FEEDBACK-SEEKING IN INDIVIDUAL ADAPTATION: A RESOURCE PERSPECTIVE

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This research examines a theory of feedback-seeking in organizations. Individuals are hypothesized to seek feedback on important issues and in new and uncertain situations. Results support these hypotheses. Individuals also report frequent seeking for feedback when they fear they are failing to attain goals. Long-tenured individuals seek less feedback, apparently in response to social pressures to appear confident and self-assured.

Several scholars have proposed that individuals actively interpret and organize their experiences (Jones, 1983; McHugh, 1969; Van Maanen, 1976) and map the environments they encounter (Bogart, 1980). White (1959) further proposed that, to achieve mastery, individuals continually explore within an environment until it is known and understood. All of these activities—exploring, interpreting, mapping, and organizing—fall within the general behavioral category of adaptation.

Despite the pervasiveness of these activities, relatively few studies have empirically examined them. With the exception of recent work by Feldman and Brett (1983) and some qualitative findings reported by Schein (1978), scholars have not tested theoretical propositions concerning adaptation within organizational settings.

To adapt is “to adjust fittingly” (American College Dictionary, 1966). In organizations, individuals adapt by tailoring their behaviors to fit the demands of a particular environment. The tailoring is based on information they are given or obtain about that environment. Thus, securing adequate information is a central consideration in successful adaptation (White, 1974).

This research took an initial step toward understanding the ways in which individuals adapt by focusing somewhat narrowly on one task of adaptation, securing adequate information. A kind of information that would seem to be especially important in the process of adaptation is that pertaining to the appropriateness or correctness of behavior for attaining various goals. This information is commonly called feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Powers, 1973).

In the interpersonal realm, feedback involves information about how others perceive and evaluate an individual’s behavior. Feedback can also be

This paper is based on a dissertation done under the direction of L. L. Cummings at Northwestern University. The author would like to thank Jeanne Brett, Larry Cummings, Jane Dutton, Jolene Galegher, Ralph Stablein, Alice Tybout, Thomas Tyler, and James Walsh for comments on an earlier draft.
provided by tasks or generated by individuals on the basis of their own thoughts and feelings (Greller & Herold, 1975). A given piece of feedback can fulfill different functions. It can serve as a reward and thus motivate performance, and it can serve as a cue useful in regulating behavior appropriately (Payne & Hauty, 1955). This research focused on the second function of feedback. By obtaining feedback, individuals can learn about the evaluative contingencies within their environments and how they stand with respect to those contingencies (Naylor, Pitchard, & Ilgen, 1980). To the extent that the ability to attain things of value within an environment can define successful adaptation (White, 1974), feedback should be a key information resource and feedback-seeking an important aspect of the adaptive process.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) defined feedback-seeking as conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states. They suggested that individuals use one of two distinct strategies to obtain information from their environments. First, individuals may monitor an environment for feedback by observing various situational cues, observing other individuals, and observing how others respond to their behavior in order to infer how well they are doing. In the parlance of social learning theory, monitoring involves receiving feedback vicariously through watching how others are responded to and reinforced (Bandura, 1977). Alternatively, individuals may directly inquire as to how others perceive and evaluate their behavior.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) argued that individuals will differentially use these strategies depending on the perceived costs involved with each. For example, if they think directly asking for feedback is inconsistent with maintaining an assured self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982), then the cost of using a strategy of inquiry increases. Under these conditions, individuals should inquire less and monitor more frequently in order to obtain the feedback they need. Monitoring in this case is the less costly strategy.

Studying processes of feedback-seeking should add to our understanding of both how individuals behave in organizations and, ultimately, how managers can handle various situations. As Katz (1980), among others, noted, individuals face a formidable task as they try to understand their organizations. Discovering "when to ask questions, give advice, take a vacation, quit early or push for a pay raise" (Katz, 1980: 93), as well as uncovering the various reward contingencies operating in an environment, are all necessary tasks for those hoping to survive and succeed in an organization. However, knowing the dimensions along which success is gauged in an environment is not sufficient. Individuals must also develop an ability to read feedback, to see themselves as others see them, and to understand how others evaluate their behavior. With this additional information, they can make corrections in behaviors and increase the likelihood of attaining their goals. Thus, understanding when individuals undertake feedback-seeking and where they may go wrong in the process is an important area for investigation.

Figure 1 presents the hypotheses tested in this research. The discussion presented in subsequent paragraphs gives the rationale for each of them.
FIGURE 1
Heuristic Model Giving Summary of Hypotheses

A Figure 1 presents the conceptual model that guided the hypotheses for this research. This model could not be tested causally in this study because the data collected were cross-sectional. Thus, multiple regression rather than a path analysis was used to test the hypotheses.

b H1 – H20 refer to the 20 hypotheses tested. The + or – sign in parentheses indicates the direction of the hypothesized relationship.
ANTECEDENTS OF FEEDBACK SEEKING

The proposed hypotheses are based on the general proposition that it is possible to predict when individuals will actively seek feedback by weighing those conditions that make feedback beneficial to them against factors that make seeking it out costly. In this sense, feedback can be treated like any other resource. The variables examined in this research, then, either directly influence the value of feedback as a resource, or index a cost inherent in searching for feedback.

Factors Influencing the Value of Feedback

The value placed on any resource—whether it be time, money, or steel—is not inherent in the resource itself but derives in part from the value placed on what it will produce. Individuals desiring material goods will thus value money; individuals interested in producing cars will value steel. Thus, if feedback is an information resource making possible the realization of various goals, the perceived importance of attaining a given goal will affect its perceived value. At its limit, the logic underlying Hypothesis 1 implies that an individual placing no importance on a particular goal should also have no desire for feedback useful in correcting errors with respect to that goal.

