

Seeing Through Performance Feedback in Organizations

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ABSTRACT— *Providing work related feedback to employees is a beneficial component contributing to the growth of the organization. Constructive feedback has been shown to have a variety of positive effects on the productivity and satisfaction of employees. Organizations can use feedback to provide role clarity and to encourage positive behaviors. Over the years the strategies used to implement feedback in organizations has evolved. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that feedback has in organizations, provide a psycho-sociological analysis, and finally look towards the current strategies used by organizations to provide feedback to employees.*

Keywords— feedback, politeness theory, organizational communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Feedback is a process that occurs often in organizations. When the feedback process occurs, and employees receive information on their task performance, the effectiveness of the employees' performance, and their behavior or misbehavior improves (Kinicki, Wu, Prussia, & McKee-Ryan, 2004). Feedback in organizations can generally be conceptualized as the performance-related information provided to employees (Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979; Pousette, Jacobsson, Thylefors & Hwang, 2003). Under this definition, the purpose of feedback is to alert employees to how their work measures against the expectations of the organization. Katz & Kahn (1978) describe feedback as an interpersonal phenomenon that is a necessary component of leadership. Additionally, feedback can be seen as an essential tool in guiding the organization down its desired path because it can be used to clarify roles and motivate employees to achieve higher-order goals (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Employees who are given feedback are able to use that information to verify if they are performing adequately in the specified roles. If the feedback indicates that the employee is not performing adequately, then the individual is able to adjust his or her behaviors to match the role expectations. Feedback also provides motivation and encouragement for employees to increase higher order goals such as self-esteem. It indicates that the employee is succeeding in his or her role could contribute to the employee's sense of accomplishment, and possibly productivity.

Feedback is a useful component of work performance for both employees and supervisors. For employees, feedback is used to receive information about performance and behaviors. On the other hand, supervisors may utilize the feedback process not only to give performance appraisals, but also to make decisions. Feedback has been shown to be a helpful tool in facilitating employee and organizational needs. Schraeder, Becton & Portis (2007) argue that feedback is a necessary tool for facilitating a variety of functions in the organization. It facilitates communication by opening a dialogue in which supervisors and employees can reduce uncertainty regarding roles and re-enforce positive and constructive work behaviors. According to Schraeder et al. (2007), feedback also increases trust in the organization. This is important because the more an employee trusts the organization, the less likely he or she will be distracted from job-related tasks (Schraeder et al., 2007). Most importantly, feedback had been shown to increase job-performance (Broady-Preston & Steel, 2002) and is one of the five core principles that predict good work outcomes and job satisfaction as outlined in Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics theory. One of the reasons why performance could increase is because feedback allows for employees and supervisors to set work-related goals that are in-line with and could potentially enhance the direction of the organization (Kikoski, 1999).

2. SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND POLITENESS THEORY

Symbolic Interactionist Theory can bring an interesting perspective on the role of feedback in employee- employer interaction. In 1902, Cooley proposed the concept of 'looking glass self' to explain how individuals create a self based on

the interaction with others and how they are perceived by others. Later on, Erving Goffman (1967) introduced the concept of face and facework. He explains that everyone presents a face in communication with others and that face is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p.5). In other words, face is a kind of identity a person presents and wants others to accept (Cupach & Metts, 1994). In social communication with others, Goffman (1967) also suggests that individuals should be considerate of others’ faces and feelings. In other words, it is important for individuals to maintain their own face, as well as others’ face. In his dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, Goffman used the concept of impression management to show how individuals attempt to portray an acceptable image of themselves to those around them. Based on these symbolic interactionist concepts, performance feedback contributes significantly to the employee identity through the looking glass self, as well as to various feelings of pride, appreciation or shame and embarrassment as they relate to an employee’s face work.

Brown and Levinson (1967) expanded upon Goffman’s face value with politeness theory. Politeness theory describes two forms of face, positive and negative. In a communicative interaction, an individual’s positive face refers to their desire to be of importance to others in society. In other words, a positive face indicates whether one feels liked, respected, or valued by others. A positive face includes the approval of an individual’s personality, attributes, accomplishments, and appearance by others in addition to the desire to be likable and worthy of friendship (Metts, 1997). On the other hand, a negative face would indicate whether one feels constrained or restricted based on the loss of autonomy or freedom (Brown & Levinson, 1967, p.62).

When communicating with others, people are concerned about their face (i.e., the self-image they present to others), and they recognize that others are too (Brown & Levinson, 1967). Any communication act can threaten a person’s face. Brown and Levinson (1967) define face threats as acts that “by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (p. 65). In addition “face threats occur when a person’s desired identity in a particular interaction is challenged” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p.4). Requests, threats, compliments, reprimands and apologies are examples of possible face threatening acts. Therefore, a positive feedback could save a person’s face, and make him or her more willing to accept feedback and suggestions. At the same time, this leads employees to have a very positive attitude to work and more effectively communicate with each other.

