
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.

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.

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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.



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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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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the simplest way of thinking about feedback is that it is something that provides us with information about progress towards the outcomes we are trying to achieve *and* information about what we are doing, our behaviours, that may be helping or hindering us in our efforts to achieve particular outcomes.

Because of its assumed importance in improving employee and organisational performance there is much practical activity and effort around providing feedback. At the same time there are widespread concerns about how effectively this is done and how it can be done better. As we will go on to discuss in this report, such concerns are actually well-founded. Feedback practices in organisations do not typically take much account of work psychology theory and evidence about feedback and what makes it effective.

This report is about *performance feedback*. That is, *feedback that specifically helps people adapt their behaviour in ways that improve their performance*. As described in detail later, there are **many other types of feedback and feedback practices in organisations which are not focused directly on changing behaviour and improving performance.**

We have chosen to focus on performance feedback in particular because it is directly connected to the fundamental purpose of feedback – to improve performance – and therefore is the type of feedback which is likely to be of most value both to employees and organisations.

We begin by setting out six key issues around performance feedback:

- 1. What type of information is performance feedback?**
- 2. Where does performance feedback come from?**
- 3. Performance feedback does not necessarily help and may even harm performance.**
- 4. Positive performance feedback is not 'good' and negative performance feedback is not 'bad'.**
- 5. Limitations of feedback research.**
- 6. Why are we ambivalent about performance feedback?**

1.1 What type of information is performance feedback?

*...almost any cue in the environment
can serve as feedback...*

(Anseel & Sherf, 2025)



We are surrounded by a very wide range of sources and types of information in the workplace. But what sort of information can guide our behaviour in ways that help us to perform better? Crucially, it is any information that links our behaviours to outcomes. This means there may be many different *types* of information (e.g., visual, verbal, numerical, auditory) and, as discussed immediately below, many different *sources* of information.

As discussed in several **Work Psychology Network** reports (e.g., [Behaviour Change in Organisations](#) and [Predicting Performance at Work](#)) it is essential to distinguish between **outcomes** (e.g., goals, deliverables, targets) and the particular **behaviours that lead to such outcomes**. This distinction is also essential when considering performance feedback.

In situations where there is a direct, observable and rapid link between a behaviour and an outcome that is mostly under our control, **the outcome itself acts as performance feedback** because if the outcome is not what we intended we are immediately aware of the need to modify our behaviour in ways that are more likely to lead to the desired outcome. And, because **there is a direct and observable link between behaviour and outcome** this feedback also provides information about which behaviours we should change.

An everyday example is playing a musical instrument such as a guitar. If the sound we produce is not the desired outcome we change our behaviour accordingly: we may have played the wrong note or the wrong chord or the rhythm may be wrong. On the other hand, if the sound we produce is the desired outcome we do not need to change our behaviour.

For this reason, performance feedback plays a central role how we learn from experience. Broadly speaking, three conditions need to be in place if we are to learn from experience:

1. Our behaviours lead to outcomes in a predictable and understandable way.
2. We receive rapid and accurate feedback on the outcomes of our behaviour.
3. The environment is relatively stable.

Returning to the guitar example, we would first need to have some basic understanding of the effects of holding our fingers on the fretboard and what happens when we pluck a string or strum to produce a chord. We would need to be able to hear the outcome of our behaviour fairly immediately and accurately. Last, the environment, in this case features of the environment such as the space between the frets or the tension in the strings needs to be relatively stable.

Under such conditions, feedback allows us to change our behaviour so we can maintain or improve our performance through learning from experience.

In general, therefore, performance feedback is information we can use to modify our behaviour to get the desired outcomes.

What is immediately obvious is that many work contexts (e.g., knowledge work, project-based work) do not resemble playing a guitar and are much more complex:

- 1. Our behaviours may *not* lead to outcomes in predictable and understandable ways.** Outcomes may be quite a long way in the future. The behaviour of many other people and many other factors may affect the outcome. It may be difficult to understand precisely how our behaviours contributed to the outcome and, therefore, which behaviours helped and which did not.
- 2. We may *not* receive rapid and accurate feedback on the outcomes of our behaviour.** If the outcome is some way in the future and many other things determine the outcome it may be tricky to understand how our behaviours affected the outcome.
- 3. The environment may *not* be relatively stable.** Of course, both goals and ways of achieving them can change. A behaviour which worked yesterday to bring about a desired outcome may not be so effective today.

Of course, **this does not mean performance feedback *cannot* be provided in more complex work situations** but that, simply, it is more challenging to provide it.

It's important to note that just because something is described as or thought to be performance feedback it doesn't mean it is actually serving that purpose. In fact, **many feedback practices do not actually provide performance feedback**. This will be discussed in detail later.

1.2 **Where does performance feedback come from?**

In general it can only be found in the task or work environment. But, within that environment, there may be many different sources of feedback including:

- **The job or task itself** (as in the example above of playing the guitar).
- **Information provided by various information systems** (e.g., error or failure rates, the state of a production or sales process).
- **The views and perceptions of the employee themselves.**
- **The views of coworkers.**
- **The views of customers and clients.**
- **The views of supervisors and managers.**

Whatever the source of feedback it can only be considered to be performance feedback if, as mentioned earlier, it provides information about outcomes or progress towards outcomes in a way that allows us to, where necessary, adjust our behaviour. Again, just because a particular source of feedback is described as or thought to be performance feedback doesn't mean that it is.

Much of work psychology research and HR practice focuses on the **supervisor or line manager as the main source** of feedback which is often provided during **formal feedback interventions** such as performance appraisal. However, as mentioned already and discussed later there are **many other sources of feedback apart from the supervisor which may be much more important** and many other mechanisms for providing feedback other than formal feedback interventions.

1.3 **Performance feedback does not necessarily help and may even harm performance**

There appears to be an implicit assumption about performance feedback: That simply providing it will help someone perform better. Based on this, organisations spend much time and other resources implementing feedback practices and encouraging line managers and others to provide feedback and encouraging feedback recipients to make use of or even ask for feedback.

Of course, **there are conditions under which performance feedback is highly likely to improve performance**. Some of these will be discussed later. But how often such conditions are in place is difficult to know not least because it seems that organisations do not routinely evaluate the effectiveness of their performance feedback activities and their purpose is not necessarily clear. **Providing effective**

performance feedback is, perhaps, a good example of an organisational activity that is not, in principle, difficult to do but is not done well in practice as it requires careful thought and effort.

There are also **conditions under which performance feedback makes *no difference* or may actually *make performance worse***. Similarly, we don't know how often this happens yet it is quite easy to imagine the conditions under which performance feedback is ineffective or harmful. For example:

- **Feedback may be inaccurate or irrelevant:** Information provided about progress towards the outcome and the behaviours necessary to reach the outcome may simply be wrong or not relevant. Responding to such feedback will not improve performance. It's easy to provide information that appears to be performance feedback but not so easy to provide accurate and useful feedback.
- **Feedback may be ignored:** Feedback recipients many choose to ignore feedback even if it is accurate. This can happen for many reasons. Recipients may, for example, feel the feedback provider is not credible in some way and therefore their feedback is not likely to help. Or they may believe the motives of the feedback provider to be about something other than genuinely wanting to improve performance.
- **Feedback may not be understood:** Recipients may not understand feedback and may therefore respond to it incorrectly or not at all. This may happen because it has been poorly communicated or because the recipient has insufficient task knowledge to understand what it means.
- **Feedback may be mistimed:** It may be provided too early or too late to be useful.

In other words, we should not simply assume that performance feedback is a good thing for performance.

1.4 Positive performance feedback is not 'good' and negative performance feedback is not 'bad'

The idea of performance feedback as being positive or negative and what that means will be outlined in more detail later in the definitions section².

² The definitions section shows there is some disagreement about what feedback, performance feedback and positive and negative feedback mean. The descriptions of positive and negative performance feedback provided in this sub-section are illustrative rather than conclusive.

However, it is important to clarify in these initial considerations that positive performance feedback doesn't mean something inherently 'positive' and negative performance feedback doesn't mean something inherently 'negative':

- Positive feedback provides information that suggests that progress towards the goal or outcome **is as expected** and **which behaviours are contributing to that progress** and should therefore **be continued** or even increased.
- Conversely, negative feedback provides information that suggests that progress towards the goal or outcome **is not as expected** and, identifies **which** behaviours are hindering to that progress and should therefore **be changed**.

When it comes to improving performance, both types of feedback are therefore equally important.

