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Recommended Citation

Stark, Gary, "The Effect of Managerial Status on Performance Appraisal Quality and Feedback Seeking." (2010). *Journal Articles*. 126.

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The Effect of Managerial Status on Performance Appraisal Quality and Feedback Seeking

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Abstract:

This paper compares the performance appraisal quality and feedback seeking of managers to that of non-managers. This study answers Ashford et al's (2003) call for more research on the feedback seeking of managers, especially compared to non-managers. This study also extends work by Ashford and Tsui (1991) and Tsui et al's (1995) on negative feedback seeking by examining the phenomenon among managers. Data were collected via survey from 355 employees of two parts of an international retail chain. Results indicate that managers receive lower quality feedback than non-managers, do not feel inhibited by the psychological and impression costs of feedback seeking, relative to non-managers, and seek feedback, more than non-managers do. This study helps us understand factors that may help us improve the feedback managers receive. This study is limited by use of a single question measure of managerial status and generalization will require sampling more broadly.

I. Introduction

Theory and practice point to the importance of feedback in improving task performance (e.g., Bandura 1991; Kluger and DeNisi 1996; Locke and Latham 1990). However, because the flow of feedback in organizations is often limited (Herold and Parsons 1985), individuals engage in feedback seeking behavior to gain much of the information needed to improve performance (Ashford 1986; Ashford et al 2003).

Ashford et al.'s (2003) landmark review of the feedback seeking literature reveals a vast amount of research on the subject, but notes a dearth of research on the feedback seeking behavior of managers, particularly as compared to non-managers and calls for the situation to be rectified (778). Specifically Ashford et al. (2003, 779, 790) call for more research to determine the quality of feedback managers receive, the ego and impression "costs" to managers for seeking feedback, and the amount of feedback managers seek. The present study is intended to answer that call. Specifically, the present study aims to compare managers versus non-managers regarding their assessment of the quality of performance appraisal, the psychological cost of seeking feedback, and the degree to which each seeks feedback.

Finally, the present study extends work by Ashford and Tsui (1991) and Tsui et al (1995). These studies examined, in part, managers' seeking of negative feedback; that is, feedback that indicated to the managers that they had performed poorly. While those studies clearly indicated that managers seek negative feedback, they did not compare managers to non-managers in regards to negative feedback seeking behavior. In order to paint a more complete picture of managers' feedback seeking behavior, the present study makes such a comparison.

I. HYPOTHESES

There are some indications that the quality or usefulness of performance appraisals for managers is lower than the quality or usefulness of performance appraisals for non-managers. It is clear that managerial work is complex and filled with role ambiguity (cf. Lombardo and McCall 1982). Gupta et al (1999) suggest that such complexity and ambiguity make managers less certain of their performance. Ashford et al (2003) suggests that managers' receipt of performance feedback becomes less consistent due to the aforementioned complexity but also due to subordinates' fear of giving honest appraisals. Indeed, Kudisch et al (2006) found that fear of retaliation and feelings of role inappropriateness stifle subordinates' desire to provide upward feedback. None of these studies empirically tested the quality of feedback managers receive although Nadler et al (2003) found that employees across all levels generally perceived upward feedback to be of lower quality.

Conway and Huffcutt (1997) provide empirical evidence that managers receive relatively inconsistent performance appraisals compared to non-managers. Specifically, their study found the inter-rater reliability of different sources of managers' performance appraisal to be lower than the inter-rater reliability among performance appraisal sources for non-managers. Given that managers receive conflicting reports about their performance (at least relative to non-managers) managers should be less certain what the performance appraisals are telling them. Conway and Huffcutt (1997) gathered objective evidence about performance appraisal quality. That is, the measure of performance appraisal quality was the inter-source consistency. The present study differs in that it gathers managers' and non-managers' subjective assessment (opinions) of performance appraisal quality. This subjective assessment is more appropriate for a study of feedback seeking behavior (the subject of the remaining hypotheses) because it is an individuals' own beliefs about whether systemic feedback is adequate that should determine his or her feedback seeking (Ashford 1986). Thus,

