

Testing multiple motives in feedback seeking: The interaction of instrumentality and self protection motives

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that information received from feedback seeking is valuable for both individual and organizational outcomes. Previous research examining the feedback seeking process has consistently suggested that individual's feedback behaviors are directly influenced by three motives. Specifically, individuals are instrumentally motivated to obtain valued information but are also motivated to protect and/or enhance their ego and to protect others' impressions of them (Ashford, Blatt and VandeWalle, 2003). The current study simultaneously examined these motives by testing the interactive effects of them on feedback seeking behavior. As predicted, they did significantly interact and the results present a deeper understanding of these motives and how employees weigh various factors in deciding whether to seek feedback within the organization.

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Organizations today are facing an increasingly global and competitive marketplace, and so they, as well as their employees must be adaptable to survive. As strategic changes become more frequent, employees face a higher level of uncertainty and complexity in the workplace (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). Moreover, employee empowerment has led to a decrease in the amount of direct supervision and guidance that many employees receive (Renn & Fedor, 2001). These factors combined suggest that employees will need to proactively seek out feedback to adequately adapt and perform. While seeking feedback can result in beneficial outcomes, it is also well-established that employees are often reticent to seek feedback. In short, research has established that there are multiple motives that govern feedback seeking behavior; individuals are drawn to seeking as a means to obtain important information (instrumental motive), but refrain from seeking when the behavior appears to potentially threaten their ego or impression on others (ego and image based motives) (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Given the importance of feedback information for adaptive organizational functioning, understanding how individuals balance these competing motives is important. Much research has examined the direct effects of these motives and factors related to them on feedback seeking, however no research to date has empirically examined how the three motives *together* influence seeking behavior. Thus the current study examined how these motives interact to predict feedback seeking behavior.

1. Feedback seeking process

Seeking feedback is a self-regulation tool that employees use to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that comes with ambiguous job situations and performance standards (Tsui & Ashford, 1994). The information gained through seeking behaviors is valuable in

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that employees can use it to adapt and improve their performance, evaluate their progress towards goal fulfillment, change their work behavior as needed, gauge others' evaluations of them, and increase their self-awareness (Ashford, 1986). For instance, Ashford and Tsui (1991) found that seeking critical feedback was related to more accurate evaluations of others' perceptions of performance. Previous research also indicates that seeking feedback improves performance by facilitating the development and fulfillment of work goals (Renn & Fedor, 2001). Finally, researchers have hypothesized that feedback seeking reduces uncertainty, which leads to increased job performance and more positive job attitudes (Morrison, 2002). In sum, the positive outcomes related to seeking feedback have been well established.

Researchers have typically examined two strategies individuals use to gather feedback information (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, 1986). First, feedback may be obtained through *monitoring*. Monitoring involves the observation of environmental factors and others' performance, reactions and interpersonal behaviors. Individuals use this information to infer relevant performance feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). A second method – *direct inquiry* – entails actively soliciting information from relevant others (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Although research identifies both strategies as potential means to obtain feedback information, inquiry may provide more useful information than monitoring for a number of reasons (Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992). For instance, monitoring requires that individuals make correct inferences from their observations (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). In addition, if an individual is working away from others, he/she may not be able to engage in monitoring behaviors (Ashford et al., 2003). In light of these issues and because our focus is on understanding multiple motives (i.e., ego and image defense motives are especially active with inquiry), the current study focuses on the strategy of directly seeking performance feedback from a supervisor (i.e., direct inquiry).

In their model, Ashford and Cummings (1983) proposed that the primary motive of feedback seeking is the instrumental value it provides the seeker. In other words, feedback that provides diagnostic information is sought because it will help individuals adapt and perform in the organization. As reviewed by Ashford et al. (2003), the strength of the instrumental motive can be increased by several factors. For instance, if individuals perceive the feedback as particularly diagnostic or are in situations with high uncertainty, they are more likely to seek. If individuals perceive a particular source as credible and capable of providing feedback, it increases the instrumental motive and thus feedback seeking from that source. However, as noted above, the motivating force of perceived feedback value is countered by individuals' motives to protect themselves from information that could damage their sense of self or others' impressions of them (i.e., perceived feedback seeking costs).

