EMPLOYEE PROACTIVITY IN THE FEEDBACK CONTEXT:
A STUDY OF THE CAUSES, MECHANISMS AND CONSEQUENCES OF
FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

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Submitted at Ghent University
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor in Applied Economics

2008
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Katleen De Stobbeleir’s work on this dissertation was sponsored by the Intercollegiate Centre for Management Science (ICM)
How it all started…

Around the age of four, I discovered that people do not like feedback. I vividly remember the look on my mother’s face after I told her that her skin looked a bit like the skin of an orange. Or the stranger’s reaction when I told him that his earrings made him look like a pirate. Around that same age, however, I also discovered that people crave for feedback. Why else would my father ask my mother whether his shirt fitted his pants? And why else did I care so much about what Miss Erna, my teacher in pre-school thought of me? The love-hate relationship that many people seemed to have with feedback puzzled me …and it has puzzled and intrigued me ever since.

Yet, when I had to pick a PhD topic four years ago, it was a daunting task for me. Given my professional background in Human Resources and my interest in feedback, it only seemed natural that I would do my PhD on the performance appraisal cycle in organizations. But it did not work out that way. The more I read about performance appraisal cycles, the more I got disconcerted. The performance appraisal literature abounded with advice to managers and to human resources departments on how to effectively construct and deliver feedback to enhance employee performance, but there was little reference to the various ways in which employees actively manage their own development and performance. After several months of drifting and wondering whether I would ever come up with a PhD topic, my advisor, Dirk Buyens, gave me yet another review article on performance appraisal systems. The author of the article, Clive Fletcher (2001), referred very briefly to a line of inquiry inspired by Susan Ashford and Larry Cummings. Apparently, these authors had challenged the feedback literature in 1983 for its traditional focus on performance appraisals, arguing that employees do not merely “undergo” feedback, but also actively seek it out.

Suddenly, all the pieces came together in my head… feedback-seeking behavior was going to be the topic of my PhD. This topic covered the importance of feedback and underscored that individuals have the capacity to maximize their talents and abilities. Of course, there were also occasions when I wondered whether feedback seeking had been the right choice. For
example, when I discussed my PhD topic with other people, they often got this strange look on their faces.

They told me that they had the sense that feedback is good to give and to receive, but that most of us do not actively seek it out. Though these comments threw me off balance, I also found them fascinating because I saw people seeking feedback all the time. At work, I observed people asking for feedback on their presentations. In restaurants, waiters were asking customers how their food tasted. Even in my favorite magazine, there was a weekly cartoon called “How am I doing?”

Everyone recognizes these everyday examples of feedback seeking. Yet there is also something about feedback seeking that is not entirely straightforward. Most of us want to know how others evaluate us. But we also worry about the answer that we might get and about how our feedback seeking might be interpreted. We all like to be liked, and as employees, we want others, especially our supervisors, to think highly of us. If others interpret our feedback seeking as a sign of incompetence or insecurity, we may be better off refraining from it. Yet, at the same time, we all value feedback. From experience, we know how it can bring us to new insights and how it can give us a different perspective on our work.

Intuitive as these issues may seem, these questions are also central to the feedback-seeking literature…and to this dissertation. Though 25 years have passed since Ashford and Cummings’ seminal article (1983), we still do not know as much as we need to know about how feedback seeking is interpreted; about how it can help, but also harm employees; about how organizations can overcome employees’ image concerns and stimulate them to seek feedback.

This dissertation is an effort, together with many other studies within this field, to take some of these issues beyond intuition and to broaden our theoretical understanding of feedback-seeking behavior. It is my strong hope that my dissertation will not only spark new feedback-seeking research, but that it will also inspire everyone who is concerned with shaping their own work lives, and with gathering, accepting and using feedback as a basis for continuous learning. I, for one, look forward to your feedback…
Acknowledgements

Whenever I felt overwhelmed or had the feeling that all my drafts and notes were never going to end up in a dissertation, I imagined writing this acknowledgement section. I always envisioned this moment as one of the most rewarding moments of my life. But now the moment is here, I have to admit that it is not what I expected. I will truly miss the exciting rollercoaster ride through PhD-Land. On the other hand: “what a thrill, what a shock, to wake up on a sunny morning in October, prosperous, almost scandalously privileged, with only a simple errand to run”. Of course, writing these acknowledgements is not a “simple errand” because I can never do everyone the justice they deserve...

First and foremost I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Dirk Buyens, my advisor and dissertation chair. Thank you Dirk, for detecting the “research spark” in my eyes. I have been amazingly fortunate to have an advisor who stretched my mind and gave me the freedom to discover my own road to success, while at the same time providing me the guidance I needed when I struggled. And wherever my road to success leads me, there is no doubt in my mind that I will never have as much fun as I did on the roads of California. Dirk, as I embark on my own academic career, I hope that one day I will become as good an advisor to my students as you have been to me.

I am also proud and happy to have Susan (Sue) Ashford on my dissertation committee, the person who introduced the wonderful concept of feedback-seeking behavior into literature, and taught me about scholarship, perseverance and Thanksgiving. Thank you Sue, for believing in my abilities, and for being in such a great mood when I applied for a visiting student position at the Ross School of Business – that email will be pinned on my bulletin board forever! In Albuquerque, someone referred to you as her role model. I feel exactly the same way. You embody the scholarly (and non-scholarly) standards I aspire to.

1 Adapted from Michael Cunningham, The Hours
A special word of thanks goes to the other members of my doctoral committee, Maddy Janssens, Ans De Vos and Marc Buelens. Thank you for generously dedicating your time and expertise to help me improve my work. Thank you, Maddy, for asking me the right questions; for stimulating me to look beyond p-values and consider the greater implications of my findings. Thank you, Ans, for being my touchstone, for joining in my enthusiasm in this project... your positive attitude and persistence are simply contagious. Thank you Marc, for holding me to high standards with respect to methods and measurement, for trusting me to teach your leadership course and for kidnapping Karen, Nele, Thomas, Dirk and me to Disney when we really needed a break.

I am also deeply indebted to the University of Michigan professors, Sue Ashford, Karl Weick, Richard (Rich) Bagozzi, Gerald (Jerry) Davis, Richard Gonzalez and Shinobu Kitayama for welcoming me into their classrooms. I feel very fortunate to have met the real people behind the amazing papers. Your courses and enthusiasm for research have made the cold Michigan Winter of 2006 worthwhile enduring... I still find myself daydreaming about those sacred Thursday afternoons with Karl Weick called “class”. I am also thankful to my fellow doctoral students at the Ross School of Business and to my friends in Michigan. I really appreciate that you embraced me as one of your own: Helena, Ryan, Jim, Sinem, Natalie, Adam, Flanery, Maria, Brent, Diane, Kathryn, Raj, Rainer and many, many others: you are an amazing bunch of people! Manu and I still miss you every single day.

A special word of thanks also goes to the various institutions and organizations that made this doctoral journey possible. The daunting, but enriching process of applying for the ICM scholarship has taught me skills I still benefit from today. Thanks to Dirk Symoens and Françoise Charlez-Degembe from the ICM, I never had to worry about the practical or financial implications of pursuing a PhD. I am also thankful to Maggie Geuens and Frederik Anseel at Ghent University for their feedback on this work, and to Freek Van Baalen for patiently answering all my questions about university procedures (I promise that I will never spam your mailbox again). I am also deeply indebted to Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School for providing me the necessary resources to do my doctoral work. A very special word of thanks goes to our library, for being the most proactive library I know. Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to the organizations and employees that participated in my survey; to Hannelore Waterschoot for helping me to find some of those companies; and to Mia
Vanstraelen and Jules Colard from IBM, for putting me on a stage in front of 500 of their Top Talents. Mia and Jules, your firm belief in me has touched me very deeply.

I also owe many thanks to my colleagues and former colleagues at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School. Thank you, Veroniek De Schamphelaere, for proofreading this thesis, for your invaluable advice and friendship, for being so much more than a colleague. Your moral support kept me going through many tough times. I am also deeply indebted to Ans De Vos, Koen Dewettinck, Eva Cools, Dave Bouckenooghe and Nele Soens for their support, mentoring and friendship. I am fortunate to be a part of such a dream team of researchers. I also want to express my heartfelt thanks to Karen Wouters and Thomas Dewilde. Thank you for your candidness and for sending me witty encouragements through cyberspace…It is my strong hope that one day you will both find your ways back to Vlerick. Special thanks also go to the Great Place to Work Ladies for taking the GPW project to the next level: Kristien Van Bruystegem, Maaike van Ameijde and Anniek Devos! I am also deeply indebted to Annelies Meganck, Jana Endrlová, Susie Gutierrez, Inge De Clippeleer, Sara De Hauw, Hans van Dijk, Heidi Klein, Kirby Van Laere, and to the members of the Vlerick Research Steering Committee and the Vlerick Employee Forum. Every day I am amazed by your ability to listen and by your endless creativity in finding ways to make Vlerick such a great place to work. Last but not least, I would like to thank my former colleagues Delphine Guiot, Bart Malfliet, Annick Vlaminckx, Isabel Brysse, Tine Huyghe, and Cecilia Dewinter. I am glad that I can still be a part of your lives.

My deepest gratitude goes to my family and friends for helping me to stay (relatively) sane through my doctoral journey. Thank you, mama, papa and Olivier (mijn “broereman”) for being my heroes, for giving me your unconditional love and support. You have always encouraged and inspired me to go as far as I can, both professionally and personally. Bedankt ook aan mijn meter, pater, nonkel Achille, tante Co, de mémé van Manu, Mariette, Jos en de andere familieleden uit Asse voor hun levenswijsheid en interesse in al wat ik doe. Merci à Allégra, Marc (†) et François-Xavier pour avoir partagé chaque étape de ce travail; pour votre affection et votre soutien. Special thanks also go to my friend Joeri Weyn for training for the 20 Km of Brussels with me. Joeri, your incredible sense of humor and ability to put everything into perspective (both on and off the track) has saved me on more than one occasion. I also owe many thanks to the talented Griet Blockx for drawing the feedback-
seeking cartoon that you can find at the bottom of this page. Finally, I want to thank my closest friends, the best friends that anyone could ever ask for (in order of appearance in my life): Ann & Joris, Pieter (sorry, Pieter, for not writing your name in font size 16 as you requested), Thomas & Birte, Sofie, Sylvia & Peter, Joke & Gert, Hannelore & Karel, Veerle & Vincent, Stefanie & Joost, Freya & Thor, Elke & David, Karl & Lieve, Koen & Joeri, Bart & Lien, Guido, Louise & Jan, Arne & Floris, Jolan, little Manu, Noah, Eppo, Zoë, Julie and Marte. I deeply value our friendship and your belief in me. Though only my name appears on the cover of this dissertation, you all have contributed to its production in your own special way.

Manu. None of this would have been even remotely possible without your love and patience. Thank you for being the “strong man behind the woman” for three years; for wanting to see me succeed in everything I do; for leaving everything behind, even your dying father, to join me to Michigan; for never giving me the feeling that I am forever in your debt, even though I truly am… Manu, I dedicate this dissertation to you. But more importantly: I love you!

Ghent, 2 October, 2008
Katleen De Stobbeleir
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Part I

General Introduction
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

By Kathleen DE STOBBELEIR and Dirk BUYENS

In this introductory chapter we discuss the general research objectives underlying this dissertation. We first highlight the importance of feedback-seeking behavior in current organizational contexts. We then review how twenty-five years of empirical research have contributed to our understanding of the feedback-seeking concept and its correlates. Throughout the review, we identify the main issues for future research and present the general research objectives underlying this dissertation. We conclude this introductory chapter with an overview of how this thesis is structured.

Keywords: FEEDBACK INTERVENTIONS, EMPLOYEE PROACTIVITY, FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Objectives

38%

38%... that is the percentage of feedback interventions that hinder individual performance, rather than improving it (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Yet there seems to be a persistent belief, both in academia and in practice, that feedback interventions always improve performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Only under specific conditions, however, feedback interventions appear to have the unequivocal performance-enhancing effects that are often attributed to them. When individuals perform routine tasks, characterized by high levels of goal clarity and pre-specified standards, providing developmental feedback seems to improve performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Such conditions do not entirely reflect reality in contemporary organizations, however. A complex set of pressures including globalization, technological developments and intensified competition has forced organizations to be proactively innovative and adaptable in order to survive (Bandura, 2002; Bandura & Locke, 2003). The heightened environmental complexity also has important implications for the work that individuals do and for how this work is being evaluated. Increasingly, employees are dealing with complex, continuously changing and even competing task demands - not with simple routine assignments (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003).

From managers’ perspective, evaluating subordinates’ performance and giving them feedback on their work has become an increasingly difficult undertaking (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003; Higgins & Kram, 2001). Much of the world of work is now being structured so that managers
have larger spans of controls and many employees have independent operational control over their work, with little direction and feedback by others (Bandura, 2001; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

As a result of these forces, the modern workplace requires employees to take charge of their own performance and seek feedback on issues that go beyond the information delivered by supervisors (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). These pressures also call for a profound shift in our theorizing about feedback processes in organizations, as traditional feedback theories do not adequately model and take into account this increased emphasis on employee self-management in today’s organizations (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003).

To date, the feedback-seeking literature provides the best look inside the various ways that employees use their feedback environment in their everyday work lives to attain desired goals (see Ashford et al., 2003, for a recent review). While traditional feedback theories typically conceive feedback as an organizational resource and focus on the feedback that is delivered by supervisors during performance appraisals (thus conceiving employees as passive recipients of feedback), the feedback-seeking framework recognizes that employees actively seek and attend to evaluations from others to obtain a sense of how they are doing (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). As such, feedback-seeking behavior is an important complement to formal performance appraisal systems within organizations, as it enables employees to adapt and respond to continuously changing goals and role expectations (Tsui & Ashford, 1994; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999).

From a broader theoretical perspective, the concept of feedback-seeking behavior relates directly to the proactivity paradigm within the organizational literature (see Grant & Ashford,
2008 for a recent review). The centerpiece of this thinking is that employees are self-regulatory agents who are capable of taking anticipatory actions to impact themselves and/or their environments. Thus, rather than portraying employees as reactive agents who merely respond to environmental stimuli and who need to be directed and given feedback by others, the proactivity literature views employees as active agents who have proactive control over their own goals and development (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

The recognition of feedback-seeking behavior as an important employee resource has resulted in a considerable body of research in this area. Twenty-five years of feedback-seeking research have revealed its key facets, and several of its antecedents and consequences. In this review, we will briefly summarize the main conclusions that can be derived from empirical work, and highlight the work still remaining.

Before starting this review, however, we wish to emphasize that it is not our intention to provide a comprehensive overview of the literature, as this has already been done elsewhere (e.g. Anseel & Lievens, 2002; Ashford et al., 2003; De Stobbeleir & Buyens, 2005; VandeWalle, 2003). Rather, the purpose of our synthesis is to provide a selective review of empirical research on feedback-seeking behavior, guided by the research objectives that underlie this dissertation. For readers to grasp how the three empirical studies, reported in this thesis, relate to each other (and to the feedback-seeking literature in general), our primary vehicle for this discussion is based on the integrative framework of feedback-seeking behavior developed by Ashford et al. (2003) (Figure 1.1).
The concept of feedback-seeking behavior was first introduced by Ashford and colleagues who defined it as “the conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behavior for attaining valued end states” (Ashford, 1986, p 466).

Despite this relatively straightforward definition, feedback-seeking behavior is far from a straightforward phenomenon. In order to obtain a sense of how they are doing, employees...
need to decide on how frequently they will seek feedback, what tactics to use, from whom to seek and what type of feedback they will focus on. Accordingly, feedback-seeking behavior is typically conceived as a multi-faceted concept, consisting of five different patterns. Two important patterns of feedback seeking involve the frequency of seeking, i.e., how often an individual seeks for evaluative information, and the tactics used to seek feedback. Individuals can choose between two tactics to obtain feedback: the inquiry tactic and the monitoring tactic. The tactic of inquiry involves direct and verbal requests for performance evaluations, while monitoring is a more covert tactic of feedback seeking, involving a screening of the environment for indirect feedback cues (e.g., by observing others) (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). A third decision regarding feedback seeking involves the source from whom to seek feedback. Employees can seek feedback from many sources. Sometimes, feedback may be gleaned from the task itself, but often people seek feedback from social sources, such as individuals in their immediate work context (e.g. supervisors and team members), other organizational sources (e.g. peers in other departments) and extra-organizational sources (e.g. clients) (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Fourth, individuals need to decide when to seek feedback, i.e., the timing of their feedback seeking. For example, they can seek feedback immediately following a performance, or while still progressing toward a goal (Ashford et al., 2003). Finally, individuals can also decide to seek feedback on a particular topic, e.g., on their strengths and successes or on their weaknesses and failures (e.g. Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007).

Twenty-five years of research have contributed significantly to our understanding of the factors that influence individuals’ decisions regarding these five feedback-seeking patterns and how these patterns impact important outcomes. In the next section, we review the main conclusions that can be derived from literature, and identify three important research gaps.
Synthesis of the literature and research objectives

The antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior.

Though differences in emphasis are prominent, there is general agreement that feedback-seeking behavior is a function of employees’ personal characteristics, of features of the context that surrounds them, and of the interaction between the two (VandeWalle, 2003). Before we start our review of the main factors that impact feedback seeking, it is important to note that these personal and contextual characteristics are assumed to shape individuals’ feedback-seeking patterns via three primary motives: (1) an instrumental motive, referring to a rational desire to obtain evaluative information because it helps to attain instrumental goals (e.g., enhance performance); (2) an image-based motive, involving a desire to manage how one is being perceived by others; and (3) an ego-based motive, referring to a desire to defend and protect one’s ego (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, Ashford et al., 2003, Morrison & Bies, 1991). Thus, feedback seeking is not only a way of gathering evaluative information about work behaviors. It can also be used as a tactic to manage the impressions that others have of us or as a tactic to protect our ego.

Personal antecedents. Research toward the personal antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior has mainly been driven by an instrumental logic, i.e., the premise that people seek feedback to obtain diagnostic information about their behaviors to attain desired instrumental goals (e.g., enhance performance) (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Accordingly, many studies have focused on how individuals’ instrumental goals affect their feedback-seeking.

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2 Within this dissertation, we focus on the instrumental motive and the image-based motive. Though we briefly refer to research in this area (e.g., the role of self-esteem), a detailed consideration of the ego-based motive was believed to be outside the scope of this introduction.
seeking behaviors (see VandeWalle, 2003 for a review). For example, Ashford (1986) found that both the extent to which individuals value goal attainment and individuals’ performance expectations are positively associated with how frequently they seek feedback.

The instrumental logic underlying feedback-seeking behavior also has influenced the range of personality variables included in empirical work (VandeWalle, 2003). For example, focusing on the content of individuals’ goals, VandeWalle and colleagues found that the individual difference of a goal orientation (an orientation toward developing or demonstrating one’s ability) influences the feedback-seeking process, with studies generally suggesting that individuals with a learning-goal orientation (i.e., a general orientation toward development) are more likely to seek feedback than individuals with a performance-goal orientation (i.e., a general orientation toward demonstrating one’s ability) (e.g. VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla & Brown, 2000). Other researchers have studied how individual preferences for diagnostic, self-verifying feedback (as opposed to self-enhancing feedback) shape the feedback-seeking process (Bernichon, Cook, & Brown, 2003). This line of inquiry shows that particularly individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to prefer self-verifying, diagnostic feedback (even if this feedback is negative) (Bernichon et al., 2003).

Researchers have also studied the individual antecedents of feedback seeking from an impression management logic, i.e., the premise that individuals desire to manage how others see them. For example, individual differences in preferences about projecting an appropriate public image, such as the need for confirmation (e.g. Klich & Feldman, 1992), and public conscientiousness (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams 1995) were found to be positively related to individuals’ tendency to seek feedback.
In sum, research toward the personal antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior has done an excellent job in illuminating how individuals’ preferences and characteristics (e.g., their goals and motives) drive the feedback-seeking process. However, given that feedback-seeking behavior also has a marked social character, there have been repeated calls in the past 25 years to move beyond individual factors and to focus on the context factors that affect individuals’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

**Context factors.** Research to the context factors affecting feedback seeking is still a newly emerging research topic, but one conclusion that can be drawn from this line of inquiry is that the context important for feedback seeking is inherently relational, consisting of the various feedback sources from whom individuals seek feedback (Ashford et al., 2003).

For example, empirical work shows that the feedback source’s characteristics and attitudes, including the source’s credibility (Fedor, Rensvold & Adams, 1992), accessibility, expertise, reward power (Vancouver & Morrison, 1995), and mood (Ang, Cummings, Straub & Earley, 1993) impact individuals’ tendency to seek feedback from that source. In the same vein, studies focusing on supervisors as potential sources for feedback seeking highlight that the supervisor’s leadership style is a central influence in the feedback-seeking process (e.g., Brown, Ganesan, & Challagalla, 2001; Madzar, 2001; VandeWalle et al., 2000). Research also shows that individuals respond to situational norms regarding the appropriateness of feedback seeking, with people tending to inquire less for feedback as the context becomes more public and evaluative (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Ang et al., 1993; Levy et al., 1995).
Taken together, such results highlight that when individuals perceive that their feedback seeking might harm their relation with important others (e.g., supervisors) or hurt the image that those others have of them, this will affect their feedback-seeking behaviors.

**Research gaps.** Although the literatures on the individual and contextual antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior are growing rapidly, they also seem to be growing in isolation from each other. Notwithstanding some notable exceptions (e.g., VandeWalle et al., 2000), little studies have tested *integrative frameworks* of feedback-seeking behavior, including both personal and contextual antecedents. The few integrative models that have been developed and tested typically include *individual perceptions* of context factors, such as the seeker’s individual perceptions of the feedback environment (e.g., Steelman et al., 2004), the credibility of a given source (e.g., Fedor et al., 2002), or the leadership style of his/her supervisor (e.g., VandeWalle et al., 2000). However, given that the context important for feedback seeking is likely to be socially constructed (Ashford et al., 2003), such models oversimplify the context in which the feedback-seeking process takes place and disregard that this context is an inherently group-level, if not a cross-level phenomenon (Chen et al., 2007).

Most research on feedback-seeking behavior seems to implicitly assume that knowledge on individuals’ perceptions of context extend to the group-level as well. For example, in their development of a scale measuring individuals’ perceptions of their feedback environment, Steelman et al. (2004, p. 166) concluded that such an instrument may be used to “*diagnose feedback processes in organizations*”. However, as Kozlowski and colleagues (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Kozlowski & Klein, 2002) point out, research has yet to reveal whether individual-level variables can be extended to the group-level, as well as whether group-level
dynamics affect individuals’ behaviors. As argued strongly by Rousseau (1985), failing to consider these level-issues within our theories can result in miss-specified models.

So far, only a few researchers have examined the role of group-level dynamics in the feedback-seeking process. For example, in one study, Chen and colleagues (2007) found that an empowering team climate (operationalized as group-level perceptions of empowerment) provides an implicit frame that encourages individual team members to seek feedback. Such results clearly highlight that individual feedback seekers are embedded within the context of groups and that more research of this type is needed.

One starting point for integrative cross-level research toward the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics underlying the feedback-seeking process may be a reconsideration of factors that have been linked to feedback seeking in prior work. For example, individual perceptions of leadership have been found to influence individuals’ feedback-seeking patterns (e.g., Brown, Ganesan, & Challagalla, 2001; Madzar, 2001; VandeWalle et al., 2000). Additionally, recent research in the leadership literature shows that leadership should be studied both at the individual level and at the group level because group-level effects explain variance in individuals’ behaviors and attitudes beyond individual-level perceptions of leadership (e.g., Chen, Kirkman, Kanfer, Allen, & Rosen, 2007). Even with such unequivocal empirical evidence of the existence of group-level leadership effects (i.e., group-level effects beyond individual-level effects), feedback-seeking researchers have only included individual followers’ perceptions of their supervisor’s leadership style, thereby ignoring these potential group-level effects.
Conceptually, many more isomorphic relationships may exist across levels of analysis and similar arguments could be made for other context factors that have been studied within the feedback-seeking literature. For example, research shows that individuals’ perceptions of group norms affect their feedback-seeking behaviors (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). Such perceptions may also generalize to the group level and explain variance in individuals’ feedback-seeking behaviors beyond individual-level perceptions of group norms. Indeed, one advantage of multilevel theorizing is that it may generate testable hypotheses at one level of analysis that are suggested by empirical results or theory at another level of analysis (Lindsley, Brass, & Thomas, 1995).

In conclusion, given that feedback-seeking theory was originally formulated as an alternative to traditional feedback theory, it is not surprising that feedback-seeking research has historically focused on studying the individual dynamics that underlie this behavior. However, as there has been rising recognition that interpersonal relations affect the feedback-seeking process as well, we believe the time is ripe for a more careful consideration of multilevel issues when studying the antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior. Specifically, we argue that the contextual antecedents previously included in feedback-seeking research (e.g. leadership) may exert their effects at both the individual and the group-level and that these effects may occur simultaneously. As such, a more comprehensive model of feedback-seeking behavior is inherently a cross-level model that recognizes that both individual-level

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3 As noted by Morgeson and Hofmann (1999), a word of caution is also necessary regarding the operationalization of collective constructs in cross-level theorizing. For example, measures of individual-level constructs cannot always be aggregated to represent a group-level construct. That being said, however, Morgeson and Hofmann (1999) also point out that for many constructs (e.g., leadership) it is theoretically justified to measure collective phenomena at the individual level, while still answering theoretical questions at the collective level. As such, researchers should clarify the levels represented in their theories and measures and clearly distinguish between the level of these theories and the level of their measures to test these theories.
dynamics and group-level dynamics shape the feedback-seeking process and that individuals, groups, and organizations are not separate categories, but affect each other (Kozlowski & Klein, 2002). Accordingly:

**Research Objective 1**

On the basis of the importance of studying both individual factors and context factors in the feedback-seeking process and given the current state of cross-level theorizing and research within the literature, it is the first of objective of this dissertation to reveal some of the individual-level and interpersonal mechanisms that affect employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

The outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior.

While most previous research has focused on identifying the antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior, there have also been several attempts to examine its consequences (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007). So far, research in this area has focused exclusively on the individual outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior. For that reason, we consider a detailed discussion of multilevel issues in the study of the outcomes of feedback seeking as being beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we do emphasize that studying the group-level dynamics of feedback-seeking behavior (i.e., feedback seeking as an independent variable) is a promising and important area for further research. Many of the multilevel issues discussed in our review of the antecedents of feedback seeking may also apply to the outcomes of feedback seeking. For example, the level of feedback seeking within a work group may affect group-level outcomes (e.g., team climate and team performance). Similarly, group-level variables (e.g., psychological safety, empowerment climate) may moderate the impact of individuals’ feedback-seeking behaviors.
on the individual-level and group-level outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior. However, given the current state of the literature on the individual outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford et al., 2003), we felt that it was more appropriate to focus our discussion on the consequences that feedback-seeking behavior has for individual performers.

By and large, two relevant themes emerge from the research investigating these individual-level effects: (1) the effects of feedback seeking on instrumental outcomes (e.g., enhance performance); and (2) the effects of feedback seeking on the images that feedback seekers convey toward others.

**Instrumental outcomes.** As with the antecedents, much of the research has focused on the instrumental outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior. A central assumption underlying most of this research is that feedback-seeking behavior is a strategy that individuals can use to better adjust themselves to the requirements of their environment in a process of adaptation (Ashford et al., 2003). For example, research shows that feedback seeking enables individuals to adapt and respond to continuously changing goals and role expectations (Morrison & Weldon, 1990; Tsui & Ashford, 1994), to obtain more accurate self-views (Ashford & Tsui, 1991), to improve their task performance (Chen et al., 2007), and to better learn the ropes of a new job (e.g., Morrison, 1993).

Although the view that feedback-seeking behavior is a “fit behavior” has dominated the literature (e.g., Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Brett, Feldman, & Weingart, 1990; Morrison, 1993; Parker & Collins, in press), this view does not entirely reflect Ashford and Cummings’ (1983) original portrayal of feedback seekers. Ashford and Cummings (1983) described feedback seekers as proactive and self-determined contributors who set their own standards
and seek feedback to achieve goals of excellence - not as individuals who need to be socialized by others and seek feedback to better live up to the expectations of others. Yet, “the general tone of feedback-seeking literature has become one of seeking to survive, to fit in, and to tailor oneself to the prevailing view held by others in the organization” (Ashford et al., 2003, p. 794). This focus on individual adjustment, may have resulted in a narrow understanding of the outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior. Ashford et al. (2003) therefore concluded their review of two decades of feedback-seeking research with the general recommendation to broaden the lens through which we study feedback-seeking behavior and to bring back notions of human agency in our theories, emphasizing how feedback seeking can help individuals to deviate in positive ways and achieve goals of distinction.

We believe that one starting point to spark research in this area is a study of how feedback-seeking behavior helps individuals to attain outcomes beyond adaptation. Specifically, feedback-seeking researchers could focus on how feedback seeking helps individuals to achieve creative outcomes. Though no studies have explicitly linked employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors to creative performance, several elements suggest that feedback-seeking behavior may be central to the creative process. For example, Madjar (2005) found that employees who maintain close contacts with individuals within and outside their organization are more creative, because of the variety of information and insights provided by these sources. Also within the realm of social network theory (e.g. Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), empirical work shows that employees who are connected to a diverse set of individuals (Perry-Smith, 2006) are more creative, because they are more likely to receive and share new input. In addition, research has shown that giving feedback to employees can be used as a tool to promote and nurture creativity in organizations (Zhou, 2008). With the exchange of system-level feedback being somewhat constrained in many organizations, however,
organizations that value creative output may need to rely on employees’ self-regulation efforts to acquire such feedback (Ashford et al., 2003; Tsui & Ashford, 1994).

