

Understanding and encouraging feedback-seeking behaviour: a literature review

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OBJECTIVES The goals of this paper are to review the literature on feedback-seeking behaviour using a self-motives framework and to provide practical recommendations for medical educators on how to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour.

METHODS To gain a better understanding of feedback-seeking behaviour, we apply a self-motives framework. Through this conceptual lens, we define feedback-seeking behaviour and review its antecedents and consequences. We provide an overview of the key findings and answer to a number of unresolved issues in the literature.

RESULTS On the basis of the literature review, we present six evidence-based insights to

encourage feedback-seeking behaviour in practice.

CONCLUSIONS The literature review shows that feedback-seeking behaviour is a valuable resource for individuals in work and educational settings as it aids their adaptation, learning and performance. Several individual and contextual factors that promote the seeking of feedback are presented. Although feedback-seeking behaviour has been a subject of research for over 25 years, some unresolved issues remain. We present a self-motives framework to resolve those issues and to stimulate future research. We conclude this paper with six actionable insights for medical educators based on the evidence reviewed.

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INTRODUCTION

'How am I doing?'

In medical settings, it is typically the patient who asks: 'How am I doing?' The question of how one is doing, however, is equally relevant to medical staff and medical students. Giving feedback is one of the most widely used psychological interventions to stimulate learning and development.¹ However, there is more to giving feedback than providing students with their grades or discussing employees' performance during an annual performance review. Research in organisational and social psychology suggests that people do not wait around passively until they are given feedback; instead, they proactively seek it.²

Feedback-seeking behaviour, the proactive search for feedback information in the environment,³ has been a subject of research for over 25 years. This literature has portrayed feedback seeking as a valuable resource for individuals because it facilitates their adaptation, learning and performance. As many workers and students find themselves in a feedback vacuum,⁴ feedback-seeking behaviour has probably never been more important.

In this review paper, we unfold the literature on feedback-seeking behaviour in the following steps. We start with the definition of feedback-seeking behaviour and a review of the consequences of feedback seeking. Next, we present the various aspects and antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour. Gradually, we identify a number of unresolved issues in the current literature. In response to those issues, we present a more comprehensive framework for understanding feedback-seeking behaviour: the self-motives framework. We conclude the paper with evidence-based advice on how to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour in practice.

WHAT IS FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR?

Feedback-seeking behaviour can be defined as the conscious devotion of effort towards determining the correctness and adequacy of one's behaviours for attaining valued goals.² From this definition, it follows that feedback seeking constitutes goal-oriented behaviour. Through feedback seeking, individuals aim to improve their chances of attaining valued end states, such as skill development, good performance or promotion. Consider a medical student who aspires to achieving a high score on the

final examination and consults a professor to obtain feedback on the adequacy of his or her study plan. Using the professor's feedback, the student reconsiders the study plan and improves his or her chances of attaining a high score on the examination.

WHY DOES FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR MATTER?

The key premise in this article is that feedback seeking benefits individuals. In this section, we review the evidence on three categories of outcome: (i) performance; (ii) learning and creativity, and (iii) adaptation and socialisation. Each category has received empirical support and is highly relevant to medical education.

Performance

Several studies have documented positive effects of feedback-seeking behaviour on job performance. Renn and Fedor,⁵ for example, found that sales employees who sought feedback more frequently realised higher sales revenues (i.e. average sales per hour) and obtained higher ratings for the quality of their work (i.e. service quality). Studies have also investigated the types of topic on which feedback is sought. For both managers and subordinates, negative feedback-seeking behaviour tends to be associated with higher performance ratings.^{6,7}

Learning and creativity

Feedback is an important determinant of learning.⁸ Indeed, through feedback seeking individuals can discover opportunities for skill improvement and obtain information about the dominant behavioural norms in a team or organisation.

