Feedback as an Individual Resource: Personal Strategies of Creating Information

SUSAN J. ASHFORD AND L. L. CUMMINGS
Northwestern University

This paper proposes a model of individual feedback seeking behaviors (FSB). Individuals are posited to seek feedback while negotiating their organizational environments in the pursuit of valued goals. The model portrays several motivations for FSB based on the value of feedback to individuals and outlines two predominant strategies of FSB, monitoring and inquiry. The costs and benefits of each strategy are discussed. Hypotheses concerning both an individual's level of FSB and subsequent strategy choice are subsequently derived. FSB is proposed as an important component of the feedback process. The concluding discussion focuses on the contribution of this perspective to the current organization behavior feedback literature.

INTRODUCTION

In attempting to survive and prosper in an organization, individuals are frequently very active in the feedback process: actively attending to evaluations from others and directly seeking verbal appraisals of their behavior. The purpose of this paper is to present a theoretical model of feedback seeking behavior (FSB) by individuals in organizations. This aim is pursued by first briefly reviewing the traditional rationale for providing feedback to individuals in their work roles; then a new and supplemental perspective is developed. Our focus will be on feedback as a personal resource in fulfilling both performance and nonperformance goals. A heuristic model of FSB is derived from this perspective and is presented as the major theme of this paper.

FEEDBACK AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCE

The positive effect of feedback on performance has been an accepted psychological principle since at least the early 1950s (Payne & Hauty, 1955). Chapanis (1964) labels this effect one of the most dependable and most studied in psychology. A comprehensive review of the empirical evidence by Ammons (1956) concludes that feedback generally enhances both performance and motivation.

The performance-enhancing effect of feedback has sparked research in

Requests for reprints should be sent to Susan J. Ashford, Tuck School, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755. The authors would like to thank Jeanne Brett, Kim Cameron, Jane Dutton, George Huber, William Ouchi, Lance Sandelands, Ralph Stablien and Susan Taylor for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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the areas of education (e.g., Van Houte, Hill, & Parsons, 1975), multiple
cue probability learning (e.g., Dudycha & Naylor, 1966; Brehmer, 1974),
psychology and organization behavior (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).
Most work in the organization behavior area has centered on formulating
a rationale as to why feedback enhances performance and in delineating
the boundary conditions of its continued occurrence. To this end, Payne
and Hauty (1955) have argued that feedback serves a directive and in-
centive function; Vroom (1964) has posited that feedback serves a cue,
learning, and motivational function, and Ilgen et al. (1979) have attempted
to specify the psychological processes that mediate the behavioral re-
response to feedback stimuli in organization settings.
Interest in the feedback area has been primarily sustained because of
its performance-enhancing effect. As such, feedback forms an important
resource for the organization. It is in essence a tool that organizational
leaders have at their disposal with which they can motivate, direct, and
instruct the performance of subordinate members. Research in the feed-
back area focuses on how this resource might best be used by organi-
zational leaders. For example, a recent review by Ilgen et al. (1979)
delineates the conditions that promote individual acceptance of feedback
and the desire to respond in line with feedback information. In addition,
practitioners using various feedback intervention strategies have dem-
onstrated the utility of this "resource" to organizational leaders by
achieving performance increases (Kreitner, Reif, & Morris, 1977; Nadler,
Cammon, & Mirvis, 1980).
Though much work has been called for to specify the personality and
contextual variables which may constrain the performance enhancement
effect of feedback, we have not moved much beyond the general state-
ment that feedback seems to improve performance. In terms of under-
standing the experience of the individual in the feedback process and the
nature of feedback in organizations, research has been constrained by its
nearly exclusive focus on feedback as an organizational resource. A shift
in fundamental perspective is required in the conceptualization of feed-
back in order to more accurately reflect the experience of individuals
involved in feedback processes. That shift in premise is the focus of this
paper.
It will be argued that while feedback is a useful and important orga-
nizational resource, it also is a valuable resource for individuals
throughout their tenure in organizations. Individuals often want to per-
form well in their organizational roles and may pursue many personal
goals in their organizational lives beyond good performance. To the extent
that performance and other personally held goals are important to the
individual, feedback on their behavior aimed at achieving these goals
becomes a valuable informational resource. This shift in perspective from
considering feedback as an organizational resource to viewing it as an individual one is profound. The shift possesses a broad range of implications as to the stance of individuals with respect to feedback. Such a shift in our thinking about the feedback process also draws attention to the relevance of different literatures in an understanding of feedback processes in organizations.

FEEDBACK AS AN INDIVIDUAL RESOURCE: THE MOTIVATION TO SEEK

The first part of this section will develop theoretical rationales as to why and when individuals will likely seek feedback. Second, we will propose a broadening of the domain of goals for which feedback is deemed valuable to an individual beyond the current emphasis on an individual’s performance.

The perspective of the feedback process to be presented here begins with a definition of feedback similar to that of Greller and Herold (1975). Specifically, feedback is defined as a subset of information available to individuals in their work environment. Feedback is that information that denotes how well individuals are meeting various goals. In the interpersonal realm, feedback involves information about how their behaviors are perceived and evaluated by relevant others. Feedback information also includes that provided by the task and by the individuals themselves. Feedback may pertain to both the appropriate behaviors to achieve a goal (referent information) and how well an individual is enacting those behaviors (appraisal information) as defined previously by Herold and Greller (1977).

A consideration of feedback as an individual resource suggests several motivators of FSB. Most fundamentally, in situations in which feedback has more value as a resource, individuals should be more motivated to seek it. A resource is not inherently valued; rather, its value stems from the end products it helps produce. Steel is valued, for example, because of the value placed on the automobiles and other goods produced from it.

There are several “end products” that the resource feedback enables an individual to produce. Symbolic interactionists have long considered feedback essential in the production of an individual’s self-concept (cf. Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902). This viewpoint argues that individuals imagine how they are perceived by others and use this attributed perception in developing a self-concept (see Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979, for a review). Individuals are thought to develop a self-concept through their interactions with others based on a constant stream of feedback.

