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EMPLOYEE REACTIONS TO FEEDBACK:
DIRECT SUPERVISOR AND MYSTERY SHOPPER

GENEVIEVE H. DOBOS

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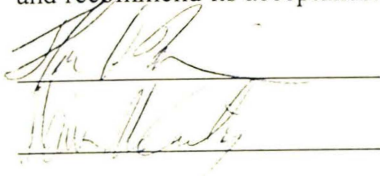
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Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Graduate
and Research Council:



EMPLOYEE REACTIONS TO FEEDBACK:
DIRECT SUPERVISOR AND MYSTERY SHOPPER

A Thesis
Presented to
the College of Graduate
and Professional Programs of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Genevieve H. Dobos

May, 1999

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research was to examine employees' reactions to two different sources of feedback when the sign of the feedback was either positive or negative.

Seventy-one participants rated one of four different scenarios describing a feedback source of either a Direct Supervisor or a Mystery Shopper. It was hypothesized that the Direct Supervisor condition would be perceived as more fair than the Mystery Shopper condition. While a significant interaction effect was found, it was not as hypothesized.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is certainly not a new trend in research to promote the value of providing employees with feedback concerning their performance. In a classic article on feedback, Ilgen, Fisher and Taylor (1979) report that as early as 1956, literature has recognized that feedback based on an employee's effectiveness is "essential for learning and for motivation in performance-oriented organizations" (p. 349). If employees are aware of what they need to know and what they must do to improve, they will be more motivated to achieve because they know which behaviors will lead to successful or desired performance (London, 1997).

Research that is more current also demonstrates support for the importance of feedback. It has been suggested that feedback can open and support lines of communication between the employee and the supervisor (Longenecker & Nykodym, 1996). Employees are thought to seek out feedback and desire to receive it (Ashford, 1989). It can also assist in career planning and increase the amount of control and power an employee feels that they have (London, 1997). In addition, feedback may keep an employee's behavior goal-directed and on track (London, 1997), as well as "increase performance by allowing for accurate attributions about past performance" (Bobko & Colella, 1994, p. 7).

Employers have long followed the wisdom of research that demonstrates the importance of providing feedback to employees. Unfortunately, it has not always been presented to the employees in a very effective manner. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that in a majority of studies, participants who received any form of feedback showed an

improvement in performance when compared to those who were not receiving any type of feedback. However, it was discovered that in over one third of the studies examined, if the feedback given to participants is not based on some specific criteria, it may actually decrease performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

For feedback to be effective, it must be considered fair. It has been consistently found that if the process used to make decisions is understood by the employee and is thought to be fair, even negative outcomes will be accepted as fair themselves (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Perceptions of fairness are associated with several practices. Gilliland and Langdon (1998) list six determinants: opportunity to participate in the process, consistency of treatment and consideration, job relevance and lack of bias, honest and ethical treatment, timely and thorough communication of feedback, and outcomes anticipated or consistent with expectations. Additionally, after surveying a group of employees to determine factors that contributed to perceptions of fairness, Greenberg (1986) reported seven conditions that were found to raise perceptions of fairness. The seven items reported were: ratings should be based on actual performance, when salary increases or promotions are based on the ratings, when the supervisor gets the employee's input before the rating takes place, when two-way communication takes place during the exchange of feedback process, when the ratee has the opportunity to challenge or respond to the feedback, when the rater is familiar with the ratee's work, and when the rater consistently applies the performance standards. Landy, Barnes, and Murphy (1978) and Dipboye and de Pontbriand (1981) reported similar results after examining employee reactions to performance appraisals.

Specifically, to increase perceptions of fairness, it is important that the employee believes that the supervisor providing the feedback is knowledgeable and familiar with their performance (Landy, Barnes, & Murphy, 1978). While over 95% of organizations surveyed by Bernardin (1992) report using a formal appraisal method, feedback should be given frequently and informally (London, 1997). In addition, the employee should be allowed to have a voice during the feedback process (Greenberg, 1986). A significant part of encouraging voice during the feedback process involves ensuring that the communication is two-way (Gilliland & Langdon, 1998). The employee should have an opportunity to respond to, or challenge, the feedback (Dipboye & de Pontbriand, 1981).

