Reflections on the Looking Glass: A Review of Research on Feedback-Seeking Behavior in Organizations

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This paper presents and organizes the results of two decades of research on feedback-seeking behavior according to three motives: the instrumental motive to achieve a goal, the ego-based motive to protect one's ego, and the image-based motive to enhance and protect one's image in an organization. Each motive is discussed with reference to its impact on the frequency of feedback seeking, seeking method (whether by inquiry or monitoring), timing of feedback seeking, choice of the target of feedback seeking, and the topic on which feedback is sought. The role of context in influencing these patterns is also discussed. Issues in the literature are identified throughout, and the review ends by identifying five promising areas for future research.
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In 1983, Ashford and Cummings (1983) criticized the feedback literature for its historic focus on performance appraisal and challenged it to move beyond the feedback employees receive from their bosses during the annual performance review to an understanding of the multiple and various ways that employees seek and use feedback in their everyday

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work lives. The current paper examines research on feedback seeking since Ashford and Cummings's (1983) original treatise. It summarizes the distance we've traveled, the lessons we've learned, and the opportunities for further exploration.

We believe that feedback-seeking behavior—as an employee practice and as a managerial concern—has never been more important. Many workers today find themselves in a feedback vacuum. For example, in knowledge-based organizations (Drucker, 1993), peers and managers may not be able to evaluate the work of experts. Thus, knowledge workers interested in feedback must devise creative ways and sources to ascertain whether they are on the right track. Also, many workers are temporally and physically separated from their co-workers and supervisors. Whether working virtually at home or across an ocean in a subsidiary, they may not be able to seek feedback information, through indirect means such as monitoring, even if they wanted to. Without proactive feedback seeking, they may be completely unprepared for what they hear in their performance appraisals. Moreover, an increasingly diverse and multicultural workforce may mean that workers cannot as easily anticipate others' feedback and do not know how others view them unless they seek that feedback directly.

Organizations also are gradually acknowledging the value of self-awareness and interpersonal acumen that are associated with emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), especially among leaders. Feedback seeking is an inherent part of attaining and maintaining this awareness and acumen. Finally, recent events teach us painful lessons about what can happen when decision-makers isolate themselves from feedback. How many corporate scandals could have been minimized if leaders broke their isolation and sought feedback? Clearly, the need to seek feedback, as well as the need to understand the processes surrounding it, remains.

Twenty years of research on feedback-seeking behavior have identified five key aspects or patterns of feedback seeking: (1) frequency, or how often individuals seek it; (2) the method used to seek feedback, whether by observing, comparing, or asking for it; (3) the timing of feedback seeking; (4) the target of feedback seeking; and (5) the topic on which feedback is sought, for example, on successes versus failures or on certain aspects of performance. This review begins with a brief introduction to these five patterns of feedback seeking.

We will then present the three primary motives that underlie feedback seeking and discuss how each motive affects the patterns of feedback-seeking behavior. These three motives are the *instrumental motive* to achieve a goal or perform well, the *ego-based motive* to defend or enhance one's ego, and the *image-based motive* to protect or enhance the impressions that others hold of one.

We will then turn to a discussion of the outcomes of seeking feedback. We will not review outcomes of the feedback information itself (which are independent of whether it was actively sought or given by others). For example, feedback, however obtained, can foster goal attainment (Ammons, 1956) and enhance performance (see Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979 for a review). Rather, we will focus on outcomes that stem from the act of seeking feedback itself, such as implications for one's image and for the accuracy of one's self-view. Finally, the review concludes with the identification of issues and opportunities for the feedback-seeking literature. The conceptual framework guiding this review is presented in Figure 1.
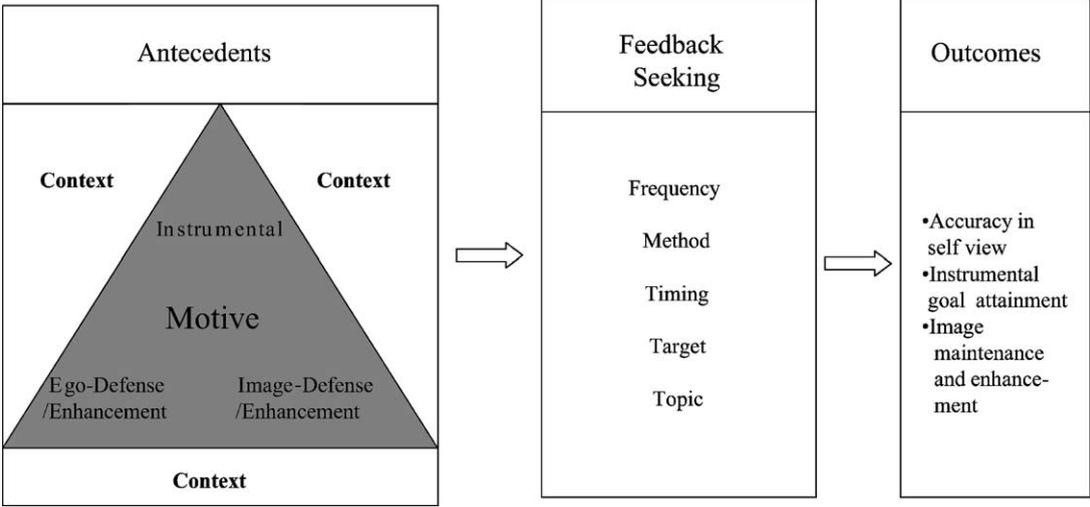
Figure 1. Feedback seeking process.

Patterns of Feedback Seeking

Ashford and Cummings (1983) highlighted several aspects about the patterns of feedback seeking that warrant theory and research. Each of these feedback-seeking patterns represents a decision that individuals make regarding how to obtain feedback information in a manner that most advances their goals.

Two prominent patterns are the *frequency of seeking* and the *method by which individuals seek it*. A key question is how often individuals engage in feedback seeking and the personal and contextual factors that influence this frequency. Two methods by which they might seek are inquiry and monitoring. Inquiry involves explicit verbal requests for feedback. For example, a worker may ask her supervisor, "What did you think of my presentation?" Monitoring, on the other hand, is an indirect method of attaining feedback information. It involves observing aspects of the environment, particularly other people, that provide indications of how one is doing, how one compares to others (Festinger, 1954), and what other people think of oneself (Jones & Gerard, 1967). From these observations a feedback message is gleaned. Another alternative to direct inquiry includes the use of what Miller and Jablin (1991) term indirect inquiry, which involves using indirect questions and third parties to seek information and testing limits to prompt spontaneous feedback from others.

A third decision regarding feedback-seeking behavior is the timing of the seeking attempt, whether immediately following performance or after a delay (Larson, 1989). Individuals may actively choose when they seek feedback and may do so based on both informational needs and strategic and reputational concerns. A fourth pattern in feedback-seeking behavior involves decisions regarding the target of feedback seeking. This choice might involve a consideration of the role relation of the target to a performer (e.g., the performer's supervisor or peer) or the target's mood (Morrison & Bies, 1991). Finally, seekers sometimes are able to make decisions about the topic of the feedback they are seeking. For example, they can sometimes decide to focus their seeking to yield feedback on one topic over another, and within a given topic they can attempt to gather more positive or negative feedback (Ashford & Tsui, 1991).

