



2011

Don't Be Such a Downer: Using Positive Psychology to Enhance the Value of Negative Feedback

Allison L. O'Malley
Butler University, aomalley@butler.edu

Jane B. Gregory

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers



Part of the [Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

O'Malley, A. L., & Gregory, J. B. (2011). Don't be such a downer: Using positive psychology to enhance the value of negative feedback. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 14, 247-264. doi: 10.1080/10887156.2011.621776 Available from digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/446/

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Don't Be Such a Downer: Using Positive Psychology to Enhance the Value of Negative Feedback

Alison L. O'Malley
Butler University;

Jane Brodie Gregory
Washington & Lee University

Effective developmental feedback promotes a balanced and authentic view of employees' current state, thereby addressing strengths and weaknesses of employees. The authors address how organizations' increased emphasis on positivity can be reconciled with the delivery of negative feedback. Drawing on principles from positive psychology, the authors outline strategies managers can implement to increase the likelihood that negative feedback interventions will yield improved performance while promoting employee well-being.

"This article may not exactly replicate the final version published in the APA journal. It is not the copy of record."

A primary goal of performance management is to foster employees' sustained ability to change and improve (Aguinis, 2009). Despite its decidedly positive orientation, performance management can involve setbacks and discouraging outcomes such as negative performance feedback. Many managers deal with the potential for negativity by avoiding negative feedback exchanges (e.g., Moss & Sanchez, 2004), therein doing organization members a disservice by withholding information that can target areas for behavior change, drive employee development, and ultimately improve work performance (e.g., Medvedeff, Gregory, & Levy, 2008; Smither & Walker, 2004). In the context of annual performance management cycles, managers may withhold informal negative feedback throughout the year only to blindside employees with a negative review at the end of the performance cycle.

Organization members may justify their aversion to negative feedback by citing the high failure rate of feedback interventions. A meta-analysis by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded that feedback interventions reduce performance more than one third of the time. Feedback needs to be perceived as accurate and constructive in order to enable behavior change (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984), and without thoughtful delivery negative feedback is unlikely to generate such perceptions in the feedback recipient. Even merely satisfactory feedback (e.g., telling employees that they “meet expectations” as opposed to “exceed expectations”) is linked to negative consequences such as decreased organizational commitment (Pearce & Porter, 1986).

Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) commonly cited directive to enhance the effectiveness of feedback interventions by keeping the feedback focused on the task rather than the task's enactor does not redress the powerful self-protective processes that automatically accompany the receipt of negative feedback messages (e.g., Ilies, De Pater, & Judge, 2007). For feedback to have a

positive effect on performance, employees need to accept and act upon the feedback information they receive (Anseel & Lievens, 2009). Unfortunately, employees often cope with negative feedback by dismissing the feedback as inaccurate (Anseel & Lievens, 2006). One way to mitigate this tendency to reject negative feedback messages is to prime strategies that enable employees to more effectively regulate the negative emotion aroused by the feedback message and to focus their attention on the message contents. We argue that implementing perspectives from the positive psychology literature can increase the likelihood that negative feedback interventions will facilitate performance improvement. Our goal is to expose our audience of psychologist-managers to strategies that help employees regulate their emotions more effectively when confronted with negative feedback.

POSITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Negative feedback may seem irreconcilable within a positive framework given positive psychology's inherent focus on personal strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). We maintain, however, that positive perspectives also have an important place when attention shifts to people's weaknesses. Effective developmental feedback promotes a balanced and authentic view of the employee's current state. We believe that this notion of balance often gets lost when scholars and practitioners approach organizational behavior from a positive perspective, a concern echoed by Fineman (2006) and Kaiser (2009). Positive psychology is often applied within a one-sided framework in which the focus is purely on personal strengths. The proliferation of tools such as StrengthsFinder (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Rath, 2007) and the Reflected Best Self Portrait (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005) reflect this perspective by offering people information about their signature strengths, largely neglecting areas that employees should target for improvement and ignoring the important role that negative feedback plays in self-regulation.

We wish to emphasize that we are not advocating a deficit perspective wherein employees' weaknesses are disproportionately emphasized during feedback interventions; rather, we are advocating a balanced perspective within which negative feedback has a rightful place (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011).

The practice of singularly focusing on the positive is consistent with hedonism, or the motivation to approach pleasure and avoid pain (see Kahneman, Diener, & Schwartz, 1999). An alternative conceptualization of happiness is afforded by eudemonic well-being (Waterman, 1993), which emphasizes existing as one's true self (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). A key aspect of such an existence is authenticity—an awareness and acceptance of one's positive and negative attributes (Kernis, 2003). In essence, to experience authentic self-awareness, it is critical to know about one's strengths and weaknesses (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This notion of authenticity is prevalent in the leadership literature (e.g., Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005), but has been not been acknowledged in the performance management literature.

In this article, we establish the importance of negative feedback in the development process and discuss the manner in which people tend to respond to negative feedback. Next, we recommend empirically based strategies that feedback givers can employ to foster positive emotions that can undo the negative emotions aroused by negative feedback (Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). We also argue that fostering positive emotions during negative feedback exchanges has significant downstream consequences including greater feedback acceptance and use, a more positive feedback orientation, increased positive psychological capital, and enhanced performance. Our arguments are summarized in the model

presented in Figure 1, which draws upon Fredrickson's (2000, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions and performance management research (e.g., London & Smither, 2002).