A common and traditional method of providing employees with feedback is through direct supervisor observation and report. An employee's performance is evaluated through the observation of the behaviors that they exhibit while working. The supervisor observes the employee's behaviors and gives the employee feedback based on what has been observed.

Mystery shopping is also not a new technique that is used to provide employees with feedback concerning their performance. Mystery shopping uses researchers or consultants to pose as customers who interact with employees and make observations (Wilson, 1998). A written report of the interaction is then provided to the employee. Since the 1960's it has been used to assess levels of service provided by many different industries including retail, health-care, banking, travel agents and fast-food restaurants (Brown, Sopp & Gould, 1997). As the concept of multisource feedback and the focus customer service have become more popular, so has the use of the mystery shopper and mystery shopping (Brown et al., 1997).

Both methods of assessment have their own advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of using the direct-supervisor source to provide feedback is accuracy. It has been found that raters make a greater attempt at being accurate when their identity will be known to the ratees (Antonioni, 1994). However, Longenecker, Sims and Gioia (1987) reported somewhat conflicting results. After sixty executives were interviewed by Longenecker, Sims and Gioia, they found that politics, not accuracy, is what drives supervisors to rate subordinates as they do. The majority of the managers interviewed reported that they “would not allow excessively accurate ratings to cause problems for themselves, and that they attempted to use the appraisal process to their own advantage” (p.191).

Lack of accuracy and trust is an issue when assessment is done by a mystery shopper. London (1997) suggests that ratees may not value the feedback provided by mystery shoppers because they know that “the raters were not accountable for providing as accurate judgements as possible”. However, if politics are clouding the accuracy of the feedback as suggested by Longenecker, Sims and Gioia (1987), employees may actually prefer to be observed by a mystery shopper. If the employee being observed does not know the identity of the mystery shopper, more than just accuracy and trust will suffer. An employee would have no opportunity to challenge or respond to the information provided by the mystery shopper. As mentioned previously, this could severely affect the perception of fairness and the effectiveness of feedback. Obviously, if a direct supervisor source is used, an opportunity for employee rebuttal or inquiry is available.

It has only been suggested by the research above that the *source* of feedback may affect perceptions of fairness. However, previous research has supported the position that

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the *sign* (positive or negative) of the feedback will affect perceptions. As stands to reason, positive feedback, regardless of the source, is perceived as fairer than negative feedback. Evans and McShane (1988) examined six characteristics of the appraisal process. Out of the six characteristics reviewed, the one that most influenced the perception of fairness was the positive sign of the feedback. Results indicated that the more favorable the feedback, the higher the employees' perceptions of fairness.

Effects of different sources of feedback on fairness perceptions, such as the direct supervisor and mystery shopper, have not been examined. Latham and Seijts (1997) have examined different forms of appraisal instruments and ratees' perceptions of fairness. It was reported that the use of a specific format of instrument (such as a behavioral observation scale) significantly affects perceptions of fairness.

While the above research has addressed the relationship of sign of feedback and perceptions of fairness, it has not closely examined the relationship of the interaction effect between sign and source of the feedback and perceptions of fairness.

Replicating previous research concerning the effect of the sign of the feedback, the present study proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a main effect of the sign of feedback such that perceptions of fairness will be greater for the positive feedback condition than the negative feedback condition, regardless of how the feedback is provided.

Given the findings on perceptions of fairness regarding different sources of providing feedback to employees, the present study proposes a second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: There will be a main effect of the source of feedback such that participants' perceptions of fairness will be greater for the direct-supervisor report condition, regardless of the sign of the feedback.

Stemming from the two main effects hypothesized above, an third hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 3: There will be an interaction effect between sign of feedback and source of feedback such that the direct supervisor-negative condition will be perceived as more fair than the mystery shopper-negative condition.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Participants

Seventy-one patrons of a university library and students from a regional university in a southern state were recruited for voluntary participation. Requests for participants were posted in the university library and on the psychology department research board. Announcements were also be made in psychology classes about the opportunity to participate in the study. Certain participants were eligible to receive extra credit based on the individual course instructor.