Within an organizational context, feedback is most useful as a means for the more efficient production of various goals valued by an individual.
The above argument suggests that the conditions that make feedback a more valuable or useful resource in attaining valued goals should also create a motive for FSB.

Uncertainty Reduction Function of Feedback

The value of feedback as a resource for attaining goals within an organization will vary as a function of the uncertainty an individual experiences about issues surrounding goal attainment. In pursuing various goals, there is often some uncertainty as to both the appropriateness of any given behavior for obtaining these goals and how goal directed behaviors are being evaluated by others. For example, a new attorney in a law office may be uncertain as to whether or not his or her attempt to process as many legal briefs as rapidly as possible is the most appropriate behavior, given his or her goal of being noticed as a rising young attorney. Producing long legal briefs or briefs of a high technical quality may be more important in achieving that goal. The conflict produced by having many possible alternative behaviors which may, more or less efficiently, achieve a valued goal creates uncertainty and makes feedback a valuable resource.

Some degree of uncertainty is in fact necessary for feedback to be valuable to an individual. Information theory (cf. Shannon & Weaver, 1949) argues that an event (such as receiving or perceiving feedback) is only informative to the extent that the individual is initially uncertain. If an individual is completely certain of the appropriate response and equally certain of the potential evaluations of that response, feedback information is accordingly not informative. Ilgen et al. (1979) similarly note that feedback is only informative to the extent that it provides an incremental increase to knowledge. In order to do so, there must be some degree of initial uncertainty.

There are two types of uncertainty which feedback information has the potential to resolve for an individual.

Berlyne (1960) argues that uncertainty is a function of (a) the number of possible responses to a stimuli available to an individual and (b) their equipotentiality. In the feedback case, this definition suggests that uncertainty is a function of the number of behavioral options an individual has in meeting a goal, and the perception that all (or many) of them seem to have equal potential for achieving the goal. Feedback has the potential to resolve this uncertainty for the individual by indicating which behaviors are most appropriate for achieving the desired goal. This type of feedback has been termed referent information (Greller & Herold, 1975).

Feedback in this case is fulfilling an error correction function for the individual. It suggests the extent and direction of errors in goal directed behaviors (Bourne, 1966). While the literature to date touts this function
of feedback as providing a benefit to the organization, it is no less likely that individuals valuing goal attainment should similarly value feedback for its error correction potential.

A second definition of uncertainty suggests a different object of uncertainty in the feedback process. Jones and Gerard (1967) argue that uncertainty is a function of the sheer number of things that can happen and their equiprobability. In the feedback case, individuals may have uncertainty about the evaluations they will receive from others. For a particular behavior, an individual may perceive that a number of evaluations are possible, ranging from highly positive to somewhat negative. In this case, the individual knows that the behavior is appropriate for achieving the goal but is uncertain as to how his or her performance of that behavior will be evaluated. If he or she believes the behavior could be evaluated in any of a number of ways, and many are equiprobable, uncertainty will ensue. Feedback has the potential to resolve this uncertainty by giving the individual information as to how the behavior is being perceived and evaluated by others. This type of feedback is referred to as appraisal information (Greller & Herold, 1975).

The uncertainty literature suggests that information seeking is a primary means of reducing uncertainty. Berlyne (1966), for example, has argued that when the appropriate response to a stimulus is ambiguous, the individual experiences a noxious state of uncertainty. This state creates a tension the individual is motivated to resolve by seeking additional information. The information is functional as it allows the individual to assess the nature of the conflict and to choose an appropriate course of action. Research in the communications area proposes that maintaining a certain level of certainty about various stimuli is an adaptive requirement, necessary in solving practical environmental and psychological problems (Atkin, 1973). Movement away from that level of certainty is argued to result in increased information seeking (Atkin, 1973).

Thus, when individuals experience uncertainty about either the appropriate behaviors for achieving a goal or how those behaviors may be evaluated within a work setting, they will be motivated to seek feedback. Feedback is a valuable resource in this case as it allows them to reduce the uncertainty that may be slowing progress toward a goal, learn about errors in performance, and/or resolve the noxious uncertain state.

**Signaling Function of Feedback**

Beyond reducing the uncertainties associated with any given goal, feedback also provides signals to employees concerning the relative importance of various goals within that particular setting. Vroom (1964) terms this the cuing function of feedback. This cuing function of feedback is a
primary reason that feedback is a useful resource to organization leaders. Giving feedback directs the energies of subordinates to those goals and behaviors most valued by the organization. As in the desire to correct errors, it is likely, however, that if individuals desire to be successful in a given organization, they too will value information that clarifies which goals have the greatest probability of future payoff.

Feedback given to employees, inherent in the situation and/or derived from the behavior of others, signals the expected payoffs of various behaviors or of achieving any of a range of goals. Individuals can use those feedback cues to maximize their total satisfaction by allocating their energies across the various possible goals. After obtaining feedback, an individual may decide to devote more effort toward those goals that have the greatest probable payoff or toward that goal that seems obtainable only with extra effort. For example, feedback cues may indicate to an individual his or her potential for advancement within a firm. Such feedback can be used to assess the expected payoff of devoting greater attention and effort to career success within that company as compared to the payoff of devoting more time to leisure or to job search.

While this perspective has a highly rational flavor, it is clear that individuals often use such feedback in making turnover decisions. They may conclude that they would be "better off" somewhere else. These feedback cues provide important signals to individuals about their potential to meet valued goals within a given organizational setting.

The Competence Creating Function of Feedback

At a more general level, the preceding sections all deal with the concept of mastery. Individuals are proposed as desiring to master the environments with which they interact in order to achieve the goals they value. White (1959) similarly argues that individuals have a motivation to competently interact with their environments in order to achieve a sense of mastery.

The organization forms an environment for individuals in their work lives. It is an environment complete with evaluative contingencies, selection pressures, and rewarded behaviors.

Feedback information available in an environment forms a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving competence. In other words, no sense of mastery is possible without the availability and use of this feedback information. Ilgen et al. (1979) also point out the relevance of feedback to attaining a sense of competence. They note that

Cues from the task itself (internal cues) and from others (external cues) provide the information necessary to make judgments about competence.