The 'positive' and 'negative' labels in everyday organisational language probably derive from the feelings of those providing each type of feedback and the anticipated reactions of feedback recipients rather than the purposes and potential equal value of each type of feedback.

Such feelings, particularly those of feedback providers, help explain the origins of **the feedback sandwich metaphor** in which the supposedly 'nasty' taste of negative feedback (the sandwich filling) is placed between two more 'appetising' pieces of positive feedback or praise (the slices of bread) in order to make the negative feedback more palatable.

It is important to distinguish between the functions of positive and negative performance feedback and to bear in mind these labels are nothing to do with how such feedback may make people feel.

1.5 Limitations of feedback research

Feedback has been studied for a very long time. It is crucial for performance and learning in the workplace. However, based on recent and detailed reviews of the field the body of theory and evidence about feedback seems to be quite seriously limited.

Of course, all research has limitations and it is important to understand these before we try to draw conclusions from it or to use it to practice. However, it does seem that, compared to *other* areas of work psychology and the research topics covered in other Work Psychology Network reports, feedback research has quite significant weaknesses:



***Much work remains to be done** to understand functional properties [of performance feedback] and how to create the best systems of feedback for both the people delivering and the people receiving feedback.*

(Johnson et al, 2023)

*We were surprised to observe less coherence and consistency than expected. Despite an appearance of a robust literature, we **struggled to identify significant cumulative progress**. We concluded that feedback research often falls short of providing a clear picture of why, when, and how people learn from feedback and thus does **not offer a meaningful guide on how to manage the complexities of feedback in everyday work life**.*

(Anseel & Sherf, 2025 – emphasis added)

*Even though there is an abundance of research...**results have not led to a clear understanding of performance feedback processes and outcomes**. The literature is divided on how feedback is conceptualized, examined and measured... Although this research has produced a rich set of findings, its breadth and inconsistent nature have made it **challenging to identify general implications**.*

(Heine et al, 2026 – emphasis added)

Quite a lot of the studies of feedback are done in nonwork contexts (laboratories) with students rather than employees. In the Heine et al (2026) review around *half* the studies they included were based on student samples.

While these weaknesses are important it doesn't mean there is no value in the work psychology literature on feedback. Understanding definitions of feedback and the underlying theory which explains how performance feedback affects performance is extremely useful. So too are the broad principles and recommendations which can be drawn from them.

As emphasised in other Work Psychology Network reports, the effective application of work psychology theory and evidence always requires a good understanding of the specific context and what, exactly, you are trying to achieve.

1.6 Why are we ambivalent about performance feedback?

Partly linked to how we may feel about giving and receiving feedback are other mixed feelings about performance feedback more generally.

Performance feedback represents the ultimate lose–lose scenario. It is extremely difficult to do well, and if it was done well, the recipients would be likely to dismiss their feedback as inaccurate and unfair... supervisors and subordinates alike approach performance appraisal with a mix of scepticism and unease.

Adler et al (2016)

On the one hand, job performance feedback is essential to development, performance improvement, and goal setting, and people generally report that they value feedback and want more of it (London, 2003). Feedback guides, motivates, and reinforces effective behaviour, and identifies and reduces ineffective behaviour. On the other hand, recipients may be defensive and dismissive of feedback, particularly negative feedback. In light of this, feedback sources may delay or distort feedback and are often reluctant to provide critical feedback.

Steelman & Williams (2019)

The dichotomy of job performance feedback is clear, feedback is important for effective job performance, but it is infrequently given and frequently misused.

Steelman & Williams (2019)

To summarise these somewhat contradictory perspectives:

- Performance feedback is extremely important.
- Feedback recipients and providers are also aware that feedback is important – at least *in principle*.
- It is difficult to do well.
- Recipients may not like it (particularly if not done well).
- Feedback providers may be aware of this which makes it more difficult to do well and lead to a reluctance to provide feedback.
- As a consequence both supervisors and supervisees may avoid performance feedback.

The extent to which such contradictory perspectives exist in any specific context is likely to vary depending on, for example, the sector, the nature of the work tasks, social norms, the knowledge and skills of the supervisor, the quality of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, and so on. Some of these contextual factors are discussed later.

In the remainder of this report we first define performance feedback, then consider some theories and models which attempt to explain or describe how performance feedback works and then discuss how performance feedback can be improved.

2. DEFINING PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Here we consider what is and, equally important, what is *not* performance feedback. This section also considers a wide range of terms for potential 'types' of feedback more generally and how these relate to performance feedback.

2.1 What *is* performance feedback?

As always, it's important to define our terms carefully. In the case of feedback and performance feedback, they are sometimes carefully defined and sometimes more loosely defined within the work psychology literature and more broadly.

However, as has been noted many times there is no agreement on any particular definition. For example:

Despite the widespread use of feedback and the large body of research demonstrating its effectiveness, an agreed-upon definition of feedback has yet to emerge, although different definitions have been suggested by researchers.

Lipschultz et al (2021)

The term "feedback" is often used in a generic and ambiguous manner. Such definitions allow scholars to make different assumptions, resulting in distinct operationalizations.

Anseel & Sherf (2025)

Seventy-five different labels with regularly differing definitions have been given to "feedback." Moreover, a significant number of articles refrained from providing a definition or conceptualization of the feedback they researched.

Heine et al (2026)

This lack of consistency not only makes it difficult to create a coherent and cumulating body of scientific theory and evidence it also presents practical challenges. Given the importance of performance feedback, organisations need to have a shared and practically applicable definition of what it is and what it isn't.

Some definitions of feedback (in general) and performance feedback (in particular)



Feedback (in general)

Few concepts in psychology have been written about more uncritically and incorrectly than that of feedback... Actually, feedback is only information, that is, data, and as such has no necessary consequences at all.

Latham & Locke (1991)

Feedback interventions [are] defined as actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance.

Kluger & DeNisi (1996)

Provides information about the performance process.

Neubert (1998)^a

Information about past behaviour or, more specifically, information about the accuracy, adequacy, or correctness of work decisions and actions.

Ren (2003)^b

A subset of the available information in the work environment that indicates how well an individual is meeting his or her goals. It conveys which behaviours are desired by the organisation and includes an evaluation of the quality of relevant work behaviour.

Rosen et al (2006)^b

Feedback is defined as actions taken by an employee's supervisor to provide information regarding task performance.

Belschak & den Hartog (2009)^a

Effective feedback is defined as feedback in which information about previous performance is used to promote positive and desirable development.

Archer (2010)^a

Information about the effects of one's actions or efforts on some criterion of interest.

Van der Vegt et al (2010)^b

A general term that often incorporates many components.

Johnson et al (2015)^a

Specific information about the comparison between observed performance and a standard.

Knesek (2015)^a

Information about past work that is communicated with the intent of improving future work.

Harrison & Dossinger (2017)^b

Feedback usually contains informal behavioural expectations that leaders desire from their subordinates and unambiguous performance evaluations of the subordinates.

Guo and Ling (2020)^a

Information about the actual performance or actions of a system used to control the future actions of a system.

Park & Choi (2020)^a

Feedback comprises of communication and evaluation concerning behaviour or performance, for the achievement of individual or group goals.

Lee et al (2021)^a

Notes: ^aIn Heine et al (2026); ^bIn Anseel & Sherf (2025).



Performance feedback (in particular)

Information about the effectiveness of one's work behaviour.

[Kinicki et al \(2004\)^b](#)

Information about performance that allows a person to change his/her behaviour.

[Daniels & Bailey \(2014\)](#)

Performance information that enables individuals to change their behaviours.

[Choi et al \(2018\)^a](#)

Information about past performance in an attempt to improve future performance.

[Chong and Leung \(2018\)^a](#)

Performance feedback is very specific information about (pinpointed) performance. In order to generate effective performance feedback, the performance must first be pinpointed. That performance information can be objective (facts) and more subjective (e.g. an interpretation of facts or a situation, delivered by another person). The main function of performance feedback is to help the performer perform better in the future.

[Den Broeder & Kerkhofs \(2020\)](#)

Feedback refers to verbal or written information provided to employees about their previous performance to guide future actions.

[Alam & Singh \(2021\)^a](#)

Information provided to employees about their accomplishment or execution of tasks, actions, or functions.

[Heine et al \(2026\)](#)

Notes: ^aIn Heine et al (2026); ^bIn Anseel & Sherf (2025).

Examining these definitions of *performance* feedback there is some agreement that its purpose is to help **improve performance** and it appears to consist of **two main types of information** (as discussed earlier):

1. Information about **performance**.
2. Information about **behaviours that may be helping or hindering performance**.

2.2 What is *not* performance feedback?

Performance feedback contains information about progress towards a specific goal *and* information about behaviours that are helping or hindering such progress. Hence, performance feedback must contain these two elements.

