Industrial and Organizational Psychology, **4** (2011), 201–203.
Copyright © 2011 Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. 1754-9426/11

Supportive Feedback Environments Can Mend Broken Performance Management Systems

JASON J. DAHLING
The College of New Jersey

ALISON L. O'MALLEY
Butler University

Pulakos and O'Leary (2011) noted that the ongoing informal feedback exchanges between managers and employees can enhance the effectiveness of performance management. However, they did not take into consideration the context in which feedback is shared. A growing body of literature on the *feedback environment* demonstrates how contextual factors shape the meaning and impact of feedback. We suggest that the behavioral changes that Pulakos and O'Leary recommended can be accomplished by helping managers to develop a supportive feedback environment within their work group (Herold & Parsons, 1985; London, 2003; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). Many of the communication barriers that derail formal performance management interventions can be overcome in workplace contexts in which supervisors have created an environment that is consistently supportive of constructive feedback exchanges. Consequently, our intent in this commentary is to provide readers with a brief overview of research on the feedback environment because attempts to build effective performance management systems are unlikely to succeed in climates that are hostile to feedback exchanges.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jason J. Dahling.
E-mail: dahling@tcnj.edu
Address: Department of Psychology, The College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Road, Ewing, NJ 08628

Definition and Conceptualization of the Feedback Environment

Early research on the feedback context in organizations focused on a wide array of sources, including formal rules and communications, personal thoughts and feelings, supervisors and peers, and the task itself (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978; Herold & Parsons, 1985). Steelman et al. (2004) refined the construct to focus on the context of informal, daily feedback exchanges between supervisors and subordinates, and between peer coworkers. They developed a measure of the feedback environment, the Feedback Environment Scale (FES), which consisted of seven dimensions. Specifically, a supportive feedback environment is characterized by a source of feedback that subordinates believe to be *credible* and knowledgeable about the feedback topic; the provision of feedback considered to be of *high quality* that is *delivered in a tactful manner*; the provision of both *positive* and *negative* feedback when it is warranted; attempts by the source to remain *available* for feedback conversations on a regular basis; and active attempts by the source to *promote and encourage feedback seeking*. Respondents to the FES evaluate these seven dimensions separately with respect to the feedback environment set by the supervisor and their coworkers. Although we believe that coworkers can also serve as important

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

sources of informal feedback, most research on the feedback environment has focused on the supervisory environment, and studies that have examined both environments have typically found that the supervisory environment has stronger effects on criteria (e.g., Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006). Consequently, our overview of outcomes below is focused on criteria that are associated with perceptions of the supervisory feedback environment.

Linking the Feedback Environment to Employee Performance and Well-Being

Although the feedback environment is a relatively new concept, an impressive body of research has documented its effects on important outcomes. Not surprisingly, the most robust finding is that feedback environment perceptions are positively related to informal feedback-seeking behavior (e.g., Dahling, Chau, & O'Malley, in press; Steelman et al., 2004; Whitaker, Dahling, & Levy, 2007). However, research also demonstrates that supportive feedback environments are directly and indirectly associated with many of the outcomes that formal performance management systems seek to generate for organizations. For example, subordinate perceptions of the feedback environment are positively related to supervisor ratings of task performance via greater feedback-seeking behavior and improved role clarity (Dahling et al., in press; Whitaker et al., 2007) and via enhanced morale (Rosen et al., 2006). Furthermore, employees who work in supportive feedback environments are more likely to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors directed toward coworkers and the organization (Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004; Rosen et al., 2006). Rosen et al. also provided evidence that feedback environments build trust and eliminate ambiguity around performance standards and rewards by showing that the supervisory feedback environment had a strong, negative effect on subordinates' perceptions of organizational politics.

In addition to improved trust and productivity, feedback environment perceptions are related to a variety of employee attitudes and psychological states. Employees who work in supportive feedback environments report higher perceptions of leader–member exchange (Anseel & Lievens, 2007), better morale and job satisfaction (Rosen et al., 2006; Sparr & Sonenntag, 2008), and high affective commitment to their organizations (Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004). Sparr and Sonenntag also focused on the psychological states that are linked to feedback environments, demonstrating that employees in supportive contexts perceive greater control over information and decisions and lower feelings of helplessness at work. In turn, these states partially mediated the relationships between the feedback environment and employees' reports of turnover intentions, anxiety, and depression.

