

# Feedback-seeking culture moderates the relationship between positive feedback and task performance

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**Feedback-seeking culture moderates the relationship between positive feedback and task performance**

### **Abstract**

Research exploring feedback in the form of workplace performance appraisals or in educational contexts, is common. However, there is a dearth of research to inform evidence-based practice in everyday positive feedback. In the current study, 289 employed adults reported on their managers' positive feedback, the feedback-seeking culture, and rated their own task performance. Findings suggest that managerial positive feedback, but not feedback-seeking culture, meaningfully predicts task performance. Furthermore, the relationship between positive feedback and task performance is partially moderated by the feedback-seeking culture. The current study further contextualises our understanding of workplace positive feedback and draws recommendations for managerial practice surrounding congruency between culture and practice.

**Key words:** Positive Feedback; Manager Communication; Feedback; Task Performance; Feedback Environment;

## Introduction

Positive feedback is defined as a positive evaluative statement about an individual's workplace behaviour, outcomes or attributes. Within the workplace, positive feedback is often considered a valuable leadership strategy to reward employees for their performance (Hamner & Hamner, 1976). Indeed, in a McKinsey Quarterly survey on over 1000 workers, 67% considered praise and recognition as effective motivators for job performance, in comparison to 60% for financial incentives (Dewhurst, Guthridge, & Mohr, 2009). However, "approximately 65% of Americans reported receiving no recognition or praise within the workplace" (Rath & Clifton, 2007), a figure which was recently replicated in an international industry survey also (BenefitNews, 2016). Positive feedback thus seems to be an under-utilised tool with the potential to motivate employees and thus to facilitate positive organisational outcomes.

The academic study of workplace feedback has undoubtedly contributed much to our understanding. Much of the extant literature has examined the main effects of feedback source, timing, and valence upon outcomes, in addition to interaction effects of the message characteristics and the recipients' individual differences (see Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018 for a review). However, despite being considered "probably the most powerful, yet least costly and most underused, motivation tool" (Wiley, 1997, p. 276), there has been limited academic or empirical examination of *positive* feedback in the workplace context to inform practice. Within academic works, positive feedback is frequently subsumed within aggregate 'feedback' scores that capture facets including source credibility and unfavourable feedback, and thus the unique impacts of positive feedback are not often clarified (Lechermeier & Fassnacht, 2018; Mulder & Ellinger, 2013). For example, Zhang, Gong, Zhang and Zhao (2017) linked a total feedback score with creative performance, but the extent to which this was due to positive feedback, or the other 6 sub-facets of feedback captured by the total score analysed, is unclear.

Furthermore, feedback is often discussed in context of performance appraisals (e.g. Cederblom, 1982; Meyer, Kay, & French, 1965), but as they are often considered annual or irregular events (Boachie-Mensah & Seidu, 2012; Nelson, 2000) and positive feedback is considered to have relatively short-term

impacts (Hamner & Hamner, 1976) there has been little consideration for the day-to-day implementation and consequences of positive evaluation of employees' performance.

The dearth of research exploring positive feedback within the workplace can be contrasted to the Educational Psychology-based domain where there have been numerous recommendations to clarify the different intricacies, outcomes and impacts of feedback. Educational Psychology researchers have explored differences in outcomes between person- and process- feedback (Brummelman et al., 2014b; Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Kamins & Dweck, 1999), or social comparison- and mastery- feedback (Corpus, Ogle & Love-Geiger, 2006; Koestner, Zuckerman, & Olsson, 1990), and the possible moderating roles of sex and age (Corpus & Lepper, 2007; Reavis, Miller, Grimes, & Fomukong, 2018). The academic study of workplace feedback therefore represents an opportunity ripe for academic work interested in replication, the wider transferability of this body of evidence, and impact.