There are many practices and types of information which may appear to be a form of performance feedback but which in themselves are probably not as they don't meet these two criteria.

Examples of feedback and practices that are not performance feedback

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Statement such as these are not performance feedback unless they also include information about goal progress and behaviours that help or hinder:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ "Well done" or "good job" or "nice work" (appreciation and praise after goal attainment)○ "I really like the way you did..." (appreciation for a behaviour or approach to a task)○ "I wasn't very happy about..." (displeasure about a behaviour or outcome)○ "You are very good at..." (evaluation of someone's ability) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Ratings and rankings of employee performance (quantifying job performance and comparing scores to others).■ Employee of the month programmes (picking out one employee as particularly worthy of recognition during that period).■ Annual performance appraisals.■ 360 degree appraisals. |
|---|--|

Some of these activities could be described as feedback and all of these activities may serve other purposes (e.g., general motivational, making employees feel valued, relationship-building) but they are not performance feedback as such.

2.3 Are there different types of feedback?

In addition to positive and negative feedback mentioned above and discussed in more detail later there are many other types of feedback. However, there may be considerable overlap between these supposedly different 'types' of feedback in part because they are poorly or inconsistently defined. Some of these types reflect the intention of the feedback, some the content, and others the source.

The table shows some examples of possibly different types of feedback drawn from a range of sources from scientific and practitioner publications along with general descriptions of what they appear to mean.

Examples of different types (intention, content, source) of feedback

360 degree or multisource: Such as peers, supervisors, supervisees, customers.

Auditory: Such as alarms.

Coaching: Similar to developmental feedback.

Constructive: Reflecting the intention of provider or the reaction of a recipient.

Continuous: Not restricted to particular points in time.

Corrective: Similar to negative feedback.

Developmental: To help someone develop or learn.

Downward: To a more junior colleague.

Formal (versus informal): Could mean planned and scheduled versus more spontaneous. Or may reflect structured versus unstructured.

Feedforward: Focused on the future though performance feedback is also partly about this.

Outcome: Progress towards goal including goal completion.

Performance conversations: Usually formal, structured and scheduled.

Process: Information about the process used to work towards a goal.

Peer: From coworkers at the same level.

Real-time: Immediate or while the task is still on-going.

Relative/comparative: Information about performance level relative to or compared to others or other time periods.

Rewarding: Presumably feedback about an action or behaviour that makes it more likely the behaviour will be repeated. Or it could refer to the feelings the feedback produces in the recipient.

Self (self-reflection, self-evaluation): Information from oneself about goal progress and/or behaviours that help or hinder.

Supervisor/manager: The source most commonly associated with the idea of feedback.

Supportive: Similar to constructive. Reflecting an intention by the feedback provider to produce a particular emotional response in the recipient.

Upward: To a more senior coworker.

Verbal: Written or spoken.

Visual: Such as lights, information panels, feedback from observing the work itself.

In some cases, these types of feedback (intention, content and source) do overlap with the subject of this report, performance feedback. The large number of 'types' of feedback reflects the observation reported earlier that "...almost any cue in the environment can serve as feedback..." (Anseel & Sherf, 2025).

Defining feedback and types of feedback is not a simple or straightforward task. However, the basic psychological processes underlying the effects of feedback on performance *are* relatively straightforward. We now turn to the basic theory explaining how performance feedback works.

3. HOW DOES PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK WORK?

Here we consider some of the approaches to explaining how performance feedback works. But first, we discuss the performance literature landscape, some of its important but mostly implicit assumptions and six different aspects or faces of performance feedback research.

3.1 The performance feedback literature landscape

As mentioned in the introduction, recent reviews of the field have suggested it has several weaknesses which, together, limit its scientific and practical value.

It is helpful to get an overview of this scientific literature partly to understand how it is structured and the themes it addresses but also to identify the nature of its inconsistencies and limited relevance to practice.

Anseel & Sherf (2025) identify and examine three key implicit assumptions in the scientific literature.

Key Assumption 1:

Feedback contains information about past performance on a particular task.

It seems reasonable to assume that the nature and process of performance feedback will depend a lot on the specific task. Yet, **“feedback scholars rarely discuss the nature of the task in connection with feedback and assume feedback is similar in content or process regardless of task”**. For some tasks there is an objectively correct solution. They describe the provision of information about progress towards the outcome in such tasks as “intellective feedback”. For other tasks, there is no correct answer as such but more subjective evaluations of progress towards the goal. Performance feedback in such tasks is described as “judgemental feedback”.

Key Assumption 2:

Feedback requires the communication of information between a feedback provider and recipient.

However, **“scholars rarely acknowledge variations in communication dynamics between provider and recipient”**. Feedback can be more or less one-sided. Low communication symmetry exists if the feedback information is provided in a way which does not allow for the feedback recipient to interact with the provider. Communication symmetry is high where there are “rich back-and-forth exchanges” between feedback provider and recipient.

Six faces of feedback research (adapted from Anseel & Sherf, 2025)

Six faces: Feedback as...	Performance criteria	Communication symmetry	Temporal window	Methodological approach
...one-time events.	+ intellectual	- symmetric	Past: 0 – narrower Future: none	Lab studies Numerical info on unknown task
...novel task skill acquisition.	+ intellectual	- symmetric	Past: none Future: narrower	Lab studies Repeated numerical info
...part of multisource programme.	+ judgemental	- symmetric	Past: wider Future: wider	Survey Multisource ratings
...availability of task information.	Unclear	Unclear	Past: wider Future: wider	Surveys Employees report on feedback availability
...performance conversations.	+ judgemental	+ symmetric	Past: wider Future: wider	Surveys Employees report on reactions to conversations
...conversations about creative ideas.	+ judgemental	+ symmetric	Past: wider Future: wider	Qualitative studies Creator reactions to feedback

Key Assumption 3:

The temporal window of feedback plays an important role in task reflection, effort and resistance.

For repeated similar tasks in a work environment both the past and future temporal window is wide in that it draws on feedback and experiences in the past that will shape behaviour in the future as the task is repeated. However, in laboratory studies (of which there are many in work psychology performance feedback research) the past window is very narrow (as typically participants are completing a novel task) and only slightly extended into the future (as typically, in experimental conditions the task is repeat only a few times).

What seems clear is that these important implicit assumptions about feedback are not usually made explicit and hence have not been carefully examined or tested. This perhaps sheds some light on why the scientific literature in this field is not as coherent and useful as it could be.

Using these assumptions to categorise the studies included in their review, Anseel & Sherf (2025) go on to describe six quite different “faces” or aspects of the performance feedback literature.

Of course, these different aspects of the research are not necessarily mutually exclusive in practice. For example, some performance conversations may include feedback based on performance criteria that are more intellectual where the task has outcomes that are largely correct or incorrect.

Reviews of the performance feedback field as well as attempting to describe the current landscape also suggest how it should change in order to produce more relevant research.

Examples of suggestions for future research from two recent reviews	
Heine et al (2026)	Anseel & Sherf (2025)
1. More high quality research. 2. Examine optimal combinations of and sequencing of positive and negative feedback. 3. Understand the definition and role of high quality supervisor-supervisee relationship. 4. Examine the roles of justice perceptions in feedback valence. 5. Effects of goal-setting after positive feedback. 6. Use a single definition of performance feedback. 7. Determinants and consequences of perceived feedback accuracy.	1. Move from generic definitions of feedback and make assumptions explicit. 2. Study dynamic, dyadic feedback processes rather than feedback as a one-off event. 3. Less focus on immediate resistance to feedback and more on how feedback leads to learning and performance. 4. Expand from feedback recipient to the broader feedback ecosystem in organisations.

These two sets of suggestions from Heine et al (2026) and Anseel & Sherf (2025) demonstrate that there is still much to do to understand feedback practices in organisations.

We now consider some the explanations of why and how performance feedback shapes behaviour in ways that improve performance.

3.2 How might feedback work? Some theories and models

In a way, it seems obvious how performance feedback works. And indeed, at the most basic level, it is obvious. Returning to the guitar example, if we hear that what we've just played doesn't sound right we change our behaviour to create the outcome we want.

As discussed, a lot of work consists of tasks that are not much like playing a guitar and understanding how feedback works in other task contexts is somewhat less obvious.

