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AUTHOR Kuchinke, K. Peter
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ABSTRACT

The role of feedback in training settings was examined in a survey-based study of feedback in nine 5-day management development training courses in a United Kingdom government agency. The courses followed a highly standardized curriculum and delivery process. Although the courses were primarily instructor-and theory-centered, they also included some role plays, case studies, and action planning. On the final day of training, questionnaires on the following feedback-related issues were distributed to the instructors and participants: information sources; individual antecedents of feedback seeking; contextual antecedents related to instructor behavior and training design; and outcomes of feedback seeking. Nine instructors (100%) and 98 participants (more than 95%) completed questionnaires. According to the completed questionnaires, participants sought information about their performance frequently and from a variety of sources. Instructors were the primary source of feedback in terms of amount and frequency of feedback sought and its perceived usefulness. Nevertheless, instructors tended to overestimate the importance of the feedback they provided. The amount of feedback sought was related to judgments of relevance of the training and the teaching styles used by instructors. Feedback seeking was determined to be important in the process of management development training. (Contains 30 references.) (MN)

FEEDBACK SEEKING IN TRAINING SETTINGS

K. Peter Kuchinke
Department of Human Resource Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
355 Education, 1310 South Sixth Street
Champaign, IL 61820
Kuchinke@uiuc.edu

This survey-based study investigated the role of feedback in nine management development training settings in a British government agency. Distinguishing among different sources and types of feedback as provided by the instructors and sought by the participant, the results of this study suggest that participants sought information about their performance frequently and from a variety of sources. Instructors tended to overestimate the importance of the feedback they provided. The amount of feedback sought was related to judgements of relevance of the training and on the teaching styles employed by the instructors. The study indicates the feedback seeking is important in the process of management development training. The implications of these findings for further research and the practice of management development are discussed.

Management training and development ranks among the most frequently provided types of training. Research results of a nation-wide study in the United Kingdom in 1999 (Institute of Personnel and Development, 1999) revealed that among 400 randomly selected private and public organizations it ranked first with over 75% of organizations providing "a lot" of management training and an additional 20% providing "some". In the United States, it ranks second in frequency after new employee orientation with 93% of companies providing this kind of training (Bassie & Van Buren, 1998). Management training and development (MD) is broadly defined as "the attempt to improve managerial effectiveness through a planned and deliberate learning process" (de Bettignies, 1975, p. 4); the two most important goals of MD programs, according to a survey by the Conference Board are to develop leadership skills in managers and to insure a pool of capable people to run the organization (Walter, 1996). MD typically includes training in areas such as performance appraisals, implementing regulations and policies, managing projects and processes, and planning and budgeting (Bassie & Van Buren, 1998) and is directed to broad range of employees ranging from first-line supervisors and team leaders to mid-level managers. MD is distinct from executive development which is usually targeted towards current and potential senior executives and focuses on corporation-wide initiatives or major business units and includes strategic planning, policy making, and goal setting (Bassie & Van Buren, 1998).

While much has been written about the importance of management and leadership skills (for the purpose of this paper, both terms will be used interchangeably, conceptual discussions over their differences notwithstanding), there is less research about the content of MD and even less about the process of MD. This paper will report the results of an empirical study conducted in a series of MD settings focusing on one key instructional process element, feedback.

Feedback is a key component of any learning process. Successful training programs incorporate feedback as an instructional design element (Goldstein, 1993; Kovitz & Smith, 1985) and also during instructional delivery to increase learning and the transfer of learning (Schoenfeldt, 1996). Recent research articles have addressed the role of feedback in different training and education settings, for instance in industry training (Viau & Clark, 1987), for supervisors providing in-service staff training (Parsons & Reid, 1995), and in college and university education settings (Dunkins & Precians, 1992, Brinko, 1993).

