



# Evaluative feedback delivery and the factors that affect success

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the factors that can affect the credibility, influence, and utility of evaluative feedback. These factors include the delivery strategy, accuracy, and type (positive/negative) of feedback provided. In this study over 500 participants were asked to complete a task, and were then randomly assigned to different conditions with varied feedback delivery methods, feedback accuracy, and types of feedback (positive/negative). Then they were asked questions about the feedback's credibility, influence, and utility.

Evaluators provide feedback to a broad stakeholder audience when they report to community members, media outlets, and interested members of the public. This type of communication hopefully engages the audience in a reflective endeavor that ultimately leads to utility. The challenge with presenting results to such a broad audience is the lack of personal connection—or personal factor (Patton, 2008)—which contributes to the credibility and potential influence or utility of the evaluation findings (Donaldson, Christie, & Mark, 2008). However, there may be other effective ways to communicate feedback without the presence of the personal factor. To gain a better understanding of the dynamics of sharing evaluation data with stakeholders with no previous connection to the evaluator, we studied the effects of different factors—including the type (positive/negative) and accuracy of the evaluation findings and feedback delivery strategies—on the perceived credibility, influence, and utility of the feedback.

Our approach to understanding this dynamic was influenced by information/message delivery research in the field of psychology (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Lizzio et al., 2008; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). This study aims to adapt some of the findings from the psychology literature to an evaluation situation. The hope is to examine how the factors identified in this area of research can be useful to the delivery of evaluative findings. In this study we chose to focus on three main feedback factors that include 1) the feedback delivery strategies, 2) the type of feedback (positive/negative), and 3) the feedback accuracy. The following provides a summary of the relevant literature to help explain each of these factors.

## 1. Feedback delivery models

Feedback delivery researchers have developed models to assess

feedback processes to better understand their relationship to performance. We have focused on an early model that forms one of the most comprehensive models for feedback delivery (Mark, Donaldson, & Campbell, 2011). This feedback delivery model, proposed by Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor (1979), highlighted the importance of feedback source, feedback informational value, and the interaction between goal and feedback specificity. The feedback source refers to the individual delivering the feedback, and the model and research evidence suggests that highly credible sources would increase the chances of recipients paying attention to the feedback. The informational value of the feedback describes the importance or relevance of the feedback offered. For example, if the feedback is about a task that is of no interest to the recipient then its likelihood of being used or viewed as credible is greatly diminished. Related to this component is the interaction between goal and feedback specificity. If the performance goals for a recipient are general and the feedback is general then the likelihood of utilizing the feedback is diminished. In contrast if the recipient's performance goals are specific, and the feedback is also specific, then the likelihood of feedback utilization increases. The authors of this model continued its development, and added feedback accuracy as another critical component of the feedback process (Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984). The perceived accuracy is a crucial factor in how an individual reacts to feedback. For example, depending on the recipient's perception of the feedback's accuracy, he or she may choose to use the feedback to improve and progress towards a goal or ignore it entirely. There have been other refinements to this model that explore the impact of factors such as the neutrality of the feedback (Brockner & Higgins, 2001), and the use of normative feedback (Schultz, 1999). But the core factors that were introduced in the original model remained the same, and we elected to focus on these as we explore their potential

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implications for the evaluation community.

### 1.1. Types of feedback

The Ilgen et al. (1979) and Taylor et al. (1984) models also attempted to categorize the different feedback results that can be received. The most basic way to categorize results is by type (positive or negative), which is a key predictor of how recipients respond to the feedback (Ilgen et al., 1979; Taylor et al., 1984). Not surprisingly, negative feedback is the least preferred feedback result (London, 2003). There is also strong preference for positive feedback, as most people would rather be praised because they are doing well on a task than be corrected (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009).

Other types of feedback include process and outcome feedback. The former refers to information about how a task has been performed; the latter is the general assessment of the overall result of performing a task (Earley, Northcraft, Lee, & Lituchy, 1990; Nyquist, 2003). Process feedback may be more useful for providing information on how to improve before a task has been completed, and it may be delivered at any point. This differs from outcome feedback, which occurs after the task has been completed. Process feedback is conceptually similar to formative evaluation, and outcome feedback is similar to summative evaluation (Scriven, 1994), which comes after a program has been completed. Psychology researchers have also noted that outcome feedback can be considered more evaluative in nature because the overall performance of an individual or a program is being judged (Medvedeff, Gregory, & Levy, 2008).

Researchers have also attempted to uncover the optimal mix of positive, negative, process, and outcome feedback for increasing recipients' motivation to seek further feedback and utilize the information provided (Medvedeff et al., 2008; Wilson, Boni, & Hogg, 1997; Nyquist, 2003). In one study, participants were assigned to one of four different feedback type combinations and their feedback motivation was assessed (Medvedeff et al., 2008). These combinations included: (a) positive process feedback, (b) negative process feedback, (c) positive outcome feedback, and (d) negative outcome feedback. They found that those in the negative process feedback condition were most likely to seek further feedback so they could learn how to improve on the task.

