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The search for effective feedback: moving beyond numbers

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to move towards filling a gap in literature about effective feedback, specifically, how it is defined and what elements contribute to how the giver and receiver of feedback perceives effectiveness of feedback. Organisations generally accept that feedback is an important part of workplace behaviour and as such feedback has attracted a great deal of attention from researchers. Unfortunately, research is largely inconclusive and ambiguous as to what exactly defines *effective* feedback. It is also uncertain whether or not academia's impression of effective feedback is congruent with employee perceptions, and how this agrees with current organisational practices. Due to these uncertainties, as well as the predominance of quantitative studies on feedback, the authors opted for an exploratory research design taking the form of semi-structured interviews with both feedback givers and receivers at organisations in Norway. Our findings were varied and address several dimensions of the feedback process, and the authors present seven of their nine emerging themes in an integrated model which possibly will contribute to understanding the complexity of giving and receiving feedback. From this, it appears that feedback and its effectiveness cannot be isolated from its context and the people involved, which accounts for at least some of the inconsistencies in research, as well as the difficulties in establishing one universal definition. At its core, perceptions of effective feedback are subjective and dependent on several factors, which make generalisations elusive. However, some trends and themes were identified, and these illustrate important key points about feedback that can be useful to practitioners and scholars alike. Moreover, the current research demonstrates that employees are passionate about and desire high quality feedback, which emphasizes the value of examining feedback in a continuously evolving society.

## Introduction

As an organisation's primary asset, it is important to maintain and develop the members in order to maximize output and efficiency ([Whelan, Collings, & Donnellan, 2010](#)). One of the most frequently discussed and researched management methods for improving performance is to give feedback, which has been considered an important tool for employee development and maintenance since the very inception of organizational and workplace psychology studies ([Anderson, Buchko, & Buchko, 2016](#)). However, research within the feedback field remains inconclusive and results occasionally contradict, suggesting that much remains unknown ([Besieux, 2017](#)). What researchers do agree on, however, is that feedback can be a double-edged sword, and the complexity should therefore be acknowledged by practitioners and scholars alike. Firstly, feedback has a number of associated benefits for both the organisation and the individuals, such as improved performance, satisfaction, commitment and motivation ([Kuvaas, 2011](#)), the maintenance of a stable organisational climate by enabling open two-way communication and building interpersonal relationships ([Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997](#)), continued learning and improvement ([Saedon, Salleh, Balakrishnan, Imray, & Saedon, 2012](#)) as well as predicting future opportunities for advancements within the organisation ([Glassman, Glassman, Champagne, & Zugelder, 2010](#); [Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997](#)). Poor feedback or lack of feedback, on the other hand, can have a negative impact, as it affects both actions and attitudes ([Kluger & Denisi, 1996](#)), which can have detrimental consequences for the organisational output and create a toxic environment. To establish and preserve good feedback procedures should therefore be a target for organizations ([Huczynski & Buchanan, 2013](#)).

Then what constitutes good feedback, exactly? Given the importance and prevalence of the topic, it is not surprising that feedback, and particularly how to give effective feedback, has become a common topic for magazines, seminars and management handbooks. Yet, the concept itself suffers from a lack of definition, and is not explored in detail by academia or practitioners, although both could benefit from a clearer understanding of the concept. As it is, the term 'feedback' is treated as unambiguous, and has become "one of the business world's most omnipresent words, yet it may also be one of the hollownest" ([Besieux, 2017, p. 436](#)). This means that feedback is used frequently, but there seems to be no effort

to align expectations and understanding, which could potentially lead to miscommunication or poor organisational practice if used incongruently. Furthermore, this lack of a definition can also indicate a lack of understanding of the concept itself, which can also lead to improper feedback application. On those occasions that effective feedback is defined, it seems overly simplistic and lacks a theoretical foundation. One such definition states that “effective feedback makes people feel bad enough to want to change, but not so bad that they can’t function” ([Furey, 2014, p. 13](#)), which implies that the purpose of feedback is to make the recipient uncomfortable. Similarly, “effective feedback should enable the receiver to walk away understanding exactly what he or she did and what impact it had on you” ([Weitzel, 2008, pp. 7-8](#)) only focuses on the communication of a specific issue, while ignoring the larger topics of what this means, what can be done about it, and so on. These definitions are vague and presuppose the existence of a universal formula of giving effective feedback, an assumption that has been discredited by several cross-sectional studies where researchers suggest that the “one-size-fit-all” strategy is unlikely to improve performance across an organization because it does not take into account the complexity and variations across feedback processes Kuvaas and colleagues ([2006, 2007, 2011; 2017](#)). Thus, it seems that feedback, despite its complexity, has been treated as a simple concept with only shallow discussions of how to employ it most effectively, an image which discredits its potential and value.

In academia, the phrases “feedback” and “effective feedback” are used without a universal or consistent definition. Previous research on effective feedback has examined the process or outcome of feedback without providing a satisfactory conceptualization of what it encompasses, thus leading to potentially incongruent results ([Besieux, 2017](#)). Instead, there seems to be an expectation that readers and researchers will have an identical interpretation of the phrase without providing any points of reference. When research does define the concept of feedback, the core concept seems to be the “communication of information” between two parties ([Gabelica, Van den Bossche, Segers, & Gijsselaers, 2012, p. 124](#)), often linked to facilitating performance improvements or changing social behaviour in organisations ([Glassman et al., 2010](#)). However, much remains unclear even if we accept this general notion. Feedback as a collective term encompasses too many variations to be used accurately without explication, but the majority of feedback research only provides a prefix to indicate their specific

area of interest, such as negative feedback, outcome feedback, formal feedback, and so on (c.f. [Brown, Kulik, & Lim, 2016](#); [Mulder, 2013](#); [van der Rijt, Van den Bossche, van de Wiel, Segers, & Gijsselaers, 2012](#)). Furthermore, there is no apparent agreement about whether the effectiveness of the feedback is determined by the process, outcome or personal satisfaction (c.f. [Audia & Locke, 2003](#); [Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#); [Kim & Miller, 1990](#); [Kluger & Denisi, 1998](#)). The importance of personal satisfaction is of particular interest, as research on feedback has primarily been concerned with the process and outcome of the feedback in relation to the organisation, while neglecting the reception of the individual themselves; certainly, little has been said about what receivers consider to be effective feedback.

This means that although feedback has been examined in terms of the behavioural changes of the employee and subsequent impact on the organisation, less attention has been devoted to the personal effects of these processes – that is, the subjective perception of the feedback from the receiver themselves. This aspect of the feedback process is important to both researchers and practitioners, as the receiver's impression is ultimately what determines their reactions and resultant behaviour or attitudes ([Geddes & Konrad, 2003](#); [Kuvaas et al., 2017](#)). Although previous research has, to a certain degree, addressed the effects and outcomes of feedback processes as seen by the individual, the research has employed limited methodology and perspectives, primarily using quantitative methods (c.f. [Mulder, 2013](#); [Wang, Burlacu, Truxillo, James, & Yao, 2015](#)) some even in strictly controlled experimental settings (c.f. [Azzam & Whyte, 2018](#); [Caballé, Daradoumis, Xhafa, & Juan, 2011](#)). This presents subjective perceptions through objective statistics, which, while creating a foundation of supported theories to lay the groundwork for further feedback research, may not tell the entire story. The generalizations made by those researchers serve as good indications of human behaviour under specific conditions, but it is difficult to infer actionability and external validity when the research situations are manipulated to a higher degree than what managers can realistically do in real life ([Argyris, 1996](#)).

Thus, the following problems emerge; firstly, there is a lack of consensus both in academia and amongst practitioners about what effective feedback really is. Secondly, research on feedback remains limited in methodology, and little attention has been given to the perceptions of the receivers versus that of the

giver. These problems have been recognized by academia before, as Audia and Locke (2003) believe qualitative methods can help examine closely the individuals' cognitive strategies of how people appraise negative feedback and how to present negative feedback to others. However, these issues remain relevant today (Besieux, 2017). Hence, this paper will use an exploratory approach to identify how individuals instinctively describe effective and ineffective feedback instances, which will hopefully go some way to fill these gaps.

### **Research question**

The goal of the research is to uncover how individuals describe effective and ineffective feedback. Thus, we aim to identify and examine the elements necessary to achieve effective feedback. The posited research question therefore becomes, “*how do individuals describe effective and ineffective feedback, and what can we infer from that?*” The specific wording of effective versus ineffective rather than positive versus negative was chosen despite acknowledging that this may trigger clarifying questions from the participants. The authors believed that the effectiveness of feedback is a more interesting point of study than the tone of the feedback, as effectiveness informs about the value of the feedback while tone does not. Although previous research has largely addressed feedback as either positive or negative (Anderson et al., 2016; Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009; Brown et al., 2016; Denisi & Kluger, 2000; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Hutt, Scott, & King, 1983; Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004; Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008), we believe that this does not sufficiently address the utility of feedback. Despite positive connotations, positive feedback can be ineffective, and vice versa: negative feedback can be effective. Hence, the effectiveness of the feedback appears to be a more interesting value to examine for both organisations and individuals, and thus chosen as the focus of this study.

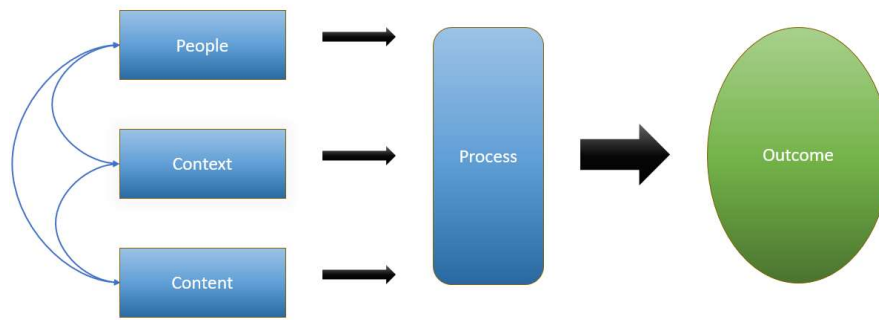
### **Literature review**

#### ***An image of feedback***

The feedback process is multifaceted and include a wide variety of interactive elements as contributors in the exchange between giver and receiver. We found that these elements and research conducted about them can be split into three mutually influential categories shaping the feedback process, which will again affect the outcome of the feedback session. As seen in Figure 1, the categories identified are 1) people, 2) context, and 3) content. These three categories do not



exist independently but continues to influence each other simultaneously. The three of them interact during the feedback process to influence the outcome.



*Figure 1.* Input variables in feedback processes

The volume of research on feedback and its variations is considerable, the majority addressing the categories identified above, as shall be explored below. This kind of research often couples input variables or stages with effective feedback, asking how people, context, content or processes can influence the feedback outcome, and subsequently, how these elements relate to effective feedback as the preferred outcome. The following section will review existing literature to illustrate how different feedback outcomes have been linked to effectiveness. From there, we will examine how input variables have been examined in relation to feedback outcomes.

### ***Process and outcome***

First, we should look at how effective feedback has been discussed and treated, if not outright defined. Most commonly, effective feedback is addressed in relation to the process and outcome from Figure 1. The process is the sum of the input elements and remains unique to each individual feedback process as the input elements themselves are unique. This means that the feedback process is influenced by the people (how they shape and affect the exchange), the context (the reason for the feedback and influence from external elements) and the content (the actual content of the message and its communication). The feedback process has been linked to feedback effectiveness in relation to how well it functions for all parties involved, as well as how accurately it discusses work performance ([Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998](#)). Nevertheless, process seems to be examined primarily as an antecedent to effective feedback, not as a measure of effectiveness of feedback itself (c.f. [Antonioni, 1996](#); [Harvey, 1997](#)).

The outcome is the resultant behaviour and attitudes exhibited by the feedback giver and receiver. The difference between these is that while the process encompasses the feedback event as it progresses, the outcome includes the lingering effects of the feedback. Hence, scholars often state that this more permanent dimension is where the effectiveness of feedback is evaluated. As concluded by Ilgen, Fisher and Taylor (1979, p. 368) "it should be emphasized that our concentration upon the feedback process should not cause one to lose sight of the fact that the final phase—that of behavior—is the criterion against which feedback effectiveness is evaluated." Other scholars have also used change of behaviour as a measurement of feedback effectiveness (Audia & Locke, 2003), while a more specific variety is the evaluation of improved performance to determine effectiveness (Denisi & Kluger, 2000; Gabelica et al., 2012). However, this notion fails to address the wider range of feedback outcomes and seems to imply that resultant behaviour is the single determinant of feedback effectiveness. Other feedback outcomes, such as facilitating communication, increasing organisational commitment, building relationships and increasing awareness of own strengths and weaknesses, remain subservient (Antonioni, 1996; Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004).

Furthermore, all these scholars fail to explain why they measure effectiveness this way, and who it is effective for. Although the change of behaviour should perhaps be enough to satisfy the sender if that was the desired outcome, this does not mean that the receiver had a positive experience of the feedback exchange; on the contrary, there could be many reasons why a receiver would change their behaviour but remain displeased (Latting, 1992). Research has established that the receiver is more satisfied with their feedback and consider it more effective when they are given the chance to provide input (Cawley et al., 1998), and some postulate that the effectiveness of the feedback should be determined by the receiver as the object of evaluation, who may not view performance improvements as the most effective outcome (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). It has also been suggested that effective feedback is feedback that has a joint purpose of improving performance and keeping employees satisfied (Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, & Gallois, 2003), but this definition remains restricted by its focus on performance improvements.

Studies on feedback effectiveness may also be limited by their focus on structure and feedback operating within specific systems. Although research

typically examines specific feedback tools and methods, such as yearly performance appraisals and the 360-degree framework (c.f. [Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#); [DeNisi & Murphy, 2017](#); [Onyango, 2013](#); [Taylor, Tracy, Renard, Harrison, & Carroll, 1995](#)), this does not capture the full volume of feedback exchanged in the workplace. Mulder and Ellinger ([2012](#)) emphasize that previous research has largely been preoccupied with the effectiveness of feedback processes involving only supervisors and their employees, which ignores or devalues feedback exchanged between peers and other organisational members despite the potential value inherent in these interactions.

To summarize, there seems to be considerable research using the concept of feedback effectiveness, but very few actually define the term or explain their employment of it. There even seems to be conflicting definitions, such as effectiveness as decided by the supervisor ([Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#)), or by the receiver ([Price et al., 2010](#)), and confusion about what exactly the desired outcome is ([Antonioni, 1996](#)). Despite these discrepant definitions, existing literature has identified concepts from people, content and context that are influential to various ideas of feedback effectiveness, and there seems to be some common trends. Thus, although we cannot be sure how they influence feedback effectiveness because we do not know what effective feedback is, it may be useful to consider these concepts when attempting to describe effective feedback because they appear to at least be linked to various feedback outcomes, as shall be explored below.

### ***People***

The people category from Figure 1 encompasses the personal properties of the sender and receiver as well as their relation to each other. It includes elements of personal demographics, roles, competencies, personalities, and the relationship between the members of the dyad. Mulder and Ellinger ([2012](#)) summarizes previous research by stating that differences in feedback perceptions can stem from the quality of the feedback itself, or the individual's ability to understand and act upon the feedback. Thus, as mentioned above, the people involved in the feedback exchange are central to determining what effective feedback is, as well as influencing how the feedback process is carried out and acted upon.

*Roles and relationships*

One of the primary ways the members of a feedback process dyad relate to one another is by what roles they play in the exchange. The two primary roles in the interaction are the sender and receiver, although some feedback processes may include a third party, acting as an external presence whose contribution to the exchange is as a supportive party to one or both dyad members. The pre-existing relationship between the dyad affects the exchange because it defines the parameters of the conversation by dictating the social norms and rules applicable for that specific situation. Dimensions of the relationship include demographic differences, seniority and tenure, hierarchal positioning, work role design, personal relations, and finally, relationship duration.

Research indicates that the relationship between the sender and receiver is important, but not a determining factor in the feedback process ([Hutt et al., 1983](#)). The very nature of the relationship between the feedback giver and receiver often includes an element of power differences, which can affect the perceptions of the feedback from both sides during both negative and positive feedback ([Cislak, Abele, & Wojciszke, 2013](#)). Notably, the two sides may have different expectations or goals going into the session, as well as incongruent impressions of the content communicated ([Cislak et al., 2013](#)). This inherent power-difference may also be the reason why leaders are more reluctant to seek feedback than subordinates, despite such feedback having been proven useful for increased understanding of their subordinates, solidarity, performance effectiveness, and so on ([Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001](#)). It is also important to note that individuals occupying the same role can also have different definitions of effective feedback depending on personal style and preferences; Goleman ([2000](#)) has demonstrated that different leadership styles can change their approach to feedback, with affiliative leaders valuing positive, frequent feedback while the authoritative leader only gives feedback when performance deviates from the expectation. Thus, it seems that while the roles occupied, and the relationship shared between the dyad can affect their individual approach to feedback, it is not a pivotal part of the exchange itself, and we should look to other factors to identify elements influencing the effectiveness of feedback.

### *Demographics*

Demographic diversity features (e.g. gender, age, nationality or ethnicity) are some of the most salient demographical features in the work place ([Ruderman & Jackson, 1995](#)). Scholars have addressed how these elements can affect individual feedback orientation and communication previously, attempting to find links between demographics and feedback effectiveness, but this research has found mixed results and remains contested. This might be a consequence of different geographical locations of the research, but it may also be affected by changing dynamics in an increasingly heterogenous society, or, as discussed, due to incompatible definitions of effective feedback by researchers examining the same field.

One major interest of research on feedback and demographics is attempting to identify whether there are dissimilarities in evaluations depending on demographical qualities. Notably, biases can become a hindrance to effective feedback ([Baxter, 2012](#)), as the question of the existence of racial, sexual or ageist biases becomes subordinate to the *perception* of such biases, which may lead to both lack of will to act upon the feedback, and dissatisfaction from the receiver. “Claims of rater [...] bias [...] are particularly troubling since regulations tie performance ratings to tangible benefits including pay, promotions, cash awards, and adjusted seniority“ ([Baxter, 2012, p. 200](#)). Previous research has found support for the existence of racial biases ([S. L. Johnson & Ronan, 1979](#); [Kraiger & Ford, 1985](#); [Sackett & DuBois, 1991](#)), but this remains contested by more recent research ([Baxter, 2012](#)), and generally, the links between race and effectiveness of feedback remain inconclusive ([Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003](#)).

Interestingly, research indicates that while men and women have different strategies and priorities when communicating feedback, they are similarly aligned when rating feedback as effective or ineffective ([Lizzio et al., 2003](#)). In contrast, research has found that younger and older generations have different feedback preferences and thus define effective feedback differently ([Anderson et al., 2016](#); [Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008](#); [Wang et al., 2015](#)). This can indicate that demographic qualities, while not predicting perceptions of feedback effectiveness by themselves, certainly seem associated with diverse opinions on what effective feedback really is.

### *Competencies and power*

Research has not addressed the relationship between perceptions of effective feedback and educational background, although it has established that educational level and field can affect behaviour at work and how relationships are formed ([Ariffin & Ha, 2015](#); [Ng & Feldman, 2009](#)). Nevertheless, these studies primarily address behaviour and attitudes towards relationships, not how these relationships actually function for highly educated versus uneducated workers. Certainly, little is said about how workers from different fields of specializations may view and interact with each other.

