence the decision of whom to ask for negative feedback. Public image concerns will motivate individuals to seek feedback from a source with whom they have a favorable relationship because sources who feel positive about the feedback seeker will be more likely to interpret the feedback seeking act favorably (Morrison & Bies, 1991). Concerns about public image may also cause people to consider the reward power of alternative sources before asking for feedback. Individuals usually are most

concerned about maintaining a favorable image vis-à-vis powerful others. If they fear that feedback inquiry will damage their public image, they will be more likely to ask from someone with less reward power (Morrison & Bies, 1991).

These considerations raise the question of what factors influence the degree to which feedback seekers are concerned about how they appear to others. One such factor is self-monitoring (more properly named, in this context, self-doubt monitoring), which refers to the extent to which individuals are concerned about the public image implications of their behavior (Snyder, 1979). High self-monitors may be more concerned than low self-monitors about the public image implications of their performance. As a result, they may refrain from seeking negative feedback despite its potential utility to correct their behavior, particularly from powerful sources and from sources with whom they have an unfavorable relationship.

2.3. Summary

The decision to seek negative feedback is influenced by three types of considerations people make: the perceived utility of negative performance information; the perceived threat to one's self-image associated with negative feedback; and the perceived consequences of the act of seeking negative feedback on one's public image. Different contingencies activate these considerations. A history of poor performance increases the perceived value of negative feedback and as a result stimulates the search for it. Low self-esteem exacerbates the perceived harmful implications of negative feedback for one's self-image and thus motivates people to avoid it. High self (doubt)-monitoring intensifies individuals' concerns about their public image and thus leads people either to avoid negative feedback or to seek it from less threatening sources.

3. Appraisal of negative feedback

Not all negative feedback is the result of the recipient asking for it. People often learn of their poor performance from other individuals without soliciting that information. In some cases, negative feedback is delivered during formal performance appraisal sessions. In others, it is transmitted through informal conversations involving a variety of individuals, including not only supervisors but also peers and customers. In this section, our primary focus is how individuals appraise negative feedback, irrespective of whether the message is solicited by them or sent by others without being solicited.

To benefit from negative feedback, whether solicited or sent, people need to derive meaning from it that extends their current knowledge. For this purpose, individuals engage in various degrees of cognitive processing (i.e., thinking), ranging from very little or no analysis to careful scrutiny of the message. We believe that negative feedback complicates the appraisal process for two main reasons. The first is that the content of the message is often more ambiguous in the case of negative feedback than in the case of positive feedback. Research has shown that when people give negative feedback, evaluators regularly transmit ambiguous messages (Baron, 1993; Fisher, 1978) in order to make them more acceptable to

the recipient. This ambiguity requires greater interpretive efforts from feedback recipients. The second complication is that negative performance information tends to activate affective reactions that increase the risk of distorting the appraisal process (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

It is obvious that negative feedback is of no use if it is not well understood. Previous work suggests that generally negative feedback is perceived less accurately than is positive feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979). The problem does not lie entirely in the ambiguity of the message. The recipient also may distort the message through the use of defense mechanisms aimed at protecting self-esteem. Research by Baron (1993) on reactions to own and other's negative feedback suggests that this defensive mechanism operates through a self-serving bias whereby people tend to attribute desirable outcomes to internal causes but undesirable ones to external factors (Miller & Ross, 1975). Because of the self-serving bias, recipients rate their own self-criticism more favorably than criticism received from others.

If one were to assume that feedback messages are always complete and valid representations of reality, effective appraisal of feedback would entail simply perceiving new performance information accurately and assimilating it. However, this assumption does not always hold. It is a fact of organizational life that the clarity and the validity of the message are not a given. Not only can the message be ambiguous, it also can be inconsistent and incompatible with performance information coming from other sources or with beliefs held by the recipient.

For this reason, in addition to perceiving the message accurately, recipients need to appraise the feedback to ascertain its validity. Problems can arise when recipients view inaccurate performance appraisals as true or valid assessments as false. One cause of these mismatches is the recipients' failure to question opinions and assumptions that may not be supported by evidence. As we discuss below, these mismatches between recipients' assessment of the validity of the message and the real facts are generally maladaptive and can have deleterious consequences.