How do individuals make choices about how frequently to seek, what method to use, when to seek, and what topic to emphasize? Herold and colleagues (e.g., Herold & Fedor, 1998) argue that performers differ in their generalized preferences for external (as opposed to internally generated) feedback. Others have looked at a variety of antecedent variables to explain patterns of feedback-seeking behavior. Much of this research has focused on the three motives of feedback seeking discussed above. These motives are prominent in Ashford's (1989) extension of the Ashford and Cummings (1983) original work and in Levy, Albright, Cawley and Williams' (1995) introduction to their empirical work; both are influenced by Azjen's (1988) more general motivation model of planned behavior. The general model we will explore here is presented in Figure 1. We identify how each motive has been found to affect patterns of feedback seeking, alone and in interaction with the other motives. We also identify unresolved issues to be taken up by future research.

Feedback-Seeking Motives

Instrumental

Instrumental people seek feedback because it has informational value that helps them meet their goals and regulate their behavior (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Although feedback is a valuable individual resource for achieving all kinds of goals in life (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), organizational settings render the whole process of self-regulation (of which feedback seeking is a part) more critical (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Organizations are themselves control systems that value certain performances and "select" certain acts (and actors) for subsequent survival and success. Not all goals are valid in any given organizational setting. Employees must attend carefully to the feedback information around them and use it to clarify and anticipate the workings of this larger organizational control system. Within work organizations, individuals seek feedback to foster this adaptation (see work by Tsui, Ashford, St. Clair & Xin, 1995 for an empirical portrayal of the ways individuals use feedback to facilitate their adaptation).

Evidence indicates that as the perceived diagnostic value of feedback increases, individuals will seek it actively more frequently (Ashford, 1986; Battman, 1988; Morrison & Cummings, 1992; Tuckey, Brewer & Williamson, 2002). Even in experimental studies, which do not replicate organizational conditions completely, researchers have found that if subjects think an ability is an important one for task attainment, feedback seeking on that ability increases (Forsterling & Schoeler, 1984; Stapel & Tesser, 2001). For example, when performance evaluations were imminent, subjects engaged in less ego-enhancing comparisons to others in favor of obtaining diagnostic performance feedback (Stapel & Tesser, 2001). In other words, when experimental conditions mimic those of an organization, subjects' instrumental need for feedback overtakes their desire to bolster their egos.

Feedback has particularly high instrumental value in uncertain situations, and research evidence indicates that under these circumstances people seek it more frequently. For example, when new to a job or organization, individuals need to "learn the ropes" and feedback information is particularly valuable to foster their adaptation (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Brett, Feldman & Weingert, 1990; Callister, Kramer & Turban, 1999; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993). As they become more acclimated, the extent of their feedback seeking declines (Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Callister et al., 1999). Feedback can reduce uncertainty regarding both one's roles and the performance contingencies in the environment. Accordingly, research has found that both role ambiguity and contingency uncertainty are associated with more frequent feedback seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1985), though this effect is attenuated if the employee has a high tolerance for ambiguity (Bennett, Herold & Ashford, 1990).

In accordance with the instrumental logic, researchers have argued that feedback seeking can foster a sense of control, particularly in new environments or roles (Ashford & Black, 1996; Callister et al., 1999; Morrison, 1993). Ashford and Black (1996), though, found no relationship between desire for control and feedback seeking, nor between feedback seeking and subsequent perceived control. Similarly, Ashford (1988) found that feedback

seeking was not an effective strategy for reducing uncertainty-related stress associated with a major organizational transition. In fact, seeking feedback during that turbulent time was associated with more stress six months after the transition rather than less. Apparently, although seeking feedback can reduce uncertainty, it may not enhance control perceptions.

Other factors can bring the instrumental motive to the forefront. For example, a learning goal orientation (a focus on developing competence and mastering new situations) increases the salience of the instrumental motive and, accordingly, feedback-seeking behavior (Butler, 1993; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla & Brown, 2000). Moreover, Tuckey et al. (2002) found that when individuals with a learning orientation perform poorly, their feedback seeking increased, presumably because of a heightened perceived instrumental value of the feedback for improving their performance. Also, the higher the importance of the goal to the performer, the more frequently the performer seeks feedback (Ashford, 1986). Similarly, the higher the skill level of the job newcomers face, the more frequent their feedback seeking (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). In high-skill situations, there is a stronger instrumental need for feedback. For example, London (1995) argued that when others determine valued outcomes, the instrumental motive to learn about others' views is invoked. Finally, situations where little feedback is offered by the task or given to the performer create more of an instrumental need for feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Battman, 1988; Fedor, Rensvold & Adams, 1992).

The instrumental motive for feedback seeking influences seeking patterns in several predicted ways, some of which have been empirically established. The studies reviewed above indicate that the instrumental motive increases the frequency of feedback seeking. Some studies have found it to increase both monitoring and inquiry (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Gupta, Govindarajan & Malhotra, 1999), whereas others have found it to increase either inquiry (Callister et al., 1999) or monitoring (Morrison, 1993). Attention to the context in which the instrumental motive is operating may account for these discrepant findings. For example, Morrison (1993) found that newcomers engaged in more monitoring, except when seeking technical information, which is both important and difficult to obtain through monitoring.

The instrumental motive also influences from whom people seek feedback. The more credible the source, the higher the instrumental value of their feedback, and thus the more likely individuals are to seek feedback from this source (Fedor et al., 1992; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995). Also, individuals appear more likely to seek feedback from their superiors than from their peers or subordinates, presumably because their feedback is more instrumental in successful organizational adaptation (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Thus, Brett et al. (1990) found that following a transition, inquiry to peers declined over time while inquiry and monitoring of supervisors remained high. Instrumental motives also dictate seeking negative feedback, which may prove more diagnostic than positive feedback. In support of this notion, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that seeking negative feedback was associated with increased accuracy of managers' knowledge about others' evaluations of their performance.

One promising area for future research on the instrumental motive involves the managerial role. To date, relatively little research has looked specifically at the feedback-seeking behavior of managers. Those studies that have (e.g., Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Gupta et al., 1999), found that managers may be more likely to seek feedback proactively for a variety

of reasons. Conway and Huffcutt (1997) and Jaques (1961) found that feedback on performance becomes both less frequent and less consistent the higher the manager's position or the more complex the manager's role. The work of managers is also more ambiguous. Moreover, people fear giving honest appraisals to those who are above them (Conway & Huffcutt, 1997), leading to what has been labeled the "CEO disease" in the popular press (Goleman, Boyatsis & McKee, 2002). An instrumental logic would argue that as one's position in the hierarchy goes up, the extent and richness of feedback received spontaneously from others declines, leading to a greater instrumental motive to actively seek it.

If the instrumental motive to seek feedback were the only motive, feedback-seeking behavior would be a cut-and-dried phenomenon. However, the prospect of obtaining feedback about the self invokes other, perhaps stronger, motives, namely to defend the ego and to defend and enhance one's image, the self that is presented to the world. We now turn to these motives and examine how the interplay among the three motives can influence decisions to either seek or avoid feedback information.

