



Moderators of employee reactions to negative feedback

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Abstract *Previous research indicates that unfavorable feedback, even unfavorable feedback provided for developmental purposes only, is not perceived as useful, results in negative reactions and is not associated with a recipient's willingness to change his or her behavior. This study examined the extent to which contextual variables mitigate these unwanted effects of developmental unfavorable feedback. Results indicate that employees are more motivated to improve their job performance based on unfavorable feedback when the feedback source is perceived to be credible, the feedback is of high quality and the feedback is delivered in a considerate manner.*

The value and importance of feedback to direct and motivate behavior is well known. Meaningful feedback can be used to guide, motivate and reinforce effective behaviors and put a halt to ineffective behaviors. Negative feedback, indicating one's job performance is not meeting expectations, is clearly of developmental value to an individual and of strategic value to organizations. Negative feedback is assumed to create awareness and motivate individuals to change behaviors. However, research in the feedback area does not always fully support this assumption. A meta-analysis found that the effects of feedback are variable and in one third of the cases, feedback had a negative result (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). It is commonly accepted that negative feedback is perceived as less accurate and thus less accepted by recipients than positive feedback (Fedor *et al.*, 1989; Ilgen *et al.*, 1979). Managers struggle with the need to coach employees to improve their performance on one hand and the negative reactions and uncertain effects on performance that unfavorable feedback may engender on the other hand.

The purpose of this paper is to assess reactions (i.e. satisfaction with the feedback and motivation to use the feedback to improve job performance) to negative feedback and examine several potential moderators of these reactions. A better understanding of how employees perceive and react to feedback, particularly negative feedback, is needed to contribute to our understanding of feedback processes and improve the effectiveness of performance appraisal and coaching sessions.

There is a substantial amount of literature suggesting that unfavorable feedback evokes defensiveness, dissatisfaction and denial in feedback recipients (Ilgen *et al.*, 1981; London, 1997; Podsakoff and Farh, 1989). Ilgen *et al.* (1979) suggested that the main strategy employees use to reduce the



impact of negative feedback is to reject it. Consistent with this reasoning, Fedor *et al.* (1989) found that negative performance appraisal feedback was less accepted and perceived as less accurate than positive performance appraisal feedback.

Providing negative feedback to others about their performance is a task very few supervisors enjoy. Supervisors have been shown to avoid, delay, and distort negative feedback (Benedict and Levine, 1988; Ilgen and Knowlton, 1980), particularly informal day-to-day feedback (Jablin, 1979). For instance, Larson (1986) found that supervisors were significantly less likely to provide performance feedback when their subordinates failed to successfully meet their performance goals than when their subordinates met their goals. He further reported that supervisors sometimes gave positive feedback even when the subordinate performed poorly. Fisher (1979) also demonstrated that supervisors tend to inflate the feedback given to low performers to decrease the uncomfortable environment associated with giving negative feedback.

Withholding negative feedback has been referred to as the “mum effect” (Tesser and Rosen, 1975), suggesting that individuals are hesitant to deliver bad or undesirable information. Larson (1984, 1986) speculates that supervisors’ reluctance to give negative feedback may be due to the likelihood of negative interpersonal repercussions. That is, managers are uncomfortable providing negative feedback because they perceive the recipient may reject the feedback, become defensive and project negative feelings back onto the supervisor. In fact, Argyris (1991) reported that managers who gave unfavorable feedback were often perceived to be biased and insensitive.

However, the effects of day-to-day, informal job performance feedback provided for developmental purposes has received less attention than performance appraisal feedback. In one study, Brett and Atwater (2001) examined reactions to 360-degree feedback provided for developmental purposes. They found that for supervisor and direct reports, negative feedback was associated with lower perceptions of accuracy and negative feedback from supervisor and peers was associated with negative reactions such as anger and discouragement. A notable limitation of this study is that the 360-degree feedback was collected as part of an MBA course project and the 360-degree feedback was provided after the ratees had quit their job at that organization to attend the MBA program. One wonders whether there would be similar reactions in an organizational setting in which developmental feedback is provided by individuals one is currently working with and will have to continue to work with.