Whilst there is limited empirical consideration of positive feedback directly, there are a number of reasons why we might expect feedback to be important in the workplace and thus consider it important to study. For example, we might tentatively suspect that feedback leads to changes in affect and mood (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Skipper & Douglas, 2012), self-perceptions of competency (Haimovitz & Corpus, 2011), relationship dynamics (Brophy, 1981) and culture through modelling of positive and supportive behaviour (Partin, Robertson, Maggin, Oliver, & Wehby, 2009). There are thus various pathways by which managerial feedback may influence employee performance and other such organisational outcomes.

Research in the educational context has asserted that the primary influence of feedback for performance in students is through intrinsic motivation (Ali & Ahmed, 2009; Bear, Slaughter, Mantz, & Farley-Ripple, 2017; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Gao & Zhang, 2016; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). There are initial results to suggest this may too be true for occupational environments (Ali & Ahmed, 2009), with changes in self-regulation behaviour (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, 2003) and implications for performance (Danish & Usman, 2010). Indeed, Zheng, Diaz, Jing and Chiaburu (2015) found that positive supervisor developmental feedback was significantly related to supervisor-rated task performance ( $r = .30$ ).

There are two key theoretical explanations for why positive feedback seems likely to influence workplace performance. Firstly, according to goal-setting theory (Locke, 1996), receiving feedback, whether positive or negative, is crucial for employees' performance as it aids them to achieve their goal effectively (Locke, 1996). For example, if individuals are given feedback that they are under-target, they normally increase effort (Matsui, Okada, & Inoshita, 1983). Positive feedback could play a significant role in orienting and motivating workers towards completion of the organisational goals and thus outcomes (Ashford et al., 2003; Danish & Usman, 2010). Secondly, in accordance with reinforcement theory (Ferster & Skinner, 1957), positive feedback is considered a form of positive reward given for desirable behaviours, which could be applied to facilitate organisational behaviour modification by shaping future behaviours (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2014). As such, positive feedback could be used by managers to modify or reinforce behaviours (good performance) which contribute to the organisational outcomes (Peterson & Luthans, 2006; Villere & Hartman, 1991).

In-line with goal-setting and reinforcement theory, and concurrent with the aforementioned works exploring the relationship between feedback and employee performance (e.g. Zheng et al., 2015), the current paper first hypothesises of a positive relationship between positive managerial feedback and task performance (i.e. proficiency in central work tasks; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Koopmans et al., 2011; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994).

H1: Positive feedback will be a significant positive predictor of task performance.

The feedback environment: the context in which individuals regularly receive, solicit and apply feedback (London & Smither, 2002), has also been linked to task performance. A positive feedback environment should represent a culture whereby individuals are comfortable and supported to exchange constructive feedback of negative or positive valence, thereby improving performance (Dahling & O'Malley, 2011). The Feedback Environment Scale (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004) is a popular measure to assess feedback environment; its total score, typically aggregated to represent a balanced feedback environment, has been positively related to a range of organisational outcomes including organisational commitment ( $r = .54$ ), burnout ( $r = -.47$ ) and organisational citizenship behaviour ( $r = .25$ ; Peng & Chiu, 2010, see also Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004).

Feedback environment has been considered a key driver of role clarity and thus task performance (Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006; Whitaker, Dahling, & Levy, 2007). Indeed, empirical works have suggested feedback environment to be a moderate predictor of creative performance ( $r = .20$ ; Zhang et al., 2017), job involvement ( $r = .26$ ; Whitaker, 2011) and overall job performance ( $r = .32$ ; Anseel & Lievens, 2007). A key sub-facet of the broader feedback environment, that relating specifically to the managers promotion of feedback (feedback-seeking culture), has been directly related to job depression ( $r = -.30$ ), job anxiety ( $r = -.18$ ), job satisfaction ( $r = .32$ ), and turnover intentions ( $r = -.24$ ; Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008). Concurrent with the plethora of positive organisational outcomes associated, it seems plausible that feedback-seeking culture will also relate to task performance by representing a positive and trusting culture where individuals have role clarity, and thus greater performance, because feedback is sought and provided openly.