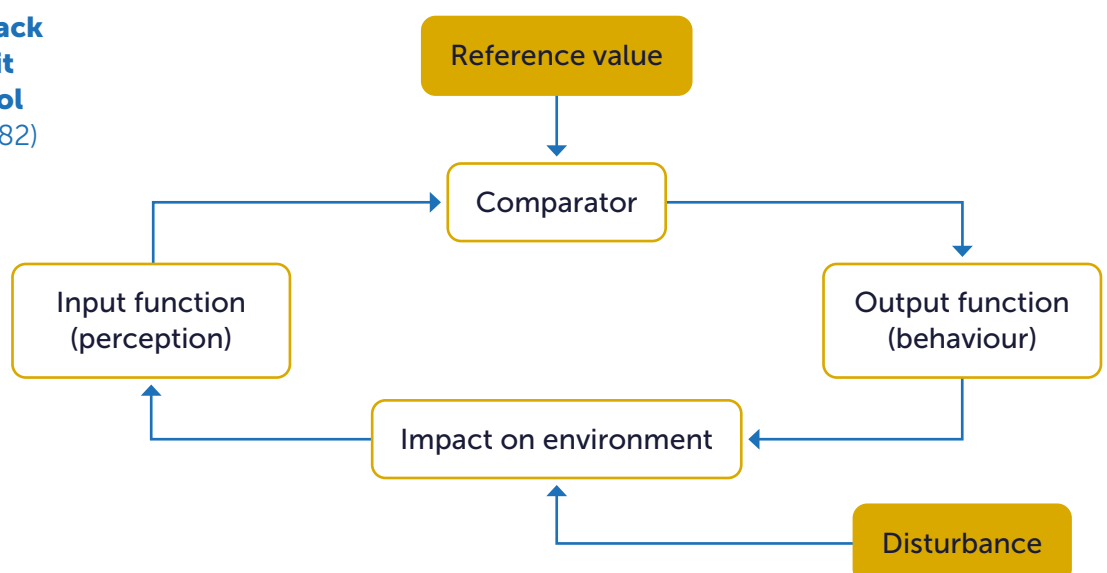
First we consider a general and relatively simple theory and then move on to more elaborate and work-specific theories and models. It is important to note that the models are more descriptive than explanatory and only some elements of them have been examined in research.

Control theory

Control or cybernetic theory is a very general way of thinking about self-regulating systems. It has been around for at least a century and can be applied to a very wide range of systems including human behaviour and has been used in many different areas of psychology.

One of the earliest papers (Carver & Scheier, 1982) describing the application of control theory to human behaviour set out the basic processes involved.

The negative feedback loop – the basic unit of cybernetic control
(Carver & Scheier, 1982)



The main process is the negative feedback loop so-called because its purpose is to reduce (or negate) environmental deviations in the environment from a desired state (or reference value).

It starts with perception (input function) of the current state and then a comparator compares the current state with the desired state (or reference value). If a discrepancy is perceived, the output function (or behaviour) attempts to make changes to the environment to reduce this discrepancy. However, there may be another influence on the environment apart from behaviour which is described as disturbance.

Perception (or the input function) repeats and, again, the current state of the environment is compared with the reference value. If there is no discrepancy there will not be an output function of behaviour attempting to change the environment as it is no longer necessary.

A common example of such a feedback loop is the thermostat in a home heating system. If the comparator detects a negative discrepancy between the input function (temperature of the room in which the thermostat is located) and the reference value (set by the user on the thermostat) then the heating will switch on. The comparator will continue to compare the room temperature with the temperature set on the thermostat. When the room temperature reaches the set temperature the heating will switch off.

As Anseel & Sherf (2025) point out, this thermostat approach makes sense to some extent with intellectual tasks, for which there is a correct answer, but does not make sense for more judgemental tasks for which there is not. They go on to say:



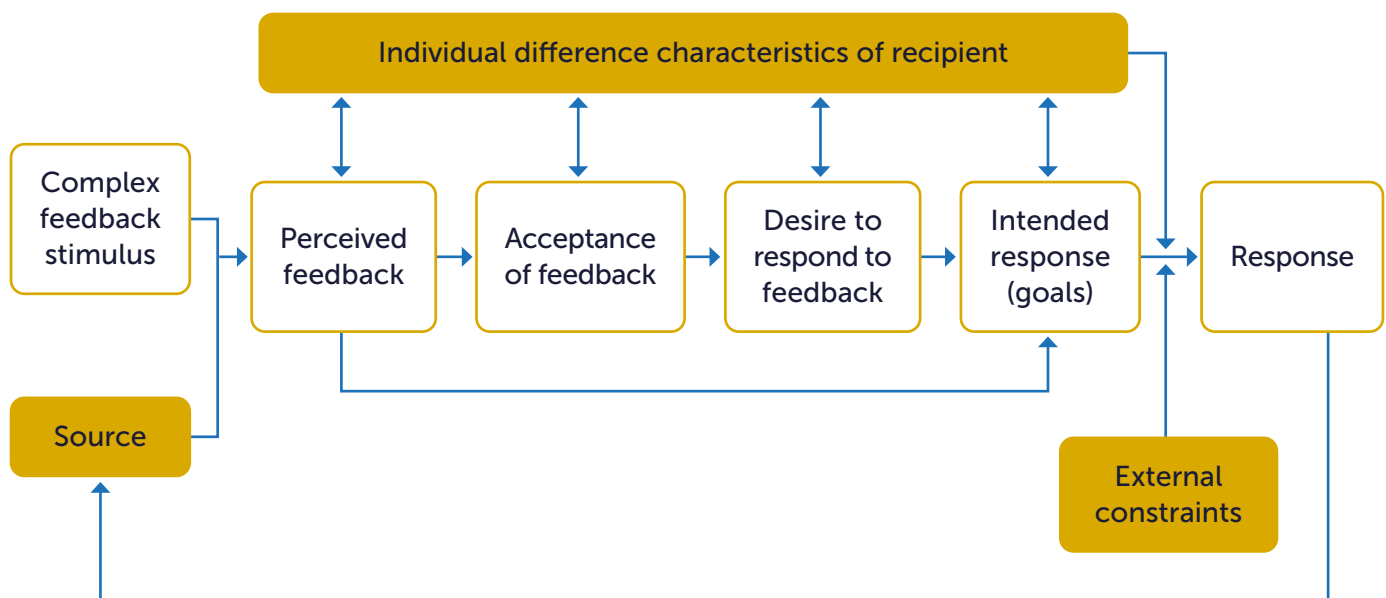
Even if one understands a discrepancy (e.g., “I am performing at a lower level than expectations”), the translation of such knowledge into action is often far from straight-forward. Recipients may recognize that a problem exists and even understand the required actions but lack confidence or desire to take such actions. Moreover, the thermostat is embedded within a closed-loop system and will never be able to use feedback information to ask questions such as “Why should the room be warmer?” “What are alternative ways to cool the room?” “Can warming the room contribute to climate change?” or “Is this the right career for me?”

Control theory has been elaborated in many ways and can explain much more than a simple thermostat. But, even in its most basic form, it is fundamental to understanding how feedback shapes behaviour and has influenced probably all theories and models of feedback.

Process model of the effects of feedback (Ilgen et al, 1979)

One of the earliest attempts to consider how feedback affects recipients was provided by Ilgen et al (1979). This process model emphasises the role of individual differences such as personality, need for achievement, and locus of control at many stages of the process.

Model of the effects of feedback on recipients



It also sets out one way of thinking about the basic steps or stages involved in the feedback process. Namely:

- Feedback stimulus.
- Perceived feedback.
- Acceptance of feedback.
- Desire to respond to feedback.
- Intended response.
- Response.

Such process models neatly illustrate that there is much that happens between the feedback itself and the response, if any, to that feedback.

Feedback intervention theory (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996)

Kluger & DeNisi (1996) observed, as had others around that time, that the effects of feedback are quite mixed. As discussed in the report introduction, feedback may lead to improved performance, have no effect or harm performance.

We argue that a considerable body of evidence suggesting that feedback intervention effects on performance are quite variable has been historically disregarded [and] has led to a widely shared assumption that feedback interventions consistently improve performance....Several researchers have recently recognized that feedback interventions have highly variable effects on performance, such that in some conditions they improve performance, in other conditions they have no apparent effects on performance, and in yet others they debilitate performance.

