

# Supervisory Feedback and Newcomer Accommodation

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## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the effects of positive and negative supervisory feedback on newcomer accommodation. Survey data was collected from 181 newly hired collectors in 5 National Tax Administration (NTA) in Taiwan, and hierarchical regression was utilized to test the hypotheses. The results suggest that positive feedback serves the uncertainty reduction and competence creating functions to increase newcomers' role clarity and performance proficiency. It also serves as a social support function to improve newcomers' feelings of acceptance by the supervisor. In contrast, negative feedback appears to have dysfunctional impact on newcomer accommodation. The study findings provide some managerially actionable implications and several directions for further research.*

**Keywords:** *supervisory feedback; newcomer accommodation; role clarity; performance proficiency; acceptance by the supervisor*

## INTRODUCTION

Organizational socialization has been defined as a process by which newcomers acquire the task, social knowledge, and behaviors needed to participate as an organizational member (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Following the definition, socialization consists of the processes of learning and adjustment, which are required information. Previous studies have shown that effective information acquisition by newcomers is often related to important socialization outcomes such as work attitudes, retention and job performance (Bauer & Green, 1998; Morrison, 1993a, 1993b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992, 1993).

Feedback is an important type of information for newcomers. It points out which employees' behavior or performance is inappropriate and allows them to make adjustments if necessary (Morrison, 1993b). According to Ilgen et al. (1979), sources of feedback include other individuals, the task environment, and the employees' self-judgment of their performance. Among the interpersonal sources of feedback, supervisors are often identified as the most valuable ones because they are typically responsible for the evaluating and rewarding performance (Morrison, 1993b).

The feedback literature have considered sign to be one of the vital characteristics of feedback message (Audia & Locke, 2003). Empirical evidence suggests that positive and negative feedback affect people and there are two kinds of impact that are neither given nor received with equal effectiveness. Negative feedback is less sought after and less readily provided than positive feedback (e.g. Fisher, 1979). Positive feedback is perceived and recalled more accurately by recipients than negative feedback (e.g. Feder et al, 1989). Acknowledging the potential different effects of positive and negative feedback have received little attention in socialization research conducted to date. The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of different types of supervisory feedback on newcomer accommodation.

## HYPOTHESES

According to Bauer and Green (1998), newcomer accommodation divides into task and social accommodation. We propose that feedback sign will influence both of these accommodation aspects.

### **Supervisory Feedback and Task Accommodation**

At the early stage, newcomers must learn how to perform their task and roles more effectively (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Thus, we use role clarity and performance proficiency as two indicators of task accommodation. Supervisory feedback provides appraisal information to the new employee as to compare his or her performance to the levels set forth by the organization; therefore, likely to lessen their uncertainty concerning with the desired levels of performance (Ashford & Cummings, 1983).

Supervisory feedback also provides information on the extent and direction of errors in behaviors (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). It enables new hires to identify problems in their performance and to learn better ways of doing things. When newcomers better understand how to perform, their competence and proficiency should rise (Fisher, 1986; Bauer & Green, 1998).

The above posited effects of feedback are expected to hold regardless of positive or negative, because both positive and negative feedback have provided information as to what the newcomer is or isn't anticipated. Therefore, it is predicted that supervisory feedback will positively influence newcomer task accommodation. We hypothesize that:

H<sub>1a</sub>: The greater the positive feedback provided by the supervisor, the greater the newcomer's role clarity and performance proficiency.

H<sub>1b</sub>: The greater the negative feedback provided by the supervisor, the greater the newcomer's role clarity and performance proficiency.

### **Supervisory Feedback and Social Accommodation**

As Morrison (1993a) concerned, social accommodation is also critical to successful newcomer socialization. Given the focus of our study is on supervisory feedback, we examined social accommodation in terms of the newcomer's feeling of acceptance by the supervisor. We expect new employees to derive different responds to different types of feedback. Newcomers are likely to appreciate positive feedback from supervisors because such feedback inherently expresses positive reinforcement (Berscheid, 1985). It represents a form of recognition of good work and makes newcomers to feel more accepted. Subordinates have greater satisfaction with supervisors who provide more positive feedback (Jaworski & Kohli, 1991). In contrast, we expect newcomers to dislike negative feedback from their supervisors because even though negative feedback may clarify the results expected of them, it may be perceived as an unwelcome signal on their weakness. If people experience too much criticism, they may generate negative attitudes toward their supervisors (Ilgen et al., 1981).

These different reactions between positive and negative feedback have generally been explained in terms of defense mechanisms that make a person more inclined to accept positive than negative feedback because of the more favorable implications for one's self-image (Audia & Locke, 2003). Thus, we predict that positive and negative supervisory feedback have different effects on newcomer social accommodation. We hypothesize that:

H<sub>2a</sub>: The greater the positive feedback provided by the supervisor, the greater the newcomer's feelings of acceptance by the supervisor.