What are some of the contingencies influencing the amount of cognitive resources people put into the appraisal process? Petty and Cacioppo (1986) make the distinction between high and low elaboration, two main modes in which people process incoming information (cf. Fedor, 1991). Under high elaboration, people actively investigate the feedback's qualities and relevance as well as assess its validity in relation to what is already known. Although noncontent cues are considered along with other feedback's characteristics, high elaboration recipients focus primarily on message content. Conversely, under low elaboration, relatively little (if any) processing of content occurs. Instead of conducting detailed analysis of the feedback message, people typically decide whether to accept or reject the message based on noncontent cues such as the credibility of the source (Fedor, 1991; Ilgen et al., 1979) and the recipient's affective relationship with the source.

Perceived credibility or trust, as noted above, is a function of at least three factors: competence, moral trustworthiness (O'Keefe, 1990; Ilgen et al., 1979), and personal liking—which is presumably associated with a belief in the goodwill of the message giver (these three factors are not necessarily independent, e.g., we usually like people that we can morally trust). Messages coming from credible, trustworthy sources are more likely to be accepted than those coming from people who are not deemed competent and morally trustworthy.

Research suggests that when a source is seen as possessing expertise but having values, including presumably moral values that conflict with those of the recipient, the feedback may be used less than information from sources who share similar values (O'Reilly, 1983). This implies that people with similar values are trusted more. With respect to the recipient's affective relationship with the source, negative feedback coming from people who are liked by the recipient is more likely to be accepted because the recipient attributes good intentions to the source (Fedor, 1991).

The importance of these cues in the appraisal of negative feedback is consistent with studies that examine the effect of different power dimension on feedback acceptance. This research shows that messages coming from sources having expert power and referent power lead to greater acceptance of negative feedback than messages coming from sources holding coercive power (Fedor & Ramsay, 1999; Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1999). Note that expert power is likely to be positively associated with recipients' perceptions of source's credibility (based on competence), whereas referent power is likely to be positively associated with an affective and morally trusting relationship between recipient and source.

Low and high elaboration appraisal modes represent different trade-offs in efficiency and precision. While ensuring a more efficient use of cognitive resources, a low elaboration mode exposes feedback recipients to greater risks of forming inaccurate perceptions of the message and of reaching incorrect conclusions about its validity. Occasionally, liked sources and even credible sources are wrong. When they are wrong, a low elaboration mode may cause individuals to accept feedback that is untrue. On the other hand, occasionally sources that are not considered credible or are not liked deliver valid messages. In these circumstances, a low elaboration mode leads people to give little or no attention to messages coming from such sources and, in so doing, induces them to perceive inaccurately or even reject feedback that is valid.

A low elaboration mode also decreases recipients' ability to effectively handle ambiguous situations. From a normative standpoint, when the facts are ambiguous, recipients should wait until more conclusive evidence is available before reaching a conclusion as to whether a feedback message is true or false. However, under low elaboration, recipients are more likely to resolve the cognitive disruption and stress caused by ambiguous feedback by relying on noncontent cues to decide whether to dismiss or accept it.

We should not paint the low elaboration mode with too black a brush, however. If one actually knows that a message giver lacks competence and/or moral character and/or goodwill, then it is fully rational to dismiss the information that they give you, whether positive or negative. The key lies in knowing how to judge these qualities in another person. The most difficult decisions are usually those involving a message giver who is partly but not wholly lacking in the desirable qualities.

Even when low elaboration does involve greater risks of being inaccurate and of reaching incorrect conclusions, high elaboration may not work. People may not have the cognitive resources to scrutinize carefully every negative piece of evidence concerning their performance, and it would not be adaptive for them to do so.

When do people engage in high elaboration rather than low elaboration appraisal of negative feedback? Research on persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) shows that people are

more likely to adopt a high elaboration appraisal mode when they perceive that the issue or object of the message has important consequences for themselves. Such perceptions of high personal relevance may apply to the feedback process in work organizations. People might consider less relevant certain aspects of their work performance and thus might be more likely to engage in low elaboration when they learn about such peripheral aspects of their work performance. For example, an academic trying to achieve tenure in a publish-or-perish institution might be more likely to carefully assess negative feedback about his research than negative performance appraisals about his service.