The focus of this study was a particular aspect of feedback, the process of feedback seeking by participants of MD programs. Feedback seeking has been described as process by which actors purposefully and actively seek to obtain information to "determine the adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states" (Ashford, 1986, p. 466). In a comprehensive review of the literature related to feedback seeking, Madzar (1995) asserted the importance of the concept for HRD practice and suggested its important role for training in general and management development in particular.

This current study was built upon the assumption that individuals self-regulate to a large extent (Bandura, 1986) and are actively involved in seeking information to monitor their progress towards specific goals. Management development programs are especially well suited to investigate feedback seeking because they present novel situations for participants who are advancing in an organization. New behaviors, knowledge, and skills are introduced which are of importance to employees who will assume new levels of responsibility. MD often serves as a rite of initiation and signals impending enhanced status and responsibilities. One key dimension of leadership is what Conover (1987, p. 585) termed "managing self" which includes monitoring progress towards goals and evaluating one's skills, strengths, and weaknesses. Feedback seeking behavior is an important source of information with regard to this dimension.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study addresses four overall research questions, related to (1) information sources, (2) individual antecedents of feedback seeking, (3) contextual antecedents related to instructor behavior and training design, and (4) the outcomes of feedback seeking.

Information Sources

The first question addressed the types of information sources that participants made use of to seek information about their performance during MD. Previous research (Van Dyne, 1992) has established three categories of sources of information for feedback seeking in work situations: constituencies (e.g., supervisors, coworkers, customers, subordinates), systems (e.g., tasks, work systems, job aids), and the self (one's own thoughts and feelings).

> H1. Related to their performance in MD settings, participants rate the amount and frequency of feedback sought as well as the its usefulness from psychologically close sources as greater than that received from psychologically distant sources.

Previous research had yielded findings that run counter to the importance that is often ascribed to managers in regulating employee performance. Greller (1980), when comparing supervisor and subordinate perception of the usefulness of six sources of feedback, concluded that supervisors generally overestimated the importance of their own feedback to subordinates and simultaneously underestimated the value of task and self feedback as perceived by subordinates.

The second hypothesis built on this research and addressed how accurately MD instructors judged the feedback from different sources.

> H2: Instructors' estimates of the amount, frequency, and usefulness of feedback sought by participants accurately reflect the participants' self reports.

Individual Antecedents

The second research question centers around the individual-level antecedents of feedback seeking behavior. While many individual level variables have been proposed as potential antecedents, only a few have been substantiated in empirical studies.

> H3a. Learning goal orientation will be positively correlated with amount, frequency, and perceived usefulness of feedback seeking.
>
> H3b. Performance goal orientation will be negatively correlated with amount, frequency, and perceived usefulness of referent information seeking.

The literature reports negative relationships between feedback seeking and tolerance for ambiguity: individuals with a lower tolerance to ambiguity engage in more feedback seeking behavior to gain certainty about their performance (Ashford & Cummings, 1985). To test whether this logic also applies in MD settings, the fourth hypothesis was:

> H4: The higher an individual's tolerance for ambiguity, the less the amount and frequency of feedback information the individual seeks.

A third variable for this study was the instructor's training style. Previous research (Madzar, 1995) had found that employees seek information more often from supervisors who are acting as role models, who pay individual attention to each employee, and who challenge employees to think critically. This leader behavior, known as charismatic or transformational leadership in the leadership literature, has been proposed to also apply to education and training situations (Walumbwa & Kuchinke 1999). The following hypothesis resulted:

> H5. Participants who perceive their instructor as charismatic, motivating, intellectually challenging, and showing individual concern, seek more feedback and do so more frequently.

Contextual Factors

Behavior is always determined by individual and contextual factors, two of which were used in this study. The first was concerned with the instructor's behavior related to providing feedback to participants. Because there are costs in terms of effort and energy associated with seeking feedback, the amount of feedback sought is likely to be limited (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Further, seeking feedback from one source limits the opportunity to seek feedback from another. Thus:

> H6. The amount and frequency of feedback sought from different sources are negatively correlated.