While it is clear that achieving feelings of competence probably requires more than feedback as to how one's behaviors are perceived and
evaluated, feedback is, however, a central, necessary resource to: understanding the environment; making self-evaluations; and, therefore, to developing and sustaining feelings of competence. Recognizing its value, individuals with a drive to interact competently with the environment will attend to and seek out feedback in order to understand its evaluative contingencies.

White's (1959) further explanation of the effectance concept suggests contexts in which this motive should be particularly operative. He argues that effectance motivation is aroused by environmental conditions which offer some degree of novelty (White, 1959). Effectance motivation subsides when the environment is well understood. This motive should thus be operative in new and changing situations such as a change caused by a new performance appraisal system, supervisory or management succession, and so forth. In contexts where the effectance motive is more operative, an individual would be expected to more frequently seek feedback concerning his or her behavior within that context.

Ego Defensive Motivation

The motivations reviewed to this point have been straightforward extensions of considering feedback as a personal resource. Feedback is valuable information and, therefore, individuals are motivated to obtain it. Previous research in the uncertainty and social comparison areas, however, has shown that the motive to achieve clarity as to how well one is doing with respect to achieving valued goals is not unequivocal. Rather, individuals often experience a conflict between the desire for an accurate feedback portrayal and the desire to enhance their self-esteem. Jones and Gerard (1967), for example, note that an individual has a dual orientation: to see him or herself honestly as others see him or her and to see him or herself in the best possible light.

Allport (1937) has called the defense of the ego "nature's oldest law." Individuals are thought to defend their egos through a variety of cognitive and behavioral strategies.

Sherif and Cantril (1947) describe cognitive defense mechanisms ranging from rationalizations to protective adjustments in which things, persons, and ideas are manipulated in memory in a highly selective fashion. The most recent treatment of such cognitive defenses is Greenwald's (1980) "totalitarian ego" in which the ego is portrayed as controlling the human memory.

Behavioral defenses involve primarily avoiding feedback or restricting information search. Janis and Mann (1977), for example, argue that

restricting one's social contacts is sometimes tantamount to making a special type of auxiliary decision to avoid exposure to disquieting messages or to guarantee that one will only hear reassuring information. (p. 218)
Research shows that poor performers tend to avoid diagnostic information (Zuckerman, Brown, Fox, Lathin, & Minasian, 1979). For example, individuals who believe they have only low abilities also prefer to work in groups rather than work alone (Willerman, Lewitt, & Tellegen, 1960), a strategy which effectively divorces them from direct negative feedback. Much of the research on this motive has been done in the social comparison literature where it primarily affects an individual's choice of a comparative referent (cf. Brickman & Bullman, 1977; Friend & Gilbert, 1973).

The evidence suggests that the motivation to defend one's ego is most operative following failure (Miller, 1976), particularly if the individual believes that failure has implications for how well he or she can expect to perform in the future. These authors conclude that individuals who expect to perform well are more likely to seek information about their ability than those who expect to perform poorly (Zuckerman et al., 1979).

Though the research findings are by no means unequivocal (cf. Miller, 1976; Trope, 1980; Buckert, Meyer, & Schmalt, 1979, for conflicting findings), there appears to be a general motive to defend one's ego behaviorally. The avoidance of disquieting information or the careful choosing of messages one is exposed to are examples of possible strategies. The motive is most operative when an individual expects to perform poorly. It appears that Kahn, Quinn, Wolfe, and Snoek's (1964) observation is indeed true: that for some people it is easier to fear the worst than to know the worst about themselves.

Thus, it appears that the motivation to seek feedback is not entirely straightforward. Though in many situations it may be very useful to obtain feedback for its error corrective and uncertainty reducing properties, individuals may be reluctant to actively pursue it in an attempt to protect their self-esteem. Indeed, it is perhaps the poor performers, those that need feedback the most for its utilitarian value, who will be the most reluctant to seek it because of potential ego damage. In any situation, then, these various motives may be more or less operative depending upon various contextual factors such as the nature of the technology, the amount of feedback provided, the seeker's past experiences, and his or her expectations for future performance. It is the level of these motivations, in combination, which will determine the individual's level of active feedback seeking.

Goals of Feedback Seeking Behavior (FSB)

Once casting feedback as a personal rather than an organizational resource, it is clear that current conceptualizations have missed much of the complexity of the feedback process. The current literature focuses almost exclusively on the role of feedback in improving subsequent mo-
tivation and job performance of employees. It is likely, however, that individuals have a wide variety of goals which they hope to achieve in a given organization. Goals such as career advancement, making friends, and being liked may be just as important to an individual as correcting errors in job performance. For any of the set of goals individuals hold, they will look to the information environment for cues and information that allow an assessment of how well they are achieving that goal.

These comments suggest that not only are individuals more active in the feedback process than the current literature suggests but they are active in a wider arena. Individuals seek feedback on issues beyond those for which organizational leaders feel they should provide regular reviews. While supervisors may provide information on performance and perhaps potential for advancement, individuals with interest in other issues must attend carefully to their information environment and actively seek feedback from others.

For example, one set of goals the current feedback literature does not address is social goals: those goals which individuals have for their interactions with others. The organization forms a social setting for individuals. Within this social setting, an individual may have a variety of goals. Goffman (1955) argues, for example, that individuals attempt to manage the impressions others have of them in their social setting. Feedback forms a valuable resource for an individual attempting to maintain a particular self-presentation. It provides information about how the presentation is being interpreted by relevant others, allowing the individual to correct errors.

The goals an individual holds for him or herself shape the FSB process. They play an important role as determinants of the type of feedback information useful to that individual and of the utility of various sources of feedback (e.g., boss, peers, subordinates) in the information environment.

CURRENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FEEDBACK

In reviewing current treatments of the feedback process in organization behavior, particular attention is given to the role of the individual implied by each perspective. These descriptions of the individual's role in the feedback process provide a central contrast for the perspective to be subsequently detailed.