The *self-presentation cost* of feedback seeking refers to the perceived risk of embarrassment that an individual may be exposed to by seeking feedback (Ashford, 1986). The focus of the self-presentation cost of seeking feedback is related to others' perceptions of the seeker. Previous research reports that perceptions of high self-presentation costs are negatively related to the frequency of feedback seeking (Fedor et al., 1992; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). The *ego cost* of feedback seeking is concerned with the individual's self-concept (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). By seeking evaluative information, individuals take the risk of hearing negative or distressing information about themselves, thereby threatening their sense of self (Ashford, 1986). Previous research has shown that if individuals have low performance expectations they reduce their feedback seeking, presumably because of the anticipated ego costs that would be incurred by actively seeking feedback (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Thus, the decision to seek feedback is a product of competing motives; individuals have a strong desire to receive valuable information but are also interested in protecting themselves from costs associated with seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford et al., 2003; Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995; Williams, Miller, Steelman, & Levy, 1999).

As illustrated above, the individual seeker is put in a difficult situation, as he/she considers both the perceived benefit and cost of feedback seeking. Interestingly, previous research has neglected to empirically examine the “weighing of costs and benefits” on seeking behavior. In other words, do perceived costs always override the perceived value of feedback or will individuals tolerate certain levels of costs in order to receive information they perceive as particularly valuable? The current study will extend the literature in two important ways; first we will examine the interaction of the motives on feedback seeking and second, we will introduce interpersonal trust as an important element impacting the instrumental motive of feedback seeking.

2. Factors impacting seeking motives

Given the effects of perceived costs and benefit on seeking frequency, research has focused on identifying and understanding factors that either increase perceived value or decrease the perceived costs of seeking feedback. In other words, researchers have either explicitly or implicitly proposed that by understanding factors that impact individuals' perceptions of the costs and/or benefits, they will understand how to influence feedback seeking (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Fedor et al., 1992; Levy et al., 1995; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990; Williams et al., 1999). A review of this literature suggests that these factors fall into three main categories; factors related to the seeker, the seeking context, and the feedback source.

Related to the seeker, Ashford (1986) found that individuals with longer tenure sought less feedback and proposed that this may indicate that the perceived value of feedback decreased as one learned his/her job. While this may be true, this reduction in seeking could also be the result of increased perceptions of seeking costs (Ashford, 1986). Researchers have also found that individual difference variables such as external feedback propensity (Fedor et al., 1992; Renn & Fedor, 2001), public self-consciousness (Levy et al., 1995), and goal orientation (Park, Schmidt, Scheu, & Deshon, 2007; Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002) are related to the likelihood of seeking feedback – either through their effect on the perceived costs or value of information.

Related to the seeking context, research has consistently found that the publicness of the seeking context (public vs. private) has a strong effect on seeking behavior (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Levy et al., 1995; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Levy et al. (1995) were able to show that individuals had a desire for feedback, but when they were made aware that seeking would be

visible to others they reconsidered and refrained from seeking. This effect is exacerbated when the context is evaluative rather than developmental (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). Organizational norms also play a role in an individual's decision to engage in feedback seeking behaviors. This is consistent with other research, which has found that the level of support in the environment is related to employees' tendencies to actively seek feedback (Ashford et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1999).

Related to the current study, research also suggests that characteristics of the feedback source are particularly important in influencing feedback seeking behaviors (Ang, Cummings, Straub, & Earley, 1993; Fedor et al., 1992; Morrison & Vancouver, 2000; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2000; Williams et al., 1999). For instance, leader consideration, or the degree to which a supervisor shows respect and concern for his/her subordinates is negatively related to perceived feedback seeking costs (VandeWalle et al., 2000). Other research suggests that perceptions of the source's mood will influence decisions to seek, because perceived costs are likely higher when the source is viewed as being in a negative mood (Ang et al., 1993). Williams et al. (1999) conducted an experimental study where they varied the source's supportiveness of feedback seeking behaviors. The researchers found that source supportiveness, or the degree to which the feedback source appeared willing and enthusiastic to give feedback, was positively related to the frequency of feedback seeking behaviors. Similar to the positive effects of organizational norms, when the benefits of feedback information are explained and active seeking is encouraged, individuals may perceive lower costs of seeking feedback (Williams et al., 1999). Finally, research also indicates that source availability, or the ease with which an individual is able to obtain feedback from the source, is positively related to the frequency of feedback seeking behaviors (Morrison & Vancouver, 2000). It is likely that having to put forth greater effort to obtain the feedback increases cost perceptions.