The sample of seventy-one participants was comprised of fifty females and twenty-one males. The ethnic composition was African American ($n = 5$, 7.0%), Hispanic ($n = 5$, 7.0%), Native American ($n = 1$, 1.4%), White ($n = 59$, 83.2%) and Other ($n = 1$, 1.4%). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to over 40; 66.2% of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25.

There has been some concern associated with the use of undergraduate college students as participants due to the lack of generalizability of the findings to employees in a field setting. However, additional research done by Locke (as cited by Dobbins, Lane, & Steiner, 1988) has supported the use of students on the basis that previous research methodology studying the issue has been flawed.

Procedure

Participation in the study was dependent upon obtaining informed consent from the participants (see Appendix A). After being provided with information about the nature of the study and giving informed consent, participants received one of four

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scenarios (i.e., direct supervisor-positive, direct-supervisor-negative, mystery shopper-positive, or mystery shopper-positive). After reading the assigned scenario, the participant was asked to respond to two questions concerning their perceptions of fairness regarding what they had just read. A series of demographic questions was also asked. Information gathered included age, gender, approximate GPA, level of familiarity with the concept of *mystery shopping* and work experience (see Appendix B).

The use of “paper-people” or scenarios has been criticized but additional research done on the subject has supported the finding that “field studies often do not have greater experimental realism than do laboratory studies” (Dobbins, Lane, & Steiner, 1988, p. 285).

Materials

Four scenarios were written that described an employee who received feedback on a specific customer interaction (i.e., direct supervisor-positive, direct-supervisor-negative, mystery shopper-positive, or mystery shopper-positive). Participants’ perceptions of fairness were assessed by two items.

Lind, MacCoun, Ebener, Felstiner, Hensler, Resnik and Tyler (1990) used items with a four point scale (anchored by *very fair* and *very unfair*) to measure, among other things, participants’ perceptions of fairness with the legal system. In research more related to the current study, two items, based on those employed by Lind et al., (1990), were utilized to assess fairness perceptions of peer performance appraisals (Barclay & Harland, 1995). The modified items reported a coefficient alpha of .86 (Barclay & Harland, 1995).

The following items were used in this study: “In your opinion, how fair was the **direct supervisor evaluation method** (or mystery shopper evaluation method, depending on the scenario) that was used to evaluate your performance on a specific customer interaction?” and “In your opinion, how reasonable was the **direct supervisor evaluation method** (or mystery shopper evaluation method, depending on the scenario) that was used to evaluate your performance on a specific customer interaction?”. These items were nearly identical to those used by Barclay and Harland (1995) and were measured with a scale identical to the one used by Lind et al., (1990). A co-efficient alpha calculated on the two items used in the present study was found to be .804, suggesting that the two-item measure is reliable. The two items were averaged to form a single composite perceptions of fairness measure ($\underline{M} = 3.23$, $\underline{SD} = 0.57$).

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed using a two-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). In this study, there are two independent variables, each with two levels; sign of feedback (i.e., positive or negative) and method of feedback (i.e., direct supervisor or mystery shopper). The dependent variable is perceptions of fairness and will be measured by taking a composite mean of the two items used to measure perceptions of fairness.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for each of the four conditions can be found in Table 1. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the three hypotheses and the results are displayed in Table 2. As suggested by previous literature and proposed by the first hypothesis, a main effect for sign was demonstrated. Positive feedback ($\underline{M} = 3.402$, $\underline{SD} = 0.460$) was perceived as more fair than negative feedback ($\underline{M} = 3.041$, $\underline{SD} = 0.623$), regardless of the source of the feedback. Support for the second hypothesis, that the direct supervisor source ($\underline{M} = 3.159$, $\underline{SD} = 0.505$) would be perceived as more fair than the mystery shopper source ($\underline{M} = 3.291$, $\underline{SD} = 0.632$) regardless of the sign, was not demonstrated, i.e., no main effect of source was found.

A significant interaction effect was found between sign and source but not in the direction as hypothesized. The differences in perceptions of fairness between the direct supervisor positive and the mystery shopper positive conditions and the differences in perceptions of fairness between the mystery shopper positive condition and mystery shopper negative conditions contributed to the strong interaction effect (see Figure 1). As demonstrated by Figure 1, the direct supervisor positive condition was perceived as significantly less fair than the mystery shopper positive condition and the mystery shopper positive condition was perceived as significantly more fair than the mystery shopper negative condition.