The degree of uncertainty about the behaviors appropriate or most useful for attaining a goal and how those behaviors might be evaluated by others also determines the value of feedback. Laboratory studies testing Berlyne’s (1960) theory of uncertainty and choice have documented the empirical relationship between feelings of uncertainty and information search (Crawford, 1974; Conolley, Gerard, & Kline, 1978; Lanzetta, 1970; Trope, 1975). Berlyne (1960) proposed that uncertainty and information-seeking are linked because the experience of uncertainty renders information more valuable and thus individuals are motivated to seek it. This research explicitly examined these theoretical links. Uncertainty is defined as a state in which individuals have no, little, or inconsistent information about the stimuli of interest (Gifford, Bobbitt, & Slocum, 1979; Heslin, Blake, & Rotton, 1972). Increased feelings of uncertainty concerning goal-related issues should increase the perceived value of feedback (Hypothesis 2), since such information allows people to structure situations and make choices as to how to proceed (Atkin, 1973; Berlyne, 1960).

Job and organizational tenure should also affect the value of feedback. Tenure and experience within a company are generally assumed to provide employees with an increasing number of cues concerning both the behaviors likely to be evaluated most positively in that setting and the relative value of various strategies of goal attainment (Hall, 1976; Katz, 1980). For example, it is the new employee who must determine “what is really expected of one, what is really rewarded, how much one can trust the official formal statements” (Schein, 1978:100). Hypothesis 3 proposes, however, that with increasing tenure these expectations become understood and individuals can judge pretty well for themselves how well they are doing (Katz, 1980).
Once individuals gain that ability they should value feedback less and thus seek it less frequently.

The socialization literature suggests, however, that any time individuals cross functional, hierarchical, or group boundaries a process of resocialization must occur (Katz, 1980; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Individuals entering even the most routine and simple jobs are likely to find their job requirements and contexts ambiguous. Cultures may also differ considerably among various workgroups within an organization (Siehl & Martin, 1982). A new job presents a new subenvironment to be learned and understood as behavioral expectations, evaluative criteria, and standards for performance may differ vastly from those of the previous position. In recognition of these learning demands, Hypothesis 4 proposes that the longer the job tenure, the lower the value of feedback.

Feedback should thus be perceived as valuable to individuals entering a new environment, whether it is a company as a whole or a subenvironment delineated by a new job, boss, or workgroup. It is at such points of entry and transition that the learning tasks environments impose are the greatest. Feedback helps individuals both to understand new environments and to map their evaluative contingencies, thereby enabling successful adaptation.

Factors Influencing the Frequency of Feedback-Seeking

The dependent variable of ultimate interest in this research was the frequency with which individuals will try to adapt to their organizational settings by actively seeking feedback through strategies of either monitoring or inquiry. The frequency of seeking is a function of several direct influences. First, the basic premise underlying the set of proposed hypotheses is that the perceived value of feedback should directly determine the extent of active feedback-seeking. Thus, Hypotheses 5 and 6 state that individuals who value feedback should seek it more often through both monitoring and inquiry.

As was mentioned in the introductory section, however, the value of feedback does not solely determine how frequently it will be sought. Rather, individuals should take several costs into account in their seeking behavior. The frequency of feedback-seeking, for example, may be inversely related to an individual's length of tenure in an organization and in a given job. A decrease in search for feedback by more tenured individuals is due only in part to a decrease in its value. Such tenured employees may also respond to social expectations that, as old-timers, they should know the ropes and not depend on guidance from others (Katz, 1980). They respond to those expectations by infrequently seeking feedback in public ways in order to maintain a confident, assured self-presentation (Baumeister, 1982). In this sense, the ability to ask questions and ask for feedback may be a special privilege offered to those new to an organization or job (Schein, 1978). Given this argument, Hypotheses 8 and 10 propose that inquiry will become less frequent as tenure increases. Note that Hypotheses 7 and 9 state that by implication the use of monitoring should increase with tenure as individuals rely on
this relatively private seeking strategy in order to maintain an appropriate self-presentation.

Feedback-seeking is also a costly activity in that it potentially increases the chances of hearing something that one would rather not know. Although individuals are indeed instrumental beings and thus value feedback because it allows them to correct errors and attain goals (Locke, 1978), they also want to sustain favorable views of themselves in order to maintain their self-esteem (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Jones & Gerard, 1967). As Jones and Gerard pointed out, an individual has a dual orientation in any setting: “He wants to see himself honestly, as others see him, but he also wants to see himself in the best possible light” (1967: 323). One way individuals defend their self-esteem is by avoiding disquieting information and feedback (Janis & Mann, 1977; Miller, 1976). Because feedback is evaluative information about the self, a primary deterrent of feedback-seeking may thus be the fear of hearing something negative.

This research examined two variables that index the extent to which individuals believe that available feedback is likely to be negative. The first measured respondents’ beliefs about their own levels of performance. Hypotheses 11 and 12 argue that individuals who believe they are doing poorly in their efforts to attain goals ought particularly to avoid seeking feedback in an attempt to protect themselves from possible negative feedback (Willerman, Lewitt, & Tellegen, 1960; Zuckerman, Brown, Fox, Lathin, & Minasian, 1979). These hypotheses imply that, for these performers, motivation to defend their egos may override desire to obtain information that would facilitate successful adaptation. The second variable measures respondents’ levels of self-confidence. Although self-confident individuals might view feedback—either positive or negative—as useful in learning about themselves and their abilities, those lacking confidence will likely see negative feedback as particularly threatening to their self-esteem (Singer, 1966). Thus, the logic underlying Hypotheses 13 and 14 is that individuals low in self-confidence are more likely to fear receiving negative evaluations and to regard their social environments as threatening. As such, they will seek feedback less frequently as they try to protect themselves from disquieting messages (Friend & Gilbert, 1973).