THE VALUE OF NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback can assume a variety of forms, and perhaps the most common way of conceptualizing feedback information is by considering its valence. It is not surprising that positive feedback tends to be more desirable to employees and more readily accepted upon its delivery (e.g., Brett & Atwater, 2001; Fecteau, Fecteau, Schoel, Russell, & Poteet, 1998; Stone & Stone, 1985); whereas negative feedback tends to be avoided, mitigated, or outright rejected (Moss & Sanchez, 2004). Although negative feedback is often portrayed as a painful motivation killer—the self-determination literature espouses this view by linking negative feedback to lower levels of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000)—ample empirical evidence suggests that negative feedback can guide performance improvement.

Control theory approaches to self-regulation view behavior as goal-directed and feedback-controlled; that is, people use feedback to evaluate their performance relative to their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Control theory rests on the assumption that when disparities between the current level of performance and the target (i.e., goal) level of performance are perceived, people are motivated to reduce them (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Taylor et al., 1984). Negative performance feedback explicitly directs attention to performance-goal discrepancies, motivating people to try harder or to shift behavioral strategies in order to reduce the discrepancy between their current state and the standard (e.g., Podsakoff & Farh, 1989). Bandura and Cervone (1986) found that self-dissatisfaction triggered the increased effort that enabled participants to bridge the gap and attain the performance standard. One implication of Bandura and Cervone's (1986) findings is that the process of self-improvement often entails a brief period

of discomfort. Of course, such discomfort should not be prolonged. Repeated negative feedback will almost certainly backfire; feedback recipients will instead reject the feedback or lower the standard rather than try harder to attain the desired level of performance (e.g., Campion & Lord, 1982).

Despite the necessity of negative feedback for increasing awareness of sub-optimal performance and guiding learning and development efforts, supervisors tend to be reluctant to give negative feedback (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Larson, 1986; Moss & Martinko, 1998). Many managers testify that giving negative feedback to subordinates is one of the most unpleasant tasks they face (Veiga, 1988). Research on the *mum effect*—the hesitancy of individuals to transmit undesirable news—suggests that people will delay providing bad news as long as possible (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Baron (1988, 1990) detailed how the tendency to postpone negative feedback backfires as managers abstain from criticism until their annoyance essentially overflows and they provide feedback in a destructive manner, thereby virtually ensuring its rejection. Negative feedback messages also tend to be more ambiguous in an effort to make them more palatable (e.g., Geddes & Baron, 1997). Thus, negative feedback often gets watered down until it is easy to discount and virtually useless.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE GET NEGATIVE FEEDBACK?

The receipt of feedback is an intense affective event (e.g., Ilies et al., 2007). Immediate reactions to feedback are primarily affective (Shrauger, 1975). In line with the motive to self-enhance (Swann & Schroeder, 1995) and the operation of underlying behavioral activation and behavioral inhibition systems (Gray, 1990), people instinctively respond positively to favorable feedback evaluations and negatively to unfavorable feedback evaluations. Negative feedback is registered as a threat to the self that needs to be countered, and evolutionary perspectives suggest that

negative emotions prepare us to handle such threats (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). Lazarus (1991) theorized that negative feedback events trigger an emotion process (known as *primary appraisal*) that begins with feedback recipients assessing the personal meaning of the feedback. This appraisal process triggers responses (*secondary appraisals*) wherein feedback recipients assess their coping options, which include potential rejection of the feedback message (Ilgen et al., 1979).

The control precedence (Frijda, 1993) of the negative emotions aroused by negative feedback interferes with mindful processing of the message contents. The Easterbrook (1959) hypothesis suggests that anxious emotional states (characterized by high physiological arousal and negative valence) narrow the scope of perceptual attention (Cacioppo, Berntson, & Crites, 1996; Larsen & Diener, 1992). This narrowed attention is adaptive under certain circumstances (e.g., when one's life is in peril), but is detrimental in performance management contexts as attention shifts from the feedback message contents to the blow dealt to one's self-esteem. Rather than heedfully addressing the implications of the negative feedback for enhancing future performance, employees often revert to a self-protective mode that involves discounting the negative feedback (Audia & Locke, 2003; Miller & Ross, 1975). Thus, negative feedback interventions backfire when their intended cognitive effects (e.g., alerting people to performance-goal discrepancies) are derailed by negative emotional reactions (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Belschak and Den Hartog (2009) found that intense bouts of disappointment and frustration are particularly likely in the wake of negative feedback. A flare-up of some negative emotion following negative feedback is inevitable (Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010), and we focus in the next section on how positive emotions can undo resultant negative emotions.

THE VALUE OF POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive psychology researchers have built a compelling case that positive emotions play an important role in the regulation of negative emotions. Although positive emotions are fleeting, less intense, and less likely to capture our attention than negative emotions (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), experiencing them can expedite people's recovery from negative emotional experiences and build resilience to future adversity (Fredrickson, 2000). Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build hypothesis suggests that, in stark contrast with the narrowing of attention prompted by negative emotion, the broadened attention afforded by positive emotion prompts engagement in an expanded repertoire of behaviors and physical, intellectual, and social resources that ultimately prove adaptive by enabling people to recognize and take advantage of new opportunities (Fredrickson, 2000). Positive emotional states signal that the current situation is safe, and this safety signal promotes an explorative mindset that is associated with more inclusive mental categories, increased creativity, and greater receptivity to new ideas (see Isen, 2000, for a review). In essence, positive emotions undo negative emotions' stronghold on the mind (Fredrickson et al., 2000) and free people to accumulate resources that promote personal success.

