

CHARACTERISTICS OF OFFENDING FEEDBACK: EVEN SUBTLE CUES MATTER

Rabea Krings, MSc*, University of Bern/University of Neuchâtel/National Centres of Competences in Research (NCCRs), Norbert K. Semmer, PhD, University of Bern/ National Centres of Competences in Research (NCCRs)

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Feedback that is perceived as offending has negative consequences for employees and organizations because it enhances emotions such as anger (Raver, Jensen, Lee, & O'Reilly, 2012) and focuses the receiver's attention on the self, which may negatively affect task performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), as well as extra-role behavior (Raver et al., 2012). To minimize those defensive reactions and to enhance acceptance of negative feedback, rules for giving negative feedback have been established (Baron, 1988, 1990, 1993), calling for feedback to be specific and considerate and to avoid stable internal attributions. Following these rules should employees' help to understand and accept negative feedback, and to change behavior toward desired directions (Shute, 2008). Negative effects of violating such rules (e.g. the perception that the feedback is not respectful and that the feedback giver wants to blame and harm the receiver) have been demonstrated based on rather strong violations of these rules, that is, destructive feedback (Raver et al., 2012). However, the well-established fact that people typically strive to protect their self-esteem suggests that they will be rather sensitive even to subtle deviations from constructive feedback (Semmer et al., 2007). Thus, Krings and colleagues (2014) demonstrate that feedback was evaluated as less fair when the feedback was subtly offending. Such subtly offending feedback was given in a very friendly way and did not explicitly suggest internal causes, but exaggerated the importance of mistakes, for instance by dwelling on little mistakes or by suggesting that errors made could easily have been avoided, thus, implying indirectly that the recipient lacked either competence or motivation (or both). This study showed that it is not sufficient to distinguish between constructive and destructive negative feedback because people react very sensitive even on subtle cues in communication that do not directly lead to internal attributions of being stupid. However, in that study, students rated a feedback that was given to another student. The present study goes one step further, analyzing how people themselves react to negative feedback that is subtly offending, as compared to constructive or destructive feedback.

PROCEDURES

We recruited 239 participants (131 female) via the amazon platform mechanical turk. Mean age was 35.58 ($SD = 11.40$). 85% of the participants were employed, 7% were unemployed, 7% were students and 1% was already retired. After agreeing to participate, participants first received a link for a general questionnaire, containing demographics and general information. 24-hours later, the link for the experiment was sent. The task was to detect differences in two almost identical pictures. The experiment consisted of three parts. The first consisted of a training session, after which participants received constructive negative feedback. The experimental part proper contained the same task, with other pictures. For the feedback on this task, participants were randomly assigned to one of the following conditions: constructive feedback ($N = 82$), subtly offending feedback ($N = 74$), and destructive feedback ($N = 83$). Constructive feedback only stated that the performance was ok and how it could be improved. Destructive feedback attributed the poor performance to stable internal causes stating that people did not work very attentively and that it seemed that performance would not change in future. Subtly offending feedback dwelled on mistakes, declared how easy it would have been to perform better, or exaggerated the importance of small mistakes. In the third part, participants had to evaluate the feedback in terms of the extent they perceived it as demeaning (frustrating, arrogant, condescending and cynical/mockingly). The adjectives were rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .89.

ANALYSES

A between subject design with one factor was used. The factor contains three groups: constructive, destructive and subtly offending negative feedback.

Results

Results show that the different feedback conditions influence the extent to which feedback is evaluated as demeaning ($F(2, 236) = 36.48, p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .22$). The constructive feedback was evaluated as least demeaning, followed by subtly offending feedback, and destructive feedback was evaluated as being most demeaning.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For organizations it is important to give negative feedback in a way it can be accepted so that performance can be positively influenced. Most supervisors realize that it is important to avoid rudeness and insults. Our results show, however, that it is not sufficient to avoid rudeness and insults, but also to avoid more subtle cues in communication like dwelling on mistakes or exaggerating little mistakes. Realizing that one is communicating such subtle cues when given feedback is more difficult.

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to distinguish not only between constructive and destructive negative feedback, but to focus also on more subtle aspects in communication that may threaten people's self-esteem.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Rabea Krings, MSc, Institut de psychologie du travail et des organisations, Rue Emile-Argand 11, 2000 Neuchâtel, Switzerland