How hierarchical positions and practical power in the workplace affect relationships and interaction patterns have been examined in greater detail. The relationships between subordinates and supervisors are inherently asymmetrical and favours the supervisor because they possess more power than their subordinate ([French, Raven, & Cartwright, 1959](#)). Hence, supervisors are in a position to influence their subordinates' behaviour through explicit displays of power (i.e. assigning tasks and allocating rewards) as well as more discreet strategies, such as reinforcing their social power through the establishment of workplace solidarity and adapting their interaction style depending on the receiver ([Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018](#); [Saito, 2011](#)). An interesting set of studies by Anicich, Fast, Halevy and Galinsky ([2016](#)) reveal that conflict arises in situations where an individual has high power but low status, meaning high formal power but low social recognition or respect. They emphasize that such situations often lead to mistreatment and negativity, both in dyadic relationship and in a broader organisational sense. From this, it appears that power and positions can affect the feedback exchange positively, as when the supervisor uses appropriate management tools ([Saito, 2011](#)), or negatively, when there are conflicts about the supervisor's status or power ([Anicich et al., 2016](#)).

### *Personality*

Personality seems to be a reoccurring theme in research about feedback receptions, and has been demonstrated to affect effectiveness perceptions. In a meta-analysis of 24 longitudinal studies examining multi-source feedback effectiveness Smither, London and Reilly ([2005](#)) found performance improvements to be generally small, with personal characteristics being suggested as a potential cause. They propose improvements are more likely to occur for

some feedback recipients than others (e.g. recipients with a positive feedback orientation, those who set appropriate goals or are action oriented), which suggests that, as with most managerial tools, “not all participants will benefit equally” ([Smither et al., 2005, p. 60](#)).

One important personal characteristic when it comes to reception of feedback is an individual’s goal orientation, that is learning or mastery-oriented ([Dweck, 1986](#)) and performance orientation. Previous research indicates that these orientations affect attitudes towards, and preferences about feedback, which in turn can also influence their subsequent behaviour following the feedback ([Merriman, Clariana, & Bernardi, 2012](#)). Young ([2005](#)) also linked learning and performance goal orientations to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, respectively, and found that this affected learning strategies adopted to change behaviour. This is consistent with Kuvaas’s ([2006](#)) findings, where he found intrinsic work motivation to have both a mediating and moderating role in the relationship between performance appraisal satisfaction and employee outcomes. The relationship for employees with a low intrinsic motivation was negative and positive for those with a high intrinsic motivation ([Kuvaas, 2006](#)), thus again emphasizing the importance of receiver perceptions to the outcome and overall feedback effectiveness.

Goal orientation also affects an individual’s feedback orientation, conceptualized as their “overall receptivity to feedback and the extent to which the individual welcomes guidance and coaching” ([London & Smither, 2002, p. 82](#)). Because “the adaptive (“mastery-oriented”) pattern is characterized by challenge seeking and high, effective persistence in the face of obstacles” ([Dweck, 1986, p. 1040](#)), individuals with a mastery rather than performance goal orientation also have a positive relationship with feedback orientation due to the useful input to behaviour and performance ([London & Smither, 2002](#)). Hence, goal and feedback orientation can influence feedback preferences and opinions about what effective feedback should and should not be.

### ***Context***

The context category from Figure 1 is the environment in which the feedback situation takes place, as well as aspects of the environment that could affect the dynamics of the feedback session. This includes the organisation, organisational framework and the socio-cultural environment in which the feedback process

operates. Identifying and examining contextual factors in feedback processes can be useful to investigate elements that potentially help or hinder feedback effectiveness. As pointed out by DeNisi and Murphy ([2017, p. 429](#)) “contextualizing performance appraisal research implies paying attention to when and why performance appraisal is carried out and the contextual variables that are likely to be important range from quite distal (e.g., national cultures) to quite proximal (e.g., supervisor-subordinate relationships).” From this, we can see that feedback does not operate in isolation, but rather, remains affected by the environment in which it exists.

### *Trigger*

The ‘trigger’ largely explains the when and why of feedback. The trigger is what determines the topic of the feedback and when it should be addressed, for example following an event that needs correction or praise quickly. Research suggests that the content, perceptions and outcome of feedback can change depending on the trigger initiating the feedback exchange. The annual performance appraisal is a typical trigger, but research has found varying results of its effectiveness despite its potential ([Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011](#)). Formalized performance appraisals are not the only feedback strategies that have produced dual results with researchers. Kluger and DeNisi's ([1996](#)) meta-analysis on effects of different feedback interventions also found varying results; in fact, over a third of the feedback interventions decreased performance. The effectiveness of feedback interventions has since been examined by other researchers, although a consensus has yet to be reached on both forms, elements and procedures ([Audia & Locke, 2003](#); [Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#); [Kim & Miller, 1990](#); [Kluger & Denisi, 1998](#)).

One aspect of research on triggers concerns the notion that some employees proactively request feedback if their supervisor’s do not provide it in a satisfactory manner. However, this type of behaviour (or lack of it, as it turns out) can affect not only the content and tone of the feedback given, but also the supervisor’s inclination towards the employee themselves. Larson ([1989](#)) examined the informal, face-to-face interaction feedback between superiors and subordinates, and argues that subordinate feedback-seeking behaviour can mitigate the level of negative feedback from the superior. A proactive feedback seeking subordinate may be seen as being motivated to improve and therefore elicit less negative feedback. Further, he postulates the feedback seeking



subordinate's motivation is to maintain self-esteem whilst the superior would rather avoid giving negative feedback unless necessary, therefore prompting them to keep this informally requested feedback primarily positive ([Larson, 1989](#)). Following all of this, the trigger can therefore affect the delivery, content, and timing of feedback, which in turn may influence perceptions of effectiveness.

### *Setting*

The socio-cultural setting of feedback may impact how the feedback is carried out (including practices and norms), how it is told, and how it is received. This can encompass both the specific setting of the organisation, as addressed below, as well as the wider geographical or cultural area. This topic has received considerable attention, and most literature support some generalizations. Firstly, it is noteworthy that research has established that feedback practices work differently across cultures, although most research has been focused specifically on performance appraisals, as in formalized feedback sessions, rather than general feedback incidents (c.f. [Harvey, 1997](#); [Kang & Shen, 2016](#); [Snape, Thompson, Yan, & Redman, 1998](#)). Peretz and Fried ([2012](#)) found cultural values and practices to affect and shape organizational performance appraisals directly, which seems in line with research concluding that the same feedback practice might look different across various cultures ([Brutus et al., 2006](#))

In addition to influencing how feedback is conducted, culture also seems to affect attitudes towards feedback. Research found that different framing strategies and feedback objectives may be necessary in different countries in order to achieve effectiveness, suggesting cultures have different values and focal points determining what should be emphasized when communicating feedback ([Kung, Kim, Yang, & Cheng, 2016](#); [Snape et al., 1998](#)). Similarly, studies on culture has and feedback-seeking behaviour shows cultures have varying opinions about when and where it is appropriate to seek feedback, i.e. laterally or horizontally ([Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000](#)). Culture also seems to affect what kind of feedback individuals prefer and seek, with collectivist cultures generally appearing inclined towards corrective feedback, while individualistic cultures tend towards success feedback ([Bailey, Chen, & Dou, 1997](#)). Notably, while research has established that culture affects how research is given and received, there are still uncertainties about exactly what these differences imply for different countries. Nevertheless, these differences potentially to lead to incongruent

feedback trajectories in global organisations, where a practice or method considered effective in one country might be completely undesirable in other countries; however, these oppositions can teach organisations about how to communicate and expand knowledge in multi-cultural environments ([Milliman, Taylor, & Czaplewski, 2002](#)).

### *Organization*

Although societal factors may affect feedback as described above, the organisational culture and structure also plays a role in shaping workplace feedback practices and norms. First, management's assigned value to feedback as a tool affects the investment in feedback and improving practices; second, structural features may make feedback effectiveness more or less available ([Ashton, 2004](#)). For example, hierarchal structure, information sharing feedback training, structural support, and so on seem to make feedback more or less effective depending on the organisation ([Ashton, 2004](#)).

### *Content*

The content category of elements is the final input variable from Figure 1 and includes the properties of the message exchanged (the topic, intention, strategy, specificity, etc) as well as the actual exchange itself (tone, delivery, style, etc). The topic is often dictated by the trigger, or can accumulate over a period before a scheduled formal session. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the content of the feedback has been associated with positive and negative receptions; people generally respond better to feedback about their performance, rather than feedback criticizing their behaviour ([Kluger & Denisi, 1996](#); [Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012](#)). However, the way the content is presented seems almost as important to perceived feedback effectiveness as the actual topic of the feedback, as demonstrated below.

### *Delivery*

The delivery entails elements such as the tone, style, tactic, timing, mood, duration, non-verbal communication, and degree of formality. The manager's chosen tactic— that is, their strategy for presenting the feedback content— may change how the message is received and interpreted. This can be especially important when delivering negative feedback; as researchers have identified that managers find giving negative performance feedback challenging, and employees avoid receiving negative feedback ([Brown et al., 2016](#)). Brown et al., (2016)

found that managers choose their feedback tactic based on observations of the receiver's personality and ability to interpret feedback, although this is a conclusion with some gaps given the amount of ineffective feedback remaining in the workplace. Supervisor personal engagement and open communication are essential elements that improve the utility and reception of evaluative processes ([K. Johnson et al., 2009](#)), further indicating supervisors' method of approach can have a considerable influence on perceived effectiveness from the receiver.

Feedback timing can also impact its reception. Research suggests there is an "inverted-U relation between the delay of performance feedback and future performance", where immediate feedback is less effective than feedback with a short delay, while greatly delayed feedback also demonstrates less effectiveness for future performance ([Thornock, 2016, p. 10](#)). Researchers Kuvaas et al., ([2017](#)) found the frequency and immediacy of feedback to have a moderating role in the relationship between perceived constructiveness and work performance. Their research showed delayed feedback to be perceived as less constructive and negatively correlated with work. It should be noted both these studies focused only on performance or task-based feedback as opposed to behavioural or person-oriented feedback. This is possibly because measuring behaviour can be messy and results can be contradictory ([Ilgen et al., 1979](#)). Furthermore, attributing behavioural change to feedback is difficult, due to the existence of several confounding factors potentially interfering with the results ([Saedon et al., 2012](#)).

Altogether, it seems that previous research indicates that the effectiveness of feedback is not only connected to receiver qualities and the context, but also how and when the sender presents their feedback. Additionally, other elements of the feedback content may contribute to its effectiveness, for example the specificity of the message, the fairness of the information, as well as the intended goal of the feedback.

### *Specificity*

Feedback specificity describes the extent to which the feedback was specific and unique to the situation or individual. This can be giving personalized or concrete statements, examples of behaviours, dictate future action plans, and so on.

Previous research on the utility of evaluative practice has largely concluded in order to be actionable and relevant, feedback needs to be credible ([Patton, 2008](#)). In a recent study, Azzam and Whyte ([2018](#)) expanded on this idea by examining

perceptions of feedback utility as well as necessary antecedents. They found that feedback which was seen as positive and accurate was attributed higher credibility by recipients and external observers, but that this credibility was insufficient in guaranteeing utility. That is, participants recognized the truthfulness of the content, but found themselves unable to act upon the feedback, rendering it less effective than it could have been. Instead, the feedback should be credible as well as actionable by including specific steps or recommendations for future endeavours, a conclusion supported by other scholars as well ([K. Johnson et al., 2009](#)). Thus, it seems that feedback that is credible and actionable is more likely to be rated effective by both giver and receiver.

Kuvaas ([2011](#)) also supports the idea that more detailed feedback is better feedback. He suggests that performance appraisals, previously assumed to almost guarantee increased motivation and performance, are complex and only serve their full potential and effectiveness if certain factors are present. He states that scheduled, standardised performance appraisals should be supported and complemented by informal, frequent feedback freely provided from the supervisor to the employee, thus increasing overall effectiveness.

### *Fairness*

Perceptions of fairness, and what factors influence fairness, has been examined by researchers for decades. Unfairness is tied to dissatisfaction, which can have an ineffective outcome. It is strongly posited that in cases where the procedure is viewed as unfair, the evaluation process should be reviewed to identify toxic elements ([Rowland & Hall, 2012](#)). Folger and Bies ([1989](#)) provide the following criteria for evaluators to make sure they are judging fairly by:

- (1) giving adequate consideration to employees' viewpoints;
- (2) suppressing bias;
- (3) applying decision-making criteria consistently across employees;
- (4) providing timely feedback to employees after the decision;
- (5) providing justification for the decision;
- (6) being truthful in communication;
- (7) treating employees with courtesy and civility ([p. 82](#))

In other words, the process should be equal and void of biases or institutionalized preferences.

Recently, perceived fairness has been linked to satisfaction and feedback effectiveness ([Kumari, 2014](#)), but previous research argued otherwise and should not be discarded too quickly. Greenberg has performed several studies on perceived workplace fairness, stressing the importance of impression management in maintaining organisational justice and employee satisfaction, also during feedback exchanges ([1988](#), [1991](#)). He concluded that the feedback outcome and fairness perception were not significantly related; rather, the feedback delivery determined the fairness impression ([1991](#)). This seems related to the delivery element discussed above, where feedback effectiveness was suggested to be linked to the giver's presentation and their impression of the receiver. Hence, when receiving explanations, employees were more liable to perceive the feedback as fair, regardless of the actual content of the feedback. Not only did this provide the workers with a summary of the evaluation criteria their supervisor had used, but it also showed that their performance had been thoroughly considered and evaluated, rather than arbitrarily given a score on a piece of paper. Thus, even though the evaluation process may look identical, a worker would perceive explained and elaborate feedback as more fair and effective compared to the briefer version. These explanations can also "serve as a useful mechanism for generating adaptive discussions facilitating the acceptance of feedback leading to improved performance" ([Greenberg, 1991, p. 57](#)), which has a greater impact on an employee's behaviour than if they had interpreted their feedback alone.

### *Goal*

The feedback goal, as identified by sender or receiver, plays an important part in a feedback exchange as well as determining its effectiveness, as it is the very purpose of the interaction. Literature on feedback has often been concerned with reinforcement or performance improvement as the default feedback goal in an organizational setting ([Kumari, 2014](#); [Thornock, 2016](#)), which is why improved performance also often emerges as the measurement of effective feedback. However, it can be difficult to determine and aim for one specific goal without also planning for related goals or behaviours necessary in order to facilitate that goal. Locke's ([1968](#)) goal setting theory emphasizes that it is not always possible to separate behaviour and task performance, as they interact. Therefore, improving task performance can be difficult without addressing behaviour, and vice versa. Ryan ([1958](#)) explains this succinctly :

Tasks, ... are to be treated as causal factors in behavior. By this I mean that a task is a necessary condition for most kinds of behavior. ... I shall assert that a very large proportion of behavior is initiated by tasks, and that a very large proportion of tasks lead to the behavior specified by the tasks. (p. 79)

Hence, the importance of the task may be one reason why very little research addresses social conduct feedback, i.e. the social behaviour of the individual in the workplace. Another factor may be the difficulty in quantifying behaviour and behavioural change, which makes it hard to study and observe ([Bodenheimer & Handley, 2009](#)). That is not to say that feedback on social conduct cannot be effective; it merely indicates that there is lacking research on whether or not this affects effectiveness.

### **Literature review summary**

To sum up existing literature on the topic of feedback and its effectiveness, it seems that there are a number of elements and factors that can impact feedback effectiveness, as well as how it is perceived. While previous researchers have not found particular links between the people category from Figure 1 and feedback effectiveness, it does seem that elements from this category affect how people define and perceive effective feedback, such as people preferring different kinds of feedback based on their age or personality ([Anderson et al., 2016](#); [London & Smither, 2002](#); [Lowe et al., 2008](#)). The context category appears to affect the feedback structure and content ([Ashton, 2004](#); [Brutus et al., 2006](#)), which can again influence the feedback effectiveness. Similarly, the content category explores how feedback is given, and many of the emotional aspects of feedback interactions – such as perceived fairness, tone, how personal the feedback becomes – arises from these elements ([Azzam & Whyte, 2018](#); [Brown et al., 2016](#); [Rowland & Hall, 2012](#)). This can heavily influence whether or not the feedback is acted upon and how it is perceived ([Kumari, 2014](#)), which certainly contributes to feedback effectiveness regardless of definitions applied. There are still considerable gaps in literature, the most prominent of which being that effective feedback remains inconclusive and vague ([Besieux, 2017](#)). This is an issue this paper will move towards rectifying through combining elements that have previously been linked to feedback effectiveness and examining their

function in actual narratives depicting effective and ineffective feedback experiences described by participants.

### **Method**

The following research was conducted as an exploratory study using the basics of the grounded theory approach where a convenience sample is examined to study the phenomenon of feedback in a multicultural workplace from a Norwegian perspective. The basics of a grounded theory approach was chosen for the methodology as these “procedures can be used to uncover the beliefs and meanings that underlie action ...[and] these procedures have proven to be culturally sensitive and applicable to individuals, large organisations and societies.” ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 11](#)). It should be noted that the authors did not reach data saturation as new concepts did continue to emerge, and the dimensional variations were not identified on all concepts ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#)). However, as this is an exploratory study, developing grounded theory was not our objective, so we do not consider this a problem. The data was collected by conducting several rounds of semi-structured interviews at the three companies over the course of three months, but no follow-up interviews were conducted with any individual participants.

### ***Research setting***

For the sake of convenience, the authors chose three Scandinavian companies based in Norway as the research setting. The first, Company A, is a multinational oil and gas company headquartered in Stavanger. The company has approximately 20,500 employees and operates in more than 36 countries. Recently, the company initiated a large strategic change which included a revision of their feedback process, however, as these new processes have not yet been implemented, all data referring to the formal feedback process refers to the previous well-established process. The second, Company B, is an international accredited registrar and classification society headquartered near Oslo with over 13,500 employees and operations in more than 100 countries. The company went through a merger five years ago, but their feedback processes remains the same. The third, Company C, is an independent oil and gas company headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. The company has over 400 employees and operates in Norway with a formal feedback process.

Following the first interview in Company C, the company structure, employee demographics and international activities differed from Company A and B. It was deemed this may detract from the analysis therefore all other interviews were conducted in Company A or B. Given their international background and diverse employee characteristics, this research setting was ideal for studying the feedback phenomenon in a multicultural setting. Furthermore, both authors have been or currently remain employed with Company A or B, which aided access to the data. The authors were granted access to contact employees for research purposes through a company facilitator. Further strengthening our argument for focusing on Companies A and B was the authors' inherent understanding of the companies and their processes, which proved to be a strength during the interviews as fewer interruptions were necessary to clarify company abbreviations, acronyms, and processes, allowing the participants' narratives to flow freely, which resulted in detail-rich incident descriptions.

### ***Participants***

In order to get a rounded impression of effective feedback, we wanted to get a convenience sample group with diverse qualities and a good balance of gender, rank and nationalities. Access to a convenience sample was gained through company facilitators. Company A and B each appointed a facilitator who was informed of our ideal target group for the study. The facilitators then chose and e-mailed potential participants asking for their voluntary participation in a 1-hour interview at their own offices (see Appendix 1 for request sent). The resulting convenience sample was ten men, seven women, seven supervisors, ten subordinates, ten Norwegians and eight different nationalities. For the purpose of this study and to ensure confidentiality as required by the ethics of research and NSD, the eight non-Norwegians were classified as a single group in the overview, see Table 1. Notably, while the group contains a relatively even distribution of Norwegians versus non-Norwegian participants, as well as a balanced male-female ratio, we did have some participants identifying as supervisors opting to describe received feedback instead of given feedback incidents when prompted, which resulted in a slightly skewed data collection regarding feedback roles. However, despite going against the researchers' intention, this may not be a problem in itself, as the goal of the research was always to get the participants'



interpretation and reaction to the questions posed, rather than dictating the topic of their descriptions.

It should also be noted that almost all participants held some form of higher education, ranging from bachelor’s degree to PhD holders. The majority of these degrees were in technical fields such as engineering, physics and IT. This was also unintentional, but it does give a representative image of the organisations examined, which generally have highly educated employees. It is not known whether or not this affects their manner of processing or attitudinal approach to feedback situations, and if so, how, but should be noted nonetheless.