Individuals should also respond to direct costs in their feedback-seeking behavior. Costs of seeking have long been thought to affect the acquisition of information (Lanzetta, 1971). O’Reilly (1982), for example, found that decision makers will use accessible sources rather than other sources providing higher quality information because of the cost in effort involved in seeking out those more informative sources. O’Reilly cited similar findings in research by Clausen (1973), Gertsberger and Allen (1968), Menzel and Katz (1955), and Mintzberg (1973).

Both strategies of feedback-seeking potentially involve costs in effort. In monitoring, individuals must actively observe situations, perhaps for some time, and devote cognitive effort toward deriving interpretations. Inquiry may involve their tracking down potential sources of feedback (targets),
finding appropriate times, and explaining their behavior. If individuals feel that obtaining useful feedback requires a great deal of effort, they may seek it less frequently. As proposed in Hypotheses 15 and 16, the effort involved deters active search.

A second potential cost in feedback-seeking is the risk of embarrassment and loss of face inherent in the inquiry strategy. Directly asking others for feedback differs from monitoring in the visibility of the behavior. Inquiry is an interpersonal event that is subject to the inference processes of others (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). By asking for feedback, individuals risk the possibility that others will see that act as a sign of weakness and uncertainty. As proposed in Hypothesis 17, the perception that such risks exist should deter the use of an inquiry strategy. In such cases then, the use of monitoring should increase because it involves comparatively fewer costs. This relationship is stated as Hypothesis 18.

Risk costs differ from the self-esteem costs incurred by hearing something negative that were discussed earlier in this section. Risk costs refer to how an act of seeking itself may be evaluated. For example, even if a person receives positive feedback from a target about certain behavior, the target may negatively evaluate the seeker's need to know as a sign of insecurity. Alternatively, a seeker might receive devastating feedback and yet the target may positively evaluate the act of seeking as signaling the seeker's desire to improve. The two costs are proposed to be independent.

Finally, Naylor and colleagues (1980) proposed that individuals have finite supplies of energy that they allocate to various activities in their workplaces. Actively seeking feedback requires energy. If the metaphor of feedback as a resource is valid, it would seem that the amount of energy individuals will devote toward seeking feedback will depend on the store they have on hand. Individuals who have already received much feedback, for example, will devote effort to other activities. They should not value feedback less than they did before but will simply not be motivated to seek more of it actively since they have some on hand to use. In contrast, individuals who have not received much feedback should be especially willing to devote effort toward actively seeking it within work environments. This argument supports the hypothesized negative relationship (Hypotheses 19 and 20) between the amount of feedback received and subsequent feedback-seeking.

These 20 hypotheses are thought to capture the major determinants of the types (monitoring or inquiry) and levels of feedback-seeking that individuals may undertake in their efforts for adaptation. The hypotheses derive from considering feedback as a valuable individual resource (Ashford & Cummings, 1983) and also take seriously the costs of seeking it within organizations.

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1 See Broll, Gross, and Piliavin (1974) and Tessler and Schwartz (1972) for similar arguments concerning seeking help on a task.
METHODOLOGY

Participants, Setting, and Procedures

Employees in the marketing department of a large midwestern public utility located in an urban area (N = 331) participated in the study by completing questionnaires. Participation in the study was voluntary. The researcher administered the questionnaire to 300 employees during half-hour meetings in their workplace during work hours. Questionnaires were collected at that time and confidentiality was assured. The remaining 31 employees, representing downstate offices, filled out questionnaires sent by mail and returned them directly to the researcher.

Respondents had the following characteristics: 45 percent were male; their average age was 33.3 years (s.d. = 10.7 years); they had been with the company for an average of 10.4 years. They represented the following job types: account executives (20%), service advisors (8%), customer services representatives (10%), and communication consultants (22%). The remaining respondents included staff managers, clerical workers, clerical supervisors, and market administrators. Approximately 20 percent held supervisory jobs; the remainder were involved in the direct sale of the utility's products (account executives) or in technical support of the sales effort (customer service representatives, communication consultants, and service advisors). Of the various job types, only the communication consultants were represented by a union. With this number of respondents, statistical power to detect effects at the .05 level is .90 (Cohen & Cohen, 1975: 119).

With respect to the generalizability of results, the number of respondents was adequate for the analyses performed and reflected a good mix of job types, education levels, and lengths of tenure is the organization. The respondents also reflected the perceptions of both men and women approximately equally. But the fact that the respondents were drawn solely from one department of a regulated utility limits generalizability. Additionally, the mean age of respondents was fairly low and most reported relatively short job tenures (x = 2.2 years). These attributes of the respondents need to be considered as potential limits to the generalizability of these results.

Access to this organization was gained through a direct request to the Vice President of Marketing, who gave permission for the study to proceed as an unfunded outside research project completely in the control of the author.