Contrary to the findings just discussed, research in the 360-degree feedback arena typically reports that individuals receiving low ratings improve their performance more than do individuals receiving more favorable ratings (Atwater *et al.*, 1995; Reilly *et al.*, 1996). 360-degree feedback provides performance information from multiple perspectives. This information should

help ratees better understand how they are viewed by others and should suggest areas for skill development and performance improvement. Indeed, some studies have found that managers receiving unfavorable 360-degree feedback demonstrated more effort in development activities (Hazucha *et al.*, 1993) and were more likely to select developmental goals (Brutus *et al.*, 1999) than were managers receiving favorable 360-degree feedback.

The inconsistency of these results with the previous studies suggest that unfavorable feedback may not always operate in the generally predicted, negative manner. The current study examines reactions to informal, day-to-day negative feedback in an existing work context. Thus, the negative feedback in this study was provided for developmental rather than administrative purposes. Based on the equivocal effects of negative feedback described, we believe that negative feedback itself might not be the sole culprit in subsequent reactions but rather contextual aspects surrounding the feedback process may also have a substantial impact on reactions to feedback. Further, we predicted that these contextual variables would moderate the impact of negative feedback on subsequent feedback reactions. We suggest that it is not unfavorable feedback that is simply driving negative reactions but rather the interaction between unfavorable feedback and our proposed contextual moderators: source credibility, feedback quality and the manner in which feedback is delivered.

Contextual variables and hypotheses

The first variable, feedback source credibility refers to a source's expertise and trustworthiness (Giffin, 1967). Source expertise includes knowledge of the recipient's job requirements, knowledge of the recipient's actual job performance and the ability to evaluate that performance in an accurate manner. Trustworthiness represents whether or not the individual trusts the feedback source to provide accurate performance information (Ilgen *et al.*, 1979). Thus, a credible source is perceived by the recipient as having expertise relative to the performance being evaluated and is trusted to provide feedback based on actual job performance rather than other factors such as political considerations or the feedback source's mood at the time. We predict:

- H1a.* Source credibility will have a significant effect on feedback reactions beyond the effects of negative feedback itself.
- H1b.* Source credibility will moderate the relationship between the frequency of unfavorable feedback and satisfaction with the feedback.
- H1c.* Source credibility will moderate the relationship between the frequency of unfavorable feedback and motivation to use the feedback to improve performance.

Feedback is generally seen as a valuable resource because it helps employees reduce uncertainty, provides information regarding how well one is progressing toward one's goal and how one's job performance is being evaluated by others (Ashford and Cummings, 1983). Ilgen *et al.* (1979) suggested that the information value of feedback is an important factor in whether or not the recipient accepts and is willing to respond to the feedback. Feedback that is considered to be valid, accurate and reliable is more likely to be accepted and perceived as useful. Thus, we predict that feedback quality will have a stronger impact on feedback reactions than will negative feedback itself and that there will be an interaction between feedback quality and negative feedback such that higher quality negative feedback will be associated with higher satisfaction and greater intentions to use the feedback for subsequent performance improvements:

- H2a.* Feedback quality will have a significant effect on feedback reactions beyond the effects of negative feedback itself.
- H2b.* Feedback quality will moderate the relationship between the frequency of unfavorable feedback and satisfaction with the feedback.
- H2c.* Feedback quality will moderate the relationship between the frequency of unfavorable feedback and motivation to use the feedback to improve performance.

The manner in which the feedback is delivered can also have an impact on the acceptance and perceived utility of the feedback. In fact, a helpful, constructive attitude on the part of the supervisor when providing feedback has been related to numerous positive outcomes such as satisfaction, perceptions of fairness, and motivation to improve job performance (Burke *et al.*, 1978). This is similar to the notion of interactional justice which refers to perceptions of fair interpersonal treatment (Bies and Moag, 1986; Tyler and Bies, 1990). Feedback provided with greater interpersonal fairness has been shown to result in more favorable dispositional attributions about the feedback source, more acceptance of the feedback source and more favorable reactions to the organization overall (Leung *et al.*, 2001).

