



# LOOKING FORWARD TO PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT: A FIELD TEST OF THE FEEDFORWARD INTERVIEW FOR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

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*This study examines the effectiveness of the feedforward interview for improving the job performance of employees relative to a traditional performance appraisal interview in a business equipment firm. Managers (n = 25) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Employees (n = 70) who engaged in a feedforward interview with their manager were observed by an anonymous peer to perform significantly better on the job four months later than employees (n = 75) who received the company's traditional performance appraisal interview. The finding that the feedforward intervention increased performance relative to the performance appraisal indicates that the effect is a relatively enduring one. The results suggest that the feedforward interview should prove useful for human resource managers who are searching for ways to increase the performance of their organization's human resources over and above the traditional performance appraisal. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

*Keywords:* feedforward interview, performance appraisal, performance management

## Introduction

**A**lthough the performance appraisal (PA) interview has been a prominent feature of human resource management practices for several decades, its usefulness for enhancing employees' attitudes and performance has been questioned (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005). Kuvaas (2011, p. 125), citing

previous research, concluded that "despite the rhetoric of PA and its impact on commitment and work performance, these relationships are mostly assumed rather than tested." Some have suggested that PA in many cases can be destructive (Coens & Jenkins, 2000; Grubb, 2007). Recognizing the shortcomings inherent in a traditional PA, Kluger and Nir (2010) developed an alternative performance

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management methodology—namely, the feedforward interview (FFI).

The FFI is intended to enhance performance and improve manager–subordinate collaboration by focusing on the positive aspects of employee experiences instead of focusing on what is “wrong” (Kluger & Nir, 2010). Unlike the traditional PA, the FFI attempts to elicit success stories from employees with a view to creating the same facilitating conditions for success in the future—hence, the name *feedforward*. The goal is to develop a knowledge base of an employee’s best practices for the future through dialogue between a manager and a subordinate (Kluger & Nir, 2010). While this proposed system has a strong theoretical foundation, only two studies have been conducted to date on the FFI (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Kluger & Nir, 2010), thus there is little conclusive evidence of its effectiveness. The present field experiment is a step toward filling this void. Because the FFI methodology is still in its infancy, we know nothing about its effectiveness for improving the job performance of employees relative to an organization’s traditional PA. Thus, the purpose of the present field experiment was to examine the effect of an FFI intervention vis-à-vis a traditional PA on employee job performance over time. Because employee performance is critical to an organization’s effectiveness (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2011), a finding that there is a significant relationship between the FFI and employee performance relative to a PA would have practical significance for human resource managers.

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From a theoretical perspective, the present experiment has the potential to generate a new line of inquiry into the appraisal process. Given the voluminous literature on the negative consequences of traditional PA interviews (e.g., Behn, 2003; Belschak & Hartog, 2009; Mani, 2002; Smither et al., 2005; Watkins

& Mohr, 2001), and subsequent calls for an effective alternative (Grubb, 2007; Lee, 2006), this study systematically evaluated the FFI in this light.

## Literature Review and Hypothesis

### *Impact of Performance Appraisal on Employee Performance*

The primary purpose of a PA is to provide an employee with feedback (Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams, 1989; Latham & Mann, 2006). Feedback is defined as “actions taken by an employee’s supervisor to provide information regarding task performance” (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 255). Feedback involves a two-way discussion of an employee’s past performance to provide a basis for administrative decisions (e.g., salary, promotion, transfer, termination) and employee development in order to align an employee’s performance with organizational goals (Linna et al., 2012; Spence & Keeping, 2011). It is deemed to be especially important for informing an employee where corrective action is needed (Ilgen & Davis, 2000).