Ego Defense and Enhancement

As Ashford and Cummings (1983) noted, feedback is not like any other information. As information about the self, it is more emotionally charged. A long tradition in psychology suggests that people are motivated to defend and protect their egos (Baumeister, 1999). Although accurate self-relevant information is most instrumental for goal attainment, people appear to have an overwhelming preference for favorable information about them that helps them maintain a positive self-view. Accordingly, they employ a variety of cognitive mechanisms to avoid or distort information that hurts their self-image (Baumeister, 1999). This self-protection motive is a major player in determining feedback-seeking behavior.

Feedback can hurt the performers' pride, ego, and vanity. This potential for injury generates a motive to avoid (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Wood, 1989), distort (Morrison & Cummings, 1992), or discount feedback (Baumeister, 1999; Frey, 1981; Mussweiler, Gabriel & Bodenhausen, 2000), particularly for individuals with a performance-goal orientation (Tuckey et al., 2002). Consistent with this logic, Northcraft and Ashford (1990) found that individuals with low performance expectations sought less feedback than those with high expectations, presumably to avoid the drop in self-image associated with negative feedback. Further, unlike unsolicited feedback which may be readily discounted (Roberson, Deitch, Brief & Block, in press), feedback that is actively solicited by individuals themselves may be more difficult to disregard. Self-perception theory would suggest that if performers seek feedback themselves, it is more difficult to subsequently disavow it (Bem, 1972). Thus, if performers expect the feedback to be negative, they would be more likely to monitor for feedback than to use an active inquiry strategy.

The ego defense motive has received much attention in the literature on feedback-seeking behavior as well as in related literatures within psychology. First, research on social comparison, a process by which individuals assess themselves through comparisons to others (Festinger, 1954), has emphasized the ego-enhancement motive underlying the directional choice of comparison referent (upward or downward) (Mussweiler et al., 2000; Wood, 1989; Wood, Michela & Giordano, 2000). Second, findings on self-confidence and self-efficacy

are relatively straightforward; highly self-confident individuals are more willing to seek feedback in performance situations (Ashford, 1986; Wada, 1990).

However, the results for self-esteem—the extent to which individuals positively evaluate their self worth—are more complex (Baumeister, 1999; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In most investigations, self-esteem has served as a proxy for the ego-protection motive. There has also been considerable debate about the influence of self-esteem, as researchers do not agree on exactly how high versus low levels of self-esteem impact people's motivation to protect their ego. Some propose that high self-esteem performers are resilient, have great confidence reserves, and therefore, can "take" negative feedback; they will seek it when the instrumental motive dictates that it is necessary. Low self-esteem individuals, in contrast, have weak egos that need protection; their fear of negative feedback will lead them to avoid any feedback (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Karl and Kopf (1994) and Northcraft and Ashford (1990) present data in support of this position. Others have found that high self-esteem is associated with reduced feedback seeking (Fedor et al., 1992; Knight & Nadel, 1986) or that self-esteem has no influence on feedback seeking (Ashford, 1986; Morrison, 1993).

Recent research by Bernichon, Cook and Brown (2003) provides an intriguing explanation for the range of relationship valences found between self-esteem and feedback-seeking behavior. Bernichon et al. note evidence that individuals who feel bad about themselves are especially disturbed by negative feedback and avoid such feedback for self protection (e.g., Brown & Dutton, 1995). However, there is also evidence from self-verification research (e.g., Swann, 1990) that individuals seek feedback that is consistent with their self-views, including seeking of negative feedback to verify a negative self-appraisal.

To explain this apparent paradox, the researchers differentiate *global self-esteem* (how one feels about the general self) from *specific self-views* (how one evaluates a given personal attribute or ability). In a series of studies that assess specific self-views about perceived social competence, Bernichon et al. (2003) found that high self-esteem individuals with positive self-views about their social competence consistently sought positive feedback while those with negative self-views sought negative feedback. For low self-esteem individuals, however, there was a tendency to seek positive feedback even when it was not self-verifying. Because high self-esteem individuals are better able to neutralize the impact of negative feedback, they can afford to seek negative feedback to verify negative self-views; they are comfortable with verifying what they already know. In contrast, low self-esteem individuals do not have the emotional resilience to seek, and thus hear, negative feedback that further verifies a negative self-appraisal of a given attribute.

Further complicating the considerations underlying the decision to seek feedback is people's desire to maintain a positive self-image in the eyes of others. Our next section discusses the image preservation motive.

Image Defense and Enhancement

Ashford and Cummings (1983) proposed that when performers perceive that seeking feedback would make them "look bad" somehow, their tendency to seek via inquiry declines. Since inquiry is a more public feedback-seeking strategy than monitoring, it may involve greater face loss considerations than monitoring. Inquiry reveals the seeker's igno-

rance about and desire for self-relevant information. Others, in turn, may interpret these as indications of uncertainty, incompetence, and insecurity.

Research largely supports the proposition that feedback seekers inquire less when they are engaged in defensive impression management (Tuckey et al., 2002) or when they think others expect them to be competent and confident. For example, Fedor, Mathieson and Adams (1990) found that perceived image costs in seeking feedback from one's supervisor were negatively associated with intentions to inquire for feedback from the supervisor and positively associated with the intention to monitor. Similarly, although Ashford (1986) found no relationship between self-reports of image risk and either inquiry or monitoring, she did find an intriguing relationship between organizational tenure and inquiry. Specifically, as tenure increased, inquiry decreased, even though tenured employees found feedback just as valuable as less tenured employees. Ashford (1986) attributed this result to concerns about image; longer tenured employees felt they should be able to assess their own performance without needing to ask and that they were supposed to be more expert. Morrison (1993) also posited a face-loss costs explanation to account for her finding that newcomers used monitoring more than inquiry to obtain feedback information. She attributed this pattern to the newcomers' recognition of the "strong social risks in asking for feedback directly" (p. 583).

Research indicates that image costs are most clearly invoked when the feedback-seeking act is public. In public contexts, individuals must weigh the instrumental or ego benefits of feedback against potential image costs. Employees, then, are quite strongly motivated not to publicly reveal things that could hurt their image. Apparently, if we have to reveal our need to know in order to get an accurate read, then we prefer distorted feedback instead. Stapel and Tesser (2001) found, for example, that poor performers avoided upward comparisons, unless there was no public disclosure of the performer's own performance (in other words, the performer gets the feedback, but does not have to tell how he/she did) or no face-to-face contact with the comparison referent. Thus, when individuals fear that performance feedback will hurt their image (i.e., public negative feedback), they may forego the instrumental benefits of that feedback (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990), and this tendency is likely to increase over time (Levy et al., 1995).

Roberson et al. (in press) recently examined a different type of image concern. They examined the concept of stereotype threat, or the "fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group through one's own behavior," as a predictor of feedback seeking. They assessed feedback seeking among a sample of African American professionals who held a solo status in their work groups and found that solo status was associated with stereotype threat. Although stereotype threat, which is a manifestation of the image protection motive, did not predict the use of an inquiry strategy, it was positively related to more frequent monitoring.