The predominant view of the feedback process holds that feedback is a special case of the general communication process in which a sender conveys a message to a recipient (Ilgen et al., 1979). In the feedback case, the message comprises information about the recipient, his or her behavior and/or performance. Feedback, then, is defined as messages sent to a recipient pertaining to his or her behavior.
A second set of definitions is embedded in the view of work as taking place in an "information environment" (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978) which the individual monitors for personally relevant information. Within this information environment, two types of information comprise feedback: referent information, that which tells the worker what is required of him or her to function successfully on the job, and appraisal information, that which tells the worker if he or she is functioning successfully (Greller & Herold, 1975).

The Ilgen et al. (1979) and Greller and Herold (1975) definitions are both consistent with an information processing point of view and both, in fact, characterize the feedback receiver as an information processor: "The worker is viewed as an information receiver in an environment capable of providing a variety of information from different sources" (Greller & Herold, 1975, p. 245). What differentiates the two views and sets the stage for the view presented here is the stance of the receiver/information processor in relation to the information available in the environment. The second view of the feedback process (i.e., Greller & Herold, 1975; Greller, 1980) implies much more of an active role on the part of the recipient. Their definition suggests that the recipient may be actively monitoring his or her environment for personally relevant information which is infused into that environment from a variety of sources (Greller & Herold, 1975; Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978). The more active monitoring and processing role attributed to the receiver is central to the description of the feedback process developed here. It has been argued that given the value of feedback to individuals, they will actively monitor their information environment for personally relevant information and directly seek such information from others in their environment.

Positing the individual as an active monitoring and processing participant in the feedback episode is in clear distinction to the Ilgen et al. (1979) position and previous work in the feedback and knowledge of results areas. As will be seen, this difference between the recipient as an information receiver versus as an active information monitor and seeker is important because it forms the basis for proposing processes which may precede those delineated by Ilgen et al. (1979). Ilgen et al. view the feedback process from the perspective of an outside observer; behavior is seen as a sender conveys a message and again as a receiver does or does not respond in line with the message. Had they posited the receiver as an active monitor and seeker of feedback information, they would have depicted processes such as differential attention to sources, source choice, and seeking behaviors that precede the receipt of feedback information. Indeed, it may well be that the implications for acceptance of feedback and the desire to respond in line with the feedback are different in the case where feedback is actively sought than if it is information
passively received. For example, an individual may have more difficulty discrediting the feedback of a source when he/she actively devoted effort to discover how that source evaluated the behavior in question. The individual may be more likely to respond in line with the same feedback if actively sought as opposed to spontaneously received from a given source.

A third treatment of feedback processes speaks of the critical role of feedback information in the maintenance of a given system. This cybernetic perspective does not directly address the role of the individual in the feedback process. It is more concerned with the role of this type of information in sustaining an ongoing system which may be an individual, group, or organization. Cybernetic theorists view feedback as "information about the actual performance or actions of a system which is used to control future actions of a system" (Weiner, 1948, p. 21). Feedback in this view is information relevant to error correction in order to meet particular goals (Powers, 1973). Cybernetic theorists argue that such feedback is only useful if there exists a reference condition (Powers, 1973). This condition is defined by Powers (1973) as "that which one compares one's behavior against in order to determine if there is error." In classic tracking experiments (cf. Taylor & Birmingham, 1948), for example, the reference condition is a spot of light subjects attempt to track. In an organizational setting the reference condition is any goal an individual hopes to achieve. Powers' (1973) main proposition is that "all behavior is oriented all of the time around the control of certain 'quantities' (i.e., behavior) with respect to specific reference conditions" (Powers, 1973, p. 47). Though the cybernetic perspective has received recent attention (cf. Bogart, 1980; Ramprasad, 1981), this cybernetic idea has not been introduced into the feedback literature in organization behavior. It has important implications for the perspective presented here.

FEEDBACK SEEKING BEHAVIOR (FSB)

Given the value of feedback as a personal resource to individuals, the primary implication is that individuals will actively monitor and seek feedback information with respect to organizationally determined and individually held goals. There is evidence suggestive of this process and a growing interest in the antecedents and consequences of such active seeking behavior. Arps (1917) long ago found that performers set up subjective sources of information which they used when the experimenter objectively (physically) stopped telling them how well they were doing. This experimental work points out that in the absence of experimenter or leader feedback, individuals construct a system of cues to subjectively evaluate their performance. This evidence suggests that in the work environment, there is always feedback information available in the acts of
others and cues offered by the situation. The extent to which this information is used by individuals and the conditions under which they will actively seek out such information are thus important processes to study in coming to a more precise understanding of how feedback affects individuals in organizations.

To date, there has been only limited empirical research relevant to such an understanding. Halisch and Heckhausen (1977), for example, measure the extent to which individuals seek feedback as to their standing throughout a competitive task. They posited success expectancy and need for achievement as individual difference variables moderating the drive to obtain such feedback information and looked at the amount of effort following the attainment of success or failure feedback.

Other authors have simply assumed that the search for feedback occurs and have looked at variables which shape the process. Swann and Read (1980), for example, argued that individuals in naturalistic situations may play an active and influential role in selecting and transforming the nature of the feedback they encounter. They empirically demonstrated that individuals search for feedback which is consistent with their self-concept.

A third area of research has demonstrated that individuals often chose activities because of their diagnosticity (Trope & Brickman, 1975; Trope, 1975). Tasks of intermediate difficulty tend to be preferred over those high or low in difficulty because these tasks maximize the extent to which people can draw inferences about their own ability level from their outcomes on the task rather than attributing their successes or failure(s) to external causes such as the ease or difficulty of the task in the first place. (Trope & Brickman, 1975, p. 918)

Individuals were shown to seek out such diagnostic tasks to a greater extent than tasks which maximize the expected value of success as predicted by the theory of achievement motivation (cf. Atkinson & Feather, 1966). Such behaviors can be interpreted as active FSB.

Brickman (1972) further demonstrated that individuals who received information discrepant with their expectations tended to search for more information than those who received information consistent with their expectations. The information he used was college course grades. Brickman demonstrated, then, that the receipt of discrepant feedback information can be viewed as a stimulant to feedback information search.

Finally, the assumption that individuals attend to and respond to situational and social cues plays a central role in recent treatments of job attitudes (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and motivational response to jobs (O'Reilly & Caldwell, 1979). A key proposition of these treatments is that individuals are actively monitoring and processing situational cues as determinants of job attitudes.
The following section presents a model of the feedback process consistent with the premise that feedback is an informational resource for individuals. The hypothesized seeking of feedback is given a central role in this portrayal of the feedback process.

