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## SELF-REGULATION FOR MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS: THE ROLE OF ACTIVE FEEDBACK SEEKING

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**This field study examined the feedback-seeking behavior of 387 managers as observed by their superiors, subordinates, and peers. Results suggest that managers' tendency to seek negative feedback increased the accuracy of their understanding about how these feedback sources evaluated their work. Seeking negative feedback further enhanced the three constituencies' opinions of the managers' overall effectiveness. Seeking positive feedback, in contrast, decreased constituents' opinions of the managers' effectiveness. Such results demonstrate the importance of both instrumental and impression-management concerns in the feedback-seeking process and support the proposition that active feedback seeking is a central part of a total process of self-regulation for managerial effectiveness.**

Feedback plays an important role in individual behavior and performance. Feedback has long been known to increase performance by both motivating individuals and directing them to correct performance strategies (cf. Ammons, 1956; Vroom, 1964). Although feedback has been studied extensively because of its effects on individual task performers, it has received little attention in the managerial effectiveness literature. Given the inherent ambiguities of managerial work, however, feedback from sources such as superiors, peers, and subordinates may play an important role in an individual's ability to be an effective manager. Feedback can provide managers with an accurate sense of how these sources perceive and evaluate their work; it also can provide guidance about strategies that could enhance their effectiveness.

This research invoked a self-regulation perspective on managerial behavior to justify the importance that active feedback-seeking behavior can have for managerial effectiveness. In this perspective, managers are viewed

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as active agents who manage their performance environments, including the solicitation of feedback from those who are important parts of their social structures.

## THE SELF-REGULATION PROCESS

### Theoretical Background

As stated, managerial work is complex and ambiguous (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Lombardo & McCall, 1982), and this ambiguity intensifies as managers move up an organizational hierarchy (Jaques, 1961). Many factors contribute to this complexity and ambiguity, including the variety of roles that are relevant to a manager's job (e.g., Mintzberg, 1973), the presence of multiple constituencies, or stakeholders, in the manager's social structure (Morse & Wagner, 1978; Salancik, Calder, Rowland, Leblebici, & Conway, 1975; Tsui, 1984a), and the organizations' frequent reliance on the subjective judgments of its members when assessing managerial performance. The complexity makes it difficult to specify precisely what managers should do at any point in time. Consequently, such traditional control mechanisms as job descriptions, standard operating procedures, and formal performance appraisal systems may only loosely control managers. Because organizational systems cannot be used to completely regulate managers, those who run organizations are dependent upon managers' self-regulatory activities in order to achieve control and coordinated action.

For managers, self-regulation does not occur in a vacuum; many parties have an interest or stake in managers' actions and decisions. Thus, the self-regulation process described here is broader and more complicated than similar processes that previous research has discussed under the rubric of self-management (cf. Luthans & Davis, 1979; Manz & Sims, 1980). Self-management research generally has been focused on the controlling of discrete, specific, objectively measurable behaviors (e.g., getting to meetings on time or filling out expense reports) in situations in which the only evaluation that matters is that of the individual whose behavior is being self-controlled. In such situations, managers usually observe their own behaviors, compare them to self-set goals, and either change their behaviors or reward themselves. Self-regulation in managerial contexts involves controlling broader phenomena or behaviors, such as style, accessibility, and leadership. Further, an organization's assessment of a manager's effectiveness often relies, at least in part, on others' subjective judgments (Mills, 1983). Consequently, self-regulation that is precipitated solely from managers' own observations of their behavior is not sufficient for attaining effectiveness. Managers must also understand and incorporate others' subjective judgments, which are usually informal and subtle, in their self-regulation efforts. These requirements suggest that there is a different, more interpersonal, self-regulation at work than that which is normally considered in the self-management literature (cf. Luthans & Davis, 1979; Manz & Sims, 1980).

Our concept of self-regulation is grounded in a control theory frame-

work (Carver & Scheier, 1981). In this framework, managers adopt standards, test their behaviors against those standards using information sensed from the environment, and take actions to reduce any detected discrepancies. The managers' regulatory objective is to minimize the discrepancy between standards and "enacted" behaviors (behaviors undertaken to attain a goal) (Lord & Hanges, 1987). Accordingly, the process of self-regulation involves at least three subprocesses: standard setting, discrepancy detecting, and discrepancy reducing. To carry out standard setting and discrepancy detecting in ways that account for the needs and goals of others in a social structure, managers must search for information and feedback from social sources such as superiors, subordinates, and peers, all of whom are important constituencies for managers (Tsui, 1984a). This self-regulation approach is consistent with Kenny and Zaccaro's (1983) proposal that the ability to perceive the needs and goals of various constituencies may be an important predictor of managerial effectiveness.

Once goals have been established, managers can either use available feedback or seek additional feedback to assess how others are perceiving their behavior. This search often yields information that allows managers to assess the discrepancy between their behavior and standards. Thus, seeking feedback is the essence of the discrepancy-detection subprocess. Once detected, a discrepancy activates the discrepancy-reduction process, a process that could involve possible adjustments in behavior or standards. Hence, because feedback seeking allows a manager to detect discrepancies and subsequently to correct behaviors, it may be the most central aspect of the self-regulation framework. Although it is the three subprocesses in total that facilitate the attainment of managerial effectiveness, the current research focused specifically on the role of active feedback seeking in managerial effectiveness.

### **Feedback Dynamics in Self-Regulation**

Managers may receive feedback in many ways and from many sources. They may receive it directly (cf. Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979), or solicit it (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), or infer it from a variety of informal cues (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Herold & Parsons, 1985). Although some feedback may be inherent in a task itself, much feedback comes from such sources as superiors, peers, and subordinates (Herold & Parsons, 1985). Spontaneous feedback from such social sources is, however, often constricted (Felson, 1980; Fisher, 1979; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). This reality implies that active feedback seeking may be essential if managers are to attain information about these constituents' evaluations of their work. Ashford and Cummings (1983) argued that in a world in which spontaneously provided feedback is somewhat constrained, individuals who seek feedback actively should perform better in their jobs than will others because active seekers will have more insight into where their behavior is off track with respect to the goals they are pursuing.

But feedback seeking is far from a straightforward process. Both the type

of feedback sought and the method used to seek it may affect the quality or the accuracy of the information acquired. The different power and structural relationships between managers and each constituency that might be a feedback source further complicates the process. These observations underlie the hypotheses tested in this research.

**Influence of feedback type.** Feedback can be positive or negative. Either type is evaluative information that directly references the self, and thus it is inherently affective (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). This observation suggests that individuals may not behave rationally in feedback seeking. They may seek one type of feedback and avoid the other even if this seeking pattern hurts their performance. In particular, individuals may avoid seeking negative feedback because they see it as ego-threatening (Janis & Mann, 1977; Miller, 1976) or because they believe that seeking feedback may make their weaknesses much more salient than they had been to the source from which they seek feedback. The empirical evidence regarding this issue is equivocal. Trope and his colleagues (cf. Trope, 1975, 1982; Trope & Bassock, 1982; Trope & Ben-Yair, 1982) showed that individuals sought and actually preferred negative (diagnostic) feedback, but Swann and his colleagues (cf. Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Read, 1981) showed that individuals did just the opposite. Past evidence on this issue, though, has been collected in laboratories, where there were no particular sanctions if individuals misjudged their abilities and no particular benefits if they developed accurate assessments. In organizations, however, avoiding negative feedback can be costly. To be effective and, indeed, to simply survive in organizations, managers must understand the ineffective actions they take so that they can correct them. They need to develop an accurate view of how they are being perceived.