In addition to speeding recovery from single stressful events (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998), the enhanced coping enabled by positive emotions is implicated in more positive emotional experiences down the road (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), thus inspiring Fredrickson and her colleagues to write of an “upward spiral” of positive emotions. Although performance management and feedback researchers have not explicitly invoked broaden-and-build theory to account for the facilitating effect of positive emotions, authors have independently recognized the value of positive emotions in feedback contexts by linking positive experiences such as

reminders of past successes to increased interest in negative feedback (e.g., Trope & Neter, 1994; Trope & Pomerantz, 1998).

WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO TO FOSTER POSITIVE EMOTIONS

When delivering negative feedback to employees, managers can engage in certain behaviors that facilitate employees' experience of positive emotions and inclination to accept and use negative feedback. Several important elements of effective feedback delivery such as focusing on the issue or behavior rather than the person (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Whetten & Cameron, 2002) and making feedback timely and specific (Baron, 1988; Ilgen et al., 1979) are already well known. Engaging in these behaviors should lead to negative feedback being construed as constructive rather than destructive, but are likely not sufficient for fostering positive emotions in the feedback recipient.

Steelman, Levy, and Snell (2004) opened the door for an exploration of the softer skills necessary for effective feedback delivery. In the feedback delivery dimension of their Feedback Environment Scale, Steelman and colleagues (2004) noted that the consideration with which a supervisor delivers feedback affects subordinates' acceptance of the feedback. We assert that the interpersonal components of a negative feedback intervention are essential to employees' positive emotional experience and subsequent likelihood of translating feedback into meaningful actions for behavior change. We build on Steelman et al.'s (2004) suggestion to show consideration in feedback delivery by incorporating several concepts grounded in positive psychology including empathy, mindful-ness, and appreciative inquiry.

Empathy

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and experience another's emotions (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006). In displaying empathy, a supervisor conveys personal interest,

reassurance, and acceptance to the subordinate (Katz, 1963). Without empathy, the supervisor may degrade the perceptions of trust and credibility that are critical to feedback acceptance (Steelman et al., 2004). Kellett and colleagues (2006) distinguished *passive* empathy—wherein managers may feel sympathy for employees but fail to influence employees' emotions—from *interactive* empathy, wherein managers exhibit leadership by creating emotional ties with employees. The displays of warmth and concern that characterize interactive empathic responding defuse tension and enable people to cope with stressful events (O'Brien, DeLongis, Pomaki, Puterman, & Zwicker, 2009). Scott, Colquitt, Paddock, and Judge (2010) examined the implications of manager empathy for employee well-being; in particular, they found that employees with empathic managers experienced more positive affect in response to goal progress. Thus, by signaling that they are emotionally attuned to their employees, managers can help employees overcome their negative emotional reactions to the negative feedback and get back on track to achieving their work goals.

Mindfulness

A rapidly growing body of literature establishes mindfulness as a core skill that facilitates people's ability to navigate difficult experiences (see Dane, 2011, for a review in a management context). Mindfulness is a psychological state cultivated by objectively focusing attention on current experience (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shear & Jevning, 1999). Thus, mindfulness entails acknowledging what one is thinking and feeling without judging these experiences (Kent & Davis, 2010). Although mindfulness is often invoked in therapeutic contexts in which individuals undergo extensive training (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1990), short-term interventions such as a 15-min focused breathing induction (Arch & Craskey, 2006) can facilitate people's ability to regulate

their emotions such that they can experience and sustain positive emotions in the aftermath of strain.

We propose that managers' mindfulness has implications for employees' emotional reactions to and acceptance of the feedback. For managers, exercising mindfulness in a feedback-delivery context entails devoting full thought and attention to the situation at hand; thus, managers should concentrate on the feedback, the employee, and the employee's emotional reactions to the feedback. This necessitates limiting distractions (e.g., off-task thoughts, technological interferences such as email or text message alerts) that would inhibit a true sense of mindfulness. In the absence of mindfulness, managers are less likely to understand how their behavior affects employees, thereby diminishing managers' capacity to experience genuine empathy (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). On the receiving end, mindful feedback recipients may be less inclined to engage in the catastrophic thinking that often accompanies bad news (e.g., "This project was a disaster ... My manager thinks I'm an idiot ... She's never going to promote me...I am going to be stuck in this role for the rest of my career").

Actively practicing mindfulness is at the discretion of the individual, and will come more easily to some (e.g., those who have experience with mindfulness-based practices such as meditation; Brown & Ryan, 2003), but all managers can make subtle comments to keep employees' attention focused on the situation at hand. For example, if an employee makes a remark about the long-term or imagined consequences of negative feedback (e.g., "I am such an idiot"), a manager can draw the employee's thinking back in to the present moment with a response such as "One isolated performance issue prompted this feedback. Let's focus on that specific issue."

Appreciative Inquiry and Visualization

Appreciative Inquiry and guided visualization can also help managers foster positive emotions during negative feedback exchanges. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a method of asking questions that prompt thinking about the ideal state and positive potential (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). At the core of AI are the notions of appreciation—that the conversation should be positive and focus on best possible outcomes, and application—that solutions or ideas should be useful and actionable (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). As such, managers can use AI to expand employees' thinking about how to use negative feedback or address developmental or performance needs in ways that are positively focused but also outcome- and action-oriented. Asking questions such as “What kinds of benefits would you experience if you addressed this performance need?” or “If you had no constraints, how would you target this development need?” can help employees consider new possibilities and explore longer-term benefits of acting on the negative feedback, as opposed to dwelling on negative emotions aroused by the feedback. Bushe and Kassam (2005) noted that one reason AI is so effective is because it not only changes what people do, but also how they think. Over time, employees who have been coached through negative feedback events with an AI approach may begin to think differently about negative feedback—seeing it as a useful source of information that will help them to continuously improve performance.