FEEDBACK SEEKING IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN HUERISTIC MODEL

Figure 1 represents pictorially the individual and his or her role in the feedback process. The individual is portrayed as existing within an information environment (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978). This information environment contains a wealth of data, some of which conveys feedback information as to how well he or she is achieving valued goals and how his or her behavior is being perceived, and/or evaluated by others.

The model posits that individuals have particular motivations to know how well they are doing and how certain behaviors are being perceived and/or evaluated by others. These motivations may entail any of those previously outlined based on the resource value of feedback: to reduce uncertainty about appropriate behaviors and potential evaluations; to attain and maintain feelings of efficacy with respect to the environment; and/or to more thoroughly understand the evaluative contingencies of a given environment.

The set of motivators are posited to increase the effort an individual is willing to exert toward an inquiry about the efficacy of his or her goal directed behavior and/or how those behaviors are perceived and evaluated by those in the environment. The more these motivators are operative in an individual, the more he or she will actively seek feedback information from that environment.

Given that an individual has some motivation to inquire, that inquiry must be organized in some fashion. The effort must be appropriately directed. The organizing function serves as the regulator and director of that effort. As shown in Fig. 1, the organizing function comprises the various reference conditions (Powers, 1973) provided by the goals which an individual holds. If an individual's goal is to be well liked by co-workers, his/her effort will be organized around a different set of seeking strategies than if his or her goal is rapid career advancement.

It is argued that the individual translates the motivation to inquire into two sets of seeking strategies. One set involves monitoring the environment for relevant feedback cues and the second set involves inquiry strategies that require direct requests for feedback information.

FSB through the Monitoring Strategy

Monitoring involves attending to and taking in information from the environment. It entails observing the situation and the behaviors of other
actors for cues useful as feedback. These feedback cues must then be interpreted by the individual. Meaning is generated within the thinking function using both the environmental cues obtained through monitoring the environment and the various goals an individual may hold as reference conditions. The goals, as reference conditions, form both the standard against which the feedback is compared and a schema useful in making sense out of the wealth of cues available. The meaning attributed to any cue is, thus, not inherent in the cue itself but is at least in part imposed as a function of the individual's goals. As Suchman (1971) notes,

Meaning is the assimilation of new encounters (cues) within the framework of one's preexisting knowledge structure. Meaning is the result of an interaction between the encounter and the ability to extract from that encounter some form of inference or assertion . . . by itself an encounter does not produce meaning . . . It is through the use of organizers (goals, hypotheses) that we make our encounters meaningful. (p. 63)

Cohen and Ebbeson (1979), give support for this position. They found that individuals' observational goals influenced how they processed an actor's behavior. Individuals unitized or broke up the observed behavior into different types of units depending on their goal. The observational goal and subsequent behavior unitization in turn had implications for recall and evaluation of the actor's behavior.

Monitoring is thus a process of meaning construction, one that involves a fair degree of interpretation and inference. Since the derived meaning
of any feedback cue is in part a function of an individual’s self- and goal-related schemas, there is the potential that the individual may “read” feedback from the environment that is inconsistent with how others are actually evaluating his or her behavior. The work on social information processing (cf. Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; O’Reilly & Caldwell, 1979) suggests that perception is a retrospective process using recall and reconstruction. As a given environmental cue is stored in memory, part of what is seen is not recalled. Individuals generally fill in information (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) using previously stored information. In this reconstruction, there are certain biases which can be expected in the derivation of meaning out of changing environmental cues. Recent experimental evidence suggests that individuals tend to search for information in line with given goals (Tyler & Galegher, 1982). Similarly, Vallacher (1980) notes that social feedback is often ambiguous and open to alternative interpretations. He argues that there is a tendency for individuals to interpret the feedback in line with their expectations for their performance. For individuals with strong expectations, then, the active role of self- or goal-relevant schemas may cause them to misinterpret the feedback inherent in situational cues. The individual may, for example, process more schema consistent information resulting in an overinflated view of his or her performance.

This work suggests that the presence of self- and/or goal-related schemas should affect which part of the environment is thoroughly attended to in soliciting feedback, the interpretation of that feedback, and the memory for various feedback messages.

There are two primary forms of monitoring. Individuals may monitor the reactions of others to their behavior (reflective appraisal) and/or compare their behavior to others (comparative appraisal) (Jones & Gerard, 1967). Reflective appraisal provides cues as to how others are evaluating given behaviors. In comparative appraisal, an individual infers an evaluation by comparing his or her behavior or abilities with those of another (Jones & Gerard, 1967). Both strategies require inference. In reflective appraisal, the individual must infer that the person’s response he/she is monitoring is (1) actually intended for him or her and (2) that the observed response is indeed indicative of some internal state of the feedback source. In comparative appraisal an individual must infer the evaluation of his or her own abilities based on the comparison.

Other observational strategies include: attending carefully to organizational stories and myths (Clark, 1972; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and extracting referent and appraisal information from them; observing the characteristics of those who are successful in the organization and using this as feedback on one’s own behavior; observing who is included in particular meetings or social gatherings; and, finally, attending to symbolic acts
of management. All are useful cues for both determining the appropriate behaviors in a work setting and for appraising one’s own performance in those arenas.

Individuals may be more or less active in the processing of situational information. It is likely that individuals are not constantly, vigilantly monitoring the environment for evaluative information. Rather, the existence of a set of motivators in the model suggests that there are contexts and times in which individuals will become more “mindful” (in the sense of Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978) of how well they are meeting valued goals and how their behaviors are perceived and evaluated by others. When the individual has some motivation to seek and thus enters a mindful state, he or she is argued to devote greater attention to environmental cues and to begin to monitor the environment.

Given the motivation to seek, individuals are posited to begin monitoring their environments for informative feedback cues. By using these environmental cues, the individual can make inferences about the value of his or her current behaviors and control future behavior in the pursuit of valued goals.