Thus, we expected that a feedback recipient's perceptions of the source's intentions in giving feedback will have a stronger impact on reactions than will negative feedback itself and there will be an interaction between negative feedback and a supervisor's mode of feedback delivery:

- H3a.* Feedback delivery will have a significant effect on feedback reactions beyond the effects of negative feedback itself.
- H3b.* Feedback delivery will moderate the relationship between the frequency of unfavorable feedback and satisfaction with the feedback.
- H3c.* Feedback delivery will moderate the relationship between the

Method

Subjects

10 *Total sample.* A total of 698 surveys were mailed to employees at two manufacturing companies. Respondents from the first company were first line supervisors and respondents from the second company were all nonunion (production and managerial level) employees. A total of 405 completed surveys were returned for an overall response rate of 58 percent. Respondents' organizational tenure ranged from one year to 42 years with an average of 18 years. Respondents' job tenure ranged from one year to 30 years with an average of ten years. There were 343 male respondents (88 percent) and 49 (12 percent) female respondents. Survey respondents ranged in age from 22 to 64 years with an average age of 45 years.

Measures

All scales were measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Frequency of negative feedback. The frequency of negative feedback was assessed with the four items. A sample negative feedback item reads: "My supervisor tells me when my work performance does not meet organizational standards". This measure assesses the extent to which veridical feedback, feedback that is justified in the eyes of the feedback recipient, is received from his or her supervisor. In a developmental context, negative feedback should be interpreted as such.

Contextual variables. The contextual characteristics associated with supervisor feedback were assessed using three dimensions of the feedback environment scale (FES) developed by Steelman *et al.* (in press). The FES references formal and informal supervisor feedback, not including the formal performance appraisal review and was developed to assess the numerous contextual characteristics associated with the feedback process as it occurs in organizations. Results presented by Steelman *et al.* (in press) indicate that the FES has adequate internal consistency and test-retest reliability, as well as convergent and discriminate validity.

Source credibility was assessed with the five items comprising the credibility dimension of the FES. A sample item reads: "My supervisor is generally familiar with my performance on the job" and has demonstrated adequate internal consistency reliability in the past ($\alpha = 0.89$) (Steelman *et al.*, in press).

Feedback quality was assessed with the five items comprising the quality dimension of the FES. A sample item reads "My supervisor gives me useful feedback about my job" ($\alpha = 0.92$) (Steelman *et al.*, in press).

Feedback delivery, interpersonal consideration, was assessed with the five items comprising the delivery dimension of the FES. A sample item reads “My supervisor generally provides feedback in a thoughtless manner” ($\alpha = 0.86$) (Steelman *et al.*, in press).

Satisfaction with feedback. Satisfaction with the day-to-day feedback provided by one’s supervisor was measured with three items. A sample item is “In general, how satisfied are you with the feedback you receive from your supervisor?”.

Motivation to use feedback. Two items, adapted from Dorfman *et al.* (1986) were employed to measure an employee’s motivation to use the feedback provided for performance improvement. A sample item is “I want to improve my job performance based on the feedback my supervisor provides”.

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the study variables are reported in Table I. Frequency of negative feedback from one’s supervisor and satisfaction with feedback from one’s supervisor are correlated at 0.34 and frequency of negative feedback from one’s supervisor and motivation to use supervisor feedback are correlated at 0.21.

The relationship between the contextual variables and negative feedback was explored through a series of hierarchical regression analyses. The results of these analyses are summarized in Tables II and III. *H1a*, *H2a* and *H3a* predicted that the contextual variables would have more impact on the dependent variables than would the frequency of negative feedback itself. Unfavorable feedback is entered into the regression equation first and is significant for both satisfaction with feedback and motivation to use feedback ($F[1, 390] = 47.02$; $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.11$ and $F[1, 389] = 17.17$; $p < 0.01$; $R^2 = 0.04$ respectively). When the contextual variables are entered next, the explained variance significantly increases for all three contextual variables and for both dependent variables (see Tables II and III). These results indicate support for the hypotheses-contextual variables have a significant

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Negative FB	5.2	1.1	0.85					
2. Satisfaction with FB	4.5	1.5	0.34	0.87				
3. Motivation to use FB	5.6	1.1	0.21	0.46	0.88			
4. Sup. credibility	5.1	1.3	0.29	0.73	0.36	0.88		
5. FB quality	4.8	1.4	0.32	0.76	0.40	0.83	0.92	
6. FB delivery	4.7	1.3	0.18	0.69	0.34	0.71	0.72	0.86