Hence, while feedback seeking may facilitate individual adaptation, the above arguments suggest that it may also be a valuable resource for employees in achieving creative outcomes. As highlighted by Ashford et al. (2003), such an extension of the scope of feedback-seeking research would also be consistent with recent research in positive psychology, a newly emerging research stream in psychology that focuses on positive deviance, human creativity and exceptional performance rather than on individual adjustment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Accordingly:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Objective 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To increase our understanding of how feedback-seeking behavior is related to individual outcomes beyond “adaptability”, it is the second objective of this dissertation to study how individuals use feedback-seeking behavior as a self-regulation strategy to attain creative outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Impression management outcomes.** In addition to its instrumental and informational impact, feedback-seeking behavior also has implications for the image that people convey to others (see Morrison & Bies, 1991 for a review). In our review of the antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior, we argued that individuals’ feedback seeking is not only influenced by their perceptions of the feedback’s value, but also by how they think their feedback seeking will be interpreted by important others (e.g., by the source from whom they seek feedback). However, while we know how image concerns affect individuals’ willingness to seek feedback (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Northcraft, 1992;
Northcraft & Ashford, 1990), we know less about whether individuals’ reluctance and/or eagerness to seek feedback under particular circumstances is indeed justified. For example, even though most feedback-seeking theories assume that feedback seeking may both harm and enhance the seeker’s image (see Morrison & Bies, 1991 for a review), empirically, we know very little about how feedback seeking is actually interpreted by observers of this behavior and how these interpretations affect the seeker’s public image.

So far, only three empirical efforts have explicitly examined how feedback seeking is actually interpreted and evaluated by the targets (or sources) of feedback seeking. Specifically, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that feedback seekers with a history of average performance were evaluated more negatively when they asked for feedback, while for feedback seekers with a history of superior performance, feedback seeking was associated with enhanced rather than negative evaluations. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) did not examine why feedback seekers with a history of average performance were evaluated less favorably than seekers with a history of superior performance. For example, it may be that feedback sources interpret superior performers’ feedback seeking differently than average performers’ feedback seeking. This is supported by a study by Lam and colleagues (2007) who recently showed that feedback sources’ reactions to feedback seeking largely depend on their attributions for this behavior. They found that feedback sources interpret feedback seeking in two distinct ways: (1) as a sign of the seeker’s achievement focus and willingness to correct ineffective work behaviors (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution); and (2) as an attempt by the seeker to manage the perceptions that others have of him or her (i.e., impression-management attribution). Lam and colleagues (2007) also showed that when feedback sources made impression-management attributions, their general evaluations of the feedback seeker’s performance were more negative than when the sources made
performance-enhancement attributions. What Lam and colleagues (2007) did not address, however, is why targets made these attributions. For example, characteristics of the seeker (e.g., performance history), characteristics of the source (e.g., personality), and of the seeking act itself (e.g., the topic on which feedback is sought) may all shape feedback sources’ reactions to feedback seekers and their seeking.

Studying how feedback sources react to feedback seekers is also important from a broader impression management perspective. As pointed out by Bozeman and Kacmar (1997), more theoretical and empirical guidance is needed on the process of impression formation by targets of impression management behaviors. For example, to date, we know very little about the impact that employees’ self-presentation activities (e.g., feedback seeking) have on how targets (e.g., feedback sources) cognitively process these behaviors. Studying these cognitive processes is important though, because target processing of actor behavior may play an important role in targets’ behavioral reactions to the actor’s impression management attempts. For example, how targets interpret employees’ work behaviors may impact their decisions regarding the allocation of rewards, opportunities for development and even performance evaluations (e.g., Bachrach, Powell, Bendoly, & Richey, 2006; Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002). Accordingly, opening the black box of how targets interpret and evaluate feedback seekers and their seeking would be an important contribution to both the feedback-seeking literature and the impression-management literature. Hence:

**Research Objective 3**

To increase our understanding of how feedback-seeking behavior impacts seekers’ social image, it is the third objective of this dissertation to examine how feedback-seeking acts are interpreted and evaluated.
Conclusions

After twenty-five years of research on feedback-seeking behavior, much has been learned about its key facets, antecedents and outcomes. However, as highlighted in our review, feedback-seeking research has made more progress in some areas than in others. Specifically, we have called attention to three areas in which empirical and theoretical progress seems to have lagged.

First, not surprisingly, most models of feedback-seeking behavior have focused on the individual factors that affect feedback-seeking behavior. There is growing consensus, however, that interpersonal relations affect the feedback-seeking process as well. The interpersonal dimension of feedback seeking is still underappreciated and researchers have only begun to unpack the context important for feedback seeking. Much of this research has focused on individual feedback seeker’s perceptions of the context. However, given that the context important for feedback seeking has a marked social character and thus may be socially constructed, we argued that one important area for further research is a more careful and integrated consideration of how both individual-level and group-level processes affect individuals’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

Another fascinating issue that requires further investigation is the premise that interpersonal relations may not only affect feedback seeking, but that interpersonal relations are also affected by feedback-seeking behavior. For example, researchers have scarcely begun to map out how others interpret feedback-seeking acts and how these interpretations affect the image that others have of feedback seekers and their seeking. Studying the impression-management
implications of feedback seeking is a fascinating challenge for further work, though, as indicated in our review, there have already been some important steps in that direction.

Finally, in addition to studying how others evaluate the “appropriateness and fittingness” of the seeker’s behaviors, we believe that future research should also explore how feedback seeking may help individuals to deviate in positive ways. For example, studying how feedback seeking helps individuals to attain goals of excellence, e.g., creative goals, offers an important avenue for further research.

By no means, this list of avenues for further research is comprehensive, as our literature review focused on the three general research objectives we derived from Ashford et al.’s (2003) general framework of feedback-seeking behavior. As such, many specific topics were not explicitly discussed within the scope of this review, e.g., the impact of cross-cultural contexts, affect, technology, team structures and ego-issues in the feedback-seeking process.

Nevertheless, we believe that our review offers some general entry points into the literature which may also guide research into these more specific research areas. For example, we believe that a consideration of culture will inevitably require the development of cross-level frameworks of feedback seeking, including both individual-level processes (e.g., independent versus interdependent self-construals) and group-level processes (e.g., demographic diversity). Though we did not discuss these issues into detail, we hope that the general research streams discussed in this chapter may also spark new research on these more specific issues.
Overview of the chapters

To address our research objectives, we conducted *three empirical studies*. The data for these empirical studies were collected within the scope of *two* larger research projects. In the remainder of Part I (General Introduction), we describe the samples that were used within these two research projects to give the reader a sense of the general context in which the three studies took place (cf. Chapter 2).

In Part II, we describe the three empirical studies using an essay format. In Chapter 3, we address the first research objective, i.e., to reveal some of the individual-level and interpersonal mechanisms that affect employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors. Specifically, in the paper entitled *“The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth: The mediating role of goals and cooperative norms in linking empowering leadership to feedback-seeking behavior”*, we report the results of a study in which we developed and tested a cross-level model regarding how leaders indirectly influence their followers’ feedback-seeking behaviors by fostering individual followers’ autonomous goal pursuit and by encouraging group-level cooperative norms.

In Chapter 4, we focus on the second objective underlying this dissertation, i.e., to broaden our understanding of the consequences of feedback-seeking behavior by relating it to employee creativity. Specifically, in the second empirical paper, *“Feedback-Seeking Behavior as a Self-Regulation Strategy for Creative Performance”*, we report the results of a study in which we developed and tested a model that depicts individual feedback-seeking behavior as a key self-regulation tactic in the creative process.
In the third empirical paper of this dissertation, “Keeping up Appearances: The Influence of Feedback-Seeking Pattern and Feedback Source’s Characteristics on Impression Formation and Performance Evaluations”, we address our third research objective. Specifically, this paper reports the results of a study in which we developed and tested a model that depicts how feedback sources develop impressions of feedback seekers and their seeking. The results of this study are reported in Chapter 5.

Finally, in Part III (Chapter 6), we discuss the theoretical contributions of this dissertation across the three empirical studies. Specifically, we highlight how the results reported in this dissertation not only contribute to the feedback-seeking literature, but also advance theorizing within the areas of impression management, the diffusion of leadership, employee creativity, and more generally to our understanding of the self-regulatory and proactive potential of employees.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Objectives

References


Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Objectives


CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION TO THE EMPIRICAL STUDIES

By Katleen DE STOBBELEIR

As stated, this dissertation has three primary objectives. To address these objectives, we conducted three empirical studies (reported in Chapter 3, 4, and 5). The aim of the present chapter is to give the reader a sense of the general context in which these three studies took place. Specifically, the data for the three empirical studies were collected within the scope of two larger research projects. As shown in Table 2.1, the data for empirical studies 1 and 2 (Chapter 3 and 4) were collected in a sample of six Belgian organizations. The data for empirical study 3, a scenario study, were gathered in a sample of MBA students and former MBA students in the United States. In the following sections we provide a general overview of these two samples. Specific details about the theoretical models, research designs and measures of the three studies can be found in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Table 2.1: Overview of the studies & samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Project</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Knowledge Workers and their Supervisors in 6 Belgian Organizations</td>
<td>Research Objective 1/Study 1 (Chapter 3): Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth (Cross-Level Model of Feedback-Seeking Behavior) Research Objective 2/Study 2 (Chapter 4): Feedback Seeking as a Self-Regulation Strategy for Creative Performance</td>
<td>Cross-Sectional Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>MBA Students (U.S.)</td>
<td>Research Objective 3/Study 3 (Chapter 5): Keeping up Appearances (How is feedback seeking interpreted?)</td>
<td>Scenario Study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Project 1

(Studies 1 & 2)

The data for empirical studies 1 and 2 were collected within the scope of a research project that was specifically designed for this dissertation. The research project consisted of a large-scale online survey within six Belgian organizations. All data were gathered cross-sectionally, i.e., the study variables were measured at one point in time. As such, the nature of our data precludes us from drawing causal inferences (Singleton & Straits, 1999). However, whereas cross-sectional studies typically rely on self-reports, we adopted a multisource research design. That is, in addition to self-reporting data from employees, we also collected data from coworkers (for Study 1 – Chapter 3) and from supervisors (for Study 2 – Chapter 4). This allowed us to reduce the potential effects of common source biases (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Target Population & Sample

The target population consisted of knowledge workers, whose jobs are characterized by little information about task objectives and limited direction from others (Drucker, 1994). For this group of employees, accurate system-level feedback is often in short supply. As a result, actively seeking out informal feedback may be the only way for these employees to obtain a sense of how they are doing (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Few studies have explicitly examined the feedback-seeking behaviors of knowledge workers, even though they represent one of the fastest growing segments of our workforce. This is why we focused on this particular group of employees.
Studies with knowledge workers as the target population typically survey employees working in the areas of research, product development or services & consulting (Janz, Colquitt, & Noe, 1997). We contacted fifteen large and medium-sized organizations active in these industries and invited them to participate in a research project on proactivity and self-management among knowledge workers. Six of these companies agreed to participate, all of which were active in services & consulting.

Specifically, two of the participating companies were active in the IT Services Industry, two came from HR Services & Temporary Staffing and two companies were active in the Social Services Industry. The smallest company employed ± 200 employees in Belgium (HR Services), the largest company ± 2500 employees (IT Services). Four companies were subsidiaries of multinational firms, one company was an internationally operating Belgian firm, and one company operated in Belgium only. All companies had a relatively decentralized and horizontal structure, rather than a centralized and vertical one.

For each of the six organizations we developed a sampling frame in cooperation with the human resources department. An example of the template we used for the development of this sampling frame can be found in Appendix 1. As Appendix 1 shows, the sampling frame included employees’ contact details, and the name and contact details of their supervisor and direct coworkers.

Only employees that fitted the following definition of a knowledge worker were included in the sampling frame: “knowledge workers have high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution or application of knowledge” (Davenport, 2005, p. 102). In four of the organizations, all
employees who fitted this definition were included. In the two remaining organizations (which were both large firms), the human resources department made a sub-selection of employees by contacting a number of supervisors and asking them whether they and their team members were willing to participate in the research project. In both firms, the research team requested to have a sample of at least 150 employees (and 50 supervisors).

Table 2.2 describes the final employee samples in the six organizations. Because three of the participating companies desired to limit the length of the survey, we were not able to collect data for all studies in these three organizations (company 1, 2 & 6). As such, Table 2.2 also shows for which study/studies the data from each company were used.

Table 2.2: Sample & response rates within the six participating companies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Data used for</th>
<th>Number of Employees Contacted</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
<th>Men %</th>
<th>Average Age (Years)</th>
<th>Average Job Tenure (Years)</th>
<th>Average Company Tenure (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization 1</td>
<td>Study 1 (Chapter 3)</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization 2</td>
<td>Study 1 (Chapter 3)</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization 3</td>
<td>Study 1 (Chapter 3) Study 2 (Chapter 4)</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization 4</td>
<td>Study 1 (Chapter 3) Study 2 (Chapter 4)</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization 5</td>
<td>Study 1 (Chapter 3) Study 2 (Chapter 4)</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization 6</td>
<td>Study 2 (Chapter 3)</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted, we also collected data from coworkers (Study 1) and supervisors (Study 2) to reduce the potential effects of common source biases (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Specific details about the sample properties of these additional sources can be found in the empirical studies reported in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.
Survey Design

Concurrent with the recruitment of participating companies, we designed the survey research materials. In this section, we describe the procedure we followed to develop the survey instrument. Given that most variables of interest had already been used in published studies, a detailed discussion of the specific measures we used is beyond the scope of the present chapter. In the methods sections of Chapter 3 and 4 we provide an overview of the items used to measure the variables of interest.

Given that we were able to use existing measures with known and acceptable validities and reliabilities, a pilot study was deemed unnecessary. However, following the advice of Swanson and Holton (2005), we did ask a team of four knowledgeable colleagues to review the survey instrument and evaluate the questions.

All variables were measured using Likert-type rating scales. We were as consistent as possible with regard to the direction in which the scale response anchors were displayed throughout the survey (Dillman, 2000). Considerable effort was also paid to the construction and design of the survey. We aimed for a logical ordering of the topics in the survey. Specifically, the survey started with relatively easy and general questions that helped the respondents get acquainted with the survey. Very specific questions that required a great deal of thought and questions considered as sensitive (e.g., socio-demographics) were placed in later sections of the questionnaire (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Furthermore, the online survey was designed so that respondents could not proceed to the next section of the survey until they had filled out all questions in the previous section. Only for the socio-demographic and
personal data, respondents were able to skip questions. As a result, there were no missing data for the variables of interest.

**Survey Administration and Data Collection**

All data were collected between January and March 2008. The date on which the survey was launched differed for each company. However, all companies followed a similar procedure to inform their employees about the research project. About one to two weeks before the launch, the HR manager sent out a communication to the selected employees, clarifying the research objectives and emphasizing the practical and academic importance of the research project.⁴

At the date of the launch of the survey, the research team sent out an invitation email to the selected employees inviting them to fill out an online survey. The invitation email restated the research objectives and included a link to an online survey. Within this email we also informed the employees that their answers would not be anonymous. However, we did guarantee that respondents’ answers would be held strictly confidential. In addition, we formally stated that only the research team had access to the employees’ answers and that any reporting of the data to their organization would be done using a summary format, so that no one could be identified.

An anonymous survey was not feasible for two reasons. First, given that we needed to match individual employees’ responses to those of their team members and/or to the responses of

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⁴ The research team provided a template of an email that could be used by the human resources department to inform the employees about the survey.
their supervisors (cf. Chapter 3 and 4), we needed to know from which individual each survey came. A second reason why the survey could not be conducted anonymously was that we gave all respondents the chance to receive a personal and confidential feedback report based on their responses. To generate these reports, we needed to be able to identify each survey.⁵

Respondents were given two weeks to complete the survey. After one week, we sent out a general reminder to the entire sample, thanking the respondents who had already filled out the survey and reminding the others of the deadline. Two days before the deadline, we sent out an additional reminder. This reminder was only sent to the employees who had not completed the survey yet. In organizations 3, 4, 5 and 6 our reminders were accompanied by additional reminders by the HRM department. This may explain why the response rates were higher within those companies.⁶

Post hoc analyses revealed that of all respondents, 52% had completed the survey within two days after the launch of the survey. On average, completing the survey took 20 minutes in the three companies where we had to limit the length of the survey, and 30 minutes in the companies where we administered the full survey instrument.⁷

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⁵ Ninety-one percent of all respondents requested this personal feedback report.

⁶ It would have been interesting to test for non-response bias in the companies that had lower response rates. However, given that we did not have any information about this group, we were unable to test for non-response bias. We were not overly concerned though, given that the lower response rates were most likely to be the result of differences in the data collection procedure used within those companies.

⁷ No significant differences were observed between these two groups in terms of the answering patterns of employees.
Chapter 2: Introduction to the Empirical Studies

Reporting of the Data

Once the data had been fully analyzed and interpreted, the next stage was the reporting of the key findings to the participating organizations and employees. The reporting process began at the highest levels of the organization and then followed a roll-out procedure to the employees (Rogelberg, Church, Waclawski & Stanton, 2003).

Specifically, the research team first developed a management report consisting of a profile of the feedback climate in the organization (including departmental comparisons and a benchmark with the average across companies). In addition to this management report, we also organized a workshop with top management and/or HR to discuss the results. All participating companies requested both the report and the workshop. The workshops all took place in May and June 2008. Communication about the results to the rest of the organization was done by the HR departments of the participating organizations.

After the general results had been presented and communicated to the employees, we sent out individual feedback reports to the employees who had participated in the study. This individual report was only delivered to the employees who had indicated (in the survey) that they desired to receive personal feedback. Ninety-one percent of all respondents requested personal feedback. The confidential feedback reports were sent to the employees in June 2008.
Empirical Study 3

The data for empirical study 3 were collected in collaboration with Susan Ashford (Ross School of Business) and Mary Sully DeLuque (Thunderbird University). The research project consisted of a scenario study among current and former MBA students from a Southwestern University in the United States. The overall design was a fully crossed 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design.

Specifically, respondents were asked to read a one-paragraph vignette that described a feedback-seeking act performed by a fictive employee called Robert. Respondents were asked to assume that the situation described in the vignette occurred in their own workplace. There were eight different versions of the vignette, and each vignette varied across three factors (with each two conditions). Respondents were randomly presented with one of these eight versions. In the methods section of Chapter 5, we provide the specific details about the theoretical model, the specific content of the vignettes, and the factors that were manipulated. Here, we briefly describe the rationale behind the method and the sample’s properties.

Rationale behind the factorial design

The purpose of the study presented in Chapter 5 was to study how feedback-seeking acts are interpreted by observers of this behavior. Specifically, we wanted to assess which characteristics of the seeker and his/her seeking shaped observers’ reactions. Because we sought to explore the causal effects of several independent variables on an outcome variable, a randomized experimental design was deemed most appropriate.
Randomized designs have three characteristics (Stone-Romero, 2003). First, the researcher manipulates the independent variable(s), with each independent variable having at least two levels/conditions. Second, the subjects (i.e., respondents) are randomly assigned to the various conditions of the study. Third, the researcher measures the effects of the manipulated independent variables on one (or more) outcome variables.

Because we were interested in examining the causal impact of several independent variables (e.g., characteristics of the seeker and feedback-seeking pattern) on an outcome variable (e.g., how that feedback seeking is interpreted), a factorial design was the preferred method (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Factorial designs are the most effective way to detect interaction effects (Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Given that our theoretical model (Chapter 5) hypothesized both main effects and interaction effects, a factorial design was the design of choice. In addition, factorial designs are efficient (Swanson & Holton, 2005). Given the limited research and limited theoretical guidance on how feedback-seeking acts are interpreted, efficiency of the research design was an important factor to take into consideration (Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

Below, we elaborate on the sampling procedure and assignment of the subjects to the eight conditions.

**Sampling and assignment to the conditions**

**Sampling strategy.**

The study was conducted online and subjects were recruited via a mass emailing to 1,885 individuals current and former MBA students from a Southwestern university in the United
States. Out of the 1,885 emails that were sent, 104 emails could not be delivered. Our total sample thus consisted of 1,781 individuals. Out of these 1,781 possible respondents, 319 individuals took part in the online study, good for a response rate of 18%.

With this low response rate, we needed to investigate the possibility of non-response rate bias (Rogelberg, 2003). Commonly occurring in survey research, Rogelberg and Stanton (2007) indicate that non-response rate may limit the generalizability of research results, especially when the non-response group differs in important ways from the respondent-group. Especially passive non-response rate should be considered given the mass-emailing technique we used for this study. Passive non-response rate is unplanned non-response. For example, it includes surveys that were not received by respondents due to email spam filters unknown to the researchers, or surveys that were misplaced or forgotten by the respondents (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Research suggests that people in this passive non-response group tend to be very similar to the respondents (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007).

Accordingly for most surveys, passive non-respondent bias is not problematic. Only when the survey topic is related to the respondents’ work demands, passive non-response may bias the results (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). To further follow up on the low response rate, one of the researchers conducted interviews with administrative personnel who typically sampled from this particular respondent pool. These individuals indicated that the response rate was both typical and expected for this pool of respondents. For these reasons, we were not overly concerned by the low response rate.
An important assumption underlying factorial designs is that the variability between the groups is due to the condition to which the respondents were exposed and not due to systematic pre-experimental differences between the respondents (e.g., socio-demographic differences). As such, random assignment of the subjects to the various conditions is of critical importance for factorial research designs.

The 319 respondents were randomly assigned to the eight scenarios. The only criterion that we used for this random assignment was that we wanted to attain similar sample sizes in the eight conditions. An overview of the final sample is provided in Table 2.3. As Table 2.3 shows, there were no significant socio-demographic differences between the subjects in the eight conditions. An important assumption underlying scenario research is that respondents across the various versions of the scenarios understand the situation that is described in the scenario (Swanson and Holton, 2005). Therefore, respondents were also asked how easily they could imagine that the situation that was described in the scenario had actually occurred in their own workplace. Also with regard to this variable, there were no significant differences between the subjects in the various conditions.

Table 2.3: Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version Scenario</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>Men %</th>
<th>Average Age (Years)</th>
<th>Full Time %</th>
<th>Average Ease of Imagining (on a 5-point scale)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>38</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>70</td>
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<td>4.03</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
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<td>68</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>319</strong></td>
<td><strong>69</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.97</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2: Introduction to the Empirical Studies

Data collection

All data were collected in January 2007. At the date of the launch of the survey, the research team sent out a mass invitation email to the target population. The invitation email stated the research objectives and included a link to an online survey. In this email we also informed the respondents that the survey was anonymous and that the research team had no access to their individual answers. The web-based survey remained online for one month. Because of university procedures, we were not able to send out any reminders. This may be an additional explanation for our relatively low response rate.

Though unlikely, one potential downside of the approach we followed is that a single individual could have filled out the survey instrument multiple times (Rogelberg et al., 2003). However, given that we did not approach the participants aggressively (e.g., by sending them multiple reminder notes), we believe that the inadvertent multiple response was non-existent (Rogelberg et al., 2003).

The survey instrument itself was structured as follows. First, respondents read the vignette. After they had read the vignette, they were asked to fill out a survey in which we assessed their reactions to the vignette. A detailed discussion of the measures we used is beyond the scope of the present chapter. In the methods section of Chapter 5 we provide a detailed overview of these measures. As in Study 1 and 2, most variables of interest were measured using Likert-type rating scales with known and acceptable validities and reliabilities. The questions were ordered so that general questions were asked first, whereas specific and

8 This survey was located on surveymonkey.com
sensitive questions (e.g., socio-demographics) were asked last (Swanson & Holton, 2005). As in Study 1 and 2, the online survey was designed so that respondents could not proceed to the next section of the survey until they had filled out all questions in the previous section. Only for the socio-demographic and personal data, respondents were able to skip questions. Respondents were also able to go back to the vignette and/or to their previous answers.

**Reporting of the Data**

Given that this was an anonymous survey, we were not able to report the data to the participants after the data had been analyzed. The fact that participants did not have the chance to request feedback may be an additional reason for our low response rate.
## Appendix 2.1: Sampling Frame for Study 1 and Study 2

<table>
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Part II
Empirical Essays
CHAPTER 3 (STUDY 1): THE FEEDBACK SEEKER IN HIS SOCIAL LABYRINTH: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF GOALS AND COOPERATIVE NORMS IN LINKING EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP TO FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR

By Katleen E. M. DE STOBBELEIR, Susan J. ASHFORD, and Dirk BUYENS

Abstract

Addressing the first research objective of this dissertation, the study reported in this paper examines the intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms through which empowering leaders impact their followers’ feedback-seeking behaviors. Drawing on goal theories and the group-norms literature, we develop and test an individual and cross-level model of feedback-seeking behavior. Using a sample of 991 employees, working in 185 teams, the results show that empowering leaders indirectly influence their followers’ selection of feedback sources by encouraging followers’ autonomous goal pursuit and by stimulating cooperative group norms.  

Keywords: FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR, GOAL AUTONOMY, EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP, COOPERATIVE GROUP NORMS

9 Note: Footnotes, tables & figures of this essay can be found at the end of this chapter
Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth

Introduction

Feedback-seeking behavior, “the conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behavior for attaining valued end states” (Ashford, 1986, p. 466), is an important employee behavior in today’s organizations. As the structure of modern work is increasingly characterized by little information about task objectives, ambiguity about work roles and limited direction from others (Hulin & Glomb, 1999; Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998), employees need to take charge of their own professional development and seek feedback on issues that go beyond the information delivered by traditional feedback systems (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Feedback-seeking behavior enables employees to evaluate their goal-progress (Morrison & Weldon, 1990), clarify role expectations (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), develop high-quality relationships with supervisors (Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007) and improve their in-role performance (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007).

While the individual and organizational benefits of feedback seeking are clearly articulated, there is still much to be learned about how it can be promoted as a common practice in organizations (Ashford et al., 2003; Levy & Williams, 2004; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004).

Practitioner-oriented publications advise managers about how to nurture a climate in which subordinates feel free to seek feedback by asking their supervisors, coworkers and other relevant sources for advice and guidance (e.g., London, 1997; Moss, 2004). However, while we know that leader behaviors affect subordinates’ feedback inquiry from their supervisor (e.g., Levy, Cober, & Miller, 2002; Madzar, 2001; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2002), no studies have explored how leaders affect the broader feedback-seeking patterns of their subordinates (e.g. peer to peer seeking). This question is important for two
reasons. First, given the emphasis placed on horizontal knowledge-sharing and teamwork in today’s organizations (Drucker, 1994; Higgins & Kram, 2001) and given the need for fast flexible action (Bandura, 2001), peers may be an increasingly important source of feedback. Second, with today’s flatter organizations and accompanying larger spans of control, leaders and supervisors may be more problematic as feedback-seeking sources (Higgins & Kram, 2001). It may be difficult to get their time and attention given their large spans of control and they may not have quality information to share given the numbers they supervise (Ashford et al., 2003).

In this study, we draw on the literature on goals (e.g., Carver, 2004; Cervone, Mor, Orom, Shadel, & Scott, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Locke & Latham, 2002) and group norms (e.g., Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004; Feldman, 1984; Wageman, 1995) to elucidate how leaders can stimulate their followers to develop a habit of seeking feedback from a wide variety of feedback sources. As shown in Figure 3.1 we examine the mediating role of individual goals and cooperative group norms in the relationship between empowering leadership and the diverse sources from whom feedback is sought. We focus on empowering leadership because it captures the emphasis on self-management for employees and thus offers a relevant framework for studying the context factors that affect feedback-seeking behavior. In addition, employee perceptions of empowerment have been linked to proactivity (Spreitzer, 1995) and feedback-seeking behavior (Chen et al., 2007) in prior work. We adopt the definition of empowering leadership presented by Srivastava and colleagues: “behaviors whereby power is shared with subordinates and that raise their level of intrinsic motivation” (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006, p. 1240).
Although this study is not the first to examine the relationship between leadership style and feedback seeking, it goes beyond previous research in at least three ways. First, whereas prior studies mainly focused on the direct, bivariate impact of leadership style on feedback-seeking behavior, our study examines some of the intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms through which leaders impact followers’ feedback seeking.

Second, while feedback-seeking research has historically focused on studying how individual factors shape the feedback-seeking process, this study examines how both within-person and between-person dynamics affect feedback seeking. Context factors have not only been under-researched in the feedback-seeking literature (Ashford et al., 2003), but also in the organizational literature in general (Johns, 2006). In addition, by testing a cross-level model of the feedback-seeking process, we recognize that the context important for feedback seeking is likely to be socially constructed.

Finally, whereas previous work has examined the effects of leadership style on how frequently followers seek feedback from their supervisor, this study more broadly focuses on how supervisors shape the feedback-seeking patterns of their followers (i.e. the various sources from whom feedback is sought).


Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth

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**Literature Review and Hypotheses**

**The Role of Leadership Style in the Feedback-Seeking Process**

Although research on general context factors affecting feedback seeking is relatively scarce (Ashford et al., 2003), it has long been documented that characteristics of the feedback source affect individuals’ feedback-seeking behaviors (e.g., Albright & Levy, 1995; Ang, Cummings, Straub, & Early, 1993; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995). Supervisors have traditionally been considered as the primary sources of feedback (e.g., Ashford, 1993; Callister, Kramer, & Turban, 1999) and research has assessed the effects of the supervisor’s leadership style on followers' feedback seeking from them (e.g., Levy et al., 2002; Madzar, 2001, 2005; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995). For example, a study by VandeWalle et al. (2002) showed that a leader’s initiating structure increased subordinates’ perceived value of feedback seeking from these leaders. In the same vein, in a laboratory study, Levy et al. (2002) found that subjects were more likely to seek feedback from transformational leaders than from transactional leaders. Overall, these studies show that depending on their leadership style, supervisors can increase or decrease the extent to which subordinates seek feedback from them (Ashford et al., 2003). Though important for enhancing our understanding of the leadership style – feedback seeking relationship, these studies are limited in two ways.

First, they focus on the impact of leadership style on one source of seeking (i.e. inquiry from the supervisor), but do not depict how a leader’s style might influence a follower’s seeking from other feedback sources. Yet, recent research in team literature shows that leader
behavior not only impacts subordinates’ interactions with their supervisors, but also has important consequences for followers’ interaction patterns with other organizational members (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Srivastava et al., 2006). It seems that despite numerous pleas for more comprehensive operationalizations of feedback-seeking behavior (e.g., Ashford et al., 2003; VandeWalle, 2003) this literature has not escaped the pitfalls described by Higgins and Kram (2001), who criticized the general tendency of organizational scholars to focus on primary sources and forms of communication instead of considering the multiple sources from whom individuals receive and seek assistance.

Second, studies investigating the relationship between leadership style and feedback-seeking behavior examine only the direct effects of leadership style on feedback seeking. However, leaders do not simply generate follower behavior by their leadership style but also have influence through more complex intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms (e.g., Bass, 1999; Bono & Judge, 2003; Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Kohli, Shervani, & Challagalla, 1998). For example, a vast body of research has shown that through their leadership style, supervisors impact their team members’ (individual) goals (Bono & Judge, 2003), their team members’ perceptions of team efficacy (Srivastava et al., 2006) and their (interpersonal) work norms (Jung & Avolio, 1999). This suggests that the relationship between leadership style and feedback-seeking behavior may not be as straightforward as previously assumed.

