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Hospitality Management 25 (2006) 54–68

International Journal of  
**Hospitality  
Management**

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# To what extent does performance-related feedback affect managers' self-efficacy?

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## Abstract

This two-part study examines the effect of supervisors' feedback—both negative and positive—on the job-specific self-efficacy of 296 subordinates. Analyses using pre- and post-treatment data collected during field experiments indicate, most notably, that negative feedback reduces subordinates' self-efficacy regardless of managerial rank, a finding that supports this largely untested theory pertaining to negative feedback and its effect on self-efficacy. As predicted, positive supervisory feedback had a significant, positive effect on subordinates' self-efficacy. The study's implications for theory, research, and management practice are discussed, limitations and challenges are identified, and directions for future research are suggested.

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*Keywords:* Performance-related feedback; Managers' self-efficacy; Positive and negative effects

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## 1. Introduction

Across disciplines and industries, academicians and practitioners have encouraged the widespread application of performance feedback as a mechanism for improving individual and organizational outcomes. London (1997, p. 15) declared, “[Feedback] enhances supervisor–subordinate relationships, fosters group development, and

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improves service quality and customer responsiveness.” With such assertions, however, researchers have also come to appreciate that responses to performance feedback are complex events that can have indeterminate and cascading effects (Fedor et al., 2001; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; VandeWalle and Cummings, 1997).

While no one disputes the potential value of performance feedback, conflicting empirical evidence regarding its direct causal effects offers more questions than answers. Balcazar et al. (1986) were quite pointed in noting this: “Feedback does not uniformly improve performance” (p. 65). Latham and Locke (1991) took a more general but equally discerning stance in stating that “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” (p. 224).

Performance feedback may be difficult to measure, but that it can produce a variety of outcomes is undeniable. This is underscored by the concept’s inclusion as an antecedent in variant forms of cognitive-motivation theories. Perhaps the most provocative of these is social-cognitive theory (SCT), where the endogenous role of self-efficacy—a self-referential belief about one’s own capacity for success—has received considerable scrutiny. Much of the thrust behind such research, as noted by Gist (1987), is the mediating role of self-efficacy in the feedback/performance linkage.

In an attempt to understand feedback’s role in altering self-efficacy Schunk and Cox (1986), for example, studied children with mathematical deficits who received prearranged performance feedback regardless of their actual performance and found that evaluative feedback regarding related personal capabilities raised efficacy beliefs. Baron (1988) expanded the methodology in a laboratory setting to include two types of performance feedback—constructive and destructive. The study showed that undergraduates who received destructive feedback expressed lower self-efficacy regarding similar tasks after receiving the feedback, while the group receiving positive feedback reported higher levels of self-efficacy. Referring specifically to the performance/feedback/self-efficacy linkage, Bandura (1997) summarizes, “These findings take on added significance because of the debilitating and enabling effects of evaluative feedback generalized across different types of activities” (p. 104).

While past studies offer provocative findings regarding the potential effects of feedback on self-efficacy, little published work has explored the direct effect inside the workplace environment, in which feedback may be positive or negative. Some studies have looked at the overarching effects of feedback and agree that “the positive effect of feedback on performance has become one of the most accepted principles in psychology” (Pritchard et al., 1988, p. 338). Furthermore, as noted by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), researchers also inevitably search for post hoc explanations when no feedback effects are found.

Rather than appealing to sampling-error variance or other measurement errors to explain variations in findings associated with performance feedback, I postulate that the effects may be more tacitly expressed in direct causal changes to individuals’ workplace-related self-efficacy. The purpose of this research, then, is to use a field study to test empirically how positive and negative feedback affects managers’

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