Image considerations need not be strictly defensive. Morrison and Bies (1991) argued that individuals' images can be enhanced as well as be harmed by feedback seeking, thereby contributing significantly to our understanding of image issues in feedback seeking. They proposed that individuals will sometimes attempt to enhance their images by seeking positive feedback even if it has no informational value, for example by seeking additional feedback after a favorable performance review, by waiting until the target is in a good mood, by seeking feedback from those with whom they have a good relationship, and by

providing information along with the feedback request that will enhance the perceived favorability of their performance. Morrison and Bies (1991) also clarified that there are two different ways that image is hurt or enhanced in feedback seeking. The first is in how the source might evaluate the act of seeking and the "need to hear feedback" that it reveals. The second stems from the source's actual verbalization of the feedback and the image that this verbalization solidifies in the source's mind. As Morrision and Bies (1991) point out, a positive image can also be solidified in this verbalization.

Accordingly, some researchers have posited that image concerns are influenced by what performers expect to hear. Brett et al. (1990) argued that as individuals adjust to their jobs and expect feedback to be more positive, they will seek more feedback, both for the sake of the positive message and so that their bosses hear themselves giving those messages. They found evidence supporting this logic in a sample of new hires. If performers expect negative feedback, they are likely to use less direct means, for example preferring computer-mediated rather than face-to-face communication (Ang & Cummings, 1994). The feedback giver's mood may also lead to expectations regarding the valence of the feedback they give. In line with this logic, Ang, Cummings, Straub and Earley (1993) found that performers sought less feedback from a source they thought was in a bad, as opposed to a good, mood, presumably because they expected the feedback to be more negative.

Research suggests that there is some real basis for the performer's concerns that feedback sources will believe what they hear themselves say. Higgins and McCann (1984) found that delivering negative feedback to a subordinate led supervisors to acquire a less favorable impression of that person. Larsons and Skolnick (1982) found that supervisors retained more favorable impressions of their subordinates' performance after delivering favorable performance feedback. Larson (1989) used these findings to craft an intriguing argument about how individuals time feedback seeking. Specifically, he argued that actively inquiring for feedback shortly after a poor performance may actually yield more positive feedback than if the performer waited until negative feedback were eventually offered spontaneously. By seeking feedback immediately following a failure, performers may prevent a buildup of negative evaluation by the feedback giver (Morrison & Bies, 1991 had a similar proposition). While intriguing, this image-based hypothesis about the timing of feedback seeking has received no empirical attention.

Two additional costs proposed by Ashford and Cummings (1983) have received much less attention. These are the effort cost in attaining feedback and the inference cost in deriving the message.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) theorized that given that inquiry may require more effort than monitoring—because sources would need to be found and the request explained—performers would rely more frequently on monitoring. Monitoring was described as taking almost no effort at all; the merest glance at a comparison referent provides feedback. However, if the signals received were conflicting or confusing, deciphering a message could take inference effort. This hypothesis has received little attention. Ashford (1986) found that the perceived effort involved did not make one method more likely than another. However, Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller's (2000) finding that newcomers did more feedback seeking if they had more opportunity to interact with potential targets suggests that effort may play a role. Inquiry also requires inference effort, both to derive the feedback message and to determine the source's intentions (Fedor et al., 1992). Brown, Ganesan and

Challagalla (2001) proposed that a monitoring strategy may overcome some of the limitations of inquiry and vice versa. Accordingly, they found that combining monitoring and inquiry enhanced role clarity. However, the benefits of a dual strategy may not necessarily lie in reducing effort costs. Currently it is not clear the extent to which effort costs alone constitute a prominent factor affecting feedback-seeking behavior.

This review has portrayed three dominant motive states that are weighed against each other in deciding whether to seek, how to seek and so forth. Personal and situational factors make one motive more or less dominant in these decisions. We have incorporated personal factors such as tolerance for ambiguity and self-esteem into the discussion thus far. We now turn to context factors that should affect the balance among the three motives.

Feedback-Seeking Context

Over the past 20 years, there have been sporadic calls to move beyond individual factors and focus on the context in which feedback seeking takes place. Context has been thought of as the "feedback environment" (Hanser & Muchinsky, 1978) made up of the various feedback sources. But there is also a larger context that should affect the three motive states we have articulated. For example, in a context filled with uncertainty, the instrumental motive for seeking dominates. The contexts that enhance the instrumental motive are high on contextual uncertainty (Ashford & Cummings, 1985), novelty (Callister et al., 1999; Morrison, 1993; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), and change (Ashford, 1988).

Recent work in the strategy literature has examined additional context variables such as the degree of organizational centralization, lateral integration, and value-chain scope (the number of separate entities involved in producing firm outcomes) as influences on the individual feedback seeking of subsidiary presidents within a multinational corporation (Gupta et al., 1999). These variables influence the degree of autonomy created for the subsidiary president and the ease of obtaining feedback. For example, they found the greater the lateral integration, the greater the ease of obtaining feedback.

Walsh, Ashford and Hill (1985) also suggested that environmental conditions affect feedback seeking and reactions. Specifically, conditions that block or thwart performers' attempts to seek feedback (what they label "feedback obstruction") affected outcomes such as anxiety and turnover. These might be a high level of uncertainty or the unavailability of feedback sources. VandeWalle et al.'s (2000) finding of a positive correlation between a leader's initiating structure and the perceived value of feedback is consistent with this view. Indeed Williams, Miller, Steelman and Levy's (1999) work reminds us that the context important for feedback seeking is often relational. They found that a supportive context, meaning a supportive feedback source and positive peer relations, increased feedback seeking. Mazdar (1995) proposed that a supervisor's considerate leadership style could reduce fears of potential image costs. Research by Miller and Levy (1997), Vancouver and Morrison (1995), VandeWalle et al. (2000), and recent research by Levy, Cober and Miller (in press) all reinforce the view that a supervisor can enhance or depress the likelihood of subordinate feedback seeking. Gupta et al.'s (1999) work suggests that the cultural distance between the subsidiary president and his or her superiors at headquarters (as measured by the Euclidian distance of four cultural dimensions) creates more of an instrumental

need for feedback. When important constituents are culturally different from the performer, there is literally more to learn about them regarding how they prioritize tasks and evaluate task performance. Performers cannot simply generalize from their cultural assumptions. Feedback seeking can help this learning process. Tsui and Ashford (1991) earlier made this identical argument regarding demographic diversity of the important constituents in a performer's (U.S.) context. The more demographically diverse they are, the more there is to learn via feedback seeking and thus the greater the instrumental value of seeking.

Although both Gupta et al. (1999) and Tsui and Ashford (1991) failed to find support for this hypothesis, their findings may reveal a deeper conundrum. While a culturally diverse setting increases the instrumental need for feedback, the adjacent intercultural communication differences are likely to increase the effort costs of feedback seeking. There may also be differences between Western and non-Western cultures about whether feedback-seeking behavior is respectful or appropriate (with implications for the ego-based and image-based motives). These cultural and demographic differences represent a form of feedback obstruction that the performer must overcome.

Contexts also influence the meaning of inquiry—whether stopping to ask for feedback is considered a sign of strength (as found by Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Ashford & Tsui, 1991) or insecurity will surely depend on the company context. These costs are both socially constructed and socially affected. In fact, it may be that an organization's culture can make inquiry for feedback more or less acceptable, thereby affecting the extent of image costs associated with it. To test this possibility, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) manipulated norms regarding how frequently performers typically seek feedback in a setting. They found that the norms significantly influenced inquiry frequency. However, their experimental manipulation of norms did not influence perceived risk. That is, in conditions of high seeking norms, subjects still expressed concern over image. In light of its importance for managerial practice, further research is needed to assess how norms can reduce the image costs associated with seeking feedback.