H1. Managers will assess the quality of the performance appraisals managers receive lower than non-managers will assess the quality of performance appraisals non-managers receive.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggest that in some instances, individuals avoid seeking feedback because those individuals fear the act of feedback seeking will make them appear incompetent or insecure to others. Morrison and Bies (1991) distinguish between avoiding feedback for fear that the *act* will affect the seeker's image and avoiding feedback for fear that the *elicited feedback* will affect the seekers image. Indeed Ashford and Northcraft (1992) and Park et al (2007) found that the fear of creating a negative impression will reduce the amount of feedback seeking. However, it appears that any negative impression created by feedback seeking does not differ by the position in the organizational hierarchy of the feedback seeker (Ashford and Tsui 1991). Therefore, I make no specific hypothesis regarding the cost to managers versus non-managers of seeking feedback and instead examine it as a research question. This is a question worthy of exploration as feedback seeking costs clearly affect the amount of feedback seeking behavior.

Ashford (1986) emphasized that the value of feedback seeking is not in feedback itself, but in the product (self-knowledge) that feedback produces. She hypothesized that uncertainty regarding performance should prompt a search for feedback because such feedback is valued for its uncertainty reduction properties. Given evidence of poor performance appraisal quality and managers' resultant performance uncertainty, we would expect that managers would engage in relatively high feedback seeking. High uncertainty was associated with feedback seeking behavior in studies by Morrison (2002) and Anseel and Lievens (2007). Also, given the complexity and ambiguity of their jobs (detailed earlier), we can expect managers to place a high value on accurate feedback.

H2. Managers will seek more performance feedback than non-managers will.

Finally, this study examines the degree to which managers purposely seek out negative feedback. Chen et al (2007) found an association between negative feedback seeking and higher performance. Studies by Ashford and Tsui (1991) and Tsui et al (1995) make it clear that managers find negative (as opposed to positive) feedback especially valuable for helping them learn the areas of their performance that need the most work and, as a result, *do* seek negative feedback. None of the studies mentioned compare non-managers to managers and so it is not clear whether non-managers find negative feedback any less worthwhile or seek negative feedback less than managers seek. However, given the logic in support of the other hypotheses that managers may value feedback more and given that negative feedback may be especially valuable,

H3. Managers will seek negative feedback more than non-managers will.

II. METHOD

Sample and Procedure

Respondents for this self-report survey were employees of two related organizations -- the headquarters and a distribution center (separated by 400 miles in the United States) for an international retail chain. These organizations were selected to provide a cross-section of activity, and geographical location. Participation was arranged with the Vice-President of Corporate Human Resources. In exchange for their participation, additional survey items were included or created to provide feedback on areas of specific interest to that organization. Where possible, steps were taken to minimize common method variance. Independent and dependent variables were included in separate instruments and were administered at different times ranging from two weeks to four weeks apart (Bouchard 1976). Participants were asked to select their own four-digit code number to facilitate the matching of separate responses. Surveys were distributed by company mail and returned by mail to the researcher.

A total of 355 useable surveys were received. Reasons for elimination of participants included incomplete surveys and failure to provide a matching code. The response rates were 76 percent for the distribution center and 83 percent for the headquarters. Demographic information is not reported as top management was particularly sensitive to collecting this information and so refused to allow its collection.

Rather than self-report surveys, a few feedback seeking studies (cf. Ashford and Tsui 1991; Tsui et al 1995) have employed a method wherein the focus person's (the feedback seeker's) constituents are asked to report the focus person's feedback seeking and other behaviors. I will term this the "constituent report" method. However, these studies were designed to measure the impression that feedback seeking created rather than measuring feedback seeking itself. In another feedback seeking study, Morrison (1993) theoretically justified her exclusion of constituent reports by noting that individuals do not always closely attend to their coworkers' seeking behaviors, and that individuals often seek feedback in less observable ways.

Measures

The independent variable, manager versus non-manager, was measured by asking a single yes/no question of the respondents -- "Do you have people reporting to you? (e.g., are you a supervisor or manager?)."

The dependent variables were all measured on a seven point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Feedback Quality was measured by four questions, designed for this study, asking about the quality of the performance appraisal system. The four questions are: "As a result of my performance reviews, I can understand my impact on others", "People can figure out how to do their jobs more effectively as a result of their performance reviews", "The system makes sure people get

feedback”, and “The review system increases job effectiveness”. Cronbach’s alpha (an estimate of a measure’s reliability) was an acceptable .88 (Nunnally, 1978).