Despite the potential value of feedback-seeking behaviour for individual learning, few studies on feedback seeking have looked directly into the relationship between feedback-seeking behaviour and actual learning. In a notable exception, Yanagizawa⁹ found that individuals who more frequently sought feedback demonstrated higher goal attainment and learning compared with individuals who sought feedback less frequently. By contrast, Hwang and Francesco¹⁰ found no relationship between the seeking of face-to-face feedback and learning. Clearly, additional research investigating the conditions that may influence the strength of the relationship between feedback-seeking behaviour and learning seems warranted, especially in educational settings.

Feedback is also important for creative behaviour.¹¹ Through feedback seeking, individuals can develop creativity-relevant skills and gain fresh perspectives on their ideas. For instance, De Stobbeleir *et al.*¹² found that employees who sought more direct feedback and those who sought feedback from a variety of sources showed greater creativity at work.

Adaptation and socialisation

Feedback-seeking behaviour has been regarded as a useful resource for individual adaptation.² Studies have shown that newcomers in organisations who frequently seek feedback integrate better in their new social environment.¹³ In addition, individuals who seek feedback in their first months in a new organisation tend to have a more accurate and clearer view of their role in the organisation.^{13,14} Finally, feedback-seeking behaviour has been linked to higher job satisfaction, less intention to leave the organisation and lower actual turnover.^{15,16}

In sum, the literature reviewed shows that feedback-seeking behaviour has important consequences for the adaptation, learning and performance of individuals. Thus, encouraging students and employees to seek feedback is an important educational and managerial strategy. In the next section, we delve into the various aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour.

ASPECTS OF FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Research has focused on five key aspects⁴ of feedback seeking: (i) the method used to obtain feedback; (ii) the frequency of feedback-seeking behaviour; (iii) the timing of feedback seeking; (iv) the characteristics of the target of feedback seeking, and (v) the topic on which feedback is sought. Although each of the five aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour is important, most of the literature has been devoted to understanding the antecedents and consequences of the frequency with which employees use two methods of obtaining feedback: inquiry and monitoring. As a result, our understanding of the timing, the topic and the target of the feedback-seeking attempt is relatively underdeveloped.

Firstly, feedback can be sought through two methods: inquiry and monitoring.³ Individuals seek feedback through the *inquiry* method when they directly ask others (e.g. a supervisor or co-worker) for feedback. Although inquiry is a useful method, individuals often report concerns relating to the risks associated with direct feedback seeking. For example, students

may not want to burden their supervisor or appear to be needy by seeking feedback. Later in this review, we discuss individual and contextual factors that influence these perceptions of risk. *Monitoring* entails an in-depth observation of the situation and other people's behaviour (i.e. one's environment) in order to collect information about one's own performance. Consider a nurse who pays careful attention when a supervisor praises other nurses for experimenting with new work methods, and infers that such innovative behaviour will benefit her chances of gaining a pay raise. The monitoring of feedback cues from the environment is not always straightforward because the individual runs the risk of misinterpreting the information collected. This inference problem is typical of an indirect method of feedback seeking.

Secondly, research has paid considerable attention to the frequency of feedback-seeking behaviour. More specifically, the dominant research approach has been to operationalise feedback-seeking behaviour through a frequency measure. Consider a sample item from Ashford's original feedback-seeking behaviour scale: 'In order to find out how well you are performing in your job, how FREQUENTLY do you seek information from your co-workers about your work performance?'² Although it is informative to know how individuals differ in the frequency of their feedback-seeking attempts, frequency measures paint only a rough picture of the feedback-seeking process. Attention to the other aspects of feedback seeking is required to complement our current understanding.