Finally, emerging research also suggests that supportive feedback environments are positively associated with the feedback orientation reported by employees (Dahling et al., in press; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). Feedback orientation is globally defined as a person's overall receptivity to feedback (London & Smither, 2002) and involves a positive appraisal of feedback in general, a tendency to process feedback mindfully, an awareness of the way one is perceived by others, and a sense of responsibility to act on received feedback (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010). Importantly, feedback orientation is conceptualized as a motivational quasi-trait that is malleable over moderate periods of time (6–12 months; London & Smither, 2002). Consequently, managers who make a concerted effort to support feedback exchanges in their workgroups can expect to see that subordinates will develop a more favorable orientation toward seeking and acting on informal performance feedback. As supervisors and subordinates develop more positive feedback orientations, we expect that it will be easier to engage in a continuous, constructive dialogue about performance improvement that sidesteps the challenges

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

associated with formal performance management interventions.

Recommendations to Develop Supportive Feedback Environments

To date, limited empirical research has examined how a supervisory feedback environment can be modified and developed, and this remains an important question for future research. However, London (2003) provided several recommendations to create a feedback culture that may prove to be a useful complement to the training interventions recommended by Pulakos and O'Leary to develop better supervisor–subordinate feedback exchanges.

Along similar lines, Peterson (2009) recently offered related suggestions for developing a culture of coaching, learning, and development. Several key themes emerge in these sets of recommendations. First, it is clear that managers need to be trained to understand the value of feedback and the dynamics involved in giving and receiving feedback. To this end, receiving ''feedback about feedback'' is a critical step toward becoming a source of tactful, quality performance information for subordinates. Such training is particularly critical for managers with low feedback orientations. Second, these authors heavily emphasize the importance of having senior leaders serve as role models to line managers by publicly seeking and responding to feedback, and by cultivating supportive feedback environments for their direct reports. Third, feedback information given to subordinates can only be accurate and useful if managers fully understand the goals, expectations, and metrics used to formally evaluate performance, so assessments of managers' perceived system knowledge (Williams & Levy, 1992) concerning the performance appraisal process may be important. Finally, feedback and development cultures are most likely to develop when managers learn that making the time for informal feedback sharing is acceptable, so it is important to clearly communicate that such efforts are supported and rewarded by the organization.

References

Anseel, F., & Lievens, F. (2007). The long-term impact of the feedback environment on job satisfaction: A field study in a Belgian context. *Applied Psychology: An International Review, 56*, 254–266.

Dahling, J. J., Chau, S. L., & O'Malley, A. (in press). Correlates and consequences of feedback orientation in organizations. *Journal of Management*. doi:10.1177/0149206310375467

Hanser, L. M., & Muchinsky, P. M. (1978). Work as an information environment. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 21*, 47–60.

Herold, D. M., & Parsons, C. K. (1985). Assessing the feedback environment in work organizations: Development of the job feedback survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 70*, 290–305.

Linderbaum, B. G., & Levy, P. E. (2010). The development and validation of the Feedback Orientation Scale (FOS). *Journal of Management, 36*, 1372–1405.

London, M. (2003). *Job feedback: Giving, seeking, and using feedback for performance improvement* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

London, M., & Smither, J. W. (2002). Feedback orientation, feedback culture, and the longitudinal performance management process. *Human Resource Management Review, 12*, 81–100.

Norris-Watts, C., & Levy, P. E. (2004). The mediating role of affective commitment in the relation of the feedback environment to work outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 65*, 351–365.

Peterson, D. B. (2009). Coaching and performance management: How can organizations get the greatest value? In J. W. Smither, & M. London (Eds.), *Performance management: Putting research into action* (pp. 115–156). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pulakos, E. D., & O'Leary, R. S. (2011). Why is performance management broken? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice, 4*, 146–164.

Rosen, C. C., Levy, P. E., & Hall, R. J. (2006). Placing perceptions of politics in the context of the feedback environment, employee attitudes, and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*, 211–220.

Sparr, J. L., & Sonnentag, S. (2008). Feedback environment and well-being at work: The mediating role of personal control and feelings of helplessness. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 17*, 388–412.

Steelman, L. A., Levy, P. E., & Snell, A. F. (2004). The feedback environment scale: Construct definition, measurement, and validation. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 64*, 165–184.

Whitaker, B. G., Dahling, J. J., & Levy, P. E. (2007). The development of a feedback environment and role clarity model of job performance. *Journal of Management, 33*, 570–591.

Williams, J. R., & Levy, P. E. (1992). The effects of perceived system knowledge on the agreement between self-ratings and supervisor ratings. *Personnel Psychology, 45*, 835–847.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2011.01327.x Published online by Cambridge University Press