

Managerial tactics for communicating negative performance feedback

Negative
performance
feedback

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Abstract

Purpose – Delivering negative feedback to employees is highly problematic for managers. Negative feedback is important in generating improvements in employee performance, but likely to generate adverse employee reactions. However, if managers do not address poor performance, good performers may become demoralized or exit the organization. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how managers communicate negative feedback and the factors that drive their choice of tactic.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors use interview data from practicing line managers with experience in delivering negative feedback to learn whether their tactic choices are consistent with Implicit (“best practice”) or Contingency (“best fit”) theory.

Findings – The authors identify five negative feedback tactics: evidence, emotive and communication tactics are foundation tactics while evidence + communication and evidence + emotive tactics are bundles of the foundation tactics. Managers apply a “best fit” approach from a set of “best practice” negative feedback options. The choice of negative feedback tactic is driven by the manager’s assessment of the “best fit” with the employee’s personality.

Research limitations/implications – Most of the managers believed that their negative feedback tactic had been effective. Future researchers should investigate which negative feedback tactics employees regard as most effective.

Practical implications – A best fit approach to the delivery of negative feedback requires organizations to give managers discretion in the delivery of negative feedback. Managers may mis-assess fit which can undermine the effectiveness of the appraisal process.

Originality/value – The authors focus on how negative feedback is communicated by managers. Existing research focusses on reactions to negative feedback without taking into account how it is delivered.

Keywords Qualitative, Performance management, Appraisal

Paper type Research paper



Organizations implement a performance appraisal system to improve employee performance (Nankervis and Compton, 2006). The appraisal process commences with the establishment of an employee’s goals and concludes with a formal meeting (“performance appraisal interview” (PAI)) at which the supervisor provides feedback and rates the employee’s job performance against the performance criteria (Aguinis, 2009). Feedback, especially negative feedback, can play an important role in facilitating

performance improvements (Glassman, 2010; Heneman and Werner, 2005; Rynes *et al.*, 2005). Negative feedback enables the employee to take any corrective action needed to meet the goal or standard (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; Locke and Latham, 2002). The way in which negative feedback is communicated affects an employee's interpretation and response to the feedback (Harms and Roebuck, 2010). Our focus is on the negative feedback that managers formally communicate to employees during the PAI. The PAI is generally not optional and the feedback communicated during the PAI is associated with important consequences (e.g. pay and promotion) for the employee (Meyer *et al.*, 1965; Prince and Lawler, 1986).

Researchers have identified the challenges in communicating negative performance feedback. Managers do not like giving negative feedback. Managers have been known to delay (Bond and Anderson, 1987; Larson, 1984), distort (Fisher, 1979; Ilgen *et al.*, 1981; Waung and Highhouse, 1997) and even avoid giving negative feedback altogether (Fried *et al.*, 1992). Managers are reluctant (Larson, 1984; Tesser and Rosen, 1975) and uncomfortable (Smith *et al.*, 2000; Villanova *et al.*, 1993) about giving negative feedback. Researchers have demonstrated that employees do not like receiving negative feedback. Negative feedback can trigger adverse employee reactions, including workplace anger, spreading rumors and physical attacks (Baron, 1988; Geddes and Baron, 1997; Tata, 2002). While the literature has provided insights into the challenges in communicating and receiving negative feedback, what is less clear is the tactics that managers use to deliver negative feedback to their subordinates.

We focus on how the negative feedback is communicated as we currently have only a piecemeal understanding of the negative feedback tactics used by managers. The way in which negative feedback is communicated is important as it affects an employee's interpretation and response to the feedback (Harms and Roebuck, 2010). Further, understanding managerial negative feedback tactics is important because negative feedback is not always effective in generating improvements in employee performance. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) conducted a meta analysis of feedback interventions and their results indicated that in more than one-third of the cases feedback lowered subsequent performance.

In this research we use feedback intervention theory to identify tactics for the delivery of negative performance feedback and then test them with practicing managers. Tactics, in this context, refer to the strategic procedures that managers use to tell employees that they have performed poorly. We identify the tactics managers believe are more likely to generate positive employee responses (Goodhew *et al.*, 2008; Silverman, 2005). We provide examples of what managers say to employees to illustrate how these tactics are applied by managers.

Researchers have typically studied the use and effectiveness of single feedback tactics (Kim and Miller, 1990; Tata, 2002). However, the PAI is a complex interpersonal interaction (Wexley and Snell, 1987), likely to demand similarly complex tactical combinations. Dorfman *et al.* (1986), for example, showed that managers are likely to bundle tactics such as discussing ways employees could improve their performance, clearing up job problems and engaging in mutual goal setting. We examine which negative feedback tactics managers are most likely to combine when communicating with their employees.