Measures

Implicit in the discussion of the hypotheses is the notion that the processes involved in seeking feedback are goal-specific. That is, individuals seek feedback about behaviors specifically aimed to achieve goals, and issues specific to each goal influence their seeking. Given this perspective, the intent of this research was to test the hypotheses with regard to two specific goals: (1) performing well on the job, and (2) having potential for advancement within the organization. Focusing on two goals allowed an exploratory
examination of feedback-seeking differences due to the characteristics of the
goal in question. Several of the constructs were thus measured with specific
goal referents: importance of a goal, the value of feedback for achieving a
goal, the amount of feedback received about a goal, negative beliefs about
one’s status of goal attainment, uncertainty about appropriate goal behaviors,
and frequencies of the two types of seeking—monitoring and inquiry. Sepa-
rate scales were constructed to measure each of these constructs for each
goal.

In assessing the measures to be used in testing hypotheses, however,
measures for the two separate goals for the same construct were found to be
highly correlated (average correlation = .54). Thus, an independent assess-
ment of the hypotheses for each goal was not possible. In addition, a prin-}
cipal components factor analysis revealed that items for the three dependent
variables, the value of feedback and the frequency of monitoring and inquiry,
were not distinguished by goal. In fact, a single underlying dimension that
included items from both goals could represent each of these constructs.
Given these findings, it is clear that these measures cannot detect differences
in feedback-seeking for these two goals. Consequently, it was decided to test
the hypotheses solely for one goal. The goal of performance was chosen on
the basis of its long research history in the field of organizational behavior.

Table 1 presents characteristics of the scales used in this research. The
actual items appear in the Appendix. A principal components factor analy-
sis was performed on each scale to assess its dimensionality. With the excep-
tion of two scales, each scale was found to be unidimensional. The following
subsections address the dimensionality of the two exceptions along with
other pertinent measurement issues.

Reliability issues. Two variables, the importance of performance and
negative beliefs about potential for goal attainment, showed constrained and
highly skewed distributions. In this sample, most respondents rated high
performance as an important goal and held fairly positive beliefs about their
potential to achieve this goal. These skewed distributions contributed to the
marginal reliabilities of these scales.

Dimensionality issues. Results of the factor analysis indicated that two
variables, risk in seeking and amount of feedback received, were not
unidimensional. The items measuring perceived risk in feedback-seeking
represented two underlying factors. Factor 1 contained items referring to risk
associated with seeking feedback from co-workers, and items loading on
Factor 2 referred to risks in feedback-seeking from supervisors. The two
factors were significantly correlated ($r = .41, p<.001$). This research articu-
lated no source-specific hypotheses. Rather, the issue of interest was the
effect of a general perception that risks exist on the reported frequency of
feedback-seeking. Thus, the items across both factors were summed to create
the risk scale.

Items measuring the amount of feedback received also loaded on two
separate factors, each reflecting different sources of feedback. The first factor
consisted of items referencing private sources (self and task); items on the
TABLE 1  
Characteristics of Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scales</th>
<th>Numbers of Items</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Standard Deviations</th>
<th>Reliabilitiesa</th>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of performance goal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.77</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.82</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organizational tenure (months)</td>
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<td>125.17</td>
<td>101.04</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>Job tenure (months)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.18</td>
<td>32.68</td>
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<td>5.20</td>
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<td>.57</td>
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<td>Effort in seeking</td>
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<td>.80</td>
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<td>Amount of feedback received</td>
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<td>.58</td>
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<td>Value of feedback</td>
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<td>12.32</td>
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<td>.72</td>
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<td>Frequency of monitoring</td>
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<td>3.29</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of inquiry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>.33b</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

a Reliabilities were assessed with Cronbach’s alpha, unless otherwise stated.  
b Interitem correlation.

second factor referred to public sources of feedback such as supervisors, co-workers, and friends. These factors were significantly correlated \( r = .31, p < .001 \) and were summed to form a composite index of the total amount of feedback received that reflected the intended theoretical construct.

RESULTS

Three separate multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the relationships of interest. Three dependent variables were examined: the value of feedback, the frequency of monitoring, and the frequency of inquiry. Table 2 presents the correlations among the independent and dependent variables. Tables 3 and 4 present the results of the multiple regression analyses. Although some of the correlations among the independent variables presented in Table 2 are significant, their magnitudes are not strong enough to demonstrate a serious threat of multicollinearity (Cohen & Cohen, 1975).

The regression coefficients linking the perceived importance of performance as a goal, perceived uncertainty about performance-related issues, and job tenure to the perceived value of feedback were all significant and in the hypothesized direction. These findings support Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. Length of tenure in the organization, however, had no direct relationship to the perceived value of feedback, disconfirming Hypothesis 4. The most important predictor of the value of feedback about performance behaviors was the length of job tenure. Respondents with long tenure on the job perceived less value of feedback on performance than other respondents. These variables explain 10 percent of the variance in the perceived value of feedback about performance.
### TABLE 2

Bivariate Correlations among Independent and Dependent Variables

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Importance of goal</td>
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<td>2. Uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
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<td>09</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Job tenure</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>41***</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Negative beliefs about</td>
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<tr>
<td>goal attainment</td>
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<td>08</td>
<td>-07</td>
<td>-10*</td>
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<td>6. Self-confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Effort in seeking</td>
<td>-16**</td>
<td>54***</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>-06</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Risk in seeking</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Amount of feedback received</td>
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<td>-17***</td>
<td>-09</td>
<td>-07</td>
<td>17***</td>
<td>-26***</td>
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<td>10. Value of feedback</td>
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<td>-20***</td>
<td>-02</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>14**</td>
<td>-09</td>
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<td>11. Frequency of monitoring</td>
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<td>-26***</td>
<td>-20***</td>
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<td>06</td>
<td>-08</td>
<td>-05</td>
<td>30***</td>
<td>27***</td>
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<td>12. Frequency of inquiry</td>
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<td>-32***</td>
<td>-17***</td>
<td>12*</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>-13*</td>
<td>-18***</td>
<td>30***</td>
<td>20***</td>
<td>51***</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*a Decimal points omitted.

* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001
TABLE 3
Multiple Regression Analysis
of Value of Feedback about Performance Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
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<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of performance goal</td>
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<td>-.24</td>
<td>-3.51***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R^2</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

TABLE 4
Multiple Regression Analysis
of Feedback-Seeking Variables

| Independent Variables          | Frequency of Monitoring | | Frequency of Inquiry |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
|                               | b  | Beta | t    | b  | Beta | t    |
| Organizational tenure         | -.07 | -.23 | -3.76*** | -.00 | -.20 | -3.25*** |
| Job tenure                    | -.00 | .07  | -1.19 | -.00 | .03  | -0.47  |
| Negative beliefs about goal attainment | .28 | .15  | 2.63**  | .16 | .16  | 2.63**  |
| Self-confidence               | .17 | .12  | 2.08* | .04 | .06  | 0.99  |
| Effort in seeking             | -.06 | -.05 | -0.84 | -.03 | .05  | 0.76  |
| Risk in seeking               | .03 | .06  | 0.90  | -.02 | -.06 | -0.97  |
| Amount of feedback received   | .34 | .27  | 4.68*** | .14 | .21  | 3.53**  |
| Value of feedback             | .42 | .22  | 3.70*** | .19 | .18  | 2.95**  |
| Adjusted R^2                  | .26 |      |       | .20 |      |       |

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

As for the two variables measuring feedback-seeking, the value of feedback was significantly and positively related to the frequency of both monitoring and inquiry. These results support Hypotheses 5 and 6. Individuals who valued feedback on their performance reported that they frequently monitored and asked for feedback related to their performance.

In contradiction of Hypotheses 7 and 8, job tenure was not related to the frequency of either monitoring or inquiry. However, the negative coefficients relating organizational tenure to the perceived frequency of inquiry for feedback on performance support Hypothesis 10.\(^2\) But Hypothesis 9, stating that

\(^2\) Given the correlation between job and organizational tenure, multicollinearity might be thought to bias or attenuate the tenure coefficients. When the regression model is analyzed with only job tenure and then again with only organizational tenure, however, the coefficients do not significantly differ from those presented in Tables 4 and 5, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a problem for these two variables.
individuals would compensate for the increased costs of inquiry by monitoring for feedback more frequently, was not supported. More tenured individuals both monitored and inquired less for feedback.

Results supported neither Hypotheses 11 nor 12. Individuals with negative beliefs about their performance did not avoid feedback, but rather reported more frequent seeking by both monitoring the environment for feedback and directly inquiring for feedback assessments.

Results did support Hypothesis 13. Individuals high in self-confidence reported monitoring for feedback more frequently. Hypothesis 14 was not supported, however, as respondents' self-confidence was not related to the perceived frequency of inquiry for feedback on performance.

The perceived effort and risk costs involved in seeking feedback had no relationship to either seeking strategy, disconfirming Hypotheses 15 through 18. In this data set, the costs of seeking did not deter searching for feedback.

The positive coefficients linking the amount of feedback received with the perceived frequency of monitoring and inquiry for both goals contradicted Hypotheses 19 and 20. These results not only fail to support the hypothesized relationships, but are problematic for the logic of the resource metaphor.

The set of predictors explained 26 percent of the variance in monitoring for feedback and 20 percent of the variance in inquiry. The perceived value of feedback was the most important determinant of reported frequency for both monitoring and inquiry, and organizational tenure emerged as the primary deterrent.

DISCUSSION

Evidence Supporting Feedback as a Personal Resource

The word resource identifies an entity with some utility or value, a helpful means for achieving an end. Consistent with this notion, the data indicate that high perceived value of feedback is associated with reports of relatively frequent feedback-seeking. The resource analogy also implies that if feedback is to be considered a resource, its value will derive in part from the desirability of the end it helps produce. Accordingly, respondents who highly valued the end state—the goal to be achieved—tended to also value the resource of feedback.

The small $R^2$ may be due to the constrained variance in ratings of the importance of performance, as most respondents rated this goal very highly. The true influence of the importance of performance on the value of feedback on performance was probably underestimated in this data set because of the low variance in importance ratings and the resultant poor reliability for this scale.

Feedback's value as a resource, however, stems also from its utility in resolving various uncertainties surrounding the attainment of goals. Consistent with the literature on uncertainty (Berlyne, 1960; Crawford, 1974; Gifford et al., 1979), both feelings of uncertainty concerning the behaviors required
to achieve performance goals and potential evaluations of those behaviors were related to the respondents' beliefs about the value of feedback. As operationally defined, uncertainty stemmed from a perceived lack of information or inconsistent information about these issues.

The value of feedback, however, appears to be viewed differently at different states of an individual's tenure within an organization. Feedback seems to be a resource useful in adapting to a new environment defined by a particular job. As individuals gain tenure in a job, they perceive feedback as less valuable. However, as individuals gain tenure in an organization, they do not necessarily value feedback on performance less. The data suggest that individuals see feedback as valuable in mastering subenvironments defined by particular jobs, regardless of whether those jobs are their first or are later in their organizational tenures. As subenvironments become known and predictable, however, individuals value feedback less. The perceived value of feedback thus can be presumed to fluctuate as individuals move from job to job within an organization rather than to decrease monotonically as a function of organizational tenure.