H<sub>2b</sub>: The greater the negative feedback provided by the supervisor, the less the newcomer's feelings of acceptance by the supervisor.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample and Procedure**

The study was carried out in Taiwan. Data were collected from 5 National Tax Administration (NTA). The respondent population for this study included 262 newly hired tax collectors who have joined their organizations within one-year period.

These organizations' personnel offices were contacted to be requested for organization-wide participation. Surveys were distributed to all newcomers. All participants were voluntary and anonymous. Finally, valid questionnaires were returned from 181 tax collectors for a response rate of 69 percent.

The majority of the sample was female (75 percent), and the average age was 22.76 years ( $SD=2.21$ ). Mean education for the sample was 14.14 years ( $SD=1.80$ ), and mean tenure in their current organizations was 6.73 months ( $SD=3.30$ ). Approximately 39 percent of the sample had work experience.

## Measures

For the purpose of this study, 21 items about positive feedback, negative feedback, role clarity, performance proficiency, and perceived acceptance by the supervisor were included in questionnaires. In addition, 5 background questions were asked.

*Positive feedback.* A three-item of a scale developed by Jaworski and Kohli (1991) was adapted to measure the degree to which new employees received positive feedback on their performance from their supervisors. A sample item is “When my manager thinks my performance is good, he provides me with positive feedback”. Items were rated on a 5-point scoring format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was .82.

*Negative feedback.* A three-item of a scale developed by Jaworski and Kohli (1991) was adapted to evaluate the degree to which new hires received negative feedback on their performance from their supervisors. A sample item is “My manager tells me when he is upset with my performance results”. Items were rated on a 5-point scoring format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was .84.

*Role clarity.* The six items of role clarity scale created by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) was used to determine the extent to which newcomers have fully understood their work role. A sample item is “I know exactly what is expected of me”. Items were rated on a 5-point scoring format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was .85.

*Performance proficiency.* The five items scale presented by Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein and Gardner (1994) was used to assess the extent to which individuals feel competent about their ability to do work-related tasks. A sample item is “I have mastered the required tasks of my job”. Items were rated on a 5-point scoring format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was .87.

*Acceptance by the supervisor.* We measured this concept by using four items scale designed specially for this study. These items are “My manager seems to accept me”; “I believe my manager likes me”; “I think my manager respects my opinions”; “My manager values my ideas”. Items were rated on a 5-point scoring format (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The reliability coefficient was .86.

*Control variables.* To test the hypothesis more precisely, gender was considered as a control variable (coded 0 for male and 1 for female). Each newcomer’s age and education were collected. We also collected tenure, measured by months on the job, and work experience (coded 0 for no and 1 for yes).

## RESULTS

### Correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. As Table 1 shows, positive supervisory feedback was received more frequently by newcomers than negative feedback. The correlation between positive and negative feedback was low ( $r = -.06, ns$ ). Thus, It reveals that these two different types of feedback are relatively independent. Second, positive feedback was positively correlated with role clarity ( $r = .41, p < .001$ ), performance proficiency ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ), and acceptance by the supervisor ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ). Third, negative feedback was negatively related to role clarity ( $r = -.24, p < .01$ ), performance proficiency ( $r = -.49, p < .001$ ), and acceptance by the supervisor ( $r = -.34, p < .001$ ). Finally, the correlations between the control variables and the study variables were nonsignificant with few exceptions.

### Regression Analyses

Hierarchical regression was used to test the hypotheses by evaluating the incremental validity of the positive and negative feedback over the potential control variables. For each of the dependent variables, two regression equations were conducted. In the first step, the potential control variables that were significantly correlated with the study

variables were entered and in the second step, the positive and negative feedback were entered along with the potential control variables.

**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Study Variables**

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Independent variable										
1.Positive feedback	3.69	.55								
2.Negative feedback	2.77	.88	-.06							
Dependent variable										
3.Role clarity	3.82	.48	.41 ***	-.24 **						
4.Performance proficiency	3.78	.53	.23 **	-.49 ***	.40 ***					
5.Acceptance by supervisor	3.68	.68	.39 ***	-.34 ***	.47 ***	.19 *				
Control variable										
6.Gender	.75	.44	.12	-.02	.01	.00	-.01			
7.Education	14.14	1.80	.05	-.05	-.12	.03	-.04	.13		
8.Tenure	6.73	3.30	.08	-.00	.23 **	.02	.11	.12	-.10	
9.Work experience	.39	.49	.17 *	-.15 *	.26 **	.20 **	.04	.11	.05	-.08

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

The results of hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 2. As Table 2 shows, positive and negative feedback explained a significant amount of additional variance in role clarity ( $\Delta R^2 = .15, p < .001$ ), performance proficiency ( $\Delta R^2 = .26, p < .001$ ), and acceptance by the supervisor ( $\Delta R^2 = .25, p < .001$ ).