Similarly, managers can use guided visualization to help employees attain better performance outcomes. Visualization has long been linked to improved performance for athletes (e.g., Ungerleider, 2005), and has more recently become a popular tool for coaching (Kauffman, 2006) and executive development (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001). Coaching employees to visualize a desired end-state at a high level of specificity may also foster positive emotions that ultimately engender improvements in performance (Kauffman, 2006; Loehr & Schwartz, 2001).

Visualization activates the same networks in the brain that are activated during the actual behavior (O'Malley, Ritchie, Lord, Gregory, & Young, 2009; Ungerleider, 2005), which may help the future actions or behaviors seem more familiar and less daunting. Guided visualization can be as straightforward as asking an employee: “What will success on this project look like to you?” or “When you have strengthened your presentation skills, how do you think people will react or respond to you differently?”

Learning Goals

Last, we propose that the manner in which managers help employees frame their goals following the receipt of negative feedback has implications for the effectiveness of negative feedback interventions. Although not traditionally regarded as a positive psychological concept, we argue that learning goals, which focus on increasing competence as opposed to demonstrating ability (Elliott & Dweck, 1988), are relevant because they reflect eudemonic well-being's emphasis on personal growth and environmental mastery (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Further, learning goals are consistent with broaden-and-build theory's emphasis on the exploratory mindset prompted by positive emotions. That is, learning goals are explicitly linked to seeking out ways to enhance one's knowledge and face more challenging task demands (Dweck, 1986).

Research has demonstrated that having a learning goal orientation can assuage the effect of negative emotions on subsequent performance, whereas having a performance-avoid goal orientation exacerbates negative emotions and inhibits subsequent performance improvements (Cron, Slocum, VandeWalle, & Fu, 2005). Cron and colleagues (2005) suggested that managers can help employees overcome initial negative emotions by helping them frame their intentions for acting on negative feedback from the perspective of a learning goal orientation. In addition, Cianci, Schaubroeck, and McGill (2010) showed that simply assigning a learning goal has a

similar positive effect on performance following negative feedback. Not only do learning goals help employees overcome negative emotions, but also the adoption of learning goals is positively associated with interest (Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, & Elliott, 1997). Drawing on this stream of research, we suggest that managers can guide employees to overcome negative emotions, experience more positive emotion, and pursue improved performance by helping them set learning-oriented goals. For example, managers can make it clear that they will support employees' efforts to master a particular task (e.g., a new billing software), realizing that performance (e.g., number of bills sent out per day) may temporarily decrease while effort is channeled into “knowing rather than showing.”

Looking Beyond the Negative Feedback Intervention

Activating the pathway from feedback to performance is a core purpose of performance management. We propose that promoting positive emotions during negative feedback exchanges will increase feedback acceptance and implementation of feedback, which will facilitate performance improvement in the long term (e.g., Whitaker, Dahling, & Levy, 2007). In the following section, we lay out the pathways by which our suggested strategies can ultimately enable performance improvement.

We believe that arousing the positive emotion of interest by implementing the strategies outlined above is the key to capitalizing on the broadening and building effects of positive emotions and unlocking the positive effects of negative feedback interventions. Interest arises in environments perceived as safe and important and thought to offer novelty, challenge, and a sense of possibility (Izard, 1977). Interest is associated with the thought-action tendency of exploration, or the desire to increase knowledge and self-awareness. From the link between

interest and the desire to build knowledge and self-awareness, it follows that interested employees will be more likely to accept and use negative feedback.

Recurrent experience of interest and related positive emotions will in turn result in greater openness to feedback. Specifically, repeated exposure to interest-arousing feedback will facilitate the development of more positive feedback orientations (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; London & Smither, 2002). Feedback orientation is a multidimensional individual difference construct that reflects employees' openness and receptivity to feedback and is positively correlated with feedback inquiry (Dahling, Chau, & O'Malley, 2010). We propose that through repeated exposure to negative feedback delivered in a positive fashion, employees will become more receptive to positive and negative feedback.

Avey, Wernsing, and Luthans (2008) observed a positive correlation between positive emotions and a constellation of psychological states organized under an umbrella known as positive psychological capital (PsyCap), which comprises (a) self-efficacy, or the confidence that one can succeed at difficult tasks; (b) optimism, or the expectation that one will succeed; (c) hope, or the energy and planning directed toward meeting one's goals; and (d) resilience, or rebounding from adversity (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007). Of particular interest for our purposes is resilience, which has been differentiated from the other three PsyCap constructs in that it is proposed to either be predicted by them or moderate relations between them and other outcomes (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006). Thus, resilience is a key lever for driving increases in the other psychological states comprising psychological capital. As employees experience the broadening and building effects of recurrent positive emotions within and beyond the context of negative feedback interventions and become more open to positive and negative feedback (i.e., develop a stronger feedback orientation), employees can be expected to recover or

bounce back from negative feedback with greater ease. This proposed pathway between feedback orientation and resilience reinforces how positive emotions can trigger a cascade of positive outcomes in the workplace (Fisk & Dionisi, 2010; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002).

DISCUSSION

Optimally designed performance management systems provide employees with an authentic overview of their current state, thereby taking into account positive and negative aspects of performance (Ilies et al., 2005). In keeping with this balanced perspective on performance, we contend that negative performance feedback has value and can be delivered in a manner that is consistent with positive principles but that is also authentic to employees' capabilities. To increase the likelihood that negative feedback will be heedfully received, we propose several positive strategies that educators and practitioners can enact while delivering negative feedback (see Table 1). In accordance with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2000, 2001), we argue that implementing these strategies will arouse positive emotions that undo negative emotions and enhance the likelihood of participants accepting and using the contents of the negative feedback message. Further, we speculate that positive emotions can have profound downstream consequences such as facilitating performance and promoting the development of more positive feedback orientations (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010).