H2: Feedback-seeking culture will be a significant positive predictor of task performance.

It seems likely that the relationship between positive feedback and performance is not direct, but complex and influenced by numerous factors (Earley, 1986; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). For example, positive feedback does not always reinforce the behaviour management intends (Scott, Swan, Wilson, & Roberts, 1986) and not everyone considers feedback similarly valuable as a desired reinforcement (Aquinas, 2006). As such, the existing literature has evidenced a number of moderating factors which influence the relationship between feedback and outcomes (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002). For example, the relationship between exaggerated praise and challenge-seeking behaviour is moderated by self-esteem (Brummelman, Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Overbeek, & Bushman, 2014).

Given the prominence of feedback-seeking behaviour in recent occupational research (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Li, Long & Er-Yue, 2017; Qian and Li, 2016; Qian et al., 2016; 2017), one of the central factors of importance established by the existing literature is that of feedback-seeking culture (Baker, Perreault, Reid, & Blanchard, 2013). There is preliminary evidence to suggest that the feedback culture influences the meaning, acceptability, and impact of feedback and thus supports more meaningful and impactful feedback (Baker et al., 2013). We might therefore expect that positive

feedback becomes more impactful when there is practice-culture congruency: in a culture where feedback is supported and encouraged (Ansari, Fiss & Zajac, 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Dahling & O'Malley, 2011; Mulder, 2013; Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006; van der Rijt et al., 2012). Such postulations are concurrent with the broader Occupational Psychology literature demonstrating the moderating role of culture on the relationship between behaviours and outcomes, whereby the success of outcomes is dependent upon the alignment of behaviours with the organisational culture (Erkutlu, 2011; Harris, Gallagher, & Rossi, 2013; Nguyen & Mohamed, 2011). As such, the current study aims to empirically explore whether feedback-seeking culture moderates the relationship between positive feedback and task performance.

H3: Feedback-seeking culture will moderate the relationship between positive feedback and task performance.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

289 participants, currently employed in the UK and over 18, completed a questionnaire evaluating their work environment, task performance and managers' use of positive feedback. 197 females and 92 males were convenience sampled using a student research participation scheme and through requests to work colleagues and social network contacts. Most participants were based in customer-facing roles (170) or office-based work (53) although public service, management, and manual workers were also present (30, 23 and 3, respectively). Age ranged from 18 to 58 with a mean of 22.84 (SD = 6.89). No payment or compensation was offered however students were awarded course credits for study completion. Participants were only sampled from the UK as research suggests that there is a cultural difference between countries in responding to positive feedback and criticism (Earley, 1986).

### *Procedure*

All data was collected online from individuals willing to report perceptions of their workplace and managers' use of positive feedback. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. No identifying information was collected, and practices were approved by an ethics committee before data

collection began. Participants received an information sheet and consent form before demographic questions and the battery of questionnaires was administered and written debrief was provided.

### *Materials*

The following battery of questionnaires was given to all participants:

Two managerial sub-facets of the Feedback Environment Scale (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004) were used: favourable feedback and promotes feedback-seeking (feedback-seeking culture). These scales were assessed using 4 and 5 items respectively, answered using a likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Example items include: “When I do a good job at work, my supervisor praises my performance” (positive feedback) and “I feel comfortable asking my supervisor for feedback about my work performance” (feedback-seeking culture). Internal reliability has been reported at .88 and .84 respectively (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004).

The Singh, Verbeke and Rhoads (1996) Job performance scale was used to assess individuals’ perception of their work performance. The scale consists of 7 items that participants were asked to rate on a 5-point likert scale. An example item is: “How would you rate yourself in terms of the quantity of work you achieved in a week?”. The internal reliability of the scale has been reported at .80 (Singh, Verbeke, & Rhoads, 1996).