Our research also investigates the factors that influence the managerial choice of negative feedback tactics. The manager has to identify the best way to deal with the poor performer and implement interventions that may or may not work. The risks for the manager in dealing with poor performers are higher than when dealing with good

performers (Jordan and Audia, 2012). Implicit theory (Larson, 1984) suggests that managers have a set of beliefs about which practices are most likely to be effective irrespective of the circumstances (“best practice”). Contingency theory (Klein *et al.*, 1987) suggests that managers will choose tactics based on the level of fit with the employee (“best fit”). We examine whether managers are more likely to use a “best practices” or a “best fit” approach when choosing negative feedback tactics.

Theoretical framework

Feedback intervention theory (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996, 1998) assists in identifying potential feedback tactics. DeNisi and Kluger (2000) define a feedback intervention as a process of providing employees with information about their performance. The tactics the manager uses to deliver negative performance feedback are therefore feedback interventions. There are two key assumptions in feedback intervention theory: first that employee behavior is regulated by comparisons of feedback with goals (and identification of gaps between the two) and second that goals are arranged hierarchically (the self-level, the task-level and the task-learning level). We now turn to a discussion of these goals and relate them to managerial negative feedback tactics.

At the self-level, goals relate to the employee’s self-concept. “Feedback interventions focus attention at this level when success at the task at hand is equated with some higher order goal or when performance on that task is central to our self-concept” (Kluger and DeNisi, 1998, p. 131). Managers can evoke self-level goals by using emotive tactics that target the employee’s self-concept. This can involve, for example, an emotional appeal to the employee’s desire to be a valued member of the organization, a good colleague or a respected team member.

Goals set at the task and task-learning levels are associated with actual task performance (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Managers can evoke task-level goals by communicating feedback that focusses the employee’s attention on the gap between actual and desired performance. Managers can then evoke task-learning level goals through feedback that focusses the employee’s attention on the specific details involved in successful task performance. This type of feedback involves an evidence tactic, in which the manager provides specific evidence (Erdogan *et al.*, 2001) in relation to past performance objectives and clearly distinguishes between the person and his or her performance. The evidence tactic focusses on demonstrating poor performance and communicating negative feedback to appear rational, legitimate, objective and reasonable.

Literature that does not explicitly reference feedback intervention theory nonetheless provides repeated recommendations to managers to be sensitive to communication tactics in the PAI, especially with respect to balancing positive and negative feedback and encouraging employee involvement. As Chory and Kingsley Westerman (2009) note, the way information is communicated to employees will impact on employee reactions to negative feedback. Some performance feedback training programs focus on the sequencing of feedback (e.g. www.ddiworld.com/). Managers are encouraged to “sandwich” negative feedback in a positive-negative-positive sequence (Lizzio *et al.*, 2008). Others regard such approaches as indirect and ineffective as the employee can experience difficulties identifying the true content of the feedback (Asmuß, 2008). Managers are also urged to involve employees in the conversation by giving them time to state their views and offer their own suggestions for improvement (Gallo, 2014; Moss, 2004).

Choosing among negative feedback tactics

Feedback intervention theory suggests that managers can use a variety of tactics to deliver negative feedback. Implicit theory and contingency theory provide insights into how managers might choose between negative feedback tactics. Implicit theory (Larson, 1984) suggests a best practices approach: the manager holds the view that some negative feedback tactics are more likely to be effective than others, irrespective of the circumstances. Managers develop beliefs about the likely consequences of giving performance feedback through direct experience (i.e. actually giving performance feedback to subordinates), training programs or observations of other people giving feedback. However, these sources are likely to focus managers' attention on a relatively small set of practices that, having worked in the past, continue to be repeated. Training programs, in particular, are likely to present generic tactics and recommend that the same tactics be applied in all circumstances (Greller, 1998). Once managers' best practice beliefs are crystallized into an implicit theory, they guide managerial behavior (Larson, 1984).

In contrast, contingency theory suggests a best fit approach; managers choose among tactics based on their assessments of which tactics are most likely to be effective with a particular subordinate. Fit is important as employees vary in their willingness to receive, process and use performance feedback (Gabriel *et al.*, 2014). Many contingency theorists highlight the importance of employee characteristics (Cummings and Schwab, 1978; Kane and Lawler, 1979; Klein *et al.*, 1987; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995) as important in driving the choice of negative feedback tactics. Fried *et al.* (1992) demonstrate that managers learn what tactics are most appropriate for each subordinate and then use those tactics which they believe are most likely to achieve managerial objectives.

Researchers have identified an employee's personality as being a salient characteristic (Klein *et al.*, 1987). Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) provides guidance on the aspects of an employee's personality that may impact a manager's selection of negative feedback tactic. Self-affirmation theory suggests that subordinates will be motivated to retain their integrity. When there is a threat to their integrity (such as negative feedback) self-affirmation theory suggests that subordinates will seek to restore their integrity. However, not all subordinates have the capacity to restore their integrity: researchers have identified employees with low self-esteem as particularly vulnerable. Low self-esteem exacerbates the perceived harmful implications of negative feedback for one's self-image (Audia and Locke, 2003). Low self-esteem has some external manifestations, such as walking head down, reluctance to make or sustain direct eye contact with others, taking things personally, offering frequent apologies or using negative, hopeless language. Managers may tailor their negative feedback tactic selection based on their assessment of the subordinate's ability to manage the negative feedback.