Research has suggested that individuals tend to have inaccurate—specifically, overinflated—views of their own behavior (see Mabe and West, 1982, for a review). This inaccuracy may occur because individuals are more likely to give each other positive feedback spontaneously and withhold negative appraisals (Larson, 1986; Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Further, when people do give negative feedback, they are likely to distort it in a positive direction (Fisher, 1979; Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980). Given these tendencies, individuals are unlikely to receive spontaneous negative feedback from others, which suggests that it is especially important for them to seek such information actively. Individuals who overcome the psychological threat and explicitly and actively seek negative feedback should have a more tempered view of their abilities, their performance, and their standing in an organization than those who do not do so. They also will have a better basis from which to take corrective actions.

Clearly, positive feedback also has information value. It describes what a person does well so that such behavior can be repeated. However, if people frequently receive spontaneous positive feedback (Larson, 1986; Tesser & Rosen, 1975), seeking it actively is not likely to yield much new information. Consequently, explicitly seeking positive feedback may have no effect on the

accuracy of a manager's understanding of constituents' evaluations. The following hypothesis is based on the comparative information value of positive and negative feedback.

*Hypothesis 1: The tendency to seek negative feedback will be positively associated with accurate knowledge of constituencies' evaluations, whereas the tendency to seek positive feedback will not be associated with such accuracy.*

Even though feedback seeking may allow managers to obtain valuable information, it is not without potential costs (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983). These costs lie in the impressions that the act of seeking may convey. Feedback seeking can result in either a positive or a negative impression. Some may see this behavior as a sign of weakness and a need for reassurance, whereas others may see it as a sign of strength, denoting that the seeker is eager to take on and overcome weaknesses. The interpretation others make will depend, among other things, on the type of feedback that is sought. If managers seek positive feedback, it may signal an underlying insecurity and a need for reassurance. Observers may question the seekers' self-confidence and reduce their opinions of the seekers' overall effectiveness. Seeking negative feedback, on the other hand, may convey an image of the seekers as eager to perform well and interested in improving their behavior, thereby enhancing the favorableness of others' overall opinions. Hence, in addition to its ability to generate valuable information, feedback seeking can also have impression management implications.

*Hypothesis 2: The tendency to seek negative feedback will be positively associated with constituencies' opinions of a manager's overall effectiveness, whereas the tendency to seek positive feedback will be negatively associated with this opinion.*

In this self-regulation framework, positive and negative feedback are conceived to be two independent sets of information that may be of interest to self-regulators. Some may seek both types of feedback in equal amounts or equally often, whereas others may seek one type more than the other type. Hypotheses 1 and 2 specify the relative effect that the tendency to seek each of the two types of feedback will have on accuracy and effectiveness. Thus, these hypotheses treat the two as separate and independent variables rather than as a variable spanning two ends of a continuum.

**Influence of feedback-seeking strategy.** Awareness of the impression management implications of feedback seeking may deter some managers from seeking feedback entirely and may alter others' seeking strategies. Individuals can seek feedback using either a direct inquiry strategy or an indirect observation, or monitoring, strategy (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Ashford (1986) found that employees with long company tenure were less inclined to seek feedback by inquiry than were relative newcomers. She interpreted this result as reflecting an inhibitory self-presentational pressure faced by employees at senior levels. Similarly, Northcraft and Ashford

(1990), in a laboratory study, found that having to seek feedback in public deterred individuals from asking for it directly. Thus, although inquiry could convey a positive impression, these studies suggest that using inquiry to seek feedback entails impression management costs.

Faced with potential impression management costs but still hoping to obtain feedback, managers might reduce their inquiry and instead attend to indirect cues, or use a monitoring strategy. When managers curtail inquiry, they can avoid the potential social cost of being viewed as weak or insecure. However, there is a trade-off. The messages inferred from the often subtle cues picked up by monitoring may require a great deal of inference, and thus they may be subject to a variety of interpretation biases (Ashford, 1989; Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Therefore, managers who rely solely on monitoring may have less accurate information than those who use inquiry (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). In short, inquiry yields information that is easily interpretable, but it conveys an impression of insecurity. In contrast, monitoring insulates a manager from impression management concerns but puts the manager in the position of having to draw inferences from subtle and often ambiguous cues. The following two hypotheses are based on the information gain and impression management costs of using inquiry as opposed to monitoring as a feedback-seeking strategy.

*Hypothesis 3: The tendency to use feedback inquiry will be positively associated with accurate knowledge of constituencies' evaluations, whereas the tendency to use feedback monitoring will be negatively related to such accuracy.*

*Hypothesis 4: The tendency to use feedback inquiry will be negatively associated with constituencies' opinions of a manager's overall effectiveness, whereas the tendency to use feedback monitoring will have no association with effectiveness opinions.*

These two hypotheses are general predictions regarding the effects of feedback-seeking strategies. In fact, in Hypotheses 1 through 4 we treated feedback type and feedback strategies as having independent, additive effects on the two outcome variables. However, these two sets of feedback variables are most likely correlated because any act of feedback seeking will involve choices about both type and strategy. An individual can inquire for either positive or negative feedback and can also monitor indirect cues regarding either or both types of feedback. Given such correlation of type and strategy, we considered the two sets of feedback variables simultaneously in estimating their effects on accuracy and effectiveness.

Finally, in estimating the impression management effects postulated in Hypotheses 2 and 4, an analysis should control for the accuracy of managers' knowledge of others' evaluations. This control is important because the self-regulation framework used here suggests that accuracy is an important predictor of effectiveness. Hypotheses 3 and 4 posit that the effects of impres-

sion management costs or benefits on feedback seeking are independent of the effects of the accuracy of a manager's knowledge of others' evaluations or opinions.

**Influence of feedback sources.** To this point, we have implied that managers are motivated to seek feedback from superiors, subordinates, and peers. However, managers may not treat all feedback sources equally. They may seek different types of feedback from and use different strategies with different sources. To date, the targets or sources of active feedback search have received little attention in the feedback literature. Although scholars have shown that different sources provide different amounts of feedback (Greller & Herold, 1975; Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; Herold & Parsons, 1985), no research has directly examined preference in source selection and patterns of feedback seeking across different sources. Given the current state of the literature on this issue, the hypotheses on feedback sources presented below are exploratory.

A variety of idiosyncratic factors can affect a feedback seeker's selection of a source. O'Reilly's (1977) work on information acquisition, for example, showed that the supportiveness of a source affected how frequently it was used. O'Reilly (1983) further suggested that factors such as the accessibility of the source, its credibility, and the potential affective sign of the information that is being sought should all affect the selection of the source.

The relevance of these idiosyncratic factors will vary among different sources and among different feedback seekers. One systematic factor is the power-dependence relationship between a manager seeking feedback and such sources as superiors, subordinates, and peers (Eder & Fedor, 1989). Previous research, has suggested, for example, that the degree to which managers depend on others causes them to alter their influence styles or tactics (Kale, 1989; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988). We posited that differences in dependence may also influence patterns of feedback seeking.

Even though managers depend on their peers and subordinates to varying degrees, all managers depend on their superiors for resources (e.g., budget) and rewards (e.g., salary increases and promotions). Because of this strong dependence on their superiors, managers may be especially motivated to seek feedback from this source. Such feedback seeking should yield information that allows managers to understand their superiors' goals, expectations, and ongoing evaluations of the managers. This understanding should contribute to a high perceived effectiveness, at least with superiors.