The second contextual factor examined in this study was the amount and frequency of feedback provided by the training activities. Since feedback constitutes an important training design element, it can be assumed that the amount and frequency of feedback provided by the materials and training activities will influence the amount of information sought from the self.

> H7. The amount and frequency feedback provided by training activities are negatively correlated with the amount and frequency of feedback participants seek from the self.

Reactions to Training

This fourth research question addresses the question of the effects of feedback seeking on reactions to training. Reaction measures are limited in gauging the value of training, but are valuable in this context where the primary intent was to measure the outcomes of feedback seeking behavior and not to evaluate the effectiveness of training.

H8. Participants who seek more and more frequent feedback exhibit a greater willingness to learn, a greater intention to transfer the training, and are more satisfied with it.

Methodology

The population in this study consisted of participants and instructors of MD training programs in a U.K. Government Agency (Agency) of about 3,000 employees. The Agency had an HRD unit of 16 employees responsible for development and training services as well as internal consulting. MD constituted a key responsibility of the HRD unit because of the need to develop and retain managerial talent and to ensure a pool of qualified employees for internal promotion and succession. The focus of this study was a series of five -day training courses for employees who had been identified by their supervisors as potential future leaders. Courses were offered on average once per month and attended by 10 - 15 participants from various parts of the Agency. The courses followed a highly standardized curriculum and delivery process to ensure consistency of learning across courses and were delivered by teams of two instructors who belonged to the HRD unit. The curriculum focused on organizational issues, such as the overall strategic direction of the Agency and strategic planning and strategy implementation, and on organization behavior issues such as motivation, team building, communication, and learning styles. The courses were primarily instructor- and theory centered, but also included some role-plays, case studies, and action planning. Prior to a course, participants met with their supervisor and developed a performance contract that specified the particular performance issues on which to focus during the training. There was also in place a follow-up process designed to ensure the transfer of learning to the workplace.

The researcher observed several courses prior to the study and collaborated with HRD management and training personnel on its design. Survey data were collected from nine consecutively held courses over a seven-month period in 1998. . Five courses were taught in a residential mode and held at a seaside resort in the South of England. Four courses were taught in a non-residential mode where participants attended during working hours and then left for home. A total of 98 participants and 9 instructors completed the surveys, resulting in a response rate of over 95% for participants and 100% for instructors. MD participants were on average 34 years of age, had 11 years of professional experience, and were relatively new to their current position. Instructors, on average, were older and had lower levels of formal education but longer professional and job-related experience.

Participant and instructor versions of the instruments were given out at the close of the final training day, completed anonymously, and forwarded to the researcher. Initial results and conclusions were reported to the Agency in late 1998 with the intent of identifying opportunities to improve the training course.

The survey instrument consisted of existing scales with known and acceptable psychometric properties and was pilot tested with a group of HRD graduate students. The pilot confirmed the reliability of the scales, yielding Chronbach

alphas of .7 or higher. The instrument contained standard demographic questions and the following 5 point Likert-type scales:

1) Amount, frequency, and usefulness of feedback sought from different sources: 12 items developed by Greller and Herold (1975)
2) Performance goal orientation: 6 items from Dweck (1986)
3) Tolerance for ambiguity: 3 items from Bennett, Herold, and Ashford, (1990)
4) Perception of Instructor: 16 items from Bass and Avolio (1995)
5) Motivation to learn: 5 items from Weinstein, 1994
6) Intention to transfer learning: 4 items from Holton, Bates, Seyler, and Carvalho, 1997
7) Reaction to training: 4 items from Kuchinke, Brown, Anderson, and Hobson (1998)

Results

The results shows descriptive statistics, reliability indices, and zero-order correlations among the variables. All scales showed sufficient (Nunally, 1967) reliability. The mean scores for the four feedback sources suggested that the 98 participants in 9 MD courses did engage in feedback seeking to substantial degree (the scale anchors were 1: none, 5: lots) and that they sought feedback from a variety of sources. They did not, however, seek feedback from all sources equally. Instructors acted as the primary source of information on how well participants were meeting the learning goals of the course, followed by their peers and the course activities, and their own thoughts and feelings. This finding is in contrast to previous research where the self was the primary source of feedback. The first hypothesis, therefore, was not confirmed.