In a preliminary attempt to fill some of these gaps in literature, Chen and colleagues (2007) theorized (but did not test) that leaders of empowered teams encourage their followers to seek feedback from coworkers rather than directly from their supervisors. The leadership literature depicts two general mechanisms through which such an effect might occur: through the personal goals that followers of empowering leaders pursue, i.e., an intra-personal
motivational mechanism (e.g., Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) and through the norms that empowering leaders foster, i.e., a collective process (e.g., Hofmann & Jones, 2005).

First, regarding goals, instead of directing and controlling their subordinates, empowering leaders encourage followers to define their own goals and performance standards (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Manz & Sims, 1987). In this regard, we think it is important to draw attention to recent theorizing in goal-setting (Locke & Latham, 2002), goal orientation (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995), self-regulation (Carver, 2004), and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Though differences in emphasis are prominent, there is a growing consensus that the energizing effects of goals not only stem from their descriptive surface features (e.g. whether goals are self-set or assigned), but also from their psychological characteristics, such as whether they are internalized and accepted (Bono & Judge, 2003; Locke & Latham, 2002). In this regard, Bono and Judge (2003) distinguish between two types of work goals: autonomous and controlled work goals. Whereas autonomous goals are pursued with a sense of personal choice and psychological freedom, controlled goals are pursued with a sense of obligation and psychological restraint (Bono & Judge, 2003; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

In work settings, researchers have shown that followers’ autonomous (versus controlled) pursuit of goals largely depends on the leadership style of their supervisor (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2003; Deci et al., 1989; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Kohli et al., 1998; Manz & Sims, 1987; Neck, Nourib, & Godwinc, 2003; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006). For example, in a study examining goal autonomy at work, Bono and Judge (2003) found that followers of transformational leaders were more likely to pursue autonomous goals. Empowering leadership is different from transformational leadership. Transformational leadership centers on the leader and the leader’s vision, whereas empowering leadership focuses on developing
followers’ self-leadership (Tekleab, Sims, Yun, Tesluk, & Cox, 2008). That said, we expect that empowering leadership will produce a similar effect on followers’ goals. The empowering approach to leadership emphasizes subordinates’ psychological ownership of goals. Given that empowering leaders emphasize personal initiative to formulate goals and to identify and solve problems autonomously, we propose that they will affect their subordinates’ goals in the following way:

*Hypothesis 1:* Empowering leadership will be (a) positively related to the tendency of followers to pursue autonomous goals and (b) negatively related to the tendency of followers to pursue controlled goals.

Second, leaders, by their personal behaviors or intentional efforts, shape *norms* within the group (Chen et al., 2007; Manz & Sims, 1987; Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004). Group norms are implicit and shared beliefs about the appropriateness of behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Feldman, 1984). They provide group members with heuristics for how to behave and how to evaluate others’ behaviors. Prior research has shown that group norms influence how group members interact with each other, how they individually and collectively make decisions, approach and solve problems (Chatman & Flynn, 2001).

Cooperative norms, i.e., norms favoring interdependency and collaboration appear to be critical to successful teamwork (Taggar & Ellis, 2007), in that they have been shown empirically to affect team efficiency and team effectiveness (Chatman & Flynn, 2001). Surprisingly, however, very little is known about norm formation and the transmission of norms in (work) groups (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000; Taggar & Ellis, 2007). Sometimes, cooperative norms are the immediate result of how the group’s tasks are formally structured and rewarded (Taggar & Ellis, 2007; Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, &
Bartol, 2007). More often however, work groups have discretion on how to go about completing their tasks (Chatman & Flynn, 2001), which suggests that norms are formed through more informal, social regulation methods (Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004).

Feldman (1984) noted that one way that group norms develop involves the group leader. Specifically, in work groups, managers may have an important impact on the types of norms adopted and espoused by their subordinates (Taggar & Ellis, 2007). Through their discourse and their own behavior, leaders communicate information about what constitutes appropriate behavior (Ehrhart & Naumann 2004; Hogg & Reid, 2006). They guide employee behavior by giving cues on what is appropriate and desirable. We expect that empowering leaders generate group norms that stimulate followers to collaborate and resolve problems among themselves. By definition, empowering leaders emphasize the importance of interdependence, knowledge-sharing and cooperation with individuals within and outside one’s work group as important contributors to effectiveness (Arnold, Arad, Rhoades, & Drasgow, 2000; Srivastava et al., 2006). This implies that followers of empowering leaders should be more likely to adopt the cooperative norms communicated and reinforced by their supervisor. Thus:

**Hypothesis 2:** Empowering leadership is positively related to cooperative group norms.

As a consequence of these two mechanisms, followers of empowering leaders have more discretion and become less reliant on their supervisors as the suppliers of goals, direction and feedback (Manz & Sims, 1987; Seibert et al., 2004). As suggested but not tested by Chen et al. (2007) the result should be increased feedback seeking from other sources than just the supervisor. In contrast, when supervisors do not empower their employees, followers’
dependence on their supervisor and thus their need to seek feedback from this source should increase, while the need of seeking feedback from others should decrease. Chen et al. (2007) did find indirect support for this proposition by showing that compared to highly empowered employees, less empowered employees sought more feedback from their supervisors, especially when they maintained a high-quality relationship with them. However, the propositions that leaders indirectly (i.e., via goals and norms) influence the extent to which their followers seek feedback from other sources remain untested.

**Goals and feedback seeking.** As stated in our first hypothesis, we expect that empowering leaders affect their followers’ goal pursuit. Followers’ goals should in turn shape the feedback-seeking process (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Morrison & Weldon, 1990; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Prior research shows that feedback seeking is more likely to occur in contexts characterized by a clear focus on specific and assigned goals (Morrison & Weldon, 1990; VandeWalle et al., 2002), because clear goals function as reference standards that are used to track goal progress (Ashford, 1993; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Carver & Scheier, 1981). For example, VandeWalle and colleagues (2002) found that employees who received specific goals from their supervisor, sought more feedback through inquiry. Similarly, Morrison & Weldon (1990) showed that assigning specific performance goals motivated individuals to engage in feedback inquiry. However, many studies also have shown that when confronted with ambiguous goals, individuals engage in feedback seeking (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996; Callister et al., 1999; Fuller, Marler, & Hester, 2006; Wanberg et al., 2000). Although this line of inquiry seems to contradict research indicating that goal clarity (as opposed to goal ambiguity) leads to more feedback seeking, these results are less surprising when we consider the dual function of feedback seeking. On the one hand, it enables employees to track their progress towards their goals; on the other hand, it allows
them to clarify their goals (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Morrison & Bies, 1991). If this is the case, it may be less useful to study the descriptive features of individuals’ goals and more informative to focus on how more psychological goal features shape the feedback-seeking process.

To date, little is known about the feedback-seeking patterns that emerge based on the psychological features of followers’ goals. In a promising line of inquiry inspired by VandeWalle and colleagues, researchers have uncovered some of the linkages between goal orientation and feedback-seeking behavior (e.g., Porath & Bateman, 2006; Tuckey & Williamson, 2002; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWaelle et al., 2002; Yanfei & Wenquan, 2004). Studies here report a positive relationship between a learning-goal orientation (i.e., an orientation toward development) and feedback seeking and a negative relationship between a performance-goal orientation (i.e., an orientation toward demonstrating ability) and feedback seeking. However, this research only focuses on the content of individuals’ goals. We propose that the reasons underlying goal pursuit also should affect goal-focused behaviors such as feedback seeking. In support of this proposal, Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that when individuals pursue their goals autonomously, they tend to de-emphasize the significance of others’ evaluations. At first blush, this would imply that individuals with autonomous goals would be less likely to seek feedback. However, we think that into organizations, an argument could be made for the opposite. Specifically, given that individuals with autonomous work goals typically feel more ownership over their goals and pursue their goals within a larger organizational control system that rewards success (Tsui & Ashford, 1994), but one increasingly characterized by flatter structures and a team emphasis, they may highly value feedback that helps them attain those goals and thus seek it out. That seeking, though, may take on a different character. When individuals pursue their
goals autonomously, they might feel less dependent on and less forced to seek feedback from sources who have formal control, such as authority figures and supervisors, and feel more free to seek feedback from a wider variety of sources. This view is supported by research indicating that individuals who have more ownership of their goals, are more likely to engage in proactive behavior (Parker et al., 2006) and are more likely to seek and process relevant information (Soenens, Berzonsky, Vansteenkiste, Beyers, & Goossens, 2005). Hence:

**Hypothesis 3:** Subordinates’ tendency to pursue autonomous work goals will be positively related to feedback inquiry from (a) supervisors; (b) immediate coworkers; (c) other organizational sources; (d) extra-organizational sources.

On the other hand, we concur with Deci and colleagues that individuals with controlled goals attach more importance to direct rewards and praise from authority figures because they exert formal control over goals and incentives (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Their heightened dependence on authority figures might trigger a need to focus their feedback seeking on sources with formal power. These goals might simultaneously decrease the felt need to seek feedback from sources who are not formally in charge of goals and rewards. Accordingly:

**Hypothesis 4:** Subordinates’ tendency to pursue controlled work goals is negatively related to (a) feedback inquiry from immediate coworkers; (b) feedback inquiry from other organizational sources; and (c) feedback inquiry from extra-organizational sources.

**Hypothesis 5:** Subordinates’ controlled work goals are positively related to feedback inquiry from their supervisor.
We first asserted that leaders affect the goals pursued by their followers (hypothesis 1), while our second set of hypotheses suggested that these goals shape the feedback-seeking process (hypotheses 3 to 5). Combining these suggestions with prior work that has linked leadership to goals and leadership to feedback seeking (e.g., Chen et al., 2007; Levy et al., 2002; Madzar, 2001; VandeWalle et al., 2002), we expect that goals will mediate the relation between empowering leadership and feedback seeking. More specifically, we anticipate that followers of empowering leaders will feel more motivated to seek feedback from a wider variety of sources, because they have adopted autonomous goals and therefore value feedback that helps them to attain those goals. In contrast, followers of less empowering leaders will possibly feel discouraged to seek feedback from various sources, because their supervisor controls their goals. Accordingly:

_Hypothesis 6:_ Followers’ goals (autonomous versus controlled) mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and the sources of feedback seeking.

**Group norms and feedback-seeking behavior.** As stated, we also expect that empowering leaders influence their followers’ feedback seeking through the cooperative norms they nurture. Cooperative group norms have been found to stimulate knowledge sharing, information sharing, helping behavior (Deutsch, 1949; Deutsch, Epstein, & Canavon, 1967; Quigley et al., 2007; Wageman, 1995; Wageman & Gordon, 2005), team coherence and the resolution of conflicts within groups (Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000; Tjosvold, Poon, & Zi-You, 2005). These findings are reminiscent of the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which proposes that individual behavior is in part determined by (subjective) norms, i.e., perceptions of how relevant others will evaluate the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). In sum, when cooperation is the norm, individuals perceive that
they can better reach their goals through collaboration with, reliance on, and assistance of others. This perception in turn shapes individuals’ social behaviors.

Existing research on the impact of group norms on feedback seeking shows that situational norms shape how frequently people inquire for feedback (Ashford et al., 2003; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 2002). For example, manipulating norms regarding the appropriate amount of feedback seeking, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that norms that favored high levels of feedback seeking increased subjects’ frequency of feedback inquiry. Although these findings have not yet been replicated in the field, several scholars have suggested that individual perceptions of group norms and also the norms shared by individuals, i.e., norms operating at the work group level (Chen et al., 2007) and at the organizational level (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992) should affect the feedback-seeking process. The general proposition is that norms provide situational cues regarding the appropriate level of feedback seeking. Building on this logic, we suggest that norms may also provide situational cues about the variety of feedback sources to seek feedback from. For example, if a norm favors cooperation, as could be expected in an empowered context (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005), then group members are likely to think that improved effectiveness can best be achieved through collaboration with others. This should result in increased feedback seeking across the variety of feedback sources available to them within their work group (i.e., supervisors and coworkers). In contrast, when individuals believe that improved effectiveness can only be achieved through individual effort, they will be less likely to seek the assistance from the available feedback sources within their work group. Hence:

*Hypothesis 7:* Cooperative norms are positively related to feedback inquiry from (a) supervisors and (b) coworkers.
Given the limited theoretical guidance on how group norms affect employees’ collaboration with individuals’ outside their work group, we did not develop specific hypotheses regarding how cooperative group norms would affect individuals’ feedback seeking from sources outside their work group (i.e., other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources). As such, a test of this relationship was considered to be exploratory.

We have proposed that empowering leaders nurture cooperative norms within their team and that norms shape employees’ feedback seeking from the feedback sources in their work group. Integrating these propositions with prior work linking leadership to norms and linking leadership to feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Ehrhart & Naumann, 2004), we anticipate that group norms will mediate the relation between empowering leadership and feedback seeking. More specifically:

**Hypothesis 8:** Cooperative norms mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and employees’ feedback seeking from (a) their supervisor; and (b) coworkers.

**Methodology**

**Research Population and Sampling Design**

The target population of this study consisted of knowledge workers. Their work is characterized by little information about task objectives and limited direction from others (Drucker, 1994). As a result, accurate system-level feedback is often in short supply. Thus, actively seeking feedback may be an important individual resource for this group of employees (Ashford et al., 2003). Knowledge workers also typically are employed in the
firms of the character we described earlier: with flatter hierarchies, greater reliance on teams, and greater emphasis on the coordination that brings speed and flexibility (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007). Few studies have explicitly examined the feedback-seeking behaviors of knowledge workers, even though they represent one of the fastest growing segments of our workforce. Studies with knowledge workers as the target population typically survey employees working in the areas of research, product development or consulting (Janz, Colquitt, & Noe, 1997). Five companies active in consulting were involved in our study.

For each of the five organizations a sampling frame was developed in cooperation with the human resources department. The sampling frame consisted of a directory of employees that met the following definition of knowledge workers: “knowledge workers have high degrees of expertise, education, or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution or application of knowledge” (Davenport, 2005). Given that this study also sought to unravel dynamics operating at the group level (e.g., the role of group norms), the sampling frame also included information about work team membership and team supervision. The original sampling frame consisted of 1824 individuals working in 230 work teams ranging from 2 to 11 members. These individuals were invited to complete an online survey during regular working hours.

Following Van der Vegt and Janssen (2003), a work team was defined as a group of employees who (1) reported to the same supervisor; and (2) worked together on a permanent basis. Especially the latter criterion was important, with a number of consultants working off-site or in temporary project teams. Given that the human resources departments of the organizations were not always able to provide this information, we included a question on temporary team membership and off-site work in our survey. Individuals who indicated being
member of a temporary team or working off-site, were excluded from the analyses, which resulted in a final sample of 991 employees, working in 185 teams (i.e., a response rate of 54%). On average, employees had held their current job for 2.5 years and had worked in their organization for 3.7 years, of which 3.3 years in their current team. Fifty-six percent were women, and their average age was 33 years.

**Measures**

**Feedback-seeking behavior.** Several scales exist to assess feedback-seeking behavior, most of which distinguish between the tactics used to seek feedback (inquiry versus monitoring) (e.g. Ashford, 1986) and between the content of the feedback sought (positive or negative) (e.g. VandeWalle et al., 2002). As many studies focus on feedback seeking from supervisors, only a minority of scales distinguishes between the various feedback sources. One example of a scale that distinguishes between the feedback sources is the scale developed by Callister et al. (1999). They adapted Ashford’s (1986) original scales to distinguish between supervisor feedback inquiry and coworker feedback inquiry. Because we sought to assess feedback seeking from other sources as well (e.g., peers in other departments, peers in other organizations), we further adapted Callister et al.’s (1999) scale so that it also captured the four sources of feedback seeking included in our study: (1) supervisor feedback inquiry, (2) coworker feedback inquiry, (3) feedback inquiry from other organizational sources, and (4) feedback inquiry from extra-organizational sources. Using five-point scales ranging from (1) never to (5) very frequently, respondents indicated the extent to which the feedback-seeking statements corresponded to their own behavior. Sample items include: “How frequently do you directly ask your supervisor for feedback about your work?” [Question repeated for each
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of the feedback sources], “How frequently do you directly ask your supervisor for an informal appraisal of your work?” [Question repeated for each of the feedback sources].

The scales measuring feedback inquiry from colleagues in other departments and from extra-organizational sources had not been used previously. Assessing the construct validity of the subscales, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on half of the sample, using principal components analysis with a "varimax" rotation. Inspection of the eigenvalues and screeplots suggested that four factors were represented in the data, corresponding to the four sources of feedback seeking. Finally, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the other half of the data. The CFA indicated a four-factor solution with an excellent fit ($\chi^2 = 38.71, \text{df} = 48, p > .05; \text{NNFI} = .99; \text{CFI} = .99; \text{RMSEA} = .01$). We found a similar acceptable fit for a single second-order factor solution, supporting Morrison’s (1993) suggestion that individuals also have a general tendency to inquire for feedback. Given that the fit was not significantly improved after the inclusion of a higher order factor and given that our hypotheses were formulated at the subscale level, we continued with the four-factor solution and formed four subscales of feedback seeking, representing the four categories of feedback sources. The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas) for these four subscales were satisfactory, ranging from .82 to .89 (alpha coefficients and scale characteristics are presented in Table 3.1).

**Empowering leadership.** Following Srivastava et al. (2006), empowering leadership was measured using a reduced version of Arnold et al.’s (2000) validated empowering leadership scale, consisting of five subscales: (1) lead by example, (2) participative decision making, (3) informing, (4) coaching, and (5) showing concern. A sample item from the scale is “Our manager teaches our team members how to solve problems on our own”. In line with
Srivastava et al. (2006), both an EFA and a CFA on the 15 items revealed a single second-order factor solution with an acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 165.36$, $df = 85$, $p < .01$; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .049). The alpha reliability of the scale was .93.

**Autonomous and controlled goals.** To measure individuals’ goals, we used the measure developed by Bono and Judge (2003). Followers were asked to identify three short-term, job-related goals (i.e., goals that can be accomplished in 60 days). Next, respondents indicated on a five-point scale why they pursued each goal. Sample items include: “You choose this goal because somebody else wants you to or because the situation demands it” (controlled goals); “You pursue this goal because of the enjoyment it provides you” (autonomous goals). Employees were fairly consistent in their reports of autonomous and controlled goals, as demonstrated by Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .69 for controlled and .80 for autonomous goals. In contrast to Bono and Judge (2003), who formed a composite score of goal self-concordance by subtracting the controlled goals score from the autonomous goals score, our EFA and CFA revealed that a two-factor structure captured our data better ($\chi^2 = 16.74$, $df = 8$, $p < .05$; NNFI = .98; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .045). Thus, we continued with the two-factor solution and formed two subscales, representing autonomous goal pursuit and controlled goal pursuit.

**Cooperative group norms.** Existing scales of cooperative group norms focus on norms regarding cooperative behaviors within groups, i.e., norms about cooperation among team members (e.g., Chatman and Flynn, 2002). Inspired by the goal interdependence literature (e.g., Van der Vegt & Janssen, 2003) and the work norms literature (e.g., Wageman, 1995), we further adapted a scale measuring cooperative group norms developed by Chatman and Flynn (2002) so that it assessed individuals’ perceptions of the existence of cooperative work
norms in general. The scale consisted of four items: “We need to collaborate with others to perform our jobs”; “We regularly need to communicate with others about work-related issues”; “Coordinating and cooperating with others is necessary within this team”; “We need information and advice from others to perform our jobs well” ($\alpha = .85$). The EFA and CFA revealed marginal, but acceptable internal consistency ($\chi^2 = 27.08$, df = 2, $p < .05$; NNFI = .94; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .16).

**Control.** Prior research has shown that employees’ tendency to seek feedback largely depends on their work experience (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Black, 1996). In keeping with other feedback-seeking studies, we therefore included job tenure as a control variable in our analyses.

**Level of Analysis and Aggregation of Data**

Following Kozlowski and Klein (2000), we first clarify the level of analysis of the variables under investigation. First, as prior research has shown that leaders develop unique and distinctive relations with their followers, but also have a tendency to behave consistently across their followers, we defined empowering leadership both from a dyadic and from a group perspective. That is, we considered both individual followers’ perceptions of their supervisors as well as group perceptions of leadership. The aggregation of individual perceptions of empowering leadership to a group score was justified, with a mean $r_{wg(j)}$ value of .95, indicating that subordinates had a shared vision of the empowering leadership demonstrated by their supervisor. In addition, ICC values proved to be acceptable (ICC(1) = .29, $p < .05$, ICC(2) = .55).
Autonomous and controlled goals were conceptualized as intra-personal mechanisms and were therefore treated as individual-level variables.

Cooperative norms, which we conceptualized as an interpersonal mechanism, were treated as a group-level variable. The aggregation of individual perceptions of cooperative group norms was justified, with a mean $r_{wg(j)}$ value of .82, indicating that team members shared the same norms regarding cooperation. Again, the ICC values were acceptable (ICC(1) = .16, p < .05, ICC(2) = .33). However, as with empowering leadership, we recognize that perceptions of group norms may vary substantially within groups as well. We therefore also considered them at the individual level.

**Data Analysis and Results**

After the examination of the measurement properties of our variables we studied the regression structure among the constructs, using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) (HLM 6.06) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (LISREL 8.80). Our analyses involved three levels of data: subordinates (level 1), who were nested within teams (level 2) that were nested within organizations (level 3). We conducted two series of analyses: an all-individual level model (i.e., all variables were conceptualized at the individual level) and a cross-level model (with empowering leadership and group norms conceptualized at the group level and all other variables conceptualized at the individual level).

**Individual-Level Analyses**

Given that individual perceptions of empowering leadership were not significantly correlated with all feedback-seeking variables (Table 3.1), we could not test all mediation hypotheses.
based on the criteria proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). However, since Table 3.1 shows a significant relationship between empowering leadership and autonomous goals and between empowering leadership and cooperative norms, we could perform a less conservative test and assess the indirect effect of empowering leadership on the various feedback-seeking behaviors (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Table 3.2 presents the significant standardized coefficients for the hypotheses.

Examination of Table 3.2 shows, as proposed in Hypothesis 1a, that empowering leaders stimulate their followers to pursue autonomous goals ($\beta = .263, p < .001$). That is, followers of empowering leaders were more likely to report working on goals because they are important and because they choose to. In contrast to Hypothesis 1b, however, empowering leadership was not inversely related to followers’ controlled goal pursuit ($\beta = -.055, \text{ns}$). Thus, followers of empowering leaders did not necessarily report less that they worked on goals because they were required to.

As hypothesized, empowering leadership was also positively related to individual followers’ perceptions of cooperative norms within the team (Hypothesis 2) ($\beta = .343, p < .001$). That is, followers of empowering leaders were more likely to report that there were cooperative norms within their work group.

Furthermore, followers with autonomous goals sought more feedback from the various feedback sources, thereby confirming Hypotheses 3a-3d ($\beta = .289$ for supervisor inquiry, $p < .001$; $\beta = .135$ for team inquiry, $p < .001$; $\beta = .123$, $p < .001$ for other organizational sources; and $\beta = .191$, $p < .001$ for extra-organizational sources).
Hypothesis 4, predicting a negative relationship between controlled goals and feedback seeking from coworkers, peers in other departments and extra-organizational sources were partially supported. In support of Hypotheses 4b and 4c, controlled goals tended to be associated with less feedback seeking from peers in other departments (β = -.080, p < .05) and from extra-organizational sources (β = -.066, p < .05). In contrast to what Hypothesis 4a predicted, however, controlled goals were not related to coworker inquiry (β = .053, ns), neither were they related to supervisor inquiry (β = -.011, ns), thereby disconfirming Hypothesis 5.

In support of Hypotheses 7a and 7b, the presence of cooperative norms made followers seek more feedback from their supervisors (Hypothesis 7a) (β = .100, p < .001) and from their coworkers (Hypothesis 7b) (β = .176, p < .001). Furthermore, our exploratory analyses regarding the impact of cooperative group norms on followers’ tendency to seek feedback from other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources revealed that when cooperative norms were present, this was positively related to feedback seeking from other organizational sources (e.g., peers in other departments) (Hypothesis 7c) (β = .151, p < .001), but not to feedback inquiry from extra-organizational sources (β = .056, ns).

Mediation analyses (Hypotheses 6 and 8). Finally, we tested whether autonomous goals and cooperative norms mediate the effects of empowering leadership on feedback seeking from supervisors and coworkers (note that we could not test for mediation for other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources given the non significant path from empowering leadership to these variables). Given that our model includes multiple mediators and multiple dependent variables, we used the approach followed by Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) to test these hypotheses. Specifically, we compared two structural equation models: a model
corresponding to the hypothesized model (full mediation) and the same model with direct paths added from empowering leadership to the feedback-seeking behaviors. The initial model (including the non-significant hypothesized paths too) fitted our data well ($\chi^2 = 756.97$, df $= 251$, $p < .05$; NNFI = .96; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .04), as did the saturated model (including the added direct paths) ($\chi^2 = 719.28$, df $= 247$, $p < .05$; NNFI = .97; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .04). The chi-square difference between the two models was 37.36 (df $= 4$) and significant, which indicates that the two models are significantly different (thereby disconfirming Hypotheses 6 and 8).

Given that our mediation hypotheses were not confirmed, we also tested the *indirect effects* of empowering leadership on the feedback-seeking behaviors (Table 3.3). Indeed, recent research has shown that the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach for testing meditational effects is a very conservative test, because the indirect effect of an independent variable on an outcome variable can still be significant even when they are not significantly correlated (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002).

As Table 3.3 shows, the indirect paths from empowering leadership (via autonomous goals and cooperative norms) to all feedback-seeking behaviors were significant, except for the indirect path from empowering leadership to feedback inquiry from extra-organizational sources via cooperative norms. Thus, the individual-level analyses provide strong support for the indirect impact of empowering leadership on feedback seeking through individuals’ pursuit of autonomous goals and their perceptions of cooperative group norms.
Cross-Level Analyses

As stated, we also conceptualized empowering leadership and cooperative norms at the group-level. Again, we could not test the mediation hypotheses using the criteria proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), because group-level perceptions of empowering leadership were not significantly correlated with all feedback-seeking behaviors. Following the same procedure as with the individual-level analyses, we tested for the indirect effects of group-level empowering leadership on the various feedback-seeking behaviors (Kenny et al., 1998).

Table 3.4 presents the significant standardized coefficients for the cross-level tests. Examination of Table 3.4 shows that the results of the cross-level analyses were largely reminiscent of the individual-level results.

Specifically, as Hypothesis 1a predicted, group-level empowering leadership was found to be positively associated with followers’ goal autonomy ($\beta = .194$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis 1b, predicting a negative relationship between group-level empowering leadership and controlled goals was not supported ($\beta = -.03$, ns).

The results further show that, as hypothesized, group-perceptions of empowering leadership were positively related to group-level cooperative norms (Hypothesis 2) ($\beta = .422$, $p < .001$).

In a next step, we assessed whether followers’ goals and group-level norms were related to individual team member’s feedback-seeking patterns. Here, we found that goal autonomy was positively related to feedback seeking from the various feedback sources (Hypothesis 3a – 3d) ($\beta = .302$ for supervisor inquiry, $p < .001$; $\beta = .166$ for team inquiry, $p < .001$; $\beta = .142$,
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Hypothesis 4, predicting a negative relationship between controlled goals and feedback seeking from coworkers, peers in other departments and extra-organizational sources were only partially supported. In support of Hypothesis 4c, controlled goals were associated with significantly less feedback seeking from peers in other departments (β = -.09, p < .05). In contrast to what Hypotheses 4a and 4b predicted, however, controlled goals were not inversely related to coworker inquiry (β = .051, ns), to extra-organizational inquiry (β = -.05, ns), nor were they related to more supervisor inquiry (β = -.002, ns), thereby disconfirming Hypothesis 5.

We also found that group-level cooperative norms made followers seek more feedback from their supervisors (Hypothesis 7a) (β = .165, p < .001), and from their coworkers (Hypothesis 7b) (β = .223, p < .001). Our exploratory analyses regarding the impact of cooperative norms on feedback inquiry from other organizational sources and from extra-organizational sources showed that these paths were not significant (β = .107, ns for other organizational sources, and β = .134, ns for extra-organizational sources).

As with the individual-level analyses, we could not test for mediation following the Baron and Kenny (1986) method, because group empowering leadership was not related to the various feedback-seeking variables. Again, we performed a less conservative test and assessed the indirect effects of empowering leadership via autonomous (individual) goals and cooperative (group) norms (note that we did not test the indirect effect of empowering leadership via controlled goals, as group empowering leadership was not related to controlled
goals). As Table 3.5 shows, the indirect relationships between empowering leadership and the feedback-seeking variables through autonomous (individual) goals and cooperative (group) norms were all significant, with two exceptions. Empowering leadership did not indirectly affect subordinates’ inquiry from other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources through cooperative group norms (only through autonomous individual goals).

In sum, by and large, the cross-level analyses revealed the same pattern of results that were found at the individual level. More specifically, the results show that empowering leaders influence their followers’ feedback-seeking behaviors through two mechanisms: an individual mechanism (autonomous goals) and an interpersonal mechanism (cooperative norms).

**Discussion**

The objective of this study was to examine the intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms through which leaders shape the feedback-seeking behaviors of their followers. The results show that empowering leaders indirectly influence their followers’ selection of feedback sources through the stimulation of autonomous goals and cooperative group norms.

**Theoretical Implications**

This study extends previous research in several ways. First, our finding that empowering leadership has a strong indirect influence on employees’ use of feedback sources is important, as previous research has narrowly and dyadically focused on how leadership impacts only supervisor inquiry. By showing that empowering leaders indirectly affect their followers’ selection of various feedback sources, this study not only contributes to the feedback-seeking
literature, but also provides indirect empirical support for Higgins and Kram’s (2001) proposition that in the current career context, employees rely on multiple individuals for advice, guidance and feedback. A consideration of the various sources of feedback and developmental interactions is important given the increased importance attached to horizontal knowledge-sharing, teamwork and cross-organizational networking in contemporary organizations (Drucker, 1994; Higgins & Kram, 2001).