In addition to influencing perceived feedback seeking costs, research has also suggested that source characteristics influence the perceived value of feedback. For instance, VandeWalle et al. (2000) found that leader initiation of structure was positively related to perceptions of feedback value and increased feedback seeking. In addition, perceptions of source credibility or expertise are also positively related to the frequency of feedback seeking (Fedor et al., 1992). A feedback source is perceived as credible to the extent that he/she has relevant and accurate information regarding the individual's performance (Fedor et al., 1992; Morrison & Vancouver, 2000). This increase in feedback seeking behavior is not surprising, since information received from a knowledgeable and trusted source is likely to be perceived as more valuable. However, as noted by Ashford et al. (2003), interpersonal trust has not received attention in the feedback seeking literature. Thus, in addition to assessing the perceived value of feedback from a source, we will also examine perceived trust in the source as a factor which impacts the instrumental motive and thus feedback seeking.

3. Trust

While no research to date has examined how trust in the source (i.e., supervisor) specifically impacts the feedback seeking process or how it interacts with other seeking motives, trust as an element in the general feedback process is not new. In fact, Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor (1979), in their seminal work on consequences of feedback, introduced trust as an important source element affecting receiver acceptance of feedback. More recently, Farr and Jacobs (2006) examined trust in the system, process, and source as critical factors in effective performance evaluation. In the current study, we propose that perceptions of trust in the feedback source play an important role in the feedback seeking process as well. Specifically, we believe that interpersonal trust in the supervisor impacts the instrumental value of feedback and thus will interact with costs to predict feedback seeking behavior.

Generally, definitions of trust are composed of at least two components. First, trust involves a state of vulnerability. The trustor, or vulnerable party, is forced to at least partially depend on the trustee for some valued outcome. To trust someone suggests a willingness to risk losing something deemed important because the trustor cannot control the trustee's actions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Winograd, 2000). This willingness to depend on others is based on the second component of trust, the trustor's belief that the trustee will behave in a way that is beneficial and acceptable to the trustor (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001; Kramer, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995; Perry & Mankin, 2004). These broad parameters can be used to define trust in ways that encompass employees, managers, top executives, and the organization at large (Kramer, 1999; Shockley-Zalabak et al., 2000). For the purposes of this study, the model of trust proposed by Mayer et al. (1995) provides a useful framework for examining how trust might impact the feedback seeking process.

3.1. Mayer et al. (1995) model

The current study adopts the definition of trust provided by Mayer et al. (1995) who define trust as the trustor's (i.e., the employee's) willingness to be vulnerable to the trustee (i.e., the supervisor) due to the belief that the supervisor will help the employee obtain some desired outcome (e.g., feedback information). Feedback seeking fits this definition because feedback is highly valuable to employees, but the act of seeking feedback makes one vulnerable to the costs associated with the behavior.

The Mayer et al. (1995) model suggests that trust is determined by the employee's propensity to trust and three distinct factors related to the supervisor: perceived ability, integrity and benevolence (see Fig. 1). In other words, if employees perceive the supervisor has the ability to provide useful feedback, will provide feedback with integrity and will consider the employee in the process they are more likely to trust them. The model further posits that trust will lead the employee to engage in a risk-taking behavior. However, as suggested in the model, the perceived risk of the behavior moderates the relationship between trust and the actual risk taking behavior. Thus, despite high levels of trust, the employee may still feel that it is too costly to translate that trust into risk-taking actions. Related to the current study, it may be that despite high levels of trust in a supervisor, the perceived costs of feedback seeking may deter an individual from directly soliciting feedback. Specifically, it is suggested that when perceived

