

Proposed Inquiry on the Relationship between Feedback, Task-Related Efficacy and Job Performance

Winarto

Universitas Methodist Indonesia, Medan

Email: winarto.zip@gmail.com

Abstract

Feedback has long played a central role in learning theory and performance. It provides the process and mechanism on how an actor assesses his/her past effort efficacy and also recognizes areas of needed improvements. Drawing from these arguments, feedback is essential aspect that is needed to track and improve job performance. The proposed inquiry offers a theoretical research model which examines the role of task-related efficacy, the content of feedback and the way a message is conveyed. A proposed research method is offered which explains the research opportunity to prove the proposed theoretical model.

Keywords feedback, task-related efficacy, job performance.

1. Introduction

Feedback has long played a central role in learning theory and performance. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) defined feedback as: “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspects(s) of one’s task performance.” Nadler (1979) argues that feedback serves as “an error detection device” as well as a stimulus for task and problem identification and solution. Further, feedback provides the process and mechanism on how an actor assesses his/her past effort efficacy and also recognizes areas of needed improvements (Van der Vegt et al., 2010). Drawing from these arguments, feedback is essential aspect that is needed to track and improve job performance. Therefore, the main research question is: *What is the relationship between feedback and performance?*

In addition, the mechanism on how feedback may improve performance is valuable to be discussed. Generally, feedback provides both informative and motivational aspects (Jaworksi & Kohli, 1991). Those aspects may improve employees’ task-related efficacy in their job and ultimately lead to positive job performance. Task-related efficacy is the extent to which individuals believe that they have the capacity to accomplish their tasks (Zellars et al., 2008). This paper mainly examined the effect of feedback on job performance through task-related efficacy. Thus, we arrived at the research question: *What is the relationship between feedback, task-related efficacy and performance?*

Because the relationship between feedback and performance has been proven to lack solidness, we investigate the role of some important feedback dynamics on the proposed relationships. More specifically, we allow for variance in source, sign and specificity of feedback and see how

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it affects the relationship between feedback and performance. The second research question is therefore formulated as follows: *How do the feedback dynamics; source, sign and specificity, influence the relationship between feedback, task efficacy, and performance?*

This paper continues by explaining the concepts of feedback (including its dynamics), task-related efficacy and job performance as well as their linkages. Afterwards it presents a graphical representation of these linkages by means of the conceptual model proposed. This will be followed by a brief proposed methodological section, implications and the papers limitations will be discussed.

2. Literature Review

The Defining Feedback. The phenomenon of feedback has been studied quite extensively in existing literature. Firstly, we define the concept of feedback, after which we highlight some important dynamics which could greatly influence the feedback/performance relationship. As mentioned before, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) defined feedback as: “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspects(s) of one’s task performance.” Feedback has both an informative, as well as a motivational aspect (Jaworski & Kohli, 1991). The informational function guides employees in their behavior, specifically, “which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate for successful performance” (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004). Together with the motivational aspect, this is essential for an employee’s learning within an organization (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

Defining Employee Performance. For a commercial enterprise, successful existence is directly linked to its profits. To reach at a state in which profits are made, one generally needs an efficient labor force. Thus, it is important to keep track of the quality of the employees in an enterprise. Jaworski and Kohli (1991) suggest that performance can be split into output and behavioral performance. Output performance is concerned with sales, profits, etc. while behavioral performance is concerned with strategies, procedures, etc. Miles et al. (2002) take this a step further and emphasize that overall job performance is a broad concept including voluntary behaviors which go far beyond simple task performance. Rotundo and Sackett (2002) suggest that job performance consists out of the tripod of task performance, citizenship and counterproductive performance. Organizational citizenship behaviors are voluntary behaviors promoting the welfare of colleagues (Organ & Paine, 1999). Counterproductive performance describes destructive behavior that harms co-workers or the organization (Miles et al. 2002). Finally, Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) add organizational commitment to the concept of overall performance, which is defined as emotional attachment to the organization, identification with the organization and involvement in the organization (Meyer et al. 2002).

