



7 Principles of highly effective managerial feedback: Theory and practice in managerial development interventions



Rouxelle de Villiers*

Business and Law School, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 June 2012

Received in revised form 10 October 2012

Accepted 18 January 2013

Keywords:

Coaching

Competencies

Education

Executive development

Feedback

Instructional methodology

Managerial development

ABSTRACT

Feedback is generally regarded as a crucial and powerful instructional technique to improve knowledge and skills within managerial development interventions – both in educational and in executive coaching situations. Within the substantial body of feedback intervention research, results on the efficacy of feedback vary dramatically, ranging from negative to neutral to positive. This paper addresses scholars' call for improved conceptual models and develops a conceptual framework which takes into account feedback's multifaceted role as well as the complex nature and structure of feedback within the contexts of both managerial development in the classroom and within organizations. This paper analyses the prior literature and evidence from a wide range of disciplines. A framework of five constructs and seven principles for constructive feedback interventions is then proposed. Finally the analysis concludes with the identification of guidelines for educationists, managers and executive coaches on the application of the model.

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1. Introduction

Feedback is generally regarded as a crucial and powerful instructional technique to improve knowledge and skills within a wide range of educational contexts (Azevedo & Bernard, 1995; Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Epstein, Lazarus, Calvano, Matthews, Hendel, & Epstein, 2002; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Pridemore & Klein, 1995; Race, 1998; Sadler, 1983). Similarly, feedback is regarded as a significant factor in competency development in the executive coaching domain (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Gregory, Levy, & Jeffers, 2008; Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Within the large body of feedback research covering more than 50 years of research on the efficacy and impact of feedback on learning and performance, results vary dramatically (Butler & Winnie, 1995; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Kulhavy & Stock, 1989; Shute, 2008). Therefore, it is hard to discern what constitutes effective feedback.

Although widely cited as an important learning and teaching methodology and facilitator of improved performance (Fedor, 1991; Ilgen et al., 1979; Shute, 2008), some authors report on the limited, neutral or debilitating effect of feedback (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Baron, 1993; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). This study will focus on conceptualizing a model for constructive, consequential or effective developmental feedback.

Scholars consistently point out the need for a better understanding of the role of feedback in competency development (Azevedo & Bernard, 1995; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Gregory et al., 2008; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Shute, 2008). This paper addresses these scholars' call for improved conceptual models and develops a conceptual model within the context of classroom and organizational managerial development interventions. Management development interventions are all events,

* Centre for Business Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty of Business and Law, AUT University, Level 1, 46 Wakefield Street, Auckland 1020, New Zealand. Tel.: +64 9 921 9999x5047, +64 21 82 81 80 (mobile).

E-mail address: rdevilli@aut.ac.nz.

inter-actions or communication (in person or in writing, people-generated or computer-generated) that lead to improvement in knowledge, skills or attributes of managers. The model offers seven core principles that need to be in place to achieve effective feedback. The paper concludes with guidelines for practitioners and curriculum designers to ensure that good feedback contributes to learning outcomes and individual performance levels.

An extensive literature review contributes to the feedback literature by providing the first integrated model that can be used to guide both practitioners and academics in their assessment and application of feedback. Although the study is exploratory, it provides the basis for future research and a framework for development of practical applications within the organizational context – either within coaching interventions or as part of development forums within organizations.

The next section of this article covers feedback as it relates to the organizational environment, followed by a brief overview of feedback as an educational development tool. The section thereafter explains the conceptual model and the seven principles of highly effective feedback.

2. Feedback to enhance managerial learning and development

Management development takes place in development interventions ranging from studies in educational institutions, to on-the job and formal organizational development interventions (DIs). The next two sections review the extant literature in these two domains.

2.1. Organizational feedback

A number of papers and journal articles which inform this study, highlight the importance of reflection stimulated through regular, honest, objective and challenging feedback provided by either a coach and/or colleagues exposed to the behavior of the coached executive (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Hall et al., 1999; Hill & Gudmundsun, 2010; Joo, 2005; Levenson, 2009; Luthans & Peterson, 2003; Sherman & Freas, 2004; Thach, 2002). This type of honest performance and behavioral feedback is generally not readily available from the learner's colleagues since they fear repercussions, lack the skills and are afraid of upsetting their peers or seniors. Peers and colleagues hence provide “nice” feedback which may lack in truthfulness, platitudes which lack in specificity or is ambiguous. The “nice” feedback provided is useless and deprives the executive of crucial information they need to develop and grow (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1969; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Some key outcomes of effective performance feedback recorded in the coaching literature are: improved relationships, behavioral changes, improved self-awareness and greater levels of emotional intelligence (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002). To grow these capabilities, managers need “honest information on leadership capabilities [which] is vital to a leaders' self-awareness and, therefore, his growth and effectiveness” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 95).

Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 81) open their paper entitled *The Power of Feedback* with this sentence: “Feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement, but this impact can be either positive or negative... The type of feedback and the way it is given can be differentially effective.” Although generally accepted that feedback is “a good thing” and provides people with insights not otherwise available, there is evidence that feedback interventions have variable effects on performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Latham & Locke, 1991).

Feedback interventions (FIs) do improve performance on average, but in more than a third of cases performance is reduced by feedback. Referring to *Feedback Intervention Theory* (FIT), the authors (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998, p. 69) posit that “regulation of feedback-standard discrepancies, locus of attention, and task complexity” may explain the negative effect of FI on some individuals.

2.2. Educational feedback

In this paper feedback, as it relates to the educational environment, is defined as conceptualized by Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 81): “information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding”... “It occurs typically after instruction that seeks to provide knowledge and skills or to develop particular attitudes” (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 102). In the educational environment *feedback interventions* (FI) are all events, including inter-actions of either inter-person verbal or in written format that provides feedback to the learner. The FI may be formative or summative (Brown, 2005; Race, 2010) and may be provided by lecturers, student peers in collective feedback, by team or group members, interviews with practitioners or experts in the field, or computer-generated feedback in response to on-online assignments, or other means (Brown, Rust, & Gibbs, 1994). Sadler (1989, p. 120) provides concise definitions of these both categories: “Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning. Summative contrasts with formative assessment in that [the former] is concerned with summing up or summarizing the achievement status of a student, and is geared toward reporting at the end of a course of study especially for purposes of certification. It is essentially passive and does not normally have immediate impact on learning, although it often influences decisions which may have profound educational and personal consequences for the student.” (Sadler, 1989, p. 120).

A meta-analysis executed by Bangert-Downs et al. (1991, p. 214), emphasizes the link between learning and feedback in the statement: “any theory that depicts learning as a process of mutual influence between learners and their environments must involve feedback implicitly or explicitly because, without feedback, mutual influence is by definition impossible”. The

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