(Kluger & DeNisi, 1996)

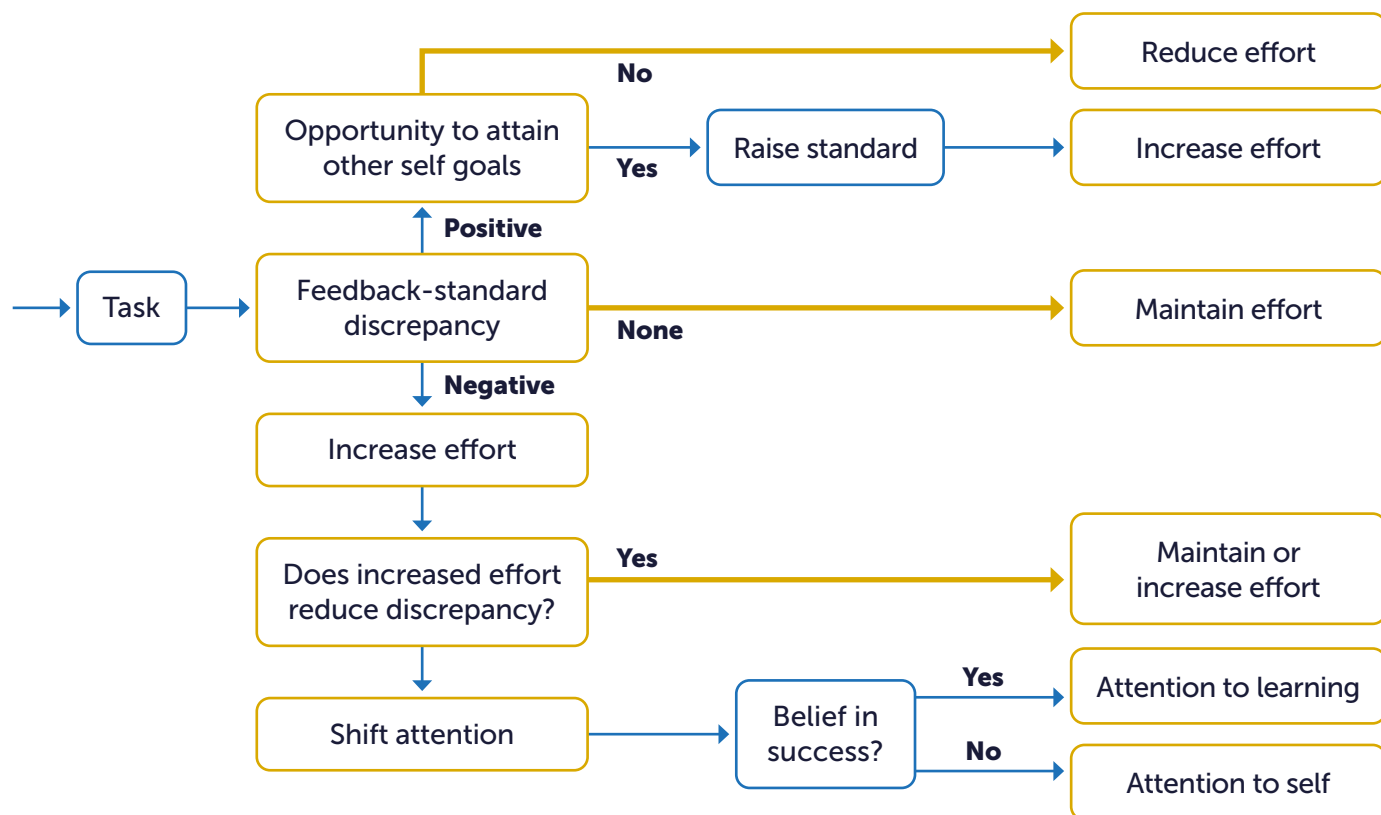
They suggested that one reason for the persistence of this incorrect assumption – that feedback interventions lead to performance improvements – was a consequence of the lack of theory explaining how and the conditions under which feedback interventions do or do not lead to increases in performance. Hence, the development of this feedback intervention theory.

This theory considers that feedback interventions direct attention on different processes on three different but hierarchically interlinked levels:

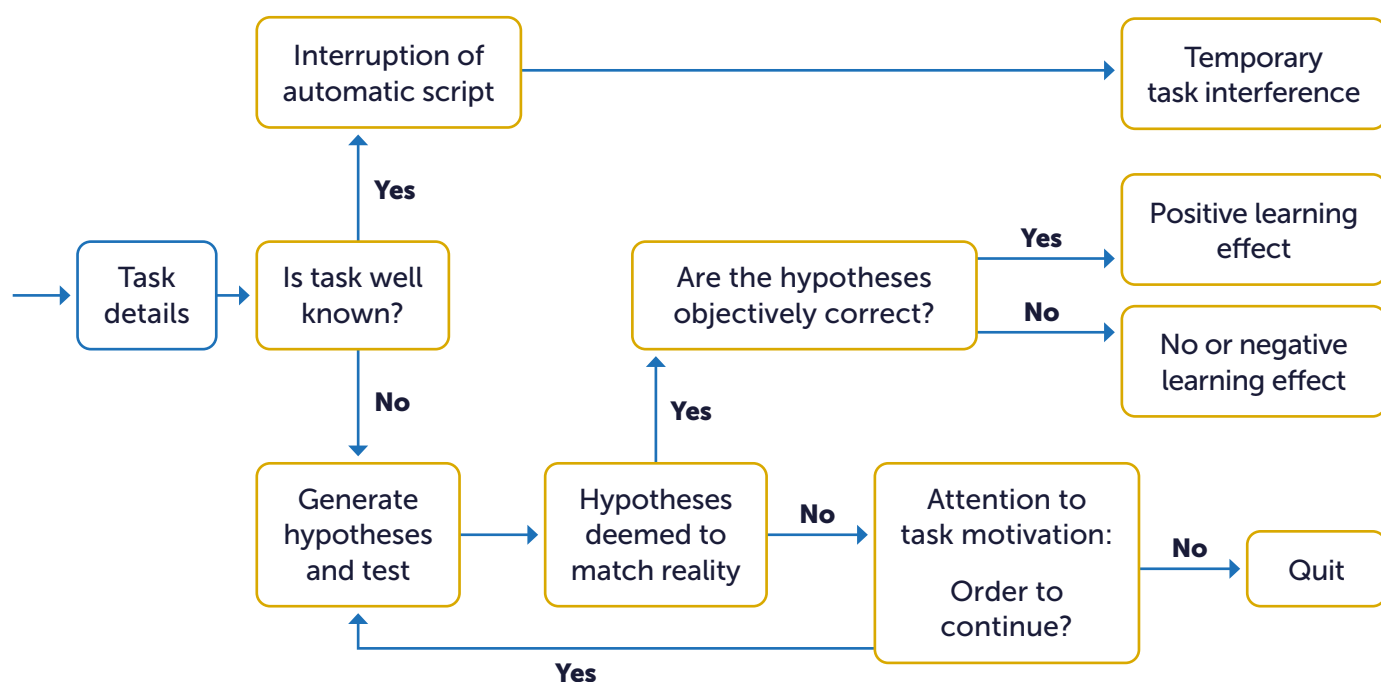
- **Task-motivation processes:** How feedback directs attention towards making effort towards a particular outcome.
- **Task-learning processes:** How feedback directs attention towards learning when simply making more effort is *not* leading to the desired outcome and a *different* behaviour is required.
- **Meta-task processes:** How feedback directs attention towards self- or identity-related thoughts and feelings about the task itself, the relationship between the self and the task and whether or not to continue striving towards the objective.

HOW DOES PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK WORK?