The four supraordinate variables were correlated highly (for feedback sources and instructor behavior) and moderately (for reaction measures and individual variables) correlated within each other. Among the variables, there were much fewer and lower correlations, with exception of moderate correlations between charismatic and, to a lesser degree, considerate instructor behaviors and feedback sources. This suggests that the more participants perceive their instructors as charismatic and considerate of their needs, the more they will seek feedback from all sources, and vice versa. An interesting finding was the negative correlations between reaction measures and feedback sources. The negative association between feedback seeking from the instructor and the other course participants and the positive reaction training, in particular, requires careful interpretation. It suggests that participants who seek more feedback from their instructors and peers tended to be less satisfied overall with the training and vice versa. The study did not address the issue of the quality of feedback participants were able to obtain. It is possible that students were looking for information that would help them make the course more relevant but never succeeded and were therefore dissatisfied with it. This question requires closer attention in a follow-up study.

The second hypothesis (H2) addressed specific aspects of feedback seeking: the amount of information sought from each source, the frequency with which they sought feedback, and its usefulness. The results shows that instructors, too, expected feedback-seeking behavior by the course participants to occur, that they recognized different sources of feedback, and that their estimation of the relative importance of the sources varied. Instructors, like course participants, saw themselves as a more important source of feedback than peers, activities, or the participants' own thoughts and feelings. Instructors did, however, rated their own role as providers of feedback as higher than did participants ($p < .05$), and this difference was due to an overestimation of the frequency of feedback they provided ($p < .05$). This finding fails to confirm, in part, H2: as in previous research with managers in work performance situations, instructors of MD programs did not accurately perceive their feedback behavior. They overestimated the frequency with which they provided feedback to MD course participants.

Hypotheses 3 - 7 addressed correlations between feedback seeking and the individual variables of goal orientation and tolerance for ambiguity and instructor variables. Zero-order correlations had yielded some initial, but sparse indications of these relationships. A series of stepwise multiple regression analyses was performed with feedback source (instructor, peers, activities, and self) and feedback characteristic (amount, frequency, and usefulness) as dependent variables.

In the regression analyses, reaction to training emerged as the most important predictor to feedback seeking from Instructors, Peers, and Activities, accounting 25%, 23%, and 11% of variance respectively. In all three cases, the regression weight was negative, suggesting that participants who are not satisfied with the training tended to seek more feedback from instructors, peers, and course activities than those who were satisfied. It should be noted that this was a post-hoc survey at a single point in time. Nevertheless, the fact that the survey was taken at the end of the 5-day training course suggests that participants had a chance to reflect back over the entire week to judge both their satisfaction and feedback-seeking behaviors. Feedback seeking emerged here as a compensatory mechanism that participants employed when the course did not meet their expectations rather than the valuable resource that the literature ascribed to the construct.

Charismatic behavior by the instructor added to participants seeking feedback from him or her.

When examining the overall frequency of feedback-seeking behaviors, professional experience emerged as a very strong predictor variable, accounting for 89% of the variance. The relationship is positive and almost perfect, suggesting that those with more professional experience also tended to seek feedback more frequently than those with less experience.

In light of these findings, H3 - H8 could not be confirmed.