Table 1  
Overview of participants

	Age ratio			Gender ratio		Nationality ratio		Rank ratio		Feedback ratio	
	30-41	42-54	55+	Male	Female	Norwegian	non-Norwegian	Supervisor	Subordinate	Giver	Receiver
Company A:	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.6
Company B:	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.6	0.4	0.6	0.4	0.1	0.9	0.1	0.9
Company C:	0.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	0.0
Overall:	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.7

Notes: Only one participant from Company C.

***Procedure and design***

Initially, the research was designed to be examined through a survey with 16 closed questions and two open questions to attempt to elicit individuals’ experiences of effective and ineffective feedback. However, a pilot study revealed that answers were limited and did not sufficiently address the research question. Hence, this data was disregarded and the methodology was changed to reflect the purpose more clearly, leading to semi-structured interviews which would enable a participants to speak freely and create their own narrative about the effectiveness of feedback, thus providing a richer source of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In total 17 one-hour interviews were conducted resulting in 249 single line A4 pages of transcription (see Attachment 1 for all 17 transcriptions).

Participants were asked to describe two feedback incidents, one which they perceived as effective and the other they perceived as ineffective, from any point or time in their career. Simple demographics of the participant at time of feedback incidents were noted, as were similar details about the other dyad member described by the participant. The authors alternated between asking the participants to describe effective and ineffective incidents first. There were several reasons for alternating. First, to reduce the possible framing effect bias (Tversky

[& Kahneman, 1981](#)), and second to reduce the possible warm-up period influencing the depth of description given for either an effective or ineffective incident. In other words, if all participants were asked to describe an effective feedback incident first, they may give a shorter description simply as the setting is unfamiliar and then give a longer description for the ineffective feedback incident as they warm to the setting. This may subsequently be interpreted as the ineffective incident being more salient to the participant whereas this may have been due to the participant's comfort zone changing during the interview.

### ***Materials and data collection***

The interviews had mixed durations depending on the participant, but ranged from 35-70 minutes, and were conducted in a meeting room at the participants place of work. The average recording time, which excluded introductions and information given was 45 minutes (see Appendix 2 for Interview protocol). Participants were reassured of their confidentiality and anonymity, and consent forms were signed prior to interview commencement. The participants were also asked if they felt comfortable being audiotaped, which all participants except for one agreed to. We used an Olympus hand held recording device (DM-720) which does not have internet connection, and the recordings were transcribed using a USB connection. If one of the authors was acquainted with the participant, the lead interviewer would be the unfamiliar author, with the acquainted author taking notes and interjecting with follow-up questions when appropriate. The notes were also used to write summarizing memos immediately after the interview. Summary memos included observations, authors thoughts, feelings, self-reflections and potential biases and are available in Attachment 2. Interviews were transcribed as soon as practically possible after the interview, the note taker was responsible for transcribing the interview.

### ***Data analysis***

Data was anonymised using a code identifying the participant by company and gender. For example, PAM15 is a participant from Company A, a male and the 15<sup>th</sup> interviewee. For clarity and transparency, all supporting data has been labelled with the corresponding code for the participant, which has also eased the verification and quality control task.

The four interviews were first transcribed in Microsoft Word and then formatted for upload into the NVivo software, which would be used in the

analysing process. The questions themselves, as well as data about participant details, were auto-coded upon input. The authors then independently open coded the raw data, allowing the codes to emerge from the data. As effective and ineffective feedback is a continuum, the authors analysed them together instead of separating them, thus making it easier to compare and contrast the incidents described. As an example of this coding, we have the following data from one participant describing perceived effective feedback:

It's to tie it to specific cases. Again, its um also the timing immediately after events to see it.... To do it immediately after the good performance if you like or when it needs to be adjusted in a way. It is a lot easier, the way that I see it, to give feedback on the delivery part.... in this company we talk about delivery and behaviour dimensions, it is a lot easier to talk about the delivery part and a bit more challenging to talk about the behavioural aspect in terms of feedback (PAM7).

This section of text was coded to seven nodes (themes and identifying tags): *PAM7, Q2, effective feedback giver, concrete, timing, performance goal and behaviour goal* (see Appendix 3 Snapshot from NVivoAppendix 3 for NVivo snapshot). After coding all transcripts, each node was then analysed individually for trends. This enabled us to look up all references to, for example, *timing*, regardless of whether it was linked to an effective or ineffective incident. Hence, we were able to analyse similarities and differences between a single participant's own two descriptions, as well as similarities and differences of other participants linking timing to their feedback descriptions. We also exported some nodes to Microsoft Word documents to enable analysis of frequency and intensity, that is the wording, tone, richness of description, explicitness and length of description. For example, exporting the nodes effective feedback (Q2) and ineffective feedback (Q4) resulted in 26 pages and 38 pages respectfully, indicating more details (an 18.75%-page increase) were given for the ineffective incidents. Exported documents available in Attachment 3.

Authors were careful to highlight the complete paragraph (rather than just the words or sentences mentioning the specific concept) in order to avoid taking the statement out of context during the process of constant comparisons ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#)). When comparing their individual coding, authors found a high level of agreement, and synonyms were merged while discrepancies were discussed and clarified. Additionally, nodes that could be identified on a

continuum, for example vague and specific, were merged to one node to allow a better comparison and contrasting process of data. As expected from an inductive study such as this one, nodes continued to emerge as the analysis proceeded, and the coding was therefore an ongoing process throughout the analysis of all transcripts. This culminated in 62 first coding nodes (see Appendix 4 for examples of nodes in NVivo). A common log was kept to both keep track of changes to nodes, and to follow the emerging themes (see Appendix 5 for excerpt). Following the first four transcription coding, the questions for the semi-structured interview were adjusted to increase the story telling from the participant (see Appendix 6 for transcription example). Some follow-up questions were added, to be asked only if the participant had not addressed these topics, the final question always opened for additional thoughts from the participant. Additionally, the semi-structured format was flexible enough to allow for convenience sequencing of questions depending on the participant's answers, ensuring the participant was able to bring up anything they might feel relevant to the interview ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#)). The analysis continued in parallel to data collection, with memos and diagrams drawn to help illustrate and organise our thinking (see Appendix 7 for example diagram). A memo with all quotes of interest was created to gather potential In vivo codes, as they represented "concepts using the actual words of research participants" ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 85](#)). This was to ensure that significant statements were not overlooked during analysis even if the concept was only mentioned once, as frequency does not equal or oppose relevance in qualitative research ([Corbin & Strauss, 2015](#)).

As concepts started to emerge, the open coding nodes were compared and brought together, rearranged, moved to another parent node or revised from a child node to a parent node as the data contradicted our first notions. These concepts became our second order themes, see Appendix 8 and Table 2 for second order themes and representative quotes supporting these. After each coding session, the authors discussed their thoughts and diagrams to embellish or identify gaps in the analyses. Following a further thirteen interviews the authors felt satisfied with the amount and quality of data collected, deeming it a good foundation for our exploratory study. As themes became more concrete models to illustrate interpretation and construed links were created in powerpoint from the NVivo diagrams, see Attachment 2. During analysis the authors continually

searched for and reviewed existing literature to potentially find research which supported or contradicted our findings.

Table 2

## Representative quotes supporting second-order themes

Second order theme	Example quotes
Self-other similarity rating	<p>"It's really... Yeah, I don't see any great similarities, and thinking in the same way, in terms of personalities, there's not a great deal there, we're not totally dissimilar, she's not a lot younger than me, have same number of kids, live in the same area... So there are connections and similarities there, but really, they're not very many. Our background, and socially... I wouldn't say there's an awful lot of similar things there" (PCM4)</p> <p>"Yeah, we're very similar on some things, we structure problems the same way, we have very different personalities, I think we have pretty equal values. Yeah, when we have these discussions – I think the value sets are very similar. But the personality is very different, but the way we think about the subject matter is quite similar." (PBF9)</p> <p>"interesting, because I was thinking in a worldwide context we are very similar because we have similar interests chose this line of work, you know." (PAF6)</p>
Relationship dependant	<p>"then they know that you are not a bad person by essence. We have a relationship, I'd pick you up, you pick me up, basically we have a relationship, it's then easier to give corrective – it's not necessarily only the evil, and then they know it is also a trust relation built in, then it's much easier to have a corrective feedback" (PAM13)</p> <p>"the way that the feedback came back... the chemistry was so... I was very offended" (PAF6)</p> <p>"I think also it is important the tone and the kind of words that you use when giving the feedback" (PBM10)</p>
Goal changes gameplay	<p>"What I was trying to do was to get this person to be – to act a little bit differently towards work, towards people" (PCM4)</p> <p>"I'm a more technical science person and we get feedback on our technical stuff all the time like you know "you need to adjust this this way" (PAF6)</p> <p>"the ultimate goal is in a way to try and address the behaviour and explain that your behaviour is causing this and try not to point fingers because we all behave differently and there is not a right or wrong</p>

	<p>answer in a way but still I think all of us need to understand what our behaviour is doing to others” (PAM7)</p>
<p>Trigger: Preparation, involvement &amp; expectations</p>	<p>“the trigger was the third party. I’m not following that daily, so I need to have an alert” (PAM13)</p> <p>“This was outside the performance appraisal, this was spurred by – he was quite open and honest and came to me and was saying that he was in a situation where he was a bit confused” (PCM4)</p> <p>“Okay, ineffective feedback... Would be feedback where you’re not prepared, and typically you start with fingerpointing” (PAM13)</p>
<p>Legitimacy of feedback</p>	<p>“I think [the feedback process] it was felt of being too complicated and a lot of calculations and arithmetic and then of course during the last year's salary increases have been typically modest so then you end up with a lot of bureaucracy for a point 2 decimal on your pay check and it doesn't really make sense” (PAM7)</p> <p>“Well I think the performance appraisals are ineffective, because I don’t think the managers are in a position to have an opinion. So that’s... The way it’s organized doesn’t work. HR doesn’t go over the work” (PBF9)</p> <p>“not really [valuable], not if you follow what these appraisals should be the last one has been.. the last one was more constructive I think because when we are in a way that has been a meeting with my manager and I exchange information and not a formal MIP. so for me that has been better and then of course we do the paperwork but we don't really put too much effort in” (PBM14)</p>
<p>Heightened awareness of feedback</p>	<p>“I can remember when I was on an internship a long time ago when I was doing my PhD, it was the first time I had to work” (PAF12)</p> <p>“the one I mentioned was maybe about 10 years ago I think one of the worst feedbacks I've ever got.... but a new routine had been introduced to the company” (PAM7)</p> <p>“It was a project which I had to learn a new application, a more financial application rather than production application” (PBF16)</p>
<p>Level of socio-culture integration</p>	<p>“there is no real culture in mentoring in Norway” (PAF12)</p> <p>“in fact, that is kind of a bit disappointment I thought they (Germans) were better on that. but they have also a completely... yes this hierarchy is restrictive” (PBM14)</p> <p>“Actually, if I am to speak open, I think UK, US – that’s the challenge for all of us, because that’s very different, and I have Middle-East, that’s much easier than the UK” (PAF5)</p>

The role of introspection	<p>“so when someone says early to you that you're doing something wrong it is actually positive feedback even if you might not recognise it at the first so normally people don't like when people say you're doing wrong” (PBM10)</p> <p>“And then the moderator said we should think about including everyone and oh we have five ears and one mouth and all that. And then I thought oh Jesus I have to think about that next time” (PBF9)</p> <p>“I was quite surprised from my perspective, but looking back and being a little bit older now, we have to treat people according to their personality, and their experience, and who they are, and the situation. One size definitely doesn't fit all” (PAM8)</p>
Without challenge there is no change	<p>[when asked what would have happened if challenged] “he would have got angry with me he would have asked me to not say anything, yes definitely” (PAF6)</p> <p>“no [I did not challenge] because I felt the project was over and it was just... no I think it is certain stage you just have to kind of move on, it's too stressful to make a big deal out of it” (PBF16)</p> <p>“No I didn't [challenge]. I didn't go in to defend myself, I just... But before I thought more about it, I felt awkward about his comment, and felt that others are thinking about it too, not good” (PBM15)</p>
Notion of prospect theory	<p>“A critique can be so hard and you can never have too many compliments in order to have that criticism balanced out” (PBF11)</p> <p>“And then you're human, you try to sugar-coat it, you sugar-coat it too much, that basically the message has not gone through... And then it's what I call the sugar-coating, you know, you start with the positive, and then you start on how to improve on something. You don't start with the negative, you know – you don't do that” (PAM13)</p> <p>“I've worked for this boss for more than ten years, and this has made – or I had a good relationship with him before, but I think that this is not good, I am not satisfied with the situation” (PBM15)</p>
A pre-requisite but not always sufficient	See Table 3 for relevant quotes for each process step.

## Findings

Through this analysis of the data, we hoped to find indications of how practitioners perceive effective and ineffective feedback, and what elements contributes in distinguishing effective from ineffective. A number of themes emerged from the data (see Appendix 8 for an overview), and out of these themes

we will focus on nine main topics about how processes and elements are used to define effective feedback. Each theme will be discussed below, and they are termed as; (1) Pre-requisite but not always sufficient (2) Level of socio-culture integration (3) Organisational structure, process, or culture (4) The goal changes gameplay (5) The impact of relationships (6) Challenge to change (7) The role of introspection (8) Notion of prospect theory and (9 ) Subjective perception of similarity to other. The first seven themes are factors in our integrated model, which ties our findings about different themes together. The two final themes do not fit into the integrated model, but were interesting phenomena observed and worthy of discussion nonetheless.

### *Integrated model*

This exploratory study aims to provide insight into the complexities of the feedback process by examining the insights of givers and receivers, and how both sides define perceive effective and ineffective feedback. Our first seven themes from the list above are illustrated in Figure 2, the integrated model. Hence, the first seven themes correspond to the seven processes or factors described in Figure 2. From this, we see that our efforts to determine a definition of effective feedback leads us to (1) the effective feedback pyramid, which seems to have seven necessary elements. However, effective feedback can also be influenced by other factors, including (2) the current and historical socio-culture of the organisation and individuals. (3) Contextual elements, especially organisational structure, and process as well as new conditions. (4) Antecedent factors; the reason for the feedback – why, the content of the feedback – what, and the delivery of the feedback – how. (5) The relationship between feedback giver and receiver will influence many aspects including (6) whether ineffective feedback is challenged, which in turn can influence the final outcome of the feedback. (7) The role of introspection following the outcome of the feedback; this indicates that the feedback process does not end once the communication of information is completed, as introspection can affect attitudes and behaviour, thereby also changing the outcome of the feedback.



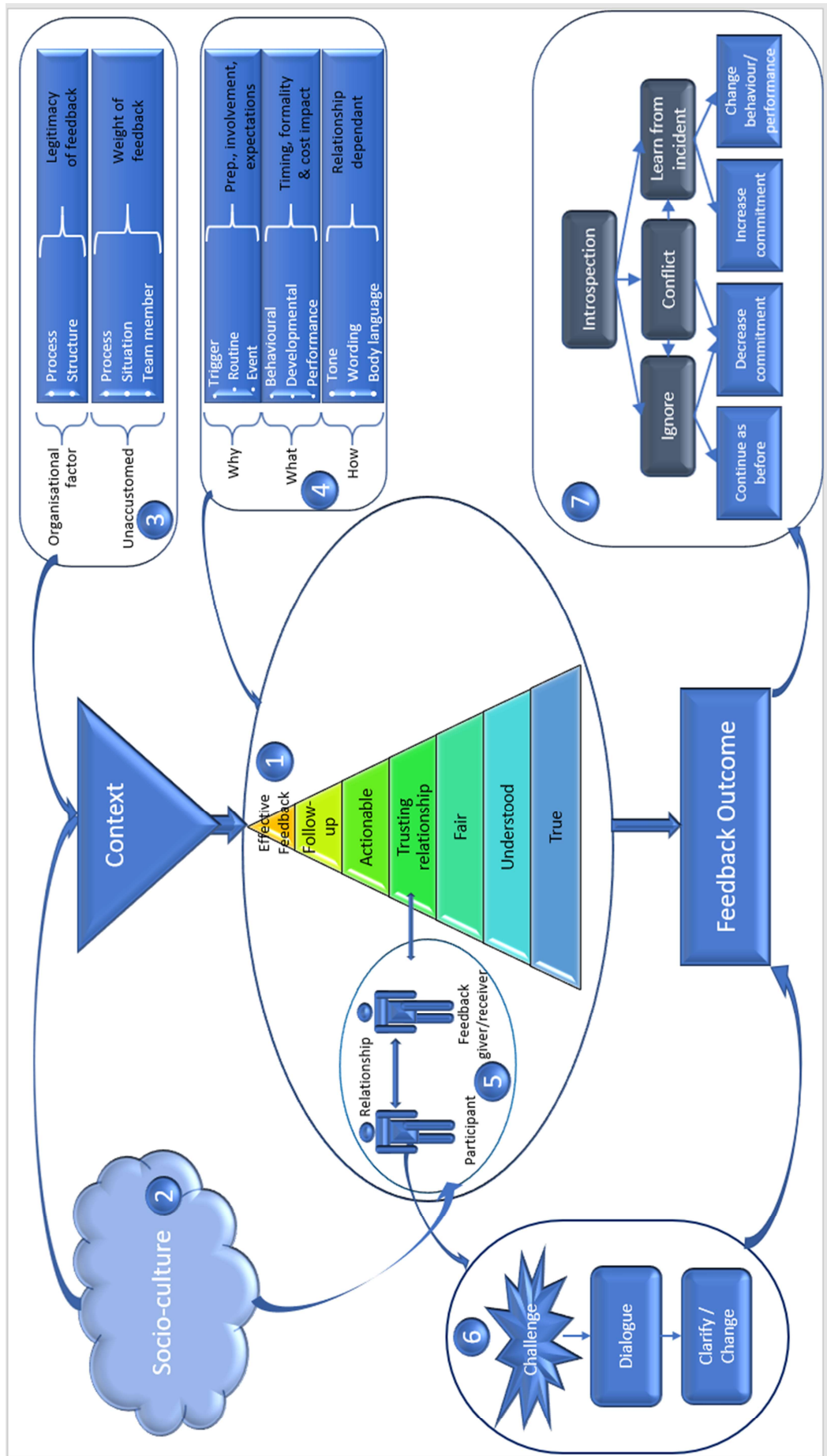


Figure 2. Integrated feedback model

### *A pre-requisite but not always sufficient (1)*

Comparing and contrasting the effective and ineffective feedback incidents led us to identify elements which seemed necessary but not always sufficient for feedback to be perceived as effective. As the elements in effective feedback were so wide-ranging, it was easier to first identify the pitfalls that would result in ineffective feedback. Table 3 gives examples from our data which supports the segmented process illustrated in Figure 3. It is important to note that these elements are from our data and may not make up an exhaustive list of elements necessary to achieve effective feedback.

Table 3

Representative quotes supporting Figure 3 and Figure 4

Process steps	Example quote from data
False	“okay, you say that, that’s not true, or I’m not going to think about that, that’s ridiculous” (PBF11).
True but <i>misunderstood</i>	“... but the other one, ineffective, I don’t think it was not well received, it was just not understood maybe, I think that was more like it, it was just very unclear messages” (PCM4).
True, understood but <i>unfair</i> *	“I think personality wise I'm quite chatty ... in a multicultural environment I realise that sometimes you just need to reduce... But too open [which was feedback] was funny because I'm like "that's one of our values" (PAF6).
True, understood, fair, but <i>no trust</i>	“I also find it not effective if it's kind of hidden agendas behind it. if I get the impression that there are hidden agendas then I just regard it as ineffective” (PBM14).
True, understood, fair, trust but <i>not actionable</i> :	“It is important that something can be done about it and that is one of the less effective feedback I have ever gotten when you get feedback that this is not good but you know immediately that it could not have been done in a different way” (PAM7).
True, understood, fair, trust, actionable but <i>no follow-up</i>	“The follow-up.... There is no point in giving feedback if you don’t follow it up, it doesn’t work. ... Because – okay, getting the feedback here and now, and then the guy has to think about it, and checking in a couple of days later, okay, are we still – was it good, did it make sense, are we fine... And then checking the implementation after. That can take a couple of weeks or something” (PAM13).