Feedback intervention theory and research suggests that there are a variety of negative feedback tactics available to managers (emotive, evidence, communication). We investigated this tactic typology using data collected from managers who regularly conduct performance appraisals.

Method

Communicating negative feedback is a complex and emotional process (Aguinis, 2009; Tata, 2002), so the most effective way to learn how and why managers deliver negative feedback is through a qualitative research method. Interviews allow managers to tell their stories in their own language (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) giving the researcher rich

descriptive details. Quantitative research has been used to assess employee reactions to negative feedback (Geddes and Baron, 1997; Sommers and Kulkarni, 2012; Steelman and Rutkowski, 2004; van Emmerik *et al.*, 2008; Yariv, 2006) but leaves unanswered the question of how individual managers select negative feedback tactics for the PAI. A semi-structured interview is an effective tool to capture the complexities of the tactic selection process (Patton, 1987).

The first interviewees were identified through personal contacts. Subsequent interviewees were identified via the snowball technique, in which each interviewee was asked to nominate other potential interviewees (Burgess, 1990). To participate in the research, the manager had to have some past experience with conducting performance appraisals. We continued to interview until the data we were collecting revealed no additional insights (Miles and Huberman, 1994), a point achieved by the 20th interview.

In total, 60 percent of the interviewees were males and 40 percent were females. This is roughly representative of the gender composition of managers in Australia: about 38 percent of managers are female (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In all, 50 percent of the participants worked in the public sector and were all from the same large government agency. Of the remaining managers, 20 percent were from a resource company, 15 percent were from an insurance company and 15 percent were from an accounting firm.

Each manager was interviewed for about one hour in his/her office or a nearby conference room. The interviews were semi-structured: the researchers developed an interview protocol which facilitated a focussed interaction. Interviewees were aware of the purpose of the interview prior to the actual interview. Each interview was recorded digitally in order to ensure a high-quality recording, which assists the transcription process leading to better quality transcripts (Modaff, 2000). Transcripts were compared to the digital recordings as a quality control check.

Interview procedure

In this study, feedback is defined as negative when managers anticipate that his/her evaluation of the employee's performance is below the employee's expectations of how well he/she has performed (Jordan and Audia, 2012). An example of negative feedback is when a manager has given the employee an overall average rating, but thinks that the employee is expecting an above average rating. From the manager's perspective, he/she is faced with the task of communicating negative feedback.

We used a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to elicit the tactics used by the manager and the rationale for their use. A critical incident technique involves asking respondents to discuss a specific event rather than making generalizations. We were looking for specific examples in order to ensure our interviews were anchored in the reality of actions taken rather than the rhetoric of what managers might feel obliged to report (Hunt and Boxall, 1998). During the interview, managers were asked to focus on a critical incident (without revealing any identifying information) where he/she had to provide feedback during a PAI, and anticipated that his/her appraisal of the employee's performance would be below the employee's expectation of how well he or she has performed. The interview protocol included a series of open-ended questions that asked the manager to explain what he/she did during the PAI ("During the performance appraisal interview, how did you actually communicate the negative feedback to your employee? What did you do? Did you use any tactics or follow a set of procedures that you think will help you achieve an outcome you want? Can you give an example?"); the rationale for their approach ("What prompted you to approach the situation in such a way? What did you

hope to achieve by approaching the situation in this way/communicating negative feedback/employing those tactics in this way?"); and, what happened after the PAI ("Did you find your way of approaching with the situation/communicating negative feedback/ the tactics that you used effective?"). Additional questions were introduced during the interview to probe for more detail (Neuman, 1997).

Method of analysis

The interview transcripts were coded by two independent coders using NVivo, a software package for qualitative data analysis. Some a priori categories were based on the literature (e.g. we anticipated a code for "sandwiching" tactics; Davies and Jacobs, 1985); others emerged from the interviews. The inter-coder reliability was 83 percent. Reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Disagreements were discussed by the two coders until a consensus was reached. Our coding relied on the constant comparative method in which newly coded text was compared with previously coded text to ensure that the new codes maintained their integrity (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Once the data were coded, we manually reviewed the transcripts for a more fine-grained understanding of tactics used by managers and their rationale.

Results

The managers in our study had extensive experience with performance appraisal systems in their current or previous organizations. Despite this experience, many still confessed to anxiety about communicating negative feedback to their employee "because you're never sure which way they are going to jump. So you think ok, they jumped how I expected, that's good, it went ok. There is always an element of unknown" (Female Manager No. 12, Government Agency).