Perceptions of high relevance of performance feedback may also be affected by one's characteristic performance level. High performers might not anticipate any important consequence if they fail to know about a momentary glitch in their achievement record. Consequently, they might dedicate little cognitive effort to negative performance feedback by not focusing on the content of the message and by paying attention only to messages coming from "high expert" sources. In contrast, low performers might stretch their cognitive resources to the maximum to keep track and scrutinize a wide array of incoming messages, which in their eyes could signal critical corrections to their behavior. Thus, we propose that past performance affects not only whether people seek negative feedback, but also whether they will employ a high elaboration strategy in relation to performance feedback.

Self-esteem may also play a role in determining how people appraise negative feedback. Earlier, we noted that low self-esteem can motivate people to avoid negative feedback. Kluger and DeNisi (1996), in their feedback intervention theory, suggests that when exposed to negative feedback, people with low self-esteem are likely to divert their attention from the details of the task to the negative meaning that information has for their self-image. Negative feedback sends a threat signal to their self-image that activates negative affective reactions (i.e., unpleasantness). Then negative affect, if unopposed by reason, impairs their ability to carefully process the message and may lead them to employ a low elaboration appraisal strategy whereby noncontent cues suggest whether to accept or disregard the message.

The relation between adherence to the facts (reality) and self-esteem is reciprocal. Those who chronically deny facts in order to protect their self-esteem can become progressively detached from reality and thereby lower their ability to function in the real world. This can progressively lower their self-esteem even as they try to protect its illusion by denying what is true.

Another factor that might affect the amount of cognitive effort people put into appraising negative feedback is the amount of prior knowledge (e.g., Fedor, 1991). People with little knowledge (e.g., people new in a job) lack the ability to assess independently the validity of the feedback they receive. Consequently, they may rely on noncontent cues such as the credibility of the source to decide whether to accept or reject negative feedback. But as information accumulates, people become increasingly able to assess, weight, and integrate new information in light of what they already know and so employ a high elaboration strategy. However, the relationship between prior knowledge and level of cognitive processing may be curvilinear. Beyond a certain point, prior knowledge may lead to insensitivity to

the impact of new information because this information represents an increasingly small proportion of the evidence already processed (Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992).

The level of elaboration of negative feedback might also be affected by self-doubt regarding an individual's status or standing in a social system (Kramer, 1999)—to the degree that one considers such status important. Research shows that people who are insecure about their status, for example newcomers or individuals in low status positions, tend to adopt a hypervigilant and ruminative style of information processing that reduces their ability to objectively assess information (Kramer, 1999). Under perceptions of uncertainty, they may rely on noncontent cues to identify messages that they see as most critical, for example focusing their attention primarily on messages coming from people who hold a position of power. Once they identify these critical messages, they may spend inordinate amounts of time ruminating over the message. In so doing, typically they exaggerate the meaning of negative performance information, seeing it as more threatening than it is, and thus giving rise to what has been called paranoid cognition (Kramer, 1999).

It must be noted that virtually all research reviewed in this section has looked at the appraisal of sent feedback, and that in our analysis we have assumed that what we know about sent feedback applies to solicited feedback. While this approach may be justified due to the lack of previous research differentiating between the appraisal of sent and solicited feedback, the issue of how the appraisal process may be affected by whether the feedback message is solicited or sent certainly merits further attention. For example, people who solicit negative feedback may be more likely to accept it as valid and to act on it than people who do not solicit it. This could be due, of course, to the fact that those who solicit negative feedback are likely to have chosen people they trust as feedback providers, but it could also be due to the fact that the act of solicitation implies a prior commitment to improve one's performance.