**FSB through the Inquiry Strategy**

Inquiry is the second form of feedback seeking behavior. It is the individual’s attempt to actually increase the amount of personally relevant data in his or her information environment by directly asking actors in that environment for their perception and/or evaluation of the behavior in question. Inquiry can be clearly differentiated from monitoring. FSB using an inquiry strategy involves the direct asking of a given source, “How was ‘X’ behavior perceived, interpreted, and/or evaluated?” (e.g., “Did I do a good job?” “How was my speech?”) FSB using a monitoring strategy implies actively attending to the information environment but not the initiation of direct inquiry to others within that environment.

**DETERMINANTS OF FSB STRATEGIES**

Individuals can adopt various strategies with respect to the feedback information in their environment. We have argued that the existing feedback literature predominantly characterizes the individual as reactive. Feedback is given to the individual at the discretion of others and he or she reacts to it. We have proposed that individuals, under many circumstances, are much more proactive. Individuals often attempt to actively understand the evaluative contingencies proposed by a given work environment and to determine how they are being evaluated within that environment. Two forms of this activity have also been outlined. Questions remain, however, about the stimulus of this activity and when an
individual's FSB will take one form over another. These questions will now be addressed.

**Determinants of the Level of FSB**

Individuals will adopt more proactive strategies in situations where feedback is more valuable to them. The determinants of the value of feedback have been detailed earlier. It is this value that creates a motive to proactively seek feedback information. Contexts in which these motives are operative should lead to greater FSB.

A second principle determinant of proactive search is the amount of feedback information the individual receives from the task, self, and others. If the individual receives enough information from these sources to fulfill the useful functions of feedback, then the individual will not be motivated to devote extra effort attending to feedback cues and seeking feedback within that environment. The feedback that the individual receives from the task and others is sufficient and reduces the motivating appeal of having more of that same type of information available in the environment.

This observation implies that individuals will be more proactive in the feedback process when the feedback they receive is inadequate. The information received may be inadequate because there is too little of it or because it is of little value.

Feedback may be of little value in situations which are rapidly changing or in situations in which there is little consensus about appropriate behaviors and/or evaluative criteria among the various environmental actors. Even if given a lot of feedback in such situations, individuals may also actively monitor and seek additional or confirmatory feedback. Individuals in such situations may feel the feedback they receive from others is of questionable utility and generalizability and therefore they engage in active search for additional information.

Individuals should remain relatively inactive when the behaviors required to achieve the goal of interest are relatively straightforward. In jobs with routine technologies and clearly defined roles, individuals will remain reactive with respect to the feedback information in their environment. The payoff of obtaining lots of data about how well they are achieving performance goals, for example, by devoting energy to monitoring the situation and asking others for feedback is minimal. The feedback information does not add much to what is already known and the job is so structured that it cannot be put to valuable use.

This argument leads to the following hypotheses concerning how active individuals will become in the feedback process:

\[ H_1 \] The greater the motivation to inquire (based on the factors previously identified), the greater the active FSB.
Determinants of FSB Strategy Choice

The existence of some motivation to inquire is, in essence, a movement from "mindless" to a "mindful" state (Langer et al., 1978) with respect to evaluative information in the environment. The individual becomes very interested in determining appropriate goal behaviors and how well he or she is enacting those behaviors. This effort can be channeled in two ways. The individual can monitor environmental events or attempt to create feedback information through direct inquiry.

It is clear that these strategies are not inherently independent. In fact, an individual can both monitor the situation and various actors and ask those same actors for feedback. We argue, however, that individuals proportion their FSB efforts across these strategies in some predictable ways based on some very real differences between the two strategies. In the most general case, we believe that once individuals are mindful of themselves, evaluative criteria, and potential evaluations from others, they will begin to monitor their environment for feedback information. It is a wholly different decision process, however, which leads that same individual to directly ask others for feedback. Such a decision is likely based on an understanding of the different costs involved in these strategies.

There are three primary costs involved in active FSB. The costs are:

(1) effort costs: the level of effort required to obtain feedback information;
(2) face loss costs: the risks involved in obtaining feedback information;
(3) inference costs: the amount and type of inference required in obtaining feedback information.

Individuals are posited to take these costs into account either explicitly or implicitly in feedback seeking. This proposition shows up in some communication research where it is argued that individuals will seek information when "the message reward value exceeds the expenditures incurred in obtaining it" (Atkin, 1973). Seeking feedback or information of any sort generally has costs associated with it. As a basic premise, we propose that individuals will engage in lower cost strategies first and more
often. Those strategies involving more cost will be used only if adequate feedback cannot be generated from the primary strategy.

This proposition is consistent with evidence in organization behavior that, given a particular desired outcome and two strategies for attainment, individuals will first utilize that strategy requiring lower effort levels (i.e., lower costs). Given a situation of inequity and the goal to resolve the inequity, for example, Adams (1963) posits that individuals will first use the least effortful strategy to achieve resolution.

**Effort Costs**

Monitoring and inquiry both involve effort. The type of effort, however, is qualitatively different for each strategy. Directly asking others in one's environment for feedback requires physical effort. The information is either simply not there to be attended to or not organized according to the individual's preference. It must be generated through some effort of the individual. The person must track down the boss, get the attention of a colleague, find an appropriate time, perhaps explain the relevant behavior, and so forth.

This type of effort differentiates this form of FSB from observational strategies in which environmental cues are sensed and meaning extracted from them (i.e., using a monitoring strategy and the thinking function). Monitoring requires cognitive and attentional effort. The individual must divert attention from other issues and devote it to monitoring environmental cues and the behavior of others. Cues must be processed, perhaps over some time period, and cognitive effort devoted to the derivation of meaning from them.

While strategies differ in terms of the types of effort involved, it is the context which determines the *amount* of effort each entails. Monitoring may involve the merest glance at a co-worker's progress while inquiry could necessitate much effort to pin down a source and obtain an evaluation. Alternatively, inquiry could involve a casual question to a co-worker while monitoring may involve observing many behaviors, determining a pattern within them, inferring an evaluation, and responding accordingly.

The amount of physical effort required in inquiry is a function of several contextual variables. These variables include: the availability of FSB targets, the familiarity of these targets with the seeker's behavior, and/or the complexity of the behavior.