A second possibility is that individuals desire different types of feedback in the different situations they encounter as they gain tenure in a firm. For example, Feldman and Brett (1983) suggested that those new to an organization may require social feedback and support, but those with some tenure who face a new job environment following a transfer will need feedback on tasks. Thus the particular context faced by an individual may affect the type of feedback sought.

The data for this sample indicate, however, that although individuals with long organizational tenure do not value feedback less, they do report seeking it less frequently. Organizational tenure was significantly and negatively related to the perceived frequency of both monitoring and inquiry. These results are consistent with the argument made earlier that a desire to avoid disclosing uncertainty may deter individuals with long tenure in an organization from seeking feedback. That is, as organizational tenure increases, people may feel that seeking feedback about their performance would undermine their standing as confident and self-assured veterans in the eyes of others, and thus they seek it less frequently.

This explanation for the observed relationship receives some additional support in this data from a small but significant ($r = .14, p<.01$) positive correlation between organizational tenure and the perception that seeking feedback involves risks. This result, along with the lack of relationship between organizational tenure and the value of feedback, suggests that more tenured individuals seek feedback less not because feedback is less of a resource but because the social costs of seeking it become too high. Although this result suggests processes that may accompany tenure, it must be kept in mind that the data tapped individuals at only one point in time. Thus it is possible that we are detecting relationships unique to this particular group of employees.
Ego-Defense Motivation

In addition to the deterrents related to self-presentation that may accompany organizational tenure, a further deterrent to feedback-seeking may exist. For certain individuals, a desire to see themselves favorably may deter feedback-seeking, whatever the length of their tenure. These individuals are thought to curtail seeking to avoid messages they believe might be negative.

Consistent with this argument, individuals low in self-confidence reported less frequent monitoring of feedback. Individual differences in self-confidence were not, however, related to the frequency of inquiry. The result for monitoring complements previous findings of research on self-esteem. Weiss and Knight (1980) found that individuals with high self-esteem relied more on themselves and less on their job environments to guide task-related behaviors. They argued that these individuals are confident of their abilities to do well and feel little need to explore their job environments for cues about how to perform. The two findings taken together suggest that individuals with high self-esteem may not rely on their environments to determine what to do (how to perform) but may confidently and proactively use their environments to assess how well they are doing. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem, lacking confidence in their abilities, may rely on the environment to tell them what to do—which tasks to perform and in what sequence—but may shy away from an assessment of how well they have done it. They may do so by seeking feedback infrequently.

It was further proposed that individuals who believe they are not doing well in attaining goals would similarly avoid feedback-seeking to protect themselves from painful information. The data directly disconfirm this hypothesis and provide a surprising source of support for the portrayal of feedback as a resource. Individuals’ negative beliefs about attaining the goal of adequate performance were in fact positively related to the perceived frequency of monitoring and inquiry. This finding clearly contradicts the ego-defense argument and suggests that perhaps these individuals see feedback as useful. Seeking feedback from others may seem to be a natural, instrumental course of action as individuals monitor their own assessments of performance and try to improve their chances of attaining goals. The finding is very supportive of the proposition that individuals view feedback as a resource, for if it is a resource, those who can most benefit from it ought in particular to seek it.

Evidence Not Supporting Feedback as a Personal Resource

Results did not support some of the hypotheses. This section identifies these sources of disconfirmation and presents possible explanations for these findings.

Possession of a stock of a resource was argued to reduce the amount of energy devoted to attaining additional supplies of that resource. Contrary to this logic, however, for this sample the amount of feedback an individual...
had recently received was associated with a reported increase in both monitoring and inquiry.

One explanation for these results is that those who seek feedback experience its value, enjoy improved performance, and thus are motivated to seek again. Although this reinforcement argument might explain these results, a more likely explanation lies in the limitations of the methodology used to assess the proposed relationships. The findings may reflect the fact that individuals who monitor and inquire more frequently quite naturally obtain more feedback. In other words, though the amount of feedback recently received was hypothesized to be an independent variable leading to the feedback-seeking criteria, it may well be an outcome of seeking. Given the cross-sectional nature of this research, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

A second threat to the utility of the resource metaphor arises when considering the results relating the costs of seeking to its frequency. A resource perspective would clearly argue that the greater the costs associated with obtaining a given resource, the less that resource will be sought. Research on predecisional information search has supported this proposition (Lanzetta, 1970, 1971). In this data set, however, neither perceived effort nor risk costs influenced reported feedback-seeking.

One explanation for these findings may lie in the interpretation of the economics of resource use. A strict economic resource perspective would argue that individuals weigh the costs of obtaining additional quantities of a resource against the value of that resource in determining search behavior (Atkin, 1973). If a resource is very valuable, they may be willing to incur great costs in seeking it out. In contrast, high costs would strictly deter active seeking if an individual places a low value on the resource.

A moderated regression was undertaken to assess these post hoc propositions. Two interaction terms were added to the model in the equations for the frequency of monitoring and of inquiry. The interaction terms were created by multiplying scores of the variable measuring value of feedback first with effort and then with risk. These interaction terms were not significant for either monitoring or inquiry, suggesting that the value placed on the resource did not result in differential effects for the costs of search on subsequent seeking behavior.

Perhaps Crawford’s (1974) conclusion about individual search behavior is relevant for this sample as well. He argued:

Individuals do not seem to employ an averaging rule for rewards and costs. Cost factors may play a significant role in the initiation of search behaviors while reward maintains the search response once emitted (1974: 627).