*Note.* \*This data was from an effective feedback incident but although it was true, understood it could have been perceived to be unfair as it was a core value of the company.

Figure 3 illustrates how the lack of certain elements can lead to ineffective feedback (this model is not in integrated model but led to Figure 4 pyramid). Although all elements listed were considered important, they were not sufficient to establish effectiveness in isolation, and so a combination is needed to achieve effective feedback. In the event that receivers experience lacking elements and perceive their feedback as ineffective, this could trigger a challenge to the feedback, as demonstrated in the right-hand process from Figure 7 (to be discussed further below). This could lead to the feedback process being repeated until effective feedback is accomplished by obtaining all elements from Figure 3.

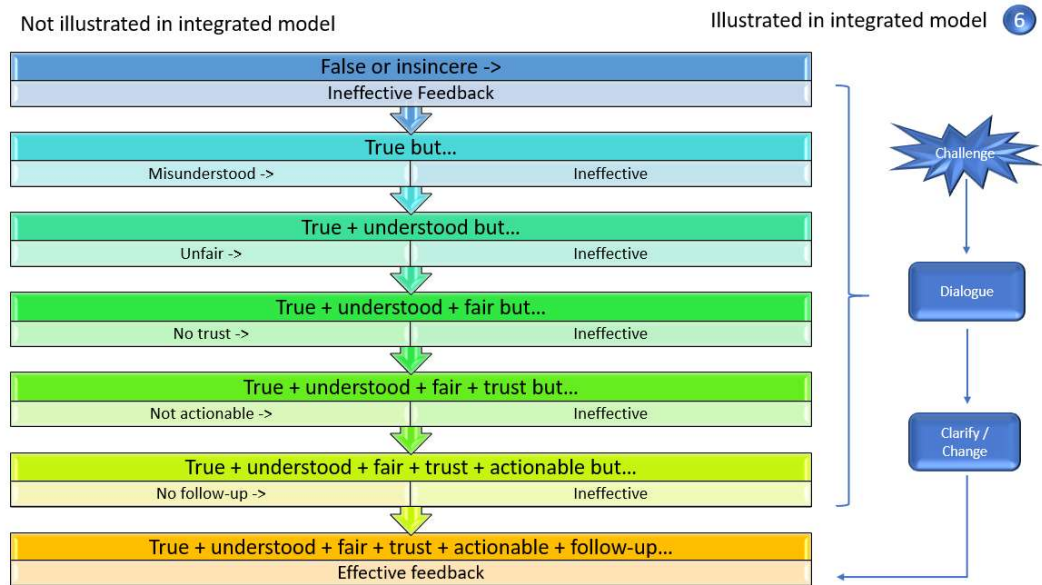


Figure 3. Pitfalls of effective feedback

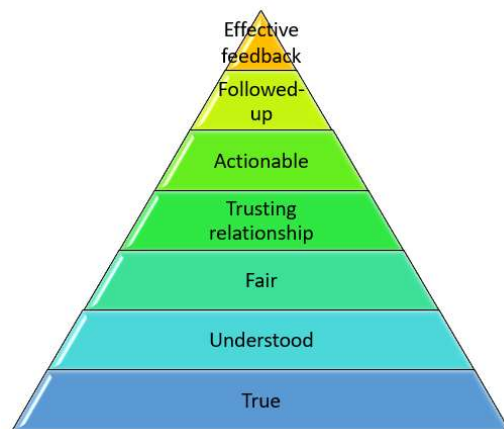
As previously mentioned, the pitfalls of effective feedback emerged from comparing and contrasting effective and ineffective feedback, both intrapersonal and interpersonal. However, interpreting trends only from the effective feedback incidents proved more difficult. That said, our findings are supported by extant feedback research, which states that effective feedback is accurate ([Azzam & Whyte, 2018](#)) specific ([Sargeant, Mann, Sinclair, Van der Vleuten, & Metsemakers, 2007](#)), justified ([Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010](#)), understood ([Ilgen et al., 1979](#)), considered valuable ([van der Rijt, Van den Bossche, & Segers, 2013](#)) and preferably given proximal in time ([Kuvaas et al., 2017](#)).

In addition to the content of the feedback itself, another important factor was the delivery of the feedback – that is, the style, tone, degree of formality, and

so on – as this evidently had a big impact on the perception of feedback. One participant explains this clearly;

in hindsight he could have said it much better because it really threw me down.... on the other hand, it really let me learn how I work.... So, it helped in one way, but it was not a nice experience (PAF12).

Comparing the effective and ineffective incidents gave rise to the effective feedback pyramid shown in Figure 4. This was achieved by reversing the pitfalls from Figure 3, which enabled the authors to arrange the essential steps to achieve effective feedback in a hierarchal pyramid. Each stage is on a continuum where the extremes may be opposites (true or false) but in reality, there will be nuances along the continuum which may be tolerated or may result in the feedback being perceived as ineffective depending on the receiver.



*Figure 4.* Pyramid of pre-requisites for effective feedback

Interestingly, but maybe not surprising, research into how seventh-grade children learn from peer feedback has found many of the same elements as identified in our research, and also suggest that these elements are necessary for effective feedback to improve pupils' academic performance ([Gielen et al., 2010](#)). The importance of training the feedback giver is emphasized, a point also brought up in our interviews. One participant described an ineffective feedback giving incident and his difficulties due to, amongst other factors, lack of knowledge and training regarding how to give feedback: “I was completely inexperienced, being the last one in the group, I was back then 30, the rest of the group was in their 40s, I was the youngest and the last one on the team, and the foreigner” (PAM13).

Searching literature to support or contradict our findings resulted in strong support for all elements in the pyramid, however some elements have received

more attention than others. The value of the utility of feedback has been emphasized by previous scholars, stating that feedback should be actionable, credible, and explicit enough to enable a reaction from the receiver ([Azzam & Whyte, 2018](#); [Patton, 2008](#)). It was stressed that even though the receiver may find it fair and truthful, this was not necessarily sufficient to elicit a change of behaviour ([K. Johnson et al., 2009](#)). Additionally, fairness has been heavily associated with receiver reactions and their will to act upon the feedback ([Kumari, 2014](#)), a finding which is also evident in our data.

The need for follow-up in the aftermath of the original feedback was also discussed at length. Most of our participants answered no when asked about whether or not the feedback was followed-up, and several expressed their desire for such an extension. Admittedly, annual performance appraisals could be considered a form of default follow-up, but this was not recognised in our data, probably due to length of time and potential lack of agreement of topics between the sessions. Desire for follow-up has also found support with previous research, with researchers Giles and Mossholder ([1990](#)) linking follow-up to supervisee feedback session satisfaction. Yet, while industrial organisational psychology research has addressed the topic of feedback follow-up, the majority of the research was found within the medical sphere. In this sector, feedback follow-up has often been examined in relation to patients as well as staff members. This shows that feedback follow-up is often addressed as a critical factor in changing behaviour (i.e. damaging habits such as smoking and poor dietary practices) of patients with chronic conditions ([Bodenheimer & Handley, 2009](#)). Thus, it seems that follow-up to feedback is imperative to change behaviour not just in the worklife, but even in life and death situations. However, although it seems the medical sphere should be aware of the importance of follow-up, they do not seem to transfer this value to the management of their staff, which receives little formal or informal follow-up from feedback sessions ([Vasset, Marnburg, & Furunes, 2010](#)). Given these results, it may not be surprising that our data does not include many examples of follow-up occurring in organisations.

In conclusion, our findings are supported by previous scholars who have examined and tested these elements and found them to be influential to the feedback process. From our findings we have been able to organise the elements in a hierarchical structure which indicates elements which may be pre-requisites

but may not always be sufficient, thus this can contribute to a better understanding of the feedback phenomenon.

### ***Level of socio-culture integration (2)***

The companies' organisational culture does not exist in isolation, and there will always be an impact from the socio-cultural context. In other words, the companies and the participants' perceptions will be closely linked to the culture and society in which they exist both today and historically. Research on this topic is inconclusive, and while there seems to be a recognition that "for example, there may be aspects of national culture (or organizational culture) that make it less acceptable to give anyone negative feedback ... we know little about how culture and societal norms really affect appraisal decisions and processes" ([DeNisi & Murphy, 2017, p. 429](#)). Our findings mentioned socio-cultural elements frequently, but few trends were identified. One reoccurring theme was, as suggested above, that participants attributed the reluctance to give negative feedback or addressing corrective behaviour as a cultural characteristic. One participant stated that "you have that barrier ... to say this is not good enough ... there is this aspect of, at least in the Norwegian society, am I going to hurt this person's feelings are they going to think negatively of me" (PAF6). Another participant addressed the cultural issue more explicitly; "I feel like in general people in Norway are a bit reluctant to address negative issues, but I don't think it has anything to do with men or women or anything like that" (PBF16). In fact, one participant compared feedback like tipping in a restaurant:

but it is that I feel that sometimes people get in their head that they're going to give praise anyway, it's the same way as Norwegians handle tipping. We either just tip because we feel that we have to, not based on service and it's the same with feedback you're told that you have to give feedback and you do it uncritically without actually there being something there to praise (PAF1).

It may be worth noting both Norwegian and non-Norwegian participants mentioned Norwegians avoiding negative feedback. Hence, although our data does not confirm the *actual* influence of culture, it seems to support the existence of *perceptions* of cultural influence on feedback style and attitudes.

### *Organisational structure, process or culture (3)*

Participants often mention contextual factors during their descriptions. In particular, structural features of the organisation, such as spatial distance, matrix structure and HR processes were spoken about at length using passionate language. Both companies have a matrix structure design, and employees frequently work on projects that removes them both physically and psychologically from their line leader (who remains responsible for formal feedback). Contextual organisational factors were often linked to a lack of legitimacy in feedback, for example due to this distance which decreases the manager's involvement with the receiver's performance. This results in the perceived ineffective feedback:

Yeah, I like him. But he can't do his job. ... Very, very many [work this way] ... and that can be very far from the line in the organization... I always dread those meetings. ...I think it's a joke.... But I haven't complained that much, no. I don't think he has a chance, really. I kind of feel for him. It's absolutely meaningless (PBF9).

Several participants mentioned that the problem was not with the feedback giver, but the formalized processes around the feedback. One specific feature that was brought up was the grading processes established by both companies which, with the exception of the youngest participant, was disliked or despised by all participants. "We have this character system from 1-5... Which is a bad system, I think" (PMB15). In particular, the system was disliked due to its connection to salary adjustments, bonuses and promotions. "I hate the grades.... So that part of the feedback, when it's sort of contaminated by money...then it takes the value of the feedback down, if you see what I mean" (PAF5). None of the participants knew what the formal criteria for the grades were, although most could give an approximation of the intentions.

Scholars have pointed out the potential dangers of standardized feedback practices. Lepsinger and Lucia ([1997](#)) believe there can be great benefits from such standardized evaluation practices, but point out that ownership and consequences of the performance appraisals plays an important role in their effectiveness. Additionally, supervisee anxiety could increase due to the meeting having consequences for the supervisee (e.g. compensation or promotion) ([Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#)). These sentiments resounded in data collected from supervisors

and supervisees alike. The processes were considered too subjective to be useful and the reward system lacked rationale and transparency leading some participants to question the inherent value in the company. One participant stated that “if we get a 5 we have to get a promotion, so we don’t get that very often, if we get a 4 we should get a salary increase, but that is not transparent...” Later, she emphasized how objectifying and invalid the system appears, stating that, “I don’t see the point. I think it’s degrading” (PBF9). Hence, the grading system seems to be a feature that only confuses and frustrates employees, rather than actually providing useful input to their performance or behaviour.

None of the participants had strong opinions or impressions of their organisation’s feedback culture. One participant stated that, “I’d say the company doesn’t, or didn’t have until quite recently, a very good feedback culture... we’ve been very poor at these kind of things” (PCM4). All participants could discuss the formalized feedback procedures, but there seemed to be no weight attached to an informal culture of feedback.

According to Goleman ([2000](#)) organisational climate can account for almost one third of financial performance, therefore the impact of feedback practices can have considerable consequences for work life satisfaction for the individual as well as the organisation’s financial endeavours. Lepsinger and Lucia ([1997](#)) considers an organisational culture which promotes open, honest feedback a necessary condition to succeed in the alignment of personnel development and performance appraisals. Organisations need to promote the giving and receiving feedback as a cultural norm where feedback is a valued source of information by all employees, as this could help instigate more frequent and potentially higher quality feedback exchanges ([Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997](#)).

Another theme which emerged was unaccustomed situations, processes, tasks, or new team members were often central in the incidents when describing both ineffective and effective feedback incidents. “I was on an internship a long time ago when I was doing my PhD, it was the first time I had to work... it was the first time I was encountering something that was really completely new” (PAF12). In fact, almost 60% of the incidents described, regardless of whether they were descriptions of effective feedback or ineffective, had an unknown or unaccustomed element. This was often in conjunction with new colleagues or team members, changing positions or changing organisational structures. Our interpretation is that new conditions may make people more sensitive to the



situation and therefore make the incident more salient or at least carry more weight than feedback given in familiar situations.

Figure 5 illustrates the process of how contextual factors, specifically organisational structure and processes, can reduce legitimacy of feedback. In particular, spatial distance, when participant and feedback giver or receiver did not sit in same office or even same country, was prominent in the data, and this often resulted in perceived ineffective feedback. Additionally, unaccustomed conditions seemed to increase the weight of the feedback, resulting in a central factor of both effective and ineffective incidents.

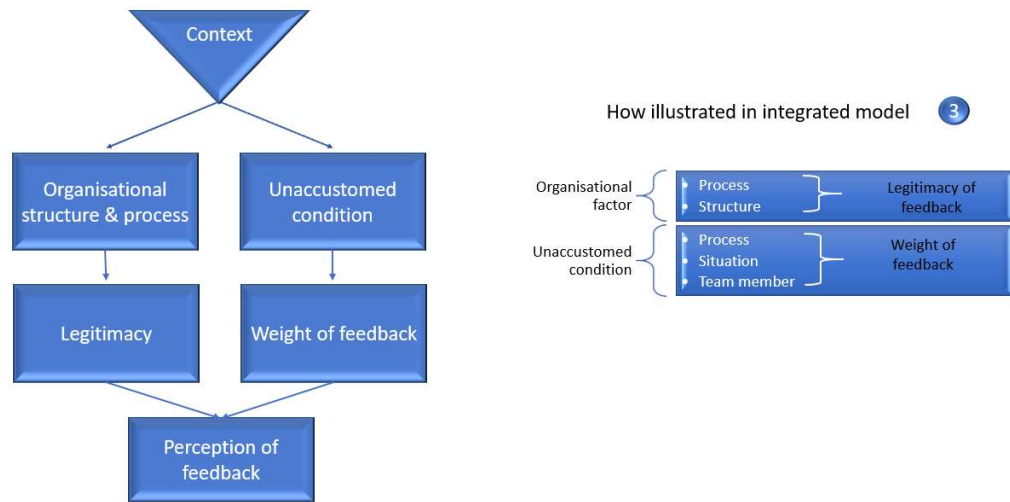


Figure 5. Lack of legitimacy and weight of feedback

***The goal changes the gameplay (4)***

In our study we define performance feedback goals as task outcome focused goals (e.g. input to presentation) and behavioural feedback goals as social behaviour outcome (e.g. input on the way a presentation was given). Only one participant specifically mentioned that the goal of feedback session included individual developmental aims despite research suggesting performance appraisal should be primarily used for this purpose ([Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#)). Admittedly, the authors acknowledge that there may be some overlap of goals in our current research, as some performance and behavioural goals mentioned may lead to developmental goals as well. Behavioural and performance goals were mentioned equally often, and some interesting themes emerged. Timing was often given as an important factor for the feedback to be perceived as effective. However, because behavioural aspects are more challenging than performance aspects, this feedback needed to

be well-thought-out, often more formal (being scheduled) or involved others, for example HR. One participant describes this issue:

Again, its um also the timing immediately after events to see it.... To do it immediately after the good performance if you like or when it needs to be adjusted in a way. It is a lot easier, the way that I see it, to give feedback on the delivery part, ... in this company we talked about delivery and behaviour dimensions, it is a lot easier to talk about the delivery part and a bit more challenging to talk about the behavioural aspect in terms of feedback.... I tend to send people an SMS directly after the performance because then we will also see that you are thinking about this outside the event so that is one thing I use to make it stronger.... and behaviour not that much then it would be quite a general statement on behaviour and probably not if it was feedback addressing some issues that needed some improvement. it would be more in the direction of saying “this was excellent” or “the way that you did this meeting was very good” (PAM7).

Two main points emerge from this quote, specifically that timing is important to the reception of the feedback, and that delivering performance feedback is easier than feedback relating directly to someone’s behaviour or personality. The participant PAM7 suggests that immediate feedback has a good effect, but also emphasizes that delayed feedback can be beneficial, particularly for delayed positive feedback. This is supported by previous literature, which has found that the timing of the feedback has a moderating role in perceived utility ([Kuvaas et al., 2017](#)), although slightly delayed feedback has been found more effective in improving future performance than immediate or greatly delayed feedback ([Thornock, 2016](#)). Admittedly, one of our participants recalled an effective incident where the feedback was given two years after the event in question, potentially indicating that although delays can reduce the value of the feedback, it does not render it completely invaluable:

I have got some positive feedback and of course that's good. that I took the challenge and executed as expected and more in fact took risk. so that I got feedback but a couple of years after the incident really (PBM14).

Hence, the difficulty in determining the right timing, coupled with the levels of preparation and formality necessary to address them, may be why behavioural issues are avoided and performance feedback preferred, as suggested by one

participant; "... the ones that are giving negative feedback there's more distant relationships more performance orientated and less people and personal if you like" (PAM7). Descriptions from other participants also indicate that good performances and good behaviours were easier to convey, but correcting behaviour was often time consuming and difficult. One participant said: "it takes a lot of time to give proper feedback, especially when it's negative feedback, or feedback to change someone's behaviour, and more or less personality in a way. That's the toughest one" (PAF5). Another participant explained that feedback with the intent of correcting behaviour could be treacherous, "that one sentence [I said] that I won't regard as negative, or that one framing of how they wanted to change things was seen as an attack... It resulted in conflict, unfortunately... This created a lot of work actually" (PAM8). Correcting performance on the other hand is easier and often less internalised, meaning the feedback is taken on corrections carried out then forgotten:

when you've written something, and it's like this section is not good enough, when you go outside and you think okay, I have to change it because I did something wrong, but that kind of goes over when you send back the proposal, you kind of don't think about it anymore (PBF11).

The goal of the feedback is often influenced by or overlapping with the reason for the feedback, which may be due to an evolving issue, an event or annual appraisal. Perhaps the most common trigger is the formalized performance appraisal. Research has shown varying results on the effectiveness of performance appraisals ([Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011](#)). Furthermore, Sommer and Kulkarni ([2012](#)) demonstrated that employees responded positively to constructive feedback focusing on poor behaviour or performance rather than personal shortcomings, which also made them feel respected and improved job satisfaction and commitment. This is supported by Kluger and DeNisi ([1996](#)), who found that feedback was better received when it centred on performance, while feedback approaching personal behaviour or characteristics were negatively received.

