

The Relative Value of Positive and Negative Feedback for Work Engagement

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We reject the recent writing of Buckingham and Goodall (2019) that denies the benefits of Unfavorable Feedback.

Balanced Feedback is Best, and Unfavorable Feedback is more engaging than no feedback.



Subjects, Instruments

- 179 Participants, including full-time and part-time employees between ages 18-75 from a variety of industries and backgrounds, in the United States of America and other countries. They were recruited using social media.
- Harman's test for Common Method Variance resulted in 36%, well below threshold guidelines.

INSTRUMENTS

- **Feedback Environment Scale (FES)** developed by Steelman, Levy and Snell (2004) to assess employee perceptions of the **supervisor** and **coworker** feedback environments
- **Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)** developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006) to assess the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption.

Feedback (FES) Items (Steelman et al., 2004)

Favorable Feedback ($\alpha = .88$)

When I do a good job at work, my supervisor praises my performance.	When I do a good job at work, my coworkers praise my performance.
I seldom receive praise from my supervisor.	I seldom receive praise from my coworkers.
My supervisor generally lets me know when I do a good job at work.	My coworkers generally let me know when I do a good job at work.
I frequently receive positive feedback from my supervisor.	I frequently receive positive feedback from my coworkers.

Unfavorable Feedback ($\alpha = .83$)

When I don't meet deadlines, my supervisor lets me know.	When I don't meet deadlines, my coworkers let me know.
My supervisor tells me when my work performance does not meet organizational standards.	My coworkers tell me when my work performance does not meet organizational standards.
On those occasions when my job performance falls below what is expected, my supervisor lets me know.	On those occasions when my job performance falls below what is expected, my coworkers let me know.
On those occasions when I make a mistake at work, my supervisor tells me.	On those occasions when I make a mistake at work, my coworkers tell me.

Analyses and Predicted Results

- Favorable and Unfavorable Feedback was divided into Low and High groups using a median split using the average of the four items in each facet. The possible extreme combination of favorable and Unfavorable Feedback would be if a person's scores were both High (H/H), it is predicted that the person will be highly engaged at workplace.
- A person who scores High Favorable and Low Unfavorable (i.e., H/L), is predicted to be moderately engaged at work. If a person scores Low Favorable and Low Unfavorable (i.e., L/L), it is predicted that the individual will report low engagement. If a person score is Low Favorable but High Unfavorable, it is predicted that the person will be moderately engaged at work, even more than the person who gets neither favorable nor Unfavorable Feedback based on the Gallup reporting (Sorenson, 2016). The most/highly engaged person in this scenario is predicted to be the person who scored High/High and the least engaged would be the person who does not receive either type.

Predicted Results

What Level of Engagement is Predicted in Each Condition?