Identifying negative feedback tactics

We found evidence of three foundation tactics and two bundles of tactics. The five tactics, and their frequency, are presented in Table I. The emotive tactic appeals to the employee's emotions and feelings about negative performance, for example, not wanting to let colleagues or the team down. Managers also expressed empathy with their employee or admitted discomfort in having to deliver negative feedback. Managers using this tactic are helpers: they are assisting the employee to perform by appealing to their self-concept. The evidence tactic relies on the use of examples, existing performance expectations, logic and reason to focus their employee's attention on task performance. Managers using this tactic are judges: they are assessing the performance of the employee through direct reference to performance targets or the performance of peers. The consequences of failing to meet targets are used to encourage higher subsequent performance. The communication tactic refers to managers' efforts to balance positive and negative feedback and encourage employee participation. The employee is encouraged to self-assess their performance and given an opportunity to explain the causes of poor performance. Managers using this tactic are conversationalists: they encourage the employee to talk about their performance through the provision of positive feedback and probing questions. We found that managers bundle tactics into two combinations: evidence + communication and evidence + emotive tactics.

The evidence + communication tactic involves managers using the evidence tactic to establish the case for negative feedback and then using the communication tactic to develop an action plan for future performance. Managers using this tactic bundle are

		% Mentioning	Negative performance feedback
<i>Emotive tactic (the manager as a “helper”)</i>			975
Managers appeal to the employees self-concept, particularly their need to be a valued member of the organization	Role of helper	25	
	Read body language	20	
Emotive tactics appeal to the employee's emotions and feelings	Impact on others and team/team-based language	10	
	Express empathy	10	
	Admit discomfort/rhetorical questions	10	
	Doing employees a favor/for employee's benefit	10	
	Managerial apology	5	
<i>Evidence tactic (the manager as a “judge”)</i>			
Managers collect and present evidence of poor performance that they have recorded throughout the performance appraisal cycle to justify the negative feedback	Use examples/feedback from others	60	
	feedback/establish expectations upfront	40	
Evidence tactics rely on the use of logic and objective data	Refer to targets/goal/comparison to peers/experience/organization	35	
	Outline potential outcomes/dismissal/other career	30	
	Talk about own experience/own target	15	
	Do not rehash issues	10	
<i>Communication tactic (the manager as a “conversationalist”)</i>			
Managers focus on how they present the negative feedback to the employee, the relative amounts of positive and negative feedback and the opportunities provided to the employee to respond to the manager	Sandwiching/start with positive/do not end negative	40	
	Get employee to talk first/self-appraisal	35	
	Listen to employee	25	
	Opportunity to explain the causes of poor performance	20	
	Start with an ice breaker	10	
	Idle chat at the end	10	
	Humor	10	
	Ask for feedback about self	5	
<i>Evidence + communication tactic (the manager as a “narrator”)</i>			
This tactic combines the evidence and communication tactics. The manager identifies how performance could be improved in the future, and describes the action plan and training opportunities	Action plan to help employees improve/focus on future	60	
	Developmental not negative	45	
<i>Evidence + emotive tactic (the manager as a “cheerleader”)</i>			
This tactic combines the evidence and emotive tactics. The manager identifies the poor performance and encourages the employee to improve his or her performance. The employee is encouraged to think positively about the challenge of improving their performance	Empower employees to improve/up to employee	25	
	Use employee's ambition as leverage	10	

Table I.
Frequency of
tactic use

narrators: the manager describes the problem and outlines an action plan with the employee to improve their performance. The evidence + emotive tactic involves the manager using the evidence tactic to establish that their employee's performance was not up to expectations, but then using the emotive tactic to encourage performance improvements. Managers using this tactic are cheerleaders: they encourage the employee to think positively about the challenges of performance improvement.

Emotive tactic. Managers who used this tactic saw themselves as helpers. The emotive tactic demonstrates "that you are interested in them as a person, not just as an employee or a cog in a machine" (Female Manager No. 22, Government Agency). Managers observed the employee's body language as a means of deciding how he/she would proceed with the rest of the PAI. When employees appeared to be visibly upset by the negative feedback, managers changed the focus of the discussion or allowed the employee to have a short recess before the PAI recommenced:

There was one point where she did get a little bit teary and I said look do you want to break the discussion? Would you like to grab a glass of water? So yeah, she went and had her coffee or water and then she was fine (Male Manager No. 8, Insurance Company).

The emotive tactic can also involve the manager acknowledging their own emotions when giving negative feedback. "I found one way of putting things at ease is to tell the appraisee that you're feeling uncomfortable about this and that you're apprehensive" (Male Manager No. 21, Government Agency).

One way our managers used the emotive tactic was by appealing to their employee's sense of commitment to co-workers or team members:

A couple of times I sort of re-emphasized the need to be a bit more accurate with the work because it impacted on the way colleagues could do their work. They were entering information into a computer system and if it wasn't accurate, they couldn't in this case raise invoices to bill clients. There were typos, spelling mistakes, incorrect address details and so forth. People raising the invoices couldn't utilize the system (Male Manager No. 18, Government Agency).