A third aspect of feedback-seeking behaviour concerns the timing of the feedback-seeking attempt. Often individuals act strategically when asking for feedback. Following an administrative error, a nurse might decide not to ask the doctor for feedback because she thinks it might be better to keep silent about the error or wait until the doctor is in a better mood. Indeed, Morrison and Bies¹⁷ proposed that individuals tend to wait until the target is in a good mood before approaching him or her for feedback. This leads to the fourth aspect of feedback seeking, which concerns the characteristics of the target. Research has shown that individuals carefully decide whom to ask for feedback. For example, the higher the target's expertise and the more accessible the target is, the more individuals will be inclined to ask this target for feedback.^{18,19} A fifth and final aspect of feedback-seeking behaviour deals with the topic on which feedback is sought. One might decide to seek feedback on successes or failures, or on certain aspects of one's performance. Ashford and Tsui,⁷ for example, found that managers who primarily sought

negative feedback from their subordinates were seen as more effective by their subordinates than managers who merely sought positive feedback.

In sum, the five aspects of feedback seeking represent the choices an individual must make when deciding whether to seek feedback. In the next section, we discuss how individuals make these choices as we focus on the antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour.

ANTECEDENTS OF FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

Several factors have been examined with respect to their influence on feedback-seeking behaviour. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the individual and

Table 1 Individual and contextual factors influencing feedback-seeking behaviour

Factors	Relationship	References
Individual factors		
External feedback propensity	+	5,50,51
Feedback orientation	+	52,53
Learning goal orientation	+	23,28,54,55
Performance, performance expectations	+	42,43,56
Tolerance for ambiguity	-	50,54,57,58
Tenure, age, experience	-	2,14,28,46,57,59
Self-esteem	Mixed	43,50,51,60
Contextual factors		
<i>Environment</i>		
Uncertainty	Mixed	2,31,57,61
Publicness of seeking	-	29,43,60
Effort	-	2
Organisational socialisation	+	45
<i>Feedback</i>		
Sign	+	62,63
Diagnosticity	+	42
<i>Target</i>		
Transformational leadership	+	30,54
Relationship quality	+	6,18
Availability, accessibility	+	18,63
Support, consideration	+	14,28,48
Expertise	+	18
Mood	+	17,49

contextual factors that have received the most research attention. On the basis of a recent meta-analysis of studies on feedback-seeking behaviour,²⁰ we also include the overall sign of the effect of each factor on feedback-seeking behaviour. As an illustration, we will discuss three of the factors in more detail.

Learning goal orientation

Goal orientations influence how individuals experience, process and respond to achievement situations.²¹ Although goal orientations represent individual differences, their strength also depends upon situational characteristics, such as birth order.²²⁻²⁴ Traditionally, two dimensions have been distinguished: learning goal orientation, and performance goal orientation.²⁵ A learning goal orientation is the desire to develop the self by acquiring new skills, mastering new situations and improving one's competence.²³ By contrast, a performance goal orientation refers to the desire to demonstrate and validate the adequacy of one's competence relative to that of others by seeking out favourable judgements and avoiding negative judgements about one's competence.²³ Typically, these goal orientations are measured using a 13-item self-report scale devised by Vandewalle.²⁶

Goal orientations have been shown to influence individuals' cost and value perceptions of feedback-seeking behaviour.^{23,27,28} Because learning goal-oriented individuals see ability as something that can be improved over time (i.e. it is not fixed), they attribute a higher instrumental value to feedback as a means for improvement.²⁷ In addition, learning goal-oriented individuals assign lower costs to feedback inquiry than do individuals with performance-based goals.²³ Learning goal-oriented individuals conceive task failure as an invitation to increase effort and not as a threat to their image or ego. This makes them less afraid of negative feedback. In sum, a learning goal orientation leads individuals to seek feedback more frequently²³ and to have a preference for more diagnostic feedback.²⁷

Public versus private context

Ashford and Northcraft²⁹ found that individuals are less likely to seek feedback when they are observed by others than when they are in a private setting. A feedback-seeking context that includes an evaluative audience makes individuals nervous about seeking feedback. Thus, it appears that public contexts highlight potential face loss costs, which discourages feedback-seeking behaviour.

