

Want Better Performance Reviews? Change This One Word - Harvard Business School

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Executive Summary

This article reports on peer-reviewed experimental research investigating whether reframing performance review requests from 'feedback' to 'advice' improves the quality of developmental input. The central argument, advanced by HBS Associate Professor Ashley Whillans and an international team, is that the word 'advice' induces future-oriented thinking (prospection), causing reviewers to focus on desired outcomes and actionable steps rather than past behaviour. Key evidence includes a 360-degree review field experiment in which participants responded more concretely to advice-framed questions than feedback-framed ones, and a separate study showing that explicitly requesting 'specific feedback' reduced response rates. Independent raters evaluated advice-prompted responses as more actionable and useful. The authors note boundary conditions: the intervention was less effective when assessing strengths, in post-mortem contexts, or in comprehensive longitudinal reviews. Cultural variability and the absence of adoption-outcome data are acknowledged as limitations. The study was published in Management Science in July 2025.

Key Insights

1. Replacing the word 'feedback' with 'advice' in performance review prompts induces prospective thinking, causing reviewers to generate more concrete and actionable developmental input.
2. Directly requesting 'specific feedback' does not reliably improve concreteness and may reduce reviewer response rates, suggesting that indirect framing manipulations outperform explicit specificity demands.
3. The advice framing effect is context-dependent: it is most effective for improvement-focused prompts but shows reduced effectiveness for strength assessments, post-mortem reviews, and extended longitudinal evaluations.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations conducting performance reviews may observe differences in the concreteness of reviewer input by substituting 'advice' for 'feedback' in developmental-improvement prompts, based on the experimental findings reported.
- The research signals that the intervention's effectiveness varies by review purpose and cultural context, indicating that uniform adoption across all review components or geographies may not replicate the observed results.

Frameworks Mentioned

360-Degree Review — A multi-rater review methodology used as the field experiment setting in which the advice versus feedback framing manipulation was tested.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The study is peer-reviewed and published in Management Science, a high-quality outlet. It employs multiple study designs including a field experiment and uses trained independent raters to evaluate output quality, strengthening internal validity. The authors proactively disclose several limitations. **Limitations:** The research did not measure whether employees actually adopted the more actionable recommendations or found them personally useful, leaving the downstream impact on performance improvement unmeasured. Cultural generalisability is flagged but not empirically tested across cultures. The study does not address long-term review cycles or the interaction of advice framing with manager-employee relationship dynamics. The article is a secondary journalistic summary of the primary paper, so some methodological detail is unavailable for full appraisal. The involvement of a Meta employee (Jaewon Yoon) among co-authors is worth noting as a potential applied-industry interest, though the research is framed academically. No evidence of vendor influence is apparent.

Organizational Practice

Performance review processes in which reviewers are prompted with written questions asking for either 'feedback' or 'advice' on an employee's development; 360-degree review structures involving multiple raters providing developmental input.

Strategic Implications

The findings suggest that low-cost linguistic modifications to review prompt design may influence the quality of developmental input generated at scale, without requiring structural changes to review systems. The context-dependency of the effect points toward differentiated prompt design for different review purposes rather than a single universal framing. The absence of adoption-outcome data leaves open whether improvements in input quality translate to measurable performance change, a gap relevant to organisations evaluating review system effectiveness.

Validation Status: passed