## **Results**

The mean total score, standard deviation and internal reliability of the scales are presented in Table 1. As all measures were negatively skewed and task performance was leptokurtic, relationships between variables captured by Spearman’s Rho are presented in Table 1. Assumptions necessary for regression analyses: linear relationships, normally-distributed and independent residuals, and heteroscedasticity, were met.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

	<b>Total Score (SD)</b>	<b>Positive Feedback</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>Task Performance</b>
<b>Positive Feedback</b>	13.79 (3.50)	<i>.820</i>	<i>.705*</i>	<i>.287*</i>
<b>Feedback-Seeking Culture</b>	13.95 (3.43)		<i>.787</i>	<i>.197*</i>
<b>Task Performance</b>	27.75 (3.94)			<i>.824</i>

*Note: Coefficients italicised on the diagonal are Cronbach's Alpha. \* =  $p < .01$*

Moderation analysis was conducted using Process 3.0 (Hayes, 2017) on SPSS, see Table 2. In the first step of the regression, positive feedback and feedback-seeking culture were included: these variables explained a significant percentage of variance in task performance ( $F(2, 286) = 12.89, p < .01, R^2 = .08$ ). Concurrent with H1, positive feedback was a significant predictor of task performance ( $b = .30, t(286) = 3.69, p < .01$ ). Contrary to H2 however, feedback-seeking culture was not a significant predictor of task performance ( $b = -.01, t(286) = -.13, p = .895$ ). In the second step of the regression, introduction of the interaction term led to a small but significant increase in the percentage of variance in task performance explained ( $\Delta R^2 = .02, F(3, 285) = 6.0196, p = .01$ ) as the positive feedback x feedback-seeking culture interaction was a significant predictor of task performance ( $b = .04, t(285) = 2.45, p = .01$ ).

Table 2: Moderation Analysis Predicting Task Performance

	b	SE	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>
<b>Step 1</b>			.08	
Positive Feedback	.30**	.09		
Feedback-Seeking Culture	-.01	.09		
<b>Step 2</b>			.10	.02
Positive Feedback x Feedback-Seeking Culture	.04*	.02		

*Note:*  $N = 289$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$

A simple slopes test was conducted to examine the relationship in greater detail and the subsequent interaction can be seen in Figure 1 below. Where feedback-seeking culture is 1 SD lower than the mean, the relationship between positive feedback and task performance is not significant ( $b = .20$ ,  $t(285) = 1.93$ ,  $p = .05$ ). The relationship between positive feedback and task performance is significant for those with a mean feedback-seeking culture score ( $b = .35$ ,  $t(285) = 3.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Where feedback climate is 1 SD above the mean, the relationship between positive feedback and task performance is even stronger ( $b = .47$ ,  $t(285) = 4.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Such results suggest that the greater the feedback-seeking culture score, the stronger the relationship between positive feedback and task performance.