Eisenberger's concept of perceived organizational support (POS) might be usefully incorporated in order to understand how some organizations can neutralize image concerns about feedback seeking (Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). POS has been shown to reduce perceived image risk in research on individuals' active attempts to raise issues in organizations (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit & Dutton, 1998), a process that can also be fraught with image concerns. Supportive cultures may free up individuals to seek feedback proactively without regard to image cost.

Because of the relative lack of attention given to context factors thus far in the feedback-seeking literature, these represent an opportunity for future research. For example, context factors that create support may reduce image costs and ego concerns, whereas contexts that require precise performance and informed self-views enhance the instrumental motive.

Outcomes of Feedback Seeking

The outcomes of the act of feedback seeking are intricate to assess, both conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, as mentioned in the overview, many of the outcomes of feedback

seeking are the outcomes of the feedback itself. Empirical assessment of outcomes is also complicated by the iterative nature of feedback, whereby the outcomes of the feedback gained from one act of seeking become the predictors of the next feedback-seeking act. So, for example, Ashford and Black (1996) argued that more frequent feedback seeking leads to heightened feelings of control, while Renn and Fedor (2001) found that feelings of personal control led to more feedback seeking. In settings outside the laboratory, it is difficult to assess the direction of causality, whether a factor is an antecedent or an outcome.

Finally, it appears that assessing the outcomes of feedback seeking in general may not be as fruitful as examining effects of particular kinds of feedback that one has sought and obtained. For example, Ashford (1988) found that feedback seeking was not an effective means of reducing transition-related stress. This finding is not surprising given that so much of the impact of feedback depends on the nature of the messages obtained. Whether the message is positive or negative, whether it confirms or disconfirms the seeker's own view, and whether it is clear or ambiguous should all play a role in the outcomes that follow. These factors have not been measured with any precision to date.

Broadly, one can assess the impact of feedback-seeking behavior relative to outcomes. Does seeking feedback help a performer obtain an accurate self-view, meet instrumental goals, and/or maintain a positive image? This section examines each of these outcomes in turn.

Obtaining Accurate Data

One instrumental goal of seeking feedback is obtaining an accurate assessment of others' views. There is both theoretical and empirical evidence supporting a link between the act of feedback seeking and accuracy of information received. The argument holds that people are reluctant to give feedback, especially negative feedback. While this tendency has been documented with reference to the annual performance review, the reluctance to break bad news is likely to be even more pronounced regarding informal feedback. In spontaneous feedback interactions, there usually is not a role mandate to give feedback. Peers and supervisors may feel awkward providing informal negative feedback, as if they are violating one or more social mores (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Thus, performers who seek feedback should develop a more accurate view of their skills and abilities relative to those who do not because they *have* more feedback. Ashford and Tsui (1991) found evidence for this relationship for the seeking of negative feedback (relative to positive) and for the use of an inquiry (as opposed to a monitoring) strategy. However, when Edwards (1995) re-analyzed these data separately for over-estimators and under-estimators, he did not find the effect.

Achieving Instrumental Goals

Other empirical studies suggest that whether seeking feedback serves instrumental goals depends on the nature of the feedback and characteristics of the seeker, including what he or she does with the feedback information. Thus, Brown et al. (2001) found that feedback-seeking behavior increased role clarity only among individuals with high self-efficacy. They argued that self-efficacy—individuals' belief that they have the ability to succeed at a task—

moderates the effectiveness with which employees use information seeking to improve role clarity and work performance. Individuals high in self-efficacy use feedback information more effectively by increasing motivation, task focus, and effort, while decreasing anxiety and self-defeating negative thinking. Renn and Fedor (2001) found that feedback-seeking behavior improved performance by increasing goal setting; individuals who sought feedback tended to use it to set feedback-based personal improvement goals. These in turn improved both the quality and quantity of their performance. Finally, VandeWalle (in press) proposed that when individuals approach a task with a learning goal orientation, compared to a performance-goal orientation, they are less likely to engage in ruminations about negative feedback that prevent them from effectively processing the feedback received to improve their performance.

Future research is needed to assess the mediating mechanisms through which feedback that is actively sought influences the attainment of instrumental goals such as performance, assessing others' opinions and one's advancement potential (Greller, 1992), job satisfaction (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), and adaptation (Brett et al., 1990).

Maintaining and Enhancing Image

The third outcome associated with feedback seeking is cost to the performer's image. We have reviewed several studies that suggest that these costs are of concern to potential seekers. However, Morrison and Bies's (1991) ideas raise an important question: just how bad is it for one's image to be seen seeking feedback? On this question the evidence is surprising. One of Ashford and Tsui's (1991) findings that did stand up to Edwards' (1995) reanalysis was that more frequent seeking of negative feedback was associated with higher effectiveness ratings by supervisors, subordinates, and peers. Ashford and Tsui (1991) and Edwards (1995) interpreted this result as evidence that seeking negative feedback created an image of effectiveness; in other words, managers who sought negative feedback were seen as attentive to and caring of the opinion of their constituents. Farr, Schwartz, Quinn and Bittner (1989) found that subordinates who were frequent feedback seekers were judged to be more concerned and interested than were infrequent seekers. Showing a decided interest in positive feedback, in contrast, hurt perceptions of a manager's effectiveness (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Edwards, 1995).

Ashford and Northcraft (1992) also found evidence for positive image consequences of feedback seeking. They examined three factors hypothesized to detract from one's image while feedback seeking: (1) length of tenure in the job, which is associated with gaining a sense of how one is doing, (2) being a superior, as opposed to a subordinate, for whom it is more role consistent to seek, and (3) having a history of "only average" (as opposed to superior) performance. They found that, on the whole, asking for feedback was associated with an enhanced rather than a negative image. However, seekers with a history of average performance suffered image losses. This finding is interesting when combined with research showing that poor performers get less feedback than good performers based on the feedback givers' discomfort in giving negative feedback. Ashford and Northcraft's (1992) finding suggests that in spite of their lack of feedback, poor performers have good cause to avoid seeking feedback. Together, these findings indicate that poor performers have a cumulative adaptive disadvantage in that they both receive and solicit less feedback.

Currently, then, findings indicate that seeking negative feedback can improve one's image, unless one is a poor performer, and seeking positive feedback can hurt one's image, especially in the eyes of subordinates. Future research is needed to both replicate these findings and to identify the influence of factors such as performance (both current and cumulative), the seeker's hierarchical position, interpersonal trust, and the feedback-seeking norms in the organization in moderating the impact of seeking on image.

Far less research has been conducted on how feedback-seeking behavior influences one's ego, or self-view. Traditionally, ego-related variables, such as self-esteem, were assessed as antecedents rather than consequences of feedback-seeking behavior. As mentioned above, the exact directionality is difficult to ascertain, particularly as ego concerns are difficult to manipulate experimentally. Two factors that are likely to be important in how feedback seeking influences self-views is whether the feedback is positive or negative (McFarland & Miller, 1994) and whether it pertains to an ego-relevant domain (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Issues and Opportunities in Feedback-Seeking Research

The review thus far has catalogued what we have learned and has raised specific questions in specific areas that might advance our knowledge in this area. In addition, we highlight five issues that represent research opportunities for this literature over its next 20 years. Each will be discussed in a separate section below.