3. MODEL OF FEEDBACK

Ilgen et al. (1979) conducted a review of literature and organized the existing research involving feedback into a model that illustrates how feedback can be examined from a source-message-receiver perspective. This perspective can be used to frame what components are necessary for effective feedback and how feedback operates in an organization.

3.1 Source

Ilgen et al. (1979) identified three categories, which describe how feedback can be sent to a receiver. The first category examines how other people would describe the individual’s behavior. People who could be included in this category are supervisors, coworkers, subordinates and clients. Each of these individuals has a unique perspective on how well an employee is operating in his or her job role. The next category that needs to be examined is the task environment. Feedback from this source would involve information from the task itself. For example, feedback from the task environment would include knowledge that the product being created was operational. An employee who makes widgets would be able to tell whether or not he or she was successful by examining the final product. The third category is the individual’s evaluation of him or herself. According to Ilgen et al. (1979), an employee will evaluate his or her performance based on his or her individual standards. An employee who believes he or she has done well will provide positive feedback to himself or herself.

Others identified possible sources in five separate categories (Greller & Herold, 1975). They argue that feedback sources include the organization, coworkers, supervisors, the task, and the self. Feedback from the organization would be operationalized by the formal review mechanisms put in place by the organization. This could include measures such as the employee’s salary, job title, or evaluations of the quality of the employee’s output. Co-workers and supervisors are seen to provide different aspects of feedback because of the differing relationships that the employee would have with the sources, versus the employee’s relationship with the organization or the task. The task and self-sources are considered to be similar with Ilgen et al.’s (1979) descriptions.

There are several factors that are seen to influence how receptive the employees are to feedback offered by different sources. Ilgen et al (1979) found out that the sources need to be credible and trustworthy in order for the feedback to be considered. If the source does not have the proper knowledge of the employee’s performance, has behaved in a way that indicates that he or she does not have proper expertise to understand the task, provides inconsistent messages, or has violated trust, then the employee will be less likely to take the feedback seriously. Additionally, Ilgen et al. (1979) observed that if sources have control over rewards and punishments, then the employee would be more likely to respond. As such, feedback that comes from the organization or the supervisor will hold more weight than feedback from a coworker or the task.

By contrast, Greller & Herold (1975) took a different approach to the impact of feedback from various sources. They argue that the more distant the source is psychologically from the employee, the less informative the feedback will be. For example, feedback from the self and task would be more useful to the employee than feedback from the organization. This could occur because those who are closest to the employee have a better understanding of what the employee does. However, additional studies demonstrated that this predicted relationship is incorrect. Later, Herold, Linden, & Leatherwood (1987) found that on the continuum from the worst received feedback to the best received feedback, feedback from the organization was worst received, followed by feedback from coworkers, supervisors, task and finally the self. Another study conducted by Andrews & Kacmar (2001) found that feedback from the self and coworkers did not have any bearing on job satisfaction and role clarity, while feedback from the task, supervisor and organization did influence job satisfaction and role clarity.

3.2 Message

Ilgen et al. (1979) argue that in order for feedback to have any value the employee must be able to interpret the information in a meaningful way. If the employee is unable to make the necessary connections between the feedback and the behavior, the feedback is useless. Ilgen et al. (1979) point out that feedback messages serve a variety of functions. First, feedback messages are used to clarify roles. Feedback can be used to decrease uncertainty about what the employee is supposed to do and how the employee is supposed to do it.

Negative and positive feedbacks are two possible types of feedback messages that a source can send. Ilgen et al. (1979) observed that positive messages tend to be better received than negative messages. Primarily because positive messages enhance the employee's self image. Pousette et al. (2003) further argue that positive feedback messages communicate confirmation of the employee's goals. Overall, it is seen that positive messages are an effective way of continuing beneficial behaviors and increasing commitment to goals. Additionally, positive feedback is a way to solidify the employee's perception of his or her role in the organization.

Negative feedback, however, can have the opposite effect. Pousette et al. (2003) observed that negative feedback messages communicate ineffectiveness and lead to an insecurity in work direction. Negative feedback tells the individual that he or she is enacting behaviors that do not fit within the desired work role, and does not provide the employee with insight into how the conflict can be resolved. It has also been observed that negative feedback causes internal conflict and anxiety within the source (Wuang & Highhouse, 1997). Feedback messages motivate employees because the feedback messages can be tied with incentives to perform better. If the employee values the reward, then he or she will be likely to change behavior in order to receive the reward (Ilgen et al. 1979).