3.1. Summary

The objective appraisal of negative feedback, whether solicited or sent, involves accurately perceiving the message and assessing its validity. People may carefully scrutinize the message (high elaboration) or rely on noncontent cues to decide whether to accept it or dismiss it (low elaboration). A low elaboration approach, while more efficient and sometimes fully valid, may increase the risk of reaching incorrect conclusions about the validity of the message. Low self-esteem, extremely low and extremely high levels of prior knowledge, a history of high performance, and perceptions of uncertainty about one's status are likely to lead people to employ a low elaboration approach. Essential to objectively appraising negative feedback is knowledge of the degree to which the sender can be trusted with respect to competence, honesty, and goodwill. What factors would a recipient properly consider in assessing the validity of feedback? Here are some:

- Is the sender a person of proven expertise in relation to this task?
- Does the sender have a reputation for honesty?
- Has the sender observed the performance in question directly?

- Are objective performance measures available?
- Is the performance in question representative of recipient's performance?
- Was consideration given to mitigating factors outside of recipient's control?
- Was the feedback clear and unambiguous?

4. Response to feedback

Based on their assessment of the feedback message, whether solicited or sent, people decide whether to modify their actions. They can respond in three main ways: (1) accepting the message and acting on it (adjusting their behavior or quitting); (2) dismissing the message while persisting with the current course of action; and (3) seeking additional feedback while persisting with the current course of action (cf. Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984).

With respect to the first type of response, the question is, what factors determine whether individuals who accept the feedback message adjust the course of action or abandon the task altogether? Goal theory sheds some light on this issue (Locke & Latham, 1990). With the support of a large body of empirical work, goal theory suggests that when informed of a negative discrepancy between their goals and performance (i.e., negative feedback) and when their belief in their ability to succeed is low, people are more likely to lower their commitment to the task or the goal. Low commitment and low self-efficacy can also lead to abandoning the task altogether (e.g., as in students dropping courses that they do not like and cannot understand). Low commitment can lead to abandonment of the task because people do not consider the task important enough to justify further efforts. They see abandoning it as part of a redefinition of their role. When self-esteem (as well as self-efficacy) is low, abandonment of the task may be a defensive response in that they cannot tolerate the threat that negative feedback on the task represents. A milder version of abandonment of the task is downward revision of the standard. Changing a goal or task, however, is not necessarily defensive in motive; one can do this because one really lacks the needed ability or genuinely changes one's interests or priorities.

If individuals accept the message and decide to adjust their behavior, how will they change their behavior? Will they put more effort in the task ("working harder") or will they try different task strategies ("working smarter") (Wood & Locke, 1990)? One factor affecting whether people adopt one or the other adjustment option is the content of the feedback. When the feedback provides details as to what strategies need to be changed, people are more likely to work smarter than work harder (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In the absence of such information, people are more likely to respond by putting more effort in the task, although they may still attempt to search for better strategies.

Turning our attention to two other possible responses, the opposite of acting on the feedback is to persist with the current course of action. We distinguish two forms of persistence. The first comes with rejection of the feedback message. Rejection may result from a narrow focus on noncontent cues such as the source's expertise. When the source is neither credible nor liked, individuals may automatically discount the message. Alternatively,

rejection may derive from an objective analysis of the content of the message leading to the conclusion that the message is untrue. In the process of rejecting the message and persisting with the current course of action, recipients may also engage in impression management strategies (Taylor et al., 1984). These include attempts to deflect blame on others and, in more extreme cases, arguing with the source (arguing is not defensive, of course, if the source is actually wrong. This is often the case with performance appraisals where the boss is biased or lacks sufficient knowledge of the recipient).

In the second form of persistence, people are uncertain about the content or the validity of the feedback and are neither ready to reject it nor to accept it. Rather they delay reaching a conclusion in order to seek additional information. They may gather additional information from the same source to better understand where and how the performance data were gathered and what standards were applied to arrive at that feedback (e.g., as in a performance appraisal on the job). In some instances, the recipient may be uncertain as to whether the feedback source knows what he is talking about or whether he can be trusted to give an honest appraisal. In such cases, obtaining feedback from other sources may be critical.