Recognizing and using emotion allowed the manager to humanize the feedback process "as we still need to get back to work and we still need to work together" (Male Manager No. 18, Government Agency). The problem with the emotive tactic, according to our managers, was that it can be difficult to apply consistently across all employees: "Sometimes when you're emotional I might not be consistent" (Female Manager No. 17, Government Agency). Further, focussing on emotions has the potential to side track the conversation. The employee may feel better by the close of the PAI, but may not have clearly received the negative feedback.

Evidence tactic. The evidence tactic situates the manager as a judge reviewing evidence (e.g. performance targets and specific examples of poor performance) when communicating negative feedback to the employee. The evidence tactic was more popular than the emotive tactic. The popularity of the evidence tactic was based on its capacity to limit employee emotions associated with negative feedback: my employee "can't really argue about the facts" (Male Manager No. 8, Insurance Company). Managers check the accuracy of their data and use specific examples to substantiate negative feedback during the PAI:

[...] get my facts right first before approaching an individual, rather than going on heresay. Try to establish some substance towards giving that feedback and if they say it was just heresay, you've got evidence to back it up (Male Manager No. 18, Government Agency).

Managers noted how important it was to select the right examples. Poorly selected examples could undermine the effectiveness of the evidence tactic: “because the way you interpret or read a situation may not be necessarily the same way that they [the employee] are looking at it” (Female Manager No. 15, Government Agency).

Managers invoked evidence in a variety of different ways: for example, in the form of organizational benchmarks or comparisons with other employees. Managers demonstrated that their employee's performance fell short of the organization's performance targets, goals set by the employee himself/herself, and the performance of his or her peers:

The negative things that I said to him is you're not where you think you are and certainly in comparison with the other graduates you are a long way behind (Male Manager No. 6, Accounting Firm).

I basically look at her performance agreement and in order to stay objective I try to really tie everything back to her performance agreement and say well you agreed to this. These sorts of performance indicators are what we agreed on prior to this. This part here I don't think you're meeting (Female Manager No. 22, Government Agency).

Communication tactic. In contrast with the evidence tactic (where the manager dominates the PAI), managers using the communication tactic regard the PAI as a conversation with the employee about their performance. The conversationalist manager actively encourages the employee to participate in the PAI:

I open up by giving the person the opportunity to say how they feel that they had been going during that part of the period and get them to do some talking initially without me indicating what I think. So the first thing is to get them talking about how they feel, whether they think they need to improve or what areas are causing them concern, etc. (Female Manager No. 16, Government Agency).

“Sandwiching” feedback (positive-negative-positive sequence) was a popular approach for generating a performance conversation: “if you have something negative to say sandwich it between positive things” (Female Manager No. 19, Government Agency). Opening with something positive encouraged the employee to participate in the PAI (Female Manager No. 6, Government Agency). The popularity of sandwiching derived from a belief in the value of “balanced feedback” (Male Manager No. 18, Government Agency): it allowed their employee to leave the PAI feeling “good” about the interaction (Male Manager No. 3, Mining and Resources Company). One manager used sandwiching cautiously with his employee as she was likely to “dwell on the positive and ignore the negative” feedback (Male Manager No. 4, Mining and Resources Company).

Some managers rejected sandwiching as a strategy. Keeping the conversation focussed exclusively on the negative feedback drew the performance issues to the attention of their employee and was more likely to lead to performance improvements:

I said to the person, look I think it is critical that you do understand exactly where you sit. So I'm going to tell you as it is (Male Manager No. 8, Insurance Company).

When the employee participated in the conversation they were more likely to “own” the discussion and be responsive to its message. The manager's intention was to create a “dialogue between the two of us” (Male Manager No. 13, Government Agency). A two way conversation did, however, carry risks and can be very time consuming. In one case the employee disagreed with the manager (Male Manager No. 14, Government Agency). In another case the manager felt compelled to listen to their employee even when they thought the employee was making irrelevant comments: “[...] he would just talk. I think that

was his defence mechanism” (Female Manager No. 7, Insurance Company). One manager had to schedule several meetings to give the employee time to digest the manager’s comments and formulate a response (Female Manager No. 15, Government Agency).

Our managers chose their words carefully when communicating negative feedback to their subordinates, particularly avoiding words that are “too value laden or derogatory” (Female Manager No. 15, Government Agency) and confrontational words or euphemisms (Female Manager No. 5, Insurance Company).

Evidence + communication tactic. The evidence tactic was popular but was often used in conjunction with the communication tactic. Managers combining the evidence and communication tactics are narrators: they are providing the connecting links between poor performance (as evidenced by the gap between performance targets and achievements) and the steps necessary to avoid poor performance in the future (communications to generate a forward looking perspective).

For some managers, the evidence tactic on its own was ineffective in bringing about changes in their employees’ performance. These managers emphasized what their employee needed to change in order to avoid negative feedback in the future:

So the focus of the discussion is very much on future thinking. It’s not about talking about what went wrong; it’s more about what hasn’t happened that should have happened. And when things haven’t happened, why it didn’t happen, what could we do to ensure that we don’t find ourselves in the same situation 6 or 12 months down the track (Male Manager No. 13, Government Agency).