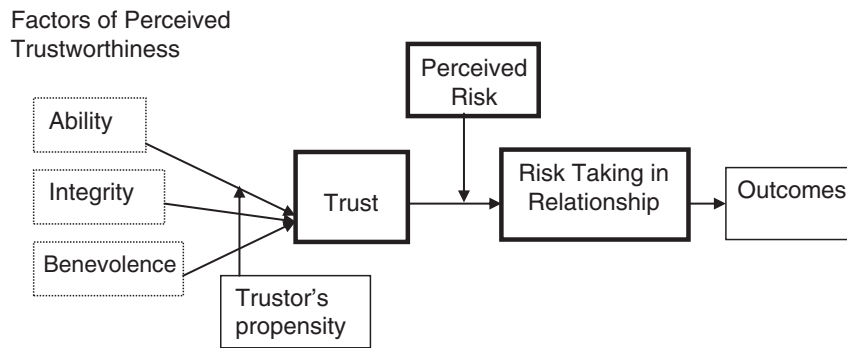


Fig. 1. Mayer et al. (1995) model of trust.

feedback seeking costs are low, increased trust will be accompanied by increased feedback seeking behaviors. However, when perceived feedback seeking costs are high, trust will be less strongly related to feedback seeking. The Mayer et al. (1995) model is consistent with the interplay of “multiple motives” introduced in the feedback-seeking literature.

In summary, researchers have theorized that there are multiple motives that operate to predict seeking behavior and previous research has established factors which impact these motives and their effects on seeking behavior. However no research to date has examined how the motives interact to impact seeking. In addition, no previous research has examined how interpersonal trust impacts the feedback seeking process. Therefore, the current study seeks to examine the interactive effects of feedback seeking costs and the perceived value of feedback and trust in the supervisor on feedback seeking behavior.

Hypothesis 1. Perceived feedback seeking costs will be negatively related to feedback seeking.

Hypothesis 2. Perceived feedback value and trust in the supervisor will be positively related to feedback seeking.

Hypothesis 3. The interaction of perceived feedback value and feedback seeking costs will significantly predict feedback seeking. Specifically, the relationship between perceived value and seeking will be stronger for those who perceive high as compared to low costs.

Hypothesis 4. The interaction of perceived trust in the supervisor and feedback seeking costs will significantly predict feedback seeking. Specifically, the relationship between trust and seeking will be stronger for those who perceive low as compared to high costs.

4. Method

4.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were 126 students enrolled in psychology courses at a large, urban university. To participate in the study, participants had to be working 20 or more hours per week and had to have worked under the same supervisor for at least 30 days. The sample was 29% male ($N=37$) and 71% female ($N=89$) and the average age of respondents was 23 years old. Of the respondents that reported race, 82% were Caucasian ($N=101$), 9% were African-American ($N=11$), 3% were Hispanic ($N=4$), 2% were Native American ($N=3$), and 3% identified themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander ($N=4$). Three participants either identified their race as “other” or did not report their race. The average job tenure of participants was 24.43 months and average tenure under a specific supervisor was 17.31 months. On average, participants worked 31 h per week.

4.2. Measures

Participants completed a 63-item questionnaire and all items, unless otherwise noted, were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

4.2.1. Demographics

Participants were asked to respond to seven demographic items. Age, gender, race, level of education, organizational tenure, and tenure with current supervisor were assessed.

4.2.2. Perceptions of feedback value

Five items from the Steelman, Levy, and Snell (2004), Feedback Environment Scale (FES) were used to assess perceptions of feedback value. A sample item was “I value the feedback I receive from my supervisor”. Coefficient alpha for this scale was .88.

4.2.3. Perceptions of trust

Five items were used to assess perceptions of trust in the supervisor. Four of the five items were taken from previous research (Mayer & Davis, 1999). Originally, the Mayer and Davis (1999) items focused on trust of top management, so the current items were modified to assess trust of the individual's direct supervisor. A sample item from the original scale (with the modification in italics) is, "I would be willing to let top management (*my supervisor*) have complete control over my future in this company" (Mayer & Davis, 1999). The fifth item was developed to focus on trust in a supervisor, related to job performance. It reads, "I would not depend on my supervisor to help me with difficult tasks or projects" (*r*). In the current study, the reliability estimate of the 5-item trust scale was $\alpha = .69$.