Cognitive Processes Underlying Feedback-Seeking Behavior

One remaining issue in developing a full understanding of feedback seeking in organizations is how individuals process and integrate the information they receive. Recent theorizing in psychology suggests that we have two modes of operation (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). The first, conscious processing, involves awareness and effort and can be controlled. Automatic processing, in contrast, is effortless and does not require conscious guidance. Bargh and Chartrand (1999) note that although automatic processes offer performers numerous advantages, including freeing up their limited cognitive and attentional capacities, people also have purposes and goals that require conscious effort. Whether conscious or automatic processes predominate depends on whether a goal is salient and also on the performance environment. For example, feedback processing may be more unconscious in nature when there is a disruption in the automatic cognitive processes regarding the self-concept, perhaps as a response to a change in the environment. Previous work on newcomers (Louis, 1980), downsizing (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998), and entering new roles (Ibarra, 1999) has applied this framework, whereby changes disrupt automatic functioning and trigger active information processing.

It also may be that whether individuals process feedback automatically or consciously depends on whether feedback is sought via inquiry or monitoring. Inquiry may be a deliberate and conscious process, whereas monitoring may be more automatic, whereby individuals absorb cues at a rapid or intermittent pace without much thought. Just as social comparisons have been found to be relatively spontaneous, effortless, and often unintentional (Gilbert, Giesler & Morris, 1995), perhaps merely perceiving the voice or gestures

of others, noting things that did not happen (but did happen to others), or even observing the well-scrubbed executives pictured in the company newsletter are taken in as data from which a self-assessment is formed and revised. Thus, one intriguing possibility is that the empirical base for any self-assessment may not be consciously accessible to performers. Given the automatic processing by which their self-perceptions were formed, individuals who rely heavily on monitoring may literally not know why they hold the self-views that they do.

However, some monitoring is clearly conscious. Performers can articulate (and self-report) observing others, making social comparisons and so forth. This more conscious monitoring most likely supplements an automatic processing of the nearly endless set of cues a performer can construe the environment as "providing."

Inquiry, in contrast, is a more explicit behavioral choice. An open question is how we portray the process of seeking feedback via inquiry. Morrison's (2002) model of information seeking in organizations suggests that the process unfolds over time, beginning with an uncertainty-induced need for information, then an assessment of costs, followed by a selection of tactics. Thus, according to Morrison's model, the instrumental motive is engaged first, followed by a consideration of costs relative to both ego and image motives, along with effort and interpretation costs. Although in Morrison's model individuals first assess costs and then determine tactics, many costs in fact depend on which tactic is chosen. Thus, costs and tactics may need to be considered simultaneously rather than sequentially. Levy et al. (1995) also propose that the feedback-seeking process unfolds over time; they introduce a reconsideration phase where the initial desire is reconsidered in light of situational costs.

Taken together, the processing of feedback is likely to unfold as follows. Individuals monitor their environments in an almost automatic fashion using visual, auditory, and relational cues as guides. Then, either the environment around them changes or perhaps the monitored cues themselves cause an interruption to automatic processing, and individuals begin thinking consciously about needing feedback. They then evaluate the costs and benefits of seeking it. Having sought feedback and resolved the uncertainty associated with the interruption, the performer returns once again to a more automatic mode of processing. These microdynamics require further clarification; an empirical testing of a process model of feedback seeking presents a fruitful avenue for future research.

The Feedback-Seeking Tendencies of Leaders

Performers are performers, whether they are on the lowest organizational rungs or CEO's hoping to build organizations that last. And yet, the feedback-seeking literature has a decidedly lower-level employee cast to it. While Ashford and Tsui (1991) extended theory to middle managers, with their particular need to please multiple constituencies, little attention has been given to the feedback-seeking dynamics of those at the top of an organization or unit.

Climbing up the hierarchy does not render a performer immune to the instrumental need for feedback or the ego and image concerns that we have described thus far. As one advances up the leadership ranks, however, emotional intelligence and social competencies supplant technical competence as ingredients for leadership success (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2001). Leaders must also contend with the problems of receiving little feedback

from others (the aforementioned CEO disease). While theory suggests that a shortage of feedback creates a motive to seek it (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), many have noted that organizations and their leaders are generally intolerant of feedback, particularly dissent (Nemeth, 1997; Sprague & Rudd, 1988). They do not seek feedback and they often do not particularly like it when it is given to them. As Morrison and Miliken (2000) point out, this tendency has real costs in terms of the leader's ability to detect and correct errors.

Leaders face several countervailing pressures that interact to make honest feedback seeking unlikely. One relates to competing idealizations of both heroic and post-heroic leadership styles (Fondas, 1997). A heroic orientation depicts leaders as setting objectives, regulating others, and finding the "right" answers. Leaders clear a path, confront enemies, and slash opposition in order to get extraordinary results. Although calls for post-heroic styles of leadership portray the ideal manager as a coordinator, facilitator, coach, supporter, and nurturer, many leaders were raised on heroic images and models, and these underlie their ideas on how leaders should act (Dentico, 1999). Key in the heroic model is to continue to move forward and "carry the day." Feedback seeking, which requires the leader to slow down and to seek input, is inconsistent with the need for fast action and positive momentum associated with the heroic model. Leaders cut from this cloth might also have image concerns about how seeking might look to followers. If leaders are supposed to have the vision, chart the course and inspire others on board, wondering about whether the course is correct may be at odds with this image.

Leaders often assume that people are self-interested and untrustworthy, what McGregor (1960) labels a "Theory X" assumption. Morrison and Miliken (2000) theoretically linked the "Theory X" assumption to the implicit and explicit discouragement of upward communication. Put simply, if leaders feel that employees are self-dealing and untrustworthy, they do not want to hear their feedback.

Moreover, leaders frequently endeavor to create change and in so doing they often adopt an orientation that may seal them off of feedback. Change-management research and advice typically indicates that people resist change (Kotter, 1996), leading change leaders to label negative feedback as "resistance to change." With encouragement by change experts to overcome resistance, leaders may miss some legitimate feedback messages. As Piderit (2000: 784) recently noted, "the label of resistance can be used to dismiss potentially valid concerns about the proposed changes."

Even without these negative assumptions, leaders still may feel that they have good reason to be skeptical of feedback from below. They may feel that lower-level employees and managers, who are housed in one function or another, do not have a broad enough view or sufficient information to give feedback. Also, because of the power differences between leaders and the folks from whom they would seek feedback, leaders may perceive any feedback they receive as politically motivated and hopelessly slanted. Finally, leaders may worry about actual limits to their time and attention. Feedback seeking, as well as interpreting and incorporating the feedback message, takes time. Moreover, leaders who seek feedback may feel pressure to either change in accordance with the feedback or to respond with an explanation as to why they have chosen not to. It may just seem simpler not to seek any feedback at all. Thus while the costs of responding to these pressures and silencing feedback are real (Morrision & Milliken, 2000), so too are the pressures faced by leaders.