In some situations, targets of FSB are relatively unavailable. In many work situations, for example, individuals work alone and for busy managers. There are few people to ask for feedback and those that exist are difficult to track down. In such a situation, the effort costs of an inquiry strategy are high.
The amount of effort associated with an inquiry strategy varies inversely with the degree of familiarity the target has with the seekers' behavior. In many situations, no one is familiar enough with an individual's work to provide adequate feedback. Much effort is thus required to familiarize the target with the relevant behavior in order to obtain an evaluation. The more unfamiliar the target is with the seeker's behavior, the greater are the effort costs associated with an inquiry strategy.

Many behaviors are complex and multifaceted. In order to obtain an adequate picture of how well he or she is performing in these situations, the individual may have to ask several targets in order to obtain a consensual opinion. In situations for which no one source can provide adequate feedback, the effort costs associated with generating feedback through inquiry should increase as individuals are forced to ask many sources in order to obtain an adequate feedback evaluation.

In situations where: sources are difficult to get hold of, sources are unfamiliar with the seeker's behavior, and/or the behavior and its evaluation are complex, individuals should be more prone to seek feedback through monitoring of that environment rather than directly inquiring of the feedback of others.

The amount of cognitive and attentional effort required in monitoring is perhaps best indexed by the degree of ambiguity in the situation. In order to obtain accurate evaluative information in a highly ambiguous context, monitoring over an extended time period (to get consistency information) and perhaps over a variety of sources (to get consensus information) may be required. In such situations, the individual may be able to get feedback with much less effort through active inquiry. Thus:

- **H₆** The greater the effort involved in the use of any strategy, the less that strategy will be used in feedback seeking;
- **H₇** The less the availability of seeking targets, the greater the effort involved in using an inquiry strategy;
- **H₈** The less the familiarity of targets with seekers' behavior, the greater the effort involved in using an inquiry strategy;
- **H₉** The greater the complexity of the behavior in question, the greater the effort involved in using an inquiry strategy;
- **H₁₀** The greater the dissension over appropriate behaviors among available targets, the greater the effort involved in using a monitoring strategy;
- **H₁₁** The greater the rate of change in evaluative criteria, the greater the effort involved in using a monitoring strategy.

**Face Loss Costs**

Directly asking others for feedback differs from other seeking strategies in that it is a public event. It is an interpersonal phenomenon rather than
the intrapersonal experience of taking in situational cues and deriving meaningful feedback from them. While monitoring involves observing others, inquiry involves actual interaction with others. Once an event is public, the work of Goffman (1959) and attribution researchers (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981) suggests that it is open and subject to the inference processes of others. By asking the boss for feedback, for example, the individual is creating a public act about which the boss could make a variety of inferences. The boss could infer that the individual is weak and cannot work autonomously or he or she could infer that the person is confident enough to be able to ask about points of insecurity in order to obtain clarification. If others are observing the FSB act, they could infer that the act of seeking feedback was an ingratiation attempt (Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977), a sincere desire to know, or an attempt to obtain flattery.

Beyond providing fuel for the inference process of others, inquiry also reveals aspects of the seeker that he may or may not want known. The act of inquiry provides information to the target about the seeker's skills: his or her verbal skills; interpersonal skills and/or political skills. Not only does the very act of inquiry allow for inferences about the seeker's confidence, strength, and self-assurance, but it also gives the target information about his or her social and interpersonal skills. The act of asking may be judged in many different ways by the target. The manner in which one asks also provides information which can be used to judge many different attributes of the seeker.

It may be that due to the public nature of the event, there is more risk involved in the strategy of asking others for feedback. The risk would involve: loss of face if the seeking attempt is rejected; revealing potentially damaging information about one's interpersonal skills, and/or loss of esteem in the eyes of the target or observers based on their interpretation of the meaning of the act. Hypothesis 12 thus states:

\[ H_{12} \text{ The more individuals perceive potential face loss costs, the less they will seek feedback using active inquiry.} \]

Because inquiry has risk and may also have effort costs associated with it, we argue that it will occur less frequently than monitoring. Monitoring the situation and the behavior of others entails none of the risks of inquiry. It is done without the awareness of others in the environment. Because of the lower risk costs associated with it, monitoring should be undertaken more frequently than inquiry strategies.

Inference Costs

Obtaining feedback through both monitoring and inquiry requires inference. The type of inference required by the two strategies is, however, qualitatively different.
In monitoring, the individual must infer a feedback message from environmental events and the behaviors of others. Ilgen et al. (1979) speak to the amount of inference required in this form of feedback. They argue that an observed nod of the head or pat on the back from a supervisor has little or no information value in and of itself. The recipient "must interpret this by converting it to an estimate of the supervisor's evaluation" (Ilgen et al., 1979, p. 351). The problem lies in the fact that the metric used by the individual and his or her subsequent interpretation of the pat on the back may not be close to what the supervisor intended by such an action. The literature in social cognition, for example, suggests that individuals have theories about the way the world works and, further, that they tend to process information in line with those theories (e.g., Langer, 1975; Ross, Lepper, & Hubbard, 1975). By invoking these theories, individuals are able to make sense out of these environmental cues in a manner that is internally consistent but perhaps completely misses the actual interpretation of their behaviors by environmental actors.

These errors of inference are important both to the organization (i.e., if high performers are reading cues to suggest that their performance is not positively evaluated and are thus demotivated) and to the individual in that he or she may miss feedback important to attaining a valued goal. For the individual, there is a trade-off between the accuracy with which he or she can know others' interpretations and evaluations of particular behaviors and the effort and risk involved in obtaining such information. Given the inferences inherent in the monitoring strategy, an individual desiring a highly accurate feedback portrayal may be motivated to undertake the perhaps more effortful and risky strategy of inquiry. The alternative is to obtain a quick impression of his or her behavior that may be inadequate.