Managers may be less motivated to seek feedback from their peers and subordinates both because of the lower perceived informational value of feedback from these sources and the potentially higher impression management costs. Because managers are superiors to their subordinates, the managers are supposed to know what roles they should perform and how well they are performing. Seeking feedback from subordinates may detract from an image of strength and confidence. Managers also may be hesitant to seek feedback from peers because of a concern that their peers might perceive them as lacking confidence and self-assurance. Even though similar con-

cerns may be present when managers ask for feedback from their bosses, the value of the information that may be obtained from superiors counterbalances such fears. Thus, although the actual value of feedback may be equivalent across sources, managers perceive a greater information value in superiors' feedback. This greater value counterbalances impression management concerns. With peers and subordinates, the perceived information value is less and so impression management concerns may dominate, resulting in reduced seeking. Thus, in general,

*Hypothesis 5: Managers will be more active in seeking feedback, using both inquiry and monitoring, from superiors than from subordinates and peers.*

In addition to engaging in different levels of feedback seeking with different sources, managers also may seek different types of feedback from different sources. Managers should desire both negative and positive feedback from their superiors. Negative feedback from superiors is important because from it managers are able to correct their performance, whereas positive feedback is important for enhancing their confidence and ensuring future rewards. Even though seeking negative feedback from a superior may include a potential cost—it may expose a weakness or crystallize a previously hazy negative impression of the seeker—the value of the information to be gained may neutralize concerns about the potential impression management costs. Further, although Hypothesis 2 suggests a social cost of seeking positive feedback, subordinates may be somewhat immune to this cost when seeking positive feedback from superiors because seeking feedback and asking for help in general is congruent with the subordinate role. Thus, any particular subordinate's seeking may not be seen as especially indicative of an underlying state like insecurity. Subordinates may be able to get away with seeking both positive and negative feedback from superiors.

In contrast, with subordinates and peers, on whom a manager is less dependent than on superiors, the pattern of seeking may be different. Impression management concerns may influence feedback seeking more than the perceived value of the information to be obtained. Specifically, managers often compete with peers for rewards and resources. Peers also tend to be closer in age to each other and to serve as a social reference group. Both of these realities motivate managers to maintain a favorable image in front of their peers. They may seek to enhance their public image of effectiveness among peers and especially to avoid disclosing weaknesses. Therefore, although managers may be reluctant to seek feedback from peers in general, should they decide to seek feedback from this source, they may tend to seek—or even to subtly publicize—positive feedback more than negative feedback.

Why would managers not take the impression management cost of seeking positive feedback (Hypothesis 2) into account when using peers as a feedback source? We posited that the competitive pressure to present a favorable public image among peers is strong enough that managers are willing to incur the cost of being seen as interested in ego-enhancing information

rather than expose potentially career-damaging negative information about themselves. Managers may believe that, overall, their interests are best served by avoiding discussion of their negative performance with peer competitors for career opportunities and other rewards. Such avoidance clearly is a departure from the rational behavior proposed in Hypothesis 2, and this departure will most likely be costly to managers in terms of peers' perceptions of their effectiveness. Consequently, of the three constituencies, we expected peers to have the least favorable opinion of managers, given the latter's general reluctance to use peers as a feedback source and tendency to prefer positive feedback from this source over negative feedback.

Regarding subordinates, the opposite may occur. Though managers may be less inclined to seek feedback from subordinates than from others, they may seek it if they think such behavior would convey an image of responsiveness, caring, and interest. This motive may lead managers to seek negative, rather than positive, feedback from subordinates. These postulations, albeit tentative, are the bases for the following hypotheses relating feedback types to feedback sources:

*Hypothesis 6a: Managers will seek more feedback, both positive and negative, from superiors than from peers and subordinates.*

*Hypothesis 6b: Managers will seek more positive than negative feedback from their peers.*

*Hypothesis 6c: Managers will seek more negative than positive feedback from their subordinates.*

In summary, we propose that active feedback seeking is an important step in the self-regulation process by which managers monitor the opinions of multiple constituencies and facilitate their effectiveness. Active feedback seeking should improve managers' accurate knowledge about constituency expectations and evaluations. Both the type of feedback sought and the seeking strategy used will affect the degree of that accuracy. In addition, as managers seek feedback from different sources, both seeking strategy and the type of feedback sought will vary with the power-dependence relations involved and the perceived impression management benefits or costs.

## METHODS

### Sample

The population for this study was composed of mid-level executives who held positions as directors of functional units such as operations, support services, finance, marketing, and human resources in a public service agency. Also included in the study were these directors' superiors, subordinates, and peers. The final group was composed of 387 executives, representing a 77 percent response rate, and 2,447 constituents—345 superiors (87% response rate), 1,056 peers (91% response rate), and 1,046 subordinates (90% response rate). The functional unit directors were the focal managers

whose feedback-seeking behaviors, role performance, and overall effectiveness this study measured.

The public service agency was organized into five semiautonomous geographical regions in which 74 divisions operated. The work and the performance goals of these divisions were essentially identical. A regional general manager who supervised a number of divisions headed each region. Divisional general managers, the superiors in this study, and seven functional unit directors—the focal managers and the peers in this study—managed each division. The outputs of each division were highly objective and clearly measurable. The organization measured each functional unit director on a number of clear, objective performance goals and indicators. Most of these indicators measured the performance of an entire division, though specific directors were more directly responsible for some indicators than others. For example, the performance measures for a human resource director could include the number of employee grievances that arose and the rates of employee absenteeism, accidents, and affirmative action hires and promotions. A report was generated every four weeks showing the performance of each division as a whole as well as the performance of each unit director's area. This report was given to all the directors. In general, the organizational context can be characterized as having a highly formalized performance measurement system with extensive measures taken on both the production process and outputs. Further, formal communication among the functional directors was quite frequent, and knowledge of each others' responsibilities was quite thorough. These directors varied, however, in their informal feedback exchanges and in their active feedback-seeking behavior with those who ranked above them, below them, and at the same level.

## Procedures

The focal managers were first asked to provide a list of the people they interacted with most frequently in their jobs via the following instruction: "Below please put down the names and addresses of (a) your immediate superior, (b) seven of your subordinates (i.e., those who report to you), and (c) five of your peers (i.e., the other unit directors). Please list those with whom you have the most regular and frequent work-related interactions." No additional instruction was given on the order in which these people should be listed. Presumably, the focal managers listed the names of those who came to mind first. One of the researchers randomly picked three names each from the subordinate and the peer lists,<sup>1</sup> and sent a coded survey to each of these seven individuals—the superior, three peers, and three subordinates. Confidentiality of their responses was assured. The focal manager

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<sup>1</sup> To randomly select from the seven subordinates listed, we wrote the numbers ranging 1 to 7 on separate pieces of paper, put them into an envelope, and randomly drew three. The same procedure was used in randomly drawing three peers from the list of five.

also completed an instrument containing measures designed for this research. All completed instruments were returned directly to the researcher at her university.

Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the focal managers and each of the three constituencies. On the average, the focal managers were 46 years old, had 26 years of full-time work experience, and had been with the agency for 21 years. Focal managers had held their current jobs for a little less than two years. The profiles of the focal managers and their peers were highly similar, which was expected since these two groups were at the same organizational level. Also as expected, the superiors were usually men who were older and had longer company tenure than the members of the other three groups. Relative to the other three groups, the subordinates were younger and had shorter company tenure, and more of them were women.