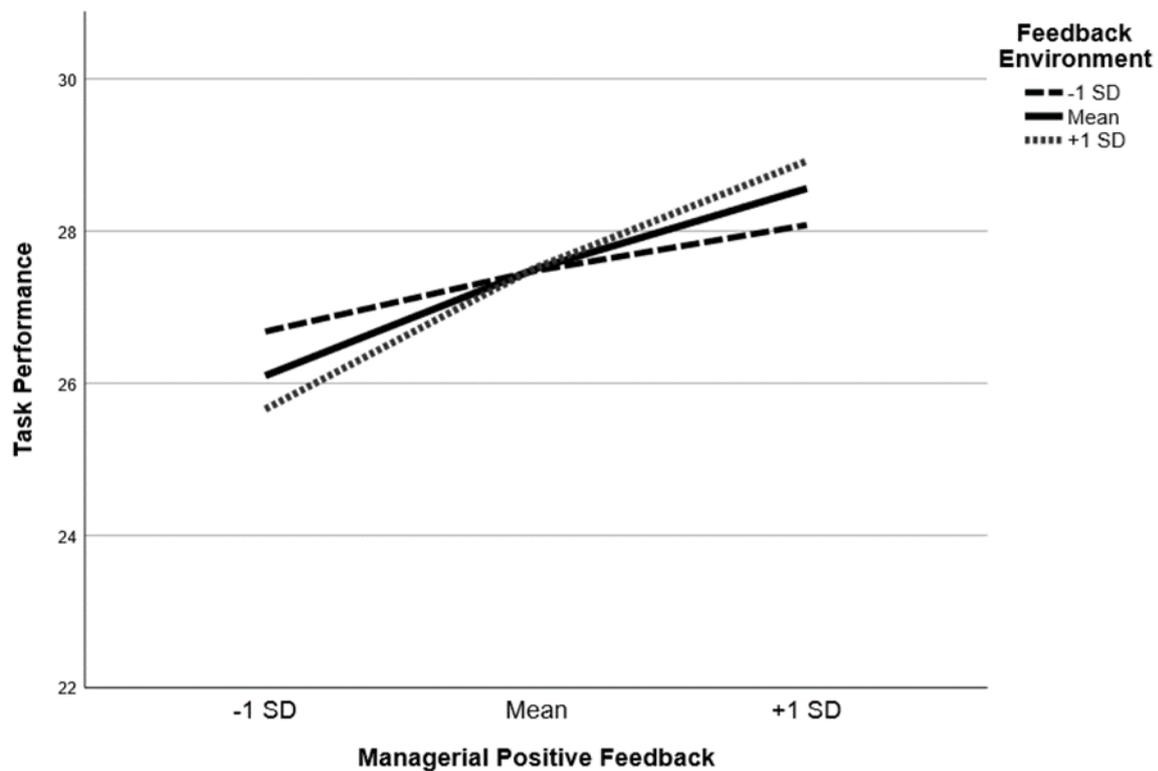


Figure 1: The moderating effects of feedback-seeking culture on the relationship between managerial positive feedback and task performance

## Discussion

The extant literature on the effectiveness of positive feedback has been investigated primarily in the context of Educational Psychology. Furthermore, when explored in occupational contexts, positive feedback is often subsumed by analyses on broader feedback scales, obfuscating nuanced findings surrounding its specific role. As such, there is little literature to explore the conditions that can influence or determine the impact of positive feedback on task performance. The current research therefore aimed to directly explore the relationship between positive feedback and task performance, considering the possible role of feedback-seeking culture as moderator.

In line with H1, positive feedback was a significant predictor of task performance. Furthermore, the size of relationship identified ( $r = .287$ ) was similar to that of Zheng et al. (2015;  $r = .30$ ). Concurrent with Goal-Setting theory (Locke, 1996) and reinforcement theory (Ferster & Skinner, 1957), the

existing literature suggests this relationship is likely due to the impacts of positive feedback upon motivation for goal-orientated action (Ashford et al., 2003; Danish & Usman, 2010). However, performance is also typically considered an antecedent of feedback, and thus a complex performance-feedback-performance loop is likely. Acknowledging reverse causality and bi-directional relationships should be considered as a worthwhile avenue to resist causal claims, and structure future works, in this field.

Contrary to H2, feedback-seeking culture was not a significant predictor of task performance, however again correlated with a similar strength to that of the existing literature (e.g. Zhang et al., 2017; Whitaker, 2011; Anseel & Lievens, 2007). As feedback-seeking culture and task performance are both endogenous variables determined by a number of other variables, the simple direct relationship calculated in the current study is a very tentative estimate. More complex modelling of drivers, context, moderators and mediators, in-line with those established within feedback research in the educational context (e.g. Henderlong & Lepper, 2002), are likely to be extremely valuable in establishing robust estimates of direct and indirect relationships.