Effects of feedback intervention-induced attention on task-motivation processes and their consequences for performance. (Simple cybernetic or control theory processes are marked with gold arrows.) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996)

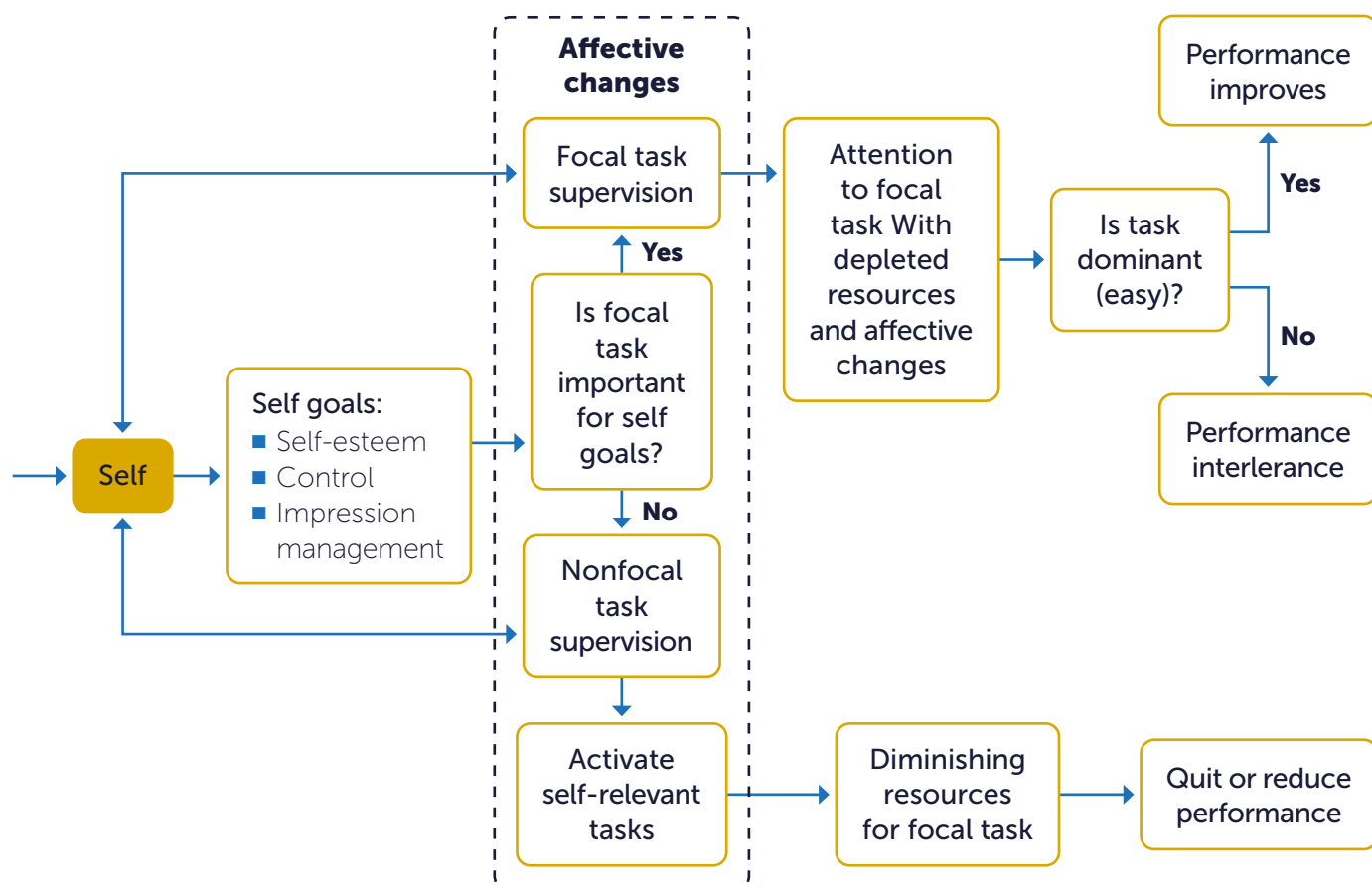


The effects of feedback intervention-induced attention on task-learning processes and their consequences for performance. (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996)



HOW DOES PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK WORK?

The effects of feedback intervention-induced attention on *meta-task* processes and their consequences for performance. (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996)



There are a number of key insights from this theory including:

- Feedback serves as a stimulus to *direct attention* and to stimulate various processes.
- Feedback can direct attention to *processes on different levels* (task, learning, meta-task) which affect behaviour and performance in different ways.

The role of feedback in the longitudinal performance management process (London & Smither, 2002)

London & Smither's (2002) model is probably the first to consider how the wider organisational context plays a role in the relationship between feedback and its consequences for behaviour and performance.

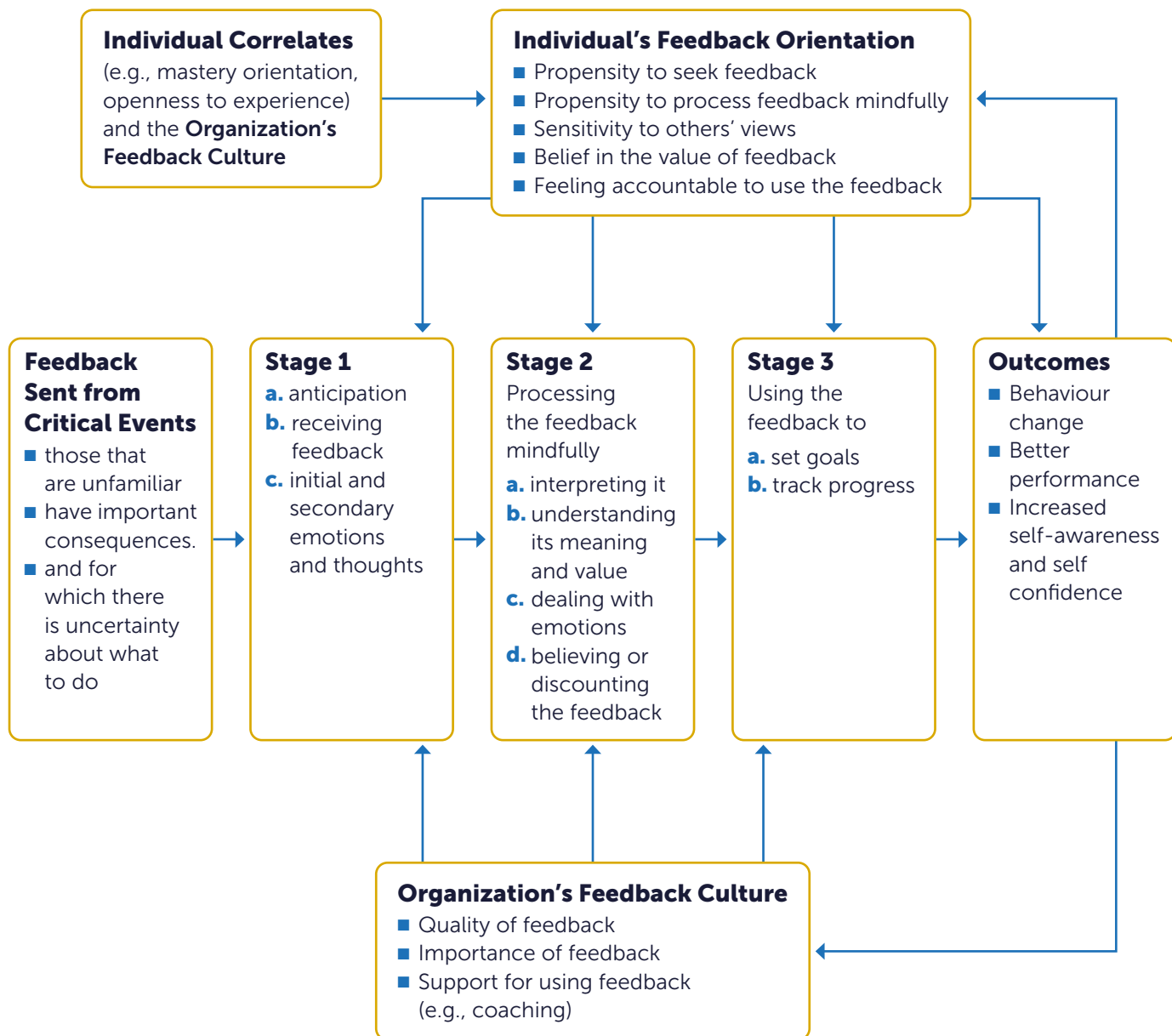
This model starts with the idea of "critical events". These are situations that direct attention towards the potential value of feedback and are situations where:

- The person perceives the situation to be novel or unfamiliar.
- They recognise that their behaviour is likely to have important consequences.
- There is uncertainty about how to perform competently.

HOW DOES PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK WORK?

The role of feedback orientation, feedback culture and critical events in the longitudinal performance management process

(London & Smither, 2002)



Such critical events then lead to the first stage of anticipating, receiving and then reacting initially to feedback about the critical event. Following this, the feedback is processed and, if believed, is used to set goals and monitor progress. At the end of this process is behaviour change and improved performance.

However, what happens in this process depends on the individual's **feedback orientation** and what is described as **feedback culture** which describes a range of practices and behaviours indicative of general support for feedback.

3.3 Does performance feedback work?

As discussed at several points in this report, the body of scientific evidence around performance feedback has considerable limitations. This means it is not yet possible to draw conclusions about the comparative effectiveness of different types of performance feedback or different performance feedback interventions and the circumstances in which they may be more or less effective for or even detrimental to performance.