4.2.4. Perceived feedback seeking costs

In the current study, 12 items (six for each type of cost) were used to assess self-presentation and ego costs. For self-presentation costs, four items were taken from previous work (Ashford, 1986; Fedor et al., 1992). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements such as, "It is embarrassing to ask my supervisor for his/her impression of how I am doing at work" (Ashford, 1986). The final two items were developed by the authors to specifically tap impression management concerns that may accompany feedback seeking behaviors. For example, one of the newly written items is "Seeking performance feedback from my supervisor will negatively influence his/her opinion of me". As previous research had not measured ego costs specifically, we created items to assess this variable. An example of an item measuring perceived ego cost is, "I hesitate to seek feedback because my supervisor may tell me I'm not performing well".

Although researchers have theoretically defined these two types of costs as independent, a factor analysis did not support the independence of the two constructs. We used principal axis factoring and direct oblimin rotation methods to factor analyze the data. The scree plot strongly indicated that only one factor emerged from the data. This was supported by the fact that only one eigenvalue over 1 emerged (5.58) accounting for 55.80% of the variance. Moreover, all items clearly loaded on this factor with item loadings ranging from .58 to .85. Finally, the correlation between the two feedback seeking costs subscales was, $r = .70$, $p < .001$, providing further evidence that the items were likely assessing a single construct. Therefore, a single "feedback seeking costs" scale was created using all the items with a coefficient alpha of $\alpha = .91$.

4.2.5. Frequency of feedback seeking

Four items asked respondents to report how frequently they seek feedback. One item from previous research was used, "In order to find out how well you are performing in your job, how frequently do you seek feedback from your supervisor about your work performance" (Ashford, 1986). Three other items were created to assess the frequency with which individuals seek feedback related to their jobs. An example of such an item is, "How frequently do you seek job-related information from your supervisor?" Responses to these items were measured on a five-point response scale, ranging from never to frequently. The reliability of the frequency of feedback seeking scale was $\alpha = .81$.

5. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables of interest are reported in Table 1. Perceived value of feedback and feedback seeking costs were significantly related to feedback seeking frequency in the anticipated directions ($r = .34$ and $-.22$, $p < .001$ respectively). In addition, perceptions of trust were positively related to feedback value and feedback seeking ($r = .52$, $p < .001$ and $.22$, $p < .05$, respectively) and negatively related to perceived costs ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$). Thus, consistent with previous research the data provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

The main focus of the current study was to examine the interactive effects of trust in the supervisor, perceived value of feedback, and feedback seeking costs on the frequency of feedback seeking behaviors. These questions were tested with a hierarchical regression; examining all possible two-way and three-way interactions. Although a three-way interaction was neither expected nor hypothesized, we wanted to ensure that it was not present before the two-way interactions were interpreted.

Table 1
Overall correlation matrix of study subscales.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	23.21	4.73									
2. Gender	NA	NA	.26**								
3. Job tenure (months)	24.43	23.11	.15	.04							
4. Tenure under supervisor (months)	17.40	17.51	.07	.07	.56**						
5. Hours per week	31.26	10.03	.32**	-.26**	.04	-.15					
6. Feedback value	3.69	.78	-.13	-.09	-.06	-.03	-.02	.88			
7. Costs	2.08	.63	.01	-.14	-.07	-.10	-.09	-.31**	.91		
8. Trust	3.26	.69	-.02	-.02	.04	.11	.05	.52**	-.43**	.69	
9. Seeking frequency	3.17	.79	-.09	-.02	.04	.06	.03	.34**	-.22*	.22*	.81

Note: Cronbach's alpha coefficients are highlighted in main diagonal, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. Bolded values on the diagonal represent reliability estimates.

In the first step of the regression, the three centered predictors (trust, costs and value) were entered into the regression equation. In the second step, all possible two-way interactions (trust costs, value costs, and trust value) were entered into the equation. And finally, the three way interaction (trust costs value) was entered at the third step. As anticipated the three-way interaction term did not account for significant variance in the prediction of feedback-seeking.

As reported in Table 2, in the first step of the analysis, the three predictors (costs, trust and value) accounted for 19% of the variance in feedback seeking frequency ($F(3,122) = 9.71, p < .01$). When all three two-way interactions were entered into the equation at the second step, they accounted for an additional .08 of the variance ($F \text{ change}(3,119) = 4.41, p < .01$), however only the trust costs and value costs interaction terms were significant ($\beta = -.39$, and $.30, p < .05$, respectively).