These different types of feedback are important to note, as our field frequently engages in the act of sharing evaluation information. As noted the most difficult or challenging feedback to deliver is outcome feedback that is negative. This is why our study focused on outcome feedback, and attempts to explore strategies that can help us deliver it effectively.

### 1.2. Feedback delivery strategies

In the organizational psychology literature, Lizzio et al. (2008) has identified four feedback delivery strategies that can potentially be adapted for a general audience, but have yet to be tested in that domain. The first is referred to as “To the Point.” According to Lizzio et al. (2008), this is a unidirectional strategy—when the feedback is delivered, it travels one way, and the recipient does not have an opportunity to respond or to have an active role in the process. The second strategy is called the “Before” strategy. Here, the recipient is asked how he or she performed on the evaluation before receiving the feedback. The third, called the “After” strategy, involves asking the recipient about his or her thoughts on the results after the feedback is delivered. The final strategy, “Before and After,” actively engages the recipient in a dialogue throughout the feedback delivery process. Specifically, the recipient is asked to comment on his or her performance before receiving the feedback, and for his or her thoughts about the feedback after receiving it (Lizzio et al., 2008). According to Lizzio et al. (2008) the most effective strategies were the “After” and “Before and After” strategies that allowed recipients to respond to feedback. This suggests that allowing stakeholders to have a role in the feedback process may be an effective

technique for evaluation practitioners.

### 1.3. Feedback outcomes

Within this study we are attempting to focus on three outcomes related to feedback delivery, which include the feedback's usefulness, influence, and credibility. The utility and influence have been discussed extensively in the evaluation field, while less attention has been given towards credibility (Jacobson & Azzam, 2016). The heavier emphasis on evaluation use and influence (Alkin & Taut, 2002; Kirkhart, 2000), can potentially be explained by the evaluation field's service orientation, which stresses the use of evaluation feedback for program improvement and development (Patton, 2008). It can also be argued that if evaluations do not achieve change or have an impact, then the long-term relevance of the field is ultimately in jeopardy.

The debates within evaluation have attempted to define what is meant by change/impact of evaluation feedback. The simplest conceptualization of this change/impact is the idea that evaluators provide stakeholders with feedback about a program then this information is directly used in decision making to change the program and this type of use is frequently referred to as instrumental use (Alkin & Taut, 2002). However, this conceptualization misses many other ways in which evaluative feedback can affect programs. For example, information and feedback from the evaluation can change how stakeholders think about and understand the program and its impact (conceptual use), or engagement in the evaluation can result in changes to stakeholders' thinking and behaviors (process use) (Patton, 2008). There are also more subtle ways in which feedback can affect the program and stakeholders, for example, an evaluation can be used for symbolic purposes to persuade or legitimate a decision that has been already made about a program (Alkin & Taut, 2002). There is also evaluation “influence”, which is defined as “the capacity or power of persons or things to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means” (Kirkhart, 2000; p.7). Scholars of evaluation influence have developed models that map out how to conceptualize the potential influence of the evaluation process and receiving evaluation feedback (Mark & Henry, 2004; Henry & Mark, 2003). For example, Kirkhart divides evaluation influence into three dimensions: source, intention, and time. *Source of influence* is an element that initiates change. Source is divided into the evaluation process and results from the evaluation. *Intention of influence* is placed on a continuum of unintended and intended influence of the evaluation or evaluation feedback. Intended influence is a purposeful attempt for the feedback to have some level of influence on stakeholders, programs, communities, and systems. Unintended influence is the unforeseen, unanticipated products of evaluation feedback.

The final element in Kirkhart's model refers to the temporal periods in which influence exists. Kirkhart divides this into immediate, end-of-cycle, and long-term influence. Immediate influence is influence that takes place during the lifespan of the evaluation process. Kirkhart notes that this could take place over the course of months or years, depending on the length of the evaluation. End-of-cycle influence refers to influence after the evaluation has ended. This could be the end of a summative or formative reporting cycle. Long-term influence describes the impact that the evaluation has in the distant future, outside of an evaluation cycle.

Henry and Mark (2003) created a framework that differentiates three levels of evaluation influence: individual attitudes and behaviors, interpersonal behaviors, and collective action in both public and private organizations. Borrowing from different areas of social science research to develop mechanisms within each level of influence, Henry and Mark (2003) utilized social psychology to include elements such as attitude change, priming, persuasion, and social norms to organize the various influence outcomes that may occur. At the individual level evaluation feedback can change attitudes, at the interpersonal it can lead to modifications in social norms, and at the collective level it can impact agendas and policies (Henry & Mark, 2003).

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