Crawford’s argument suggests that effort and risk did not affect the frequency of feedback-seeking because, although these variables may influence the initiation of search behavior, they exert a nonsignificant influence on the frequency of those behaviors over time. Since this research measured chronic levels of seeking, the effect of these cost variables may have been obscured.

The data also refuted the conceptual independence of the two seeking strategies, monitoring and inquiry. In contrast to the argument that previous
research posed (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), these strategies appear to be neither compensatory nor independent. In fact, the two strategies enjoy quite similar relationships with the predictors and are highly correlated. At this point, given the level of knowledge about these processes, our effort may be better directed toward predicting a general level of activity within the feedback process rather than the specific forms that activity might take. It should be noted, however, that consistency biases of self-reports and common method variance may also account for the high correlation between the reported use of these strategies.

Limitations

This research has some clear limitations. First, the reliance on cross-sectional data does not allow the making of causal statements about the process of feedback-seeking. Although these data are relatively informative given the current level of theoretical development and empirical findings concerning individual adaptation within organizations, the need for longitudinal models and controlled experimental studies that would further our understanding of these processes is clear. Second, the data are self-reports of feedback-seeking efforts. Though methodologies based on self-reports dominate studies that deal with adaptation (Feldman & Brett, 1983; Latack, 1984), they have two inherent weaknesses, one of which is particularly relevant to this study. The first and most common weakness is that self-reports may not validly reflect actual behaviors. The second lies in asking individuals to report the frequency with which they initiate various behaviors such as seeking information on tasks (Feldman & Brett, 1983; Weiss, Ilgen, & Sharbaugh, 1982), feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), and social support (Feldman & Brett, 1983; House, 1981). Individuals may overreport actions undertaken at their own initiative. They may claim, for example, encounters involving feedback that were initiated by a supervisor as feedback they actively sought. Though items in this study were clearly worded to identify initiators, the possibility of overreporting must be considered.3

3 This limitation would be a particular concern if the bias were not randomly distributed across all respondents. To test whether employees holding different jobs (i.e., sales, technical, and clerical employees) and of differing managerial ranks (i.e., supervisory vs. nonsupervisory personnel) differed in their self-reports of feedback-seeking, two one-way ANOVAs were undertaken for each dependent variable. The ANOVA for rank revealed that supervisory personnel did not differ from nonsupervisors in their reports of monitoring ($F_{1,287} = 1.66, p = n.s.$), or inquiry ($F_{1,285} = 1.70, p = n.s.$). The ANOVA for type of job uncovered no difference in self-reports of inquiry across the three groups ($F_{2,281} = .64, p = n.s.$), but it did uncover a significant difference in reports of monitoring ($F_{2,285} = 6.93, p = .01$). A Scheffe test of differences among the three means indicated that sales personnel reported undertaking significantly more monitoring than did either clerical or technical support personnel. Thus, though respondents do not show wide variability in self-reports of monitoring and inquiry, the tendency of sales personnel to report more frequent monitoring must be noted. From these data, we cannot tell whether sales employees are biased in their reports of monitoring or whether they in fact monitor more frequently for feedback on their behavior.
A final limitation of the research is that it tested propositions about feedback-seeking with respect to only one goal, performing well on the job. Although it was proposed that the process may vary depending on various characteristics of goals, the correlated dependent measures across goals did not allow examination of goal-related differences in this research. It may be that goals such as performing well and maintaining potential for advancement are in fact correlated in the minds of most employees. Other goals, such as acceptance by a workgroup of various goals related to self-presentation, may provide a more useful contrast in future research.4

Areas for Future Research

Within the limits of self-reported cross-sectional data, this research does suggest that individuals actively adapt to settings that are new, uncertain, or troublesome by seeking out information useful in regulating their behavior. They do so both by observing others and drawing inferences about ways in which they might change their behavior to survive and succeed in those settings, and by directly asking others for assessments of their behavior.

These simple empirical observations raise a host of researchable questions concerning feedback-seeking. For instance, how do individuals combine the feedback they seek with that spontaneously given to them? If two messages are discrepant, which has more weight when individuals draw conclusions about their performance? Do they resolve discrepancies in favor of self-generated feedback or in favor of feedback volunteered by others?

This research examined only one strategy of adapting to a work setting. Future research needs to broaden this picture by specifying the relationship between this strategy and others individuals may employ. White (1974), for example, argued that individuals must also maintain freedom of movement and satisfactory internal conditions for response in order to adapt. Future research should simultaneously address these preconditions and shift attention to dependent variables that tap some of the consequences of successful and unsuccessful adaptation. For example, it is not clear whether active feedback-seeking leads to better or worse performance of tasks. Active seekers may attain their goals more efficiently than inactive seekers, or they may get bogged down by responding affectively to the various feedback messages they read or ask for. Accurate negative appraisals, for example, may be demoralizing for some individuals. The desire to avoid this experience may affect subsequent adaptation if an individual begins seeking not to determine the errors in a course of action, but rather to confirm the utility of that course of action.

Future research should also specifically address the effects of organizational contexts on individual’s feedback-seeking behavior. This study conceptualized feedback-seeking as an individual psychological phenomenon. However, organizational structure and technology and the demography of a

4 Credit for this suggestion goes to an anonymous reviewer.
particular workgroup may all affect feedback-seeking by creating settings in which feedback is more or less accessible to individuals. Information-sharing norms may also affect feedback-seeking behavior (DeWhirst, 1971). Methodologies that involve repeated measurement could address issues that reflect the ongoing process of seeking. Crawford (1974), for example, suggested that individuals will seek feedback only if they have received useful information from doing so in the past. Research might address other attributes of messages that could affect the process of search. These attributes might include the affective sign of the feedback obtained and whether or not the first piece of feedback encountered diverges from or confirms an individual’s own evaluation.

