

The future of feedback: Motivating performance improvement through future-focused feedback

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the persistent failure of performance feedback conversations to produce intended behaviour change. The authors — Gnepp, Klayman, Williamson, and Barlas — argue that the conventional diagnostic approach to feedback (analysing causes of past performance) is counterproductive because it amplifies self-serving attributional biases in recipients. Across three studies — a survey of 382 managers reporting real feedback incidents (Study 1) and two role-play simulations involving 380 and 162 executives/MBA students respectively (Studies 2 and 3) — the research finds that recipients of negative feedback consistently attribute failures to external causes and reject feedback as inaccurate or the provider as unqualified. Critically, feedback discussions did not reduce these attribution gaps; they widened them. Recipients showed significantly more self-enhancing and self-protective attributions after the discussion than before. Across Studies 2 and 3, the strongest predictor of both feedback acceptance and intention to change was the recipient's perception that the conversation was future-focused — oriented toward next steps and prospective planning rather than diagnosis of past performance. The authors conclude that future-focused feedback can sustain effectiveness even when feedback is predominantly negative, offering implications for performance management theory and practice.

Key Insights

1. Performance feedback discussions do not reduce provider-recipient disagreement about the causes of past performance — they actively increase it, as recipients make significantly more self-enhancing and self-protective attributions after the discussion than before.
2. Recipients of negative feedback consistently rated that feedback as less accurate and the provider as less qualified, a pattern observed across survey data from real workplaces (Study 1) and controlled role-play simulations (Studies 2 and 3).
3. The strongest predictor of both feedback acceptance and intention to change across Studies 2 and 3 was the recipient's perception that the feedback conversation was future-focused — centred on next steps and future success rather than analysis of past failures — and this effect held even when feedback was predominantly negative.

Practical Takeaways

- Feedback conversations oriented toward prospective planning and collaborative generation of next steps were associated with greater recipient acceptance and stated intention to change, compared to conversations centred on diagnosing the causes of past performance.

- Attribution disagreement between provider and recipient was associated with lower feedback acceptance and, in Study 3, with weaker intention to change — suggesting that minimising retrospective causal analysis in feedback discussions may reduce the conditions that trigger self-protective responses.

Frameworks Mentioned

Management by Objectives (MBO) — Referenced implicitly via goal-setting theory as the conventional standard against which performance is evaluated, with feedback theorists advocating diagnosis of past performance relative to goals and standards.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The research employs a multi-study design combining naturalistic survey data (Study 1) with controlled role-play simulations (Studies 2 and 3), providing both ecological validity and experimental control. Effect sizes are reported (partial η^2), mediation analyses are conducted, and hierarchical linear modelling is used to validate the pooling of Studies 2 and 3 data. The three-way replication of the future-focus finding strengthens confidence in the core result. The open-access publication and data availability declaration support transparency. **Limitations:** The role-play samples — drawn from Executive MBA and advanced HR classes in Australia — are non-representative and predominantly male in Study 1 (82% male). The role-play method cannot replicate the relational history, power dynamics, monetary stakes, or career consequences of real performance reviews, and the authors acknowledge that effect magnitudes in actual workplaces may differ substantially. Future-focus was measured by self-report immediately after the discussion, introducing potential demand characteristics and retrospective rationalisation. The study measures intention to change, not actual behaviour change, which is a recognised limitation the authors note. Two of the three authors (Gnepp and Klayman) were owners of a management consulting firm (Humanly Possible) during the research, which could introduce a subtle commercial interest in findings that support future-focused coaching approaches, though the authors declare no direct financial interest in the findings. The sample in Study 1 is geographically limited to EMBA cohorts in Chicago, Barcelona, and Singapore, and females comprised only 18% of participants. The reliance on Likert-scale self-report measures for all key constructs (future focus, intention to change, feedback acceptance) limits objectivity.

Organizational Practice

The article describes the widespread organisational practice of structured performance feedback conversations between managers and subordinates, including formal annual performance reviews and more frequent informal feedback discussions. It documents how these conversations typically involve diagnosis of past performance causes, review of goal attainment, and developmental guidance. The article also describes the common practice among feedback providers of directing conversations toward employees' weaknesses and improvement areas. Role-play simulations of performance review meetings — used in management training — are described as an established organisational development practice.

Strategic Implications

The findings point toward a measurable gap between the conventional diagnostic model of performance feedback — focused on understanding past causes — and the conversational approach associated with greater recipient acceptance and stated change intention. Organisations that continue to structure performance conversations primarily around retrospective evaluation may be inadvertently triggering

self-protective attributional responses that reduce the very motivation to improve they seek. The data suggest that the temporal orientation of a feedback conversation — how much it focuses on future actions versus past causes — is a more influential variable than feedback favourability in predicting recipient engagement. This has implications for how performance management systems are designed, how manager capability in conducting feedback conversations is developed, and how the purpose of performance reviews is framed organisationally. The finding that future focus moderated the negative impact of unfavourable feedback on effectiveness suggests that structural shifts in conversation design — rather than changes to rating accuracy or frequency alone — may be a more productive lever for improving PMS outcomes.

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