
FEEDBACK AND WORK PERFORMANCE



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INTRODUCTION TO THE NETWORK

At CRF we believe HR's purpose is to help the organisation build both people capability and an enabling environment, helping define and deliver business performance. Therefore, a key goal of HR practices and HR strategy more broadly is to shape employee behaviour in ways that contribute to the performance of the organisation.

Psychologists have studied behaviour at work since around the early 1900s. Work psychology¹ as a scientific discipline therefore provides much of the foundational knowledge for HR practice.

The purpose of the **Work Psychology Network** is to provide an outline of work psychology theory and evidence relevant to various areas of HR activity and consider its implications for HR practice.

These reports contribute directly to the effectiveness of the HR function and HR professionals by providing a more detailed, elaborate and nuanced understanding of both the nature of the workplace behavioural phenomena HR is trying to shape and which practices or approaches are most likely to help do this.

As discussed in several of our previous reports – including [*Evidence-Based HR: A New Paradigm*](#) and [*Driving Organisational Performance: HR's Critical Role*](#) – the HR function's effectiveness depends on being able as accurately as possible to identify HR-relevant business issues and actions that will help resolve those issues.

The insights provided by work psychology research help us do both these things, taking us beyond the usually unhelpful notion of 'best practice' and instead to practices relevant to our business context and the specific issues our business faces.

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¹ Work psychology is also known as organisational psychology, occupational psychology, industrial psychology, I-O psychology, business psychology and is more-or-less the same as organisational behaviour and behavioural science.

At APS, we believe feedback is fundamental to learning, behaviour change, and performance improvement. Yet despite its importance, feedback remains one of the most misunderstood and inconsistently applied practices in organisations.

Often, feedback becomes associated with ratings, annual reviews, or difficult conversations, rather than its true purpose: helping people understand how their actions influence outcomes and what they can do differently to improve performance. Research reminds us that feedback is not inherently effective simply because it is given. To create value, it must be relevant, credible, understood, and linked to meaningful goals.

From an APS perspective, effective feedback is less about judgement and more about insight. It provides people with clear information about progress, highlights behaviours that support or hinder success, and enables informed decisions about what to continue, stop, or change. Equally important is feed forward: using evidence from past experience to identify practical actions and behaviours that will improve future performance. By focusing not only on what has happened, but also on what can be done next, feedback becomes more actionable, motivating, and development-oriented. When delivered within a culture of trust, clarity, and accountability, feedback becomes a powerful mechanism for growth at both an individual and organisational level.

This report brings together contemporary work psychology research to separate evidence from assumption and identify the principles that underpin effective performance feedback. Our hope is that it helps leaders move beyond feedback as a process and embrace it as a capability that drives learning, performance, and organisational success.

When delivered within a culture of trust, clarity, and accountability, feedback and feed forward become powerful mechanisms for growth at both an individual and organisational level.



Rob Field

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about *performance* feedback. That is, **feedback that specifically helps people adapt their behaviour in ways that improve their performance.**

Performance feedback includes **two types of information:**

- 1.** Information about **progress towards outcomes;**
- 2.** Information about **behaviours that may be helping or hindering that progress.**

Six initial key issues are considered before performance feedback is discussed in more detail:

- 1. What type of information is performance feedback?** There is much information in the workplace but only information which guides behaviour to help us perform better can be considered to be performance feedback. This would include several different types of information from many different sources. Sometimes the outcome itself can act as feedback but only where is a direct and observable and immediate link between behaviour and outcomes. This is only the case for some kinds of tasks.
- 2. Where does performance feedback come from?** There are many different sources of feedback including from the job or task itself, information systems, employees own views, coworkers, customers and supervisors.
- 3. Performance feedback does not necessarily help and may even harm performance.** There appears to be an assumption that providing feedback will help someone perform better. However, feedback may be inaccurate, irrelevant, ignored even when accurate and relevant, not understood or mistimed. If any of these apply, then performance feedback may not help and even make performance worse.
- 4. Positive performance feedback is not 'good' and negative performance feedback is not 'bad'.** Positive feedback refers broadly to the idea that progress is as expected and negative feedback to the idea that progress is not as expected. Both types of feedback are essential and cannot therefore be considered to be good or bad.
- 5. Limitations of feedback research.** Although feedback has been studied for some time and the literature is quite large it is generally regarded as quite limited in several respects. However, this does not mean it is not valuable but, rather, that these limitations need be taken into account.
- 6. Why are we ambivalent about performance feedback?** Feedback is both important and something about which both feedback recipients and providers may feel ambivalent. Recipients may not like receiving it and providers may not like giving it while at the same time regarding it as – in principle at least – important.

In general, there is **little agreement on precisely what feedback means**. This means the both research and practice tend to work with inconsistent definitions.

However, there are **a range of definitions** of feedback in general and performance feedback in particular. Definitions of performance feedback tend to suggest **it contains two forms of information already discussed**: Information about goal progress and information about behaviours that are helping or hindering goal progress.

There are **many practices in organisations that may be regarded as performance feedback but which are not**. These include praise, appreciation, admiring a skill, ratings and rankings of performance, recognition programmes, annual performance appraisals and 360 degree appraisals.

There are also many **different types (intention, content, source) of feedback** including auditory (e.g., alarms), developmental, constructive, corrective, real-time, peer, verbal, visual. Some of these may overlap somewhat with performance feedback.