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$. Internal consistency estimates are provided on the diagonal

Table I.
Descriptive statistics
and correlation matrix
for study variables

Table II.
Summary of regression results for the satisfaction with feedback dependent variable

Step	Variable	β	R^2	ΔR^2	F change
<i>Model 1</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	0.07	0.11	0.11	47.02*
2.	Sup. credibility	0.65	0.55	0.44	383.22*
3.	Unfavorable FB \times sup. credibility	0.07	0.55	0.00	0.126
<i>Model 2</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	0.22	0.11	0.11	47.02*
2.	Feedback quality	0.94	0.58	0.47	436.878*
3.	Unfavorable FB \times feedback quality	-0.30	0.58	0.00	1.96
<i>Model 3</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	0.07	0.11	0.11	47.02*
2.	Feedback delivery	0.45	0.51	0.40	321.72*
3.	Unfavorable FB \times feedback delivery	0.27	0.51	0.00	2.00

Note: * $p < 0.01$

Table III.
Summary of regression results for the motivation to use feedback dependent variable

Step	Variable	β	R^2	ΔR^2	F change
<i>Model 1</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	-0.30	0.04	0.04	17.17*
2.	Sup. credibility	-0.19	0.14	0.10	44.41*
3.	Unfavorable FB \times sup. credibility	0.77	0.16	0.02	7.55*
<i>Model 2</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	-0.28	0.04	0.04	17.17*
2.	Feedback quality	-0.20	0.16	0.12	54.11*
	Unfavorable FB \times feedback quality	0.78	0.17	0.02	6.82*
<i>Model 3</i>					
1.	Unfavorable FB	-0.27	0.04	0.04	17.17*
2.	Feedback delivery	-0.30	0.13	0.09	40.06*
3.	Unfavorable FB \times feedback delivery	0.81	0.16	0.02	10.59*

Note: * $p < 0.01$

effect on satisfaction with feedback and motivation to use feedback over and above the effects of unfavorable feedback itself.

H1b, *H2b*, and *H3b* predicted that supervisor credibility, feedback quality, and feedback delivery would moderate the effect of unfavorable feedback on satisfaction with supervisor feedback and was assessed by adding the interaction terms at step three of the multiple regression analyses. If the interaction term accounts for significant variance, it can be concluded that a moderated effect exists (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Table II shows the results for this series of regressions. These hypotheses were not supported.

H1c, *H2c*, and *H3c* proposed that supervisor credibility, feedback quality, and feedback delivery would moderate the effect of unfavorable feedback on motivation to use feedback for performance improvement. Table III presents

the results for this series of regressions. Supporting *H1b*, supervisor credibility significantly moderates the relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback ($F[1, 387] = 7.55; p < 0.01; R^2$ change = 0.02). This significant interaction (see Figure 1) reveals that there is a stronger relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback when supervisor credibility is high. Thus, employees are more motivated to use unfavorable feedback from a highly credible source to improve their performance than unfavorable feedback from a less credible source.

Supporting *H2b*, feedback quality significantly moderates the relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback ($F[1, 387] = 6.82; p < 0.01; R^2$ change = 0.02). This significant interaction (see Figure 2) reveals that there is a stronger relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback when feedback quality is high. Thus, employees are more motivated to use unfavorable feedback that is perceived to

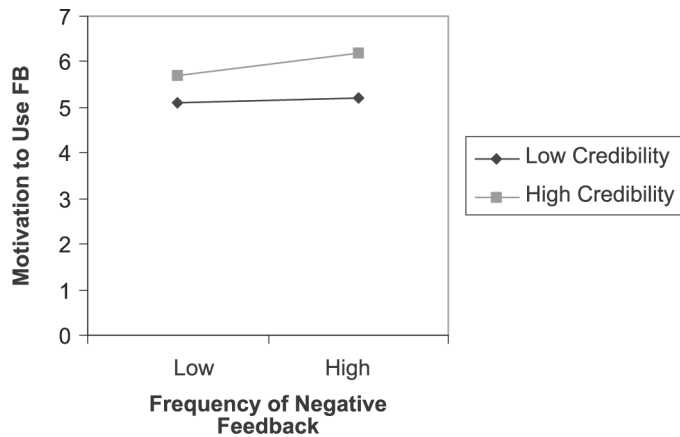


Figure 1.
Plotted interaction of
frequency of negative
feedback and supervisor
credibility on motivation
to use feedback