Leadership style

Levy *et al.*³⁰ showed that subordinates who see their supervisors as transformational leaders (as opposed to transactional leaders) have higher intentions of seeking feedback from their supervisor. Related to this, Chen *et al.*⁶ discovered that a high leader-member exchange (i.e. a high-quality relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate that fosters exchange and reciprocity) predicted a higher willingness in followers to seek negative feedback. In sum, the style of leadership and the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship tend to signal that the supervisor is considerate of the follower, which seems to decrease potential costs associated with feedback-seeking behaviour.

UNRESOLVED ISSUES IN THE LITERATURE

Inconsistent results regarding motives for seeking feedback

Traditionally, three types of motive have been identified in the literature on feedback seeking: (i) the instrumental motive to seek feedback in order to meet goals and regulate behaviour; (ii) the ego-based motive to seek feedback that can bolster the ego and avoid feedback that might threaten the ego, and (iii) the image-based motive to protect and enhance one's public image.³ The literature, however, has produced two sets of inconsistent results that suggest the need to reconceptualise these three motives.

The first set of inconsistent results refers to the instrumental motive. Researchers have concluded that 'in a context filled with uncertainty, the instrumental motive for seeking dominates'.⁴ It has been argued that some degree of uncertainty is often necessary for feedback to have informational value,³ which has led researchers to refer to this motive often as the uncertainty-reduction motive. Given the importance and dominance of the uncertainty-reduction motive, it is surprising that empirical studies have produced conflicting results. For example, Ashford² found a negative relationship between uncertainty and feedback-seeking behaviour. Thus, contrary to the uncertainty-reduction motive, it seems that the more uncertainty individuals experience, the less they seek feedback, and vice versa. Research has also shown that feedback-seeking behaviour does not always reduce uncertainty. Ashford³¹ found that in the context of an organisational transition, individuals who sought more feedback tended to experience more uncertainty-related stress 6 months later. These

results are unexpected based on the uncertainty-reduction motive and thus call for a more comprehensive understanding.

Inconsistencies in the literature are also found for the ego-based motive. The ego-based motive posits that feedback from others is typically not very neutral to the feedback receiver because it can contain unfavourable information. Sometimes, feedback may hurt an individual's self-esteem. Therefore, it is usually expected that individuals will refrain from feedback seeking when it is too threatening to the ego.³² However, as Table 1 shows, the relationship between self-esteem and feedback-seeking behaviour is not straightforward and different studies have reported both positive and negative, as well as insignificant, relationships. Again, these results are unexpected based on the ego-based motive and thus call for a reconsideration of the traditional motives for seeking feedback.

The 'black box' of feedback reactions

Feedback-seeking behaviour can aid performance in several ways. For example, the information gained through feedback can direct individuals' efforts towards more effective performance behaviours and plans, and can aid them to correct mistakes at an early stage. Although several mechanisms have been postulated, few studies have empirically explored the specific processes underlying the relationship between feedback seeking and performance. In a notable exception, Renn and Fedor⁵ showed that individuals who sought feedback frequently were able to improve their work performance by setting feedback-based goals. As individuals gained feedback information, they were better able to adapt their goals, which benefited their work. Most other studies, however, give little empirical attention to the question of how feedback seeking leads to enhanced performance. We need a more in-depth understanding of the intermediate steps that explain how an initial intention to seek feedback may eventually lead to better performance. To date, virtually no theory with which to open this 'black box' has emerged in the literature on feedback-seeking behaviour.

In sum, we have presented several unresolved issues concerning the motives underlying feedback-seeking behaviour, as well as the mechanisms linking feedback-seeking behaviour to performance. Together, these issues clearly call for additional theory. In the next section, we present a comprehensive framework with which to resolve these issues.

A SELF-MOTIVES PERSPECTIVE ON FEEDBACK-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

In this review paper, we build on recent theoretical work by Anseel *et al.*³² as we present a comprehensive framework for understanding feedback-seeking behaviour (i.e. the self-motives framework). Bringing together evidence from diverse research streams, this framework depicts four self-motives for feedback seeking.³³ An overview of these motives can be found in Table 2.