Yet, **there is no doubt that performance feedback is essential for performance.** This is why, in the last section of the report, we draw on general principles and underlying feedback theory to identify some of the ways in which performance feedback can be improved.

Even though the body of scientific evidence is limited, **it is worth considering, interpretations of some of the evidence that does exist** for three common feedback interventions: Performance ratings, performance evaluation more broadly and multisource feedback. It's worth noting that these interventions may, or may not be, providing *performance* feedback depending on how they are used in any particular context.

What is notable about each of these practices is that they are quite widely used and yet questions have been raised about their value for many decades. Again, this does not mean they are never useful but that, based on the available evidence, it appears that much needs to be done to ensure they are reasonably valuable.

Performance ratings

This is the practice of assigning some sort of numerical rating to the performance of an employee. These are sometimes used in the context of performance reviews or performance appraisals or broader performance evaluations and performance management systems discussed in the next section immediately below.

In their paper, ***Getting rid of performance ratings: Genius or folly?*** **A debate** Adler et al (2016) consider arguments for and against getting rid of performance ratings.

Arguments for and against getting rid of performance ratings (Adler et al, 2016)

Arguments <i>for</i> getting rid of performance ratings	Arguments <i>against</i> getting rid of performance ratings
1. The disappointing interventions. 2. The disagreement when multiple raters evaluate the same performance. 3. The failure to develop adequate criteria for evaluating ratings. 4. The weak relationship between the performance of ratees and the ratings they receive. 5. The conflicting purposes of performance ratings in organisations. 6. The inconsistent effects of performance feedback on subsequent performance. 7. The weak relationship between performance rating research and practice in organisations.	1. The recognition that changing the rating process is likely to have minimal effect on the performance management process as a whole. 2. Performance is always evaluated in some manner. 3. “Too hard” is no excuse for industrial–organisational (I-O) psychology. 4. Ratings and differentiated evaluations have many merits for improving organisations. 5. Artificial trade-offs are driving organisations to inappropriately abandon ratings. 6. The alternatives to ratings may be worse. 7. The better questions are these: How could performance ratings be improved – and are we conducting the entire performance management process properly?

The arguments presented for and against performance ratings show that there is a lively and important debate taking place amongst work psychology researchers and practitioners. These arguments also reveal that performance ratings are seriously flawed even though they are widely used and it is not yet clear how they could be improved.

Performance evaluation and performance management systems

These are a little wider in scope than just ratings provided via something like an annual performance appraisal and may also include real-time, informal and more frequent feedback as well as attempting to align goals and activities across the organisation.

In *Performance management will not die but it should*, Murphy (2020) considers **four barriers to successful performance evaluation**. Some of these points relate to the arguments made against performance ratings made in the previously discussed paper (Adler et al, 2016) which Murphy also coauthored.

- 1. The distribution of performance:** It is suggested that performance ratings are not normally distributed (a bell curve) but, rather, follow a power law distribution. In such a distribution **there are a very small number of high performers who contribute disproportionately and almost all other employees perform less well and are relatively homogenous or quite similar in their level of performance**. For this reason, **there is no need for complex performance measurement systems** as high performers are easy to spot and **there is little purpose in measuring performance among the rest of the workforce** as any differences found are likely to be unimportant.
- 2. The continuing failure to devise reliable and valid methods for obtaining judgements about performance:** There are some jobs where it is possible to capture objective aspects of job performance though other important elements of performance will still be missed. However, in other jobs, **performance measurement relies almost entirely on subjective judgements** which are generally unreliable due to factors other than the ratee's job performance (e.g., source of rating, timing of ratings and attributes of ratees). In general such **performance ratings provide little information about the performance of the person being evaluated**.
- 3. The limited acceptability and utility of performance feedback to employees:** With perhaps a few exceptions, **performance feedback does not appear to be particularly accepted by employees**. In part, this may be because it does not seem to consistently help employees perform better and may even lead to worse performance. In other words, such feedback is not useful. **Some employees may seek feedback** but it may also be the case that these are the very employees **who need least help** with their performance so would benefit the least from receiving it. In addition, **providing more or more frequent feedback which is already poorly-received and seen as of little use is unlikely to be helpful**.

- 4. The limited utility of performance evaluations to organisations:** Results from surveys suggest that organisations use performance ratings for two main purposes. **First, to help identify training and development needs. Second, to provide input for decisions around salary, promotions, redundancies and dismissals.** Clearly, **these two goals are completely different** and a single performance appraisal system is unlikely to achieve these twin goals. Performance evaluations also have limited utility in other ways. Most **employees receive very similar ratings** and ratings **of different aspects of job performance are highly intercorrelated** suggesting a halo or horns effect. In other words, **such performance evaluation practices do not provide information which is likely to help them realise their purposes.**

It seems that performance evaluation and management systems which typically do include some elements of performance feedback leave much to be desired.

Multisource feedback (360 degree feedback)

In *Evidence-based answers to 15 questions about leveraging 360-degree feedback*, Nowack & Mashihi (2012) suggest that:

Under the right circumstances, feedback interventions can facilitate some of the conditions required for successful behavioural change, yet there are many studies showing that such processes sometimes create no measurable change whatsoever, small effects or may have negative effects on both engagement and productivity.

Nowack & Mashihi (2012)

Taken as a whole, the answers to the questions posed in this paper reveal that we have quite limited evidence about the effects of 360-degree feedback on performance and the conditions under which it may be effective, ineffective or even harmful. It is worth noting that, in general, the effects of this type of feedback where they are found are quite modest.

This section has considered the performance feedback literature landscape, theories and models which attempt to explain *how* performance feedback works, and illustrative examples of the evidence for effectiveness of three performance management practices.

We now turn to a discussion of how we can improve performance feedback.

4. IMPROVING PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

Organisations don't have a choice about whether or not to provide performance feedback. It is essential to manage and improve performance. It may happen through formal and explicit processes. It will also, inevitably, happen anyway through informal and more implicit processes.

In this section, we describe some of the ways in which performance feedback can be improved. As discussed earlier, although the work psychology literature provides some possibly useful theories, models and principles, there is currently quite limited evidence about the relative effectiveness of different performance feedback practices and how that effectiveness may vary across task and organisational contexts. For this reason, the suggestions provided here draw on these general performance feedback principles.

As a reminder, here is the definition of performance feedback provided earlier:

The purpose of performance feedback is to help **improve** performance. It consists of **two main types of information**:

1. Information about **performance or goal progress**.
2. Information about **behaviours that may be helping or hindering performance**.

We now consider practices which are unlikely to provide performance feedback and outline the key conditions or prerequisites under which performance feedback *can* be provided. Next, we identify some of the factors that limit the effectiveness of performance feedback which can be addressed to improve performance feedback. Finally we outline steps that organisations can take to improve the quality and quantity of performance feedback.

4.1 Identifying practices which are probably not providing performance feedback

In order to improve performance feedback it seems important to start with a good understanding of the practices and activities we currently have in place and the extent to which they are effectively providing performance feedback.

A good starting point is to consider **which organisational practices currently in place are probably *not* providing effective performance feedback**. It may be that, if supplemented with *other* activities, the combination *could* provide performance feedback.

These are some **examples** of practices which probably **do not, in themselves, provide performance feedback** (some of which were discussed earlier):

- **Annual/regularly scheduled performance appraisals:** These are typically composed of a performance evaluation and views from a supervisor about what they think was good about the supervisee's performance over the review period and what could be improved. These do not provide performance feedback as the performance evaluation is unlikely to be accurate (see immediately below) and are too distant in time and specificity (e.g., a particular task or goal) to pinpoint helpful and hindering behaviours.
- **Performance evaluations:** These are typically stand-alone quantitative ratings of performance but they may also form one element of annual appraisals. As discussed earlier, these are not particularly reliable or valid and do not provide useful performance feedback.
- **360-degree feedback:** It is likely to suffer from some of the same weaknesses as performance evaluations in general. It may not provide accurate information about performance. It may not be the purpose. It does gather perceptual information about behaviours but not clear how these behaviours can be identified as ones which help or hinder performance. May reflect preferences of raters.
- **Praise:** This would include informal thanks and congratulations for an action or achievement or more formal employee recognition programmes. This is not performance feedback though it might indicate that an outcome has been achieved (which the praise recipient is already likely to know) or that others are pleased with or value the recipient's performance.

The first way we can improve performance feedback is to **discount practices that might be regarded as providing performance feedback but which probably do not**. As mentioned earlier, these practices *may* achieve other things that are important to employees and the organisation.