Research shows that despite this laudatory objective, the traditional PA is frequently ineffective for improving a person’s job performance (Jawahar, 2007; Smither et al., 2005) and may have a negative effect on an employee’s job satisfaction (Ferris, Munyon, Basik, & Buckley, 2008). For example, Brown, Hyatt, and Benson (2010) found that employees who had a poor experience with their appraisal interview were more likely to be dissatisfied with their job, and to have low organizational commitment. Similarly, in a recent four-year longitudinal study with a sample of more than 6,000 public-sector employees, Linna et al. (2012) found that a poor PA experience had a negative effect on employees’ perceptions and attitudes. Even more troubling is research showing that when employee experiences are positive, appraisal interviews still resulted in negative attitudes and lower organizational performance. For example, Mani (2002) found that over 40 percent of the staff in a public-sector organization were dissatisfied with their PA, including those who received a “good” or “outstanding” rating.

Among the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the traditional PA is that the feedback provided by managers is often biased (Levy & Williams, 2004; Scullen, Mount, & Goff, 2000) and politically motivated (Latham & Dello Russo, 2008; Longenecker, Sims, & Gioia, 1987). Hence, the appraisal is often viewed as unfair (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). In a comprehensive review of the literature, Levy and Williams (2004) warned that even the most psychometrically sound PA system will do little to improve performance if employees “did not see it as fair, useful, valid, or accurate” (p. 890).

Another issue affecting the traditional PA interview is the motivation of managers. Longenecker et al. (1987) interviewed 60 executives from several large organizations. They found that feedback is often a highly political process used at a manager’s discretion.

A third, inter-related reason for the frequent failure of a PA to improve an employee’s performance is that it is often negative. Negative feedback tends to produce defensiveness on the part of employees because it involves a discussion of their mistakes, and shortfalls (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). This “deficit model,” where an employee’s weakness is emphasized as an area for improvement, can diminish a person’s motivation for making a significant contribution to the organization (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005).

In sum, the foregoing studies suggest that something is inherently wrong with the traditional appraisal interview, particularly the manner in which feedback is given. This is evidenced by the fact that less than one-third of over 5,000 employees surveyed in a recent poll believe that their performance appraisal helped them improve their performance (Aguinis et al., 2011). In light of these findings, some researchers have advocated abolishing performance appraisals (e.g., Coens & Jenkins, 2000). However, this recommendation ignores the fact that a PA is a legal requirement in many jurisdictions in the West. Hence, others have called for a suitable alternative (Lee, 2006). In recognition of these concerns, Kluger and his colleagues have advocated a shift in emphasis

from feedback to feedforward (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Kluger & Nir, 2010).

### *The Feedforward Interview and Employee Performance*

The FFI is based on the theory of appreciative inquiry. The foundations of appreciative inquiry can be found in social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The concept has been explored as part of the positive psychology movement (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The basic premise of this theory is that dialogues that focus on strengths, successes, and values are transformational and thus facilitate a productive change in behavior (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). At the core of appreciative inquiry is the notion that eliciting stories of success can assist in the identification of conditions that could support future high performance. Appreciative inquiry has been applied to a variety of contexts, including developing leadership capacity in organizations (Bushe & Kassam, 2005) and improving personal relationships (Kelm, 2005). Kluger and Nir (2010) have applied appreciative inquiry to the performance management process by developing the feedforward interview methodology.

The adaptation of Appreciative Interview into the FFI protocol was guided by four theoretical considerations (Kluger & Nir, 2010). First, the interviewee is asked to rely on his or her memory in order to identify stories that illustrate successful performance (e.g., Robinson & Clore, 2002). Recalling a specific successful event through the examination of details surrounding that event may generate unique knowledge and new insights (Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Second, the interviewer focuses the conversation on situations wherein both the employee and the organization benefit. In other words, the FFI methodology guides the interviewee to focus on a story that is not only outcome-successful but also process-successful and wherein the employee demonstrated extraordinary performance without compromising either their own needs or the needs of others (Kluger & Nir, 2010). Third, active listening, or the practice of putting one’s own opinions aside

while working to fully understand the message of the interviewee, is entrenched within the FFI process. Active listening is a communication technique that encourages win-win outcomes (Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006). Finally, the motivating force of cognitive discrepancy is used to facilitate change (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1981). Through the FFI process, the interviewee is asked to identify the discrepancy between his or her goals and the current state. Identification, discussion, and goal setting around this discrepancy can create the motivation required for behavioral change (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