For managers, an understanding of feedback-seeking processes may be helpful in clarifying several issues. What cues do they give that are—perhaps wrongly—interpreted as feedback? What situations cause individuals to desire feedback? How might they make this information more accessible to their employees, either directly, or by influencing norms about information-seeking and sharing? Qualitative studies suggest that individuals do in fact look for feedback in managers’ actions. Turner (1971), for example, noted that in an organization, remarks or pronouncements by a chief executive are “ransacked for latent meanings” and that “any aspect of his behavior may be treated as if it contained messages for others in the organization” (1971:108). Through a systematic investigation of what information and feedback individuals need, what strategies they use to obtain it, and where they go wrong in the process, managers may be able to help employees to interpret their organizational contexts more accurately.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

All items used to measure the constructs tested in this research appear below. Unless otherwise noted, items used a 5-point response format anchored by strongly agree and strongly disagree. "R" indicates reverse scoring.

**Independent Variables**

1. Importance of performance goal:
   - How important are the following goals to you in your current setting at (X)?
   - Good performance in your present job (5-point response format from very important to very unimportant)
   - Of all the goals I have at (X), I value performing well the most.
   - I wouldn’t feel good about myself if I weren’t performing well.

2. Uncertainty about appropriate behaviors and potential evaluations:
   - It is unclear to me exactly what I should do in order to perform my job better.
   - I really get little useful information about performance standards within my department.
   - Information about how my performance will be evaluated has been directly communicated to me. (R)
   - People around here give pretty consistent information about what we can do to perform better in our jobs. (R)

3. Organizational tenure:
   - How long have you worked for (X)? Year(s) __________ Month(s) _________

4. Job tenure:
   - How long have you worked at the job you presently hold? Year(s) ______ Month(s) ______

5. Negative beliefs about potential for goal attainment:
   - How well do you believe you are performing in your current job? (5-point response format ranging from very well to very poorly)
   - My performance may not be adequate for this organization.
   - Others may rate my performance as below standard.

6. Self-confidence (5-point response formats ranging from completely true to completely false):
   - I sort of only half believe in myself. (R)
   - I feel that I am a person of worth, on an equal plane with others.
   - I seem to have a real inner strength in handling things. I am on a pretty solid foundation and it makes me pretty sure of myself.
   - I am frequently bothered by feelings of inferiority. (R)

7. Effort in feedback-seeking:
   - The way things are set up around here, it would take a lot of effort to get feedback from others.
   - I can get feedback from others with little effort whenever I want it. (R)
   - How much effort does it take for you to get useful feedback from the following sources? (4-point response format including a lot, some, a little, and none at all)
     - Your boss
     - Your co-workers

8. Risk in feedback-seeking:
   - I think my boss would think worse of me if I asked him/her for feedback.
   - I would not be nervous about asking my boss how he/she evaluates my behaviors. (R)
   - It is not a good idea to ask your co-workers for feedback; they might think you are incompetent.
   - It is embarrassing to ask my co-workers for their impression of how I am doing at work.

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5 See Heslin and colleagues (1972) for the derivation of this measure of the uncertainty construct.
6 High scores represent more negative beliefs.
7 Items drawn from self-esteem scales presented in Robinson and Shaver (1973).
It would not bother me at all to ask my boss for feedback. (R)
It is not a good idea to ask your boss for feedback; he/she might think you are incompetent.
It is embarrassing to ask my boss for feedback.
I think my co-workers would think worse of me if I asked them for feedback.
I would not be nervous about asking my co-workers how they evaluate my behaviors. (R)
It is better to try and figure out how you are doing on your own rather than ask your co-workers for feedback.

9. Amount of feedback recently received (4-point response format—a lot, some, a little, and none at all):
How much feedback information have you received recently from the following sources about your performance?
From your boss
From your co-workers
Using your own thoughts and feelings
From the task itself
From friends outside the organization and/or your spouse

10. Value of feedback about performance behaviors:
It is important to me to receive feedback on my performance.
I would like to get more feedback on what behaviors will help me do better in performing my job.
I find feedback on my performance useful.
It is important for me to receive feedback on my potential for advancement within (X).
I would like to get more feedback on what behaviors will help me advance within the company.
I find feedback on my advancement potential useful.

Feedback-Seeking*

11. Frequency of monitoring about performance behaviors:
In order to find out how well you are performing in your present job, how FREQUENTLY do you (5-point response format ranging from very frequently to very infrequently)
Observe what performance behaviors your boss rewards and use this as feedback on your own performance?
Compare yourself with peers (persons at your level in the organization)?
Pay attention to how your boss acts toward you in order to understand how he/she perceives and evaluates your work performance?
Observe the characteristics of people who are rewarded by your supervisor and use this information?

12. Frequency of inquiry about performance behaviors:
In order to find out how well you are performing in your job, how FREQUENTLY do you (5-point response format ranging from very frequently to very infrequently)
Seek information from your co-workers about your work performance?
Seek feedback from your supervisor about your work performance?
Seek feedback from your supervisor about potential for advancement within the (X) system?

* These items were chosen on the basis of a pretest conducted in a different utility in a different state. They were drawn from separate factors representing each strategy (monitoring and inquiry) for the two goals the study originally was to test. Items were included if they loaded higher than .60 on a factor and no higher than .30 on any other factor.

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