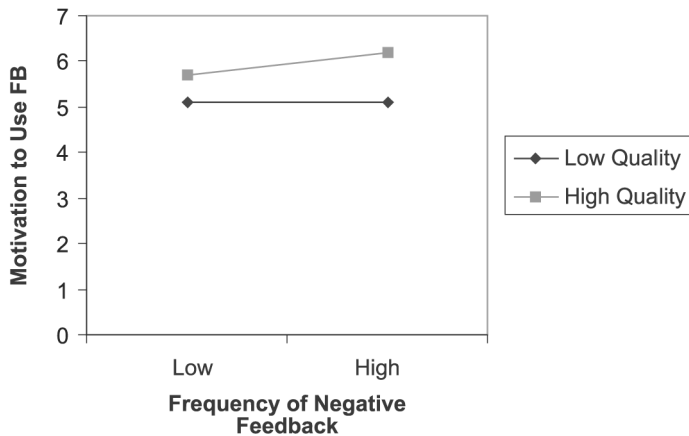


Figure 2.
Plotted interaction of
frequency of negative
feedback and feedback
quality on motivation to
use feedback

be of high quality to improve their performance than unfavorable feedback perceived to be of lower quality.

Supporting *H3b*, feedback delivery significantly moderates the relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback ($F[1, 387] = 10.59; p < 0.01; R^2 \text{ change} = 0.02$). This significant interaction (see Figure 3) reveals that there is a stronger relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use feedback when the feedback is delivered in a considerate manner. Thus, respondents indicated that they are more motivated to use negative feedback that is delivered tactfully and constructively to improve their performance than negative feedback is delivered in a less considerate manner.

Discussion

The results of this study further expand on our understanding of employee's reactions to unfavorable developmental feedback. Although numerous studies have demonstrated that unfavorable feedback results in negative attitudes, less acceptance of the feedback and unwillingness to change behavior based on the feedback (Brett and Atwater, 2001; Fedor *et al.*, 1989; Meyer and Walker, 1961), our results indicate that favorable contextual characteristics can mitigate the negative consequences of unfavorable feedback.

First, our results indicate that the contextual characteristics of supervisor credibility, feedback quality and feedback delivery had a larger impact on the outcomes of satisfaction with feedback and motivation to improve than did unfavorable feedback itself. The significant contribution of the contextual characteristics in explaining important reactions to negative feedback indicate that negative feedback does not operate in a vacuum and may be more complicated than previous studies indicate (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996).

Three contextual characteristics were proposed to moderate the impact of unfavorable feedback on the feedback outcomes. The results of our study

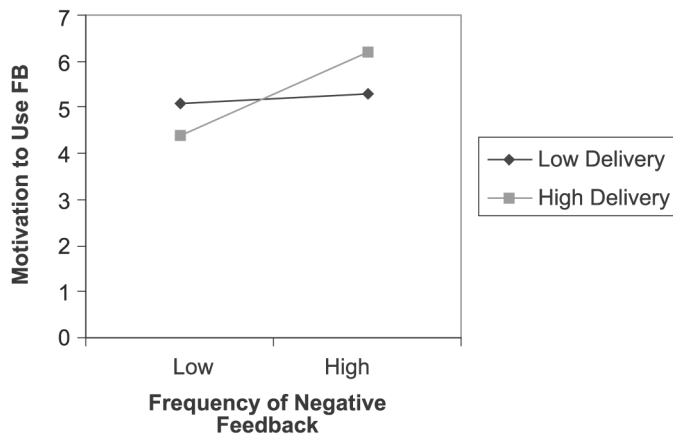


Figure 3.
Plotted interaction of frequency of negative feedback and feedback delivery on motivation to use feedback

indicate that source credibility, feedback quality and feedback delivery do not moderate the relationship between unfavorable feedback and satisfaction with feedback but they do moderate the relationship between unfavorable feedback and motivation to use that feedback to improve job performance. Thus, the current data suggest that employees are most motivated to modify their job performance when unfavorable feedback is from a credible source, is of high quality or is delivered in a considerate and constructive manner. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) suggest that feedback interventions may not always improve performance because some feedback directs attention to the self, inspiring defensiveness and rejection of the feedback. Negative feedback may operate in this manner unless the moderating influences of contextual variables are present.