Finally, a significant interaction effect was noted whereby the relationship between positive feedback and task performance was moderated by the feedback-seeking culture, supporting H3. As the highest levels of task performance were reported by those with both high positive feedback and feedback-seeking culture, and lowest when the culture was suggested to be encouraging feedback-seeking yet little positive feedback was offered, the current data suggests that employee outcomes may be more preferable where there is congruency between culture and practice. Such results are directly concurrent with the existing literature surrounding practice-culture congruency (e.g. Ansari, Fiss & Zajac, 2010), and the best explanation available would suggest that the feedback culture influences the meaning, acceptability, and impact of feedback (Baker et al., 2013; Dahling & O'Malley, 2011; Mulder, 2013; Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006; van der Rijt et al., 2012).

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

Of primary consideration is the use of a cross-sectional correlational design whereby causal statements cannot be inferred. More experimental, longitudinal, and thus causal evidence is needed to draw robust conclusions as to the exact nature of the relationship between positive feedback and task performance and to determine more confidently the extent to which factors like feedback-seeking culture influence this relationship. Furthermore, reverse causality should be acknowledged to determine the role of task performance as a predictor of positive feedback. Thus, longitudinal data to disentangle the likely bidirectional nature of this relationship would be of particular value to inform estimates of feedback-intervention efficacy.

Second, self-rated performance is particularly sensitive to distorted self-perceptions and thus can be a weak predictor of actual performance (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003; Murphy, 2008). The multidimensional measure of task performance adopted, and lack of participation incentive, is likely to have minimised this impact in the current study, and further confidence in the current conclusions is established from similarities in relationship strength to data collected using other-reports (e.g. Zheng et al., 2015). Nevertheless, future research exploring positive feedback should endeavour to build other-rated measures into study design. Research on collegial dyads to build consensus, or manager-subordinate relationships, would be particularly fruitful avenues for facilitating collection of other-reported data. As the current findings can only be generalised to UK workers (Earley, 1986), examination of cross-national worker dyads would also be particularly fruitful for examining the unique roles of culture and industry.

Future research should endeavour to experimentally establish the extent to which positive feedback can affect performance in the workplace and determine the full range of contributing factors influencing its efficacy, which can contribute to further detailed practical recommendations for more effective practice. Future occupational research focussing upon positive feedback must prioritise the identification and exploration of the many possible underlying mechanisms and influencing factors e.g. trust, source credibility, type of feedback, feedback delivery etc, that have been established within the educational literature. For example, there is initial evidence to suggest feedback would be especially important for remote workers, where positive feedback can support orientation to culture and outcomes (Mulki,

Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009), thereby facilitating role clarity (Whitaker, Dahling, & Levy, 2007). Therefore, examination of positive feedback in context of the physical and emotional relationship between the individuals involved may be of value. Furthermore, see Anseel et al. (2015) for meta-analytic data, and recent works by Qian et al. (2016a; 2016b; 2017) and Li, Long and Er-Yue (2017), on the role of feedback-seeking behaviour. Such works are fundamental to determine the key factors of importance in effective implementation, and thus for driving recommendations and intervention for evidence-based practice in positive feedback.

### *Implications*

There is growing evidence to suggest that small nuances in communication are important (Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2015) and that simple managerial practices, such as positive feedback or humour, can establish meaningful benefits for individuals, teams and organisations by influencing daily work habits (e.g. Evans & Steptoe-Warren, 2018; Stevic & Ward, 2008). The current study builds upon the existing literature in determining the specific role of feedback-seeking culture in context of positive feedback and task performance. Based upon the current findings, positive feedback is likely to have a greater positive impact upon task performance when enacted in context of an appropriate feedback-seeking culture. Managers interested in maximising performance are therefore recommended to cultivate a climate which best represents their actions, to achieve culture-practice congruence. The current study suggests that establishing a feedback-supportive culture is not enough for maximal outcomes, and that the time and opportunity for providing actual feedback is likely to be fundamental to realising its benefits (van der Rijt et al., 2012). In essence, to talk the talk but not walk the walk is insufficient – a culture congruent with the actions of its workforce is likely to be the most impactful.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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