To examine these interactions, we plotted them using the procedure outlined by Aiken and West (1991). As shown in Fig. 2, the relationship between feedback value and frequency of feedback seeking is moderated by perceived feedback seeking costs, thus supporting Hypothesis 3. Specifically, the relationship between value and seeking is stronger for individuals who perceive high feedback seeking costs compared to individuals who perceive low feedback seeking costs. Interestingly, when the feedback is perceived as high in value, seeking frequency is the same regardless of perceived costs. However, when the feedback value is low, individuals who perceive higher costs reported lower seeking frequency compared to those who reported lower costs.

Hypothesis 4 was also supported. As shown in Fig. 3, the relationship between trust in the supervisor and seeking was moderated by feedback seeking costs. Specifically, the relationship between trust and seeking is stronger when costs are low than when costs are high. Moreover, feedback seeking remained relatively constant across levels of trust when costs were high. In addition, regardless of the level of costs, seeking remained relatively low level when trust was low. The interpretation and comparison of these interactions will be examined more fully below.

6. Discussion

Given the positive effects of feedback seeking on individual and organizational outcomes, it is important to understand the motives that impact the likelihood of seeking. The current research study sought to achieve two goals. First, we sought to support the proposed interaction between the instrumental and ego and impression motives. This is the first study to empirically examine the interaction of the motives on the frequency of seeking feedback. Second, we sought to extend the feedback-seeking literature by examining interpersonal trust as a factor impacting the instrumental motive in this process.

6.1. Feedback seeking process

The original model outlined by Ashford and Cummings (1983) suggested that individuals weigh the costs and benefits associated with seeking when making the decision to seek. While a great deal of research has supported the direct effects of each of these factors in feedback seeking behavior (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Renn & Fedor, 2001; Tsui & Ashford, 1994; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997), the current study is the first to examine the interaction of these two antecedents of seeking. Consistent with previous literature, we also found that perceived costs and value had direct effects on seeking. However, our findings extend the current literature by examining the more complex relationship between the seeking motives and feedback seeking.

The results related to Hypothesis 3 suggest that the perceived costs of feedback seeking moderate the relationship between perceived value and feedback seeking behaviors such that when perceived costs are high, there is a stronger positive relationship between perceptions of feedback seeking value and feedback seeking behaviors than when perceived costs are low (Fig. 2). Interestingly, when the perceived value of feedback seeking is high, individuals report the same level of seeking behaviors regardless of the level of perceived feedback seeking costs. These data support the fact that employees do desire information and when they perceive the information to be particularly helpful to them, they will seek it despite even potentially high costs. In other words, it appears that if the perceived value of feedback is high enough, it may trump the effects of perceived feedback seeking costs. However, as expected, when the perceived value is low and costs are high employees reduce seeking as a way to avoid unnecessary costs. This provides strong empirical support that these seeking benefits and costs are not only apparent to seekers, but they carefully assess them when deciding to seek feedback. Further, the current results support that these motives do not operate independently, but are considered jointly.

Table 2
Regression summary for Hypothesis 3.

Step	Variable	β	R^2	ΔR^2	F change
1	Feedback seeking costs	-.18	.19	.19	9.71**
	Trust	-.06			
	Value	.42*			
2	Feedback seeking costs	-.14	.27	.07	3.91**
	Trust	1.29*			
	Value	.16			
	Trust costs	-.39**			
	Value costs	.30*			
	Trust value	-.14			

Dependent variable: Feedback Seeking * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

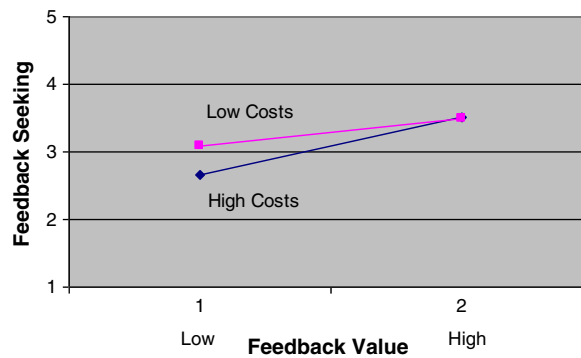


Fig. 2. Interaction of feedback value and perceived costs on feedback seeking.