3.3 Receiver

Ilgen et al. (1979) identified several factors that influence the receiver interpretation of feedback messages. The first factor is perception. This factor describes the conditions that will result in a positive perception of the feedback. Ilgen et al. (1979) argue that feedback needs to closely follow the enactment of the behavior. It has been observed that the more time that has passed between the behavior and the feedback, the less likely the feedback will have an effect on behavior. Additionally, the feedback needs to be frequent in order to identify patterns and remind the employee about expectations.

The second factor that effects the employee's interpretation of the feedback is known as acceptance (Ilgen et al., 1979). Acceptance is the belief the feedback is an accurate representation of the work being done. This factor is largely dependent on the credibility and trustworthiness of the source. If the source is not credible and untrustworthy, then the employee will be less likely to believe that the feedback is an accurate representation of his or her work.

The last factor is the desire to respond. There are several components that could influence an employee's response to the feedback. This first aspect includes any incentives put in place to motivate the employee to act on the feedback. Pay and status raises are incentives that supervisors could use following feedback recommendations. The power to punish the employee will also affect the desire to respond to feedback. Ilgen et al. (1979) also indicate that self efficacy is an important factor to consider. The employee needs to believe that he or she can respond to the feedback in a productive manner, or the feedback will be ignored. Finally, the intrinsic motivation of the employee will influence whether or not the feedback will have the desired effect. Individuals who have the internal desire to please others or are satisfied with a job well done are more likely to respond positively to feedback.

4. APPLICATION OF THEORY AND CURRENT TRENDS

Using the foundational work of Herold and Greller (1975) and Ilgen et al. (1979), a variety of feedback strategies have been developed ever since. One of the most popular strategies being implemented in organizations in the United States is known as the 360-degree feedback.

The 360-degree feedback strategy is considered a multi-rater system. The strategy incorporates feedback from all of the sources identified by Greller and Herold (1975) and Ilgen et al. (1979) and has been used since the 1950's (Bookman, 1999). The strategy complements the idea of participative management in that subordinates should be included in the

evaluation process. This feedback involves using a survey instrument to evaluate the target employee (Bookman, 1999). Some systems allow clients or customers to complete the evaluation process as well. The purpose of 360-degree feedback is to allow for a more realistic view of the situation and allow the employee to gain insight into the perceptions of those around him or her (Waldman, 1998). It has been shown to increase participation, accuracy, and fairness in performance evaluations (Wanguri, 1995).

While the 360-degree feedback has many benefits to the individual and the organization, there are several flaws in the system. First, the feedback is costly to implement (Rogers et al., 2002). A measuring instrument needs to be created to fit the organization and employees need to be trained to use the measurement. One of the ways to accomplish this is to hire a 360-degree consulting firm to organize the feedback system. Second, the strategy is time consuming. Multiple employees need to take time away from work in order to complete the measurement. Additionally, a manager will need to supervise the implementation of the tool and interpret the results.

Another downfall of 360-degree feedback is the role that individual feels plays in receiving accurate rating of the target employee. Waldman (1998) argues that subordinates who are evaluating supervisors will be hesitant to accurately rate the individual and that rating will change if the feedback is being used for descriptive purposes or official evaluation purposes. Variance could also occur depending on whether or not the ratings are anonymous. Evaluations are influenced by the individual wants and desires of the rater and not necessarily based on objective and valid measurements (Waldman, 1998).

This model does not take into account several of the factors of effective feedback as outlined by Ilgen et al. (1979). The strategy does not explicitly take into account the influence that the credibility, trustworthiness, and closeness have on the employee's interpretation of the results. It is likely that those factors will affect how receptive the employee is to the feedback. 360-degree feedback also makes it difficult to provide feedback frequently and in a closely related time frame to the feedback events. Since 360 degree feedback is time consuming and costly to implement, it is not a process that could occur frequently.

5. CONCLUSION

Attracting and retaining competent and efficient employees is one of the most critical issues that organizations are faced with in the 21st century. One area that is important in retaining employees and surviving in a competitive business world is the feedback process. For organizations, the feedback process is important because it helps determine employee promotion and pay rises in the workplace (Lam, Yik, & Schaubroeck, 2002). In other words, feedback helps the organization provide information to employees so they can understand where to focus their energy and what areas they need to work on in order to advance in the organization and their profession.

There are several components of feedback that are essential to providing constructive information to employees. Supervisors should make sure that the sources of feedback are credible and trustworthy. It is also more effective if the person who is giving the feedback has the ability to provide incentives to ensure compliance. Additionally, feedback messages should be clear and give the employee direction about how to change or enhance behaviors. Feedback also needs to occur often and be closely related in time to the behavior being critiqued. Finally, supervisors need to ensure that the employee has the ability to meet expectations and pursue the awards being offered.

While 360-degree feedback has been shown to be effective and has been implemented in a variety of organizations, it fails to meet the standards set by Ilgen et al. (1979). In order to provide the most effective feedback organizations should adopt a variety of feedback mechanisms to make sure that the components of effective feedback are being met.

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