Leaders who feel constrained from seeking feedback face several choices. They can incorporate feedback seeking into their personal style. Such seeking, particularly if it is open to negative as well as positive feedback, need not damage the leader's image (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Another option is to engage in indirect inquiry (Miller & Jablin, 1991) by, say, delegating someone in the top staff group to seek feedback and convey the messages to the leader. Web surveys also enable quickly taking the pulse of the organization on various issues, although they may provide information that is less rich or accurate. Finally, leaders may employ "executive coaches" who give them feedback.

In sum, compared to subordinate feedback seeking, our discussion about leader feedback seeking reveals a more complex terrain for study. Leaders must make feedback-seeking target decisions from a larger set of constituents, such as customers, the community, and governance boards, not just supervisors and peers. The instrumental motive advances from merely seeking feedback about goal attainment to also seeking feedback that helps the leader discern what should even be the goals at the strategic level. Given the heroic leadership persona, leaders may have less latitude in seeking feedback for ego defense and enhancement. With this limitation, how can leaders effectively (and safely) still meet their ego needs? Finally, with the image motive, feedback seeking must encompass more than concerns about positive and negative impression management. Such seeking must also include agenda items such as how the leader is viewed on procedural justice and integrity.

Self-Esteem Revisited

As discussed in the ego motive section, the research of Bernichon et al. (2003) provides an intriguing explanation as to how self esteem, specific self-views, and feedback valence interact to influence feedback seeking. Recent theoretical work on the self-esteem domain specificity offers additional insight about the interrelationship between ego-protection and self-esteem that may further account for the range of self-esteem-feedback-seeking relationships that were enumerated earlier. Similar to Bernichon et al., Crocker and Wolfe (2001) distinguished between global- and domain-specific feelings of self-worth. They also suggested that not all domain-specific self-evaluations are relevant for global self-worth, but only evaluations in contingent domains—performance contexts in which individuals stake their self-esteem. Self-esteem in contingent domains is fragile and individuals are strongly motivated to avoid the painful drops in self-esteem associated with failures in these domains. Likewise, they seek the rises in self-esteem associated with success in contingent domains (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). In domains unrelated to one's contingencies, successes or failures are less likely to affect global self-esteem (Wood, 1989).

Extending Crocker and Wolfe's (2001) framework to feedback seeking, we would expect that when individuals perform in contingent domains, their global sense of self-worth is on the line. Thus, if they expect feedback to be negative, or are uncertain about the quality of their performance, they may avoid feedback altogether. In this high-stakes situation for the ego, individuals opt to forego the instrumental benefits of the feedback as a means of improving their performance for the sake of their self-esteem. If, on the other hand, individuals expect feedback on a contingent domain to be positive, they may seek it in order to enhance their self-esteem, despite the potential image costs associated with seeking positive feedback (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). Given the profound implications for this

concept, domain contingency should be explored systematically in future feedback seeking research.

The addition of the contingent domain concept, however, raises an interesting question—how does the desire for self-verification interact with the need to protect the ego in a contingent domain? For individuals with a low level of global self-esteem, if they are unlikely to seek negative feedback that verifies a specific self-view, seeking negative feedback in a contingent domain should be even more painful, and thus even more strongly avoided. For individuals with a high level of global self-esteem, however, there is new wrinkle. For a contingent domain, will these individuals continue to seek the feedback that verifies their positive or negative specific self-views? Alternatively, does domain contingency weaken the emotional resilience of even high self-esteem individuals enough that they will bypass the self-verification tendency? The answers to such questions are important because accurate self-knowledge is critical to achieving significant progress toward goals, and employees may give up real opportunities to achieve in important domains in the service of protecting their egos.

In earlier sections of the paper, we briefly referred to the concept of goal orientation. We expand the discussion here to discuss the interplay of self-esteem, goal orientation, and feedback seeking. Dweck (1999) identified two classes of underlying goals that individuals can pursue: (a) a *learning goal orientation* to develop competence by acquiring new skills and mastering new situations, and (b) a *performance-goal orientation* to demonstrate competence and validate worth by seeking favorable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about one's competence. Learning and performance goal orientations are associated with different implicit theories about personal attributes, different beliefs about the causes of success, and different interpretations of feedback. A learning goal orientation is associated with an *incremental* implicit theory—ability is viewed as a malleable attribute that can be developed with effort and persistence. In contrast, a performance-goal orientation is associated with an *entity* implicit theory—ability is viewed as a fixed, innate attribute that is difficult to develop. Moreover, a learning goal orientation is associated with a belief that *effort* is a primary determinant of success, while a performance-goal orientation is associated with a belief that high *ability* is a primary determinant of success. With a learning goal orientation, feedback is viewed as information on how to improve; with a performance-goal orientation, feedback is viewed primarily as an evaluation of aspects of the self such as one's competency and worth (Dweck, 1999).

Poor performance and negative feedback have different "diagnostic implications" for the two orientations (Dweck, 1999; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), leading to different patterns of feedback seeking. High learning goal-oriented individuals will seek negative feedback for its contribution to their learning goals, even in contingent domains. Their desire to develop, focus on the diagnostic value of feedback, and belief that ability can be developed enhance the instrumental motive to seek feedback (and neutralize the ego and image concerns about feedback seeking). Tuckey et al.'s (2002) finding that individuals with a learning orientation did not avoid feedback following poor performance provides support for this logic. With a performance-goal orientation, ability is viewed as a fixed attribute, so the instrumental motive to seek diagnostic feedback is reduced. In contrast, when a performance goal-oriented individual is struggling with a given task or event, potential negative feedback is viewed as an indictment about one's ability. Concerns about such

judgments increase the cost of seeking (both ego and image motives), and thus reduces feedback seeking.

Goal orientation appears to be an excellent candidate to explain how and why individuals differ in their use of feedback-seeking behavior to attempt to raise and maintain their self-esteem. Learning goal-oriented individuals may attempt to strengthen their self-esteem by seeking feedback that could enhance and acknowledge personal development. In contrast, performance goal-oriented individuals may attempt to strengthen their self-esteem by seeking feedback that could validate and promote (to others) personal ability (Brockner, 1988).

Cross-Cultural Contexts

Americans have done the bulk of feedback-seeking research, in American contexts and with American samples. And yet, individual behavior cannot be separated from the culture in which it occurs (Earley, 1997). A real opportunity for this literature lies in bringing in a cross-cultural perspective. Theorizing and empirical efforts can be directed to two important questions. First, how might feedback-seeking processes look different in cultures that differ from the United States? And, second, how can differences between cultures lead to clashes when managers from different cultures come together—either as superiors-subordinates (say in the case of mergers, multi-nationals, and joint ventures) or when managers take expatriate positions?