Table 1

Means for perceptions of fairness: Source and sign of perceptions of fairness

	Direct Supervisor Source	Mystery Shopper Source	Row Total
Positive sign of feedback	$\underline{M} = 3.194$	$\underline{M} = 3.611$	$\underline{M} = 3.402$
Negative sign of feedback	$\underline{M} = 3.111$	$\underline{M} = 2.971$	$\underline{M} = 3.041$
Column Total	$\underline{M} = 3.291$	$\underline{M} = 3.152$	

Table 2

Analysis of Variance for Perceptions of Fairness

Analysis of Variance					
Source	Sum-of Squares	df	Mean- Square	F-ratio	P
SIGN (SI)	2.324	1	2.324	8.255	0.005
SOURCE (S)	0.338	1	0.338	1.201	0.277
SI x S	1.377	1	1.377	4.891	0.030

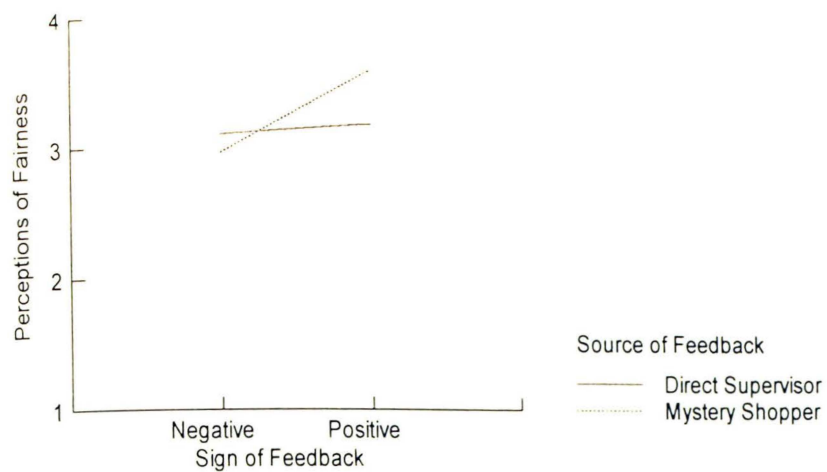


Figure 1. Interaction between sign and source.

DISCUSSION

The results of the test of the first hypothesis, that positive feedback would be perceived as more fair than negative feedback regardless of the source, provided support for the hypothesis. These findings are consistent with the findings of previous literature (e.g. Evans & McShane, 1988). After testing the second hypothesis, that the direct supervisor source would be perceived as more fair than the mystery shopper source regardless of the sign of feedback, the results generated did not support it. Previous literature had provided some guidelines that would support conditions of fair feedback and based on that literature, it was surprising that the mystery shopper condition was not perceived as less fair than the direct supervisor condition, as initially proposed (e.g. Greenberg, 1986). In addition, no support was found for the third hypothesis. Interestingly enough, instead of there being an interaction effect such that the direct supervisor negative condition would be perceived as more fair than the mystery shopper negative condition as originally proposed, a significant interaction effect was found such that the mystery shopper positive condition was perceived as significantly more fair than the direct supervisor positive condition.

It is possible that the reported interaction effect can be explained by the fact that both of the sources (mystery shopper and direct supervisor) were measured in very sterile conditions. No manipulation was made that addressed if the participant believed that the direct supervisor was motivated to assess their performance (as depicted in the scenario) accurately. Because no characteristics of the direct supervisor were included, participants may have automatically conjured up an image of an actual supervisor with which they had a negative experience in the past, and that image of a negative supervisor may have been a confounding factor.

confounding factor.

By carefully controlling for the personality of the supervisor, the ability to generalize the results of this study may be compromised. The sterile environment in which these hypotheses were tested does not match what may be found in the true work environment. Suggestions for future research would include a measure of the supervisor's personality characteristics, and some description of the supervisor's motivation to assess performance accurately.

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APPENDICES

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Austin Peay State University

You are being asked to voluntarily participate in a research study. *Please read the following material carefully.* It describes the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, risks and benefits of your participation, and what will happen to the information that is collected from you.