Interestingly, our findings often contradicted the above research. The participants, rather than favouring task performance feedback as literature predicted they would, expressed a preference for behavioural feedback due to their inability to accurately evaluate their own behaviour:

well when I get an effective feedback, when I sort of know it myself. That this is a good point it becomes very strong in a way. So for instance in my case, I know my communication style is quite compact if you like, and I can receive feedback that I, "you have to use more words you have to explain better why you argue for this or that" then I think it's a very effective feedback because I recognise that this is a good point, and I understand that the person has something to offer (PAM7).

Our interpretation of the associations between the goal of the feedback and costs and outcomes indicate that performance corrections can be done quickly, informally and still be perceived as effective. Contrarily, correctional behaviour usually requires more preparation, often extremely time consuming with greater outcome uncertainty. A noteworthy exception described correctional behavioural feedback given immediately in an informal setting as highly effective.

I lost my temper and there was a consultant [present]... and I spoke badly of one in [the company], and for that I was corrected, and I agree, it wasn't nicely done. ... Yeah, it was afterwards, at the coffee machine. (PBF9).

Figure 6 illustrates how the trigger (an event or annual appraisal) influences the original goal. Praising or correcting performance was often done immediately and informally, usually resulting in perceived effective feedback. Similarly, praising behaviour immediately and informally was also perceived as effective. On the other hand, correcting behaviour involved a completely different strategy which was time consuming and costly with uncertain outcomes. The red arrow indicates behavioural goals process and the blue arrow performance goals process. The black arrow is developmental goals, but our data lacked details for interpretation.

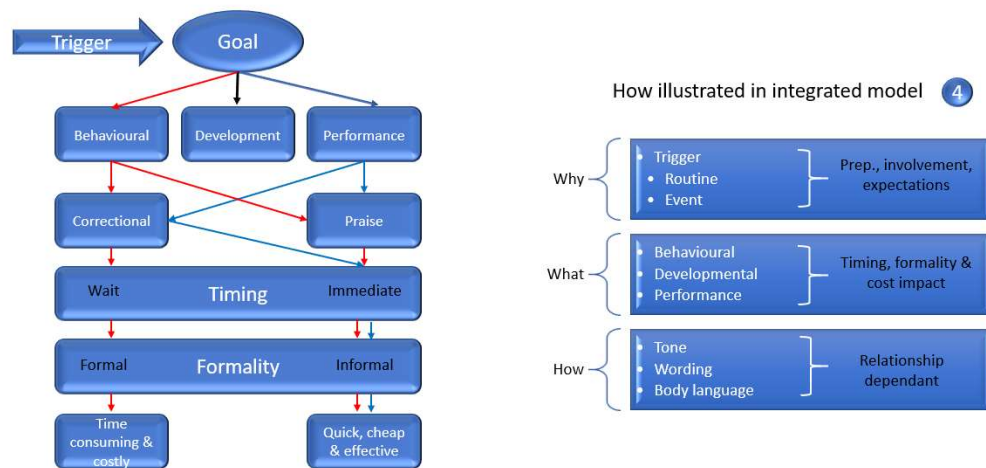


Figure 6. The goal changes gameplay

### *The impact of relationships (5)*

The relationship between sender and receiver certainly seems to have an impact on the willingness to communicate feedback and how it is received. Some of the participants noted a close personal relationship to their supervisors and subordinates, while others stated that they barely know theirs. However, all participants agreed that the relationship between the members of the exchange was important. All participants said, either of their own accord or when prompted, that a close personal relationship had an impact on the ease with which they would give or receive negative (constructive) feedback, but there were contrasting ideas about what exactly that meant. While some stated that a closer relationship would promote honesty and trust to communicate openly, others said they would hesitate to give even constructive criticism in fear of jeopardizing their relationship. This seems to suggest that feedback can influence the way relationships are built and maintained. One participant, when asked about the influence of personal relationships and feedback, stated that

I would take [the feedback] onboard differently, but I think I would be even more happy if somebody I didn't like said something [positive], because then I have to reevaluate the relationship, I think. Yeah, that would be something to think about" (PBF9).

This interest to preserve positive relationships in feedback interactions certainly seems to affect sessions between manager and employees. There is an asymmetrical relationship that might make it difficult to address or even notice discrepancies between perceptions of fairness between the two parties,

particularly due to supervisors' frequent pragmatic approach to their subordinates ([Cislak et al., 2013](#)). This is perhaps particularly evident in exchanges including negative or constructive feedback, which is more often problematic and potentially poorly perceived ([Brown et al., 2016](#)). One supervisor discussed some potential discrepancies and the difficulties associated with his role. He explained how spending more time with one subordinate than others can be perceived as unfair, and also how personal closeness can be problematic:

I think it [personal chemistry] plays a big role because when you get this trust building you can also go into domains you did not dare to do without the trust both in constructive and trying to change things but also in the way you relay positive feedback. It is also a pitfall in a way, because liking... if you like someone very much it can sort of clutter your views in terms of 100% of objective feedback... feedback doesn't necessarily have to be feedback is also the way you relate to people around you and if you like someone quite a lot you may spend more time and pay more attention etc etc and that is also part of the feedback (PAM7)

Research indicates that the relationship between the sender and receiver is an important, but not determining factor in the feedback process ([Hutt et al., 1983](#)). In a study of both positive and negative feedback Hutt, Scott and King (1983) found that for positive feedback to be effective, the facilitative relationship is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition. A facilitative relationship is where the supervisor supports the supervisee, alleviating the fear of failing, and therefore the relationship increases the supervisee's growth and learning. Our findings support this research, with one supervisor describing an ineffective feedback incident from Asia where the subordinate lacked a facilitative relationship with his supervisor:

when I visited the office I saw the exact same behaviour and way of working.... you're not really communicating the negatives, because you always want to communicate the positive, that yes, yes, we understand, we will be on time, ... And then at one point you have to come clean, and you come clean way too late.... Yeah. For me it was really the culture aspect of not being allowed to fail. Like the hierarchy would look at that, and it's not like in Norway, with safety of work and work control, so that's – like, you're out on the day, so you have much more stress in covering things (PAM13).

**Challenge to change (6)**

The individual’s experience of feedback remains unique to their personal experience and the factors influencing the perception of ineffective feedback were varied and many. However, during analysis of ineffective feedback incidents, it appeared that few actually challenged the message conveyed to them, and hence the concept *challenge to change* emerged from this data.

When asked if their ineffective feedback was challenged, one participant replied, “I am not ready to commit suicide” (PBM14), another; “no I didn't at the time because I had to process and think about it” (PAF6). Only one participant reported challenging her feedback, but remained dissatisfied: "yes I did question why, but I didn’t really get a proper explanation" (PBF16). Supervisors also admitted to rarely challenging their leaders. After describing feedback received which was perceived as ineffective, one supervisor was asked if they challenged it: “No I did not but that is probably my mistake as well, but I just felt that I didn't care to deal with it you sort of lose trust in this person immediately which is not a good thing” (PAM7). The statement that the ineffective feedback made them lose trust in their leader, and subsequently their ability to give effective feedback at all, is an interesting observation that may well be a common reason for not challenging feedback in general.

The authors found very little research on challenging feedback, although it should be noted it has been recognised as a success factor for many years, the penultimate of Letting’s (1992, p. 425) 12 guidelines for giving corrective feedback is “ask for reactions; be willing to be influenced”. This is fundamentally what our emerging model reflects. Figure 7 illustrates how tolerating or encouraging the feedback receiver to challenge feedback perceived as ineffective may change the outcome and the individual experience.

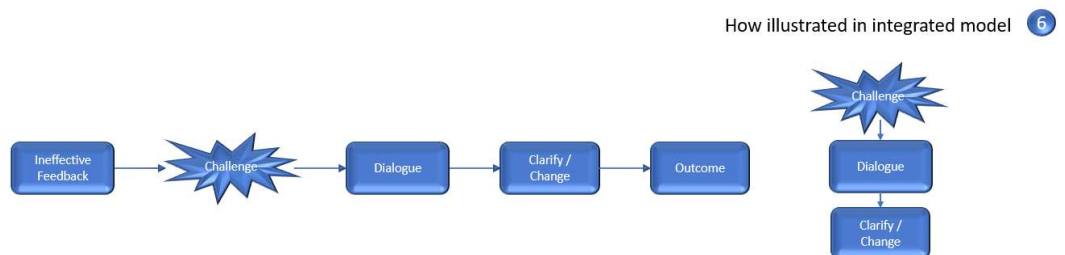


Figure 7. Challenge to change

### *The role of introspection (7)*

Participants described the feedback outcome as generally falling into one of four categories; continue as previously, decrease or increase in commitment, or change behaviour or performance. Frequently – in as much as over 70% of the incidents described – the feedback process went through an introspective period, which appeared to be central to the formation of a subjective perception regardless of content. As stated by one participant: “...then after a while I realised that that's just business and that's just the way things are and now I kinda don't care too much about it” (PAF6). This same participant described an ineffective feedback session which included all elements from the effective feedback pyramid, yet the feedback was ignored following their introspection, and she continued as before:

I have received feedback that I say "yes" too much to things, it is a challenge that I have been aware of for a very long time and I have been advised to prioritise and say yes to less things and I have not taken that on board but that was a conscious choice. And I understand why I should do it but I choose not to do it... I think it is applicable to me, I think it is something I do, but the reason I have decided it is ok still to say yes to things is because I get a lot more opportunities and a lot more exposure to different types of things and their effect of course on me is more stress and you know I'm running around like always and I've decided that that negative is ok because of the positive outweighs the negatives. Perhaps it would be irritating... it is irritating, it irritates me as well that I'm like that, but it's something that I have just accepted (PAF6).

One participant described an ineffective feedback incident which, following a longer period of introspection, turned out to be very effective.

and he said to me "maybe this is not something you can't do" and in that moment I felt horrible.... in that moment it did not help me at all it actually just put me down and made me very concerned ... I knew I could do it, I mean I knew I would try to do it and I could deliver. I just didn't know myself enough to understand that I get that confused the first time I am with something so new to me. it has helped me a lot – but honestly at that moment it could have been a disaster (PAF12).

Another participant described a time of effective feedback with a shorter introspection period:



we had a workshop, and then it got quite heated, and I liked it. I enjoyed it, I felt it was quite a positive energy. But then there was somebody who couldn't participate, because they were not – we started being loud, and walking around, and everything. And I was one of those who walked around. And then the moderator said we should think about including everyone and oh we have five ears and one mouth and all that. And then I thought oh Jesus I have to think about that next time (PBF9).

Introspection was also shown to lead participants to adapt the feedback to their behaviour beyond the workplace. Participant PBF11 described a time she received feedback stating she should be more present and avoid running from one meeting to another as this could be perceived to indicate a lack of value assigned to the first meeting. This advice was internalised and affected the participant's private life behaviour, as the participant made greater efforts to be attentive and present in the company of friends and family, for instance by not looking at her phone or ignoring additional tasks while socializing. Other participants also mentioned considering workplace feedback in relation to their private behaviour or activities, indicating that workplace and private behaviour is not easily separated.

Research often organise self-knowledge into two broad categories; feedback (interpersonal, knowledge from others) and introversion (intrapersonal, knowledge of self), and the introspection is a way of conciliating the new information from the feedback (provided it is from a credible source) with personal self-knowledge (Bollich, Johannet, & Vazire, 2011). The introspection is illustrated in Figure 8, which models how feedback outcome frequently goes through an introspective step leading to different final outcomes.

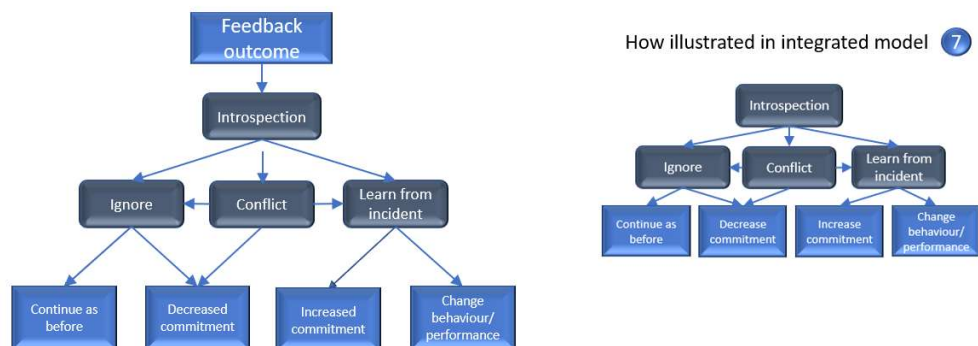


Figure 8. The role of introspection

The role of introspection seems to be largely overlooked in feedback research, but our findings indicate this is an important part of the feedback process and the concluding element of our integrated model. We now move on to other emergent themes which did not fit into our integrated model but nevertheless should be addressed.

### *Lingering consequences of ineffective feedback*

Although previous feedback research often categorise feedback as either positive or negative ([Anderson et al., 2016](#); [Azzam & Whyte, 2018](#); [Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009](#); [Brown et al., 2016](#); [Denisi & Kluger, 2000](#); [Geddes & Baron, 1997](#); [Hutt et al., 1983](#); [Luthans et al., 2004](#); [Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008](#)), this dichotomy is not the distinction of interest in our current research. While positive and negative feedback can become almost synonymous with praise and criticism, this does not necessarily address the value attributed to the feedback by givers and receivers. Negative and positive distinguishes the tone of the feedback, while effective and ineffective defines its worth. For example, negative feedback does not only have negative consequences; negative feedback can be destructive or constructive, with constructive criticism usually considered good feedback. Similarly, positive feedback can feel superficial and hollow perceived as ineffective as it is not useful for the organisation or the recipient. The authors therefore found effective versus ineffective feedback a more interesting duo of concepts to explore in further detail, a decision which has been supported by our findings. Some participants did describe positive feedback instances as ineffective and negative feedback situations as effective. An example of positive feedback perceived as ineffective:

I guess a time to be given too much praise when it feels out of place either due to the amount of praise or compared to the task you've actually done I understand that people are trying to be positive and reaffirming and all that... it was all just so out of this world compared to what I was doing ... So, it felt like it was more patronising than it was actually praise....so that to me just it doesn't make me feel good, it doesn't give me anything to work with, it just feels a bit like something you would just say rather than something you actually mean. it just feels like I have to remember to praise everyone, so I guess that was actually a positive feedback that didn't work very well (PAF1).

An example of negative feedback perceived as effective:

personality wise I'm quite chatty and I guess this case about being too open ... when I did get this feedback it was like "wow I say a lot" ... I now try to reduce what I say by about 50%. So that I am just addressing the key points and then it becomes really clear without a lot of noise around it, so that was a very effective feedback. (PAF6)

In this case, the participant was told that her communication style was too open and that this could lead to confusion in a multicultural setting. Although the participant believed openness should be considered a positive quality, she accepted the feedback and acknowledged that it was effective and fair.

An interesting finding that came from asking specifically about effective and ineffective feedback was that participants seemed to remember these differently. It was also evident that the length of time since effective feedback incident recounted is much less (average 2.63 years) than time since the ineffective feedback incident (average 5.10 years). In fact, 11 participants described effective feedback incidents which happened within the last 2 years, in contrast seven participants chose to recount ineffective incidents which happened as far back as 7 years ago or more. This brought up several questions; is ineffective feedback less common, meaning that participants need to search further back in time, or does an ineffective incident remain salient longer? Our data indicates ineffective feedback is in fact frequent: "Ineffective means for me that I get some feedback that I find valid but is not followed up"... "it happens very regularly" (PBM14). Another when asked if the perceived ineffective incident was believed to be an isolated incident "No, I don't feel like it is isolated" (PBM15). Thus, leading us to interpret the latter to be a possible explanation, that ineffective feedback remains salient to the participants far longer than effective feedback. Our interpretation was further supported when analysing the exported effective and ineffective nodes. This exposed that the participants described ineffective incidents using richer language and in far more detail, despite more time having passed since the comparative incidents.

### ***Subjective perception of similarity to other***

After describing the feedback incidents, the participants were asked to subjectively rate themselves and the feedback giver or receiver on a scale from one to ten where one was very dissimilar and ten was very similar. Our findings

suggest the dyad demographics (i.e. age, gender, nationality) were not important factors to the feedback incident itself. Individual differences may affect how individuals perceive and react to feedback, but differences between the dyad members did not appear to affect whether the feedback situation itself was perceived as effective or ineffective. In other words, individual differences were evident but comparative differences were not. For example, one participant, when asked if she considered demographics when rating the similarity, replied, "oh no I don't think about those things, well personality yes, not gender not nationality not ethnicity, that doesn't have anything to do with it" (PAF12).

Although age and cultural background factors were occasionally given as one of the basis to the subjective rating, such as one participant saying he based his rating on "Age, cultural background, attitude, generally speaking, attitude to work and general social life, yeah" (PAM13), more often, demographics were stated as not part of the participants consideration "I don't think that gender or age really matters in this at all"(PBM3). Furthermore, comparative analysis of gender and nationality of participant and giver/receiver of ineffective versus effective feedback data supports this. Previous research on age differences and reactions to feedback indicates that generations have diverse expectations, preferences, and capabilities to act upon feedback, with Wang et al., (2015) found that older employees were more attuned to and valued socioemotional focused feedback, whereas younger employees responded better to feedback about their technical and professional performance. Similarly, Anderson et al., (2016) study demonstrated that the Millennial generation expect more frequent and constructive feedback about their performance than older generations. In this current research, however, age varied so much that comparisons were difficult to interpret, and it was not possible to suggest themes or trends based on age.

Comparing ineffective and effective feedback incidents and whether the persons involved were same gender and nationality resulted in 56% of ineffective incidents involved participants and giver/received with same gender and 38% with same nationality. The effective incidents resulted in 47% with same gender and 35% with same nationality. Both same gender and same nationality being the higher percentage in the ineffective feedback incidents. This finding was not predicted by the authors, but research on the topics of dyad characteristics, perceived fairness and attributed effectiveness remains inconclusive. For example, Johnson and Ronan (1979) argued for the existence of both sexual and racial

prejudice in performance evaluations, a position later fortified by Ford and Kraiger (1985), who published a meta-analysis concluding that people have a tendency to rate individuals from their own social group higher than out-group members. Their research has since been discredited, most notably by DuBois and Sackett (1991), who instead posed the idea that social identity has an effect on subjective judgements made by supervisors and, consequently, their evaluation of them. In practice, this would lead to higher ratings of Whites compared to Blacks, or rating men more favourably than women (Sackett & DuBois, 1991). Other studies have examined the effects of stereotype threat and tokenisms as potential demotivators for seeking feedback and interpreting negative feedback (Roberson et al., 2003; Sackett, DuBois, & Noe, 1991), but these results have not received further support.

Although results indicate that while most participants had at least one reference to the demographics of their counterpart or themselves, it was rarely discussed as a significant part of the exchange. There was one exception to this, that being participant PAF5's experience of giving ineffective feedback to a colleague of an ethnic minority. While the intention was to initiate the discussion of the colleague's overly ambitious behaviour with a humorous remark, the comment was perceived as insensitive and caused a conflict between sender and receiver, with PAF5 stating that "I managed to say to him that it was not very Norwegian to do it that way, and that was like the worst thing to say, because he is Norwegian, he is born in Norway, but with Pakistani parents." Hence, the ethnicity of the colleague, while irrelevant for the message, became an important aspect of the interaction, and the main determinant of the negative outcome.

Otherwise our findings indicate simple demographics (e.g. gender and nationality) did not influence the rating. Nevertheless, participants did rate themselves more similar with the effective feedback giver or receiver, average rating 6.25 than the ineffective feedback giver or receiver, average rating 3.63 based mainly on workstyle and personality. Since feedback in the workplace was the framework of our interviews, it is maybe not surprising that it came up as a frequently mentioned factor for basis of similarity rating given by the participant.