How can we identify practices which are likely to be providing performance feedback? There are several conditions which need to be in place. These are discussed in the next section.

These conditions can be used as criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of performance feedback practices we have in place.

Examples of the extent to which common practices and activities can be considered to be providing performance feedback.

Practice or activity	Is its purpose to improve performance?	Does it provide information about performance?	Does it provide information about behaviours helping or hindering performance?
Annual Performance Appraisals	Somewhat though purposes mixed and contradictory.	No, as not very accurate.	No, as not specific enough.
Performance evaluations	Possibly though sometimes unclear.	No, as not very accurate.	No.
360-degree feedback	Sometimes but purpose perhaps more 'developmental' and contradictory.	No. Not its intention.	No. Does provide information about perceived behaviours but not how they link to performance.
Praise	No. Not directly.	No. Though may indicate that a goal has been achieved but recipient likely to know already.	No.

4.2 Identifying five key conditions for providing performance feedback

We have suggested there are some practices which are probably not providing performance feedback. But how can we identify those that do?

One way is to consider, using basic principles, those conditions that need to be in place for effective performance feedback to take place.

For the purposes of illustration, **we will focus on the example of a supervisor providing feedback to a supervisee.** But, as mentioned, there may be other equally and more important sources of performance feedback in the work environment. Returning, again, to the guitar example, the musician is accessing information about desired performance and behaviours that are helping or hindering from the process of playing entirely from the environment (unless the musician is working with a teacher who is giving immediate feedback). In some task contexts, the work itself can also provide the same or similar information.

The essential prerequisite for providing performance feedback is that there must be a clear goal or outcome.

Five key conditions under which performance feedback is possible

- 1. A clear goal:** Given the meaning of performance feedback, it is simply not possible to provide it unless there is a good understanding of the goal or outcome the person is working towards. Without such an understanding it is not possible to provide information about progress towards the goal. In other words, **performance feedback cannot meaningfully exist without a clear goal.**
- 2. A shared understanding of this goal:** Both the supervisor and supervisee must understand *and* share this understanding. Without a shared understanding there may be confusion about the extent to which the goal has been achieved and hence likely confusion about feedback about those behaviours that are helping or hindering. For this reason, discussing the goal or outcome and ensuring mutual understanding is important.
- 3. An understanding of how and which behaviours help or hinder goal progress is required:** Without such an understanding it is not possible for the supervisor to identify and provide information about those behaviours that lead to goal progress. In other words, the supervisor needs to understand what it is the supervisee is doing or not doing that is helping or preventing them achieving the outcome. The supervisor doesn't necessarily need to be a task expert but they need to know enough to make connections between behaviours and outcomes. This is more difficult in teamwork and long-term goals.
- 4. Supervisors must have knowledge of supervisee behaviour:** Supervisors cannot provide performance feedback unless they know what the supervisee is doing or not doing. This, of course, implies that behaviour is observable. But it may not be for a range of reasons including that the behaviour is cognition. Where behaviours are difficult to observe there may be other ways of inferring that such behaviours are occurring.
- 5. Supervisees must understand the feedback:** The information provided by the supervisor about goal progress and which behaviours, if any, need to be changed must make sense to the supervisee so they are able, in principle, to modify their behaviour and understand why it is necessary.

In examining these four conditions one may reflect that such perfect conditions almost *never* exist in organisations. This may well be the case. However, all that is required for performance feedback to take place is that these conditions are in place to a reasonable extent. Furthermore, the more the conditions are present, the more performance feedback is likely to be provided. **One way of improving performance feedback is to ensure that, as much as possible, these conditions are in place.**

But even if such conditions *are* in place and performance feedback *is* being provided it may still not lead to improvements in performance. What might constrain the effect of performance feedback on performance?

4.3 What limits the effectiveness of performance feedback?

Providing good quality performance feedback does not, of course, guarantee improvements in performance. There are several factors that may limit the extent to which such feedback actually helps performance such as:

- **Poor supervisor-supervisee relationships:** This may reduce the chances the supervisee will accept and/or act on the feedback.
- **Perceived credibility of the supervisor:** Low credibility is likely to mean the supervisee will not take the feedback seriously. And they may be right to do so if indeed the feedback is poor quality.
- **Supervisor discomfort with and reluctance to give 'negative' feedback:** As discussed in the introduction we may have ambivalent feelings about performance feedback. One reason for this are anxieties around negative feedback. Supervisors may not want to provide it as they wish to be liked and feel that giving negative feedback will harm the relationship and make them less likeable.
- **Supervisee characteristics:** Individual differences such as personality or receptivity can affect whether the feedback is accepted and/or acted upon.
- **Control over behaviours:** Some of the required behaviours may be very difficult to enact because of, for example, lack of support, skills or training.
- **Controllability of the outcome:** No matter how much the supervisee responds to the feedback the outcome or goal may be much more strongly influenced by many other factors outside the supervisee's control.

Another **way of improving the effectiveness of performance feedback is to ensure, as much as possible that these factors are minimised.**

4.4 What can organisations do to increase the quality and quantity of performance feedback?

Within the organisation more broadly, outside the supervisor-supervisee dyad, there are many actions that can be taken to make it more likely that there is more effective performance feedback. These actions are described here as a set of questions:

- 1. Does the organisation engage in careful goal-setting practices?** Are clear and specific goals set? Are these discussed and negotiated with employees? Are they understood? Are they periodically reviewed and if necessary changed or refined? Are ways of assessing goal progress and goal completion established?
- 2. Are employee and team goals linked to organisational objectives?**
If the purpose of the performance feedback is to help organisational as well as individual performance then it is essential that the individual's goals are linked to organisational goals through a cascade process. If they are not, then this could mean individual employees are performing well in relation to goals but it has no impact on organisational performance. This is discussed in more detail in a previous Corporate Research Forum report, [*Driving Organisational Performance: HR's Critical Role*](#).
- 3. Are supervisors and supervisees trained in goal-setting and performance feedback practices?** Do employees have a good understanding of goal-setting and how it works? Is the purpose and nature of performance feedback explicitly stated? Are the roles and responsibilities of all employees around goal-setting and feedback made clear?
- 4. Are performance feedback practices in place?** This would include activities such as regular reviews, shorter check-ins and more informal and frequent sharing of performance management information. Are responsibilities around these practices made clear? What are these specific responsibilities (e.g., timing of practices, recording of information)?
- 5. Are goal-setting and performance feedback practices tailored to the nature of different tasks?** The nature of the goal-setting required and the nature of performance feedback depends a lot on the task. There's a huge difference between, say, a relatively short-cycle task with observable outcomes linked to behaviour in obvious ways and a long-term outcome involving knowledge work in projects and within multiple teams. Goal-setting and performance feedback must be appropriate to the nature of the 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?** Whatever other system is in place around performance management it must support rather than inhibit performance feedback. Performance

management systems can become highly bureaucratic and over-elaborate in ways that are detrimental to performance. It is possible to check the extent to which the performance management system is compatible with the basic principles of performance feedback set out in the five conditions above.

These six questions represent the key issues to consider on an organisational level to enhance performance feedback.

To improve performance feedback there are, as discussed above, a number of considerations:

- Be clear about **what performance feedback actually means**. How is it defined?
- **Identify** and discount (for the purposes of improving performance feedback) **practices linked to feedback but which are probably not providing performance feedback**.
- Consider the **five key conditions which need to be in place to provide performance feedback**. Performance feedback starts with a goal or outcome.
- Bear in mind some of the **many things that can limit performance feedback** and **ensure as much as possible that these limitations are minimised**.
- Consider the **broader organisation-wide actions** that can be taken **to improve the quality and quantity of performance feedback**.

5. CONCLUSION

The principles of performance feedback are quite clear. They are not difficult to understand. Yet, it seems hard in practice to provide good performance feedback.

One reason for this is the over-reliance and over-application of a wide range of feedback practices and techniques that, though plausible, do not seem to be particularly effective. A second is the discomfort feedback providers and recipients may feel about the whole process, particularly if it involves negative feedback. A third reason is that organisations are, on the whole, not particularly good at goal-setting or having a detailed understanding of how work achieves those goals.

Performance feedback simply cannot occur without clear goals *and* a good understanding of the behaviours that create these outcomes. What may be happening – all too often, is that feedback providers are, in good faith, trying to provide feedback on progress towards somewhat vague goals and second-guessing about which behaviours are helping and which are getting in the way of progress.

Returning to the basic principles of performance management and applying them in as simple a way as possible would seem at the moment to be the best way to improve performance feedback and in turn, the performance of employees and organisations.

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