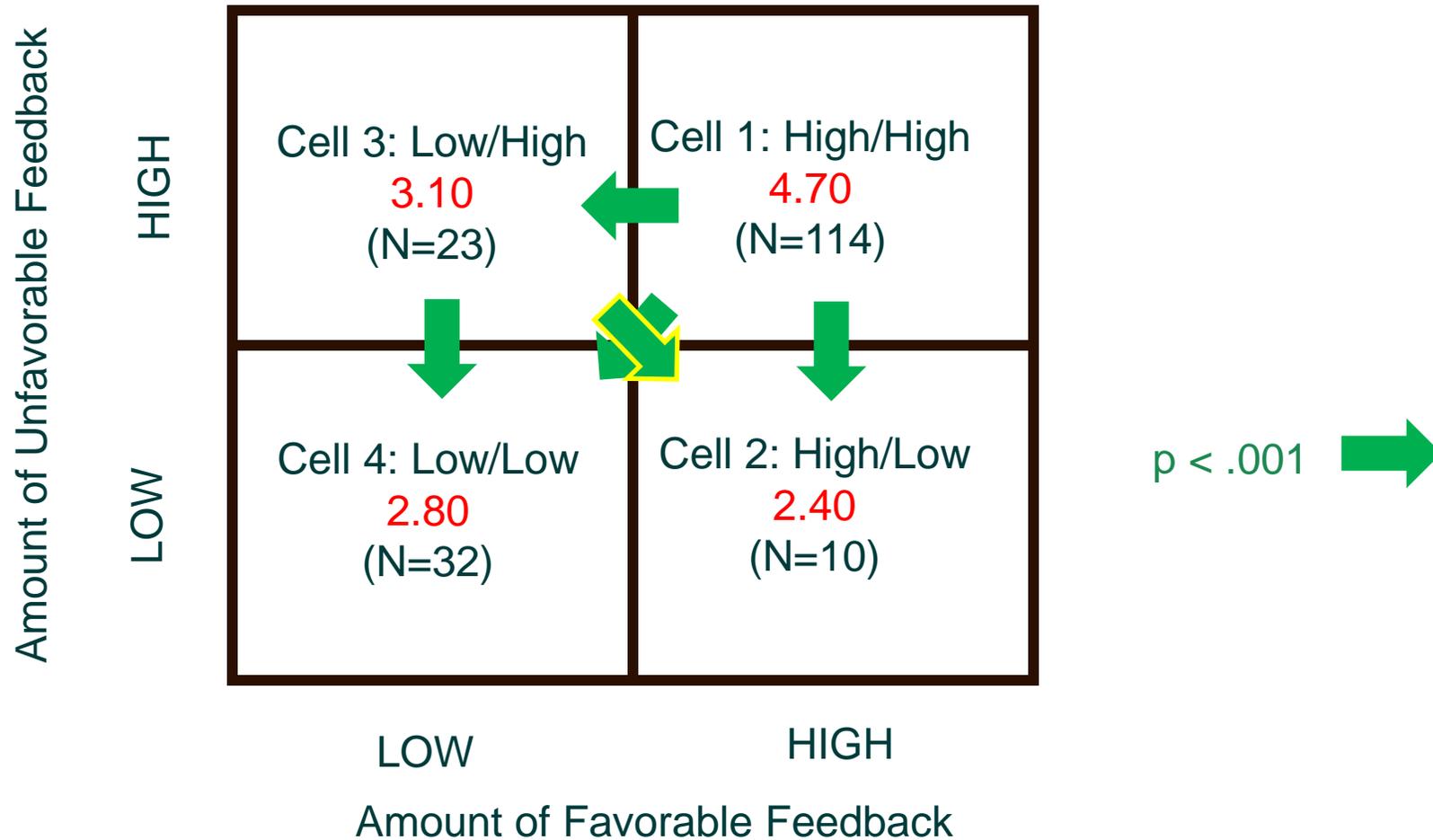
Amount of Unfavorable Feedback	HIGH	Moderate Engagement (3)	High Engagement (1)
	LOW	Low Engagement (4)	Moderate Engagement (2)
		LOW	HIGH
		Amount of Favorable Feedback	

Results

- The results for **Supervisory** feedback (Fig. 2) AND **Coworker** feedback (Fig. 3) reflect the expected results
- For Supervisors, the exception is Cell 2 where the engagement level is lower than Cell 4, though at a nonsignificant level. The t-test between Cells 1 and 3 is also not significant ($p=.06$).
- As predicted, and at a significant level ($p<.001$), the L/H respondents in Cell 3 are more engaged than both the L/L AND H/L participants, reinforcing the power of negative feedback from the Supervisor, even if not when coupled with Favorable Feedback (H/H).
- In both sources, we also see that the good news is that largest population is in the H/H quadrant. The not-so-good news is that being deficient in either type of feedback has a severe impact on employee engagement, and only the H/H combination has close to desired results. That said, an average of 4.70 on a seven point scale is not very energizing and says something about the current state of engagement in the current workforce.
- Overall, we note the **potency of both sources and both types** of feedback, with an accentuated effect for Coworkers.

Supervisory Feedback (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2 Supervisory Source
UWES Scores (in Red)



Coworker Feedback (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3 Coworker Source
UWES Scores (in Red)

Amount of Unfavorable Feedback	HIGH	Cell 3: Low/High 3.90 (N=23)	Cell 1: High/High 5.80 (N=87)
	LOW	Cell 4: Low/Low 1.53 (N=53)	Cell 2: High/Low 2.80 (N=16)
		LOW	HIGH

Amount of Favorable Feedback

All inter-cell UWES
differences sig. $p < .05$

Discussion

- The confirmation of our predictions for the pattern of engagement level depending on the mix of Favorable and Unfavorable Feedback for both Supervisor source and, to an even greater degree, Coworkers is exciting and provides fodder for many follow up studies.
- As importantly, we offer these results as further confirmation that the focus on strengths (Buckingham, 2015; Buckingham & Goodall, 2019) to the detriment of developing other needed skills and behavior is not productive if maintaining and increasing engagement is a goal. This seems particularly so at the workgroup level that is the unit of analysis for this type of instrument (FES), with Supervisor and Coworkers being the source of the feedback.

Conclusions

- The notion that employee development should focus on a person's strengths, implying that negative feedback should be avoided, is often traced back to Kluger and DeNisi (1996) with no regard for types of studies used.
- Unfavorable feedback might be necessary to change the poor performance with the condition that poor-performing employees are aware of the gap between desired performance and actual performance so that they will devote time and effort to minimize the gap (Ilgen & Davis, 2000). These findings clearly demonstrate that Unfavorable Feedback has benefits when used in the workplace.
- We reject the recent writing of Buckingham and Goodall (2019) that denies the benefits of Unfavorable Feedback.

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