Additionally, factors relating to the competencies, and subsequent knowledge and power of the dyad members were often brought up in the interviews. Primarily, the individuals' education, accomplishments and positions in the organization were mentioned as factors affecting how and why the feedback

was delivered or interpreted as it was. When it comes to the effect that educational level has on interactions between colleagues in the workplace, previous research remains limited, and our knowledge of this aspect of the feedback exchange therefore remains restricted. One indication comes from Ariffin and Ha (2015), who found that differing education levels could affect organisational commitment and relationship building at work, where individuals of higher educations had higher levels of both, as opposed to unskilled workers. Similarly, Ng and Feldman (2009) found that higher educated workers exhibited better citizenship behaviour compared to their less educated colleagues. This does not seem to explain our findings, but may indicate that education can change the dynamics of the workplace, as was indicated in the data although without evident trends.

Personality similarity or dissimilarity was by far the most often reason given for the rating, "I think with the guy, our personalities are quite aligned in terms of our sense of humour" (PCM4). Personality dissimilarity is especially prominent in the ineffective feedback incidents, one participant stating that "within the workplace, personality wise, and experience wise we are a little bit dissimilar individually" (PAF6). Another participant said:

I think the personality is a little bit more different. he has this less approachable personality I mean he will allow you to become friends and he can be very nice and very normal, but he has more of an introvert type of personality" (PAF12).

Personality and personal chemistry therefore seemed to have an impact on how members of the dyad perceive and relate to each other, and how feedback is exchanged in general. Although asked about the importance of personal chemistry during feedback communication, our results on this topic remain inconclusive, as the participants seemed divided on this topic themselves.

### ***Findings sum-up***

Our data confirms previous feedback research – feedback is complex (Brown et al., 2016; Gabelica et al., 2012; Harrison & Rouse, 2015; Ilgen et al., 1979; Kuvaas et al., 2017; Mulder, 2013; Mulder & Ellinger, 2012; Nadler, 1979; Thornock, 2016; Yang, 2016). Figure 2 summarizes our main findings by combining the main models and phenomena outlined above. There are several processes taking place simultaneously during the feedback session as well as before or after the actual exchange, and all affect the outcome to a smaller or

larger extent. At the core of the actual feedback process is the exchange in which the giver and receiver interact to communicate a message in a specific manner. That is, the core of the feedback exchange becomes the who, and the what.

The 'who', includes properties of the sender and receiver, as well as their relationship. We found that the dyad relationship influenced almost all incidents either positively or negatively, and also had an effect on whether or not the feedback was eventually challenged if found unsatisfactory, which could then lead to an alternative outcome if the challenge was met with success. While demographic features such as age, gender and nationality were not found to be influential in this relationship, several participants emphasized personality as important both for their choice of strategy in giving feedback, as well as how they received it. Additionally, some participants specifically mentioned educational level and field of specialization as influential elements affecting the exchange. This was particularly true for participants in highly technical positions who either held a PhD themselves or worked closely with colleagues that did. Participants with lower education levels did not bring this up, and generally seemed less aware of the education history of their colleagues.

The 'what' makes up the most salient dimension of communicated feedback; the actual content, topic, and goal of the message itself, as well as its delivery. This includes criticism, praise, future plans, and any other emergent issues. From the data at hand, there are no evident trends about the specific topics of the feedbacks discussed; this in itself is not unexpected or problematic, as the topics naturally vary from individual situations. That is, the topic does not dictate whether or not the feedback is effective. Instead, the communication of feedback must possess specific qualities and properties in order to be effective, as described at length above through Figures 3 and 4. These qualities emanate both from the system, the communication mode and the presentation of the topic. They include that the content must be true and recognizable by the receiver, it must be understood, perceived as fair, coming from a credible and trusted source, actionable, and finally, followed up after an interval of time has passed.

The presentation of the topic and subsequent receiver implementation of the feedback can also be affected by situational factors. This includes prior expectations and goals of the receiver and sender, the timing and the delivery. Three main questions help identify problems that shape the implementation of the feedback; why is the feedback necessary? What does the feedback need to

address? How should the feedback be delivered? The trigger for the feedback is what determines why the feedback is taking place. This can be either a routine event, such as the formalized performance appraisal, or an ad hoc session where specific situations require action to be taken, i.e. a job well done or an emerging conflict. Accordingly, this affects the content of the feedback, as well as the preparation, involvement and expectations held by the individuals involved in the exchange. Unprepared feedback sessions in our data was found to lead to either miscommunication in the case of negative feedback, or satisfaction for positive feedback such as praise. This is not to say that feedback with little delay always lead to miscommunication; rather, feedback with insufficient preparation lead to miscommunication.

Previously, we stated that the topic of the feedback does not determine its effectiveness. It does, however, affect the delivery strategy, which in turn affects effectiveness. We found that the topic needing to be addressed – that is, behavioural, performance or developmental topics – informs the timing, formality and cost impact on the organisation. For example, we observed that performance feedback was often given ad hoc, quickly and cost-efficiently, while correctional behavioural issues were delayed, and often reserved for formalized procedures.

The question of how feedback should be delivered concerns the micro-level choices the giver makes in order to communicate their message. The wording, tone, body language, presentation tools, and so on depend on the features outlined above, but is also dependent on the relationship between the giver and receiver, and how the giver interprets the receiver's preferences and capabilities. For example, PAF5 had a comment about Norwegian culture that was taken poorly by her receiver of an ethnic minority; she stated that their relationship was quite fresh, which meant that she was not able to predict his reaction to the phrasing and they were not familiar enough for him to forgive such a mistake easily.

Finally, feedback does not operate in a vacuum. All of the processes and elements described above are affected by the feedback situation's context, both the localized organisational context, and the socio-cultural context. Present and historical socio-culture factors were obvious in the data but were so diverse few themes emerged with the possible exception of Norwegians tending to avoid negative feedback. However, the organisational context had a considerable impact in most of the participants experiences. In particular, there were two dimensions of the organisational context that affected the individual feedback experiences: 1)



the size and structure of the organisation, 2) the feedback and evaluation procedures in place. The sizes of the organisation and the matrix structures often lead to increased distance, both spatial and psychological, between the feedback giver and receiver. Similarly, the evaluative procedures, including grading scales, led to perceptions of non-transparency and reduced legitimacy of feedback. Furthermore, unfamiliarity, usually as a result of changes in positions or the organisation's internal structuring, had a considerable effect on feedback outcomes for both effective and ineffective incidents. This leads us to the interpretation that people experience heightened sensitivity in new situations.

In addition to all these influential factors, the feedback receiver's perception of feedback was often found to be processed through personal introspection. Several participants pointed out that they had taken time to interpret and consider the message of the feedback after the feedback session finished, at which point they arrived at four possible outcomes; they ignored the feedback, a conflict arose, their commitment increased or decreased, or they learned from the incident.

## **Discussion**

Just as previous research has established, our study illustrates the difficulty of narrowing effective feedback down to a simple concept. Furthermore, our results suggest that feedback is a process that moves far beyond the mere evaluation and subsequent adjustment of performance, thus adding to its importance and complexity.

Our research question – *How do individuals describe effective and ineffective feedback and what can we infer from that?* – relates directly to the subjective perception of the participant to the feedback giver or receiver. We wanted to explore factors that influence individual perceptions of effective feedback, and we found some factors to be more evident than others. One of our least prominent elements is the influence of culture on perceptions of feedback, a topic which is paradoxically one of the most researched, yet least conclusive of our elements. While we were unable to identify trends or patterns linked to the influence of culture, we were able to note ideas that were not stated explicitly by the participants but suggested by us as explanations for phenomena observed. Specifically, we suggest that culture could, at least in part, account for some of the behaviours discussed in the *challenge to change* theme. Our study was carried out in a Norwegian setting, which as a society at large is more consensus-oriented,

scoring low on power distance dimension and has a high level of equality in power, scoring low on masculinity dimension ([G. J. Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002](#)). These two culture dimensions, interestingly enough, remain in opposition in this context but could both potentially explain Norwegians' reluctance to challenging feedback. On the one hand, Norway scores low on power distance, which would suggest that challenging authority should be easy. On the other hand, the Norwegian society scores low on masculinity dimension, which encourages a cooperative working environment and may lead to suppression of interpersonal challenges. Furthermore, G. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov ([2010](#)) suggest extreme femininity societies (societies scoring low on masculinity) have a hard time standing up for their rights.

Although challenging feedback seems to be difficult, Shipper, Hoffman and Rotondo ([2007](#)) studied Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism and masculinity dimensions across five countries and found that while 360° feedback was generally effective across all countries examined, it was particularly useful in individualistic cultures with comparatively low power distances. As Norway is considered an individualistic society with low power distance, this would suggest that the 360° feedback tool could be a useful tool to apply. Despite this, Cho and Payne ([Cho & Payne, 2016](#)) caution that research on feedback and cultural values remains incomplete, as culture varies not just between countries but also inside countries, and this complexifies the interaction between culture and feedback even further.

While culture may account for some of our findings, simple demographic categories (e.g. age, gender, nationality) were apparently not the primary factors considered when participants rated themselves implicitly and others more explicitly. There may be a number of explanations for this. Tsui, Xin and Egan ([1995](#)) suggest that according to the leader-member theory, leaders categorize their subordinates into the ingroup and outgroup and change their style and behaviour to suit the category they believe the subordinate belongs to. Likewise, according to Tajfel and Turner's ([1979](#)) social identity theory, individuals designate themselves and others into *us* and *them* categories. The process works as a) social categorisation, to understand the social environment, b) social identification, to understand which norms to adopt, and c) social comparison, the tendency to look favourably on the *us* group and unfavourably on the *them* group. Prominent demographics such as age, gender and nationality are of course not the

only categories individuals consider, and our findings show that work-style and personality may be as relevant as demographics. Furthermore, Chrobot-Mason, Ruderman and Nishii (2013) suggest that leaders of diverse workgroups who discover similarities that cut across simple demographic categories are more likely to be effective, which can have a contagion effect of reducing the salience of the demographic categories within the group.

There was a definite trend that the effective feedback incidents chosen by participants were more recent than the ineffective incidents. A plausible explanation may be gained by looking at the prospect theory, where loss is felt stronger than gain (Plous, 1993), as ineffective feedback can be seen as loss of an opportunity, pride, trust, and so on. Similarly, in an extensive study into the “inner work life” of seven companies, researchers Amabile and Kramer (2011) found a negative event is felt more than twice as strong as a positive event. Furthermore, their study showed emotions have two dimensions; *pleasantness* and *intensity*. The more unpleasant the event is perceived, the more intense it is felt versus comparable pleasant events. Our findings seem to reflect this intensity curve, as participants were far more detailed in their description of the ineffective feedback incident as opposed to the effective incident, despite the former being further in the past.

Similarly, our participants frequently recalled situations of uncertainty due to unfamiliarity. Our initial interpretation of the phenomenon that unfamiliar situations seems to heighten the weight of the feedback is that a new situation may make people more sensitive to the situation and therefore make the incident more salient. Neuroscience may offer some insight as to why this is the case; in a Harvard Business Review article researcher Pillay (2014) explains how individuals process familiar faces double as quick as unfamiliar faces, also suggesting that we treat work tasks in similar ways. Lord and Forti (2010) distinguish between the two forms of cognitive schemas individuals work with. First there is the *automatic processes* which demand little attention, can process simultaneous activities and are difficult to suppress, ignore or alter. Then there are the *controlled processes* which demands a lot of attention, focuses on one activity, and is easily reversed or altered. The controlled processes are called upon when we take on new complex work tasks. Thus, as most individuals experience a certain degree of information overload as a new employee, they rely on controlled processes which takes more effort and may not be able to process all the

information provided ([Lord & Forti, 2010](#)), leading to uncertainty. Similarly, Kahneman ([2011](#)) explains that given time pressure, complexity and ambiguity, we often rely on heuristics. Heuristics are unconscious rules of thumb that simplify decision-making, and individuals frequently use these tools unconsciously to avoid information overload. This led us to suggest that the inclusion of the unknown or unaccustomed elements required a controlled cognition schema, coupled with a slower harder work requirement which may be the reason unaccustomed experiences become so prominent when asked to recall an incident. Leaders should be aware of the added sensitivity felt when employees tackle new situations. If handled correctly, this can be an easy win for the leader, but if mishandled, it could become a burden both for the leader and employee.

This unfamiliarity often arose as a result of internal changes in the organisation, most often due to new job positions. But organisational elements were also the source of another issue. Specifically, the data suggests that organisations implementing matrix structures need to ensure line leaders giving the feedback are well informed of their employees' contribution and potential short comings; too often the participants felt the feedback lacked legitimacy as the feedback giver was unaware of the participants daily work. Accordingly, a perception of misalignment or lack of transparency in reward systems was also evident in our data. Our findings also show that participants felt market factors to be a more important factor than internal ratings in relation to wage adjustments, a situation that may be caused by imbalances in the management of interdependencies between internal and external environmental changes ([Caspin-Wagner, Lewin, Massini, & Peeters, 2013](#)). Our data suggests there is either a misalignment with processes or a misfit of interdependencies.

However, although the matrix structure seems to be a considerable issue, there is research outlining its value. To this end, one possible explanation is that the matrix structure itself may not be the issue, but rather the policies implemented within the structure. Galbraith and Kate ([2007](#)) point out the many advantages of matrix structures, (e.g. balanced perspective, integration and flexibility) but they stress that ineffective deployment can be costly and unsatisfactory to the employees. One of the pitfalls Galbraith and Kate ([2007](#)) point out is personal stress on the employee caused by not knowing to whom they are accountable. However, our current research does not provide data sufficient to analyse this question further and hence we will have to settle with an indication

that structural features can make a major impact on perceptions of effectiveness by employees.

Another structural feature that was frequently brought up was the performance appraisal. Several participants instinctively asked if we wanted them to recount their last performance appraisal, and several of the incidents described came from these situations. As illustrated in Figure 6, performance feedback, whether correctional or praise, was usually given without difficulty, quickly, informally, and was perceived as effective. An explanation of why individuals do not always equate negative performance feedback as ineffective is the Hawthorne effect. Although research into the Hawthorne experiments do not always agree with the significant variable which increased productivity, the term “Hawthorne effect” is commonly used to describe a change in behaviour as a result of being observed ([Adair, 1984](#)). Thus, when individuals are praised or corrected they still experience the attention as a positive input as they feel noticed and considered.

This brings us back to the aim of this study, namely to examine and identify key elements of effective feedback. Our current data suggests that there are certain pre-requisites needed in order for feedback to be considered effective. By comparing cases described by individual participants and making comparisons across participant descriptions, we found some clear elements which were necessary for the participant to perceive the feedback as effective. Briefly summed up, our findings in the effective feedback pyramid indicate that the receiver needs to understand the sender’s message as the sender intended it, as well as seeing the value in this message. The receiver also needs to feel positively affected, for example through feeling appreciated, respected, seen by the management, and so on. Finally, the feedback needs to be actionable and realizable. If all of these conditions are in place, the feedback will be effective because the receiver recognizes the value in what the sender is telling them (*why* they should do as their supervisor tells them), they feel positively inclined to the message and the situation, and they know what to do about the issue at hand, whether that is to continue as before or change their behaviour in a given area.

The importance of these points should not be neglected. Previous researchers have found that in cases of disagreement between the feedback receiver and provider, the feedback was less likely to be acted upon to improve performance ([Geddes & Konrad, 2003](#)), as the feedback was perceived as unacceptable or inaccurate ([Anseel & Lievens, 2009](#)). In other words, the

feedback that was perceived as inaccurate or unfair was ineffective, as the receiver disregarded it and subsequently refused to change their behaviour. This is completely in line with our findings, where feedback that was considered untrue, unfair, and so on were ignored or resulted in conflict and in almost all cases, not challenged. Most participants also expressed regret over not pursuing this following the initial feedback process, admitting that they may have received useful information if they had enquired further.

Although research suggests individuals do not always recognise their own incompetence ([Kruger & Dunning, 1999](#)), making it more difficult for the feedback giver to make themselves understood, our research sample consisted of individuals highly educated in their field, and therefore it is fair to assume that not all suffer from an inflated view of their capabilities. We therefore suggest that when preparing for a feedback session, leaders should ensure their feedback addresses all the steps of the pyramid as a bare minimum, as well as encouraging the employee to challenge any discrepancies. Admittedly, each step in the pyramid is a continuum, and our data gave little understanding of nuances in the steps, which raises the question – how much deviation from the extremes (e.g. fair or unfair) do people tolerate? In other words, how close to the pole (i.e. fair) does the feedback need to be in order to actually be assigned that value, and where is the distinction made – towards the middle, or closer to either pole? This remains unclear, but is also likely to be dependent on the properties of the feedback as well as the receiver.

The emergent role of introspection strengthens the need for feedback to be actionable and followed-up. We liken the role of introspection to Lewin's Action Research methodology ([Lewin, 1946](#)), which has its foundation in Gestalt psychology ([Burnes, 2005](#)). Gestalt therapy emphasizes personal responsibility and that successful change can only be attained by helping the individual to reflect on and gain insight of their overall situation ([Perls, 1973](#)). Action Research is an iterative process where each step is composed of the individual fact finding, planning, actioning, and evaluating the results of the action which again results in fact finding. Action Research stresses that change must be a participative and collaborative process in order to be effective ([Burnes, 2005](#)). The role of introspection should therefore not be underestimated, and leaders who include the receiver in discovering actionable solutions as well as following up the feedback may achieve more effective perceptions desirable outcomes.

Finally, our data implores organisations to reconsider the benefits of grading individuals during a feedback process. All organisations in our study currently include grading with the annual appraisals, and although one organisation has recently changed their feedback process, participants remain cynical to the change, and one supervisor stated; “you will end up with the same results.... it’s up to the boss who they like ... It was the same before, because the grades were also reflecting what the boss felt about you” (PAF5). Participants’ feelings towards the grading process varied from one participant expressing indifference to many having an aversion to it, and some even abhorring the system. Research into the pros and cons of performance appraisals has been carried out for over a hundred years (c.f. [DeNisi & Murphy, 2017](#)), so any discussion here would not do this topic justice. The authors simply encourage leaders to heed over half a century’s research which suggests separating the process of salary appraisal (performance appraisal) and motivational and development appraisal (performance management) ([Meyer, 1991](#)). As Carl Rogers ([1967](#)) points out, the role of judge and counsellor is simply not compatible.

### **Limitations and future research**

The contributions of this exploratory study should be viewed in light of several limitations. One issue presented by this research is that while previous scholars as well as our participants themselves suggest that personality has a considerable impact on reception and choice of strategy, our research did not measure or examine the personal characteristics of the participants. As a qualitative study, it could have been purposeful to ask the participant to describe their own characteristics and examine their responses in relation to theories on personality and culture, but the focus of this research was on the incidents and not the person themselves, and so it was not considered critical to investigate personal details.

It has previously been mentioned that the authors are familiar with the organisations examined, and how this has given us certain advantages when it comes to understanding the systems and procedures in place. However, this could also be a hindrance, as the authors might be quick to infer meanings and references that are not inherently stated in the data, and that might be unavailable to other interpreters. Similarly, these assumptions may contain biases or be outdated.

### **Future research**

Our research was carried out using qualitative methodologies to specifically address issues not covered by quantitative research, and this has revealed several potential topics for future research. One of the questions posed to participants describing ineffective feedback incidents was whether or not they challenged the feedback, and as previously mentioned, only one participant said she did. She also described how her response to this challenge was unsatisfactory and suggested she might not even have bothered. However, it remains unclear why some people challenge feedback while others do not, and if this is determined by situational or personal characteristics, or both. Several participants could recount incidents of ineffective feedback from years in the past, but when asked why they did not challenge it, there seemed to be no clear replies. What is this reluctance to challenging feedback? It was at one point alluded to job security, but this seems unlikely to be the sole reason as our research context was Norway, a country with a relatively high level of job security and procedural justice. The question also remains what the potential outcome could be; is better feedback a realistic expectation, or would supervisors feel inclined to only give positive feedback such as demonstrated by previous research in relation to feedback seeking behaviour? Future research may be able to examine this in greater detail.