Second, whereas prior work has mainly focused on the intra-personal mechanisms that underlie feedback-seeking behavior, this study has also revealed some of the interpersonal mechanisms that shape the feedback-seeking process. Both the leadership style of the seekers’ supervisor and the presence of cooperative group norms (conceptualized as both individual-level and group-level variables) were found to be related to employees’ selection of (mainly intra-organizational) feedback sources. This finding is important, as prior work has tended to neglect the situational/interpersonal factors affecting feedback seeking (Ashford et al., 2003). The scarce research to the situational/interpersonal factors that shape employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors has typically focused on individual feedback seekers’ perceptions of context factors (e.g., VandeWalle et al., 2000). Our results, together with those of Chen and colleagues (2007) show that the context important for feedback seeking is socially constructed and is an inherently group-level, if not a cross-level phenomenon.

Our finding that followers of empowering leaders tend to seek more feedback from multiple sources within and outside their organization because they have autonomous goals supports Grant and Ashford’s (2008) suggestions that proactive behavior is more likely to occur in situations that stimulate autonomy. Contrary to what we expected, however, having an
empowering leader did not discourage employees’ controlled goal pursuit (neither did their style encourage it). Though unexpected, this finding is consistent with Bono and Judge (2003), who found no relationship between transformational leadership and controlled motivation. It may be that other organizational processes, such as formal reward systems, swamp the effects that leaders have on their followers’ controlled goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This would also suggest that controlled goals and autonomous goals can coexist and that it may be beneficial for organizations to stimulate autonomous motivation even in the presence of controlled goals. Further research is needed to test this intriguing possibility.

Further, by specifically examining how leaders stimulate autonomous goal pursuit among their followers and nurture cooperative group norms, this research also integrates two major theories regarding the diffusion of leadership: theories that focus on how leaders influence their followers through intra-personal motivational processes (e.g., Shamir et al., 1993) and perspectives that focus on how leaders impact their followers through collective processes (e.g., Hofmann & Jones, 2005).

Further, our finding that empowering leadership is associated with the development of cooperative group norms also has important implications for the literature on the formation of group norms. Within this literature, the role of leaders in nurturing group norms has been widely stipulated (e.g., Feldman, 1984; Taggar & Ellis, 2007), but has rarely explicitly been tested (Taggar & Ellis, 2007). Our study is one of the first to demonstrate the impact of (empowering) leaders on the development of group norms within an organizational context. As such, our results provide insight in how leadership is diffused within organizations.
Finally, this study also has important implications for the proactivity literature. Rather than focusing on the domain-specific mechanisms that underlie the feedback-seeking process (e.g., the perceived costs and benefits of feedback seeking and situational norms pertaining to feedback seeking), we focused on general intra-personal and interpersonal mechanisms that might govern other proactive behaviors as well. For example, our focus on cooperative norms rather than on feedback-seeking norms and on autonomous goals rather than on specific reasons for feedback seeking is consistent with Grant and Ashford’s (2008) recent call for examining antecedents that potentially generalize across various proactive behaviors.

**Managerial Contributions**

Our study provides some important insights for management practice as well. First, from an organization- and team-perspective, our results highlight that it is possible to develop work contexts that encourage employees to seek feedback across a broad range of sources, their supervisors, coworkers and others for advice and guidance. Based on these results, organizations might implement management development programs aimed at developing an empowering leadership style among their managers. Training non-empowering leaders to lead by example, show concern, involve their employees in decision making, inform and coach their subordinates, may help them to foster a climate in which cooperation becomes the norm. Such a norm is not only important in stimulating cooperative behaviors and feedback seeking, but also in enhancing team effectiveness (Srivastava et al., 2006). In the same vein, organizations may also find it useful to screen candidates on their leadership style when selecting supervisors.
Second, our results indicate that cooperative norms are important in stimulating feedback processes within the organization outside of formal supervisory channels (e.g., feedback seeking from immediate coworkers and other organizational sources). Empowering leadership is one way to promote these norms, but as shown by Wageman (1995), cooperative norms can also be encouraged through other work characteristics, such as task definition at the group level, group-level reward systems, etc.

Finally, explicitly paying attention to goal autonomy may also be valuable for organizations, as our results indicate that goal autonomy leads to the consultation of the widest variety of feedback sources. As theorized in the creativity literature, this might be very beneficial for organizations, as individuals’ network variety may result in more varied input and enhanced creativity (e.g., Ekvall, 1996; Martin, Allwood, & Hemlin, 2004; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Zhou & George, 2003). Our finding that controlled goals and autonomous goals can coexist highlights that it may be beneficial for organizations to stimulate autonomous motivation even in the presence of controlled goals.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

As with all studies, there are also a number of limitations to be addressed. First, we collected all data using a survey methodology, so common-method biases may have confounded our results (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, our cross-level research design (including both individual-level as group-level variables), allowed us to deal with consistency issues that would have emerged if we had only explored individual-level dynamics. In addition, most of our findings are consistent with laboratory studies exploring
the links between leadership, goals, norms and feedback-seeking behaviors (e.g., Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Butler, 1993; Levy et al., 2002).

Second, our focus on knowledge workers may limit the generalizability of our results. For example, our results may not generalize to populations other than knowledge workers. However, as noted by VandeWalle et al. (2002), this should result in a more conservative test of the hypotheses, as the variance of our variables can be restricted. Future research should nevertheless replicate our findings using other samples.

Causal effects can also not be assessed with our data. In fact, it may be that some of the relationships we found may operate in reverse. For example, it may be that empowering leaders do not promote individual goal autonomy, but that when employees pursue autonomous goals and demonstrate high levels of ownership over their goals, their leaders may demonstrate an empowering leadership style in response. In contrast, if employees are disinterested, managers may choose a leadership style that focuses on manager control, rather than on self-direction (Srivastava et al., 2006). Given the cross-sectional character of our study, we were not able to test this hypothesis. Longitudinal research designs may overcome this limitation of our study.

Further, though most cross-level dynamics were similar to the patterns of results we found at the individual level, there were some inconsistencies as well. For example, our individual-level tests indicated that through cooperative norms, empowering leaders influenced subordinates’ tendency to seek feedback from supervisors, immediate coworkers and other organizational sources, but not from extra-organizational sources; while at the group-level, empowering leaders indirectly influenced supervisor inquiry and coworker inquiry, but not
inquiry from other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources. We do not know why the results we found at the group-level differed from those at the individual level, but our sample for the individual-level analyses was relatively big, which makes it easier to find statistically significant relationships. In this regard, our cross-level analyses provide a more conservative test of our hypotheses.

We also wish to point out that it is not only important to assess how goals and group norms shape feedback-seeking patterns, but also how they shape the outcomes of feedback seeking. For example, it could be that individuals with autonomous goals are more likely to use the feedback they sought to improve their performance. Along these lines, group norms may shape how feedback-seeking acts are evaluated by others, which in turn may shape general appraisals of feedback seekers (Chau, Dahling, Swee, & Levy, 2008).

The present study also does not provide insight in the outcomes of feedback seeking from various sources. Though prior work suggests that feedback seeking has a positive impact on important employee outcomes (Ashford et al., 2003), this does not necessarily imply that seeking feedback from a wide variety of feedback sources is equally beneficial. Grant and Ashford (2008) suggested that employees who seek feedback indiscriminately (e.g., from a wide variety of feedback sources) may pick up a lot of irrelevant information as well. Future research should therefore explore how employees’ variety in feedback sources affects employee performance.

Finally, this study only focused on social sources of feedback seeking. We note, however, that employees may also seek feedback from impersonal feedback sources (e.g. documents or the tasks they are performing). Similarly, another source of feedback may be the “self”
That is, individuals may not only track their goal progress through feedback seeking from others, but also by self-appraisal. Campbell and Lee (1988) noted that the motivation underlying self-appraisal is purely intrinsic (i.e., autonomous), while feedback-seeking research shows that the motives underlying feedback seeking are often both intrinsic and extrinsic (Ashford et al., 2003). This suggests that individuals with autonomous goals may value self-appraisal even more than feedback seeking from others.

**Conclusion**

As hypothesized, the results of this study show that empowering leaders shape the feedback-seeking behaviors of their followers through the stimulation of autonomous goals and cooperative group norms. Followers of empowering leaders were more likely to report that they worked on autonomous goals, which in turn made them seek feedback from a wide variety of feedback sources, both within and outside their work group and organization. Followers of empowering leaders were also more likely to report the existence of cooperative group norms within their work group. These norms in turn shaped employees’ tendency to seek feedback from the various feedback sources in their work group. These findings not only contribute to the feedback-seeking literature, but also extend our understanding of the diffusion of leadership, group norms and goals in organizations.
Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth

References.


Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth


Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth


Chapter 3 (Empirical Study 1): The Feedback Seeker in his Social Labyrinth


Figure 3.1: Conceptual model

- **Context (individual & group level)**
  - Empowering leadership

- **Intra-personal mechanism (individual level)**
  - Autonomous goals
  - Controlled goals

- **Interpersonal mechanism (individual & group level)**
  - Cooperative norms

- **Feedback-seeking behavior**
  - Sources:
    - Supervisor
    - Coworkers
    - Other organizational sources
    - Extra-organizational sources
Table 3.1: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for hypothesis testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual level</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Empowering leadership (individual level)</td>
<td>3.79 (.61)</td>
<td>3.93 (.66)</td>
<td>3.12 (.74)</td>
<td>3.60 (.74)</td>
<td>2.99 (.94)</td>
<td>3.03 (.87)</td>
<td>2.32 (.87)</td>
<td>2.32 (.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Autonomous goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Controlled goals</td>
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<td>4) Cooperative norms (individual level)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) Inquiry Supervisor</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6) Inquiry Coworkers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7) Inquiry Other Org. Members</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8) Inquiry External Sources</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross level</th>
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<tr>
<td>2) Autonomous goals (individual)</td>
<td>3.93 (.66)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Controlled goals (individual)</td>
<td>3.12 (.83)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Cooperative norms (group level)</td>
<td>3.60 (.74)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Inquiry Supervisor (individual)</td>
<td>2.99 (.94)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Inquiry Coworkers (individual)</td>
<td>3.03 (.87)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Inquiry Other Org. Members (individual)</td>
<td>2.32 (.87)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Inquiry External Sources (individual)</td>
<td>2.32 (.95)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
The diagonal values (between brackets) represent the alpha-reliability coefficients.
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.
*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.
### Table 3.2: Individual-level analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Empowering Leadership</th>
<th>Autonomous Goals</th>
<th>Controlled Goals</th>
<th>Cooperative Norms</th>
<th>Job Tenure (Months in position)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-level tests</strong></td>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
<td><strong>β</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1: Linking the Independent variables to the Dependent Variables</strong>&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.353**</td>
<td>.289**</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>.100**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.201**</td>
<td>.135**</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>.176**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.123**</td>
<td>-.080*</td>
<td>.151**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.191**</td>
<td>-.066*</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2: Linking Individual-Level Empowering Leadership to the Mediators</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous Goals</td>
<td>.263**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled Goals</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.031*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Norms (individual-level)</td>
<td>.343**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.040*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3: Linking the independent variables &amp; mediators to the dependent Variables</strong>&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.276**</td>
<td>.241**</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td>.038</td>
<td>-.064**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.122*</td>
<td>.114**</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.152**</td>
<td>-.081**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>.129**</td>
<td>-.080*</td>
<td>.157**</td>
<td>.053*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources</td>
<td>-.015</td>
<td>.193**</td>
<td>-.090*</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>-.067**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

* For each of the feedback-seeking variables, two separate HLM analyses were conducted: one with empowering leadership as the independent variable and one with autonomous goals, controlled goals and cooperative norms as the independent variables.

* Mediation analyses for other organizational sources and extra-organizational sources were not possible, as empowering leadership was not related to these variables.

* p < .05
** p < .01
### Table 3.3: Test of individual-level indirect effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual-level indirect paths</th>
<th>Indirect Effect</th>
<th>z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Autonomous Goals → Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>5.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Autonomous Goals → Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>3.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Autonomous Goals → Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Autonomous Goals → Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>3.77*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Cooperative Norms → Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.42*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Cooperative Norms → Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>4.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Cooperative Norms → Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>3.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership → Cooperative Norms → Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources a</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note:_

a. This was a ‘redundant’ test, since the path from cooperative norms to inquiry from extra-organizational sources was not significant

* p < .05
Table 3.4: Cross-level analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-level tests</th>
<th>Empowering Leadership (group)</th>
<th>Autonomous Goals (individual)</th>
<th>Controlled Goals (individual)</th>
<th>Cooperative Norms (group)</th>
<th>Job Tenure (individual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>β</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Step 1: Linking the Independent variables to the Dependent Variables**

- Supervisor Inquiry: .394**, .302**, -.002, .165*
- Coworker Inquiry: .277**, .166**, .051, .223**
- Inquiry Other Organizational Sources: .133, .142**, -.09*, .107
- Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources: .205, .140**, -.05, .134

**Step 2: Linking Group-Level Empowering Leadership to the Mediators**

- Autonomous Goals: .194**, -.028*
- Controlled Goals: -.03, .021
- Cooperative Norms (group – level): .422**, -.019

**Step 3: Linking the Independent Variables & Mediators to the Dependent Variables**

- Supervisor Inquiry: .323**, .288**, .01, .045, -.065*
- Coworker Inquiry: .178**, .160**, .039, .159*, -.09*
- Inquiry Other Organizational Sources: .066, .140**, -.08, .086, .044*
- Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources: .136, .136**, -.04, .086, -.033

**Note:**

a. For each of the feedback-seeking variables, two separate HLM analyses were conducted: one with empowering leadership as the independent variable and one with autonomous goals, controlled goals and cooperative norms as the independent variables; Job tenure was always included as the control variable.

b. This analyses was done using linear regression.

*. p < .05

**, p < .01
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-level indirect paths</th>
<th>Indirect Effect</th>
<th>z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Autonomous Goals → Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>2.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Autonomous Goals → Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Autonomous Goals → Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Autonomous Goals → Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>2.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Cooperative Group Norms → Supervisor Inquiry</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>2.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Cooperative Group Norms → Coworker Inquiry</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>2.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Cooperative Group Norms → Inquiry Other Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering Leadership Climate → Cooperative Group Norms → Inquiry Extra-Organizational Sources</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*. p < .05
CHAPTER 4 (STUDY 2): FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR AS A SELF-REGULATION STRATEGY FOR CREATIVE PERFORMANCE

By Katleen E. M. DE STOBBELEIR, Susan J. ASHFORD, and Dirk BUYENS

Abstract

Using a sample of 456 supervisor-employee dyads from 4 organizations, this study addresses our second research objective by examining how employees use feedback seeking as a self-regulation strategy to manage their creative performance. As hypothesized, employees’ cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity affected two patterns of their feedback seeking, i.e., their tendency to inquire for feedback from various sources and their propensity to monitor their environment for indirect feedback cues. Feedback inquiry from various sources further related to supervisor ratings of employee creative performance.

These results highlight the importance of studying employees’ self-regulatory behaviors in the creative process and support the proposition that feedback seeking is not only a strategy that facilitates individual adaptation, but also an individual resource that can help individuals to achieve creative outcomes.\(^\text{10}\)

Keywords: SELF-REGULATION, FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR, EMPLOYEE CREATIVITY, COGNITIVE STYLE, PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR CREATIVITY.

\(^{10}\) Note: Footnotes, tables and figures of this paper can be found at the end of this chapter
Chapter 4 (Study 2): Feedback-Seeking Behavior and Creative Performance

Introduction

“\textit{The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources}”. - Albert Einstein

As the above quote by Albert Einstein highlights, creativity is far from a solitary process. Recent theory and research on employee creativity show that creative outcomes are often the result of employees’ social interactions, mentoring relationships and collaborations with others (e.g., Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta, & Kramer, 2004; Ford, 1996; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Tierney & Farmer, 2004; Zhou & George, 2003). Via their interactions, employees are exposed to new perspectives, which enhance their domain-relevant knowledge and facilitate the generation of unique ideas and solutions (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). Not all interactions necessarily affect creativity, however. Feedback exchanges in particular, i.e., the exchange of evaluative information about (creative) performance, impact the creative process considerably (see Zhou, 2008 for a recent review). For example, there is convergent evidence that providing task-focused developmental feedback in an informative and constructive manner stimulates employee creativity, while the delivery of negative and controlling feedback undermines employees’ creative performance (e.g., Amabile, 1996; Carson & Carson, 1993; Zhou, 1998; Zhou et al., 2003).

As noted by Zhou (2008), however, studies investigating the role of feedback in the creative process have tended to focus on dyadic feedback exchanges that occur within the immediate work context of the employee (e.g., supervisor feedback), without considering the multiple sources from whom individuals receive feedback, both within and beyond their immediate
job context (e.g., clients, peers in other organizations). In addition, the majority of creativity research has conceived feedback as a context factor, i.e., as information that is in essence available or not available to employees (e.g., Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Zhou, 1998; Zhou & George, 2003). By doing so, the literature has delineated the boundary conditions for the effective delivery of feedback on creative work, but has tended to disregard that employees also actively manage their own performance by proactively seeking out feedback in many ways and from a wide variety of feedback sources (see Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; VandeWalle, 2003, for recent reviews).

This self-regulation perspective, conceiving feedback as an individual resource rather than as a context factor has received little attention in the creativity literature. Analogously, within the feedback-seeking literature, no studies have explored the role of feedback seeking in the creative process. Indeed, despite Ashford and Cummings’ (1983) initial focus on employee proactivity in their conceptualization of feedback seeking, this behavior has generally been depicted as an adaptive strategy to facilitate individual conformance to the demands of their organization (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996; Parker & Collins, in press) rather than as an individual resource that can help individuals to achieve creative outcomes. In Ashford et al.’s (2003, p. 794) words: “The general tone of feedback-seeking literature has been one of seeking to survive, to fit in, and to tailor oneself to the prevailing view held by others in the organization”.

In response to the above issues, the present study invokes a self-regulation perspective on creative performance by exploring the role of feedback-seeking behavior in the creative process. We develop and test a model (Figure 4.1) that integrates and extends previous creativity research by simultaneously considering individual traits and context factors as
antecedents of creativity and by identifying feedback-seeking behavior as an underlying mechanism through which these antecedents affect creative performance. In keeping with previous creativity research (e.g., Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), we propose that the individual difference variable of a cognitive style (Kirton, 1994) and the context factor of perceived organizational support for creativity (Scott & Bruce, 1994; Zhou & George, 2001) independently and interactively affect two elements of employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors, i.e., their overall propensity to inquire for feedback from various sources and their tendency to monitor their environment for indirect feedback cues. Employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors are in turn expected to influence (supervisor ratings of) employee creativity, which we define as employees’ generation of novel and useful ideas regarding work related procedures and processes (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1991; Zhou & George, 2003).

Theory and Research Background

Self-Regulation for Creative Performance

In the past decade, considerable research efforts have been invested in identifying and describing the individual and contextual factors that facilitate and hinder creative performance. Literature reviews have consistently concluded that employee creativity is a function of the employee’s individuality, of features of the context surrounding the employee, and of the interaction between the two (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003; Shalley & Zhou, 2008; Shalley et al., 2004; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). Regarding individual differences, research has identified a number of personality characteristics and traits that are likely to be
associated with creative outcomes. For example, research shows that individuals who tend to be more flexible in absorbing information (McCrae & Costa, 1997), prefer to solve problems in innovative ways (Kirton, 1976, 1994), and are more open to new experiences (Feist, 1998), exhibit more creativity. Regarding the contextual factors affecting employee creativity, the key finding is that managers and organizations can build work environments that support employee creativity by setting creativity work goals, making creativity a job requirement, providing developmental feedback on creative goal progress, and rewarding employees when they achieve creative outcomes (Amabile & Mueller, 2008; Paulus, 2008; Shalley, 2008; Shalley & Liu, 2007; Tierney, 2008; West & Richter, 2008; Zhou, 2008).

Considering this impressive support for how employee traits and managerial actions affect employee creativity, it is surprising that so little is known about the actions employees take to manage their own creative performance (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999; Mumford, 2000). For example, a widely described, but relatively understudied phenomenon within the creativity literature is the notion of individual creative cognitive processing, i.e., the cognitive and behavioral process of analyzing problems, preparing to solve issues, generating ideas, and evaluating these ideas (Amabile & Mueller, 2008; Drazin et al., 1999; Drazin, Kazanjian, & Glynn, 2008). While the mainstream literature assumes that such a process takes place and that employees behaviorally attempt to produce creative outcomes, empirically, we know little about the specific strategies employees use to manage their creative performance and how these relate to actual creative performance (Drazin et al., 2008; Ruscio, Whitney, & Amabile, 1998).

The view that employees actively manage their creative performance resonates with self-regulation theory, a general framework that highlights individuals’ ability to guide their own
goal-directed activities and performance, by setting their own standards and monitoring their progress toward these standards (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Self-regulation theory has been applied to a variety of organizational phenomena, including managerial work (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Tsui & Ashford, 1994), employee socialization (Ashford & Black, 1996), and employee performance (Porath & Bateman, 2006; VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1999). On the basis of self-regulation theory’s proven use for studying organizational phenomena, we believe that it also offers a promising lens for studying employee creativity.

One key self-regulation tactic that has been identified in literature is feedback-seeking behavior, i.e., individual’s proactive search for evaluative information about their performance (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Porath & Bateman, 2006). Two elements suggest that feedback-seeking behavior may be central to the creative process. First, research has shown that feedback given to a performer can be used as a tool to promote and nurture employee creativity (Zhou, 2008). However, in the dynamic world of work where creativity and innovation have become sources of competitive advantage, organizations may not always be able to systematically pre-define and pre-specify the goals that employees need to achieve (Ashford et al., 2003). Because of the ambiguity accompanying creative work, evaluating employees’ creative performance has become an increasingly intricate task for managers (Shalley, 2008). To the extent that these factors constrain system-level feedback, today’s organizations largely depend on employees’ own self-regulation efforts to acquire feedback (Ashford et al., 2003; Tsui & Ashford, 1994).

Second, the creative process has a marked social character (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). It is one where individuals outside employees’ immediate work setting are important
contributors to employees’ creative performance (Madjar, 2005; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002). Indeed, research shows that employees’ interactions with individuals with different expertise, e.g., with individuals from different departments and organizations, are an important source of new ideas (Madjar, 2005; Madjar et al., 2002). These external sources may not always provide their feedback spontaneously, however. They may not be aware of the employee’s need for advice and guidance (Higgins & Kram, 2001) or they may feel that they have not formal authority to provide feedback. As such, actively seeking feedback from these sources may be the only way for performers to obtain this crucial external input.

Hence, while managers can use feedback as a tool to stimulate and foster employee creativity (Zhou, 2008), the above two realities suggest employees too can seek and use feedback in managing their own creative performance.

Feedback-Seeking Behavior and Employee Creativity

Ashford and Cummings (1983) distinguished several patterns of feedback seeking that warrant research. An important pattern of feedback seeking involves the tactics used by individuals to seek feedback (Ashford et al., 2003). Employees can seek feedback using either the tactic of inquiry, which involves direct and verbal requests for performance evaluations, or the more covert tactic of monitoring, which involves examining the environment for indirect feedback cues (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Our framework argues that individuals can use these two tactics to attain creative outcomes. Below we elaborate on our rationale for including these patterns of feedback seeking.
Inquiry from various sources. A first tactic that individuals may use to manage their creative performance, is directly asking others for feedback. For example, employees may deliberately choose to ask multiple sources for feedback, because this may help them to get more diverse insights. The view that seeking feedback from a various set of feedback sources may contribute to an employee’s creative performance is consistent with social networks theory that suggests that individuals who are connected to a diverse set of individuals may acquire more varied input, which may result in the generation of more creative ideas (Perry-Smith, 2006; 2008).

Thus, while employees’ main feedback sources tend to be their supervisors (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995), to attain creative outcomes, employees may also solicit feedback from immediate coworkers, other organizational sources (e.g., peers in other departments) and extra-organizational sources (e.g., peers in other organizations).

So far, feedback-seeking researchers have focused primarily on employees’ feedback source preferences (e.g. Ashford & Tsui, 1991) and on the source characteristics that influence these preferences (e.g. Levy, Cober, & Miller, 2002; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995; Williams, Miller, Steelman, & Levy, 1999). For example, studying feedback seekers’ sources for feedback seeking, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that managers tend to seek more feedback from supervisors than from peers and subordinates. Exploring the underlying mechanisms of these results in the laboratory, Vancouver and Morrison (1995) found that several source characteristics, including their reward power, accessibility and expertise, trigger feedback seekers' preferences for certain sources. While these results highlight that individuals discriminate between the various feedback sources and favor supervisors as sources of
feedback, no studies have explicitly assessed whether individuals also differ in their overall propensities to seek feedback across the various sources. On the basis of the logic that feedback seeking from various sources may be an important self-regulation strategy that employees use to obtain new input, we include employees’ tendency to inquire feedback from various sources in our framework.

**Feedback Monitoring.** To this point, we have implied that the self-regulation of creative performance involves that employees directly ask others for feedback via the tactic of inquiry. However, employees may also seek feedback using other tactics, such as the tactic of monitoring, i.e., employees’ observation of indirect cues within their environment to obtain indirect feedback about how they are doing (Ashford & Cummings, 1983).

Building on research that has shown that individuals can increase their overall effectiveness by monitoring their environment for indirect cues (Ashford & Tsui, 1991), we believe that this tactic may also be valuable for employees who desire to achieve creative goals. For example, in the early stages of the creative process, such as the incubation phase (i.e., the phase of reflecting on an issue until a novel solution emerges) (Perry-Smith, 2008; Zhou & George, 2003), employees may believe that their ideas need further elaboration and refinement before they can directly ask others for feedback on them. Direct requests for feedback might entail image costs, especially when the seeker is not (yet) performing well (Larson, 1989; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). By attending to other, more indirect cues in their environment, individuals may overcome some of the potential image costs associated with inquiring for feedback on their ideas, while still attaining the feedback they need to further develop them.
Innovative Orientation and Feedback-Seeking Behavior

Not all individuals may be equally motivated to use feedback seeking as a strategy to manage their creative performance. Building on research that suggests that certain individuals may be predisposed to behave creatively (see Shalley et al., 2004 for a review), we expect that employees’ tendency to seek feedback will in part be determined by their cognitive style, i.e., their preferred way of gathering, structuring and applying information (Hodgkinson & Sadler-Smith, 2003; Kirton, 1976, 1994). This variable has been studied extensively as an antecedent of creative performance in the creativity literature (e.g., Tierney et al., 1999).

While debate exists about the dimensionality of cognitive styles (Cools & Van den Broeck, 2007; Hodgkinson & Sadler-Smith, 2003), the perspective most frequently adopted in the creativity literature is Kirton’s (1994), who uses a bipolar continuum to distinguish between two general orientations: (1) an adaptive style, characterized by a pronounced preference for accurate information, facts, figures, and conventional theories and procedures; and (2) an innovative style, characterized by an orientation toward risk-taking, divergent thinking and creative problem-solving. Empirical work shows that a cognitive style directly and interactively (i.e., in interaction with context variables) impacts employee creativity. For example, Tierney et al. (1999) found that in addition to exerting main effects, an innovative style interacted with employees’ high-quality relationships with supervisors in impacting several indicators of creative performance.

One limitation of prior studies, however, is that they do not examine why cognitive styles affect creative performance. Presumably, cognitive styles affect employee creativity through their impact on employee behaviors that enable creative performance. For example,
individuals with an innovative style may be better at seeking out and combining new information, which may permit them to achieve more creative outcomes (Shalley et al., 2004).

We propose that individuals’ cognitive style will affect both employees’ propensity to inquire for feedback from various sources and their tendency to monitor their environment for indirect feedback cues.

For example, by definition, adaptors value information and facts and figures. Intuitively, one could expect that they would also value evaluative information about their own performance and actively seek it out. Adaptors, however, tend to be more introverted than individuals with an innovative style (McKinnel Jacobson, 1993). Given that adaptors tend to be more socially inhibited, it seems unlikely that they would spontaneously inquire for feedback. This does not necessarily imply that they would seek feedback via the tactic of monitoring, though. Adaptors tend to value unbiased and impersonal information, such as facts and figures (Kirton, 1994), while the feedback that is sought via the tactic of monitoring is much more impressionistic and may be biased and inaccurate (Ashford et al., 2003; Brown, Ganesan, & Challagalla, 2001; Morrison & Bies, 1991). Moreover, adaptors only value and conform to others’ opinions to the extent that these others exert formal control over their (work) goals and rewards (Houtz, Selby, Esquive, Okoye, Peters, & Treffinger, 2003; Isaksen, Lauer, & Wilson, 2003). This should make supervisor feedback important to adaptors, but decrease the importance of feedback from sources with less formal reward power, such as team members, peers, and extra-organizational sources. That is, while adaptors may value the feedback that they receive from supervisors, we expect their overall tendency to actively seek feedback (both via inquiry and via monitoring) to be rather limited.
Innovators, on the other hand, tend to be more externally oriented, more aware of their social environment and more sensitive to others’ opinions (Houtz et al., 2003, Isaksen et al., 2003). Given their interpersonal orientation and interest in others’ opinions, innovators should also be interested in how others evaluate them. In addition, rather than solely attending to individuals with formal reward power, innovators tend to be independent thinkers, who prefer self-direction based on the information they acquire from diverse sources and in diverse ways (Houtz et al., 2003; Kwang, Ang, Ooi, Shin, Oei, & Leng, 2005). Innovators also tend to value personal information, even though this information tends to be biased (Kirton, 1994). This also suggests that they will not be reluctant to use a tactic such as monitoring, if it can provide them with this type of information. Accordingly, we expect that individuals with a more innovative style will be more interested in others’ feedback and will try to acquire this feedback by actively monitoring their environment and directly asking others for feedback. Thus:

\textit{Hypothesis 1: Employees’ cognitive styles will affect their general propensity to seek feedback such that:}

1a. The more individuals endorse an innovative cognitive style, the more they will inquire for feedback from the various feedback sources available to them.

1b. The more individuals endorse an innovative cognitive style, the more they will seek feedback via the tactic of monitoring.
Building on theory and research suggesting that supportive contexts encourage both employee creativity (see Shalley et al., 2004 for a review) and feedback-seeking behavior (Ashford et al., 2003), we expect that employees’ tendency to seek feedback will also be determined by their perceptions of their organizational context. We focus on employees’ perceptions of organizational support for creativity as this variable has already been identified as a direct antecedent of creative performance in the creativity literature (Zhou & George, 2001). Little is known, however, about the mechanisms through which an organizational context that supports creativity impacts creative performance.

Theoretically, contextual conditions are believed to influence creativity via their effects on employees’ intrinsic motivation (Shalley et al., 2004). However, the studies that have examined the mediating role of intrinsic motivation have yielded inconsistent results (e.g., Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001). In response to these inconsistent results, Shalley and colleagues (2004) suggested that contextual characteristics may not affect creativity via intrinsic motivation but via alternative mechanisms (Shalley et al., 2004). We believe that feedback-seeking behavior may be one such mechanism.