The final hypothesis addressed the relationship between feedback seeking and reaction measures. Here, again, stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted. Performance orientation emerged as a strong predictor variable for motivation to learn and also for intention to transfer the learning to the workplace, accounting for 51% and 50% of variance respectively. In both cases, the beta weights are positive, indicating that the higher an individual's desire to demonstrate his or her abilities, the greater the motivation to learn and to transfer the learning after the end of the MD training course. These findings were surprising given the theoretical definition and previous research that had associated higher levels of performance orientation with a decrease in the willingness to learn because individuals are primarily focused on demonstrating their abilities rather than exploring new ways of performing.

Another surprise was the strong negative correlation between intellectual stimulation and reaction to the course. Where in previous research, leader behavior that challenges individuals' assumptions and encourages them to think in new ways had been shown to contribute to satisfaction with that leader, this study showed the opposite effect. The more participants perceived the instructor to challenge beliefs and assumptions, the less satisfied they were overall with the course.

H8, based on previous research, had hypothesized positive correlations between feedback-seeking behavior and motivation to learn, intention to transfer, and overall reaction to the course. None of these relationships were substantiated by the data and H8 could not be confirmed. Instead, the first two variables appeared to be influenced by an individual's level of performance orientation, and overall satisfaction with the course depended on how little the instructor challenged participants views, values, and behaviors.

Conclusions

Feedback-seeking research is an emergent strand in the organizational behavior (OB) literature and extends traditional feedback research by proposing that employees actively pursue a number of strategies to obtain feedback about their performance. This study sought to extend this line of research into a key area of HRD, management development training. Studying feedback-seeking behavior in a series of MD courses, this study suggests a number of conclusions.

First, it appears legitimate to extend feedback-seeking research to MD settings. Feedback-seeking behavior tends to occur in MD settings, where, in contrast to the OB literature, not work performance, but learning is the goal. As in regular work settings, MD participants engage in feedback-seeking behavior, they seek substantial amounts of information about their performance, they do so frequently, and seek out a variety of sources. The instructor emerged as the

primary source of feedback in terms of amount and frequency of feedback sought and its perceived usefulness. Residential courses appeared to encourage seeking feedback from peers and course activities, presumably because there more opportunities to interact than in a non-residential mode.

Second with regard to the accuracy of their own perception, MD instructors acted much like managers and supervisors in other studies, that is, they overestimated their own role in providing frequent feedback. Both roles bear similarities that might account for this: managers and instructors carry responsibility for the employee and participant performance outcomes and exert control to direct them toward these outcomes. Both groups also appear to underestimate the extent to which employees/participants self-regulate.

Third, in contrast to the OB literature, feedback seeking did not appear as a valued and positive resource. The negative association between feedback and overall satisfaction seems to suggest that those who sought more feedback were also less satisfied with the course. Feedback seeking here appears as a strategy that participants applied when the course did not meet their expectations.

Fourth, few of the hypothesized relationships based on OB literature were confirmed in this study. Charismatic behavior of the instructor was positively associated with feedback seeking, but accounted for only 10% of the variance. Professional experience emerged as a strong predictor of feedback seeking, perhaps suggesting that those with more experience were more focused on attaining specific goals and sought the information they needed to monitor their goal attainment.

This study is among the very few that investigated the role of feedback seeking in MD settings. Replications and extensions of this line of investigation are required to build a reliable knowledge base on this topic. Among the more imminent research needs are: replication of this study with other types of training and in different organizations; replication with training that is more student-centered and perhaps might provide more opportunity to seek feedback from sources other than the instructor; feedback seeking in applied problem-solving situations, such as experiential learning and action learning set with complex task without clear answers and solutions.

Several implications for practice emerge from this study. First, the training of trainers should include the concepts of self-regulation and feedback seeking among course participants. Instructors who overestimate their own importance in providing feedback might fail to recognize the role of feedback from other sources. Second, participants of MD programs should be prepared to be alert to feedback from sources other than the instructor, especially their own thoughts and feelings. Upon completion of the training when participants are required to act in complex and novel situations, like leadership situations, the Self will oftentimes

be the sole guidepost for assessing whether a particular course of action is appropriate or not.

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