The first motive refers to self-assessment and represents the motive to obtain accurate information about the self. Individuals subject to this motive want to obtain an accurate and true self-image and thus to see themselves as they really are. The second motive is the self-improvement motive, which is the motive to improve one's traits, abilities and skills. Individuals subject to this motive strive for true betterment of their selves. The third motive is self-enhancement, which is the motive to enhance the favourability of self-views. Individuals subject to this motive are driven to seek and recall information that puts them in a good light, irrespective of whether this is justified or not. The fourth and final motive is self-verification, which refers to the desire to maintain consistency between one's central self-views and new self-relevant information. Individuals subject to this motive seek out self-confirming information from others to confirm their self-views and try to convey their own self-views to others.

Self-motives are determined by individual differences, as well as situational influences.^{32,33} Consider an employee who is generally driven by self-assessment motives. In the weeks preceding a promotion

decision, this individual might become more self-enhancing and try to cover up any poor performance. Choosing not to seek feedback on a poor performance, but seeking feedback on a good performance episode might impede the development of an accurate self-view, but heighten the individual's chances of obtaining promotion.

Note how individuals motivated through self-enhancement or self-verification also actively strive to convey a certain image to others. The goal of an individual driven by a self-enhancement motive is to present a favourable image of himself to others.³³ In the self-verification motive, the objective is to make others see the feedback seeker in the same way as the seeker sees himself. For instance, an individual can elicit feedback that confirms his negative self-views about his ability to speak in public: 'I'm not very good at public speaking, am I?'

Resolving current issues in the literature on feedback seeking

The first issue relates to the inconsistent relationships found for the traditional uncertainty-reduction motive (i.e. instrumental motive) for seeking feedback. The review showed that uncertainty can lead individuals to seek less feedback and that feedback-seeking behaviour can increase uncertainty-related stress over time. Although these findings seem to contradict the traditional perspective on motives for seeking feedback, they make more sense from a self-motives perspective.

When a self-verification motive is activated in the feedback-seeking process, individuals who are more certain about a particular self-view often take more

Table 2 Overview of self-motives

Motive	Description	Behavioural example
Self-assessment	Motive to obtain accurate information about the self	Choosing diagnostic tasks that provide accurate feedback
Self-improvement	Motive to improve one's traits, abilities and skills	Working on challenging projects that can stimulate learning
Self-enhancement	Motive to enhance the favourability of self-views	Seeking positive feedback after a mediocre performance
Self-verification	Motive to maintain consistency between one's central self-views and new self-relevant information	Seeking confirming negative feedback after a bad performance

action to confirm this self-view.³⁴ Thus, it is possible that people experiencing high levels of certainty seek more feedback to obtain self-verifying feedback,³⁵ and that individuals who are uncertain about a particular self-view will seek less feedback. Future research should illuminate when uncertainty leads to feedback-seeking behaviour and when feedback seeking reduces uncertainty by explicitly taking into account the roles of different self-motives.

Secondly, inconsistent relationships have been found for the ego-based motive. More specifically, studies have reported positive, negative and insignificant relationships between self-esteem and feedback-seeking behaviour. In line with the self-motives perspective, a study by Bernichon *et al.*³⁶ showed that individuals with high self-esteem sought self-verifying feedback, even if it was negative, but those with low self-esteem sought positive feedback, even if it was non-self-verifying. As such, a self-motives perspective might help to explain the differences in the feedback-seeking tendencies of individuals with, respectively, high and low self-esteem.