The feedback literature has been described as having **six different faces** or ways of thinking about feedback. Feedback as: one-off events; novel task skill acquisition; part of a multisource programme; availability of task information; performance conversations; conversations about creative ideas. This partly accounts for the fragmented nature of the scientific literature about feedback.

The simplest way of thinking about how feedback works is **control or cybernetic theory**. In this approach, the basic idea is that a comparator **compares the current state of the environment with a reference value** (what the environment should be like). **If a discrepancy is perceived, an output function makes changes to the environment in order to reduce this discrepancy**. One example of such a system is a thermostat.

The **process model of feedback** considers **the process through which a feedback recipient responds to a feedback stimulus**. This process includes the perception of the feedback, whether it is accepted, the desire to respond, the intended response and then, finally the response. This process is seen as heavily influenced by the recipient's individual differences.

Feedback intervention theory was proposed to explain why **feedback sometimes enhances performance, sometimes has no effect and is sometimes detrimental**. This theory sets out **the conditions under which feedback can lead to improved performance** and the three different levels on which feedback operates: **task-motivation processes; task-learning processes; meta-task processes** (thoughts and feelings about the task).

One model considers **feedback within the longitudinal performance management process**. This model starts with feedback from critical events from the environment which seem unfamiliar and may have important consequences for performance. The performance model then goes on to describe the process of dealing with this feedback and its subsequent consequences for behaviour.

But **does performance feedback work?** In principle, and according to these theories and models **performance feedback is effective under some circumstances**. However, given the limitations of the research **is not possible draw conclusions about the relative effectiveness of different types of performance feedback or interventions** and the contexts in which they may be more or less effective. At the same time, we know that **performance feedback is essential for performance**.

Interpretations of the evidence for three common types of feedback interventions is considered: **Performance ratings**, **performance evaluation more broadly** and **multisource feedback**.

First, there is **considerable debate about the validity, reliability and utility of performance ratings**. In general, **performance ratings are regarded as quite ineffective**. There may, however, be ways of improving such ratings.

Second, there is also considerable debate about **performance evaluation more broadly in the context of performance management systems**. One problem with these evaluations and systems is they often include **performance ratings which are often ineffective**. Another problem is that they **can confuse two quite distinct purposes**: to identify training and development needs and to provide input for decisions around pay, promotions and dismissals. They may also be **perceived by both employees and organisations to be of limited utility**.

Third, the limited evidence around **multisource feedback** suggests that in some circumstances it **may lead to performance improvements** but, on the other hand, **may also result in no change** or even have **negative effects**.

Performance feedback is essential for performance so **how can it be improved?** **Four ways of doing this** are discussed.

First, we can **identify practices which are probably not currently providing performance feedback** such as performance appraisals and 360-degree feedback and discount these as part of our performance feedback provision. These practices may serve **other important purposes** or it may be that they **can be redesigned** such that they do provide performance feedback.

Second, we can ensure that as many as possible of the following five key conditions are in place. This focuses on the example of a supervisor providing feedback to a supervisee though as noted there are many other forms of feedback.

1. The primary essential prerequisite for providing performance feedback is that there *must be a clear goal or outcome*. Without this, it is impossible to provide performance feedback.
2. The supervisor and supervisee must have a **shared understanding of this goal**. Without this, there is likely to be much confusion about the nature of the feedback provided.
3. The supervisor must **understand how and which behaviours help or hinder goal progress**. Without an understanding of the connection between supervisee behaviour and outcomes they will not be provide accurate performance feedback.
4. Supervisors must have **knowledge of supervisee behaviour**. Without knowing what supervisees are doing, or not doing, supervisors cannot identify links between behaviours and outcomes and will not be able to provide performance feedback.
5. **Supervisees must understand the feedback**. Unless the supervisee understands the feedback they will not, in principle, be able to act on it.

Third, we can **understand and where possible remove contextual limitations to effective performance feedback**. Such limitations include poor supervisor-supervisee relationships, perceived credibility of the supervisor, supervisor reluctance to give 'negative' feedback, supervisee characteristics, supervisee control over behaviours, and controllability of the outcome.

Fourth, we can **take organisation-wide actions to increase the quantity and quality of performance feedback**. The actions required can be understood as a set of **six questions**:

1. **Does the organisation engage in careful goal-setting practices?**
Goals are an essential prerequisite for providing performance feedback.
2. **Are employee and team goals linked to organisational objectives?**
This link is required otherwise individuals and teams may be achieving their goals but it will have no effect on organisational performance.
3. **Are supervisors and supervisees trained in goal-setting and performance feedback practices?**
4. **Are performance feedback practices in place?**

- 5. Are goal-setting and performance feedback practices tailored to the nature of different tasks?** How goals are set and how performance feedback is provided depends on the nature of the specific task.
- 6. Is there a broader performance management 'system' in place and, if so, is it facilitating the delivery of high quality and effective performance feedback?** Performance management systems can become highly bureaucratic and over-elaborate in ways that do not facilitate performance. It is possible to assess the effectiveness of the system by considering the extent to which it meets the five key conditions for performance feedback.

In conclusion, **the principles of performance feedback are clear** and not difficult to understand and yet **it seems hard in practice to provide good performance feedback**. One reason for this may be the **over-reliance on feedback practices and techniques** that do not seem effective. A second is the **discomfort** employees experience around performance feedback. And, third, is that organisations **do not seem to be particularly good at goal-setting**.

Whatever the reasons for providing poor performance feedback it appears that **returning to and applying the basic principles of performance feedback is most likely to help**.

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