Another reoccurring theme which we lacked the adequate data to analyse properly is how personal relationships affect the feedback process. Our research gave mixed results about this idea, with some people insisting that good personal chemistry can make it easier to give negative feedback, some said close relationships could make praising others an issue due to perceived favouritism, while others suggest that personal chemistry is necessary for effective feedback exchanges, both positive and negative. Future research can address both the discrepancy, why it is that people disagree so fundamentally, and what implications that has for attitudes to feedback in general. Does that impact the way we give feedback to people we are not personally close to, and is there a level of proportionality involved? The current research does not answer these questions, but it could be useful for future research.

Finally, the research at hand does not, as previously mentioned, go into detail about the personal characteristics of the participants, such as behavioural patterns, social awareness, motivation alignment, agreeableness, and so on. We therefore remain unable to give further insight into the connection between



personality and perceptions, interpretation and preferences of feedback. Future research should address this by employing a qualitative framework in order to obtain the richest data from the participants themselves. As demonstrated in this research, qualitative approaches to feedback studies have considerable merit because it allows the participants to emphasize what they consider important, and as it turned out, our participants were quite passionate about workplace feedback. Hence, it could be useful for future research to combine quantifiable properties of personality with qualitative methods on statements and opinions.

### **Concluding remarks**

The biggest contribution of this study is its qualitative approach to searching for a definition of feedback effectiveness and influential factors. While previous studies have addressed feedback effectiveness, there has been a lack of qualitative data on the topic, and neither scholars nor practitioners have agreed on a universal definition of effective feedback. By going directly to employees engaged with feedback regularly, this study hoped to uncover descriptive definitions of effective feedback, rather than prescriptive. From this, we found that one size definitely does not fit all, and that feedback is more than merely comments on performance. Our contributions to the field, arising from the interviews conducted, include the hierarchical pyramid of elements contributing to effective feedback, the issue of challenging feedback, as well as the importance of a period of introspection in determining the final outcome of the feedback. Furthermore, this study goes a way to answer some specific calls from other researchers, such as Azzam and Whyte's (2018) call for research on how credibility can be increased. Our findings suggest practitioners ensure, as a bare minimum, the elements in the pre-requisite pyramid are present during feedback session to increase credibility. Additionally, Kang and Shen (2016) called for studies collecting data from both managers and non-managerial employees. Our study provides insight from both roles, thereby giving a richer view of feedback perceptions in the workplace. Yet, the study also revealed that many aspects of the feedback process remain unexplored, and that results previously demonstrated by other scholars may not be applicable across a variety of settings, as some of our findings contradict earlier results. The authors hope that future research on feedback will endeavour to uncover more about the feedback phenomenon and its complexities while remaining sensitive to the subjective nature of individual feedback perceptions.

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## **Appendices**

### ***Appendix 1* Request for participation in research project**

***Project title: A research study on feedback***

#### **Background and Purpose**

The purpose of the present research is to gain further understanding of feedback in the workplace. The data collected will be analyzed and used as a contribution to a master's thesis for the Leadership and Organisational Psychology programme for BI Norwegian Business School, Oslo.

The sample for this project is drawn from the employees of two large Norwegian companies with international activities who engage regularly in feedback sessions.

#### **What does participation in the project imply?**

You are requested to agree to be interviewed by two student researchers, the interview should take under one hour and will be scheduled at your convenience and take place in your office. The interview entails you describing, in your own words, a time you received or gave effective/ineffective feedback – this does not have to be related to current company or any supervisor/subordinate relationship you are presently involved in. Additionally, some demographic and measurement scaling questions will be asked for research purposes only.

#### **What will happen to the information about the participants?**

All personal data will be treated confidentially. Only the students and supervisor will have access to the data, no participants will be recognizable in the thesis, and your anonymity is guaranteed.

The project is scheduled for completion by 30/9-18. As there is no need to contact the individual participants or know who they are this will be final date for anonymization.

#### **Voluntary participation**

It is voluntary to participate in the project, and you can at any time choose to stop the interview and withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be deleted.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions concerning the project, please contact [Moraigh.J.Stewart@student.bi.no](mailto:Moraigh.J.Stewart@student.bi.no) (student), [ida.m.g.halvorsen@student.bi.no](mailto:ida.m.g.halvorsen@student.bi.no) (student), or [laura.e.m.traavik@bi.no](mailto:laura.e.m.traavik@bi.no) (supervisor).

The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

#### **Consent for participation in the study**

You will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

## ***Appendix 2 Interview protocol***

Thank you for volunteering to help us with our research. As we wrote in the e-mail our research is to gain further understanding of feedback in the workplace.

We will ask you to recall a time you received/received effective/ineffective feedback in the workplace, this does not have to be in your current job.

The interview is expected to take less than 1 hour and you can choose to stop the interview and withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be deleted.

Do you have any questions before we start the interview? In order to transcribe the interview we would like to tape the interview is that ok with you? All data will be anonymised.

Great I will conduct the interview and x will be taking notes but may also come with add on questions. Feel free to slow us down or speed us up so we go at a comfortable pace for you.

Great I will conduct the interview and [name of other interviewer] will be taking notes but may also come with additional questions. Feel free to slow us down or speed us up so we go at a comfortable pace for you.

*Q1. Are you a supervisor?*

- a. Yes (if yes questions on giving feedback)
- b. No (if no questions on receiving feedback)

(Swap between starting on ineffective/effective questions).

*Q2. Thinking of at time you received effective feedback, can you describe the incident in as much detail as possible?*

- Q3. Thank you, can you describe why you feel it was effective?*
- Q4. What was the goal of the feedback?*
- Q5. How long ago was the incident you describe?*
- Q6. Now we'd like you to think of a time you received ineffective feedback, can you describe the incident in as much detail as possible?*
- Q7. Thank you, can you describe why you feel it was ineffective?*
- Q8. What was the goal of the feedback?*
- Q9. How long ago was the incident you describe?*
- Q10. Supervisor: What do you feel you could have done differently to improve the outcome?*
- a. Was the feedback challenged?
- Q11. Subordinate: Expectations prior to feedback meeting*
- a. Did you challenge the feedback?
- Q12. Can we ask some personal details for our research – again if you prefer not to answer that is an option for all questions.*
- a. What is your nationality?
  - b. (do we need to ask ethnicity if for example the answer Norwegian above and they are white?)
  - c. What is your line of education?
- Q13. We would now like to get some details of you at the time of the incidents you describe and also the feedback receiver. We realise that you may not know exactly all the details of the receiver but if you can give a best guess that would be appreciated.*
- Q14. At the time of giving the effective feedback –*
- a. what age were you?
  - b. what was your highest completed form of education?
  - c. how long had you worked at the company?
  - d. How long had you held that position?
  - e. how long had you worked with the receiver of the feedback?

Subordinates demographics – receiving effective

Please describe the demographics of the person receiving the effective feedback you have described (if unsure please provide your best guess).

*Q15. What age was the person who received the feedback - at the time of the effective feedback*

- a. Which gender was the person
- b. Which nationality was the person
- c. Which ethnic group did the person
- d. What was the highest completed form of education of the person
- e. What was their education in (most relevant)
- f. how long had they worked at the company?
- g. How long had they held that position?

*Q16. Totally subjectively how similar would you rate yourself and the person receiving effective feedback, on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is totally dissimilar and 10 is very similar?*

*Q17. And a rating for the person receiving ineffective feedback?*

*Q18. What was the basis for the rating?*

*Q19. Do you have any additional comments on feedback?*

**Appendix 3 Snapshot from NVivo**

The image shows a screenshot of the NVivo software interface. The top portion displays a coding density chart with various categories and their corresponding bar lengths. The categories include: Effective giver (purple), Seek, Q9~ Demographics of participant, Actionable, Goal, Valuable, Ineffective receiver, Introspection, Delivery, Q8~ Goal of ineffective feedback, Constructive, Understood~Fair, Effective receiver (purple), Formality, Ineffective giver, Organisation proc + culture, Q7~ Goal of effective feedback (green), Concrete~Relevant (blue), Trust, Q14~ Basis on subjective rating (yellow), Q2~ Effective feedback (green), Q4~ Ineffective Feedback (green), Q15~ General comments on feedback (purple), and Coding Density (black).

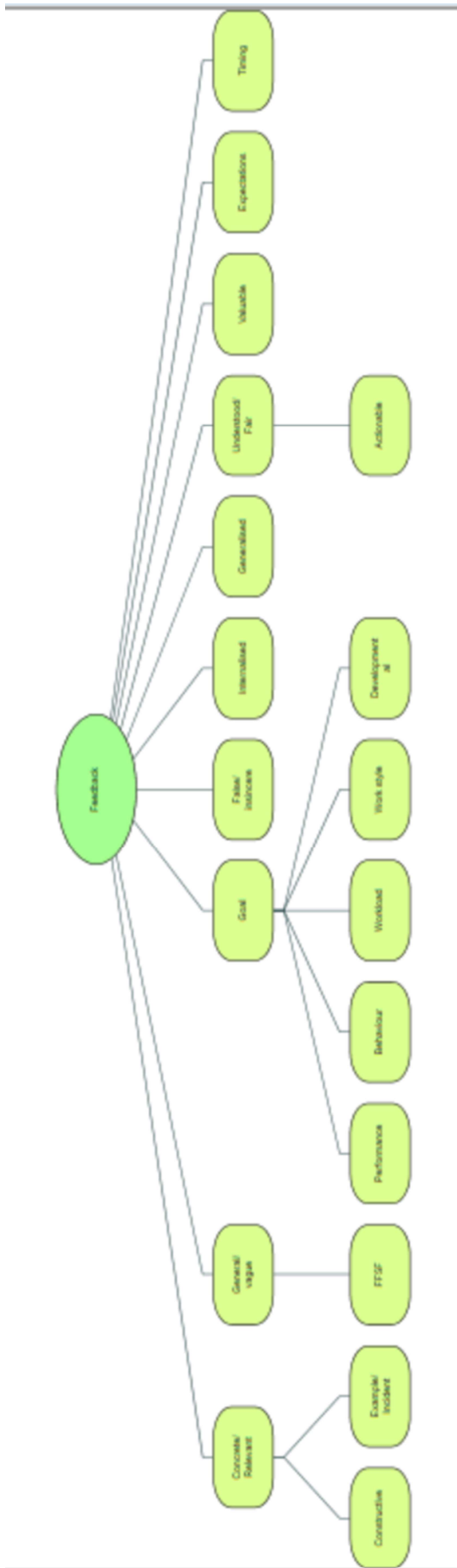
The bottom portion shows a text view of an interview transcript with several segments highlighted in purple, corresponding to the 'Effective giver' and 'Effective receiver' codes. The transcript includes the following text:

Lead interviewer  
 And when you are giving feedback and you want it to be effective what sort of steps do you take make sure the feedback you are giving becomes effective.


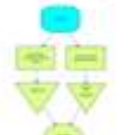








PAM7  
 It's to tie it to specific cases. Again, its um also the timing immediately after events to see it. I me you are researching into it so you will probably be aware that this is one of the essentials. To do immediately after the good performance if you like or when it needs to be adjusted in a way. It i easier, the way that I see it, to give feedback on the delivery part, [Anon] is aware of that in this company we talked about delivery and behaviour dimensions, it is a lot easier to talk about the delivery part and a bit more challenging to talk about the behavioural aspect in terms of feedback

Note taker  
 I think it is potentially... it's not just the personal... it's easier to change the delivery than the pers and if you're aware of that in itself it can make it uncomfortable to say we need to look at your

**Appendix 4 Open coding – example of node model in NVivo**



**Appendix 5 Excerpt of coding and theme log**

Code	Category	Sub-category	Text	Diagram
20/01/2018	Concept map			
21/01/2018	Concept map	Challenge	Whether challenging would change outcome	
21/01/2018	Concept map	Challenge	Question for nodes	
24/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Comparison, format, context	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Factors needed for effective	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	After this interview coding	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Organizational structure (vertical, high risk, equal distance, some sustained)	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Very little difference between effective or ineffective as outcomes or sign, significant difference between effective or ineffective coding	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Factors of requirements and potential to feedback, as well as factors influencing feedback	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	"no follow-up" emerged	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Org. structure impact	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Individual impact	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Weight of feedback	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Effective feedback requirements	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Participant	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Requirements for effective feedback	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Participant	
26/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Effective feedback influencing participant	
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Timing and frequency needs change depending upon type of feedback	
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback	Change more early for behavior than performance	
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		
27/01/2018	Concept map	Feedback		

## ***Appendix 6 Example of transcription***

All transcriptions are in separate document – Merged transcriptions total 249 single spaced pages

Interview **Barbara** (name anonymised) on 11 June 2018 at Company A.

*Q1: Supervisor*

**Lead interviewer**

First of all are you a supervisor

**Barbara**

*No not at this time*

*Q2: Effective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

so we're thinking of a time that you received effective feedback can you describe this incident in as much detail as possible?

**Barbara**

*effective feedback, yeh, erm, it depends on what aspect you are really interested in. I'm a more technical science person and we get feedback on our technical stuff all the time like you know "you need to adjust this this way" there is also the more personal things like feedback about "maybe you are a little too open" things like that what are you looking for?*

**Note taker**

really what you perceive as effective, if you feel one is more effective than the other or vice versa it's really all to do with your perception of effective feedback

**Barbara**

*I think I take, personally I take all feedback in and I evaluate it. So you want an example of feedback that I got that had an effect. So I think personality wise I'm quite chatty and I guess this case about being too open - like I say a lot, I think sometimes when I did get this feedback it was like "wow I say a lot" - in a multicultural environment I realise that sometimes you just need to reduce... I now try to reduce what I say by about 50%. So that I am just addressing the key points and then it becomes really clear without a lot of noise around it, so that was a very effective feedback I think. Because it both related to my personality which is my natural tendencies to say too much, how effectively that is received by the other side and by filtering what I say, I'm then and more effective communicator.*



**Lead interviewer**

so was this feedback that you got during a performance appraisal or did your boss come to you, or what was the context around it?

**Barbara**

*I have got it both from my boss and during an evaluation from peers. We have this system for you to get rated by your peers on values. But too open was funny because I'm like "that's one of our values".*

*Q3: Why effective*

**Lead interviewer**

that is an interesting feedback to get you said it was effective because you said that you sort of incorporated that in the way that you work how did you digest that information did you have this period of challenging it and thinking "oh no that's not true at all" before you started internalizing it or did you just take a step back and think "ok maybe yes".

**Barbara**

*I think I took a step back and said oh yeah because it's true and I know it to be true and I don't know if I realised before that it was a negative, but it was essentially because it was detracting from my ability to communicate a message because I was putting all the information out there. I'm the kind of person who likes to have all the information and that is of course why I was being that way but it turns out some people don't want it they just want it very direct. Whether or not I think that's good or not is a different issue.*

**Note taker**

did you actually get, when you got it explained that you were too open, did they use an incident to show you, to give an example or was it just generally "**Barbara** we feel that you're just a bit too open."?

**Barbara**

*yes it was not a specific example that would have been useful to follow up with that person to ask what do you mean by that so that is how I interpreted it there was no follow up actually so I may be interpreting it incorrectly*

*Q7: Goal of effective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

but you felt that... you said that you received that feedback a couple of times but when you went into the feedback sessions did you feel that the goal of the session

was to make you less open "I'll make you change your behaviour" was that the communicated end game

**Barbara**

*no I don't think so I think it was more just a general comment maybe you want something that's more applicable*

**Lead interviewer**

no not necessarily

**Barbara**

*no I don't think it was the full goal I think it was just kind of looking at the full picture of how you are and how you relate to other people it was under the context of "yay good job".*

**Lead interviewer**

so this in itself was good feedback but the thing that you got from it was "this is something I could use". how long ago was this approximately

**Barbara**

*probably 8 years ago and so it still stands out*

**Lead interviewer**

when you went into this meeting or these meetings did you have expectations in advance did you think that this was going to be addressed

**Barbara**

*no well I knew that we would be discussing the results of the 360 feedback, so I knew I was going in to get feedback on how I work, yes I was aware*

**Lead interviewer**

the supervisor that gave you that feedback based on how he interacts with you did you have any expectations on how he would approach you?

**Barbara**

*Yeh I know him pretty well so it was totally fine*

**Lead interviewer**

So you expected he would give you something useful

**Barbara**

*Yeh*

*Q4: Ineffective Feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

now I would like you to ask you to think of a time when you received ineffective feedback can you describe an incident like that for us?

**Barbara**

*yes, ok, so I have received feedback that I say "yes" too much to things, it is a challenge that I have been aware of for a very long time and I have been advised to prioritise and say yes to less things and I have not taken that on board but that was a conscious choice. And I understand why I should do it but I choose not to do it.*

*Q5: Why ineffective*

**Lead interviewer**

so you felt that thank you but that is not applicable to me that is not something I want to use.

**Barbara**

*no I think it is applicable to me, I think it is something I do, but the reason I have decided it is ok still to say yes to things is because I get a lot more opportunities and a lot more exposure to different types of things and their effect of course on me is more stress and you know I'm running around like always and I've decided that that negative is ok because of the positive outweighs the negatives. Perhaps it would be irritating... it is irritating, it irritates me as well that I'm like that, but it's something that I have just accepted.*

*Q8: Goal of ineffective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

so you felt the goal for this feedback session was to make you reduce your workload a little bit and prioritise how long ago was this

**Barbara**

*2 years ago*

**Note taker**

when you made the conscious choice not to follow the advice did you also give that or challenge back to the feedback giver

**Barbara**

*no I didn't at the time because I had to process and think about it. Because when people give you effective feedback it's not something that... you're not necessarily seeing about yourself so you do need to have this process time. And I think for a while I may have actually did it, because I do what I'm told normally, (laughing)*

*but then you know you go through a cycle again and people are asking you to do things, and then I thought I had the feedback in the back of my head, and then I said this is the risk you're going to risk getting into the situation where you have too much work to do in a limited amount of time. But then I guess I do take some actions where I immediately say "I am actually very busy with the project here is where I can contribute I will not be able to go in depth into this but I can say very few things based on the data give me a day or so" something like that so maybe it was effective - but I still say yes.*

**Lead interviewer**

But as long as you felt it was ineffective when your supervisor told you this did you feel it was because he was concerned for you because you were doing too much and stressing yourself or was it because he was trying to help you improve the quality of the job you would doing?

**Barbara**

*that's a good question. I believe it was the first case that I was stressing myself too much. It turns you know when you have a certain specially a niche that you work with that there really aren't that many people that can do what you do, you can also guide others like say ok somebody else who has more time perhaps, or has been working on the asset. I mean I don't think there's anyone in the environment that thinks I deliver 100% perfectly, that's not realistic it's always a battle between the amount of time you have and what you can deliver*

*Q9: Demographics of participant*

**Lead interviewer**

yes that's a fair observation. We would like to ask you some personal details for the sake of our research, you can choose not to answer if you would not like to just say "choose not to answer" and we all move on. What is your nationality

**Barbara**

*American*

**Lead interviewer**

line of education

**Barbara**

*PhD in structural geology*

**Lead interviewer**

and you've had that all the time you've worked for a Statoil?

**Barbara**

*yes and a post doc - so I am over educated.*

**Lead interviewer**

we would also like to get some details from the times of these incidents took place and if you don't remember exactly that's fine, just give us an approximate answer.