After having identified the different ways in which people respond to feedback, the critical question is, which response is the most appropriate and under what circumstances? If one were to assume that the feedback message is complete and valid, then the correct response would be to accept the message and adjust one's course of action accordingly. However, as it was noted in our discussion of the appraisal of negative feedback, this assumption is often not made. In everyday life, an important task for feedback recipients is to check the validity of the feedback message. It is particularly critical how recipients handle situations in which the feedback message creates doubts and confusion. Do they reach a conclusion based on inconclusive evidence? Or do they seek additional feedback from the same source and/or other sources?

Effective responses are those that are based on correct conclusions about the validity of the message. Some mismatches occur when people accept the message and act on it (altering effort, changing direction of behavior, or quitting) when the message is untrue. Others occur when people dismiss the message and persist on the current (wrong) course of action when the critical message is valid. When the facts are uncertain because the feedback message raises new hypotheses about what is true but does not offer conclusive evidence, we suggest that the best response is to neither dismiss nor accept the message. In these instances, it is rational to persist with the current course of action while seeking additional feedback to test these new hypotheses as opposed to persisting while dismissing the message (of course, people often have to act on incomplete or uncertain information, e.g., picking stocks, but the key here is to know the difference between what can be known and what cannot and to have clear reasons for the choices one does make).

4.1. Summary

Individuals respond to negative feedback in three main ways: (1) accepting the message and acting on it; (2) dismissing the message while persisting with the current course of action; and (3) seeking additional feedback while persisting with the current course of action.

Effective responses do not necessarily consist of accepting the message and adjusting the course of action accordingly. Since the feedback message is not necessarily clear and valid, effective responses are those that are based on correct conclusions about the validity of the message. When the feedback message does not offer conclusive evidence, the best response is to persist with the current course of action while seeking additional feedback to resolve uncertainty.

5. Conclusions

Our focus on negative feedback should not be taken to imply that positive feedback is unimportant. It is not enough to know that one is wrong. Knowing when one is right is also vital because it facilitates the retention of effective courses of action. But although both positive and negative feedback are vital elements for individuals, they present different challenges. Positive feedback flows more freely in organizations than negative feedback because people are naturally inclined to give each other good news and to be receptive to it. Thus, the main problem with positive feedback seems to lie more in its detrimental consequences after repeated exposure to it (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) than in its circulation and appraisal.

For example, in an experimental study (noted earlier) of strategic decision makers, Audia et al. (2000) demonstrate that repeated exposure to positive feedback (i.e., past success) impairs individual's ability to recognize when it is the time to change a strategy that is no longer effective. Their study shows that such dysfunctional persistence is due to the fact that past success leads people to believe that what worked in the past will work in the future. This increases motivation in the form of higher goals and higher self-efficacy and leads people to pay less attention to unfavorable information.

The effective use of negative feedback seems even more problematic. More precisely, our review of the literature suggests that people must overcome several obstacles in order to benefit from negative feedback. When its circulation is restricted by people's reluctance to give negative feedback, the first hurdle is to take the initiative to seek negative feedback. People may be reluctant to seek negative feedback because it requires use of their limited time and cognitive resources. Even when the need for performance information is sufficiently strong to override these efficiency considerations, anticipation of negative emotional reactions induced by a perceived threat to their self-image or concerns about their public image may dissuade individuals from seeking negative feedback. The second obstacle is appraising negative feedback objectively. Whether negative feedback is solicited or sent, people do not necessarily allocate cognitive resources to scrutinize carefully the accuracy and validity of the message (high elaboration appraisal). For a variety of reasons, they often use mental shortcuts that allow them to infer (at times correctly) from noncontent cues, such as source's characteristics, the importance and accuracy of the message (low elaboration appraisal). The third obstacle is taking effective actions in response to negative feedback. Given that clear and objective feedback is a rarity, before taking any action people should

make sure that the content of the feedback is valid. It would be ineffective to change one's actions in response to feedback that is incorrect.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that in some situations, the most practical response for recipients might be to accept the message and conform to it, irrespective of its validity. An example might be when the boss says, "Do it my way or get fired," or the teacher says, "Do it this way or flunk the course" (of course, if the demand is unethical, one has to decide when it is better to quit than to conform).