**TABLE 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

<b>Demographic Variables<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Focal Managers</b>	<b>Superiors</b>	<b>Peers</b>	<b>Subordinates</b>
Gender				
Men	87	93	89	79
Women	13	7	11	21
Race				
White	76	73	79	77
Minority	24	27	21	23
Education				
High school	3	5	4	9
Some college	39	31	38	53
B.A. or B.S.	15	6	16	19
Graduate courses	19	41	20	12
M.A. or M.S.	20	18	21	6
Doctorate courses	2	0	1	1
Doctorate	2	0	1	1
Age				
Mean	46.0	51.2	46.2	44.5
s.d.	6.7	7.8	6.9	7.8
Years of full-time work experience				
Mean	25.9	31.0	26.2	24.5
s.d.	7.5	8.3	7.3	8.6
Company tenure				
Mean	21.4	27.4	21.6	19.7
s.d.	6.7	8.4	6.8	8.2
Job tenure				
Mean	1.9	2.6	2.0	2.9
s.d.	1.4	2.5	1.7	3.2

<sup>a</sup> Statistics shown are percentages. The sample sizes were 387 for focal managers, 345 for superiors, 1,056 for peers, and 1,046 for subordinates.

## Measures

**Dependent variables.** The first dependent measure was the accuracy of the focal managers' knowledge about constituency evaluations of their role performance. To measure accuracy, we adopted a procedure used in performance appraisal research (Cardy, 1982; Cardy & Dobbins, 1986) and in previous role accuracy research (Greene, 1972; Greene & Organ, 1973) and based on the *D*-statistic developed by Cronbach and Gleser (1953). The basic procedure involves comparing the scores obtained from a focal manager to the scores obtained directly from a constituency, with the latter treated as the true score. The sum of the squared differences between the two sets of scores measures the extent to which a focal manager was inaccurate in his or her knowledge of the constituency's evaluations of a set of stimulus items.<sup>2</sup>

The stimulus items used in this research were Mintzberg's (1973) ten managerial roles. The focal managers received the list of roles, each described by a brief paragraph. They were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale ranging from 1, "not at all effective," to 7, "extremely effective," how they thought their superiors, their subordinates, and their peers would each rate their effectiveness in performing each role. We also obtained the constituents' actual ratings of the focal managers, using the same role descriptions and identical scoring anchors. The accuracy score for each constituent was derived by the following formula:

$$\text{Accuracy}_j = 360 - \sum_{i=1}^{10} (FC_i - C_{ij})^2,$$

where

$FC_i$  = a focal manager's (*F*) estimated rating with respect to each constituency (*C* = superior, subordinate, or peer) for each managerial role ( $i = 1$  to 10),

$C_{ij}$  = the actual rating on each role (*i*) by each constituent (*j*) in each constituency (*c*),

and

360 = the maximum score if the focal manager's ratings were completely inaccurate with respect to a constituent.

A separate accuracy score was obtained for each constituent. We then

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<sup>2</sup> We considered the various alternatives to difference scores suggested by Johns (1981) and decided that, given the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, difference scores were the most meaningful approach in measuring accuracy. Their use was also consistent with practices in previous research (Greene & Organ, 1973). Following Johns, we computed reliability estimates for both the component scores and the difference scores. The alpha coefficients for the components ranged from .81 to .92, with a mean of .88. The alphas for the difference scores ranged from .74 to .81, with a mean of .78. This level of reliability for the accuracy scores appeared highly acceptable.

reversed the accuracy score by subtracting it from 360 so that a large score denoted a high level of accuracy.

The second dependent variable was the constituents' judgments of the focal managers' overall effectiveness, measured with the reputational effectiveness scale developed by Tsui (1984b). This three-item summary scale measured the extent to which focal managers had met constituents' performance expectations. The alpha coefficient of this scale was .91 for superiors, .89 for subordinates, and .90 for peers.

**Independent variables.** Two sets of independent variables were involved: (1) feedback type, or sign, which captured each focal manager's tendency to seek negative or positive feedback, and (2) feedback-seeking strategy, measuring a focal manager's tendency to use inquiry or monitoring in seeking feedback.

Based on preliminary interviews and two pilot tests using fully employed executive M.B.A. students, we developed three items to measure the tendency to seek negative feedback (e.g., "how characteristic was it of this executive to prefer detailed, critical appraisals even though they might hurt") and three items to measure the tendency to seek positive feedback (e.g., "how characteristic was it of this executive to tend to seek good news about himself or herself"). The constituents were asked to use a five-point scale to indicate how characteristic the behavior each item described had been during "the past six months."<sup>3</sup> We chose the six-month time frame because it was consistent with previous research using behavioral recall (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980).

Items measuring feedback-seeking strategies were adopted from Ashford (1986). Inquiry was measured by five items and monitoring by nine items. The constituents were asked to indicate, also on a five-point scale, how frequently a focal manager used each method to obtain feedback from others during the six-month period.

Factor analyses were performed on the feedback items to define a set of measures with the highest levels of construct validity and internal consistency reliabilities. This was done by splitting the sample of 2,447 constituents into two approximately equal, random subsamples, treating one subsample as the developmental group, and using the second for validation of the factor structures identified. First, we performed a principal components factor analysis with oblique rotation on the data from the developmental subsample, using oblique rotation because of the assumed correlations among the feedback variables. For the feedback type items, as expected, a scree test indicated that two factors were most meaningful, accounting for 77.4 percent of the total variance. However, only two items loaded mean-

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<sup>3</sup> For three reasons, we deemed self-reports of feedback seeking less acceptable than reports provided by constituents. First, people may not be able to verbalize their mental processes accurately (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Second, espoused actions may depart from real actions (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Third, these feedback items might elicit socially desirable responses. Thus, constituents were asked to describe the behaviors of the managers.

ingfully on each factor. The loadings were above .85 on each factor, with no high cross loadings. Thus, we retained these four items and confirmed the factor structure using a LISREL confirmatory factor analysis on the validation subsample. The results showed a goodness-of-fit index of 1.00 and a clean and unambiguous factor structure. Table 2 shows the factor-loading pattern based on the LISREL factor analysis performed on the validation subsample. The alpha coefficients for negative feedback and positive feedback factors were .70 and .72, respectively.

The feedback-seeking strategy items were factor-analyzed using a similar procedure. However, the scree plot suggested that a three-factor solution

**TABLE 2**  
**Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results**

(a) Feedback Type	Negative Feedback	Positive Feedback	Goodness of Fit
"Thinking about the past 6 months, how characteristic was it of this executive to:			1.00
1. Ask others to be critical when they gave him or her feedback	.62		
2. Prefer detailed, critical appraisals even though they might hurt	.91		
3. Tend to seek good news about himself or herself		.77	
4. Ask for feedback if he or she knew it would be positive rather than negative"		.68	
Cronbach's alpha	.70	.72	
(b) Feedback-Seeking Strategy	Direct Cue Inquiry	Indirect Cue Monitoring	Goodness of Fit
"During the past 6 months, to obtain feedback, how frequently did this executive:			0.97
1. Directly ask for information concerning his or her performance	.89		
2. Directly ask you, 'how am I doing?'	.78		
3. Directly ask for an informal appraisal	.69		
4. Observe how quickly you returned his or her phone calls		.83	
5. Observe how often you went to him or her for advice		.69	
6. Observe how long he or she was kept waiting when you and this manager had a set appointment		.70	
7. Pay attention to how you acted toward him or her	.74		
8. Pay attention to informal, unsolicited feedback	.69		
9. Pay attention to casual remarks you made"	.68		
Cronbach's alpha	.83	.75	

accounting for 70.2 percent of the total variance was most meaningful. Three items loaded highly (above .75) on each factor with no cross-loadings. Two separate factors emerged from the items defining the monitoring strategy. The factor correlation between these two monitoring factors was .23. Therefore, we retained three factors. LISREL confirmatory factor analysis using the validation subsample also confirmed this three-factor structure, with a goodness-of-fit index of .97 ( $\alpha$ s = .83, .75, and .75). On the basis of the item descriptions, we labeled the three factors (1) inquiry (e.g., "During the past six months, how frequently did this executive directly ask you 'how am I doing?' "); (2) direct cue monitoring (e.g., "pay attention to informal, unsolicited feedback"); and (3) indirect cue monitoring (e.g., "observe how quickly you returned his or her phone calls"). The items loading on the indirect cue-monitoring factor constituted cues that seemed to require more inference as to the meaning of the feedback message than did direct cues.<sup>4</sup>