We also sought to examine the construct of interpersonal trust in the feedback seeking process. Using the conceptual model of trust posited by Mayer et al. (1995), we predicted that trust would be positively related to seeking and would interact with perceived costs to predict feedback seeking. First, the positive correlation, although modest, between trust and seeking suggests that interpersonal trust does impact the instrumental motive. Additionally, as shown in Fig. 3, this relationship was moderated by perceived seeking costs. Specifically, when perceived costs were low, the positive relationship between trust in a supervisor and feedback seeking from the supervisor remained positive. However, when perceived costs were high, the relationship was essentially zero. Contrary to perceived value, these results suggest that even when trust in the supervisor is high seeking will not increase when individuals perceive high costs related to feedback seeking. Finally, when trust perceptions were low, the level of feedback seeking was the same regardless of the perceived costs.

It is interesting to consider the differences related to trust and perceived value. While we proposed that they were both factors which would raise the instrumental motive and they were related to seeking, they interacted in a unique way with seeking costs. As reviewed above and by Ashford et al. (2003), factors related to the seeker, the feedback message (diagnosticity), and the source (e.g., credibility, trust) all impact the instrumental motive. And while value and trust were strongly related to one another ($r = .52$, $p < .01$) in the current study they do not appear to behave similarly in the model. In other words, the current data suggest that the form of the interaction of the motives may not always be equal. The results of the current study suggest that perhaps perceiving the feedback as valuable has a stronger impact on the decision to seek than trust in the feedback source. In other words, participants in the current study appeared to be more willing to withstand the costs associated with seeking if they perceived the feedback as valuable, than if they trusted the source.

Given that this is the first study to examine interpersonal trust in the feedback seeking process, future work should be conducted to more fully understand the role of trust. In the current study, we did not stipulate as to what type of feedback the individuals were seeking. It may be that the form of the interaction would have looked different for varied types of feedback. Perhaps trust is particularly important when seeking negative or critical feedback. One can imagine that if you are anticipating critical feedback, the degree to which you trust the source would have an especially strong impact on whether you actually seek. However, if someone were seeking objective task feedback, perhaps perceived value of the feedback is more important. Future research is encouraged which more carefully examines both the elements of trust and their relationship to seeking, but also how trust predicts seeking specific types of feedback.

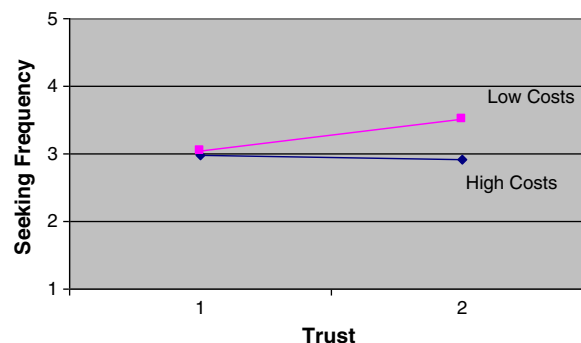


Fig. 3. Interaction of trust and perceived costs on feedback seeking.

6.2. Theoretical implications

The results of the current study contribute to the body of research in the area of employee feedback seeking as well as employee trust. Previous research has identified a number of variables that contribute to individuals' decisions to seek feedback. The current study suggests that an individual's level of trust in his/her supervisor is positively related to the individual's feedback seeking behaviors. This finding adds to previous research that has revealed a positive relationship between characteristics of the feedback source, such as leader consideration and support, and employee feedback seeking behaviors (VandeWalle et al., 2000; Williams et al., 1999).

The current study also extends previous research on the feedback seeking process by providing empirical evidence of the interaction between perceived value and costs on seeking behavior (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Renn & Fedor, 2001; Tsui & Ashford, 1994; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Although a great deal of research has found evidence of the direct effects, this is the first study to provide evidence of an often assumed interactive relationship. It would be interesting to examine if the shape of this interaction holds across all conditions or whether certain factors would impact when individuals would be willing to tolerate the costs related to seeking in order to obtain valued feedback. Our study sample was made up of employees from unique organizations, so a common organizational variable cannot account for the current findings. But one can imagine that there might be specific, contextual factors which may influence this interaction.