Implications for Research and Practice

Our emphasis on positive and negative emotions and constructs such as psychological capital reflects our commitment to experiences and states that are malleable and responsive to intervention (Luthans et al., 2008). We recognize that employees' responses to a stressor such as negative feedback will be influenced by their appraisals of the situation, the nature of the relationship with their manager, and by their capacity to process the experience, attach meaning

to it, and incorporate it into their belief systems (Rutter, 1985). This appraisal process is clearly influenced by dispositional factors. For example, people high on self-esteem, optimism, or internal locus of control have more positive appraisals of stressful events (Holahan & Moos, 1991; Schiaffino & Revenson, 1992) and are more likely to use problem-focused coping (e.g., Holahan & Moos, 1991). Although we accept that negative feedback is likely to resonate more or less with feedback recipients depending on their dispositional attributes, we maintain that explicitly attending to all of the individual differences that affect reactions to negative feedback is impractical and likely to discourage organization members from delivering negative feedback. A more valuable approach is to deliver negative feedback in a manner that enables all employees to benefit from it.

We hope that our recommendations for delivering negative feedback forge the way for the development and implementation of more holistic performance management systems that recognize and incentivize increases in employee well-being in addition to more traditional performance outcomes. Although pursuing employee well-being for its own sake is an enticing prospect, we realize that more substantive support may be necessary for these suggestions to be compelling to management educators and practitioners. A growing literature provides evidence for the positive organizational outcomes of employee well-being. It is well established that employees who are more satisfied in their jobs are less likely to be late or absent and have a lower risk of attrition (Spector, 1997). When employee well-being is low, the negative relationship between satisfaction and turnover is even stronger (Wright & Bonett, 2007). Wright, Cropanzano, and Bonett (2007) found that employee well-being moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance, such that job performance was highest among employees who reported high personal well-being and job satisfaction. Lateness,

absenteeism, and attrition cost organizations billions of dollars annually, and the opportunity to even slightly reduce these counterproductive behaviors can have a significant effect on organizations' operating expenses (e.g., Griffeth & Hom, 2001). In addition, employees in the rising generation seek personal meaning and fulfillment from their jobs and generally want to find work enjoyable (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2002). From an attraction and recruitment standpoint, organizations touting a culture anchored by a performance management system that fosters employee well-being are likely to succeed in attracting top talent.

Gilbreath and Montesino (2006) acknowledged that manager behavior is a key component in fostering employee well-being. By engaging in behavior that promotes perceptions of interpersonal justice and facilitating employee development and flourishing, managers can create microcultures that foster employee well-being. As we suggest, managers can draw on a number of strategies to help foster employee well-being during particularly tense organizational moments that involve negative performance feedback. In particular, managers can help create more constructive negative feedback exchanges that do not diminish employee well-being by displaying interactive empathy, practicing and encouraging mind-fulness, using Appreciative Inquiry and guided visualization techniques, and establishing learning goals rather than performance goals. Our recommendations extend existing feedback directives urging feedback givers to stave off defensiveness by directing negative feedback toward the feedback recipients' observable behavior or performance rather than at stable aspects of the employees themselves (e.g., abilities, character, personality; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Whetten & Cameron, 2002).

Our model provides a departure point for research examining the efficacy of attempts to arouse positive emotion in the wake of negative feedback. Field research must seek to establish that when negative feedback is presented in a way that fosters employee well-being, feedback

recipients spend less time on ego repair or rumination in the aftermath of negative feedback and are more inclined to constructively act upon the feedback. Once the effectiveness of the positive techniques has been empirically established in organizational settings, sights can be turned to developing and evaluating training programs cultivating empathy and mindfulness, or whichever combination of techniques is shown to be most effective. An added benefit of employing the positive techniques we propose is that in the process of embodying these techniques, managers themselves are likely to experience more positive emotions and become less reluctant to deliver negative feedback. This possibility invites research on emotional contagion processes in negative feedback interventions (e.g., Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009) and the need to model shifts in the feedback giver and feedback recipients' feedback orientations.

CONCLUSION

Positive organizational scholars tend to focus on personal strengths at the expense of aspects of performance that could benefit from negative feedback interventions. Although the value of negative feedback for goal pursuit and improved performance is often overwhelmed by the negative emotional effect of negative feedback, we maintain that negative feedback is a crucial part of the performance management process and believe that infusing positive emotion into negative feedback interventions is the key to enhancing their effectiveness. Our proposed positive techniques are expected to dampen negative emotions and arouse interest in the aftermath of negative feedback, ultimately unlocking mechanisms for achieving higher levels of performance and employee well-being at work.