**Table 2: Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses**

Variable	Role clarity		Performance proficiency		Acceptance by supervisor	
	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2	Step1	Step2
Control variable						
1.Tenure	.25 ***	.21 **	.04	.01	.12	.07
2.Work experience	.28 ***	.19 **	.21 **	.10	.05	-.07
Independent variable						
3.Positive feedback		.35 ***		.18 **		.38 ***
4.Negative feedback		-.19 **		-.47 ***		-.33 ***
R <sup>2</sup> at each step	.13	.28	.04	.30	.02	.27
$\Delta R^2$		.15 ***		.26 ***		.25 ***

\*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Hypothesis 1a predicted a positive relationship between positive feedback and task accommodation. Results supported this hypothesis. As expected, positive feedback was positively associated with role clarity ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ) and performance proficiency ( $\beta = .18, p < .01$ ).

Hypothesis 1b proposed a positive relationship between negative feedback and task accommodation, was not supported. Significant results were found for role clarity ( $\beta = -.19, p < .01$ ) and performance proficiency ( $\beta = -.47, p < .001$ ), but both were in a negative direction.

Hypothesis 2a posited a positive relationship between positive feedback and social accommodation. Results supported this hypothesis. The analysis indicated that positive feedback was positively related to feelings of acceptance by the supervisor ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ).

Hypothesis 2b, which predicted a negative relationship between negative feedback and social accommodation. Results supported this hypothesis. The analysis indicated that negative feedback was negatively associated with feelings of acceptance by the supervisor ( $\beta = -.33, p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence for the hypothesized influences of supervisory feedback on newcomer accommodation. First, positive feedback serves an uncertainty reduction function. It clarifies what are expected of

newcomers and decreases their insecurity. Second, positive feedback also serves a competence creating function. It indicates which behaviors are appropriate for achieving the goals and motivate newcomers to develop feelings of mastery. Finally, positive feedback seems to serve a social support function, in which the previous feedback literature had little addressed or focused on, by providing approval to the recipients to meet their social needs through task accomplishment. Thus, feedback on positive results attained by a newcomer appears to be the most effective way to improve their accommodation.

In contrast, negative feedback exerts adverse effects on newcomer's role clarity, performance proficiency, and acceptance by the supervisor. These results partially are opposite to our expectations. One possible reason is that the signals sent by negative feedback are less clear or distorted in their implications. When a newcomer receives feedback indicating that either past behavior or performance is unacceptable, that message alone does not tell the newcomer the way of improvement (Wood & Arasu, 1987). Therefore, negative feedback is likely to increase a recipient's role ambiguity. In addition, most people do not want negative feedback from the supervisors because it threatens their self-esteem and sense of competence (Audia & Locke, 2003). Moreover, such emotional shock can lead to unpleasant feelings toward their supervisors and often to worsen subsequent performance (Baron, 1988).

The design and maintenance of feedback systems are essential for both individual and organization performance (Fedor, 1991). By examining the sign of supervisory feedback, the study provides some insights into the directions along which may be useful for managers to cultivate their feedback communication climate. Our findings suggest that supervisors could seek opportunities to provide more positive feedback to their newcomers. Positive feedback communicates confirmation of the adequacy of existing work methods and goals, which can motivate, direct, and instruct the performance of new employees.

A second implication of this investigation is that negative supervisory feedback, due to its potentially harmful nature to communication, is best to be carefully delivered. To be sure, it has a function as it questions existing methods and generates interests in inspiring new ideas for better performance. This benefit; however, only exists side by side with clear guidelines on how to improve. Negative feedback, therefore, should be offered in a specific and tactful form so that the newcomer's self-image and ego are not made to suffer (Audia & Locke, 2003)

If a supervisor wants to give some negative feedback to newcomers, he or she may use the "feedback sandwich" technique. It consists of one specific criticism between two specific praises. This technique can help him or her to earn the trust of new employees and to enhance their success.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are interpreted in accordance with several limitations. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, one must treat carefully when it comes to the reported relationships. What is called for, rather, is longitudinal experiments which illuminate causality even better. This is especially true, given the facts that causal relationships cannot be proven in the current study. Nevertheless, the relationships examined here seem to be consistent with previous research (e.g. Jaworski & Kohli, 1991). This makes the hypothesized causal relationships are theoretically plausible.

We must emphasize that the reliance of our measurements on a single method might make the inflation of association among this study's constructs possible. A comparison of multi-method approaches (e.g. obtaining data from both newcomer and company records) might be of better future utilization. Furthermore, we investigated the newcomers' perceptions of their supervisors' feedback, and not the actual feedback itself. Obviously, variance might exist between perceived and actual feedback possibly due to the newcomers' individual biases and predispositions. This matter merits special attention in this study.

It is unclear how newcomer's perceptions of feedback are affected by its timing, frequency, or quantity. Each of these properties of feedback will no doubt influence the impact that feedback has on newcomer accommodation, which are important to investigate in future studies. In addition, newcomer's personality (e.g. self-efficacy, need of control) can also provide assistance toward a specific explanation on how a particular type of feedback will be interpreted, accepted, and responded to by a newcomer. Such studies will contribute to the greater understanding of the effect in which a particular type of feedback is desirable with a particular newcomer.

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