1. **The purpose of this project** is to determine if employees believe that one method of getting feedback on their performance is more fair than another is. The project will also see if opinions of fairness are different, depending if the feedback received is positive or negative. Additionally, the relationship between demographic information and opinions of how fair the feedback was judged to be will be explored.
2. **Procedures to be used.** You will be asked to read a short paragraph describing an employee who has received a specific type of feedback. After reading the paragraph, you will be asked to answer some questions regarding your opinion of how fairly the employee was treated. A short series of demographic questions will also be asked. Participation in the study will take approximately 15 minutes.
3. **The potential risks of participation** in this study are minimal. It is possible that you may not be comfortable answering some of the questions. If you become uncomfortable, you may let the experimenter know that you would like to stop participating.
4. **Benefits of participation.** Participating in this study can be a learning experience for you. You may enjoy contributing to psychological research. In addition, some participants may receive extra credit.
5. **What will happen to the data collected.** The data obtained from you is coded with a series of numbers placed on the form provided to you. Your name will not be directly linked or attached to the responses that you provide. All data will be stored on disk in a secure location with the original response forms. No identifying information will be stored in this location; all informed consent forms will be stored in a separate secure location.

If you would like a summary of the findings of this study, you may contact:

Genevieve H. Dobos	Dr. Denton	Dr. Golden
Graduate Student in Psychology	Professor of Psychology	Professor of Psychology
Austin Peay State University	Austin Peay State University	Austin Peay State University
Clarksville, TN 37044	Clarksville, TN 37044	Clarksville, TN 37044
(931) 648-7233	(931) 648-7233	(931) 648-7233

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Please read the statements below. They describe your rights and responsibilities as a participant in a research project.

1. I agree to voluntarily participate in the present study conducted by Genevieve H. Dobos
2. I have been informed orally and in writing of the procedures to be followed as well as the risks and benefits to me for participating in this study. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.
3. I have been informed that I may end my participation at any time without penalty or prejudice. I will have the opportunity to have all data that could be connected to me destroyed up to one week after my participation in the study.
4. I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Name, Signature and Date

DIRECTIONS: Please read the following paragraph. After reading the paragraph, please answer the questions below, referring back to the paragraph if necessary. If at any time you do not wish to continue your participation in this study you may do so.

Assume that you are a cashier at a fast food restaurant. Occasionally your customer service skills are evaluated by your direct supervisor. Your direct supervisor does this by observing how you handle a specific customer interaction. An example of a customer interaction would be how you greet, wait on and serve a customer. Yesterday, a specific interaction between you and a customer was observed and evaluated by your direct supervisor. Based on that interaction and the behaviors you demonstrated, your supervisor made some notes on your performance. Today, in an informal meeting, your direct supervisor gave you some feedback that indicated your performance in serving the customer was poor.

1. In your opinion, how fair was the **direct supervisor evaluation method** that was used to evaluate your performance on a specific customer interaction?

_____ Very fair _____ Somewhat fair _____ Somewhat unfair _____ Very unfair

2. In your opinion, how reasonable was the **direct supervisor evaluation method** that was used to evaluate your performance on a specific customer interaction?

_____ Very reasonable _____ Somewhat reasonable _____ Somewhat unreasonable
_____ Very unreasonable

please answer the following demographic information.

1. Gender ☐ Female ☐ Male
2. Age ☐ 18-21 ☐ 22-25 ☐ 26-30 ☐ 31-39 ☐ over 40
3. Ethnicity ☐ African American ☐ Hispanic ☐ White
 ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander ☐ Native American ☐ Other
4. Approximate GPA (if you are a student) _____
5. Before participating in this study were you familiar with the concept of mystery shopping? ☐ Yes ☐ No
6. Do you have any experience working as a cashier at a fast food restaurant or a retail store? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Genevieve H. (Gaida) Dobos was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota. After graduating from Duluth East High School, she attended college at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN. In May 1995, Genevieve received a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a major in Business/Speech Communication from the University of St. Thomas. She entered the Graduate College in pursuit of a Master of Arts Degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology in January 1998 and plans to graduate August 1999.