At the time of receiving the effective feedback how old were you

**Barbara**

32

**Lead interviewer**

how long had you worked at the company?

**Barbara**

*2-3 years*

**Lead interviewer**

Same position from when you started to when you received that feedback

**Barbara**

*Yeh kinda, we reshuffled but essentially yes*

**Lead interviewer**

How long had you worked with the person who gave you that feedback?

**Barbara**

*well it was a colleague feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

ok so it was not a supervisor it was a colleague

**Barbara**

*yes and meetings*

**Lead interviewer**

the colleague that you've been working with him for the whole time that you have been in Statoil

**Barbara**

*probably about a year or half a year*

*Q10: Demographics of effective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

I would also like to ask you some questions about these people the other party in the incidents you have described again if you don't know the answer just give

approximate guess the person who gave you the effective feedback you talk too much what gender was this person and nationality and ethnic group.

**Barbara**

*Male, Norwegian, Caucasian*

**Lead interviewer**

his highest education?

**Barbara**

*I think Masters in Geo science, geophysics*

**Lead interviewer**

and how long has he worked at the company

**Barbara**

*6 years*

**Lead interviewer**

How old

**Barbara**

*37 - I'm guessing I just know he's older than me*

*Q11: Demographics of ineffective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

and the person who gave the ineffective feedback would like to ask the same questions about her. Nationality, ethnic group, highest completed education, age

**Barbara**

*Female, Norwegian, caucasian. I took the information onboard, I did, now I'm feel like, I listened to the man and not to the woman*

**Lead interviewer**

no no no that's not what this is about. How long has she worked in the company

**Barbara**

*15-20 years*

**Lead interviewer**

How old?

**Barbara**

*At the time 43 maybe*

*Q12: Subjective perception of similarity of effective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

so this is a little bit of a difficult question so just take a little bit of time to think about it if you like but on a scale from one to ten where one is very dissimilar and 10 is very similar how would you rate yourself and the person who gave you the effective of feedback?

**Barbara**

*I would say 7, hold on was I similar? No ok then a 3*

*Q13: Subjective perception of similarity of ineffective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

and same question for the ineffective feedback

**Barbara**

*I would say 4*

*Q14: Basis on subjective rating*

**Lead interviewer**

when I asked you this question what did you think about what traits or characteristics did you think about?

**Barbara**

*interesting, because I was thinking in a worldwide context we are very similar because we have similar interests chose this line of work, you know. But within the workplace, personality wise, and experience wise we are a little bit dissimilar individually. The person who gave me the feedback that I took on that I was too open I kind of thought ok that someone who's fairly different from me and giving me feedback from a perspective of somebody who has been listening to me. Whereas the person who gave me the [ineffective] feedback I totally understood where she was coming from, she is very caring, she is caring about me, and that was more from her seeing I was stressed and I thought she was being very kind. I wouldn't say it was ineffective it was effective really, but I just made a conscious decision to still say yes, I took it on like okay don't get too stressed make sure you can handle the workload and accepted this is just how you are so in all cases I took it on I just consciously decided that I would continue to say yes.*

**Lead interviewer**

so if I say I interpret this, that in the first place you kind of internalized it you took this piece of advice, let's just call it advice for the sake of simplicity, you took onboard and you started using it in your daily work life but for the second one you

thought about it evaluated it and found that this is not something I want to do this is not advice I want to follow, is that correct?

**Barbara**

*yes I still took it on and recognised what she said and recognised why she said it. It had a lot of value I just decided that I would not follow it as it keeps my job interesting*

**Note taker**

you mentioned very early on that you work in a multicultural environment did you feel that that actually had an influence on the feedback

**Barbara**

*yes definitely, I am a chatty American that's something I've learned a lot over the last 11 years being here I am far more reserved.*

**Lead interviewer**

were you the only foreigner in your team at the time?

**Barbara**

*at the time I was one of the only Americans I think there was only Emil who was the other one. Since that time we have gotten a lot more [foreigners] but whether I was the only American or the only foreigner in the beginning no I think we've always had a lot of cultures in our teams actually.*

**Note taker**

is it fair to say that most teams have a higher ratio of Norwegians?

**Barbara**

*most teams do, yes, but in our team because we're in exploration excellence division which is like over educated scientists they come from all over actually, my team now I think it is not dominantly Norwegian. Sitting with me currently there is only one Norwegian and 5 Internationals, from Iran, US, Scotland, France, and Mexico.*

**Lead interviewer**

would you say that personal chemistry has been an important factor during the feedback sessions do you think the personal chemistry makes a difference as to how you receive or how you interpret what they're saying to you?

**Barbara**

*Yeh absolutely*

**Lead interviewer**



so if you have a chemistry what does that mean verses when you have a bad chemistry.

**Barbara**

*I think I have a lot of good chemistry with a lot of people I just like people. Can you repeat the question?*

**Lead interviewer**

yes, if you have a good chemistry or a bad chemistry with the person what does that mean to you stepping into the room?

*Q4: Ineffective Feedback*

**Barbara**

*That's a very interesting question. I'm going to say a couple of things about it because I've reflected on this in the past that are what we call challenging people who for some reason or another have some strange, not strange, but maybe an obvious chip on their shoulder or something that's really bugging them and for some reason I listen to those people a lot or maybe some people do and some people don't but then I think "why does that person have this issue with me?" and you think a lot about it and you' adjust your behaviour to fit somebody who is a really difficult and challenging person. Why? there's a psychological reason for it. perhaps you know better, I don't know but I've looked into it. Then I made a conscious decision to stop doing that because why are we falling over our feet for challenging people, if they have a valid point for sure it's valid and you see it because you're intelligent enough to do that. But if it's just they're being difficult because they have some issue I don't know what, then I have decided - why not focus on the people who are actually contributing to helping out and focus your energy there, just kind of don't let it get to you. so with the chemistry there yeah. And I found myself that I behave differently around the challenging people as well, all of a sudden, I would be more quiet I wont to say things because they're super opinionated I didn't want to seem "actually I have a way better case". [phone rings] actually it's this guy. I'll just walk you through it in case you find it more interesting. I was in my PhD I did fieldwork in an area where I met this person and that's the reason I'm here with this company because we had similar schools and we were leading the field trip and I had a different finding than he had out in the field and I mentioned it and I think that in science debate is relevant and useful but then I went on maternity leave and I had literally written*

*the guidebook like the whole thing. And he's great, like she has great work, but I went on maternity and when I came back he took me off the course and I was like "oh" and the feedback I got from that was that "Peter didn't like the way you disagreed with him about the joints or pressure solutions seams in the field on that one outcrop". And I was like "oh ok" then I actually followed up and called the people and then they said we just don't need to have that many structural geologists on the team. Then I've been on other trips where they have had three sedimentologists on the team and I'm like "I don't know then". I kind of thought "what is that?" And it upset me a lot and my boss actually at the time came and talked to me about it. And I was just like "you know ok fine I get it" but it matters it matters because those fractures are either going to be open in the substructure or the going to be closed and that's why it's relevant I never really... so I went on a field trip last week and I noticed, and this is like 8 years on, but I noticed within myself that I was quiet I didn't talk about things and I had to introspect and think "why am I doing this?" but that was because he was in a position of power he was leading the field trip and I told him I'm coming to be the HSE support, I've got the first aid pack back da da da da I'll step in when needed. I did talk a little bit but I definitely toned it down huge [time] and I thought to myself "I don't know if I will do this trip with him again". And that was more a chemistry than a personal thing because when I'm working on other projects fine he doesn't have a problem with what I'm putting on the table but when I disagreed with him and something, it had a huge impact and on the chemistry and the way I behaved. so that was just another case*

**Note taker**

but you probably would have still challenged had there been something that was relevant?

**Barbara**

*I wouldn't have. I actually said to myself this is like an intellectual me too.*

**Lead interviewer**

in a hypothetical way if you had challenged him what do you think would have happened? what would the consequences have been?

**Barbara**

*he would have got angry with me he would have asked me to not say anything, yes definitely.*

**Lead interviewer**

so he would have smacked you down again?

**Barbara**

*Yeh actually it came up the pre-course, I was like I'm not going to say anything I'm just not going to bring it up.*

**Lead interviewer**

you said that to him?

**Barbara**

*yes*

**Lead interviewer**

that's interesting actually I'm getting some chills just listening to it. It is an intellectual me too. it's not good

**Note taker**

do you know this person well enough to know is this something that happens all the time when he gets challenged by someone else?

**Barbara**

*yes a little bit he's a very... his personality type is such that these things would bug him a lot, yes. You have to do a lot of base work to cover your ground and stay on the ground but I had done that so I wasn't worried about it and he was still... but then when we were out in the field I gave him feedback because he was making things too complicated, what a group of 22 people coming from totally different backgrounds learning this stuff he was making it very complicated I said "Peter you know you're over complicating it there's really 4 key messages and if you just say that then they're going to get the message". [he replied] "well but the reservoir engineers don't really care"... [I said] absolutely every reservoir is always more complicated but if you want to deliver a message in a course you need to keep it simple. So I gave him feedback but I didn't use the case that we discussed earlier*

**Note taker**

did he take that onboard?

**Barbara**

*I don't know, hopefully, but we'll see*

**Note taker**

so you felt that it was his personality that he always had to be correct generally?

**Barbara**

*or that he wasn't open to a scientific debate which is kind of anti-science*

**Lead interviewer**

Is he much older than you? Is there a nature of seniority that he might have felt challenged?

**Barbara**

*Yeh, sure, definitely, I think so.*

*Q11: Demographics of ineffective feedback*

**Note taker**

could you give some details about him regarding his nationality etc

**Barbara**

*British, PhD*

**Lead interviewer**

Approximate age

**Barbara**

*he's probably 48 or 53 I've no idea, middle aged. If you're looking for generalizations I don't know if you're only going to leadership track but also senior advisors and leading advisors and all the technical track is a challenging subset of people quite intellectual and also people will have some less challenging personalities jumping to teams of people with technical know-how they are really challenging people socially they are slightly different if you know what I'm saying, in a roundabout way I'm saying "they're hard to deal with."*

*Q11: Demographics of ineffective feedback*

**Lead interviewer**

would you say that your line manager is someone who is also a PhD holder?

**Barbara**

*she is Masters I believe*

**Lead interviewer**

is she educated in the same field as you

**Barbara**

*slightly different but geoscience yes.*

*Q13: Subjective perception of similarity of ineffective feedback*

**Note taker**

can I ask you to rate the British PhD 53 year old and yourself on the similar/dissimilar scale

**Barbara**

*3, 2 maybe. mean we're all kind of similar really often you say that people most similar...*

**Note taker**

this research is more inductive so we don't really know what we're looking at at the moment

*Q15: General comments on feedback*

**Barbara**

*ok here's the difference I would say. the way that the feedback came back... the chemistry was so... I was very offended and that might have had to do with my hormones because I was just back from maternity leave (laughing) and I had done so much work for it that it was kind of offensive that the older more powerful more senior people... but then after a while I realised that that's just business and that's just the way things are and now I kinda don't care too much about it but at the same time when I came back and did it again with him I thought ok I'm just saying yes because I would love to go back it's interesting I always get a lot of feedback from the people and it's a good thing.*

**Lead interviewer**

so would you say if the delivery of this feedback had been nicer more constructive would you have received it better

**Barbara**

*yes if you had come to me and said that you know last time we were out in the field we had a disagreement about this could we open it up to hear what you have to say we could come to a scientific understanding about it are agree to disagree or whatever or have it be a science unknown that's fine and we could approach it in some other way that would have been way better absolutely.*

**Note taker**

did you get the feedback from him or did you get it from someone else

**Barbara**

*I got it from someone else I didn't really understand what had happened, I guess I reacted strongly and my boss spoke to me and it became a big deal but then I said I'm fine about it. it was probably both my reaction to it...*

**Note taker**

is this person now aware or has it never really been discussed openly

**Barbara**

*I don't know if it's been discussed openly I'm going to actually ask one of the co leaders because I said to him at one point because we had a very good chemistry and we did a great job teaching it when I done it without this guy but he in a way... I was walking on eggshells around him and that is not really facilitating an open discussion about stuff and I said I don't know whether I should say something because I'm kind of getting a weird vibe. I don't know if that's me or if it's him and then I think he maybe said something to him, I'm not sure because then he was like nice. I don't know you never know what happens behind the scenes I don't feel comfortable talking to him about it I just feel it's not worth it.*

**Lead interviewer**

What's interesting is that is stuck with you for 8 years it's still has an impact on your relationship with this guy.

**Barbara**

*we get along really well otherwise we'll use each other quite a lot for all sorts of things it's kind of just like a little click that this is just how he is and you have to deal with people as they are I think it's ok. So I kinda look more at my reaction, "am I enjoying this" "is it ok for me to be in this powerless role and still participate."*

**Note taker**

it's interesting you should say that because when you speak about the situations, you are saying you just have to accept people as they are, however you talk about the effective as it was actually changing you and what you are, which sounds contradictory.

**Barbara**

*that is a very astute observation. it's true but these are choices. You get feedback in life and you realise some things you want to take on board and some things you don't. because but that's something I think with maturity that happens with me. now I am at a place where I am more confident about myself I'm more comfortable with my weaknesses and strengths and I can still adjust my weaknesses to make myself a more effective employee but that's my choice. I can take the feedback and make a decision on whether or not to take it onboard or*

*not. But, you're right I do try to make myself better, but who doesn't it's called growth isn't it.*

**Note taker**

but there are two sides of it as well, there are some that are very rigid and don't bother to change

**Barbara**

*yes you can see that but I am more like a chameleon I will adapt to my situation. whereas some people are just like a rock they are always the way they are.*

**Note taker**

and that's the thing, that may be because you are the Chameleon or you're more accepting and you have that growth mindset that people are willing to give you that feedback to say that sometimes you are too open for example with as if you were a different kind of person they may not even go there.

**Barbara**

*I completely agree with that. another example is I gave a presentation after having taken a course on giving effective presentations so after I asked for some feedback and I nailed the presentation. the feedback was just like all complaints and then the next guy gave a really crapy presentation and there was no useful feedback given but then I thought it's because I opened up for feedback because if you were to compare them next to each other you would feel that one was far better.*

**Lead interviewer**

I speak from experience when I say... that for example I'm a fairly good writer so when we do coursework and oftentimes if I'm asked to give feedback I am happy to point out "this is crap" or "this is not good you need to fix this and you need to do that" but if I read someone else's paper and they haven't asked for feedback I'm not going to give it to them because I would feel bad giving them something that's like, it's constructive but it is essentially negative it is essentially still "this can be improved this is not good enough" but you have that barrier of actually going out of your way to say this is not good enough unless they specifically asked for it because then there is this aspect of, at least in the Norwegian society, am I going to hurt this person's feelings are they going to think negatively of me and all of that. it is a phenomenon, not even a phenomenon it just a thing.

**Barbara**

*yes the social dynamics I totally agree with you on that. and that's true opening it up or not opening it up for feedback and I also think no matter how we say something you can basically get to something that's quite negative but you can say it in the right way that doesn't get received as being very negative as a positive thing.*

**Note taker**

we did a course in creativity and he opened up for feedback on what he was showing us and everybody was negative and he actually said this is how we are so when you open up the feedback expect negative feedback nobody would have said we really like this that was not one person who said this was good.

**Lead interviewer**

I think there was one person who said this is good because it is so bizarre it can't be real or something like that

**Note taker**

and yet everyone else was negative so I'm afraid that's how we are as people it seems

**Barbara**

*Yeh, and then you listen to the psychologist who says that for every one negative thing we need to say 5 positive things.*

**Note taker**

correct but that's not how we live our lives, so ducks water and backs have to come into it.

**Barbara**

*Yes exactly*

**Lead interviewer**

I think we have got a lot here thank you

**Barbara**

*if you need better numbers I can get those.*

**Lead interviewer**

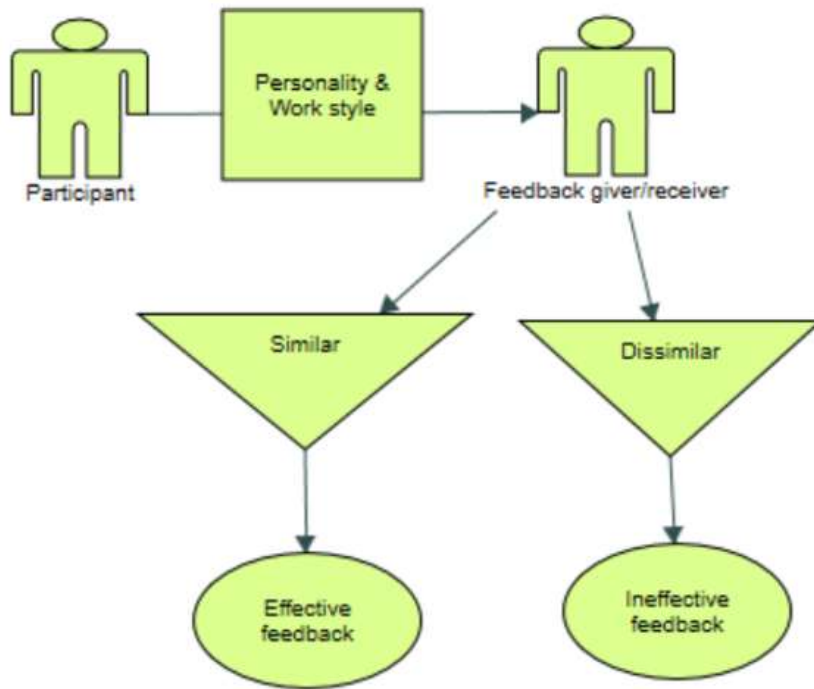
Not really one of the key elements is the perception so your approximate guess is probably more interesting than the real numbers to be honest.

**Barbara**

*well I wish you very good luck.*



*Appendix 7 Early diagram from data*



**Appendix 8 Coding and emergent themes overview**

Open coding		Second order codes / themes
Feedback		
	People	Self-other similarity rating
	Competence	
	Position	
	Education	
	Peers	
	Comparison	
	Demographi	
	Age	
	Gender	
	Nationality	
	Common background	
	Roles	
	Giver	
	Receiver	
	Third party	
	Relationship	
	Professional	
	Peers	
	Duration	
	Seniority	
	Age	
	Tenure	
	Hierarchy	
	Personality	
	Work style	
	Delivery	Relationship dependant
	Tone	
	Mood	
	Finesse	The goal changes gameplay
	Goal	
	Behavioural	
	Developmental	
	Performance	
	Timing	reparation, involvement & expectation
	Formality	
	Trigger	
	Routine	Legitimacy of feedback
	Event	
	Expectation	
	Organisational factors	
	Process	
	Structure	
	Culture	
	Size	
	Field	

	Unaccustomed			Heightened awareness of feedback
		Process		
		Situation		
		member		
Socio-culture				Level of socio-culture integration
	Social factors			
	National difference			
	Company difference			
	Values			
Outcome				The role of introspection
	Ignore			
	Emotional reflection			
	Self analysis			
	Learn from incident			
	Leave company			
Challenge				Challenge to change
	Yes			
	No			
Content				
	Effective/Ineffective			Lingering consequence of ineffective feedback
		time since incident		
	Constructive			pre-requisite but not always sufficient
	Distinctive			
	Fluff			
	Time spent			
	Intention			
	Specificity			
		Personal		
		Concrete		
		Examples		
		Future plans		
	Positive/Negative			Meaning behind the word?
	Time work together			
	Setting			
		Time		
		Physical		

Please see separate documents uploaded in Digiex

**Attachment 1 Merged transcriptions document**

**Attachment 2 Merged NVivo memos & Theme models & build up**

**Attachment 3 Q2 & Q4 exported effective/ineffective feedback incidents**