Though organizational support for creativity has not been directly related to employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors, Ashford et al. (2003) alluded to the possible role of a supportive organizational context in the feedback-seeking process. They argued that when an organizational context supports feedback seeking, employees will experience few negative consequences when they directly ask for feedback. This view is empirically supported by research showing that supportive contexts neutralize employees’ image concerns about
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raising issues in organizations, a process that also tends to entail image concerns (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit & Dutton, 1998).

In addition to reducing the image costs of feedback seeking within the organization, however, we believe that specifically a context that supports creativity will stimulate employees to seek feedback from a wider variety of feedback sources, because contexts that support creativity encourage employees to process information from diverse sources, explore alternatives and build informal networks (West & Richter, 2008). As such, the organization is likely to convey that when creativity is the goal, employees’ developmental needs may not only be met by individuals within their immediate work group (e.g., their supervisor or immediate coworkers), but also by individuals in other departments and even by individuals beyond their own organization (Cole, Shaninger, & Harris, 2002).

Similarly, in addition to stimulating feedback seeking from diverse sources, a supportive context may also stimulate employees to be more attentive to indirect feedback cues about their performance. Employees working in supportive contexts tend to feel that their organization accepts employee feedback and that management throughout the organization is continuously open and attuned to employees’ suggestions for improvement (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Zhou & George, 2001). Employees may respond to this organizational attentiveness to feedback by being more open to feedback themselves and by monitoring their environment for feedback on a more continuous basis. Indeed, research in related areas suggests that employees tend to reciprocate the presence of perceived organizational support by engaging in continuous learning behaviors, e.g., by participating in developmental experiences that are beneficial to the organization (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), seeking organization-relevant information, learning important work skills (Rhoades & Eisenberger,
2002), and engaging in self-reflection (West & Richter, 2008). All these elements suggest a possible role of a supportive climate in the feedback-seeking process. Accordingly:

**Hypothesis 2:** Perceived organizational support for creativity is positively associated with employees’ feedback-seeking behavior, such that:

2a. The more employees perceive organizational support for creativity, the more they will inquire for feedback from the various sources.

2b. The more employees perceive organizational support for creativity, the more they will seek feedback via the tactic of monitoring.

**The Joint Effects of Perceived Organizational Support for Creativity and an Innovative Style**

Our framework also argues that the effect of perceived organizational support for creativity on employees’ tendency to seek feedback from various sources (and ultimately on creative performance) is a function of the employee’s cognitive style. Only a handful of studies have explicitly looked at the interaction effects of a cognitive style and context factors on employee creativity (Baer, Oldham, & Cummings, 2003; Tierney et al., 1999). In addition, as pointed out by Zhou (2003), the research exploring person-context interactions has one-sidedly focused on identifying the conditions that maximize the creativity of individuals with a creative predisposition (e.g., individuals with an innovative cognitive style) (e.g. Oldham & Cummings, 1996).
Only recently have researchers begun to untangle the conditions that help individuals with less creative predispositions (e.g., individuals with an adaptive style) to perform creatively. For example, in one study, Tierney et al. (1999) found that employees with an adaptive cognitive style were most creative when they maintained high-quality relationships with their supervisors. Similarly, Zhou (2003) found that the joint contribution of supervisor developmental feedback and the presence of creative coworkers was stronger for employees with less creative personalities than for employees with a creative predisposition. While these results suggest that employees’ personality and cognitive styles influence how they respond to contextual factors, they do not explain why individuals with an adaptive personality were able to improve their creative performance under certain conditions.

It is conceivable that under conditions characterized by a high support for creativity, employees with an adaptive cognitive style develop behavioral strategies that help them to improve their creative performance. Contexts that support creativity emphasize that it is important for employees to be creative (Zhou & George, 2001). Given that adaptors tend to be more compliant, and easily influenced by external pressures (Kirton, 1994) adaptors may respond to their organization’s support for creativity by directing their efforts toward creativity (Tierney et al., 1999).

This suggestion is in accordance with theorizing within the cognitive styles literature suggesting that individuals can learn to behave in ways that are not consistent with their habitual cognitive style, i.e., by adopting so-called “cognitive strategies” (i.e., behaviors that are not consistent with one’s cognitive style) (e.g., Sadler-Smith & Badger, 1998). Thus, whereas a cognitive style is a purely individual attribute, context factors may induce
individuals to adopt behavioral strategies that do not necessarily correspond to that cognitive style (Allinson & Hayes, 1996; Sadler-Smith & Badger, 1998).

Specifically, we propose that contexts that support creativity may encourage individuals with an adaptive style to develop the behavioral strategy of feedback seeking. By seeking feedback, individuals with an adaptive style may acquire feedback that helps them to generate more creative ideas and improve their creative performance, regardless of their initial disposition. As stated, supportive contexts may trigger individuals with an adaptive style to develop such a behavioral strategy (Sadler-Smith & Badger, 1998). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*Hypothesis 3:* Cognitive styles and perceived organizational support for creativity interact in impacting employees’ general tendency to seek feedback such that:

3a. Individuals with a more adaptive cognitive style who perceive high support for creativity will inquire more for feedback and inquire from a wider variety of sources than adaptors who perceive little support for creativity.

3b. Individuals with a more adaptive cognitive style who perceive high support for creativity will seek more feedback via monitoring than will adaptors who perceive little support for creativity.

On the basis of this logic, one could expect that synergies would emerge when the organization supports creativity and when the employee has an innovative cognitive style. However, given the little empirical support for this suggestion (e.g., Tierney et al., 1999; Zhou, 2003), we did not hypothesize this interaction effect.
Building on research highlighting the importance of feedback exchanges in the creative process, the second part of our framework argues that individuals who actively seek feedback will be more creative than individuals with no such tendency.

Though no studies have explicitly linked employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors to creative performance, several theories suggest this possibility. For example, drawing on insights derived from the literatures on individual cognition (Ohlsson, 1992), brainstorming (Paulus, Larey, & Dzindolet, 2001) and group diversity (Milliken & Martins, 1996), Madjar (2005) theorized that employees who seek information from individuals within and outside their organization are more creative, because of the variety of information and insights provided by these sources. Also within the realm of social network theory (e.g., Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), empirical work shows that employees who are connected to a diverse set of individuals (Perry-Smith, 2006) are more creative, because they are more likely to receive and share fresh information.

Employees do not always need to communicate with others to obtain such input, however. For example, research conducted from a social cognitive perspective has shown that individuals can learn to think and behave creatively by observing and monitoring creative models (Shalley & Perry-Smith, 2001; Zhou & George, 2003). Thus, diverse information, whether obtained directly (e.g., via inquiry) or indirectly (e.g., via monitoring) cognitively stimulates individuals to think out-of-the-box, consider alternatives and generate more ideas (Madjar, 2005). Building on these suggestions and on the demonstrated impact of feedback on the creative process (see Zhou, 2008 for a recent review), we hypothesize:
Hypothesis 4: Employees’ feedback-seeking behavior affects supervisor ratings of creativity such that:

4a. Employees’ feedback inquiry from various sources is positively related to creative performance.

4b. Employees’ monitoring of their environment for indirect feedback cues is positively related to creative performance.

The Relationship between Traits and Context and Creative Performance

We argued that cognitive styles and perceived organizational support for creativity are directly and interactively related to employees’ tendency to seek feedback, which in turn, is positively related to their creative performance. Previous creativity research has linked cognitive styles and perceived organizational support for creativity to creative performance (e.g., Scott & Bruce, 1994; Tierney & Farmer, 2002). On the basis of this observation, we expect that these factors will also have a direct impact on employees’ creative performance. Linking this suggestion to our four hypotheses, we hypothesize that employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors will mediate the relationship between our independent variables (cognitive styles, perceived organizational support for creativity and their interaction) and creative performance. Because we assume that self-regulatory mechanisms other than feedback seeking may explain the effects of these variables on creative performance, we expect the mediation to be partial.
**Hypothesis 5:** The impact of cognitive styles, perceived organizational support for creativity and their interaction on creative performance is partially mediated by employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

5a. Employees’ tendency to inquire for feedback from various sources partially mediates the impact of a cognitive style, perceived organizational support for creativity and their interaction on creative performance.

5b. Employees’ tendency to monitor their environment for indirect feedback cues partially mediates the impact of a cognitive style, perceived organizational support for creativity and their interaction on creative performance.

### Methodology

**Research Population and Sampling Design**

Data were collected as part of a larger research project on proactivity and feedback dynamics in organizations. The sample consisted of 456 supervisor–subordinate dyads from four consulting firms, each employing between 300 and 800 employees. We focused on the knowledge workers within these firms, as behaving creatively and creating new knowledge are key elements of knowledge workers’ jobs (Davenport, 2005). Two sets of online questionnaires were used: a subordinate survey and a survey for the immediate supervisors of the subordinates. For each of the organizations a sampling frame of knowledge workers was developed in cooperation with the human resources department. The sampling frame included information about the employee’s work group and team supervision.
The original sampling frame consisted of 908 subordinates working for 162 managers who each supervised 3 to 11 members. Employees and their supervisors filled out the online survey during regular working hours. To limit the length of the supervisor survey, supervisors were asked to evaluate the creative performance of at least three of their subordinates, whose names appeared randomly in the survey. After three subordinates had been evaluated, the supervisors had the option of evaluating their other subordinates as well.

122 Supervisors and 661 employees filled out the survey (i.e., a response rate of 73% for both groups) and we obtained 456 usable supervisor–subordinate dyads out of 908 possible dyads (i.e., an overall response rate of 50.2%). Thus, each participating supervisor evaluated on average 3.73 employees\(^1\). On average, the employee sample had held their current job for 2.79 years and had worked in their organization for 3.3 years, of which 2.87 years in their current team. The length of the average dyadic relationship was 2.63 years. Fifty-six percent of our employee sample was female, 76 percent worked fulltime and their average age was 34 years.

**Measures**

**Cognitive style.** We used a 13-item reduced version of the Kirton (1976) Adaptation-Innovation inventory validated by Bagozzi and Foxall (1995) in three different samples. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale ranging from 1 (very hard) to 5 (very easy) how difficult it would be for them to maintain specific types of innovative and adaptive behaviors. A sample item from the scale is “Create something new rather than improve it”. Bagozzi and Foxall’s (1995) results suggest that a three-factor structure (sufficiency of originality, efficiency and rule governance) best fit the data. Consistent with previous
creativity research (e.g., Baer et al., 2003), however, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on our data yielded a single second-order factor solution with an acceptable fit and adequate measurement properties ($\chi^2 = 59.04$, $df = 62$, $p > .05$; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .00). Thus, in keeping with previous research (e.g., Baer et al., 2003), we collapsed the dimensions of the cognitive-styles construct into a composite variable (i.e., a bipolar scale). This composite variable showed adequate reliability ($\alpha = .83$).

**Perceived organizational support for creativity.** Perceived organizational support for creativity was measured using four items that Zhou and George’s (2001) adapted from a scale developed by Scott and Bruce (1994) ($\alpha = .85$). A sample item includes “Creativity is encouraged at [company]”.

**Feedback inquiry from the various sources.** Most feedback-seeking studies assess feedback seeking from supervisors (e.g., Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007) and do not distinguish between the various feedback sources. One notable exception is a scale that Callister, Kramer and Turban (1999) adapted from Ashford’s (1986) original feedback-seeking scales. The scale distinguishes between supervisor feedback inquiry and coworker feedback inquiry. Because we sought to assess feedback seeking from sources beyond even supervisors and immediate coworkers (e.g., peers in other departments, peers in other organizations), we further adapted the scale so that it captured a broader range of others that employees may consult when seeking for feedback (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993): supervisors, coworkers, other organizational sources (e.g., peers in other departments) and extra-organizational sources (e.g., peers in other organizations). Using five-point scales ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*), respondents indicated the extent to which the feedback-seeking statements corresponded to their own behavior. Sample items include:
“How frequently do you directly ask your supervisor for feedback about your work?”
[Question repeated for each of the feedback sources], “How frequently do you directly ask
your supervisor for an informal appraisal of your work?” [Question repeated for each of the
feedback sources]. The scales measuring feedback inquiry from colleagues in other
departments and from extra-organizational sources were developed for this research. We
therefore first conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the feedback-seeking items
on half of the sample, using principal components analysis with a varimax rotation.
Inspection of the eigenvalues and screeplots suggested that four factors were represented in
the data, corresponding to the four sources of feedback seeking. In a next step, we conducted
a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the other half of the data and found an acceptable fit
for a single second-order factor solution, which we labeled “inquiry from various sources” ($\chi^2
= 47.75, \text{df} = 50, p > .05; \text{NNFI} = .99; \text{CFI} = .99; \text{RMSEA} = .00$). This single second-order
factor solution supports Morrison’s (1993) claim that individuals have a general tendency to
seek feedback from various sources. Though we also found a similar acceptable fit for a four-
factor solution, we continued using the higher order factor solution because our hypotheses
were formulated at the aggregate level (i.e., tendency to seek feedback from various sources).
Thus, we collapsed the dimensions of the feedback-seeking construct into a composite of the
four sources of feedback seeking and created an index that captured employees’ general
propensity to seek feedback from the various sources. This composite variable showed
adequate reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

**Feedback monitoring.** Items measuring feedback monitoring were adopted from the scales
developed by Ashford and colleagues (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Eight items
asked how frequently respondents observed and monitored the behaviors of others to obtain
information about their own performance. Sample items include: “How frequently do you
pay attention to how your boss acts toward you in order to understand how he/she perceives and evaluates your work?”; “How frequently do you compare yourself with peers in your organization (i.e., persons at your level within the organization?)”; “How frequently do you compare yourself with peers in other organizations (i.e., persons at your level within other organizations)?” An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on half of the sample and a CFA on the other half of the sample revealed that one factor was represented in the data. Thus, responses to the items were averaged for an overall score of monitoring ($\alpha = .72$).

**Creative performance.** Consistent with prior research, we used supervisor ratings to assess employees’ creative performance (Zhou, 1998; Zhou & George, 2001; Zhou & George, 2003). Using 13 items developed by Zhou (1998), each supervisor rated the creative performance of their subordinates on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristic*) to 5 (*very characteristic*). A sample item taken from the scale includes “Comes up with creative solutions to problems.” Responses to the items were averaged for an overall score of creative performance ($\alpha = .84$).

**Controls.** Prior research has shown that employees’ tendency to seek feedback depends in part on their work experience (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Black, 1996). In keeping with other feedback-seeking studies (e.g., VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2002), we therefore included job tenure as a control variable in our analyses. Consistent with previous creativity research (e.g., Zhou & George, 2003), we also controlled for three additional demographic variables: gender, age, and position in the organization. Finally, to control for the potential effects of the organization and of the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate, we controlled for company membership and the length of the dyadic relationship between the subordinate and his or her supervisor (as reported by the subordinate).
Data Analysis and Results

Data Considerations and Analytical Plan

After inspecting the measurement properties of our variables, we examined several aspects of our data. First, we ensured that the assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, linearity and absence of multicollinearity were met. To deal with multicollinearity caused by the interaction terms, all variables were mean-centered (Aiken & West, 1991). Because of the nested structure of our data (i.e., subordinates are nested within their supervisors, and supervisors’ work groups are nested within organizations) we also needed to check our data for the potential presence of dependence and for supervisor effects on ratings of creative performance (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). To assess dependence within our data, we followed the procedure recommended by Lam, Huang, & Snape (2007) to conduct two series of analyses. In the first series of analyses, we tested our model using a hierarchical multivariate regression procedure in SPSS 15.0. We chose regression over structural equation modeling (SEM) because of the interaction term included in our model. As noted by Jaccard & Wan (1996) interactions are difficult to estimate in SEM. Furthermore, as our measures showed acceptable measurement properties, we felt confident analyzing the data using hierarchical regression (Jaccard & Wan, 1996). In the second set of analyses, we redid the analyses using multilevel modeling (HLM 6.06) to control for the effects caused by the different supervisors. As both series of analyses yielded similar results, we follow the recommended approach to only report the results of the regressions (Lam et al., 2007; Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Oosterhof, 2003).
Results

Table 4.1 presents the means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients and correlations among the study variables.

**Analyses for feedback seeking.** To test Hypotheses 1 to 3, we conducted two series of hierarchical moderated regressions with employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors as the dependent variables. After having entered the control variables step 1, we entered the two hypothesized main effects (cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity) in step 2. The two-way interaction was entered in step 3. Table 4.2 presents the standardized coefficients for hypotheses 1-3.

As shown in Table 4.2, we found support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 ($\Delta R^2 = .07, p < .01$ for inquiry; and $\Delta R^2 = .05, p < .01$ for monitoring). As Hypothesis 1a and 1b suggested, the more employees endorsed an innovative cognitive style (i.e., a high score on cognitive style), the more they inquired feedback from the various feedback sources ($\beta = .19, p < .05$) and the more they monitored their environment for indirect feedback cues ($\beta = .11, p < .05$). In support of Hypothesis 2, we found that perceived organizational support for creativity was positively related to employees’ tendency to inquire for feedback ($\beta = .17, p < .05$) and to the use of the monitoring tactic ($\beta = .18, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 3, predicting an interaction between perceived organizational support for creativity and the employee’s cognitive style in impacting employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors, was not supported ($\beta = -.05, ns; \Delta R^2 = .00, ns$ for inquiry; $\beta = -.02, ns; \Delta R^2 = .00, ns$ for monitoring).
Thus, summarizing Hypotheses 1 to 3, we found that employees’ cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity exerted independent, rather than interactive effects on employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

**Feedback seeking and creative performance.** We next tested whether employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors related to their creative performance. In support of Hypothesis 4a, we found that employees with a general tendency to inquire for feedback from various sources were rated as being more creative by their supervisors ($\beta = .15, p < .05; \Delta R^2 = .03, p < .05$). Hypothesis 4b, predicting that monitoring would also be positively associated with supervisor ratings of creative performance, however, was not supported ($\beta = .06, ns; \Delta R^2 = .00, ns$).

Hypothesis 5 predicted that employees’ tendency to seek feedback would partially mediate the relationship between the independent variables (cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity) and supervisor ratings of their creative performance. Hypothesis 5a was tested using the mediated regression method recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, the independent variables (cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity) needed to be related to both the outcome variable and the mediators.

As Table 4.2 shows, the first condition was met by the significant path coefficients of a cognitive style and perceived organizational support on both creative performance and feedback-seeking behavior. Moreover, the path coefficients of the independent variables were reduced once the mediator, i.e., feedback inquiry was entered into the regression. Given that the path coefficients were not reduced to insignificance (which would have implied full mediation), we performed Sobel tests to test for partial mediation. This analysis indicated that feedback inquiry partially carries the main effect of cognitive style and perceived...
organizational support for creativity on creative performance (Sobel $z = 2.61$, $p < .05$ and Sobel $z = 2.04$, $p < .05$ respectively), thereby confirming hypothesis 5a.

Hypothesis 5b, predicting that monitoring would partially mediate the relationship between the independent variables and creative performance could not be confirmed. Mediation requires that the mediator is significantly related to the outcome variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986), which was not the case for feedback seeking via the tactic of monitoring.

In sum, our results show that the individual characteristic of a cognitive style and the context factor of perceived organizational support for creativity shape employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors and that employees’ efforts to inquire for feedback from the various feedback sources serves as a mediator for these variables’ effects on creative performance.

**Supplementary Analyses**

**Assessment of the structural model.** Given that a cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity did not interact in impacting employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors and creative performance, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to conduct a supplementary analysis to test the mediated model (i.e., without the interaction term). This technique allows for a more conservative test of the hypotheses than the Baron and Kenny (1986) procedure, because it explicitly corrects for measurement error and provides explicit estimates of these parameters (Byrne, 1998).

The indicators and constructs were formed as follows. For constructs with a higher order factor structure, we reduced the number of parameters to be estimated following the partial
aggregation method discussed by Bagozzi and Edwards (1998). This procedure involves averaging the responses of subsets of items measuring a construct. Based on exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, we formed three indicators for cognitive style (representing the three subscales) and four indicators for employees’ feedback-seeking inquiry (representing the four sources). Because monitoring and creative performance were one-dimensional constructs and an exploratory factor analysis would not have permitted us to form composite indicators of these variables we conducted an exploratory factor analyses in which we asked for a three factor solution. The items for each factor were averaged, so that we obtained three indicators for each of these variables. Perceived organizational support for creativity was measured with only 4 items, so, consistent with the total disaggregation model (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) we used the item scores as the indicators for these constructs.

To test our conceptual model, we followed the procedure described by Bagozzi and Bergami (2000). Specifically, we compared a fully mediated model (i.e., Figure 4.1) to a number of alternative models (note that we only hypothesized partial mediation). Though the chi-square test for this baseline model (Figure 4.1) was significant and thus indicated poor fit ($\chi^2 = 312.14$, df = 96, $p < .05$), the other fit indices indicated that our model fitted our data well (NNFI = .93; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06). The significant parameter estimates for this structural model are reported in Figure 4.1. As shown in Figure 4.1, the structural equation analyses support our previous findings that cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity impact employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors and that employees’ inquiry (but not monitoring) is significantly related to creative performance.

In a next step, we compared this baseline model to a number of alternative models to determine whether our model was sufficiently parsimonious and comprehensive. Table 4.3
reports the results from these analyses. First, we compared the baseline model to our hypothesized model, i.e., a partially mediated model. Thus, we added two additional paths to the baseline model: a direct path from cognitive style to creative performance and a direct path from perceived organizational support for creativity to creative performance. This saturated model fitted our data significantly better ($\chi^2 = 288.08$, df = 94, $p > .05$; NNFI = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06; $\Delta \chi^2 (2) = 24.06, p < .01$). Specifically, we found significant path coefficients from both cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity to creative performance ($\beta = .25, p < .05$ for cognitive style, and $\beta = .20, p < .05$ for perceived organizational support for creativity). Thus, the structural equation analyses support our previous findings that feedback inquiry partially mediates the impact of a cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity on creative performance.

Given the non-significant path from monitoring to creative performance in both the baseline model and the hypothesized model, we also compared these models to a model in which we dropped the path from monitoring to creative performance, by fixing this path coefficient to zero (i.e., alternative model 2 in Table 4.3). This model did not significantly change our chi-square statistic ($\chi^2 = 288.77$, df = 95, $p > .05$; NNFI = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .06; $\Delta \chi^2 (1) = .69, ns$). This suggests that alternative model 2 fitted our data equally well as the previous models we tested. However, given that alternative model 2 was more parsimonious, this model was deemed to capture our data best. This was consistent with the findings of our regression analyses that indicated that hypothesis 4b was not consistent with our data.

Next, to assess whether an even more parsimonious model would fit our data equally well, we also dropped the paths from the independent variables to monitoring. This model significantly worsened the fit of alternative model 2 ($\chi^2 = 315.82$, df = 97, $p > .05$; NNFI =
.93; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .07; $\Delta \chi^2 (2) = 27.74, p < .05$), indicating that this model was not sufficiently comprehensive. In summary, the results of our structural equation analysis confirm the results from the regression analyses that both cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity affect employees’ creative performance and that these effects are partially mediated by employees’ tendency to inquire for feedback.

**Exploratory analyses for the specific sources of feedback seeking.** Bagozzi and Edwards (1998) pointed out that global constructs (e.g., employees’ general tendency to inquire feedback from various sources) may obscure the distinctiveness among sub-facets of the construct (e.g., the various sources of feedback seeking). For example, it may be that respondents discriminated between the various sources of feedback seeking and that these differences did not surface because we only considered employees’ general feedback-seeking propensities.

Because some studies have shown that individuals discriminate between the various feedback-seeking sources (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; De Stobbeleir, Ashford & Buyens, 2008; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995), we redid our analyses for Hypotheses 1a, 2a and 3a for each of the feedback sources separately. That is, in addition to assessing the impact of cognitive style and support for creativity on general inquiry, we assessed whether these factors differentially affected the extent to which individuals sought feedback from each of the sources.

Results of these analyses showed that there were no differential effects of these variables on the feedback sources, with one exception. Specifically, individuals’ cognitive styles did not relate to supervisor feedback inquiry ($\beta = .07, ns$). Further examination of the data showed
that adaptors’ (operationalized at 2 SD’s under the mean of cognitive style) supervisory inquiry was not significantly different from innovators’ (operationalized as 2 SD’s above the mean of cognitive style) supervisor inquiry ($t = 1.67$). However, individuals with an adaptive style tended to seek significantly more feedback from their supervisor than from the other feedback sources ($t = 1.99, p < .05$), while innovators discriminated less between the various sources.

Thus, it appears that adaptors did not have a general propensity to seek feedback from various sources, but did engage in more frequent supervisor feedback seeking. This finding is consistent with research showing that adaptors tend to value the opinion of individuals with formal reward power, while innovators tend to value the opinion of others in general (i.e., regardless of their reward power) (Houtz et al., 2003; Isaksen et al., 2003). However, in sum, these source-by-source tests bolster our previous suggestions that in addition to discriminating among the feedback sources, as has been shown in previous research (e.g., Morrison, 1993), individuals also exhibit general propensities of inquiring feedback from the various sources.

**Discussion**

This study highlights that employee creativity may take more than selecting an employee with a creative predisposition or building a context that supports creativity. Rather, our results highlight that these factors may help individuals to develop the self-regulatory skills needed for achieving creative outcomes. Specifically, we found that an innovative cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity lead to creative success and that this
relationship was partially mediated by the self-regulatory skill of inquiring for feedback from various sources.

Contributions

Our findings extend previous research in at least four ways. Above all, the results of this study provide direct support for a paradigm in organizational literature that focuses on employee proactivity at work (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008). Traditionally, the creativity-literature has focused on how managers can foster and stimulate employee creativity by, for example, providing developmental feedback to employees (Zhou, 1998; Zhou, 2008; Zhou & George, 2003). These models of employee creativity implicitly portray employees as relatively reactive agents in the creative process, who need to be motivated and led by others. This, however, is a narrow view of employee creativity which fails to recognize the self-regulating potential of employees. Rather than considering creativity from an organizationally-driven perspective, the results of this study show that employees actively manage their creative performance by proactively seeking out feedback in many ways and from a wide variety of feedback sources.

Second, our study adds to the creativity literature by testing an integrative model of employee creativity and by examining how dispositional, contextual and behavioral factors simultaneously contribute to creative performance. In our process focus on creative performance, we found that feedback-seeking behavior is an important intervening variable in the relationship between employees’ cognitive style, perceived organizational support for creativity and creative performance. Whereas prior work has demonstrated the direct impact of these factors on creative performance (e.g., Baer et al., 2003; Oldham & Cummings, 1996;
Tierney & Farmer, 2002), our study was one of the first to identify a behavioral mechanism through which these factors impact employee creativity. This shows that developing and possessing creativity-relevant skills and strategies increases creative performance and that employee creativity thus takes more than merely selecting an employee with a creative personality or building a context that supports creativity.

This study also provides indirect support for the social network perspective on employee creativity (e.g., Perry-Smith, 2006, 2008; Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003). By showing that individuals who seek feedback from various sources (within and outside their organization) are rated as being more creative, we not only highlight that creativity has a marked social character, but we also show that particularly the feedback that is exchanged during social encounters is an important dimension to consider when studying individuals’ social networks.

Finally, our results also break exciting new ground in the literature on feedback-seeking behavior. This behavior has traditionally been depicted as a strategy that helps individuals to conform to the requirements of their environment in a process of individual adjustment (Ashford et al., 2003; Parker & Collins, in press). By broadening the lens through which we study the outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior and by showing that feedback seeking helps individuals to achieve goals of excellence, we have brought back notions of human agency and positive deviance in feedback-seeking theory. Such an extension of the scope of feedback-seeking research is also consistent with recent research in positive psychology, a newly emerging research stream in psychology that focuses on positive deviance, human creativity and exceptional performance rather than on individual adjustment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).
Practical Implications

Our study provides some important insights for management practice as well. First, for organizations interested in stimulating employee creativity, our results illustrate the importance of developing work contexts that support creativity. As discussed by Shalley (2008), such contexts may be developed by setting creativity goals, by making creativity a job requirement, by providing feedback, and by building reward systems that value employee creativity. Supportive contexts may also stimulate employees to seek feedback, a self-regulation tactic that proved to be a crucial self-regulation strategy for creative performance within our study. In order to stimulate feedback-seeking behavior and employee creativity, organizations may reduce or eliminate some of the image costs associated with the inquiry of feedback by developing a general feedback climate (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004) that supports the spontaneous exchange of informal feedback throughout the organization.

Our results also underscore the importance of stimulating employees to seek feedback beyond their organization’s boundaries. By developing a context that supports creativity, organizations may successfully encourage their employees to broaden their developmental networks and seek feedback from multiple sources, rather than limiting themselves to supervisor delivered feedback. To incorporate this valuable feedback from outside, organizations may stimulate their employees to participate in learning communities across organizational boundaries (Nonaka, 1994; Raelin, 1997).

From an individual perspective, our results highlight that individuals who want to achieve creative outcomes, may do so by seeking feedback from a wide variety of feedback sources. Feedback seeking may not only help them to refine their ideas and to obtain relevant new
input, but may also be a way of promoting these ideas and making them visible to others (Ashford et al., 2003; Morrison & Bies, 1991).

**Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

As with all studies, future research needs to address a number of limitations of this study. First, all data were collected using a survey methodology, so common-method biases may have confounded our results (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). However, as we collected measures of our predictor and outcome variables from different sources, we could reduce the effects of consistency motifs, implicit theories and social desirability (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Second, though our main hypotheses were supported, we found some null results as well. For example, we found no interaction effect between employees’ cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity in impacting creative performance. One explanation for this finding is offered by Zhou and George (2001), who found that job dissatisfaction interacted with useful feedback, coworker helping and support, and perceived organizational support for creativity in impacting creativity. Linking Zhou and George’s (2001) findings to our results, we believe that one boundary condition for adaptors’ feedback seeking may be their job satisfaction. Specifically, it might be that only when adaptors are dissatisfied with the status quo, a climate that supports creativity would stimulate them to seek feedback. Future research should investigate this possibility. In addition, given that interactions are difficult to observe in field research (McClelland & Judd, 1993) our theory also needs to be tested in the laboratory.
We also found no statistically significant relationship between feedback monitoring and creative performance. Though unexpected, these results do not necessarily imply that monitoring is unimportant within the creative process. For example, one explanation for our null results could be that monitoring and feedback inquiry play important roles at different stages in the creative process. For example, when an idea is still premature, employees may monitor their environment for indirect feedback cues to obtain a first assessment of the viability of the idea. Based on this initial indirect feedback, employees may then decide whether or not to further pursue and refine the idea. When the employee decides to further develop the idea, he or she may then decide to directly ask others for their feedback. Hence, rather than contributing directly to creative performance, monitoring may help individuals to channel their energy toward ideas that are worth pursuing. Testing this process view of the role of feedback at different stages in the creative process using longitudinal research designs offers a fruitful avenue for future research.