REFERENCES

Aguinis, H.2009. *Performance management* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

- Anseel, F., & Lievens, F. (2006). Certainty as a moderator of feedback reactions? A test of the strength of the self-verification motive. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 79, 533–551.
- Anseel, F., & Lievens, F. (2009). The mediating role of feedback acceptance in the relationship between feedback and attitudinal and performance outcomes. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 17, 363–376.
- Arch, J. J., & Craske, M. G. (2006). Mechanisms of mindfulness: Emotion regulation following a focused breathing induction. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44, 1849–1858.
- Audia, P. G., & Locke, E. A. (2003). Benefitting from negative feedback. *Human Resource Management Review*, 13, 631–646.
- Avey, J., Wernsing, T. S., & Luthans, F. (2008). Can positive employees help positive organizational change? Impact of psychological capital and emotions on relevant attitudes and behaviors. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 44, 48–70.
- Bandura, A., & Cervone, D. (1986). Differential engagement of self-reactive influences in cognitive motivation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 38, 92–113.
- Baron, R. A. (1988). Negative effects of destructive criticism: Impact on conflict, self-efficacy, and task performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 73, 199–207.
- Baron, R. A. (1990). Countering the effects of destructive criticism: The relative efficacy of four interventions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75, 235–245.
- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5, 323–370.
- Belschak, F. D., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2009). Consequences of positive and negative feedback: The impact of emotions and extra-role behaviors. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 58, 274–303.
- Bond, C. F., & Anderson, E. L. (1987). The reluctance to transmit bad news: Private discomfort or public display? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 23, 176–187.
- Bouskila-Yam, O., & Kluger, A. N. (2011). Strength-based performance appraisal and goal setting. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21, 137–147.
- Brett, J., & Atwater, L. (2001). 360± feedback: Accuracy, reactions, and perceptions of usefulness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 930–942.
- Brown, K. W., & Ryan, R. M. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 822–848.

- Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D. O. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. New York: Free Press.
- Bushe, G. R., & Kassam, A. F. (2005). When is Appreciative Inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *41*, 161– 181.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Berntson, G. G., & Crites, S. L., Jr. (1996). Social neuroscience: Principles of psychophysiological arousal and response. In E. T.Higgins & A. W.Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 72– 101). New York: Guilford Press.
- Campion, M. A., & Lord, R. G. (1982). A control systems conceptualization of the goal-setting and changing process. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, *30*, 265– 287.
- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1998). *On the self-regulation of behavior*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cianci, A. M., Klein, H. J., & Seijts, G. H. (2010). The effect of negative feedback on tension and subsequent performance: The main and interactive effects of goal content and conscientiousness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *95*, 618– 630.
- Cianci, A. M., Schaubroeck, J. M., & McGill, G. A. (2010). Achievement goals, feedback, and task performance. *Human Performance*, *23*, 131– 154.
- Cooperrider, D. L. & Srivastva, S. (1987) Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. W.Woodman & W. A.Pasmore (Eds.) *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 129– 169). Stamford, CT: JAI Press.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J. M. (2003). *Appreciative Inquiry handbook*. Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore.
- Cosmides, L., & Tooby, J. (2000). Evolutionary psychology and the emotions. In M.Lewis & J. M.Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 91– 115). New York: Guilford Press.
- Cron, W. L., Slocum, J. W., Jr., VandeWalle, D., & Fu, Q. (2005). The role of goal orientation on negative emotions and goal setting when initial performance falls short of one's performance goal. *Human Performance*, *18*, 55– 80.
- Dahling, J. J., Chau, S. L., & O'Malley, A. (2010). Correlates and consequences of feedback orientation in organizations. *Journal of Management*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1177/0149206310375467
- Dane, E.2011. Paying attention to mindfulness and its effects on task performance in the workplace. *Journal of Management*, *37*, 997– 1018.

- Dasborough, M. T., Ashkanasy, N. M., Tee, E. Y. J., & Tse, H. H. M. (2009). What goes around comes around: How meso-level negative emotional contagion can ultimately determine organizational attitudes toward leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *20*, 571– 585.
- Dweck, C. S. (1986). Motivational processes affecting learning. *American Psychologist*, *41*, 1040– 1048.
- Easterbrook, J. A. (1959). The effect of emotion on cue utilization and the organization of behavior. *Psychological Review*, *66*, 183– 201.
- Elliott, E. S., & Dweck, C. S. (1988). Goals: An approach to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 5– 12.
- Facteau, C. L., Facteau, J. D., Schoel, L. C., Russell, J. E. A., & Poteet, M. L. (1998). Reactions of leaders to 360-degree feedback from subordinates and peers. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *9*, 427– 448.
- Fineman, S. 2006. On being positive: Concerns and counterpoints. *Academy of Management Review*, *31*, 270– 291.
- Fisk, G. M., & Dionisi, A. M. (2010). Building and sustaining resilience in organizational settings: The critical role of emotion regulation. In N. M. Ashkanasy, W. J. Zerbe, & C. E. J. Härtel (Eds.), *Research on emotion in organizations* (Vol. 6, pp. 167– 188). Bingley, England: Emerald Group.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2000). Why positive emotions matter in organizations: Lessons from the broaden-and-build model. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, *4*, 131– 142.
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, *56*, 218– 226.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Joiner, T. (2002). Positive emotions trigger upward spirals toward emotional well-being. *Psychological Science*, *13*, 171– 175.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Levenson, R. W. (1998). Positive emotions speed recovery from the cardiovascular sequelae of negative emotions. *Cognition & Emotion*, *12*, 191– 220.
- Fredrickson, B. L., Mancuso, R. A., Branigan, C., & Tugade, M. M. (2000). The undoing effect of positive emotions. *Motivation and Emotion*, *24*, 237– 258.
- Frijda, N. H. (1993). Moods, emotion episodes, and emotions. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (1st ed., pp. 381– 403). New York: Guilford Press.

- Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005). “Can you see the real me?” A self-based model of authentic leader and authentic follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *16*, 343– 372.
- Geddes, D., & Baron, R. A. (1997). Workplace aggression as a consequence of negative performance feedback. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *10*, 433– 454.
- Gilbreath, B., & Montesino, M. U. (2006). Expanding the HRD role: Improving employee well-being and organizational performance. *Human Resource Development International*, *9*, 563– 571.
- Gray, J. A. (1990). Brain systems that mediate both emotion and cognition. *Cognition & Emotion*, *4*, 269– 288.
- Griffeth, R. W., & Hom, P. W. (2001). *Retaining valued employees*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harackiewicz, J. M., Barron, K. E., Carter, S. M., Lehto, A. T., & Elliot, A. J. (1997). Predictors and consequences of achievement goals in the college classroom: Maintaining interest and making the grade. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *73*, 1284– 1295.
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Keyes, C. L. (2002). Well-being in the workplace and its relationship to business outcomes: A review of the Gallup studies. In C. L.Keyes & J.Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: The positive person and the good life* (pp. 205– 224). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Holahan, C. J., & Moos, R. H. (1991). Life stressors, personal and social resources, and depression: A 4-year structural model. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *100*, 31– 38.
- Ilgén, D. R., Fisher, C. D., & Taylor, M. S. (1979). Consequences of individual feedback on behavior in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *64*, 349– 371.
- Ilies, R., De Pater, I. E., & Judge, T. (2007). Differential affective reactions to negative and positive feedback, and the role of self-esteem. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *22*, 590– 609.
- Ilies, R., Morgeson, F. P., & Nahrgang, J. D. (2005). Authentic leadership and eudaemonic well-being: Understanding leader-follower outcomes. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *16*, 373– 394.
- Isen, A. M. (2000). Positive affect and decision making. In M.Lewis & J.Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 417– 435). New York: Guilford Press.
- Izard, C. E. (1977). *Human emotions*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York: Delacorte.

Kahneman, D., Diener, E., & Schwarz, N. (Eds.). (1999). *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Kaiser, R. B. (2009). *The perils of accentuating the positive*. Tulsa, OK: Hogan Press.

Katz, R. L. (1963). *Empathy: Its nature and uses*. London: Free Press of Glencoe.

Kauffman, C. (2006). Positive psychology: The science at the heart of coaching. In D. R. Stober & A. M. Grant (Eds.), *Evidence-based coaching handbook: Putting best practices to work for your clients* (pp. 219–254). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Kellett, J. B., Humphrey, R. H., & Sleeth, R. G. (2006). Empathy and the emergence of task and relations leaders. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17, 146–162.

Kent, M., & Davis, M. C. (2010). The emergence of capacity-building programs and models of resilience. In J. W. Reich, A. J. Zautra, & J. S. Hall (Eds.), *Handbook of adult resilience* (pp. 427–449). New York: Guilford Press.

Kernis, M. H. (2003). Toward a conceptualization of optimal self-esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 14, 1–26.

Kluger, A. N., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: A historical review, meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 254–284.

Larsen, R. J., & Diener, E. (1992). Promises and problems with the circumplex model of emotion. In M. S. Clark (Ed.), *Emotion: Review of personality and social psychology* (Vol. 13, pp. 25–29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Larson, J. R. (1986). Supervisor's performance feedback to subordinates: The role of subordinate performance valence and outcome dependence. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 37, 391–408.

Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Linderbaum, B. A., & Levy, P. E. (2010). The development and validation of the Feedback Orientation Scale (FOS). *Journal of Management*, 36, 1372–1405.

Loehr, J. & Schwartz, T. (2001). The making of a corporate athlete. *Harvard Business Review*, 79, 120–128.

London, M., & Smither, J. W. (2002). Feedback orientation, feedback culture, and the longitudinal performance management process. *Human Resource Management Review*, 12, 81–100.

- Luthans, F., Vogelgesang, G. R., & Lester, P. B. (2006). Developing the psychological capital of resiliency. *Human Resource Development Review*, 5, 25– 44.
- Luthans, F., Youssef, C. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2007). *Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Medvedeff, M., Gregory, J. B., & Levy, P. E. (2008). How attributes of the feedback message affect subsequent feedback seeking: The interactive effects of feedback sign and type. *Psychologica Belgica*, 48, 109– 125.
- Miller, D. T., & Ross, M. (1975). Self-serving biases in the attribution of causality: Fact or fiction? *Psychological Bulletin*, 82, 213– 225.
- Moss, S. E., & Martinko, M. J. (1998). The effects of performance attributions and outcome dependence on leader feedback behavior following poor subordinate performance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 19, 259– 274.
- Moss, S. E., & Sanchez, J. I. (2004). Are your employees avoiding you? Managerial strategies for closing the feedback gap. *Academy of Management Executive*, 18, 32– 44.
- O'Brien, T. B., DeLongis, A., Pomaki, G., Puterman, E., & Zwicker, A. (2009). Couples coping with stress: The role of empathic responding. *European Psychologist*, 14, 18– 28.
- O'Malley, A. L., Ritchie, S. A., Lord, R. G., Gregory, J. B., & Young, C. (2009). Incorporating embodied cognition into sensemaking theory: A theoretical integration of embodied processes in a leadership context. *Current Topics in Management*, 14, 151– 182.
- Pearce, J. L., & Porter, L. W. (1986). Employee responses to formal performance appraisal feedback. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, 211– 218.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Podsakoff, P. M., & Farh, J. H. (1989). Effects of feedback sign and credibility on goal setting and task performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 44, 45– 67.
- Rath, T. 2007. *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. New York: Gallup Press.
- Roberts, L. M., Dutton, J. E., Spreitzer, G. M., Heaphy, E. D., & Quinn, R. E. (2005). Composing the reflected best-self portrait: Building pathways for becoming extraordinary in work organizations. *The Academy of Management Review*, 30, 712– 736.
- Rutter, M. 1985. Resilience in the face of adversity: Protective factors and resilience to psychiatric disorders. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 147, 598– 611.

- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55, 68– 78.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, L. F. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57, 1069– 1081.
- Schiaffino, K. M., & Revenson, T. A. (1992). The role of perceived self-efficacy, perceived control, and causal attributions in adaptation to rheumatoid arthritis: Distinguishing mediator from moderator effects. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 18, 709– 718.
- Scott, B. A., Colquitt, J. A., Paddock, E. L., & Judge, T. A. (2010). A daily investigation of the role of manager empathy on employee well-being. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 113, 127– 140.
- Shear, J., & Jevning, R. (1999). Pure consciousness: Scientific exploration of meditation techniques. In F. J.Varela & J.Shear (Eds.), *The view from within* (pp. 189– 209). Thorverton, England: Imprint Academics.
- Shrauger, J. S. (1975). Responses to evaluation as a function of initial self-perceptions. *Psychological Bulletin*, 82, 581– 596.
- Smither, J. W., & Walker, A. G. (2004). Are the characteristics of narrative comments related to improvement in multirater feedback ratings over time?*Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89, 575– 581.
- Steelman, L. A., Levy, P. E., & Snell, A. F. (2004). The feedback environment scale (FES): Construct definition, measurement, and validation. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 64, 165– 184.
- Stone, D. L., & Stone, E. F. (1985). The effect of feedback consistency and feedback favorability on self-perceived task competence and perceived feedback accuracy. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 36, 167– 185.
- Swann, W. B.Jr., & Schroeder, D. G. (1995). The search for beauty and truth: A framework for understanding reactions to evaluations. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 1307– 1318.
- Taylor, M. S., Fisher, C. D., & Ilgen, D. R. (1984). Individuals' reactions to performance feedback in organizations: A control theory perspective. In K. M.Rowland & G. R.Ferris (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resources management* (Vol. 2, pp. 81– 124). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Tesser, A., & Rosen, S. (1975). The reluctance to transmit bad news. In L.Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 8, pp. 192– 232). New York: Academic Press.

- Trope, Y., & Neter, E. (1994). Reconciling competing motives in self-evaluation: The role of self-control in feedback-seeking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *66*, 646– 657.
- Trope, Y., & Pomerantz, E. M. (1997). Resolving conflicts among self-evaluation motives: A resource for overcoming defensiveness. *Motivation and Emotion*, *22*, 53– 72.
- Ungerleider, S.2005. *Mental training for peak performance: Top athletes reveal the mind exercises they use to excel*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press.
- Veiga, J. F. (1988). Face your problem subordinates now! *Academy of Management Executive*, *11*, 145– 152.
- Wachs, K., & Cordova, J. V. (2007). Mindful relating: Exploring mindfulness and emotion repertoires in intimate relationships. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *33*, 464– 481.
- Waterman, A. S. (1993). Two conceptions of happiness: Contrasts of personal expressiveness (eudaimonia) and hedonic enjoyment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 678– 691.
- Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Whitaker, B. G., Dahling, J. J., & Levy, P. E. (2007). The development of a feedback environment and role clarity model of job performance. *Journal of Management*, *33*, 570– 591.
- Wright, T. A., & Bonett, D. G. (2007). Job satisfaction and psychological well-being as non-additive predictors of workplace turnover. *Journal of Management*, *33*, 141– 160.
- Wright, T. A., Cropanzano, R., & Bonett, D. G. (2007). The moderating role of employee positive well being on the relation between job satisfaction and job performance. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *12*, 93– 104.

TABLE 1
How Supervisors Can Undo Negative Emotions and Foster Positive Emotions in Subordinates Following Negative Feedback Delivery

<i>Technique</i>	<i>Description</i>
Empathy	Managers' genuine experience and display of interactive empathy will positively influence employees' emotional reactions to negative feedback events.
Mindfulness	Managers must be fully present throughout the negative feedback intervention.
Appreciative Inquiry	Managers can use Appreciative Inquiry to expand employees' thinking about how to use negative feedback by encouraging contemplation of ideal states and positive possibilities.
Visualization	Managers can use guided visualization to help employees fully realize desired outcomes.
Goal framing	Managers can conclude negative feedback interventions with the establishment of learning goals.

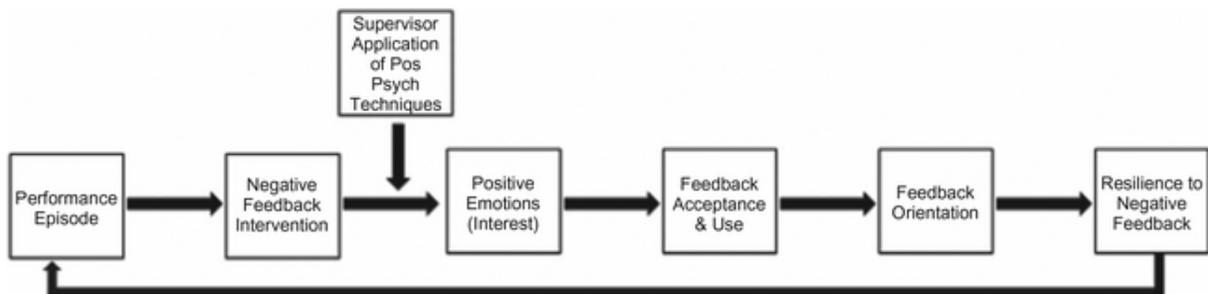


Figure 1. Conceptual Model