The forward looking developmental focus generated an “action plan.” An action plan identified the areas for improvement and “specific actions that we can work together on to try and get you there” (Female Manager No. 5, Insurance Company). By taking a forward looking approach the manager sought to foster a positive exchange with the employee and avoid the risks inherent in replacing the employee with a new hire (Male Manager No. 1, Mining and Resources Company).

Managers believed that subordinates appreciated the developmental focus of the evidence + communication tactic (Male Manager No. 13, Government Agency); this tactic bundle encouraged the employee to believe the organization had their best interests in mind (Female Manager No. 22, Government Agency).

Evidence + emotive tactic. When using the evidence + emotive tactic bundle, the manager demonstrates that the employee has not performed to expectations but emphasizes that the employee has the capacity to meet performance expectations in the future. The manager is encouraging their employee to think positively about performance improvements so can be seen as a cheerleader:

So yes acknowledging that this needs to be done, yes you do have the capability to do this, what you need is process and a strategy to acquire those skills and to better apply them (Male Manager No. 13, Government Agency).

Our managers sought to instill capacity in their employee to change their performance. The manager had identified what needed to change but was pointing out it was now up to their employee to implement the changes. Managers believed they needed to empower their employee to make changes in their work performance:

But I said to him you’re a pretty strong character and you can pull through this and you just gotta get out there and have a crack. I mean you can take it in one of two ways. You can give up and you can walk away and not achieve anything. Or you can take this on the chin and really start to make some changes (Male Manager No. 6, Accounting Firm).

Learning about negative feedback tactics. Managers identified the influence of training, observation and experience in forming their views about negative feedback tactics:

We've had training on ways to go through the feedback. I guess you try and remember the training message in terms of how to deal with people sort of in a way that they can take it and use the feedback productively (Male Manager No. 12, Government Agency).

Observing the tactics that other manager's use can be influential. Some managers identify a person who does a good job of providing feedback, observe how that person goes about the task and subsequently imitate the tactics that they believe to be effective:

I'm good at what I call trying to isolate the "champions" and how they go about it. Just trying to pick what would work for me out of that (Male Manager No. 21, Government Agency).

The other managers, we have a lot of discussions amongst each other and give each other advice (Female Manager No. 11, Accounting Firm).

Two types of experience were important in forming views about negative feedback tactics: learning from past PAI mistakes as a manager and learning from experiences of negative feedback as a recipient. As recipients, managers observed how negative feedback was communicated to them and subsequently adopted the same approach when they communicated negative feedback to their employees. However, managers only used the same tactics if they, as the recipient of the feedback, had a positive experience.

"Best practice" or "Best fit"?

Under a best practices approach, the manager believes that some negative feedback tactics are more likely to be effective than others, irrespective of the participants. Under a best fit approach, the manager believes that negative feedback tactics need to be tailored to the feedback recipient. We find that managers see merit in each of the five negative feedback tactics. However, it was also evident that managers tailored their tactic selection from this set of best practices for a particular PAI based on the characteristics of the employee:

[...] people respond better when they are treated as individuals when you are giving them feedback. Not a vanilla flavored feedback mechanism of everybody gets the same sort of feedback and it's not done to a recipe (Male Manager No. 3, Government Agency).

Our managers assessed best fit based on their employee's personality. Managers made an assessment of the "personality type" of their employee and provided "feedback in a way that will suit their personality type" (Female Manager No. 11, Accounting Firm). As one manager found, a misalignment between the tactic and their employees' personality resulted in their employee taking the negative feedback "personally and get[ting] down the dumps sad, long face, come to work but not do a lot" (Male Manager No. 12, Government Agency). The manager's purpose in assessing their employee's personality was to determine the employee's capacity to handle the negative feedback. Managers noted that sensitive and low self-esteem subordinates were most likely to react adversely to negative feedback. One manager with a sensitive employee had to "tippy toe around everything and just sort of take it quietly" (Male Manager No. 9, Accounting Firm). Another manager noted:

This particular person does get quite emotional so therefore that threw up another problem. On this occasion you're not quite sure whether they'll accept it for what it is or whether they will basically become quite emotional and then basically react quite the opposite of what you would like (Male Manager No. 1, Mining and Resources Company).

With sensitive employees, managers adopted the evidence tactic in order to try and avoid any emotional scenes at the PAI: "I didn't really go in hard on her. It was more a matter of giving her the facts" (Male Manager No. 8, Insurance Company). Managers identified sensitive employees as unlikely to respond well to a combination of negative and positive feedback. One manager found their sensitive employee tended to "dwell" (Male Manager No. 14, Government Agency) on the negative feedback and react adversely. One manager noted that the evidence + communication tactic was helpful with employees with a fragile self-esteem:

That was why I spent as much time as I did and went as slowly as I could for this particular person so we could [...] be as sensitive as possible and preserve his esteem along the way (Female Manager No. 7, Insurance Company).