We also wish to point out that it is not only important to assess how individuals’ propensity to inquire for feedback from different individuals relates to creativity, but also how it affects other outcome variables such as employees’ on-the-job-adaptability. It may be that employees’ general tendency to seek feedback from various sources will differ depending on the outcome under investigation. For example, when employees use feedback seeking as a strategy to mold themselves to the prevailing view of what constitutes acceptable behavior within their immediate work context, they may be better off limiting themselves to feedback seeking from sources who endorse the prevalent standards within their work context (e.g., their supervisor). Seeking feedback from a wider variety of sources (e.g., peers in other organizations) might even have disruptive effects, because these sources might provide the seeker with ideas that are considered as deviant and inappropriate within their own work
context. Thus, while our results highlight that individuals may achieve goals of distinction and positive deviance by seeking feedback from various sources, the effects of this seeking may take on a different pattern depending on the outcome under investigation.

In the same vein, Grant and Ashford (2008) recently suggested that when individuals seek feedback indiscriminately (e.g., from too many sources) this may be detrimental for their performance because of the energy lost on filtering out irrelevant information. This view, suggesting that only an optimal level of feedback seeking may result in positive employee outcomes, is consistent with the information processing literature, which posits that too much information may distract and overwhelm individuals and negatively affect the quality of their decisions (Eppler & Mengis, 2004). Though we found no indication of a nonlinear relationship between employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors and their creative performance, this may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Research should also identify the mechanisms that moderate the relationship between employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors and creative performance. For example, Zhou (2008) developed an intriguing argument that much may depend on the consistency of the feedback provided by the various sources. Similarly, much of the outcomes of feedback seeking are likely to depend on how the seeker uses the feedback to improve his or her (creative) performance (Renn & Fedor, 2001).

Finally, future research should delineate other self-regulatory mechanisms used by employees to manage their creative performance. For example, VandeWalle and colleagues (1999) found that goal-setting, effort, and planning were important self-regulation tactics for sales
performance. In the same vein, Porath and Bateman (2006) identified proactive behavior, emotional control and social competence as key self-regulatory skills for employees.

Conclusions

In spite of the limitations of our research, our study breaks new ground in the creativity literature by highlighting individuals’ proactive role in the creative process. The results indicate that individuals manage their own creative performance by actively seeking feedback on their work from various feedback sources. Such findings highlight the importance of studying employees’ self-regulatory behaviors in the creative process and support the proposition that feedback seeking is not only a strategy that facilitates individual adaptation, but is also an individual resource that can help individuals to achieve creative outcomes.
References


Chapter 4 (Study 2): Feedback-Seeking Behavior and Creative Performance


Chapter 4 (Study 2): Feedback-Seeking Behavior and Creative Performance


Figure 4.1: Conceptual Model

Note: The path coefficients represent the standardized parameter estimates for the mediated structural model that we tested in SEM.

The interaction path was not estimated using SEM.
### Table 4.1 Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations for hypothesis testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cognitive style</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Perceived organizational support for creativity</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>0.15**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Inquiry from feedback-seeking sources</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Monitoring</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>0.12**</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Creative performance</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.16**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
The diagonal values represent the alpha-reliability coefficients.
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.
*. Correlation is significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.
Table 4.2: Results of the Hierarchical Multivariate Regression for the Moderated Mediation Model for Creative Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Creative Performance</th>
<th>Inquiry from Various Sources</th>
<th>Monitoring</th>
<th>Creative Performance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-3.81**</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-3.00**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>2.49*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-1.65</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-1.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyad length</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company_dummy1</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company_dummy2</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company_dummy3</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main effects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive Style</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>4.63**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>3.19**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POS Creativity</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>2.69**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>3.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ R²</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POS Creativity x Cognitive Style</td>
<td>-.00</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ R²</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry from various</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.16**</td>
<td>.03**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Δ R²</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n = 456 a. Gender (1: male; 2: female); POS Creativity = Perceived Organizational Support for Creativity; Cognitive Style: higher scores correspond to an innovative style; lower scores correspond to an adaptive style b. Beta weights for control variables are reported for the final step (i.e., including the mediator). * p < .05  ** p < .01
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3: Comparison of the baseline structural model to alternative models</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$\Delta\chi^2$</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline model: mediated model (Figure 4.1)</td>
<td>312.14</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative model 1: Hypothesized model</td>
<td>288.08</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>24.06**</td>
<td>Significantly better fit than baseline model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POS creativity $\rightarrow$ creative performance relaxed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Both paths were significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive style $\rightarrow$ creative performance relaxed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative model 2: Alternative model 1 with monitoring $\rightarrow$ creative performance fixed to zero</td>
<td>288.77</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>Most parsimonious model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative model 3: Alternative model 2 with POS creativity $\rightarrow$ monitoring fixed to zero Cognitive style $\rightarrow$ monitoring fixed to zero</td>
<td>315.82</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>27.74**</td>
<td>Significantly worse fit than alternative model 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Footnotes

1. We tested for significant differences between the respondents that were rated by their superior and those that were not rated with regard to all study variables of interest. Chi-square tests (i.e., for demographic variables) and two-sample t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences between the rated and the non-rated group of respondents.

2. Because univariate hierarchical regressions do not take into consideration the correlations among the dependent variables (i.e., monitoring and inquiry), we also analyzed our data using multivariate moderated regression in which we entered employees’ feedback-seeking behaviors as the dependent variables and the control variables, hypothesized main effects (cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity) and interaction term as the independent variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Because this additional analysis yielded similar results, we only report the results of the hierarchical regressions.

3. In another study, Tierney et al. (1999) found significant relations between context factors and a squared cognitive style term. They included this squared term because regression diagnostics of the residuals suggested nonlinearity between a cognitive style and supervisor ratings of creative performance. In our sample, however, regression diagnostics revealed linearity in the relationship between the independent variables and the outcome variables, so transformations were not needed or employed.

4. As Table 4.2 shows, employee’s cognitive style and perceived organizational support for creativity did not interact in impacting variety in feedback-seeking sources. In keeping with prior creativity research, we also assessed the direct impact of the cognitive style x perceived organizational support for creativity interaction on creative performance ($\beta = -.01, ns$). Given that our interaction term was neither related to variety in feedback-seeking sources, nor to our outcome variables, we employed the Baron and Kenny (1987) method. If the interaction would have been significant, Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) approach for integrating moderation and mediation would have been more appropriate.
CHAPTER 5 (STUDY 3): KEEPING UP APPEARANCES: THE INFLUENCE OF FEEDBACK SOURCE’S AND FEEDBACK SEEKER’S CHARACTERISTICS ON IMPRESSION FORMATION AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

By Katleen E. M. DE STOBBLEIR, Susan J. ASHFORD, & Mary SULLY DELUQUE

Abstract

This study examined how feedback seekers’ and targets’ characteristics affect how feedback-seeking acts are evaluated. We studied how two aspects of the pattern of feedback seeking, the sign of the feedback sought (positive versus negative) and the frequency of seeking (frequent versus infrequent) interact with the performance history of the feedback seeker to affect impressions formed by feedback targets. In addition, we assessed how the target characteristic of implicit person theory affects feedback-seeking attributions and how this relationship is shaped by the pattern of seeking. Results indicate that the pattern of feedback seeking is a relevant moderator of the effects of the seeker’s performance history and targets’ implicit person theories on targets’ impressions of feedback seeking. In addition, the results show that targets’ attributions for feedback seeking are one of the underlying mechanisms explaining why feedback-seeking behavior affects important individual outcomes. Such results highlight that it is important to not only study the instrumental outcomes of employee proactivity, but also its potential image costs.

Keywords: FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOR, IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT, IMPLICIT PERSON THEORY, ATTRIBUTIONS
Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

**Introduction**

In a work world with increasingly dynamic job demands where employees are expected to become more self-directed and proactive (Campbell, 2000; Grant & Ashford, in press), feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) is generally considered a desirable individual behavior (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). FSB enables people to adapt and respond to continuously changing goals and role expectations (Morrison & Weldon, 1990; Tsui & Ashford, 1994) and to improve their task performance (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007).

Despite its instrumental and informational value, FSB is far from a straightforward process. Decisions about how frequently to seek, the tactics to use, from whom to seek and what type of feedback to focus on, all may be shaped not only by the seeker’s perceptions of the feedback’s value, but also by perceptions of how the seeking act itself will be interpreted by others (see Ashford et al., 2003; and Morrison & Bies, 1991 for a review). However, individuals’ perceptions of possible image costs (or gains) in feedback seeking are of questionable accuracy. The meaning of an interpersonal act such as FSB is shaped by context factors, attributes of the observer and characteristics of the actor (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989). As a result, it is difficult for individuals to make adequate inferences about how this particular behavior is actually perceived by others (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Schneider, 1981).

To date, research has focused primarily on how image concerns affect individuals’ willingness to seek feedback (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). We know less about whether and when feedback seekers actually incur image costs (or benefits) when asking for feedback (Ashford
& Northcraft, 1992; Chau, Dahling, Swee, & Levy, 2008; Lam, Huang, & Snape, 2007). Yet, from a practical standpoint, studying how targets react to interpersonal behaviors such as feedback seeking is important as others’ reactions to workplace behaviors such as FSB affect outcomes as important as reward decisions, opportunities for development and even performance evaluations (e.g., Bachrach, Powell, Bendoly, & Richey, 2006; Johnson, Erez, Kiker, & Motowidlo, 2002).

Also from a broader proactivity perspective, studying the potential image costs of feedback seeking is important. Grant and Ashford (2008) strongly argued that not all proactive behaviors may be interpreted positively, yet research in this area has tended to focus on the instrumental outcomes of employee proactivity, without considering its potential costs. Studying how proactive behaviors such as feedback-seeking behavior are being interpreted may help proactivity researchers to address this gap in literature.

Three empirical efforts have addressed how feedback seeking is actually interpreted. They found that (1) the seeker’s performance history (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992); (2) the typical sign and the focus of the solicited feedback (Chau et al., 2008); and (3) the attributions that targets make for feedback seeking (Lam et al., 2007) affect how targets react to feedback seekers and their seeking.

While the extant research provides important insights, Chau et al. (2008) note that the field has yet to elucidate the joint impact of characteristics of the seeker, the target, and the seeking act itself. The prevailing perspective has been that these antecedents have straightforward (main) effects on impression formation (e.g., Lam et al., 2007). However, it is likely that they interact and provide the conditions under which particular impressions are formed. For
example, as suggested by Ashford and Northcraft (1992), what the targets of FSB regard as an appropriate frequency of feedback seeking, is likely to be affected in part by the performance history of the seeker. For superior performers, frequent feedback seeking may yield impression-management benefits, while for only average performers, frequently seeking feedback may be costly. To date, no research of this type has been conducted. The present investigation contributes to the literature on feedback seeking by testing a framework (Figure 5.1) that simultaneously incorporates characteristics of the feedback seeker, attributes of the feedback target and the pattern of feedback seeking.

Theory and Hypotheses

Targets’ Attributions for FSB

Impression management theory (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1999) suggests that employee behaviors elicit a cognitive response in the targets of those behaviors. These cognitive responses are in turn predicted to affect how targets respond to the performers of those behaviors.

Particularly attribution theory has proven to be useful in understanding targets’ cognitive responses to feedback-seeking behavior (e.g., Green & Mitchell, 1979; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Martinko, 1995; Weiner, 1974). Using attribution theory, Lam and colleagues (2007) recently showed that targets’ reactions to feedback seeking and feedback seekers are largely determined by the attributions they make for those behaviors. Research suggests that targets interpret feedback seeking in two distinct ways: (1) as a sign of the seeker’s achievement
focus and willingness to correct ineffective work behaviors (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution); and (2) as an attempt by the seeker to manage the perceptions that others have of him or her (i.e., impression-management attribution) (Ashford et al., 2003; Chau et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2007; Morrison & Bies, 1991).

Thus, when the target perceives that the seeker is trying to obtain diagnostic information about his or her work performance by asking for feedback, this will result in a performance-enhancement attribution. However, targets may not always see the diagnostic value of feedback seeking, because individuals also use feedback seeking as a tactic to shape the view and image that others have of them (Morrison & Bies, 1991). When targets feel that the seeking is calculated and aimed at enhancing or managing the image that others have of the seeker, this will result in an impression-management attribution.

Although research has shown that these two attributions affect targets’ reactions to the feedback seeker (e.g., Lam et al., 2007), little is known about why targets make these attributions and how they are formed.

**Performance History of the Seeker Matters**

The impression-management literature suggests that the meaning of an interpersonal act such as FSB is shaped by attributes of the observer, characteristics of the actor, characteristics of the behavior and context factors (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989). Regarding actor characteristics, research suggests that how feedback seeking is interpreted, is in part determined by the seeker’s performance history (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). Specifically, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that feedback seekers with a history of only average performance are perceived as less confident and less competent than seekers with a history of
superior performance. Thus, ironically, the very performers who could benefit most from feedback (those with an only average performance history) may be most reluctant to seek it given how such seeking will be evaluated.

Ashford and Northcraft (1992) did not examine why feedback seekers with a history of only average performance were evaluated less favorably than were non-seekers and seekers with a history of superior performance. It may be that individuals who have a reputation of being superior performers suffer fewer image costs because their feedback seeking is interpreted in a way that corresponds to their performance history. This halo-effect hypothesis (e.g., Asch, 1946; Kelly, 1955; Thorndike, 1920) suggests that when targets are told that an individual performed well or poorly, they will interpret that individual’s specific behavior (e.g., feedback seeking) in a way that corresponds to this general cue. So, while targets may interpret a superior performer’s feedback seeking as a sign of the performer’s achievement focus (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution), the same behavior by an only average performer may be interpreted as a strategy of the seeker to demonstrate an achievement focus, with the aim of concealing average performance (i.e., impression-management attribution). Accordingly, consistent with Ashford and Northcraft (1992), we believe that targets use the seeker’s past performance as a cue in evaluating and interpreting FSB.

**Hypothesis 1:** A feedback seeker’s performance history will affect the attributions targets make to explain that seeking such that:

- **1a.** Targets are more likely to make impression-management attributions for a feedback seeker with a history of only average performance and

- **1b.** Targets are more likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for a feedback seeker with a history of superior performance.
The Moderating Role of the Pattern of Seeking.

Ashford and Northcraft (1992) also did not examine whether some patterns of feedback seeking might be less costly (or beneficial) for only average and superior performers. As suggested, but not tested by these authors and Chau et al. (2008), the seeker’s performance history likely interacts with the feedback-seeking pattern in impacting the impressions formed by the feedback target. This suggestion is in accordance with theorizing in the impression management literature that suggests that how employee behaviors are being interpreted also depends on characteristics of the behavior itself (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989).

We propose that two patterns of feedback seeking will moderate the effects of the seeker’s performance history on targets’ attributions: the typical sign of the feedback sought and the frequency of seeking.

Regarding the typical sign of the feedback sought, individuals can gather feedback about their weaknesses and their inadequacies (i.e., negative feedback seeking) or they can seek feedback about their strengths and successes (i.e., positive feedback seeking) (Ashford et al., 2003; VandeWalle, 2003). Research shows that observers of feedback-seeking acts may not always evaluate positive feedback seeking favorably. Seeking feedback about strengths might be interpreted as a form of seeking reassurance or as an attempt to divert attention from poor performance (i.e., impression management), especially when such seeking is done by an only average performer. For example, examining the impact of the typical sign of the sought feedback, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that managers who sought negative feedback were evaluated more positively by their subordinates, while the seeking of positive feedback had a
negative impact on subordinates’ appraisals. However, this study was inconclusive about why negative feedback seeking was evaluated more favorably: because managers actually improved their performance following negative feedback seeking or because it simply looked better to subordinates to see their manager so interested in their own faults and weaknesses. Indeed, Chau et al. (2008) found that targets tend to attribute positive seeking more to impression-management motives than seeking feedback on weaknesses. However, their study did not consider the performance history of the feedback seekers, or other patterns of seeking. We believe that targets may make different attributions for superior and only average performers’ feedback seeking, depending on the typical sign of the sought feedback. For example, while targets may react negatively when only average performers seek feedback about their strengths (because positive feedback would not help them to correct their ineffective work behaviors), targets may still see the value of negative feedback seeking (because it gives average performers valuable information about how to improve).

In addition, we expect that how superior and only average performers’ positive and negative feedback seeking is interpreted, will depend on a second pattern of feedback seeking, the frequency of seeking. To date, research focusing on the outcomes of feedback seeking has implicitly assumed that FSB is always beneficial: the more feedback people seek, the better. For example, prior studies have shown that frequent feedback seeking leads to higher feelings of control (Ashford & Black, 1996) and helps employees to improve their performance (Renn & Fedor, 2001) and the quality of the relationship with their supervisor (Lam et al., 2007). The question of whether frequent feedback seeking can also have negative consequences or can be negatively evaluated remains unanswered.
Related research in other areas suggests that the relationship between feedback seeking and targets’ evaluations may not always be positive. For example, exploring the dynamics of help-seeking behavior in organizations, Nadler, Ellis and Bar (2003) found that intermediate levels of help seeking were evaluated more positively than high levels of help seeking. These authors concluded from this finding that targets interpret excessive help seeking as a dysfunctional behavioral pattern that reflects the seeker’s overreliance on the help of others (Nadler et al., 2003).

Earlier, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) suggested that a similar mechanism might be operating in the feedback-seeking process. While targets may interpret occasional feedback seeking as a sign of the seeker’s achievement focus (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution), frequent feedback requests may be interpreted as a desire to manage impressions, because others may perceive it as a tactic of the seeker to get the attention of others.

Linking this logic regarding the influence of the feedback-seeking pattern to our hypotheses on the impact of the seeker’s performance history on feedback-seeking attributions, we expect a three-way interaction between the typical sign of the sought feedback, the frequency of seeking and the performance history of the seeker. First consider the case of an only average performer. Targets may interpret average performers’ occasional requests for negative feedback positively and see them as an effort by the seeker to correct weak performance (i.e., performance-enhancement attribution). On the other hand, Ashford and Northcraft’s (1992) finding that seekers with an only average performance history were seen as weaker and having less potential suggests that frequent requests for negative feedback should be more costly for such performers. Frequent requests in the face of a history of weak performance may lead targets to question the value of frequently asking for negative
feedback. Also, seeking feedback typically means that a target conveys a feedback message in response. When an only average performer frequently seeks feedback, the target gives more negative feedback more often, thereby reinforcing a negative view of the performer (Larson, 1989). Likewise, targets may interpret the only average performers’ requests for positive feedback as an attempt to conceal their average performance, thus as an attempt to change the image that others have of them (Morrison & Bies, 1991). In sum:

**Hypothesis 2:** A feedback seeker’s performance history will interact with the typical sign of the sought feedback and the frequency of seeking such that:

2a. For seekers with a history of only average performance, targets will be less likely to make impression-management attributions for the infrequent seeking of positive or negative feedback, than for the frequent seeking of positive or negative feedback.

2b. For seekers with a history of only average performance, targets will be more likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for the infrequent seeking of negative feedback compared to the infrequent seeking of positive feedback, or the frequent seeking of positive or negative feedback.

To further clarify the proposed three-way interaction, not all FSB undertaken by superior performers may be perceived in an equally positive manner. For example, targets may interpret superior performers’ frequent requests for positive feedback as an attempt to highlight their performance history (i.e., as impression management) instead of as a behavior that will contribute to superior performance in the future. On the other hand, targets may interpret a superior performer’s frequent or occasional requests for negative feedback more
positively. Their view of these behaviors may be colored by this performance history, i.e. they see such seeking as a behavior that contributed to the superior performance of the seeker. Thus:

2c. For seekers with a history of superior performance, targets will be more likely to make impression-management attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the frequent and infrequent seeking of negative feedback and for the infrequent seeking of positive feedback.

2d. For seekers with a history of superior performance, targets will be less likely to make performance-enhancement attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the frequent and infrequent seeking of negative feedback, and for the infrequent seeking of positive feedback.

**Characteristics of the Feedback Target**

As stated, the manner in which interpersonal acts are interpreted also depends on attributes of the observer of those behaviors (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989). Thus, while the interpretation of seeking may be driven by the seeker’s characteristics (e.g., performance history), we expect that also *attributes of the target* will affect how the act of feedback seeking is interpreted. As demonstrated by Dweck and colleagues (1999; 1995a; 1995b), people tend to have one of two implicit assumptions or theories about the “changeability” of people: entity theory versus incremental theory. Individuals with an entity theory believe that people’s personal characteristics and abilities are largely fixed, whereas those holding incremental theories assume that people can grow and develop their abilities. These implicit person theories (IPT) have been found to affect both what people do, for instance whether
they will seek feedback (VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), and how people judge others’ behaviors and performance (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005; McConnell, 2001; and see VandeWalle, 2001 for a review). We propose that implicit theories will affect how one evaluates others’ feedback-seeking behaviors.

IPT theory suggests that targets endorsing an entity theory will see little instrumental value in engaging in a behavior aimed at developing capabilities that are largely fixed to begin with. It is therefore unlikely that they would interpret behavior such as FSB as an achievement-oriented behavior. Instead, they may see it as aimed at impressing the target of the behavior. In contrast, we expect that incremental theorists will be more likely to recognize the instrumental value of feedback seeking for enhancing performance and correcting deficiencies, as incrementalists believe in the growth potential of individuals. As suggested by VandeWalle (2001), incrementalists are more likely to see the utility of diagnostic feedback because it can help individuals to improve their performance. We therefore expect that incrementalists will consider FSB as a tactic that people can use to obtain diagnostic feedback and as a behavior that is achievement-oriented rather than impression-management oriented. Thus:

**Hypothesis 3:** Targets’ implicit person theories will affect their attributions regarding feedback seeking such that:

3a. The lower the target scores on implicit person theory (i.e., the more entity oriented the theory), the greater the impression-management attributions for feedback seeking.
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3b. The higher the target scores on implicit person theory (i.e., the more incrementally oriented the theory), the greater the performance-enhancement attributions for feedback seeking.

These effects should occur regardless of the seeker’s performance history. That is, entity theorists and incrementalists should not differentiate between the FSB of an only average performer or a superior performer. Based on their implicit theory, an incrementalist should consider feedback seeking as instrumental for both. In contrast, because entity theorists attribute both poor and good performance to fixed abilities, they may not see why any performer (average or superior) should engage in this behavior. For parallel reasons, we do not expect the sign of the feedback sought to interact with implicit person theory in impacting how feedback seeking is interpreted. That is, whereas incrementalists are likely to see the instrumentality of both negative and positive feedback, entity theorists may question the benefits of seeking, either negative or positive feedback (VandeWalle, 2001).

However, we do expect that the impact of IPT on feedback-seeking attributions will be contingent on the frequency of feedback seeking. Specifically, entity theorists’ tendency to discount the instrumental value of feedback seeking would only be enhanced when the seeker has a habit of frequent feedback seeking. Given that they see little value in engaging in a behavior that they don’t believe can help people, they may see frequent seeking as even more time consuming and dysfunctional. In contrast, because incrementalists believe that people can grow and develop themselves continuously, they will more likely see the instrumentality of developing a habit of seeking feedback frequently. We thus expect that because entity theorists see less instrumental value in feedback seeking, they will attribute this behavior to other motives, such as impression management. In contrast, incremental theorists should be
more likely to interpret frequent feedback seeking as a sign of strength and as an effort to grow. Thus:

**Hypothesis 4:** The frequency of seeking will interact with targets’ implicit person theories in impacting feedback-seeking attributions, such that:

4a. The more entity oriented the theory, the greater the impression-management attribution for an individual’s more frequent feedback seeking.

4b. The more incremmentally oriented the theory, the greater the performance enhancement attribution for an individual’s more frequent feedback seeking.

**Attributions as a Mediating Mechanism between Feedback Seeking and Outcomes**

Attribution theory posits that targets’ attributions for behaviors shape their overall attitudes to the performers of those behaviors (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko, 1995; VandeWalle, 2001). This suggests that targets’ attributions for FSB should also shape what targets think of the seeker. To remain consistent with previous research (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992) and given its relevance for organizations, we focus on targets’ appraisals of the seeker’s performance potential and personal characteristics (e.g., their level of insecurity, confidence).

Empirical work investigating how feedback seekers are evaluated shows that when targets attribute feedback seeking to performance-enhancement motives, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude towards the seeker. For example, Chau et al. (2008) showed in the lab that when supervisors made performance-enhancement attributions, they perceived the seeker as more motivated and committed than when they thought the feedback seeking was
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driven by impression-management motives. In the same vein, Lam et al. (2007) found that when supervisors made performance-enhancement attributions for their subordinate’s feedback seeking, their relationship with their subordinates was of higher quality compared to when the supervisor made impression-management attributions. What past research has not examined is how these attributions affect performance evaluations. Based on Chau et al. (2008) and Lam et al.’s (2007) findings, it is likely that performance-enhancement attributions will result in positive performance evaluations, whereas impression-management attributions should produce less favorable performance evaluations.

*Hypothesis 5:* Targets’ impression-management attributions will relate negatively to the targets’ perceptions of the seeker’s personal characteristics and performance potential.

*Hypothesis 6:* Targets’ performance-enhancement attributions will relate positively to the targets’ perceptions of the seeker’s personal strengths and characteristics and performance potential.

Finally, we expect that targets’ attributions for FSB will mediate the relationship between feedback seeking and targets’ appraisals of the seeker’s performance potential and personal characteristics. This logic is consistent with empirical work rooted in attribution theory that has demonstrated that targets’ attributions for behaviors mediate the relationship between those behaviors and targets’ general evaluations of the performers of those behaviors (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko, 1995; VandeWalle, 2001). For example, Johnson et al. (2002) showed that targets’ attributions for helping behaviors mediated the link between those helping behaviors and subsequent reward decisions. Accordingly, we hypothesize:
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Hypothesis 7: Targets’ attributions for feedback seeking mediate the relationship between feedback seeking and target’s general appraisal of the seeker.

Method

Participants

Hypotheses were tested by having 319 current and former MBA students from a Southwestern university respond to an online survey. The subjects were recruited via a mass emailing to 1,781 individuals, for a response rate of 18%. The mean age of the sample was 33 years; 69% were male; 78% Caucasian, 18% African American and 4% other.

Procedure

The methodology replicated that of Ashford and Northcraft (1992). We described the study as one on impression formation in organizations. Respondents read a one-paragraph vignette that described a feedback-seeking act performed by an employee named Robert. In the vignette, which was adapted from Ashford and Northcraft (1992), respondents were asked to assume the role of Robert’s manager and to imagine that the situation described, occurred in their own workplace. The vignettes provided the independent variables for the study by varying the feedback seekers’ past performance (only average versus superior), the frequency of seeking (frequently versus infrequently), and the typical sign of the sought feedback (focused on strengths versus weaknesses). Hence, the overall design was a fully crossed 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design. Respondents were randomly presented with one of the eight vignettes. A sample of one of the vignettes can be found in Appendix A.
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Measures

Respondents then completed an anonymous questionnaire assessing reactions to the feedback seeker. First, based on advice from Fedor, Eder, and Buckley (1989) we asked the respondents to indicate on a five-point scale how easily they could imagine that the scenario described in the vignette could actually take place in their own workplace. With a mean-ease-of-imaging of 3.97 on a five-point scale, subjects found the vignettes relatively easy to imagine. Ease-of-imagining was unrelated to the independent variables, but to remain consistent with previous research, we controlled for this variable, age and gender in all subsequent analyses (Ashford et al., 1992).

We then asked subjects to rate their perceptions of the feedback seeker’s personal characteristics, using a four-item seven-point Likert scale developed by Ashford and Northcraft (1992) (α = .83). Sample items from the scale include: “I suspect that Robert is insecure” and “I suspect that Robert is unconfident.” Items were coded so that high scores corresponded to positive ratings of Robert’s personal characteristics.

Next, using Ashford and Northcraft’s (1992) two-item measure for assessing performance potential, we asked respondents to assess Robert’s ability to perform in his current job and his advancement potential. The items from the scale are “What is your impression of Robert’s potential to advance” and “What is your impression of Robert’s performance potential.” Because Cronbrach’s alpha is an inappropriate reliability indicator for two-item scales, we calculated the Spearman-Brown coefficient to estimate the scale’s reliability (Hulin & Cudeck, 2001). The Spearman-Brown coefficient was .89, indicating substantial internal consistency.
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The target’s attributed motives for feedback seeking were measured with two Likert scales adapted from Lam et al. (2007). Respondents were asked to rate to what extent they thought that Robert’s feedback seeking was motivated by performance-enhancement motives and by impression-management motives. A sample item from the six-item performance-enhancement attribution scale is “To what extent do you perceive Robert’s feedback-seeking behavior is motivated by a desire to perform better?” (α = .77). A sample item from the eight-item impression-management attribution scale is “To what extent do you perceive Robert’s feedback-seeking behavior is motivated by a desire to create a good impression?” (α = .91). Subjects rated their impressions on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Finally, implicit person theory (IPT) was assessed with an eight-item Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) developed by Levy and Dweck (1997). Following Heslin et al. (2005), responses to the entity-worded items were reverse-coded and a mean IPT score for each subject was calculated (α = .91), with high scores corresponding to an incremental IPT.

**Results**

**Overview Data Analysis Plan**

To test the hypotheses, we performed a series of regressions and General Linear Models (GLM). There were no univariate or multivariate within-cell outliers at α = .05. The assumptions of normality, homogeneity of variance, linearity and absence of multicollinearity were satisfied. Because this study sought to combine mediation and moderation, we followed the prevailing three-step approach recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986). However, to
isolate the moderated direct, indirect and total effects, we supplemented Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step approach with Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) integrative approach for estimating the path coefficients of First Stage Moderation Models. Such models include moderating effects (e.g., IPT x frequency) that impact mediator variables (e.g., attributions), which in turn influence the dependent variables (e.g., evaluation of personal characteristics).