Inference costs, however, also accompany the strategy of inquiry. Because this strategy is interpersonal, the individual must take into account not only his or her own history, motives, and feelings but also those of the target. Little inference is required in receiving direct feedback from a target when asked for. The message is straightforwardly conveyed. Deciding whether or not the feedback reflects the "true feelings" of the target, however, requires a great deal of inference. Several discounting cues are available to the seeker. The seeker may believe, for example, that the source was trying to be "nice" and that the feedback did not reflect the evaluation that source would spontaneously give the seeker.

The seeker must also take into account the motives of the target. The same question of trustworthiness which arises when an individual receives unsolicited feedback from others (cf. Ilgen et al., 1979) arises here. The seeker must determine whether, when asked, this target will be honest or will be motivated to manage a certain impression, undermine
the seeker, harm or help him, and so on. Because the feedback encounter is interpersonal and is initiated by the seeker (as opposed to the usual case where it is planned by the giver), several agendas may be played out within the interaction. The individual must judge the extent to which these agendas affect the accuracy of the feedback. To the extent that he or she feels the accuracy is colored by such agendas, he or she would be better off attending more closely to the supervisor’s behavior toward him or herself and toward others and deriving feedback from those impressions. In such cases, actions probably do speak louder than words. These arguments suggest that:

\[ H_{13} \] The greater an individual’s desire for an accurate feedback portrayal, the less he or she will use a strategy involving a high level of inference.

\[ H_{14} \] The more the relationship between the seeker and the target is characterized by trust, the less the inference involved in a strategy of inquiry.

Summary

From the above arguments, it is clear that individuals respond to the costs inherent in their work setting. Individuals do not frequently ask for feedback because that behavior seems fraught with potential costs. These costs include potential embarrassment and the possibility that their asking may be misinterpreted to mean they feel uncertain of their own abilities. It is not surprising that, in such a situation, an individual will go to “great lengths” to find out how well he or she is doing without indicating a desire to know through directly asking others. An overreliance on a monitoring strategy, however, has certain predictable consequences. Information is often interpreted in line with the individual’s expectations and goals. Monitoring individuals may interpret cues and develop a feedback impression different from the actual assessments of others. Many self-esteem theorists, for example, would argue that individuals of low self-esteem would overly attend to negative cues and miss many positive evaluations of their behavior (cf. Jacobs, Berscheid, & Walster, 1971; Shrauger & Lund, 1975). Such a tendency may explain why some subordinates, to the bewilderment of their supervisors, have low aspiration levels and lack confidence in their own competence. It is likely that these subordinates rely on monitoring as an FSB strategy and have biases in the inference and meaning generation processes. The result is a biased impression of their own ability.

Conversely, some research shows that individuals tend to seek confirmatory feedback (Swann & Read, 1980). Individuals believing in their abilities may seek out confirmatory cues from their information. Thus,
the overinflated views some employees have may result from an overreliance on a monitoring FSB strategy.

These arguments suggest that it may benefit both individuals and organizations to not only give subordinates more feedback as the current literature suggests but also to promote the use of inquiry as a FSB strategy. Such a promotion can be best achieved by attempting to reduce some of the risk and effort costs involved in this strategy. Managers can play a major role in manipulating the "shared meaning" of this act. Rather than a sign of weakness and uncertainty, asking for feedback could come to represent a confident desire to understand one's strengths and weaknesses. Opening up this channel of feedback will allow employees to obtain more accurate appraisals of their work at the times when such appraisals are most valuable.

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests a major expansion of the conceptualization of feedback processes in organizations to include the motivation for and strategies of obtaining feedback consistent with the metaphor of feedback as an information resource valuable to individuals. The value of this reconceptualization is evident in several ways.

Primarily, the perspective presented here raises a host of new questions, such as:

- What determines the strength with which the information environment is monitored by different people?
- Which parts of the information environment are more fruitfully monitored?
- Under what conditions will an individual seek feedback information?
- Which seeking strategy provides the individual with a more accurate feedback portrayal?
- Which sources will be relied upon?
- When will an individual move across different sources in seeking feedback?

These issues arise only through viewing feedback as an individual as well as an organizational resource. There is much room for theoretical development and empirical research in developing answers to the above questions and others not raised here. The issues are fruitful ones because they allow the application of other literatures and theoretical perspectives to an understanding of the feedback process. In particular, growing bodies of literature dealing with information search in social psychology (cf. Manis, 1977; Swann & Read, 1980; Snyder & Swann, 1978) and organizational decision making (e.g., Huber & Powers, 1980; O'Reilly, 1979)
are relevant as are more traditional treatments of the motivation to inquire (cf. Berlyne, 1966; Lanzetta, 1971). Other relevant literatures focus on the biases inherent in the way people combine information (e.g., Peterson & Beach, 1967; Crocker, 1980), the social construction of reality, and the processing of social cues (e.g., Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; O’Reilly & Caldwell, 1979).

The perspective presented here also may facilitate understanding how people come to interpret their performance in situations where they cannot ask for and are reluctant to trust feedback spontaneously received. Organization development consultants are one such group, teachers are another. Because of their particular relationships with those who have the potential to offer feedback, they may be reluctant to trust those feedback messages. Yet, these professionals are very concerned about their day-to-day performance: “Is the lesson working?” “Are the clients responding?” “Have I lowered resistance to change?” and so on. What environmental cues do they attend to? How do they process situational cues as feedback on their performance? For these and other sets of actors, the monitoring, interpreting, and seeking of situational cues may be the only reliable form of feedback they receive.

The perspective presented here is also beneficial in that it more accurately reflects how individuals actually acquire and respond to feedback in their organizational lives. In situations where no verbal feedback is being given, our perspective argues that the individual is processing environmental cues and is deriving feedback information from them. Second, it is probably accurate to conceive of the individual as having several goals in his or her organizational life beyond present performance and that each of these goals may serve as the organizing function of FSB. Finally, this perspective on feedback more accurately reflects the organizational experience of individuals because it includes hypotheses about people’s actual seeking behavior and their attempts to generate feedback information useful in the “production” of their goals.

What this reconceptualization offers is a heuristic model characterizing the individual’s role in the feedback process. The model suggests likely strategies of FSB and explores some of the complexities of the process. The processes suggested in no way supplant extant feedback conceptualizations but complement them by suggesting processes that precede the actual receipt of information by the individual.

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