### Analyses

In the hypotheses, we assumed that managers would engage in fairly similar behavior toward all subordinates as a group—or constituency—and likewise would behave consistently toward peers as a separate group. The assumption of within-constituency agreement needed to be verified before we aggregated or pooled the data from each focal manager's three subordinates or the three peers. We thus performed a Chow test (Greene, 1990) on the three subordinates' regression models and a separate one on the three peers' regression models. We performed these tests using both the accuracy scores and the effectiveness ratings as dependent variables and the five feedback-seeking variables as the predictor variables. The values of *F* comparing the sum of squares of errors in the full models (for example, the three regression equations for the three subordinates) and in the restricted models (the three subordinates' data pooled) were nonsignificant for both outcome variables. These results mean that the relationship of the feedback-seeking variables to accuracy and effectiveness was similar among the three subordinates. Similar results were obtained on the peers' models. Therefore, in all the analyses related to the hypotheses, we treated the three subordinates as one group and the three peers as another group.

Next, we computed the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among all the variables in the study separately for each of the three

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<sup>4</sup> To test whether job-level differences might affect the factor structures of these feedback items, we performed additional factor analyses, one for each of the seven constituents and one for each of the three sources. The factor structures and factor loadings were highly similar—indeed, nearly identical—among all of these subsamples. A final set of factor analyses was performed on the total sample as well as on subsets of samples, including all 13 feedback items and the three overall effectiveness items. This process confirmed a six-factor solution with clear loadings, a result strongly suggesting that the five feedback variables and the overall effectiveness measure are independent constructs.

constituencies.<sup>5</sup> The multiple regression procedure was used for testing Hypotheses 1 through 4. For Hypotheses 2 and 4, we included the accuracy score in the equation as a control variable. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and correlated t-tests were used to test Hypotheses 5 and 6, with constituency as the classification variable.

## RESULTS

Table 3 shows the intercorrelation matrixes. The correlational patterns appeared to be quite similar among the three feedback sources. Specifically, the following significant relationships emerged for all three groups: (1) the accuracy score was positively associated with the overall effectiveness rating (average  $r = .46$ ), (2) the tendency to seek negative feedback was negatively correlated with the tendency to seek positive feedback (average  $r = -.25$ ); (3) the tendency to seek negative feedback was positively associated with both accuracy and effectiveness (average  $r$ 's =  $.31$  and  $.49$ , respectively), whereas the tendency to seek positive feedback was negatively associated with both outcome variables (average  $r$ 's =  $-.14$  and  $-.27$ , for accuracy and effectiveness, respectively); (4) the three feedback-seeking strategy variables were positively correlated with each other (average  $r = .29$ ); (5) the inquiry strategy was positively correlated with the overall effectiveness rating (average  $r = .20$ ); (6) the tendency to seek negative feedback was positively associated with inquiry (average  $r = .37$ ); and (7) the tendency to seek positive feedback was positively associated with indirect cue monitoring (average  $r = .17$ ). Also, in general, the magnitude of the correlations among the independent variables did not indicate a multicollinearity problem.<sup>6</sup> They ranged from  $-.25$  to  $.46$ , with a median of  $.12$ .

Table 4 summarizes the results for Hypotheses 1 through 4. As hypothesized, the tendency to seek negative feedback was positively associated with the accuracy score for all three constituencies ( $\beta$ s =  $.25$ ,  $.25$ , and  $.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , for superiors, subordinates, and peers). The tendency to seek positive feedback was not related to the managers' accurate knowledge of

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<sup>5</sup> We followed several recommendations outlined in Podsakoff and Organ (1986) to avoid or estimate the potential common method variance problem. First, we placed the feedback-seeking items prior to the accuracy and effectiveness items in the survey to diminish the influence of implicit theories respondents might have had about the effectiveness determinants. Second, we examined the amount of variance the first factor accounted for and verified a six-factor structure among the five feedback-seeking variables and the overall effectiveness measure. The first factor accounted for only 26.9 percent of the total variance. The six-factor solution was confirmed. These checks suggest that common method variance was not a serious concern in this study.

<sup>6</sup> We found no definitive statement on the level of correlation that would constitute a serious multicollinearity problem. Most researchers do not seem concerned until the correlation exceeds  $.75$ . Green (1978: 227) argued that no predictor should have a multiple correlation with the remaining predictors that exceeds that of the criterion variable with the full set of predictors. Our data passed this test.

**TABLE 3**  
**Intercorrelations Among Feedback-Seeking Behaviors, Accuracy in Knowledge of Constituency Evaluations, and Overall Effectiveness Ratings**

Variables	Means	s.d.	y <sub>1</sub>	y <sub>2</sub>	x <sub>1</sub>	x <sub>2</sub>	x <sub>3</sub>	x <sub>4</sub>
<b>Superiors</b>								
y <sub>1</sub> . Accuracy in knowledge	335.36	18.63						
y <sub>2</sub> . Overall effectiveness rating	5.08	1.28	.39***					
x <sub>1</sub> . Negative feedback	2.98	0.82	.26***	.46***				
x <sub>2</sub> . Positive feedback	2.92	0.78	-.12*	-.25***	-.25***			
x <sub>3</sub> . Inquiry strategy	2.52	0.89	.08	.14**	.32***	.11*		
x <sub>4</sub> . Direct cue monitoring	3.40	0.69	.02	-.02	-.02	.05	.24***	
x <sub>5</sub> . Indirect cue monitoring	1.81	0.72	-.05	-.11*	-.08	.12*	.21***	.26***
<b>Subordinates</b>								
y <sub>1</sub> . Accuracy in knowledge	331.38	24.78						
y <sub>2</sub> . Overall effectiveness rating	5.13	1.45	.52***					
x <sub>1</sub> . Negative feedback	2.99	0.91	.32***	.50***				
x <sub>2</sub> . Positive feedback	2.82	0.84	-.19***	-.29***	-.25***			
x <sub>3</sub> . Inquiry strategy	1.85	0.87	.16***	.22***	.32***	.05		
x <sub>4</sub> . Direct cue monitoring	3.01	0.95	.18***	.23***	.32***	-.02	.41***	
x <sub>5</sub> . Indirect cue monitoring	2.28	1.01	.07	-.00	.04	.16***	.19***	.35***
<b>Peers</b>								
y <sub>1</sub> . Accuracy in knowledge	332.28	22.92						
y <sub>2</sub> . Overall effectiveness rating	4.63	1.37	.48***					
x <sub>1</sub> . Negative feedback	2.82	0.89	.36***	.51***				
x <sub>2</sub> . Positive feedback	3.00	0.76	-.11***	-.26***	-.25***			
x <sub>3</sub> . Inquiry strategy	2.05	0.90	.18***	.25***	.46***	.04		
x <sub>4</sub> . Direct cue monitoring	3.07	0.81	.11***	.21***	.20***	.08	.40***	
x <sub>5</sub> . Indirect cue monitoring	1.91	0.83	-.02	-.02	-.00	.23***	.26***	.30***