We utilized weighted effect coding to represent the three factors (frequency, sign and performance history) and to correct for unequal cell sample sizes in the eight conditions (Aiken & West, 1991; Darlington, 1990). To deal with multicollinearity resulting from the inclusion of the interaction terms, we centered the continuous variables by extracting the grand means of those variables from the subject’s original score. The interactions between the continuous and categorical variables were formed by multiplying the continuous variables with each of the effect-coded categorical variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

**Results**

Table 5.1 displays the means, standard deviations reliabilities and correlations among the variables of interest.

**Feedback sign and target’s attributions.** Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that the seeker’s performance history would independently and interactively (i.e., in interaction with the frequency of seeking and the sign of the sought feedback) impact target’s attributions. As Table 5.2 shows, these hypotheses were partially supported.
Contrary to Hypothesis 1a, targets did not attribute only average performers’ feedback seeking significantly more to impression-management motives than they did for superior performers’ seeking ($\beta = -.042, ns$). However, we did find support for Hypothesis 1b, which stated that targets would attribute superior performers’ feedback seeking significantly more to performance-enhancement motives than only average performers’ seeking ($B = .144, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 2, predicting a three-way interaction between the seeker’s performance history, the sign of the feedback sought and the frequency of seeking in impacting impression-management attributions, was partially supported ($\beta = .147, p < .05$). To probe the interaction, we formulated a series of planned contrasts. We found that, in partial support of Hypothesis 2a, when average performers infrequently sought feedback about their weaknesses, this act was less attributed to impression-management motives than the other three patterns of seeking ($t(68) = -2.54, p < .05$). Contrary to what Hypothesis 2a predicted however, the infrequent seeking of positive feedback did not result in significantly less impression-management attributions than the frequent seeking of positive and negative feedback. Rather than finding that targets made more impression-management attributions for the frequent seeking of positive feedback than for the other patterns of seeking (Hypothesis 2c), we found that targets made significantly less impression-management attributions when superior performers frequently sought feedback about weaknesses ($t = 2.56, p < .05$). So, when a superior performer frequently sought negative feedback, the seeker incurred less image costs compared to the other forms of feedback seeking.

We found partial support for the hypotheses predicting that the target’s IPT would independently and interactively (i.e., in interaction with the frequency of seeking) affect the
target’s attributions. Disconfirming Hypothesis 3, we found no relationship between the target’s IPT and attributions for feedback seeking ($\beta = -.046$, ns for performance-enhancement attributions and $\beta = -.111$, ns for impression-management attributions).

In support of Hypothesis 4a, we found that the target’s IPT interacted with the frequency of seeking in impacting impression-management attributions ($\beta = -.145$, $p <.05$). As Table 5.3 shows, when we probed these interactions (Aiken et al., 1991), we found support for Hypothesis 4a. The more targets held an entity theory, the more they attributed frequent seeking to impression-management motives. The target’s IPT x frequency interaction was unrelated to performance-enhancement attributions ($\beta =-.036$, ns), thereby disconfirming Hypothesis 4b.

Summarizing Hypotheses 1 to 4, we conclude that contrary to what was expected, feedback targets’ performance-enhancement attributions were only directly influenced by the feedback seeker’s performance history. The formation of impression-management attributions is more complex. Rather than having main effects, a seeker’s performance history interacted with the sign and frequency of feedback seeking in impacting the target’s impression-management attributions.

**Attributions for feedback seeking and outcomes.** In support of Hypothesis 5, targets who tended to make performance-enhancement attributions evaluated the seeker more positively in terms of their personal characteristics ($\beta =.259$, $p<.01$) and their performance potential ($\beta =.259$, $p<.01$). Attributed impression-management motives related negatively to target’s evaluations of the seeker’s personal characteristics ($\beta = -.113$, $p<.05$) and to evaluations of the seeker’s performance potential ($\beta =-.152$, $p<.01$), supporting Hypothesis 6.
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**Mediation analyses.** Finally, we tested whether targets’ attributions mediated the effects of the independent variables (performance history, feedback sign, frequency of seeking and IPT) on the targets’ evaluations of the seeker’s personal characteristics and performance potential (Hypothesis 7). To test for statistical mediation against the criteria established by Baron and Kenny (1986), we performed a Performance x Frequency x Sign x IPT GLM on the two dependent variables in our study: personal characteristics and performance potential. We found a performance main effect ($\beta = .463, p<.01$), a frequency x IPT interaction effect ($\beta = -.120, p<.05$) and a Performance x Frequency x Sign interaction effect ($\beta = .126, p<.05$) on personal characteristics. For performance potential, we only found a significant main effect of the seeker’s performance history ($\beta = .624, p<.01$).

We then entered the full factor model and the attributions simultaneously into the regression. As recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007), these regression equations also included the interaction terms of the mediator with the independent variables. Performance history remained a significant predictor of personal characteristics ($\beta = .421, p<.01$) and performance potential evaluations ($\beta = .580, p<.01$), thereby excluding full mediation (Baron et al., 1986). To test for partial mediation, we performed Sobel tests and found that performance-enhancement attributions partially mediate the main effect of performance history on personal characteristics and performance potential (Sobel $z = 2.04, p<.05$ and Sobel $z = 4.71, p<.01$ respectively).

We then tested whether impression-management attributions mediated the interaction effects of Frequency x IPT and Frequency x Performance x Sign on personal characteristics (note that these interactions did not affect performance potential evaluations). When we entered the
full factor model and impression-management attributions simultaneously into the regression, the interaction effects were reduced to insignificance ($\beta = -0.093$, $ns$ and $\beta = 0.095$ respectively), thereby providing support for full mediation.

**Discussion**

Finding partial support for our initial model, this study complements and extends feedback-seeking literature in several ways. First, by studying targets’ implicit person theories (Hypotheses 3 and 4) and targets’ attributions for feedback seeking, this study provides additional insight into attributions as one of the underlying mechanisms for why FSB affects important organizational outcomes (Hypotheses 5 to 7) and into the patterns of feedback seeking (sign and frequency) as relevant moderators of these effects (Hypothesis 2).

Second, our results add to those reported in prior work (e.g. Chau et al., 2008; Lam et al., 2007) by providing an initial test of why targets make particular attributions. Specifically, we found that rather than exerting the main effects that were found in previous work, the sign and frequency of feedback seeking interacted with the performance history of the seeker. Ashford and Northcraft (1992) found that among the variables they tested, only the seeker’s performance history shaped outcomes. We also found that it interacts with the two feedback-seeking patterns (frequency and sign) to shape attributions for seeking (Hypothesis 2) and through those attributions, shaped outcomes (Hypothesis 1). For superior performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to be viewed positively, except when they frequently seek positive feedback. For only average performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to entail impression-management costs, except when they occasionally seek negative feedback. It may be that when evaluating the frequency and type of the feedback sought, targets adopt different
tipping points for superior performers than for only average performers. For those with a history of superior performance, feedback seeking seems to convey as positive an impression when it occurs both frequently and infrequently; however, for only average performers, the benefits of feedback seeking seem to become costs the more often it occurs. While our operationalization of feedback-seeking frequency as a categorical variable (feedback was either sought frequently or infrequently) makes it impossible to test a tipping point hypothesis, it is an attractive avenue for future research.

Third, this study was the first to show that characteristics of the target affect how they interpret FSB. Specifically, we showed that the target’s *implicit person theory* affects attributed impression-management motives through an interaction with the frequency of seeking (Hypotheses 4). Targets with an entity theory attribute frequent feedback seeking significantly more to impression-management motives than do targets endorsing an incremental theory. Thus, the appropriate frequency of feedback seeking is not only determined by the seeker’s performance history and the sign of the feedback sought (Hypothesis 2), but also by characteristics of the feedback target. Future research should examine other target individual differences such as the targets’ attributional complexity (Fletcher, Danilovacs, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986). Researchers may also fruitfully investigate how context factors impact interpretations of feedback seeking. For example, feedback seeking may elicit different reactions depending on the level of task interdependence in the organization (Van der Vegt & Van de Vliert, 2005). Additionally, the contextual factor of uncertainty may impact target behavior. Research reveals a curvilinear relationship between uncertainty and desire for feedback, where people show more interest at high and low levels of uncertainty, as opposed to moderate levels of uncertainty (Anseel & Lievens, 2007).
Fifth, we showed that the formation of *performance-enhancement impressions* happens in a relatively straightforward manner. Feedback targets’ performance-enhancement attributions only seem to be influenced by the feedback seeker’s performance history. Though we did not find the predicted interaction with the feedback-seeking patterns, this finding is reminiscent of Ashford & Northcraft’s (1992) pattern of results in which for three suggested determinants of target impressions, only performance history mattered. These results are also consistent with those reported by Chau and colleagues (2008) who found no relationship between the sign of the sought feedback and attributed performance-enhancement motives. This suggests either that performance history swamps all other effects or that other causes and explanations need to be explored. One possible explanation is that respondents were responding in a socially desirable manner, an important methodological issue in scenario research. Although our vignettes gave no hints regarding the most appropriate response, targets may have assumed that it is appropriate to attribute FSB to performance-enhancement motives. If such a social desirability mechanism was operating, though, this does not explain why targets differentiated between superior performers’ and only average performers’ seeking, shown by the support for Hypothesis 1b. However, given the pervasiveness of social desirability in social research (see Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996 for a review), future work nonetheless needs to investigate this possibility. It may also be that targets tend to give feedback seekers the benefit of the doubt when making attributions. That is, feedback targets may assume implicitly that all FSB is to some extent driven by a desire to improve performance. Further theoretical guidance and research is needed to test the possibility that targets’ performance-enhancement and impression-management attributions are formed in divergent ways. To some extent, interpretation may be driven by culture. It has been theoretically argued (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000) and empirically shown (MacDonald, Brown, & Sulsky, 2008) that cultural differences affect the propensity of individuals to seek feedback from different
sources. Although this body of work has primarily centered on feedback seekers, implications for feedback targets could be specified.

Finally, from a broader proactivity perspective, our results highlight that proactivity researchers should focus on both the benefits and the costs of the proactive behaviors that they study. Although Grant and Ashford (2008) strongly argued that not all proactive behaviors may be beneficial, researchers tend to focus on how proactivity helps individuals, work groups and organizations (Grant & Ashford, 2008). We believe that the present study provides an excellent starting point for research in this area. Specifically, our results underscore the importance of studying the cognitive processes underlying targets’ evaluations of proactive employees (e.g., their attributions for these behaviors).

**Practical implications**

Our study provides some important insights for management practice. First, from an organizational perspective, our results highlight the need to develop work contexts that reduce the impression-management costs of feedback seeking. For example, organizations might implement training interventions on the importance of feedback in organizations. These training interventions may particularly be relevant for entity theorists who do not fully appreciate the diagnostic value of feedback and FSB. As shown by Heslin, VandeWalle and Latham (2006) training entity theorists to become more incremental may have important positive consequences for coaching behaviors at work. Similarly, such training may help entity-theory leaders (and other feedback targets) to see the benefits of feedback and feedback seeking, especially for only average performers who need it the most.
Second, our results indicate that it is important for feedback seekers to have some insight into their own performance history as this determines the most appropriate pattern of seeking for creating positive attributions and outcomes. For superior performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to yield impression-management benefits, except when they frequently seek feedback about their strengths. For only average performers, all forms of feedback seeking seem to be costly, except when they occasionally seek feedback about their weaknesses. Thus, before initiating feedback seeking, it is important for feedback seekers to have a sense of how they are perceived to be performing. This is a somewhat paradoxical recommendation, of course, because the act of feedback seeking may be what is needed for individuals to gain this insight. We are not suggesting that average performers should generally avoid feedback inquiry. However, instead of employees of only average performance (determined through performance appraisals) seeking feedback through direct inquiry, it may be recommended that these individuals develop a broader repertoire of seeking strategies such as monitoring (Ashford & Cummings, 1983) and indirect inquiry (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000).

Finally, our results indicate that it is important for seekers to know a bit about how the target of their feedback seeking defines natural ability. If the target does not believe that feedback will help the individual to grow (i.e., when the target endorses an entity theory), frequently seeking feedback may be very costly. However, when the target believes in the diagnostic value of feedback in enhancing performance (i.e., when the target is an incrementalist), then frequently asking feedback may yield impression-management benefits. Again, we are not suggesting that employees should avoid asking for feedback if their supervisor has an entity vision on development. However, instead of directly asking for feedback, individuals may choose other tactics, or highlight the instrumental value of feedback to their supervisors.
Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

Limitations

In considering our results and their practical implications, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, our use of a scenario research design limits the generalizability of our results as it lacks contextual realism. To partially assess this, we asked respondents how easy it was to imagine the scenario happening in their organization. The 3.97 mean of this variable is consistent with the means found in prior scenario research (e.g., Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Fedor et al., 1989) and suggests that respondents found the scenarios easy to imagine. Moreover, scenario studies have the advantage of increased experimental control. As such, they are suitable for drawing causal inferences, as it is more likely than in field studies that changes in the dependent variable occurred due to the manipulation of the independent variables (Singleton & Straits, 1999). Nevertheless, future research should test the findings of our research in real-life settings.

Another limitation of this study is that we only found partial support for our hypotheses, especially those pertaining to targets’ performance-enhancement attributions. We note however that both statistically significant findings and non-findings have important implications for examining theoretically derived hypotheses. For example, the fact that targets did not use the frequency of the feedback sought as a cue when attributing FSB to performance-enhancement motives shows that impressions of feedback seeking are formed in more complex ways than previously assumed. However, as mentioned, it is unclear whether our lack of findings for performance-enhancement attributions are due to methodological issues (e.g. because respondents were responding in a socially desirable manner or because of the relatively small sample size) or because of the underlying processes through which such attributions are formed. As stated, it may be that targets’ performance-enhancement and
impression-management attributions are formed in divergent ways. Further theoretical
guidance is needed to explore this possibility.

The constraints aside, the results of this study advance our understanding of the impression-
management costs and benefits of FSB in organizations and extend the existing feedback-
seeking literature by focusing on the boundary conditions that shape the “effective” inquiry
for feedback.
Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

References


Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

Figure 5.1: Conceptual Model

```
Feedback-Seeking Pattern
  Sign
  Frequency

Feedback Seeker
  Performance History

Target
  Implicit Person Theory

Target’s Attributions for Feedback Seeking
  Performance enhancement
  Impression management

Evaluations of the Seeker
  Personal Characteristics
  Performance Potential
```
## Table 5.1: Means, standard deviations, reliabilities and intercorrelations for hypothesis testing

<table>
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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SD</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sign</td>
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<td>.027</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Freq.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Perf. Hist.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.451**</td>
<td>(.83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Pers. Char.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.620**</td>
<td>.184*</td>
<td>(.89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Perf. Pot.</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>.037</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>.147*</td>
<td>.306**</td>
<td>.322**</td>
<td>(.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Perf. Enh. Att.</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>-.005</td>
<td>-.132*</td>
<td>-.144*</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Impr. Mgt. Att.</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.021</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>-.078</td>
<td>(.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 IPT</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>-.033</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.044</td>
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</table>

**Notes.** Sign = typical sign of sought feedback (-1: strengths, 1: weaknesses); Freq = frequency of seeking (-1 frequent, 1: infrequent); Perf. Hist. = performance history (-1: only average, 1: superior); Pers. Char. = personal characteristics (higher scores correspond to more positive evaluations); Perf. Pot. = performance potential (higher scores correspond to more positive evaluations); Perf. Enh. Att. = performance-enhancement attributions; Impr. Mgt. Att. = impression-management attributions; IPT = Implicit Person Theory (higher scores correspond to incremental theory)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, two-tailed.**

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level, two-tailed.
**Table 5.2: Coefficient Estimates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personal Characteristics</th>
<th>Performance Potential</th>
<th>Performance Enhancement Attributions</th>
<th>Impression Management Attributions</th>
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<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
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<td>Step 1: Linking the Independent variables to the Dependent Variables</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance History</td>
<td>.463***</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>.624**</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance History x Sign x Frequency</td>
<td>-.126*</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>-.059</td>
<td>.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT x Frequency</td>
<td>-.120*</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>-.091</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Linking the Independent Variables to the Mediators</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>.144*</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance History x Sign x Frequency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.073</td>
<td>.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT x Frequency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>.043</td>
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<td>Step 3: Linking the Independent Variables &amp; Mediators to the Dependent Variables</td>
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<td>Performance History</td>
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<td>.056</td>
<td>.580**</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.063</td>
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<td>Performance History x Sign x Frequency</td>
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<td>Performance Enhancement Attributions</td>
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<td>.259**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impression Management Attributions</td>
<td>-.113*</td>
<td>.070</td>
<td>-.152**</td>
<td>.041</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes. Sign = typical sign of sought feedback (-1: strengths, 1: weaknesses); Frequency = frequency of seeking (-1: frequent, 1: infrequent); Performance History (-1: only average, 1: superior); IPT = Implicit Person Theory (higher scores correspond to incremental theory).

a. All main terms and all first order, second order and higher order interactions were entered in the regression equations. The table only reports the hypothesized path coefficients. None of the other main effects of interactions were significant.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$
Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

Table 5.3: Predicted values of impression-management attributions as a function of frequency of seeking and IPT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPT</th>
<th>Frequency of Seeking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low*</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(entity theory)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highb</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incremental theory)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>0.44*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

Note: IPT = Implicit Person Theory

a. Estimated values when IPT was two standard deviations below the mean

b. Estimated values when IPT was two standard deviations below the mean
Chapter 5: Keeping up Appearances: How is Feedback-Seeking Behavior Interpreted?

Appendices

Appendix A

Today is a day like any other. You work for a large Southwestern organization. You have several immediate coworkers, you report to a single superior, and you have a small staff reporting to you. You are sitting comfortably at your desk working on final preparations for your year-end area review when you hear a knock on your office door. You look up to find Robert, one of your subordinates, standing in the doorway. Robert has a history of superior performance. You and Robert were involved in an important staff meeting yesterday. The meeting was long and covered a variety of topics. One of the topics of the meeting was a project that Robert is working on. Robert gave a prepared presentation that lasted about 15 minutes, and then he spent about 5 minutes answering questions about the project. Robert asks if you are free for a few minutes. After the two of you exchange greetings, Robert asks you, as he has done only a few times before, to comment on the weaknesses of his presentation.
Footnotes

1. We use the terms seeking positive feedback and seeking feedback about strengths interchangeably. Similarly, we use negative feedback seeking and feedback seeking about weaknesses interchangeably.

2. We formulated and tested two series of contrasts: one for the superior performers and one for the only average performers. For both groups, we tested whether there was a mean difference between frequent feedback seeking about weaknesses on the one hand and the average of the other three patterns of seeking on the other hand (frequent seeking about strengths, infrequent seeking about weaknesses and infrequent seeking about strengths). We repeated the same procedure for each feedback-seeking pattern. The t-test that is reported in the paper, pertains to the contrast that was hypothesized.

3. Table 5.3 shows the predicted values for impression-management motives for frequent and infrequent seeking when IPT was high (centered at two standard deviation units above the mean, i.e., more incremental) and when IPT was low (centered at two standard deviation units below the mean, i.e., more entity theory).
Part III

Conclusions
CHAPTER 6: EPILOGUE

By Kathleen DE STOBBELEIR

This dissertation had three primary objectives. The first was to develop and test a cross-level model of feedback-seeking behavior and reveal some of the individual-level and interpersonal mechanisms that shape employees’ feedback-seeking patterns. The second objective was to broaden our understanding of the instrumental consequences of feedback seeking by examining how it affects an important outcome beyond individual adjustment and “fit”, i.e., employee creativity. The third objective was to shed some light on the potentially “dark side” of feedback-seeking behavior by focusing on how others interpret and evaluate feedback-seeking acts.

To this end, we conducted three empirical studies. The first study examined how leaders indirectly influence their followers’ feedback-seeking behaviors by fostering individual followers’ autonomous goal pursuit and encouraging group-level cooperative norms. In the second empirical study, we developed and tested a model that depicts individual feedback-seeking behavior as a key self-regulation tactic in the creative process. The last empirical study focused on how feedback sources develop impressions of feedback seekers and their seeking.

This dissertation attained each of the three goals it set out to accomplish. In doing so, our research makes important theoretical contributions to the organizational and psychological
literatures. We start this concluding Chapter with a discussion of how our findings, from a broader theoretical perspective, contribute to our general understanding of the self-regulatory and proactive potential of employees. We then discuss how our research specifically advances the feedback-seeking literature and the related fields of impression management, leadership, and creativity. Throughout our discussion of the main theoretical contributions of our research to each of these fields, we identify directions for future research through the lenses of these theoretical frameworks. Next, we discuss the methodological contributions and limitations of our research. Finally, we conclude this thesis with some additional theoretical and practical considerations.

Theoretical Contributions & Directions for Future Research

General contributions

Contributions to the proactivity literature.

At a general level, the results of this dissertation provide additional support for an expanding paradigm in the organizational literature that focuses on employee proactivity. By recognizing the self-regulation capacities of employees, the results of this study, together with many others, suggest that individual employees take anticipatory actions to impact and shape their own work lives (see Grant & Ashford, 2008 for a recent review). Although this dissertation pertains most directly to the role of employee proactivity in the feedback context, we believe that many of the mechanisms we described and many of the conclusions we drew may be extended to other proactive behaviors as well.
First, because many proactive behaviors may share similar antecedents, processes, and consequences (Grant & Ashford, 2008), we deliberately included general dynamics, rather than domain-specific mechanisms in several of the models we developed. For example, our results suggest that much may be learned from studying how general antecedents (e.g., leadership) and mechanisms (e.g., goals and norms) shape specific manifestations of proactive behavior. A next step could be to test whether the model we developed to predict feedback-seeking behavior (Chapter 3) can also be applied to other categories of employee proactivity. In the same vein, the cross-level findings reported in Chapter 3 also highlight that employee proactivity can not be studied in isolation from the context in which it occurs and that an appreciation of the interrelatedness of individuals and their contexts can increase our understanding of employee proactivity. Not surprisingly, however, employee proactivity is typically studied and framed from an individual perspective (e.g., Parker & Collins, in press). Given that proactive behaviors take place within an organizational context and given that employee proactivity may even involve that employees alter their context, we believe that research would benefit from a focus on the interpersonal dynamics that underlie employee proactivity. The theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 may provide an excellent starting point for research in this area. Similarly, by demonstrating that individual employees use feedback seeking as a strategy to manage their creative performance, this study underscores the importance of linking proactive behaviors to models of work performance that go beyond socialization and adaptation. Future research may fruitfully link other categories of proactive behaviors to creative performance.

By showing that feedback seeking is not always associated with positive outcomes, our results also highlight that researchers should focus on both the benefits and the costs of the
proactive behaviors that they study. Although Grant and Ashford (2008) strongly argued that not all proactive behaviors may be beneficial, researchers tend to focus on how proactivity helps individuals, work groups and organizations (Grant & Ashford, 2008). We believe that the third empirical study reported in this dissertation provides an excellent starting point for research in this area. Specifically, our results underscore the importance of studying the cognitive processes underlying targets’ evaluations of proactive employees (e.g., their attributions for these behaviors). Studying how proactive behaviors are actually being interpreted may help proactivity researchers to study both the instrumental outcomes and the potential image costs of employee proactivity.

Our final contribution/suggestion is a rather general one. As theory and research have moved beyond the study of the dispositional characteristics affecting employee proactivity, with increasingly more research focusing on the conditions under which proactive behaviors are more likely to occur, we believe it is more important than ever to clarify the concept of employee proactivity, and more importantly: what it is not.

For example, we found that cooperative norms stimulate feedback seeking. However, much of the transmission of social norms occurs in a non-conscious manner (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). Is an employee who is subconsciously pressed by norms to seek feedback really being proactive? Or should feedback seeking that is triggered by situational norms be considered as reactive behavior? In an excellent attempt to resolve some of these issues, Grant and Ashford (2008) described proactivity as anticipatory and change-oriented actions that employees take both within and outside their work roles. Based on this definition, a performer who seeks feedback in a context with cooperative norms, is proactive when he/she is thinking, planning,
calculating, and seeking feedback with an anticipated outcome in mind (e.g., enhance performance). Thus, conceptually, whether or not the seeker is being triggered by norms to behave proactively is not as important as whether or not the behavior is being performed with a future goal in mind. By definition, proactivity refers to a set of behaviors in which employees are conscious and anticipatory in their actions, but this does not necessarily imply that they should also be aware and conscious of all the processes that underlie and motivate these proactive behaviors (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004). This may complicate future research to employee proactivity, as proactive behavior is typically depicted as a cognition-driven phenomenon. More theoretical guidance is needed to address some of these issues (see Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2004; Grant & Ashford, 2008 for two important steps in this direction).

**Contributions to the self-regulation literature.**

While supporting an emerging paradigm of employee proactivity in the organizational literature, the results reported in this dissertation also relate to broader theorizing in the area of self-regulation within general psychology (see Baumeister & Vos, 2004 for a recent review). Self-regulation refers to the “exercise of control over oneself, especially with regard to bringing the self into line with preferred (thus, regular) standards” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 2). In other words, self-regulation theory focuses on the many processes by which human beings (and not just employees) exercise control over themselves. Within this broader theoretical framework, proactivity is only one of the many ways in which individuals regulate themselves and their environments.

The feedback-seeking framework has been historically rooted within the self-regulation
literature (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991) and we believe that we made at least two theoretical contributions to this field.

First, by demonstrating that individuals use feedback-seeking behavior as a self-regulation strategy to achieve instrumental (e.g., creative) goals, this study, together with others (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991) broadens the scope of applied self-regulation research. Applied self-regulation studies typically focus on the ramifications of self-regulation failure and on how individuals can successfully suppress undesirable behaviors. For example, self-regulation theory has been applied successfully to the domains of abusive eating, drinking, and smoking (see Baumeister & Vohs, 2004 for a review). While research in these areas shows that self-regulation failure is linked to “a broad range of bad outcomes” (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 4) and that successful self-regulation often requires the inhibition of maladaptive behaviors (e.g., stop smoking), our research has mapped out some of the dynamics of successful self-regulation that go beyond the inhibition of adverse behavioral patterns.

Our study also resonates with recent developments in self-regulation theorizing with regard to the role of self-regulation in social functioning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Leary, 2004; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). By studying how one self-regulation tactic (i.e., feedback-seeking behavior) is affected by interpersonal dynamics (e.g., leadership), and by considering how this tactic also shapes individuals’ social image, our research provides direct empirical support for the theorized, but scarcely tested link between self-regulation and social functioning (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Leary, 2004; Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). Simultaneously, however, our results highlight that employees not only use self-regulation strategies to mold themselves to the prevalent requirements and standards within their social
environment (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991), but also as a strategy to depart from conventional norms within their environment (e.g., by being creative).

While our study contributes to self-regulation theory, we believe that an important challenge for future feedback-seeking and proactivity research will be to continue building on theoretical extensions and developments within the self-regulation framework. For example, Carver (2004) recently theorized that individuals use their affective experiences as feedback on how well or how poorly they are doing in achieving their goals. Though there is an increased interest in the role of affect and emotions at work (e.g., Fox & Spector, 2002; Weiss, 2001), within the proactivity literature, research on the role of affective experiences seems to have lagged. This is not surprising, as most proactivity theories are historically rooted in cognitive frameworks (Grant & Ashford, 2008). However, given that proactive behaviors often involve taking ego and image risks, we can assume that proactive behaviors are also triggered by individuals’ affective experiences (Grant & Ashford, 2008). One promising theoretical framework for studying the role of affect in employee proactivity and feedback seeking, is the framework developed by Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall and Zhang (2007). This framework not only argues that individuals’ behaviors may be shaped by their emotional states, but also raises interesting questions regarding how individuals anticipate future emotions, develop emotional self-awareness and adapt their behaviors accordingly. The view that even emotions may have a cognitive component resonates with the increasing interest in organizations in concepts such as emotional (self-) awareness, emotional intelligence, and emotional labor (Goleman, 1998). This seems particularly relevant from a feedback-seeking perspective, as feedback seeking may be a critical strategy that individuals can use for attaining and maintaining this awareness (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003).
Future research should build on these developments within self-regulation theory and study how affective experiences, anticipated affect and emotional self-awareness serve as inputs and outputs for employee proactivity.

Specific contributions

In addition to contributing to notions of employee self-regulation and employee proactivity in general, the results reported in this dissertation also contribute to more specific domains in organizational research, such as the feedback-seeking literature, and the areas of impression management, leadership, and creativity.

Contributions to the feedback-seeking literature.

The results of this dissertation most directly advance our understanding of the feedback-seeking process and its impact on important individual outcomes. First, this study adds to the literature by providing insight in both the individual dynamics and the context factors that shape the feedback-seeking process. In addition, rather than simply demonstrating that individuals’ perceptions of their social context (e.g., individual perceptions of leadership) affect feedback-seeking behavior, the results of this study demonstrate that the context important for feedback-seeking behavior is socially constructed and should be studied at multiple levels of analysis.

A second way in which this study adds to the feedback-seeking literature is by broadening the understanding of the outcomes of feedback seeking. Unlike existing research, which has focused primarily on feedback seeking as a critical strategy for employee adjustment (Parker
& Collins, in press), our results highlight that feedback seeking helps individuals to attain goals beyond adjustment and adaptation (i.e., creative goals).

A final contribution of this research is that we provided a direct test for the impression management implications of feedback-seeking behavior. With the exception of three studies (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Chau, Dahling, Swee, & Levy, 2008; Lam, Huang & Snape, 2007), researchers have focused exclusively on impression-management concerns as antecedents of feedback-seeking behavior. A critical assumption underlying feedback-seeking literature, however, is that this behavior impacts the social image that people convey to others (Morrison & Bies, 1991). This study tested and found support for that assumption.

In conclusion, this dissertation provides valuable insight into the feedback-seeking process. This does not imply, however, that we know everything that we need to know about feedback-seeking behavior. We already highlighted important directions for future research throughout the empirical studies (Chapter 3, 4 & 5) and in this epilogue. Here, we offer two more possible directions for future feedback-seeking research.

First, we found that under some conditions (e.g., when the seeker has a history of only average performance) feedback-seeking behavior may be associated with impression-management costs for the seeker. An important next step will be to uncover whether feedback seeking that harms one’s social image may nonetheless have some instrumental value to it. Accordingly, in future research, it will be important for researchers to simultaneously examine both the instrumental benefits and image costs of feedback-seeking behavior. Similarly, researchers should study how feedback-seeking behavior that serves one’s public
image may be detrimental for the achievement of instrumental outcomes. For example, feedback seekers may be so focused on seeking feedback that they ultimately become the slaves of their own proactivity. This way, an apparently beneficial behavior may actually harm individuals in the long run.