Although we cannot quantify the probability of stumbling upon any of these three obstacles, our analysis suggests that it is certainly not an easy task to use negative feedback effectively. In fact, people may fail at different stages of the feedback process. Our review of the literature identifies some of the variables that are likely to affect their chances of success. It is important to note that some of these relationships have received empirical support (e.g., low self-esteem people seek less negative feedback than high self-esteem people), whereas others have been drawn from existing theory but need empirical verification (e.g., highly performing people are more likely than poorly performing people to adopt a low elaboration appraisal mode). One variable that seems to influence several steps of the negative feedback utilization process is past performance. Its effects, however, are likely to be contingent on other factors. Poorly performing people are more likely to seek negative feedback than highly performing people. However, poorly performing people with a low level of self-esteem may experience difficulties in processing the information because they lack the cognitive resources to manage its harmful potential. To complicate things further, their level of knowledge related to the content of the message may impair their ability to assess the validity of negative feedback. If they know too little, they lack the background against which to check the incoming message. If they know too much, they may be insensitive to additional information. It must be noted that since our review was selective rather than exhaustive, it is possible that other variables—such as attributional styles, reward structures, and saliency of performance—play also a role in the feedback utilization process.

Our analysis lends support to the notion that feedback may have highly variable effects. Since [Ilgen et al. \(1979\)](#) questioned the notion that more feedback is better, other researchers have found evidence of the mixed effects of feedback on performance. [Kluger and DeNisi \(1996\)](#) conducted a meta-analysis of 131 studies, which revealed that feedback improved performance on average but that in over one third of the cases it decreased performance. Feedback sign per se did not help to explain this variability, though other feedback message variables affected performance. The lack of significance of feedback sign may well be due to differences in the way people process feedback, particularly negative feedback. People who have access to negative feedback, whether solicited or sent, are in a better position to benefit from it than people who do not. However, our analysis suggests that whether they reap any benefit from it depends on their ability to assess carefully its validity and take appropriate responses.

Our theoretical analysis calls attention to the importance of validity testing as an important outcome of the appraisal process. Previous research on feedback recipients has stressed their role as information processors ([Ilgen et al., 1979](#)) and feedback seekers ([Ashford &](#)

Cummings, 1983) but has somewhat neglected the issue of whether the information being processed is correct. People in organizations routinely face situations in which feedback raises more questions than answers either because feedback comes from multiple sources holding divergent views about reality or because feedback sources are unable to formulate and communicate a complete and clear message (Fedor, 1991). In these situations, feedback recipients' ability to reach correct conclusions about the validity of the message is a critical element of the feedback utilization process.

Our review of the literature clearly signals the need for more empirical research, particularly on how people appraise negative feedback. For each component of the model, we have identified variables such as past performance, self-esteem, and prior knowledge that are likely to affect the use of negative feedback. A potentially fruitful and simple research approach is to examine in laboratory settings their effect on the search for negative feedback and on responses to it. Typically through such studies, one can only infer from the presence or absence of hypothesized effects whether certain cognitive processes take place. In-depth, qualitative investigations of how people approach and process negative feedback could help examine more closely individuals' cognitive strategies and thus compensate for the limitation of laboratory investigations. Such methodology allows also examining the role played by contextual variables such as characteristics of the task and of the social context.

Our review suggests also a pressing need for a better understanding of how the way people obtain negative feedback, whether soliciting it or receiving it, may affect their appraisal and response to the message. Most previous research has examined how people appraise and respond to sent feedback. An important question that remains unanswered is whether the search for negative feedback alters how individuals process and react to negative feedback. For example, future research could seek to answer questions such as, Does the act of seeking influence intentions to appraise and utilize the message and how? Is the level of processing affected by the purpose for which one solicits the feedback or from whom? Under what conditions individuals would ignore feedback they asked for?

Finally, on a more practical level, more research needs to be done on how to present negative feedback to others. We know that if people experience too much criticism, they often just tune out, especially if they are feeling emotionally threatened (Baron, 1993; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The solution may be to get across the critical negative information while at the same time sustaining the individual's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) because we know that if self-efficacy drops, performance deterioration is likely to follow. This is an area where clinicians, academics, and practitioners could profit from carrying out joint research projects.

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