Testing multiple motives in feedback seeking: The interaction of instrumentality and self protection motives

Jocelyn Courtney Hays [a], Jane R. Williams [b],*

[a] pan-A TALX Company, USA
[b] Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, USA

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that information received from feedback seeking is valuable for both individual and organizational outcomes. Previous research examining the feedback seeking process has consistently suggested that individual's feedback behaviors are directly influenced by three motives. Specifically, individuals are instrumentally motivated to obtain valued information but are also motivated to protect and/or enhance their ego and to protect others' impressions of them (Ashford, Blatt and VandeWalle, 2003). The current study simultaneously examined these motives by testing the interactive effects of them on feedback seeking behavior. As predicted, they did significantly interact and the results present a deeper understanding of these motives and how employees weigh various factors in deciding whether to seek feedback within the organization.

Organizations today are facing an increasingly global and competitive marketplace, and so they, as well as their employees must be adaptable to survive. As strategic changes become more frequent, employees face a higher level of uncertainty and complexity in the workplace (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Moreover, employee empowerment has led to a decrease in the amount of direct supervision and guidance that many employees receive (Renn & Fedor, 2001). These factors combined suggest that employees will need to proactively seek out feedback to adequately adapt and perform. While seeking feedback can result in beneficial outcomes, it is also well-established that employees are often reticent to seek feedback. In short, research has established that there are multiple motives that govern feedback seeking behavior; individuals are drawn to seeking as a means to obtain important information (instrumental motive), but refrain from seeking when the behavior appears to potentially threaten their ego or impression on others (ego and image based motives) (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Given the importance of feedback information for adaptive organizational functioning, understanding how individuals balance these competing motives is important. Much research has examined the direct effects of these motives and factors related to them on feedback seeking, however no research to date has empirically examined how the three motives *together* influence seeking behavior. Thus the current study examined how these motives interact to predict feedback seeking behavior.

1. Feedback seeking process

Seeking feedback is a self-regulation tool that employees use to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that comes with ambiguous job situations and performance standards (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). The information gained through seeking behaviors is valuable in

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* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, 402 N Blackford, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA. Fax: +1 317 274 6756.
   E-mail address: jrwillim@iupui.edu (J.R. Williams).

that employees can use it to adapt and improve their performance, evaluate their progress towards goal fulfillment, change their work behavior as needed, gauge others' evaluations of them, and increase their self-awareness (Ashford, 1986). For instance, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that seeking critical feedback was related to more accurate evaluations of others' perceptions of performance. Previous research also indicates that seeking feedback improves performance by facilitating the development and fulfillment of work goals (Renn & Fedor, 2001). Finally, researchers have hypothesized that feedback seeking reduces uncertainty, which leads to increased job performance and more positive job attitudes (Morrison, 2002). In sum, the positive outcomes related to seeking feedback have been well established.

Researchers have typically examined two strategies individuals use to gather feedback information (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, 1986). First, feedback may be obtained through *monitoring*. Monitoring involves the observation of environmental factors and others' performance, reactions and interpersonal behaviors. Individuals use this information to infer relevant performance feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). A second method – *direct inquiry* – entails actively soliciting information from relevant others (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Although research identifies both strategies as potential means to obtain feedback information, inquiry may provide more useful information than monitoring for a number of reasons (Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992). For instance, monitoring requires that individuals make correct inferences from their observations (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). In addition, if an individual is working away from others, he/she may not be able to engage in monitoring behaviors (Ashford et al., 2003). In light of these issues and because our focus is on understanding multiple motives (i.e., ego and image defense motives are especially active with inquiry), the current study focuses on the strategy of directly seeking performance feedback from a supervisor (i.e., direct inquiry).

In their model, Ashford and Cummings (1983) proposed that the primary motive of feedback seeking is the instrumental value it provides the seeker. In other words, feedback that provides diagnostic information is sought because it will help individuals adapt and perform in the organization. As reviewed by Ashford et al. (2003), the strength of the instrumental motive can be increased by several factors. For instance, if individuals perceive the feedback as particularly diagnostic or are in situations with high uncertainty, they are more likely to seek. If individuals perceive a particular source as credible and capable of providing feedback, it increases the instrumental motive and thus feedback seeking from that source. However, as noted above, the motivating force of perceived feedback value is countered by individuals' motives to protect themselves from information that could damage their sense of self or others' impressions of them (i.e., perceived feedback seeking costs).

The *self-presentation cost* of feedback seeking refers to the perceived risk of embarrassment that an individual may be exposed to by seeking feedback (Ashford, 1986). The focus of the self-presentation cost of seeking feedback is related to others' perceptions of the seeker. Previous research reports that perceptions of high self-presentation costs are negatively related to the frequency of feedback seeking (Fedor et al., 1992; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). The *ego cost* of feedback seeking is concerned with the individual's self-concept (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). By seeking evaluative information, individuals take the risk of hearing negative or distressing information about themselves, thereby threatening their sense of self (Ashford, 1986). Previous research has shown that if individuals have low performance expectations they reduce their feedback seeking, presumably because of the anticipated ego costs that would be incurred by actively seeking feedback (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Thus, the decision to seek feedback is a product of competing motives; individuals have a strong desire to receive valuable information but are also interested in protecting themselves from costs associated with seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford et al., 2003; Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995; Williams, Miller, Steelman, & Levy, 1999).

As illustrated above, the individual seeker is put in a difficult situation, as he/she considers both the perceived benefit and cost of feedback seeking. Interestingly, previous research has neglected to empirically examine the "weighing of costs and benefits" on seeking behavior. In other words, do perceived costs always override the perceived value of feedback or will individuals tolerate certain levels of costs in order to receive information they perceive as particularly valuable? The current study will extend the literature in two important ways; first we will examine the interaction of the motives on feedback seeking and second, we will introduce interpersonal trust as an important element impacting the instrumental motive of feedback seeking.

2. Factors impacting seeking motives

Given the effects of perceived costs and benefit on seeking frequency, research has focused on identifying and understanding factors that either increase perceived value or decrease the perceived costs of seeking feedback. In other words, researchers have either explicitly or implicitly proposed that by understanding factors that impact individuals' perceptions of the costs and/or benefits, they will understand how to influence feedback seeking (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Fedor et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1995; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990; Williams et al., 1999). A review of this literature suggests that these factors fall into three main categories; factors related to the seeker, the seeking context, and the feedback source.

Related to the seeker, Ashford (1986) found that individuals with longer tenure sought less feedback and proposed that this may indicate that the perceived value of feedback decreased as one learned his/her job. While this may be true, this reduction in seeking could also be the result of increased perceptions of seeking costs (Ashford, 1986). Researchers have also found that individual difference variables such as external feedback propensity (Fedor et al., 1992; Renn & Fedor, 2001), public self-consciousness (Levy et al., 1995), and goal orientation (Park, Schmidt, Scheu, & Deshon, 2007; Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002) are related to the likelihood of seeking feedback — either through their effect on the perceived costs or value of information.

Related to the seeking context, research has consistently found that the publicness of the seeking context (public vs. private) has a strong effect on seeking behavior (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Levy et al., 1995; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Levy et al. (1995) were able to show that individuals had a desire for feedback, but when they were made aware that seeking would be