From a practical standpoint, this research suggests that supervisors that pay attention to contextual variables when providing negative feedback might help ensure that the feedback recipient will respond more positively and will be more inclined to alter behaviors based on that feedback. These results are consistent with the literature on 360-degree feedback and are very applicable to organizations whose goals are to develop management training programs and performance management systems. According to the findings, subordinates are more motivated to improve their performance if credible supervisors deliver quality feedback in a considerate, meaningful manner. This means providing factual information and taking the time to work with subordinates to set goals for future improvements.

Surprisingly, our predictions for satisfaction with the feedback were not supported by the data. Supervisor credibility, feedback quality and feedback delivery have a substantial direct impact on satisfaction with the feedback but they do not moderate the relationship. Although negative feedback had a positive correlation with satisfaction with feedback, the contextual variables had stronger positive correlations with satisfaction. This may, in part, be explained by the nature of the measure of negative feedback used in this study. The measure of negative feedback was designed to assess instances of veridical unfavorable feedback or the extent to which employees perceive that they receive unfavorable feedback from their supervisor that is justified. This measure is distinguished from other feedback scales (e.g. Herold and Parsons, 1985) that have traditionally measured feedback sign in a way that simply tapped whether employees were provided with feedback that they were performing well or not performing well (i.e. positive or negative sign) – the accuracy or merit of this feedback information is infrequently explored. In the past, these negative feedback subscales have been negatively related to outcome variables such as satisfaction with feedback (e.g. Fedor *et al.*, 1989). In the current study, veridical unfavorable feedback, an indicator that the recipient needs to change one or more work behaviors, is associated with more favorable reactions. An employee can not improve his or her job performance if

there is no indication that job performance should be improved. Unfortunately, receiving veridical negative feedback may not be the norm in organizations (Fisher, 1979; Larson, 1986).

The effects of negative feedback in 360-degree feedback systems have been documented. For instance, Atwater *et al.* (1995) found that individuals receiving unfavorable feedback from their subordinates, that is feedback that is lower than self appraisals, improved their leadership behaviors and significantly reduced their self ratings. The intriguing impact of contextual characteristics on feedback reactions and subsequent performance in 360-degree feedback systems has yet to be investigated. We suspect that favorable contextual characteristics will have a positive impact on developmental activities, particularly for over raters, those individuals who receive negative feedback by virtue of the fact that other's ratings are lower than one's self ratings. Contextual characteristics such as supervisor credibility, feedback quality and feedback delivery may provide the additional needed support for low performers to accept and utilize the feedback they receive. The extent to which supervisors enact a supportive feedback context may also impact a subordinate's feelings of accountability to participate in developmental activities. Within the framework of 360-degree feedback, future research should also examine the impact of negative feedback from other sources such as co-workers and subordinates and the extent to which contextual characteristics may improve feedback acceptance and performance.

Although the current results appear to be robust, future research should examine the generalizability of the results in other cultures. In fact, Earley and Stubblebine (1989) found that workers in the UK had different reactions to feedback than did workers in the USA. Future research could examine the impact of cultural variables (power distance, individualism/collectivism) on the feedback process. For instance, in a high power distance culture, supervisors and subordinates do not consider themselves as equals. This could have negative consequences for the transmission and receipt of unfavorable feedback. Many authors suggest that examination of cultural differences in feedback and performance appraisal is an important area for future research (Ashford *et al.*, in press; Fletcher, 2001).

The current study examined the impact of negative feedback on satisfaction with the feedback and motivation to use the feedback to improve one's job performance. Previous research has indicated that negative feedback is destructive and following suit; supervisors are often unwilling to provide unfavorable feedback to their subordinates. This study found that the often-cited negative effects associated with unfavorable feedback can be alleviated through positive contextual aspects of the feedback process. We have shown that unfavorable feedback, under certain conditions, can have a positive impact on individuals.

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