Feedback Seeking was measured using a three question scale developed by Ashford (1986). An example is “In order to find out how well you perform on your job, how frequently do you seek feedback from your supervisor about your work performance?”. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure, in this study, was an acceptable .77 (Nunnally 1978). Negative Feedback Seeking was measured with two questions designed for this study – “I typically look for information that tells me I am not doing well” and “I typically look for information that suggests I am performing poorly”. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was an acceptable .87 (Nunnally 1978). Cost of feedback seeking was measured with three questions from Ashford (1986). An example is “I would look incompetent if I asked for additional information about my performance”. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure, in this study, was .66.

III. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations for the study variables. All hypotheses (and the exploratory study of feedback seeking cost) were tested using t-tests. Hypothesis 1 predicted that managers would assess the feedback they receive as being poor quality more so than non-managers would. Hypothesis 1 was supported. The quality of performance appraisal managers received was self-reported to be lower ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.32$, $N = 91$) than the quality of performance appraisals non-managers reported that non-managers received ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.35$, $N = 248$), $t = 2.95$, $p < .01$. Hypothesis 2 predicted that managers would seek more feedback than would non-managers. Hypothesis 2 was supported. The amount of feedback seeking self-reported by managers was higher ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.26$, $N = 92$) than the amount of feedback seeking self-reported by non-managers ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.45$, $N = 262$), $t = 2.61$, $p < .01$. Hypothesis 3 predicted that managers would seek negative feedback more than non-managers would. Hypothesis 3 was not supported. The amount of negative

feedback seeking self-reported by managers ($M = 3.71, SD = 1.40, N = 93$) was statistically equal to the amount of feedback seeking self-reported by non-managers ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.72, N = 257$), $t = 0.76, p = .448$. This study also explored the relative cost of feedback seeking of managers versus non-managers. Managers self-reported that the cost of feedback seeking ($M = 2.86, SD = 1.00, N = 84$) was statistically equal to the cost of feedback seeking for non-managers ($M = 2.95, SD = 1.09, N = 245$), $t = 0.68, p = .500$.

As a whole the results reveal that managers are interested in actively pursuing feedback. This is not surprising given that the quality of performance appraisal managers receive is lower than that which non-managers receive. It is a bit surprising that managers did not seek more negative feedback than non-managers given our discussion that managers find negative feedback especially valuable. Recall though that the previous studies reported did not compare managers to non-managers regarding how much each *values* negative feedback. The present study compared managers' versus non-managers' *frequency* of negative feedback seeking. Future studies should compare how much managers versus non-managers *value* negative feedback.

The researcher found no difference in feedback seeking costs between managers and non-managers. This is not particularly surprising. The researcher made no hypothesis as to a difference and results are consistent with Ashford and Tsui's (1991) findings that any negative impression created by feedback seeking does not differ by level in the organizational hierarchy. In fact, results of the present study indicated mean feedback seeking costs were low for all respondents (around 2.9 where seven is highest cost). Perhaps the efforts the organization surveyed in this article made toward reducing "costs" of seeking feedback were effective at all levels.

Future research should exam managers' aptitude, motivation, and skill for using self-improvement tools like feedback seeking. That may be a key to understanding the differences between managers and non-managers uncovered in this article.

This study is not without its shortcomings, most notably, the single-question measure of managerial status. This raises questions of the validity of the measure. Another shortcoming that may limit the generalizability of this study is that the sample was heavy on the manager to non-manager ratio. It is possible that such a large representation of one occupation may have skewed the results of the study. Finally, generalization of results will require sampling across a broader variety of organizations.

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Table 1Descriptive Statistics and Scale Inter-correlations^a

| | Mean | Manager | Perf. App. Quality | Cost | Feedback Seeking | Negative Feedback Seeking |
|------------------------------|----------------|---------|-----------------------|--------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Manager ^b | 93 mgrs. | -- | | | | |
| | 262 non-mgr. | | | | | |
| Perf. App. Quality | 4.09 (1.37) | .16** | [.88] | | | |
| Cost | 2.92 (1.07) | .04 | -.22** | [.66] | | |
| Feedback Seeking | 3.37 (1.37) | -.14** | -.05 | -.15** | [.77] | |
| Negative Feedback Seeking | 3.61 (1.63) | -.04 | .123* | -.05 | .28** | [.87] |

Note: Standard deviations in parentheses, internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) in brackets

a N = 355

b 1 = manager, 2 = non-manager

* = $p < .05$

** = $p < .01$