Employees who were unlikely to react adversely to the negative feedback (confident and ambitious subordinates) gave managers more freedom to utilize different negative feedback tactics. Confident employees were seen to be best-suited to the communication tactic. Confident employees could handle negative feedback without the "sugar coating" of positive feedback: "this guy could take it on the chest and it made it easier for me" (Male Manager No. 6, Accounting Firm). One manager waited for her employee to regain her confidence after the negative feedback: "She was upset for the first 20 minutes and then she tended to get more relaxed and more confident in talking about what we were there to talk about" (Female Manager No. 11, Accounting Firm).

The evidence + communication tactic was useful for dealing with ambitious employees. One manager reported that an ambitious employee is more likely to challenge negative feedback. The manager decided to approach the PAI with solid evidence (Female Manager No. 19, Government Agency). The evidence tactic gave the manager some communication leverage in the PAI with her ambitious employee:

I want to help you get promoted, but you're not going to get promoted unless you do certain things. And you have to understand that you need to have my support because I have got that leverage because I am the manager and you are a lower level staff, so you've got to listen to me (Female Manager No. 22, Government Agency).

Employees, however, did not always behave as their managers had anticipated. The manager forms an opinion about the personality of their employee prior to the PAI but employees can react in unpredictable ways during the PAI: "Sometimes you think people won't get offended or won't react and you get quite a strong reaction from the person so it's very hard to gauge" (Male Manager No. 18, Government Agency).

Managers revised their "reading" of an employee in light of how their employee reacted to previous negative feedback (Female Manager No. 15, Government Agency):

Just experience with having dealt with the same person previously and recognizing what went well and what didn't go so well in previous interactions. So adjusting my behaviors to meet with them [...] But making sure that I'm giving feedback in a manner that was going to be received well by this person (Manager No. 3, Mining and Resources Company).

Impact of negative feedback. We asked managers if they thought the negative feedback had been effective (Carson and Cupach, 2000): 35 percent of the managers believed that the employee's performance had improved; 40 percent of managers indicated the employee subsequently changed employment and 25 percent of managers indicated there was no meaningful improvement in the performance of the employee. In those interviews where the employee had subsequently changed jobs the manager regarded this as a good

outcome. For example, the employee had been unable to adapt to changes in the department (Male Manager No. 21, Government Agency), did not have the capabilities to do the job (Male Manager No. 14, Government agency) or had been hired as a result of a recruitment and selection error (Male Manager No. 8, Insurance Company).

Discussion and conclusions

Communicating negative feedback to employees is highly problematic for managers. On the one hand, negative feedback is important in generating improvements in employee performance (Aguinis, 2009), but almost certain to generate adverse employee reactions. Geddes and Baron (1997) found that 98 percent of managers reported an adverse employee reaction after communicating negative feedback. On the other hand, if managers do not deal with poor performance, good performers may exit the organization (Sujansky, 2007). In order to achieve the benefits (and avoid the costs) of negative feedback we need to understand how negative feedback is being communicated by managers.

Our first contribution to the literature is conceptual by identifying five negative feedback tactics: evidence, emotive and communication tactics are foundation tactics while evidence + communication and evidence + emotive tactics are bundles of the foundation tactics. These five best practice tactics were invoked by managers to cover a variety of employee performance issues. Second, we found that managers apply a best fit approach from a set of best practice negative feedback options. Consistent with contingency theory (Klein *et al.*, 1987) the ultimate choice of negative feedback tactic in any particular PAI is driven by the manager's assessment of the best fit with the employee's personality. Third, based on self-affirmation theory, we find the ability to handle negative feedback is an important aspect of employee personality driving a manager's choice of tactics. The evidence and the evidence + communication tactics were most often used with employees who are least able or most able to deal with negative feedback. The evidence tactic reduces emotion in the PAI with the sensitive employee; the evidence + communication tactic boosts subordinates with low self-esteem or provides a forward looking perspective for the confident and ambitious subordinate.

Policy and practice implications

The managers in our study preferred to tailor their negative feedback to the characteristics of the recipient ("best fit"). However, this approach carries risk for the organization: first, it can result in inconsistent negative feedback to employees. Consistent feedback is more credible and aids employees by making expectations more predictable (Harms and Roebuck, 2010). Inconsistency in the delivery of negative feedback may also have legal ramifications (particularly when the feedback is used to justify pay and career progression). Second, there is the potential for "bad fits" in the delivery of negative feedback (when the manager misreads the personality of the employee or is affected by perceptual biases or stereotypes; Spector and Jex, 1991). Third, the "best fit" approach may require the organization to review its managerial career system. Best fit rests on the assumption that the manager works with an employee long enough to form an opinion about what tactic is most likely to be effective. Constant changes in management positions in organizations reduce the time a manager gets to spend with an employee and form an opinion about what tactics are most likely to be effective (Fried *et al.*, 1992). Finally, training programs typically do not equip managers with the skills to make best fit assessments of their employees (Shields, 2007) so managers make assumptions about what tactic will work best with

each employee. Our findings should encourage organizations to review their PAI training program in order to make explicit managers' assumptions about the fit of negative feedback tactics to particular employees.