Sully de Luque and Sommer (2000) give us substantial guidance on the first question in their integrated model of feedback seeking across cultures. Based on Earley's (1997) work and on a comprehensive literature review, they assessed the impact of four dimensions of cultural variability (what they call "syndromes") on feedback seeking: high (low) status identity, specific (holistic), high (low) tolerance for ambiguity, and individualisim (collectivisim). Sully de Luque and Summer (2000) suggest that in high status-identity cultures (where status accrues to one by birthright or gender), a greater distance between supervisors and subordinates means that more effort is required to obtain feedback and more face can be lost if the act of seeking is seen as an insult to the authority figure. In these cultures, inquiry is reduced and peers become more important sources of feedback. Effort and inference costs will be more impactful in specific (as opposed to holistic) cultures, because various aspects of life are compartmentalized, and more swayed by face-loss costs in holistic (as opposed to specific) cultures. People in holistic cultures care about relationships and avoid losing face (Earley, 1997). Thus we should see less inquiry and more monitoring in holistic culture as people attempt to save both the face of the seeker and of the target, who may be confronted suddenly by the need to respond with information that undermines relational harmony. We should also find more monitoring, as feedback must be obtained somehow. It also makes sense that performers may monitor longer, taking in more cues before coming to a feedback judgment in the more interconnected holistic rather than specific contexts (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000).

Individuals performing in cultures low in tolerance for ambiguity seek more feedback in uncertain contexts and, because of their greater felt need for feedback, they will be less affected by feedback-seeking costs. Thus low tolerance for ambiguity contexts raise the instrumental value of feedback.

In collectivist cultures, individuals are hypothesized to seek more feedback about group rather than individual performance and will not seek via inquiry, as that would bring too much individual attention to the performer (Sully de Luque & Sommer, 2000). Bailey, Chen and Dou (1997) also found that performers in individualistic cultures (where the goal is to stand out) expressed a stronger desire for feedback on successes while in collectivist cultures (where the goal is to fit in) they wanted information on failures. Heine's et al. (2001) empirical work suggests this pattern is based on different underlying theories of the self. In individualistic cultures the self is defined by a set of relatively fixed inner attributes, leading to a strong motive see oneself in a positive light (*self-enhancement*). In collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, the self is seen as mutable, leading to an emphasis on efforts toward meeting role obligations through *self-improvement*. These theories of self mirror the implicit theories that underlie learning and performance goal orientations (Dweck, 1999); their implications for feedback-seeking behavior reinforce our recommendations in the previous section regarding the importance of a learning orientation for promoting seeking of feedback that is diagnostic for performance, such as feedback on failures. Research on this cultural dimension might incorporate ideas from Robinson and Weldon's (1993) theoretical work on feedback seeking in groups. These propositions have received no empirical attention to date. However, the cross-cultural context in general and focus on this dimension in particular may better highlight their relevance to and importance in organizational life around the globe.

In a global economy with a trend toward multi-national corporations, the importance of the following research question grows—what happens with feedback-seeking dynamics when an individualistic person works in a collectivist culture (or vise versa)? For example, consider a request by an individualistic person for feedback (to validate progress and prompt positive recognition) from collectivist colleagues. Both parties could find this transaction frustrating. For the collectivist colleagues, the feedback seeking may be viewed as selfish and rude; further, providing positive feedback may be viewed as a sign of weakness. The failure to receive positive feedback is likely to frustrate the individualistic person as the attempt to obtain performance recognition is thwarted and goal progress remains ambiguous.

Conversely, a group of predominately individualists may develop doubts about the competence and engagement level of a collectivist colleague whom seldom seeks nor gives feedback. These suggested interpersonal dynamics provide fascinating opportunities for both cross-cultural research and for informing cross-cultural management practices.

Tone

Our last suggested opportunity for feedback-seeking research is a quite general one. It relates to the lens through which we look at the phenomena—a matter of tone. One initial impetus for feedback-seeking research was Ashford and Cumming's (1983) claim that people are more proactive than the managerially focused literature had given them credit for to that date. They are actively involved in the creation of the selves they are to be in the world of work and in the attainment of important goals. However, as Ashford and colleagues expanded the sense of feedback seeing in the early 1990s to portray it as part of a process of adaptation (Ashford & Taylor, 1990) and a cybernetic reduction of gaps between actual and aspirational performance (Ashford, 1989), the more general tone of feedback seeking

became one of seeking to survive, to fit in, and to tailor oneself to the prevailing view held by others in the organization. The resultant tone is one in which individuals attempt to obtain feedback in order to modify their behavior to become acceptable to others—but the others are setting the code, defining the desired end state.

Recent research in positive psychology and positive organizational studies argues strongly that we should move away from a concern with weakness and disease and a portrayal of the individual as passive toward the study of human strengths, exceptional performance, and human activity (and proactivity) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; see also edited volumes by Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Positive psychology offers a lens that opens up new avenues for research in addition to existing streams; it suggests we look for and study positive "deviants." Thus, rather than focusing on the goals of fitting in, fixing problems and surviving, as has been emphasized in the feedback-seeking literature (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy & Quinn, 2003), positive psychology expands the scope of study to how individuals achieve goals of excellence and distinction in work settings.

This shift in tone would lead feedback-seeking researchers to focus on different issues and ask different questions. For example, the clarity of the performer's vision of what he or she *could be* in an organization (something akin to what Markus & Nurius, 1986 label "possible selves") becomes a more important concern. How vivid and engaging is this vision as a benchmark against which the performer can measure progress in an organization? The performer would also ask different questions in seeking feedback: Not just "how am I doing?" but also "are my actions in line with my vision of who I can be?" This latter question might never be posed to others in the environment, but rather is considered individually. Information (rather than feedback) seeking might be the priority with this new emphasis, as the performer seeks information on the current setting to determine whether it is the best fit for the vision of what the performer has to offer and wants to become.

Finally, rather than looking for negative feedback on where the performer is not making it, interest shifts to obtaining feedback on strengths or what Quinn, Spreitzer and Brown (2000) label "best self." There is evidence in the feedback-seeking literature regarding the important role that positive feedback can play. Trope and Neter (1994) argued that feedback on weak points was not more diagnostic than information on strengths and found that positive feedback helps a performer cope with subsequent negative feedback. The positive psychology perspective reminds us that an environment is not just a puzzle to be cognitively understood, but it is also a social milieu in which a person hopes to thrive; that there is an emotional component to the process that is fed by positive messages from the environment. It may be that seeking positive feedback in the old conception was a crass ploy for reassurance and flattery. Under the new conception, which is stimulated by an internally derived vision, information seeking on strengths or places where the performer has been at his or her best, communicates a stronger, more agentic message, one that won't detract from effectiveness.

This last suggested opportunity is our most speculative, but potentially the most fruitful theoretically. Ashford and Cummings' (1983) emphasis on notions of human agency is consistent with a growing movement in psychology that celebrates human creativity and strength. Working out the implications of this shift in tone for our theories of feedback seeking is an important next step.

Conclusion

After two decades of research, much has been learned about feedback-seeking behavior. In particular, scholars have developed a robust understanding of the core "building blocks" of feedback-seeking behavior—the antecedents of seeking, the motives to seek, the patterns of seeking, and the outcomes of seeking. In the decade ahead, we foresee that many important research opportunities will arise by studying how the core building blocks of feedback-seeking behavior operate in important, evolving arenas of management research—cross-cultural settings, new leadership paradigms, team structures of organization, technology mediated relationships, the emergence of the positive psychology movement, and the growing responsibility of individuals for their personal and career development. We look forward to the opportunities for seeking and learning.

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