Finally, the study also extends our understanding and use of the Mayer et al. (1995) model of trust. Previous work in this area has examined outcomes of trust such as performance, negotiation outcomes, and relationship outcomes. The current study suggests that their model can be generalized to predict feedback seeking behavior as well. In fact, their inclusion of vulnerability as an important component of deciding to take a risk seems right in line with the feedback seeking literature (Levy et al., 1995). Future research may want to further incorporate this model into understanding other elements of the feedback seeking process. We examined only a portion of their model in the current study and as mentioned above it would be interesting to examine how the three factors of trustworthiness (e.g., ability, integrity, benevolence) may influence the feedback seeking process. For instance, do all three equally influence this process or is there a particular component of trustworthiness (i.e., benevolence) that is especially important for predicting seeking behavior.

6.3. Applied implications

In addition to theoretical implications, the current findings have several practical implications for organizations and especially individuals working in a supervisor capacity. Previous research has supported the notion that there is a feedback environment which is heavily influenced by supervisor behaviors (Steelman et al., 2004). For instance, the current results suggest that the relationship one holds with his/her supervisor will have a significant effect on the likelihood of seeking. As such, behaviors supervisors may engage in to further encourage seeking are important to understand. Research has suggested that employees who feel that they receive individualized support from their supervisor trust their supervisor more than those who do not perceive that type of support (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996). Other transformational leadership behaviors, such as communicating an organizational vision to employees and setting expectations for their performance may also lead to increased trust in a supervisor (Podsakoff et al., 1996). Related to the current study, trust may be enhanced by supervisors' efforts to increase their knowledge of subordinates' jobs and tasks, thereby increasing perceptions of supervisor ability. Likewise, by acting in a professional and empathetic manner, supervisors may be able to increase others' perceptions of their integrity and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995).

6.4. Study limitations

There are some limitations that should be discussed when drawing inferences from the results of the current study. First, we have to consider common method variance when examining these results. Researchers have debated how wide spread the effects of common method variance are on studies (Chan, 2009) and while we cannot conclude with certainty that it has not impacted our observed correlations, the size of the correlations in our study may not warrant great concern. In addition, the variables of interest could only really be captured from the employee (i.e., perceptual in nature) and so we feel confident about the data collection decisions. Second, a stronger test of the hypotheses may have come from a longitudinal design; assessing employee perceptions at time one and feedback seeking at a later time point. Future research is encouraged to design and implement more complex studies.

Additionally, the reliability of the trust scale, although improved from previous research, was not as high as we would have liked. We chose this measure as it has been used in previous work which has employed the Mayer et al. (1995) model. However, it may be preferable to use a trust measure meant to assess trust in a feedback seeking context rather than a general measure of trust in the supervisor. We did add one item to reflect trust in the supervisor. Future research may want to examine a supervisor trust measure focused specifically on seeking feedback. Finally, we need to consider that the sample used in the current study might limit the generalizability of the results. The sample was made up of college students, who although worked on average 31 h per week and had been in their positions on average of 2 years, may not have been working in positions that were long-term or ones they intended to continue past completion of their education. Thus, the current estimates of relationships between the constructs may in fact be different in a sample of long-term, career-focused individuals. Nevertheless, this sample does represent a meaningful cohort of employees within our workforce that often does not receive ample attention. However, we recognize that future work should replicate the current findings in a broader sample.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the interactive effects of perceived feedback seeking costs and value and trust in the supervisor, in the feedback seeking process. Both trust and perceived feedback seeking value appear to play significant roles in employees' decisions to seek performance feedback from their supervisors. In addition, perceived feedback seeking costs were found to moderate these relationships. Interestingly, it appears that trust in a supervisor may not mitigate the effects of perceived costs, but if the perceived value of feedback is high, individuals will engage in feedback seeking behaviors regardless of the perceived costs of such behaviors. In sum, the current study enhanced understanding of the perceived costs and values that individuals must weigh when deciding to actively seek feedback from their supervisors. Given the benefits of feedback seeking for individuals and organizations, it is important to examine factors that may promote or deter active seeking behaviors.

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