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

**TABLE 4**  
**Regression Analysis Results**

Feedback-Seeking Variables	Feedback Sources <sup>a</sup>					
	Superiors		Subordinates		Peers	
	Accuracy	Effectiveness	Accuracy	Effectiveness	Accuracy	Effectiveness
Focal manager's tendency to						
Seek negative feedback	.25***	.33***	.25***	.30***	.34***	.34***
Seek positive feedback	-.06	-.13**	-.14***	-.14***	-.02	-.15***
Use the inquiry strategy	.00	.04	.06*	.05	.01	-.01
Monitor direct cues	.03	-.01	.05	.08**	.05	.13***
Monitor indirect cues	-.03	-.06 (.16)***	.05	-.06* (.15)***	-.03	-.01 (.17)***
Accuracy in knowledge of evaluation	.06	.28***	.13	.38***	.13	.33***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	5.39***	24.54***	31.01***	122.69***	31.16***	114.50***
F	18.06	1.14	23.17	1.11	21.43	1.07

<sup>a</sup> For superiors, N = 340; for subordinates, n = 1,041; and for peers, n = 1,052.

<sup>b</sup> The statistic in parentheses is the unique R<sup>2</sup> in the effectiveness rating accounted for by the feedback variables after the effects of accuracy are controlled.

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

\*\*\* p < .001

superiors' and peers' evaluations ( $\beta$ s =  $-.06$  and  $-.02$ , n.s.) whereas it was negatively related to their accurate knowledge of subordinates' evaluation ( $\beta$  =  $-.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results supported Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 was also supported. Controlling for accuracy, we found that the tendency to seek negative feedback was positively associated with overall effectiveness ratings from all three constituencies ( $\beta$ s =  $.33$ ,  $.30$ , and  $.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , for superiors, subordinates, and peers). In contrast, the tendency to seek positive feedback was negatively associated with all three overall effectiveness ratings ( $\beta$ s =  $-.13$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and  $-.14$  and  $-.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Hypothesis 3, however, received only weak support. Only one of the feedback-seeking strategy variables was associated with the managers' accurate knowledge of constituency evaluations. The regression coefficient for inquiry was positive and significant ( $\beta$  =  $.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) on the subordinates' accuracy score. This result is consistent with Hypothesis 3. However, monitoring was unrelated to any of the three accuracy scores.

Table 4 shows no support for Hypothesis 4, which proposed a negative effect of inquiry and a null effect of monitoring for overall effectiveness. Inquiry was not associated with any of the overall effectiveness measures. Monitoring of direct cues, however, was positively associated with the overall effectiveness ratings from subordinates ( $\beta$  =  $.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ) or from peers ( $\beta$  =  $.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Monitoring of indirect cues was negatively associated with the overall effectiveness ratings from subordinates ( $\beta$  =  $-.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, findings did not support Hypothesis 4.

The amount of variance in the accuracy score the five feedback variables accounted for ranged from 6 percent in the superiors' model to 13 percent for both the subordinates' and peers' models. The amount of variance accounted for in the overall effectiveness ratings by the five feedback variables and accuracy was substantial. They accounted for 29 percent of the variance in the superiors' model, 41 percent in the subordinates' model, and 39 percent in the peers' model. With accuracy controlled, the feedback-seeking variables accounted for 16, 15 and 17 percent of the variance in the overall effectiveness ratings for the three feedback sources, respectively.

Table 5 summarizes results for Hypotheses 5 and 6. The one-way ANOVA results supported the general postulate that managers used different feedback-seeking strategies and sought different types of feedback from the three sources ( $F = 12.96-74.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A multiple range test using the Scheffé procedure indicated that the managers used inquiry and monitoring of direct cues more frequently with superiors than with either subordinates or peers. However, these managers also used indirect cue monitoring with peers as often as they used it with superiors. Hypothesis 5 was generally supported.

Hypothesis 6a received partial support. The managers had a stronger tendency to seek negative rather than positive feedback not only from superiors but also from subordinates. They were least likely to seek negative feedback from peers. Also as hypothesized, managers were most likely to seek positive feedback from superiors. However, they were equally likely to

**TABLE 5**  
**Results of Analysis of Variance**

Feedback Variables	Superiors		Subordinates		Peers		F
	Means	s.d.	Means	s.d.	Means	s.d.	
Seeking strategy							
Inquiry	2.52	.89 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.85	.87 <sup>c</sup>	2.05	.90	74.81***
Direct cue monitoring	3.40	.69 <sup>a,b</sup>	3.01	.95	3.07	.81	27.56***
Indirect cue monitoring	1.81	.72 <sup>a</sup>	2.28	1.01 <sup>c</sup>	1.91	.83	58.88***
Feedback type							
Negative	2.98	.82 <sup>b</sup>	2.99	.91 <sup>c</sup>	2.81	.87	11.98***
Positive	2.92	.78	2.82	.84 <sup>c</sup>	3.00	.76	12.96***

<sup>a</sup> The difference in means between superiors and subordinates was significant at  $p < .05$  or less.

<sup>b</sup> The difference in means between superiors and peers was significant at  $p < .05$  or less.

<sup>c</sup> The difference in means between subordinates and peers was significant at  $p < .05$  or less.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

seek it from peers. Managers were least likely to seek positive feedback from subordinates.

Results supported Hypotheses 6b and 6c. Managers were more likely to seek positive than negative feedback from peers ( $t = 4.53, p < .001$ ) and more likely to seek negative feedback than positive feedback from subordinates ( $t = 4.09, p < .001$ ).

According to our logic for Hypothesis 2, however, by seeking more positive than negative feedback from peers, managers should pay a social cost of lowering their effectiveness as perceived by this source. To assess this proposition, we compared the effectiveness ratings the three sources gave (see Table 3 for the mean values) using  $t$ -tests. The mean effectiveness rating peers gave was, in fact, significantly lower than that given by both the superiors ( $t = -5.35, p < .001$ ) and the subordinates ( $t = -8.10, p < .001$ ).

Finally, an additional analysis was performed on the accuracy scores to determine with which constituency the managers were most accurate. The results of a one-way ANOVA ( $F = 4.27, p < .01$ ) suggested that the managers were most accurate in estimating their superiors' evaluations of their performance on the ten managerial roles. They were equally accurate in estimating the subordinates' and peers' evaluations.

## DISCUSSION

The theoretical basis for this research is a self-regulation framework that depicts standard setting, discrepancy detecting, and discrepancy reducing as important processes in people's attempts to improve their effectiveness. This study specifically examined the role of active feedback seeking in the self-regulation efforts of managers. The specific issues examined in the current research were: Is active feedback seeking associated with accuracy in detecting performance discrepancies? Is feedback seeking associated with per-

ceived effectiveness by constituencies? Do individuals seek feedback differently with different sources? Within each of these questions, we analyzed the influence of the type of information sought (positive or negative) and the strategy of seeking used (inquiry or monitoring) to develop a fine-grained understanding of feedback-seeking dynamics in the self-regulation process. The results reveal that feedback-seeking behavior is associated both with how accurately managers know others' opinions of their work and with others' opinions of managers' overall effectiveness. Furthermore, the nature of feedback-seeking behavior was also shown to vary with different feedback sources.