Feedback and Employee Performance. Although there are several argumentations implying a positive relationship between feedback and performance (Ashford and Cummings, 1983; Ilgen et al., 1979; Latham & Yukl, 1975; Locke & Latham, 1990), the effect of feedback on performance is not as straightforward as it seems. Ilgen et al. (1979) already nuanced that the relationship between feedback and subsequent behavior can be very confusing. For example, Baron (1988) found that criticism can develop anger, resistance, and avoidance towards future

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disagreements and can lead to lower goal setting. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) confirm this relational ambivalence in their meta-analysis: after over one-thirds of feedback interventions, task performance deteriorated. Research on the relationship between feedback and the broader concept of overall performance, including organizational citizenship, counterproductive performance, and organizational commitment, is rather limited and of contestable strength. Vigoda-Gadot and Angert (2007) conclude that “the feedback method in their study may have encouraged employees to engage in future organizational citizenship behavior.” Belschak and Den Hartog’s (2009) statement likewise lacks strength: “performance feedback from one’s supervisor can result in emotional reactions that may evoke several affect-driven extra-role behaviors and attitudes.” The first proposition is therefore formulated as follows:

Proposition₁: There is a relationship between feedback and employee performance

Task-related Efficacy as a Mediating Variable. This paper builds on a direct relationship between feedback and job performance. However, based on the elaborated model of work design, there is an underlying process which mediates the feedback/performance relationship (Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001). The mediating process proposed here is task-related self-efficacy, the extent to which individuals believe that they have the capacity to accomplish their tasks (Zellars et al., 2008). Feedback provides information and motivational aspects which directs employees in their daily work activities for performance improvement (Jaworksi & Kohli, 1991). The information and motivational aspects may improve employees’ task-related efficacy because those aspects show which behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate for successful performance (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004). Therefore, proposition two is defined as follows:

Proposition₂: The relationship between feedback and employee performance is mediated by task-related self-efficacy.

The Moderating Role of Feedback Dynamics. It is because of the uncertainty about the end effect of feedback that we delve into the three dynamics of feedback: source, sign and specificity, to reach a more detailed explanation. The definition by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) indicates the first important dynamic of feedback, namely: the source. They go further than an often assumed top-down nature of feedback by indicating that the information is provided by “an external agent”. Kohli and Jaworski (1994) reinforce this broad perspective by declaring the importance of co-worker feedback, which is from employee to employee. Finally, Luthans and Peterson (2003) also emphasize that feedback could originate from multiple sources besides subordinates when they use the term “360-feedback.” Examples are: peers; subordinates; and the employee self. Herold and Greller (1977) state that sources more intrinsic or more psychologically closer to the employee are more important in indicating performance. This indicates the importance of co-workers originating feedback next to traditional supervisory feedback. Kohli and Jaworski (1994) note that on the one hand, co-worker feedback indeed could be valued higher because it is less threatening or stressful and enhances skills and performance. On the other hand, they note that the opposite could also be true as co-workers do not have the authority that a supervisor has and thus may be experienced as undesired

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interference of procedures. In addition, Luthans and Peterson (2003) propose a combination of feedback from multiple sources, varying in connection to the employee. Concluding, we propose as follows:

Proposition₃: feedback from multiple sources positively increases the effect of feedback on performance through self-efficacy.

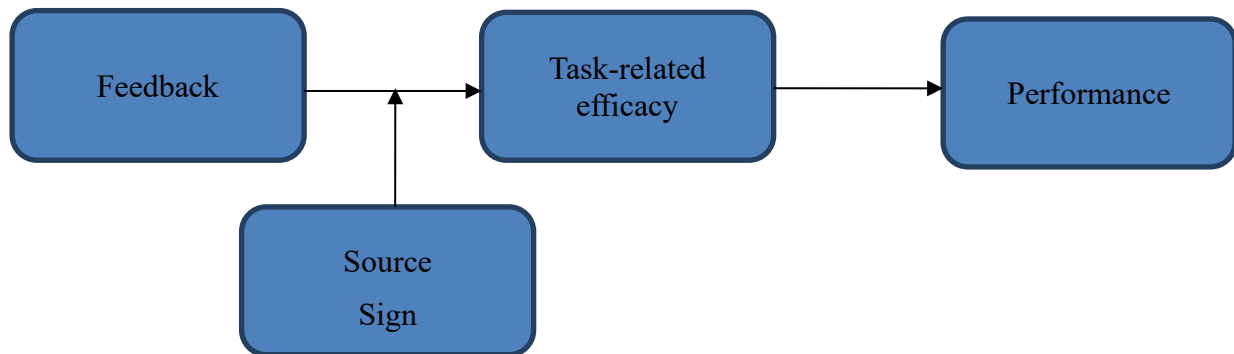
The first thing of importance when considering the content of feedback is the meaning of the message, e.g., the sign of the feedback. A value judgment can be either positive or negative depending on the performance of the recipient and the way the message is conveyed (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009). Becker and Klimoski (1989) found that negative top-down feedback expressions were related to lower performance. Jaworski and Kohli (1991) state it more mildly, both positive and negative feedback increase performance, however, negative feedback increases performance to a relatively small extent. Proposition four is therefore formulated as follows:

Proposition₄: positive feedback, more than negative feedback, positively increases the effect of feedback on performance through self-efficacy.

When considering the content of feedback and the way a message is conveyed, another important aspect is of importance: the degree to which the feedback is specified. Information can either define the outcomes of performance but also include the causes that lead to these outcomes (Liden & Mitchell, 1985). Jaworski (1988) split this up into input, process, and output stages, where the input and process stage are concerned with behavioral strategies and procedures, while the output stage describes sales, profits, etc. Goodman, Wood and Hendrickx, (2004) describe input and process information as deeper level feedback. The deeper the level of information, the more information about the process and behaviors that underlie the reached outcome are provided (Davis et al., 2005). Generally, more specific feedback leads to more positive attitudes and beliefs (Ilgen, Mitchell & Fredrickson, 1981; Liden & Mitchell, 1985). Jaworski and Kohli (1991) importantly note that output feedback leads to improvement in performance, where behavioral feedback (more specific), mainly affects satisfaction instead of performance. The fifth and final proposition is therefore formulated as follows:

Proposition₅: the degree of specificity positively increases the effect of feedback on performance through self-efficacy.

Figure 1. The Proposed Theoretical Model



3. Research Method

Taking into account the theoretical concepts developed and the model elaborated in the previous sections of the paper, a qualitative and quantitative research approach through semi-structured interviews can be conducted to collect the data in departments/teams of the company, for example, a commercial/marketing department. The informants are the leaders and the team members. The collection of primary data can be done through a questionnaire where the team leader and the members respond to the questions. or a quantitative research approach can be chosen.

The researcher interviews team members and the supervisor in order to analyze the effect of feedback on performance, and to explore the kind of feedback based on the source, the sign and the specificity. The interview ask the supervisor, particularly on his responsibility, educational background, working experiences, how he/she gives feedback, the kinds of feedback that he/she gives to his team member, as well as the importance of feedback on improving task-related efficacy and individual performance.

The interview continue to ask the team members. The questions are about the study and employment background, how they think the feedback given by the supervisor, the kind of feedback they received, the usefulness of the feedback for enhancing task-related efficacy and task performance, also whether they receive and give feedback from and to the colleagues. Besides through semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire can be used to collect the primary data in an organization(s).

4. Finding and Discussion

Our contribution to the body of literature is mainly concerned about the proposed mediating role of task-related efficacy in the relation of feedback and performance. In other words, when an organization wants to implement new working teams, they have to make sure that feedback is taken into account in order to maintain or enhance performance.

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This study also proposes a possible role for source sign feedback as a moderator in the relation between feedback and task-related efficacy. Every newly formed team may encounter initial problems, but when managed properly a team can overcome these problems and experience a higher level of performance. The leader can influence the functioning of the team by emphasising teamwork and convincing the team members of the importance of the new cross-functional team. To conclude, in order to let members of cross-functional teams experience a higher level of performance it is important to make sure that the teams are being led by a proper leader who gives a proper feedback to the team members.

5. Conclusion

The reliability of this research would benefit from a larger sample of participants. Using a sample size of small employees makes it difficult to generalize upon the results. Including more than one company would also enhance the quality and value of conclusions that are drawn. Another point of improvement would be to combine the qualitative data that is gathered in this study with additional quantitative measures in order to strengthen the reliability and value of the results and implications. For further research, it is suggested that the role of leadership as a moderator is implemented in the body of research on this topic. There are some indications that the way that leaders act, especially during the implementation phase, can influence the relation between operating in a cross-functional team and job performance.

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