Thirdly, we argued that theory and research concerning the mechanisms guiding the effect of feedback-seeking behaviour on performance are lacking. When we look at this issue from a self-motives perspective, the literature indicates that the self-motives that influence feedback seeking are crucial in determining feedback reactions. Two factors are deemed especially important when considering feedback reactions: feedback processing, and feedback acceptance.³⁷

Firstly, feedback processing represents how deeply and accurately the recipient cognitively processes the feedback from a given source.³⁷ Research has found that self-motives influence the recall and processing of self-relevant information.³³ In comparison with self-enhancement and self-verification, especially the self-assessment and self-improvement motives lead to deep processing of feedback information.³⁸ For example, individuals with a self-enhancement motive tend to remember feedback on success better than feedback on failure³⁹ and spend more time reading favourable than unfavourable information about themselves.⁴⁰

Secondly, feedback must be accepted in order to have an effect on behaviour.³⁷ For example, individuals with a self-verification motive are more likely to dismiss self-refuting feedback as inaccurate and devalue the credibility of the source of self-refuting feedback.³³

Together, these aspects of the feedback process illustrate that feedback must be processed deeply and be accepted in order to have an effect on performance. The self-motives perspective can provide an integrative framework for future research investigating different aspects of the feedback process, such as how and when individuals seek feedback and how they react to feedback they receive. This should result in a better understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the relationship between the seeking of feedback and performance.

CONCLUSIONS

Suggestions for future research

The self-motives framework provides a more comprehensive perspective for the study of feedback-seeking behaviour. More specifically, we have shown how this framework can aid in unravelling some of the inconsistent results concerning the traditional instrumental and ego-based motives, as well as improve our understanding of how and when feedback seeking leads to performance improvement.

Although the framework was developed on the basis of a large stream of empirical evidence, it is still best thought of as a set of working hypotheses awaiting further empirical testing.³³ As such, several avenues for future research exist. Building on the self-motives framework, researchers might look for individual and situational antecedents of feedback-seeking behaviour that have been overlooked in the previous literature on feedback seeking. In addition, researchers have mostly adopted experimental approaches to study self-motives (for an overview, see³³). More recently, researchers have begun to adopt survey approaches.⁴¹ Accordingly, future research should take the self-motives framework from the laboratory to the field for empirical testing and refinement.

Encouraging feedback-seeking behaviour in medical settings and medical education

On the basis of the literature reviewed, we present six recommendations that are intended to encourage feedback-seeking behaviour in work and educational settings.

- 1 Encourage individuals with low performance expectations to seek feedback so that they can correct errors and learn from them.^{42,43}

Emphasise that errors and mistakes are accepted as a normal part of the learning process and create an environment that is psychologically safe.⁴⁴

- 2 Encourage feedback seeking during the socialisation periods of newcomers by means of special orientation programmes, social events and mentoring.⁴⁵
- 3 Make sure sufficient feedback is provided to individuals who have extensive tenure or job experience, even when they do not seek feedback themselves.^{2,46}
- 4 Design training programmes in order to develop the learning goal orientations of individuals (e.g. by changing the attributions individuals make about success and failure). Use developmental performance appraisal systems in which feedback is provided on the individual's own performance rather than on the individual's performance relative to the performance of others.^{23,28} Map goal orientations of individuals and customise feedback systems.⁴⁷
- 5 Use information technology and communication media in order to encourage feedback seeking, such as by registering, tracking and displaying performance statistics. Provide alternative avenues for privately seeking feedback (e.g. a helpdesk or an intranet) so that the cost of seeking feedback publicly can be diminished.^{29,43}
- 6 Train leaders in different strategies for encouraging feedback seeking, such as by showing consideration and supportiveness,^{14,48} by concealing a bad mood,^{17,49} and by using a transformational leadership style.³⁰

The literature reviewed shows that feedback-seeking behaviour has important consequences for the adaptation and socialisation, learning and creativity, and performance of the individual. In this review, we present several individual and contextual factors that influence feedback-seeking behaviour. On the basis of the self-motives framework, we aim to stimulate future research on the relationship of feedback-seeking behaviour with uncertainty and self-esteem, and on reactions to feedback following feedback-seeking behaviour. Encouraging the application of the literature reviewed, we provide six evidence-based insights to stimulate feedback-seeking behaviour in work and educational settings.

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