### **Feedback Seeking and Accuracy**

The findings suggest that although a tendency to seek positive feedback will not necessarily hurt managers, a willingness to seek negative feedback is associated with more accurate knowledge of how others evaluate their work. Thus, managers who are willing to seek negative feedback should be better able to keep their efforts on track with regard to their goals.

These findings are important in light of the previous controversial evidence on people's willingness to seek out negative information (cf. Swann & Read, 1981; Trope, 1975). As mentioned, previous evidence was collected in laboratories, where there were no particular costs to an individual's holding an inaccurate self-view. The self-regulation framework suggests that in organizations, inaccurate knowledge has some clear costs. Managers cannot meet or attempt to influence their constituents' demands if they cannot accurately assess how these constituents are responding to or evaluating their work. This failure can result in unrealistic goal setting, misguided efforts, or failure to undertake necessary remedial actions (Ashford, 1989). Given this reality, it is perhaps not surprising that in this field study the willingness to seek negative feedback paid off in terms of increased accuracy.

The strategies chosen to obtain feedback were also related to accuracy. In examining these effects, this study first revealed that monitoring is a more complex process than that described by Ashford and Cummings (1983). The types of cues individuals monitor could be critical. Monitoring of direct cues involved managers' attending to informal feedback or to casual remarks others made directly about them. Monitoring of indirect cues, on the other hand, seemed to focus on indirect data that were less informative or more susceptible to inference errors. For example, people may not return phone calls for many reasons. To infer a feedback evaluation from this cue could be highly misleading. Further study of the impact of feedback-seeking style at a more refined level is clearly needed.

We hypothesized that the feedback-seeking strategy a manager used would also be associated with accuracy because the feedback obtained with each strategy requires varying amounts of inference. This hypothesis was based on Ashford and Cummings's (1983) suggestion that monitoring requires a greater amount of inference than inquiry and, hence, knowledge

derived from monitoring should be less accurate than knowledge derived from inquiry. Results from this study provided only marginal support for this assertion. Inquiry was related positively to accuracy with one source, subordinates, whereas monitoring was not related to accuracy with any of the sources. These results suggest that monitoring may not require more inference than inquiry since it was not associated with inaccuracy. It may be that the different feedback-seeking strategies require different types of inference rather than differing amounts of inference. The inference required in inquiry may simply be more social in nature, for instance, a manager might wonder if a feedback source is inflating an appraisal to be nice or how much trust there is in a relationship. It is also possible that seekers may contribute to inaccuracy by inquiring in such a way that they elicit feedback that confirms their own self-views rather than unbiased appraisals.

Besides the inference each feedback-seeking strategy requires, additional variables may explain accuracy as well. Variables such as the types of environmental cues that individuals seek out, seekers' self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Carver, & Scheier, 1975) or self-monitoring ability (Snyder, 1979), how accurately they interpret the feedback they obtain, and the frequency of their interaction with feedback sources may provide additional explanatory power. Potentially, the frequency of ongoing interaction may be a very important moderating variable. Interaction presumes exchange of information. Frequency of interaction also presumes that both parties perceive some value in the exchange between them. Thus, frequent interactors should gain a more accurate sense of each others' opinions and feelings than infrequent interactors. The sheer number of participants in a manager's social network, however, may constrain interaction frequency. Future studies might include measures of feedback seekers' spans of control as well as of the sizes of their peer networks.

In summary, these results suggest that if the self-regulatory objective of managers is to gain accurate knowledge of how constituents view their work, the managers should focus on seeking negative, rather than positive, feedback. Further, they should not be too concerned with the type of strategy used in obtaining feedback. Neither inquiry nor monitoring appeared to offer an accuracy advantage.

### **Feedback Seeking and Effectiveness**

The results provided reasonable support for the hypotheses that the type of feedback managers sought and the seeking strategy they employed would influence constituents' perceptions of the managers' effectiveness. Specifically, the findings on type of feedback are consistent with the impression management argument that observers (constituents) react unfavorably to managers' visible interest in positive feedback and respond favorably when they perceive that a manager is interested in obtaining negative feedback. These reactions may account for the positive association between the tendency to seek negative feedback and effectiveness ratings and the negative association between positive feedback and effectiveness.

Together with the accuracy findings reported above, these findings specifically confirm the importance that negative feedback plays in the self-regulation process and generally suggest, as did Herold and Parsons (1985), that those investigating how individuals respond to and use their feedback environment should pay attention to the type of feedback individuals seek and not just to the amount or direction of seeking. Our findings also reinforce the importance seeking negative feedback has in actual organizations as opposed to laboratory settings.

When we controlled for the type of feedback sought, we found that the strategy of seeking used also had both social benefits and social costs. Subordinates' and peers' opinions of the focal managers were positively associated with the managers' tendency to monitor direct cues. Further, subordinates' opinions were negatively related to the managers' tendency to monitor indirect cues. Perceived reliance on these indirect cues might have conveyed a sense of insecurity to subordinates.

One surprising finding was the lack of an association between inquiry and constituents' effectiveness opinions. This lack of association suggests, in contrast to the implications of previous research, that inquiry may carry no particular social cost and may be an acceptable behavior, especially when it is used to seek negative feedback. Would inquiry involve a social cost if it were used to seek positive feedback? We performed some additional analyses to investigate this question and found only a few significant interactions between type and strategy. For example, the perceived effectiveness ratings the subordinates gave were the highest for managers who tended to seek negative feedback using an inquiry strategy and lowest when they were low on both seeking negative feedback and using the inquiry strategy. Additionally, our results show both that managers sought more positive than negative feedback from peers and that their effectiveness rating with peers was lower than their rating with superiors and subordinates. Although these additional results are both interesting and consistent with the findings for the main hypotheses analyzed in this study, they should be treated as exploratory and tentative at this point. The amounts of variance these interaction effects accounted for were very small (less than 1 percent in most cases), and we do not know for sure whether these managers actually used inquiry to obtain negative feedback. The correlational results (Table 3), however, suggest that the seeking strategies were differentially associated with the two types of feedback. Future research should be designed for a direct investigation of the potential interaction effects of feedback types and seeking strategies on outcomes.

In total, these results supported our arguments regarding the impression management concerns associated with active feedback seeking. Seeking negative feedback and monitoring direct (or relevant) cues appeared to be a social benefit; both were positively related to perceived overall effectiveness. Seeking positive feedback and monitoring indirect (or less relevant) cues appeared to carry some social costs. These were negatively related to the sources' opinions of the overall effectiveness of the seeker managers.

## Feedback-Seeking Sources

The third issue addressed in this research was whether seeking was conducted differently with different feedback sources. We found that managers sought different types of feedback from and used different seeking strategies with each source. This behavior varied according to the managers' power relationships with the sources. As expected, managers were more active in seeking feedback from their superiors than from the other two sources. This active feedback seeking seemed to have instrumental value: the managers' knowledge of their superiors' evaluations of their work was more accurate than their knowledge of the other sources' evaluations. This finding is consistent with the argument that superiors' feedback is perceived to be highly valuable information for managers. Future research should determine what might induce managers to seek more feedback from peers and subordinates and could also analyze the consequences of such increased feedback-seeking activity for the seekers' perceived effectiveness.

The differences in the types of feedback sought from peers and from subordinates were consistent with an impression management logic: managers want to make salient their positive performance among peers and to convey an image of responsiveness as bosses among subordinates.

