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Agile learning strategies for sustainable careers: a review and integrated model of feedback-seeking behavior and reflection

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Learning agility has been identified as one of the most important 21st century skills for sustainable careers. In recent years, research findings on reflection and feedback-seeking behavior, two closely related behavioral strategies driving learning agility have quickly accumulated. We summarize our current knowledge on these two agile learning strategies, identify ways how organizations can support them and explain how they work as two sides of the same coin. Our review shows that both reflection and feedback-seeking behavior are instrumental in enhancing learning, performance, adaptability, and well-being. However, to fully benefit from their potential, we need to better understand how these two strategies work in concert. To this end, we provide a model that may help integrate reflection and feedback-seeking behavior research in the future.

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Introduction

Quickly adapting to changing environments, flexibly navigating job transitions and eagerly mastering new technologies is becoming increasingly important in today's career environment [1]. Given the increased self-directedness of contemporary careers, taking charge of one's own learning is pivotal for employees for sustained employability in terms of satisfying, healthy and long careers in a volatile labor market [2]. As a result, learning agility, 'the ability to come up to speed quickly in one's understanding of a situation and move across ideas flexibly in service of learning both within and across experiences' ([3], p. 262) has been identified as one of the most important 21st skills for sustainable careers.

A critical conceptual analysis of learning agility [3] shows how the construct fits into a broader framework of constructs related to learning from experience, with specific focus on the cognitive and behavioral processes through which learning agility operates. Building on this framework, we review research findings on two key behavioral strategies driving learning agility that have accumulated quickly in the last decades. While we acknowledge the diversity of behaviors encompassing learning agility, we have gathered a good evidence base on how employees can strategically use reflection and feedback-seeking behavior to manage their learning, effectiveness, adaptativeness, and well-being. Hence, the aim of the current paper is to summarize our current knowledge on these two learning strategies, identify ways how organizations can support them and explain how they work as two sides of the same coin. To this end, we provide a model that may help integrate reflection and feedback-seeking behavior in future research.

Feedback-seeking behavior

Employees are not passively waiting for supervisors to give them feedback but are proactively navigating their work environment, seeking out feedback information wherever they can get it and whenever they need it. This line of research depicts feedback seeking as a valuable resource for individuals because it may facilitate their adaptation to new environments, help them monitor goal progress, and potentially improve performance [4]. Feedback seeking behavior (FSB) has attracted a lot of attention over the past three decades due to its presumed role as a driver of learning and task performance (e.g. [5,6]).

Defining and conceptualizing feedback-seeking behavior

Defined as a 'conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states' ([7], p. 466), feedback-seeking behavior is instrumental proactive behavior for work adjustment, particularly in contexts where uncertainty and ambiguity prevail [8,9]. Following the tenets of uncertainty reduction theory [10], FSB helps to get information useful for navigating in uncertain environments, reducing the anxiety uncertainty may cause, and self-regulating one's behavior. Studies addressed

different aspects of feedback seeking: firstly, the method used to seek feedback, secondly, the frequency of feedback-seeking behavior, thirdly, the timing of feedback seeking, fourthly, the characteristics of the target of feedback seeking, and finally, the performance dimension on which feedback is sought. Although each of these aspects received some attention, most of the literature aimed to understand the antecedents and consequences of the frequency with which employees use two methods of feedback seeking [11••]: inquiry and monitoring. Individuals seek feedback through inquiry when they directly ask others (e.g. their supervisor or co-workers) for feedback. Conversely, feedback monitoring implies scanning the work environment and other people's behavior in order to glean for information that can be used for privately evaluating one's own performance without directly asking anyone.

Deciding on the method to seek feedback results from an internal cost-value analysis [5]. For instance, although inquiry is a useful method to learn how others evaluate one's performance, individuals often report concerns relating to the risks associated with direct feedback seeking. Employees may not want to burden their supervisor or appear insecure to others by seeking feedback. When seeking feedback in public, negative feedback can come at the risk of losing face [12]. This makes feedback monitoring the safer option, although the feedback obtained accordingly may be less informative and difficult to interpret. Conversely, employees may also use feedback-seeking behavior as a deliberate impression-management strategy to convey a favorable image to their supervisor or colleagues. In fact, employees might strategically decide to seek feedback on successes or on certain aspects of their performance when they are aware that positive feedback will follow (e.g. after a successful presentation). Thus, by openly seeking positive feedback and avoiding negative feedback, employees may find that strategically managing their feedback-seeking behavior can help them protect their self-esteem while at the same time presenting a favorable image to others [13].

The question about the underlying motives that drive or refrain individuals to seek feedback has proven a particularly fruitful domain of study. Although various motives have been proposed to underlie FSB (e.g. [4,14]), generally three main motives have been distinguished (e.g. [4,5,7,15]). First, an instrumental motive is assumed to drive FSB when individuals find value in obtaining information that helps them reduce uncertainty, improve performance, attain their goals, and regulate their behaviors. Second, an image-based motive (or self-presentation motive) would be elicited when the feedback is perceived to potentially convey a negative evaluation of one's competencies, thereby revealing negative aspects about oneself toward others, or when positive feedback is sought for enhancing one's image toward others. Third, an ego-based motive is activated when the feedback is perceived to be costly to, or threaten, one's ego and self-esteem.

The conclusion of this overview is that it might be naive to expect that people seek feedback solely driven by the desire to obtain accurate diagnostic information for improving their performance. Feedback-seeking behavior results from a complex cost-benefit analysis wherein different motives compete for attention [14,16]. This means on the one hand that feedback obtained from feedback-seeking efforts may not always be the best depiction of one's performance level. On the other hand, it remains unclear to what extent feedback-seekers will deeply process the resulting feedback and use it for regulating learning and performance.

Outcomes of feedback-seeking behavior

Three categories of outcomes have been examined: firstly, learning and performance, secondly, adaptation and socialization, thirdly, wellbeing. First, several studies have documented positive effects of feedback-seeking behavior on job performance [17••]. For instance, Renn and Fedor [6] found that sales employees who sought feedback more frequently realized higher sales' revenues (i.e. average sales per hour) and obtained higher ratings for the quality of their work (i.e. service quality). Through feedback seeking, individuals can also develop creativity-relevant skills and gain fresh perspectives on their idea. For instance, De Stobbeleir *et al.* [18] found that employees who sought more direct feedback and who sought feedback from a variety of targets showed higher creativity at work.

Second, feedback-seeking behavior has been regarded as one of the most important proactive behaviors that can be used by newcomers to get information for reducing uncertainty and navigating more efficiently through the socialization period [19–23]. Studies have shown that newcomers integrate better in their new social environment by seeking feedback [9,24]. Also, individuals who seek feedback in their first months in a new organization tend to have a more accurate view of their role in the organization [4,25].

Third, feedback-seeking behavior has been linked to higher job satisfaction, lower intentions to leave the organization and lower actual turnover [26••]. By seeking feedback, individuals also build better connections with both leaders and colleagues [11••]. In sum, feedback-seeking behavior has important consequences for individuals' adaptation, wellbeing, and performance, making it an important strategy driving learning agility.

Implications for organizations and future research

Given the potential benefits of seeking feedback, organizations may want to encourage individuals with low performance expectations to seek feedback [27]. As being