For researchers, our results challenge earlier evidence that suggests that managers are "cognitive misers" who minimize their cognitive effort by searching for and arriving at decisions that are easy to justify (Mero *et al.*, 2007; Tetlock, 1992). Tailoring negative feedback tactic selection to the personality of the employee is cognitively challenging, but our managers decided that the short term costs are outweighed by the medium and long term benefits.

Strengths, limitations and future research

A strength of our study is the perspective provided by managers experienced in the delivery of negative feedback. In contrast to much of the research on negative feedback, which has relied on vignettes and experimental designs, we collected data from managers who have had to deal with the workplace realities of communicating negative feedback to an employee.

The findings of this study should, however, be considered in light of the limitations. First, there is the issue of a limited sample size. However, interviews with managers were conducted until the tactics that were described reached a point of saturation and no new tactics were generated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Second, managers who participated in this study were recruited via a snowball sampling strategy. There is the issue of bias associated with this sampling strategy as the range of potential participants is limited by the number of contacts in a participant's professional network (Thomson, 1997). A snowball strategy runs the risk of missing "isolates" who are not connected to any network that the researcher has tapped into (Van Meter, 1990). However, given that communicating negative feedback is a situation that often causes managers discomfort (Smith *et al.*, 2000) the snowball technique is useful in making contact with participants where trust is required for getting access to potential participants. This can also increase the likelihood that managers would share their experiences openly and honestly.

Third, the managers were asked to provide a retrospective description of a critical incident where he or she had to communicate negative feedback. Retrospective accounts may be inaccurate. However, several steps were taken in order to improve the accuracy of the critical incidents reported. Prior to the interview, managers were asked to spend some time recalling the details of the incident that he or she would talk about during the interview. During the interview, managers were prompted to give a great level of detail about the situation. Flanagan (1954) argues that if interviewees provide full and precise details, interviewers can assume the critical incident is accurately reported.

Future researchers might build on our findings by investigating the status of the employee receiving the negative feedback. It would be useful to compare and contrast the tactics used with employees in senior roles vs those in junior roles within an organization (Burke *et al.*, 1982). The organization may be more dependent on senior than junior employees so managers are more likely to utilize the evidence + communication or the evidence + emotive tactics. These tactics demonstrate where the employee has underperformed but are forward looking as the organization needs to retain the skills of the employee.

Our focus has been on the formal face to face communication of negative feedback. The growth in telework and other alternative working arrangement suggests that feedback may need to be communicated via a non-face to face electronic channel

(Westerman *et al.*, 2014). The non-face to face communication of negative feedback allows supervisors and employees to “compose, edit and process messages carefully” (p. 245), thereby improving the quality of the communication process. Research suggests that managers may prefer to send bad news electronically as it avoids the discomfort of communicating bad news face to face (O’Sullivan, 2000). Future researchers are encouraged to examine the tactics used to communicate negative feedback via electronic channels.

Models of performance management (Shields, 2007) suggest that feedback should occur throughout the performance cycle, not just formally at the PAI. Future research might usefully examine the extent to which managers provide negative feedback informally, examine the tactics used to communicate negative feedback informally and evaluate their effectiveness. Informal negative feedback has the potential to be more effective than formal as it can be delivered in a more timely manner rather than being delayed till the next PAI meeting. Managers, however, need to use tactics that ensure the employee understands that they are being given informal feedback that will form part of their overall performance evaluation.

In our study, 25 percent of the managers indicated that the negative feedback had no impact on the employees’ performance. Future researchers should investigate what employees “hear” when being given negative feedback. Fisher (1979) demonstrated that managers tend to transmit ambiguous messages when communicating negative feedback in order to make the information more acceptable to the employee. Future researchers should investigate employee perceptions of the five negative feedback tactics, including the clarity of the message associated with each tactic, and the impact on employee willingness to improve performance. We might expect that an employee’s amount of PAI experience and their usual performance level will have an impact on their perceptions of, and reactions to, negative feedback tactics. Experienced employees will have a greater familiarity with the performance appraisal process and the consequences of the PAI so they may be less receptive to negative feedback tactics than inexperienced employees. High performing employees may also take little notice of negative feedback tactics if the negative feedback is to do with a “momentary glitch in their achievement record” (Audia and Locke, 2003, p. 638). Self-affirmation theory suggests that employees high in self-efficacy might feel able to ignore negative feedback from their manager. Future research should examine the conditions under which employees are least likely to respond to negative performance feedback.

Negative feedback in a PAI is difficult for both the manager and the employee. Receiving negative performance feedback can be a turning point in the employee – manager relationship (Chory and Hubbell, 2008), so the tactics used by the manager are thus important and worthy of continued study.

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