## Limitations of the Study

Some cautions are in order about the interpretation of the present results. Because this study was cross-sectional, we could not assess causality between the independent and dependent variables. It may be that effective managers are more confident and thus more willing to seek negative feedback. They might also have strong egos and thus be willing to use direct inquiry in seeking feedback. In addition, this study focused on the relationships of feedback seeking and managerial effectiveness. Clearly, there are many additional possible predictors of managerial effectiveness. Future research should include other important predictors of effectiveness in assessing the unique contribution by active feedback seeking. Because there is implied causality between feedback seeking and managerial effectiveness, more controlled and preferably longitudinal studies are needed to test causality and to rule out alternative causes.

The results also may be susceptible to attributional biases associated with respondents' implicit theories of the relationship between feedback seeking and effectiveness. Individuals might attribute different feedback-seeking behavior to effective and ineffective managers. Even though we placed the feedback-seeking items in the survey before the effectiveness items to reduce this "consistency motif" (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986: 534), we cannot completely rule out attributional bias in these results.

Further, because this study used constituents' reports of managers' feedback-seeking behavior as data, we cannot draw conclusions regarding managers' intentions. We don't know whether managers consciously seek feedback or whether they see a connection between feedback seeking and effec-

tiveness. Given our arguments regarding impression management, however, how managers are perceived—whatever their intentions may be—is probably the most important variable. Nonetheless, how intentions might affect feedback seeking is an important topic for future research.

There may be some limitations to the generalizability of these findings owing to the nature of the people and organization studied. Some might argue that performance pressure is lower in public agencies than in the private sector. However, if this argument were true, the managers studied here might have been less inclined to engage in self-regulation than employees of private firms. Thus, these respondents actually provided a more conservative test of the hypotheses than private employees would have. It should be noted that the accuracy score was quite large for these managers. This result might be due to the organization's use of an explicit formal performance measurement system and the high frequency of interaction among unit directors. Such a managerial context could be unique to this organization. It is unknown, without further research, whether the findings from this study are generalizable to organizations that have more ambiguous performance measurement systems and in which, therefore, information exchange and interaction might be more important than in the organization we studied.

The experience level of the focal managers may further limit the generalizability of the results. These managers had an average company tenure of 21 years and an average effectiveness rating of 4.95 out of a possible 7 points. The large accuracy scores also suggest they had a good knowledge of others' opinions about themselves. These characteristics suggest that the results may not be generalizable to individuals who are newer on the job than the people studied here or to those with performance problems. Indeed, such individuals may be overwhelmed by the information obtained via frequent feedback seeking. It is possible that feedback seekers' career stage, company tenure, and performance level moderate the relationships of feedback types, seeking strategies, and feedback sources to accuracy and effectiveness.

Finally, using one organization we could not test the importance of feedback-seeking norms. Assuming that organizations vary in the degree to which it is acceptable for their members to solicit feedback from others and in the meaning ascribed to such behavior, such norms should affect both the amount and the type of feedback sought. Future research using multiple organizations might address this issue.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The results of our study supported the importance of active feedback seeking in the self-regulation process for managers, with active seeking defined as including the explicit seeking of feedback and a focus on negative rather than positive information. Such active feedback seeking is associated with accuracy in detecting performance discrepancies and gaining favorable effectiveness ratings from multiple constituencies. Although Ashford and

Cummings (1983) argued that feedback is an important individual resource, this study is the first to show that active feedback seeking has a payoff in terms of important outcomes. Prior research has focused more on the antecedents of feedback than on its effects. If the logic underlying these results is correct, the payoff of active feedback seeking ought to increase as managers move up in a hierarchy to levels at which feedback on performance is scarce and infrequent (Jaques, 1961). In such cases, active feedback seeking could become an important effectiveness tool. Active feedback seeking by senior-level managers has another advantage: their actions may sanction such behavior and create a norm of active feedback seeking in an organization. This norm-setting role of senior managers could be an interesting subject for future research.

Future studies should also consider other influences on the impression management dynamics that are inherent in the feedback-seeking process. Even though this study examined the type of feedback sought and the seeking strategy used, future studies could examine the style of seeking. For example, managers might be able to seek positive feedback in such a way that it seems they are asking for negative feedback. Factors such as the performance history of a seeker could also influence the impression management dynamics. For high performers, feedback seeking may convey a different message than it does for low performers.

Researchers should also consider contextual influences on the impressions that feedback seeking conveys. Contextual factors such as an organization's culture and feedback-seeking norms may influence whether feedback seeking is thought of as a sign of weakness, interest in other people's welfare, self-preoccupation, and so forth. Such social constructions may be an important influence on the willingness to seek feedback in different firms.

Future research might also expand the set of constituencies. Whereas the current research focused exclusively on internal constituencies, external constituencies, such as clients and customers, may be equally important in some managerial positions. In fact, one additional predictor of effectiveness might be how managers construe their constituency set, that is, whom they include and whom they ignore.

Finally, this research focused on only one, albeit an important, subprocess of the self-regulation framework. However, although active feedback seeking may produce accurate knowledge, knowledge itself is useless unless it is used to achieve a purpose. Managers must act on the knowledge attained. Indeed, it is likely that constituents' ratings of a manager's effectiveness will depend on what the manager does following the seeking of feedback. If a manager typically seeks negative feedback but does not alter his or her behavior as a result of that feedback, constituents may begin to believe that the manager is ineffective. Essentially, research is needed on the discrepancy reduction subprocess that follows feedback seeking. Such research could contribute to the self-regulation literature and also to the role conflict literature. Research on role conflict has been focused mainly on antecedent

and outcome variables (Jackson & Schuler, 1985) rather than on strategies for coping with conflict. The self-regulation process presented here suggests that dealing with role conflict (i.e., incompatible expectations) and coping with performance discrepancies (i.e., deviations between standards and enacted behaviors) are critical for managerial success. Research is needed on questions such as: What alternative strategies do managers or individuals employ to reduce detected discrepancies between actual behavior and performance goals? What individual and contextual factors influence the use and effectiveness of different discrepancy reduction methods? Investigation on the discrepancy reduction subprocess of self-regulation offers a fruitful and important line of inquiry for researchers who are interested in self-regulation specifically and in managerial effectiveness in general.

This study's results also suggest some new theoretical directions for work on self-regulation and control theory. First, they substantiate Klein's (1989) argument that control theory needs to move beyond its implicit assumption of a single goal (or goal hierarchy) and a single feedback message to consider situations in which individuals have multiple goals and competing goal hierarchies and receive feedback, often conflicting feedback, from multiple sources. Our arguments and data suggest that in organizations, managers clearly live in the complex world Klein (1989) described and that their failure to self-regulate actively drawing on all sources leads to effectiveness decrements. Future controlled laboratory studies could profit from assessing self-regulatory reactions under these more complex—but more realistic—conditions. Researchers need to learn, for example, the process by which multiple conflicting feedback messages, each obtained from an important constituency, are converted to a single "error message."

Our study also highlights the interpersonal factors that may render a control system that can be described in fairly mechanistic terms (Locke & Latham, 1990) inoperable in organizations. That is, control theory presumes that an "organism" will receive feedback or spontaneously and frequently seek it in order to detect discrepancies; the example of a control system most frequently cited in such work is a thermostat that senses the air around it to determine if it is maintaining the correct room temperature. Although control theory provides a framework for describing managerial behavior, managers clearly are not thermostats. They do not mechanistically seek feedback. Rather, there seem to be a variety of interpersonal dynamics, such as impression management, and intrapersonal dynamics, such as ego defense (cf. Northcraft & Ashford, 1990), that govern their seeking behavior. These factors often discourage managers from seeking the very information on which their control systems rely. Control theory research might benefit by taking these factors into account.

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