Second, in an attempt to study the interrelatedness between feedback seekers and the feedback context that surrounds them, we developed a cross-level model of feedback-seeking behavior. What researchers should do next is studying and describing the dynamic interplay between feedback seekers and their environment. For example, by seeking feedback from various sources within and outside the boundaries of their organization, employees may gather information that does not correspond with the organizational goals or the priorities of their leaders (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003). Future research should test how employees deal with the often inconsistent feedback cues in their environment. Recently, Ashford and Northcraft (2003) developed a theoretical framework that may guide research in this area. Specifically, they depicted a dynamic model of how individuals allocate their attention across multiple feedback cues within their environment and how this in turn affects their attention and efforts in multiple goal situations. This framework is an excellent starting point for more research to the dynamic relationship between performers and their environment.

**Contributions to the impression-management literature.**

Our explicit consideration of the interpersonal mechanisms underlying feedback-seeking behavior also pertains to the impression-management literature. Specifically, by revealing some of the conditions under which feedback-seeking behavior harms and enhances the seeker’s social image, this study is one of the first to open the black box of targets’ reactions
to employees’ self-presentation activities (e.g., feedback seeking).

Indeed, as highlighted by Bozeman and Kacmar (1997) many models of impression management in organizations are actor-centered, and focus on the performers of impression-management behaviors, without considering the targets of those behaviors. These actor-centered models neglect that impression management is an inherently dynamic process that takes place in a social context. Thus, whether or not employees’ impression-management tactics are accepted by others may largely depend on the conditions under which these behaviors are performed. We showed that researchers interested in how impression-management behaviors are actually interpreted, should focus on at least three elements: (1) characteristics of the performer of the behavior (e.g., performance history), (2) characteristics of the impression-management tactic under investigation (e.g., how often it occurs), and (3) characteristics of the target of the behavior (e.g., the target’s personality). Though we did not explicitly assess this within the current study, future research should also test whether context factors shape how targets interpret and evaluate impression-management tactics. A test of this suggestion within the feedback-seeking literature would involve an analysis of whether feedback-seeking behavior is more likely to be accepted in some situations (e.g., contexts characterized by high levels of ambiguity), than in other situations (e.g., contexts characterized by high levels of certainty).

**Contributions to the leadership literature.**

Our research also extends leadership theory in important ways. Specifically, by studying leaders’ impact beyond the dyadic level (e.g., by studying how empowering leaders affect group-level norms) we provided direct support for Avolio and Bass’s (1995) assertion that
leaders exert broader influence than the dyadic impact that researchers tend to focus on. Such results highlight that we need to pay more attention to how leadership is being diffused within work groups.

In addition, unlike previous research, which has mainly focused on studying either the individual-level effects or the group-level impact of empowering leaders, this research identified how leaders exert their effects through both intra-personal (i.e., goals) and interpersonal (i.e., norms) mechanisms. Such results highlight that a comprehensive model of the diffusion of leadership is by definition a cross-level model. By specifically examining how leaders affect autonomous goal pursuit among their followers and stimulate cooperative group norms, this research also integrates two major theories regarding the diffusion of leadership: theories that focus on how leaders influence their followers through intra-personal motivational processes (e.g., Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) and perspectives that focus on how leaders impact their followers through collective processes (e.g., Hofmann & Jones, 2005).

While our research has shed some light on how leaders influence individual follower’s behaviors through both individual-level and group-level processes, more research is needed to how proactive behaviors (e.g., feedback-seeking behavior) shape the bottom-up diffusion of leadership. For example, as highlighted by Szrivastava, Bartol, and Locke (2006), it may be that it is not an empowering leadership style that empowers employees to behave proactively, but it may be that empowered employees who behave proactively encourage their managers to demonstrate an empowering leadership style. Thus, rather than being initiated by management, leadership and norms may be a consequence of employees’
behaviors and attitudes. This view fits nicely with the image of the proactive employee, i.e., an individual who shapes and changes his/her environment, rather than being impacted by it.

**Contributions to creativity literature.**

Our findings related to feedback seeking and employee creativity may also modify how we conceptualize employee creativity. Rather than considering creativity from an organizationally-driven perspective, the results of this study show that employees actively manage their creative performance by proactively seeking out feedback in many ways and from a wide variety of feedback sources. In doing so, our results highlight the need for more research on individuals’ proactive role in the creative process. Our research revealed one self-regulatory strategy used by employees to manage their creative performance, but future research may identify other self-regulatory behaviors that are conducive to the creative process.

Our study also adds to the creativity literature by developing an integrative framework on how dispositional, contextual and behavioral factors simultaneously contribute to creative performance. Unlike previous work, which has focused on the direct impact of personal and contextual factors on creative performance (e.g., Baer, Oldham, & Cummings, 2003), our study has started to unpack the behavioral mechanisms (e.g., feedback-seeking behavior) through which these factors impact employee creativity.

While our research has shed some light on individuals’ self-regulation potential in enhancing their creative performance, we believe that the creativity literature would also benefit from a more careful consideration of how the creative process unfolds over time. Little is known, for
example, about how individuals evaluate their ideas and about how this affects their creative performance.

Similarly, future research might successfully study the impression management implications of employee creativity. Creativity often involves a challenge of the status quo and this may be more acceptable in some situations than in others. As such, employee creativity may also have a dark side. Linking this to our discussion on the importance of studying targets’ reactions to employee behaviors, we believe that an important avenue for future research is to study the conditions under which employee creativity is likely to be accepted.

**Methodological Contributions & Limitations**

**Methodological Contributions**

In addition to making important theoretical contributions, this thesis also makes at least three important methodological contributions.

An important methodological contribution is that in two of our studies, we used a multiple source research design. A unique contribution of this study is that we gathered multiple source data on both the antecedent variables (e.g., leadership style, norms) and the outcome variables. First, rather than assessing the impact of contextual variables on feedback-seeking behavior by studying the feedback seeker’s perceptions of the feedback context, we explicitly considered the seeker’s embeddedness in a broader context by including group-level perceptions as well. Second, given that common method issues become particularly salient
when performance outcomes are involved (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), we used supervisor measures to obtain measures of employee performance (i.e., creative performance).

Another methodological contribution of this thesis is that we refined and broadened our measure of feedback inquiry (Chapter 3 & 4). Most existing scales of feedback inquiry do not distinguish between the various feedback sources from whom individuals seek feedback. The few scales that do make the distinction, only focus on the sources in the immediate role set of the feedback seeker, i.e., supervisors and coworkers (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Callister, Kramer, & Turban, 1999). We also assessed feedback inquiry from other sources (e.g., feedback seeking from individuals in other organizations) and found that this measure had adequate measurement properties and predicted important outcomes.

A final methodological contribution is the sample we used in Study 1 and Study 2. First, in contrast to previous studies, which have mainly gathered their data in single organizations, we collected data from employees working in multiple organizations, thereby increasing the generalizability of our findings. In addition, we focused on an important target population: knowledge workers. Given the level of ambiguity and uncertainty that is associated with knowledge work, feedback from sources such as superiors, coworkers and colleagues in other organizations play an important role in the development of this group of employees (Davenport, 2005). Formal feedback systems often do not capture all facets of knowledge workers’ jobs, thus actively seeking feedback may be an important individual resource for knowledge workers (Ashford et al., 2003). Given that few studies have explicitly examined the feedback-seeking behaviors of knowledge workers, this was also an important
contribution to the literature.

**Methodological Limitations**

Although this dissertation has made several theoretical and methodological contributions, there are also a number of methodological limitations to be addressed. We already discussed the specific limitations associated with each of the studies reported in the empirical essays (Chapter 3, 4 & 5). Here, we briefly discuss the limitations of this dissertation across the three empirical studies.

**Survey-data & self-reports.**

A first limitation of this dissertation is that we relied primarily on *survey-data*. For many of the variables we even relied on self-report data. This raises the issue of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For example, consistency motives, social desirability, implicit theories, illusory correlations, leniency, acquiescence and mood states all may have biased individuals’ responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

According to Podsakoff and colleagues (2003), however, such method biases are most likely to occur in studies in which the data for both the predictor and outcome variable are obtained from the same person. In two of the empirical studies (Chapter 3 & 4), we overcame this issue by collecting the measures for these variables from different sources (e.g., supervisors). Given that this was not possible in the laboratory study, we statistically controlled for method effects in that study (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Another concern that is associated with self-reported data is the issue of social desirability.
This was particularly a concern in Study 1 and Study 2, where we could not collect data anonymously. We tried to solve this issue by guaranteeing confidentiality and by giving respondents the opportunity to receive personal feedback (because feedback would only be relevant to respondents if they responded honestly). Despite the various remedial actions we took to limit social desirability and to control for common method biases, however, it would be naïve to assume that we resolved all of the potential sources of common method biases.

There are two things that should be kept in mind, though. First, the models we tested were derived from theory and second, many of our results were consistent with those of studies conducted in other settings, using different methodologies. This, in combination with the preventive measures we took to control for sources of common method variance, makes us confident that our results are robust.

Sample.

In addition to the use of survey-data, a second potential limitation of this dissertation is that we used homogeneous samples. In Chapter 3 and 4, we collected data from knowledge workers and in Chapter 5, our sample consisted of MBA students (and alumni). This may limit the generalizability of our results. However, as noted by VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown (2002), sample homogeneity is likely to result in a more conservative test of the hypotheses, as the variance of all variables is restricted, which makes it more difficult to observe statistically significant relationships between variables. In addition, we had a strong theoretical basis to focus on knowledge workers in Chapter 3 and 4, given that few studies have explicitly examined the feedback-seeking behaviors of knowledge workers. Nevertheless, caution is warranted for generalizing the findings until they are replicated with
other samples and settings.

*Cross-sectional data.*

Finally, we proposed causal directions in our hypotheses and consider the underlying logic sound. However, the cross-sectional character of our research designs in Chapter 3 and 4 precludes us from drawing causal inferences. As such, many of the relationships we found may also have been reverse-ordered. Even though the models we tested were theoretically sound and even though many of the results were consistent with those reported in experimental studies, we believe that future research should test our models using longitudinal research designs.
Some Concluding Reflections…

In the past two decades, the study of employee proactivity has evolved from being a niche area studied within the peripheries of organizational literature, to being one of the most popular paradigms in the study of organizational behavior (Porath & Bateman, 2006). The main conclusion that can be drawn from this line of inquiry is that employee proactivity is an essential aspect of everyday work life that has wide-ranging implications for both individuals and organizations (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

A potential downside of a view that argues so strongly for the proactive potential of employees, however, is that organizations may thrust aside their responsibilities under the assumption that employee proactivity requires high levels of effort and initiative at the individual level, but not at the organizational level (Campbell, 2000; Porath & Bateman, 2006). This is of course not the message that we wish to convey. Organizations that desire and/or employ proactive employees, but fail to proactively manage them, neglect that increased employee proactivity also raises important issues for firms: “Firms and managers need to determine whether and under what circumstances they are prepared to live with the increased unpredictability if employees do become more proactive” (Campbell, 2000, p. 53).

As such, employee proactivity has far-ranging implications for several organizational domains, including selection and recruitment, training, and decision making (see Campbell, 2000 for a detailed discussion of these implications).

Thus, although we started this dissertation with the simple plotline that employees are more
proactive than traditional feedback theories often give them credit for, we felt that this thesis would not be complete without an explicit consideration of the organizational challenges associated with increased employee proactivity in the feedback context.

**Organizational challenges associated with employee proactivity in the feedback context.**

Organizations that encourage self-management and employee proactivity expect their employees to take responsibility for their own learning and development. Employees can do this by actively seeking and attending to feedback cues in their environment, instead of passively waiting for feedback to be given to them (Ashford et al., 2003). Ideally, the organization’s emphasis on employee proactivity is also accompanied by a supportive feedback environment, i.e., an environment in which feedback flows freely and where both managers and employees feel comfortable to give, seek and receive feedback (London, 2003).

While such an environment may be in part developed by enhancing the quality of feedback and by increasing the availability of feedback sources (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004), an important question remains how organizations can assure that individuals’ aggregate feedback environment is congruent with the organization’s goals and priorities (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003). That aggregate feedback environment is dynamic and consists of many different cues: the formal feedback that employees obtain through performance reviews, the informal feedback that they seek from sources within and outside the boundaries of the organization, the feedback that they glean from their tasks, etc. To date, we know very little about how individuals deal with their aggregate feedback environment and how they allocate their
resources across the different feedback cues that are available to them. For example, what happens when employees seek or receive feedback that is inconsistent with their own goals? And what happens when this feedback conflicts with the organization’s goals? It seems that one boundary condition for an effective feedback environment is that there is an alignment between the organization’s priorities and employees’ goals (Campbell, 2000).

However, even if such an alignment between the organization’s goals and the employee’s goals can be achieved at a general level, this does not necessarily imply that employees are always capable of effectively allocating their resources among the many competing goals and task demands they face in their everyday work lives.

In a seminal article, Ashford and Northcraft (2003) illustrate this point with the “teaching paradox”, i.e. the phenomenon that many junior faculty members focus on teaching activities despite having been told that research should be their first priority. According to Ashford and Northcraft (2003), one explanation for this phenomenon may be found in the aggregate feedback environment. Feedback on teaching is not only more readily available than feedback on research, but it also tends to be more specific (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003). So, even if “research” is a stated priority at the organizational level, and even if individuals would also consider it as their personal goal, natural differences in the pace and specificity of feedback on teaching and research may be detrimental to the actual achievement of this goal (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003).

Organizations are still learning how to deal with these issues and research has only begun to explore how both organizations and employees can create a feedback environment that
supports organizational goals and helps individuals to effectively allocate their resources among multiple competing task demands and various stakeholders (e.g., management, clients, and coworkers).

In the spirit of issues, we hope that in the decade ahead of us, research will provide insight in how individuals’ aggregate feedback environment can become an integral component of the performance management process of organizations.

**General Conclusions**

After twenty-five years of research on feedback-seeking behavior, much has been learned about its key facets, antecedents and outcomes. However, feedback-seeking research has advanced more in some areas than in others. We called attention to three areas in which empirical and theoretical progress seemed to have lagged: (1) how both individual-level and group-level level dynamics shape employees’ feedback-seeking patterns, (2) how feedback seeking affects important outcomes beyond individual adjustment and “fit”, and (3) how feedback seeking can both harm and enhance individuals’ social image. We found that both individual-level (e.g., goals) and group-level dynamics (e.g., leadership and norms) affect employees’ feedback-seeking patterns and that several of these patterns were related to important individual outcomes, including employee creativity and employees’ public images. These findings not only contribute to our understanding of feedback-seeking behavior, but also to our understanding of impression management, employee creativity, the diffusion of leadership, and more generally to our understanding of the self-regulatory and proactive potential of employees.
References.


38%...dat is het percentage van alle feedback interventies die een negatieve, eerder dan een positieve impact hebben op individuele prestaties (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Toch gaat men er zowel in de organisatiewetenschappen als in de praktijk vaak vanuit dat feedback enkel voordelen oplevert. Uit onderzoek blijkt echter dat feedback enkel onder zeer specifieke omstandigheden de resultaten oplevert die eraan worden toegeschreven. Enkel wanneer mensen routinetaken verrichten, die gekenmerkt worden door duidelijke doelstellingen, werkt feedback prestatiebevorderend (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Dergelijke omstandigheden vindt men echter zelden terug in hedendaagse organisaties. Factoren zoals toegenomen competitiviteit, globalisering en technologische ontwikkelingen hebben organisaties ertoe gedwongen om continu te innoveren en proactief te zoeken naar nieuwe opportuniteiten. De toegenomen complexiteit op organisatieniveau heeft ook belangrijke implicaties voor het werk dat medewerkers verrichten en voor de manier waarop dat werk wordt beoordeeld.

Steeds meer worden medewerkers vandaag geconfronteerd met complexe, voortdurend wijzigende doelstellingen...niet met de eenvoudige routinetaken zoals we die hierboven beschreven. Daardoor wordt het steeds moeilijker voor leidinggevenden om hun medewerkers te evalueren en hen systematische feedback te geven op hun werk. Organisaties
zijn bovendien een stuk vlakker dan in het verleden. Steeds meer leidinggevenden superviseren grote groepen van medewerkers, wat het extra uitdagend maakt om de prestaties van die medewerkers nauwkeurig op te volgen. Voor medewerkers betekent dit dat zij zelfstandig dienen te kunnen functioneren met beperkte feedback van hun leidinggevende. Daardoor moeten in de huidige organisatiecontext medewerkers steeds meer zelf verantwoordelijkheid nemen voor hun ontwikkeling en zelf op zoek gaan naar feedback, van verschillende bronnen en niet enkel van hun leidinggevende. Gezien traditionele feedback theorieën onvoldoende rekening houden met deze toegenomen nadruk op zelfmanagement in de feedback context, is er een kentering nodig in de manier waarop we feedback processen in organisaties bestuderen.

Het toegenomen belang van zelfmanagement in het feedbackgebeuren wordt voornamelijk erkend binnen de literatuur rond feedback zoekend gedrag. Deze literatuur biedt inzicht in de verschillende manieren waarop medewerkers in hun dagelijks werk omgaan met feedback om hun doelstellingen te bereiken. Waar traditionele feedback theorieën voornamelijk focussen op de feedback die leidinggevenden geven in het kader van prestatiebeoordelingen, erkent deze literatuur dat in de hedendaagse organisatiecontext medewerkers vaak zelf actief op zoek (moeten) gaan naar feedback om een zicht te krijgen op hun eigen prestaties. In die zin wordt feedback zoekend gedrag, geïnitieerd door medewerkers zelf als een belangrijk complement beschouwd voor de formele prestatiebeoordelingssystemen binnen organisaties.

Verschillende studies hebben substantieel bijgedragen tot ons begrip van dit belangrijke werknemersgedrag. Zo heeft 25 jaar onderzoek een duidelijk zicht gegeven op de individuele factoren en de persoonlijkheidskenmerken die bepalen of mensen al dan niet feedback zullen
gaan zoeken. Daarnaast blijkt ook uit onderzoek medewerkers die regelmatig feedback zoeken zich beter kunnen aanpassen aan de eisen die hun omgeving aan hen stelt.

Toch is het onderzoek op andere vlakken minder geavanceerd. Binnen dit doctoraat focusten we op drie onderzoeksvragen waaraan bestaand onderzoek weinig aandacht heeft besteed:

(1) Welke individuele én groepsdynamieken bepalen dat medewerkers op zoek gaan naar feedback bij verschillende bronnen (bv. collega’s, leidinggevenden, maar ook mensen buiten de eigen organisatie)?

(2) Hoe helpt feedback zoekend gedrag medewerkers niet alleen om zich beter aan te passen aan de vereisten van hun omgeving, maar hoe helpt het medewerkers om bijvoorbeeld creatief te zijn?

(3) Hoe wordt feedback zoekend gedrag geïnterpreteerd door degenen waaraan medewerkers feedback vragen? Zijn er met andere woorden omstandigheden waaronder dit gedrag negatief wordt gepercipieerd?

Samenvatting van de Studies

Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, voerden we drie afzonderlijke studies uit (zie ook Hoofdstukken 3, 4 & 5). In wat volgt lichten we kort de belangrijkste resultaten toe die naar voor kwamen uit deze studies.
**Empirische studie 1: De effecten van een motiverende leiderschapsstijl op feedback zoekend gedrag.**

In de eerste empirische studie onderzochten we de individuele en groepsfactoren die bepalen dat medewerkers op zoek gaan naar feedback. Meer bepaald bouwden we verder op inzichten verworven uit de literatuur rond de rol van een motiverende leiderschapsstijl in het stimuleren van feedback zoekend gedrag. We ontwikkelden een conceptueel model waarin we voorstelden dat leidinggevenden het feedback zoekend gedrag van hun medewerkers zouden beïnvloeden via twee belangrijke mechanismen: (1) via een individueel mechanisme dat eruit bestaat dat deze leidinggevenden hun medewerkers aansporen om autonoom doelstellingen te zetten; en (2) via een interpersoonlijk mechanisme dat eruit bestaat dat deze leidinggevenden de verschillende teamleden binnen hun groep aansporen om samen te werken.

Het voorgestelde conceptuele model werd getest aan de hand van een steekproef van 991 kennismedewerkers, die deel uitmaakten van 185 teams. De resultaten ondersteunen de idee dat leidinggevenden hun medewerkers kunnen aansporen om feedback te gaan zoeken bij verschillende bronnen (niet enkel bij de leidinggevende). Meer bepaald tonen de resultaten aan dat motiverende leiders hun medewerkers stimuleren om autonoom doelstellingen te zetten. Die autonome doelstellingen zorgen er vervolgens voor dat medewerkers niet enkel op hun leidinggevende rekenen voor feedback, maar dat zij ook bij andere bronnen feedback gaan zoeken (zowel binnen als buiten hun organisatie). Verder tonen de resultaten aan dat leidinggevenden met een motiverende leiderschapsstijl constructieve samenwerkingsnormen binnen hun team stimuleren en dat die normen ervoor zorgen dat medewerkers vaker feedback gaan zoeken, zowel bij hun collega’s als bij hun leidinggevende.
Dergelijke resultaten tonen aan dat niet enkel het individu, maar ook leidinggevenden een belangrijke rol kunnen spelen in de mate van zelfmanagement die medewerkers aan de dag leggen binnen het feedbackgebeuren. Samenvattend kunnen we dus stellen dat de inzichten uit Studie 1 verduidelijken hoe leidinggevenden hun medewerkers kunnen aansporen om een meer actieve rol op te nemen in het feedback proces.

**Empirische studie 2: Feedback zoekend gedrag als een zelfmanagement techniek voor creativiteit.**

Het doel van de tweede empirische studie was na te gaan of feedback zoekend gedrag nog andere voordelen oplevert voor medewerkers dan de voordelen waarop in voorgaand onderzoek werd gefocust. In de literatuur wordt feedback zoekend gedrag namelijk vooral voorgesteld als een tactiek die mensen kan helpen om zich beter aan te passen aan de vereisten van hun omgeving. Maar het zijn de anderen die de norm zetten, de anderen die de doelstellingen bepalen. Dergelijke voorstelling van feedback zoekend gedrag als een “adaptatietechniek” staat in schril contrast met het idee van de proactieve medewerker die aan zelfmanagement doet door doelstellingen voor zichzelf te formuleren en die zelf initiatieven neemt om zijn/haar omgeving te verbeteren.

Verder bouwend op suggesties in de literatuur om ook aandacht te besteden aan de rol van feedback zoekend gedrag in het creatieve proces, ontwikkelden en testten we in Studie 2 een model waarin we suggereren dat medewerkers feedback zoekend gedrag als een zelfmanagement tactiek gebruiken om hun creativiteit op te drijven.
Meer bepaald wordt een model voorgesteld waarin we stellen dat individuen met een innovatieve cognitieve stijl meer feedback zoeken van verschillende bronnen. Op basis van theoretische inzichten voorspellen we verder ook dat contexten die creativiteit stimuleren, medewerkers ertoe aanzetten om meer feedback te zoeken over hun ideeën. Tenslotte voorspellen we dat de creatieve prestaties van medewerkers die meer feedback zoeken van verschillende bronnen, significant beter zullen zijn dan de creatieve prestaties van medewerkers die dit niet doen.

Het model werd empirisch getoetst op basis van de input van 456 medewerkers en hun leidinggevenden in vier verschillende organisaties. Zoals verwacht, zochten individuen met een innovatieve cognitieve stijl en medewerkers die vonden dat hun organisatie creativiteit aanmoedigde significant meer feedback dan individuen zonder een innovatieve stijl en dan individuen die geen ondersteuning kregen voor creativiteit. Verder bleek ook uit deze studie dat medewerkers die meer feedback zochten bij verschillende bronnen, meer gevarieerde input kregen rond hun ideeën en daardoor hun creatieve prestaties konden verbeteren. Dergelijke resultaten tonen aan dat feedback zoeken medewerkers niet alleen kan helpen om zich aan te passen aan de verwachtingen van anderen, maar dat het evenzeer een belangrijke vaardigheid is binnen het creatieve proces.

**Empirische studie 3: Hoe wordt feedback zoekend gedrag geïnterpreteerd?**

In de derde studie gingen we na of er ook nadelen kunnen verbonden zijn aan het zoeken van feedback. Uit voorgaand onderzoek is namelijk gebleken dat medewerkers vaak geen feedback durven te vragen, omdat ze vrezen dat dit zou worden geïnterpreteerd als een teken
van onzekerheid of als een teken van incompetentie. In de derde empirische studie gaan we na of deze vrees ook terecht is. Meer bepaald ontwikkelden en testten we een model waarin we voorstelden dat zowel kenmerken van de zoeker (prestatiehistoriek), karakteristieken van het gedrag (frequentie van zoeken en type van de gezocht feedback) als kenmerken van de feedback bron (visie op leren) zouden bepalen hoe feedback bronnen dit gedrag interpreteren.

Het model werd getoetst op basis van een scenariostudie bij 319 MBA en ex-MBA studenten in de Verenigde Staten. De resultaten tonen aan dat de manier waarop feedback zoekend gedrag wordt geïnterpreteerd in de eerste plaats afhangt van de prestatiehistoriek van de zoeker. Meer bepaald vonden we dat wanneer een medewerker een historiek had van zwakke prestaties, zijn feedback zoekend gedrag werd geïnterpreteerd als een tactiek om de aandacht af te leiden van die zwakke prestaties en niet als een tactiek om die zwakke prestaties te gaan verbeteren. Enkel wanneer een medewerker met zwakke prestaties slechts heel af en toe feedback zocht, was de impact op diens publiek imago minder negatief. Voor medewerkers met een historiek van goede prestaties daarentegen, bleek feedback zoeken geen nadelige effecten te hebben op hun publiek imago. Enkel wanneer zij zeer frequent feedback zochten over hun sterktes, werd hun feedback zoekend gedrag minder positief geïnterpreteerd. Verder toonden de resultaten ook aan dat de manier waarop feedback zoeken geïnterpreteerd wordt, ook sterk afhangt van de persoonlijkheid van de feedback bron (i.e., de persoon waaraan men feedback vraagt). Wanneer deze bron een groeivisie op ontwikkeling heeft, zal hij/zij feedback zoeken positiever interpreteren dan wanneer deze bron geen groeivisie heeft.

In hun totaliteit tonen deze resultaten aan dat het belangrijk is om de mogelijke nadelen die feedback zoeken inhoudt voor medewerkers met zwakke prestaties te reduceren én dat het
belangrijk is om leidinggevenden (maar ook andere feedback bronnen) te trainen opdat zij
een groeivisie zouden ontwikkelen.

**Conclusies**

Dankzij bovenstaande studies heeft dit doctoraat de onderzoeksvragen beantwoord die
vooropgesteld werden. Daardoor maakt dit proefschrift belangrijke bijdragen aan de
organisatieliteratuur.

Ten eerste ondersteunen de resultaten uit deze studies een belangrijk paradigma binnen de
organisatieliteratuur die focust op proactiviteit van medewerkers. Door te focussen op de
zelf-regulerende vaardigheden van medewerkers binnen hun feedback context, tonen deze
studies (samen met vele anderen) aan dat medewerkers een actieve rol spelen binnen het
feedbackgebeuren. Op deze manier openen we een aantal pistes tot verder onderzoek.

Een andere belangrijke bijdrage van dit doctoraat is dat we een beter zicht hebben gekregen
op intra-persoonlijke en inter-persoonlijke mechanismen die feedback zoekend gedrag
bepalen. Door aan te tonen dat naast individuele mechanismen ook de sociale context een rol
speelt, onderstreep dit doctoraat dat organisaties een rol kunnen vervullen in het stimuleren
van proactiviteit in de feedback context.

Een derde theoretische bijdrage is dat we ons begrip hebben verruimd van de instrumentele
waarde van het zoeken van feedback. Onze resultaten tonen aan dat het zoeken van feedback
medewerkers niet alleen helpt om zich beter aan te passen aan de verwachtingen van anderen
(zoals bleek uit voorgaand onderzoek) maar dat het medewerkers ook helpt om creatieve doelstellingen te bereiken.

Een laatste bijdrage van dit onderzoek is dat we getoetst hebben welke gevolgen het zoeken van feedback heeft voor iemands imago. Uit onze resultaten bleek dat deze gevolgen vooral afhangen van een combinatie van de prestatiehistoriek van de zoeker, kenmerken van het zoekgedrag en kenmerken van de feedback bron.

Samenvattend kunnen we stellen dat dit doctoraat belangrijke inzichten verschaft in het feedback zoekend gedrag van medewerkers. Dat betekent echter niet dat we alles weten wat we moeten weten over de manier waarop medewerkers met feedback omgaan in hun dagelijkse werkomgeving.

Voor verder onderzoek suggereren we dan ook in de eerste plaats het implementeren van een longitudinaal onderzoeksdesign. Op die manier kunnen de antecedenten en effecten van feedback zoekend gedrag over de tijd heen gemeten worden en zijn conclusies met betrekking tot de vooropgestelde causale verbanden meer sluitend. Ten tweede suggereren we dat verder onderzoek meer aandacht zou moeten besteden aan hoe feedback zoekend gedrag tegelijk instrumentele voordelen kan opleveren als nadelen voor iemands imago. Binnen dit doctoraat focusten we in afzonderlijke studies op de instrumentele gevolgen (Studie 2) en op de imago-gevolgen (Studie 3), maar het is waarschijnlijk dat het zoeken van feedback beide uitkomsten tegelijk beïnvloedt. Ten slotte is ook meer onderzoek nodig vanuit een breder proactiviteitskader. Toekomstig onderzoek moet uitwijzen in welke mate proactiviteit binnen de feedback context ook samenhangt met proactiviteit in andere omstandigheden.
Wat betreft de implicaties voor de managementpraktijk gaven de theorie en empirische data in dit proefschrift aan dat feedback zoekend gedrag individuele voordelen oplevert die ook van belang zijn voor organisaties (bv. creativiteit). Bovendien toonden we aan dat organisaties hun medewerkers kunnen stimuleren om meer feedback te zoeken via hun leidinggevenden (motiverende leiderschapsstijl), via samenwerkingsnormen en via een klimaat dat creativiteit aanmoedigt. Bovendien toonden we ook aan dat het voor organisaties zinvol is om een aantal van de potentiële risico’s weg te nemen dat het zoeken van feedback kan inhouden voor iemands imago. Meer bepaald kunnen organisaties dit doen door leidinggevenden te trainen en te coachen opdat zij een groeisisie op leren zouden ontwikkelen.