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The alleged advantage of the FFI is that negative feedback from a supervisor is eliminated (Kluger & Nir, 2010). The methodological premise of the FFI is that employees can, if probed, identify their performance-effective achievements and, more importantly, ways to create conditions for similar, if not greater, achievements in the future. This is because self-discovery of what led to personal effectiveness triggers self-set goals to further create positive experiences that will broaden one's strengths (Kluger & Nir, 2010). Thus, the focus in a FFI, in contrast to a traditional PA, is primarily on behavioral intentions or goals rather than an employee's performance in the past. It is a strength-based rather than a deficit-based model. The implicit, if not explicit, assumption underlying the FFI is that people excel when they understand their pat-

tern of strengths and learn how to broaden them in different job-related contexts.

To date, only two studies have assessed the effectiveness of the FFI as a method for improving an employee's performance. Kluger and Nir (2010) found that the FFI, when used prior to a traditional PA, reduced employee defensiveness to the review as well as to 360-degree feedback. A case study in an organizational setting showed that FFI improved

interpersonal relationships (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011). No evidence was obtained regarding an employee's job performance. Hence, the following hypothesis was tested in a field experiment:

*Employees who receive an FFI from their manager perform significantly better on the job than those who receive the traditional PA interview.*

## Method

### Participants

All the managers ( $n = 25$ ) in the sales and customer service of a business equipment firm in Canada participated in this field experiment. Their mean age was 41 ( $SD = 8.12$ ); 66 percent were male. All of their direct subordinates ( $n = 145$ ) participated. Their mean age was 46 ( $SD = 7.87$ ); 68 percent were male. Their mean tenure with the firm was 11 years ( $SD = 7.48$ ).

### Procedure

The managers and their respective employees were randomly assigned to one of two conditions—namely, feedforward ( $n = 13$  managers, 70 employees) or feedback ( $n = 12$  managers, 75 employees). This design was used to maximize external validity by applying the FFI technique to the appraisal of employees within an existing organizational context. As noted by McGrath (1981), all study design choices involve a trade-off between generalizability, precision in measurement, and realism of the study context. Lawler (1977) noted that the traditional laboratory experiment fails to address the realities of life in organizations. Both Highhouse (2009) and Hollenbeck (2002) argued for the use of field experiments where the phenomenon of interest can be examined within a naturally occurring environment. Thus, the present study tested the effectiveness of FFI in a "real world" context.

The managers in the feedforward condition received 2.5 hours of training in the feedforward technique. The training consisted of lecture, group discussion, and role playing in dyads. The lecture emphasized the

necessity of focusing an employee's attention on a positive work experience involving goal attainment. The methodology they practiced to facilitate an employee's recall is similar to Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique: (1) "No matter how bad the past year was that you may have experienced, everyone has had one or more positive experiences. Please tell me about a specific incident where you felt especially good about attaining a goal?" (2) "What were the circumstances that enabled you personally to be effective?" (3) "What exactly did you do that made you feel full of life and energized?" and (4) "What can you do this coming year to create conditions/circumstances that will enable you to think, feel, and behave on an on-going basis the way you did in the incident you described?" Group discussion during training focused on ways to paraphrase these questions to fit the personal style of the individual managers.

Employees were not aware that managers had received training in performance interview techniques. Managers engaged in performance appraisals as per the yearly performance appraisal process within the organization. Every manager in this study received training of some kind in order to minimize psychological or behavioral responses due to treatment alone (Cook & Campbell, 1979). In addition, many of the employees in this firm work in either service or sales roles that require them to be away from the organization for a large part of their work time. This further minimized the potential for contamination between the training interventions.

## Measures

### Performance

To avoid the probability of the measures being biased favorably (i.e., positive leniency error toward the employee who reports to a line manager), the human resource manager selected a peer to provide an anonymous performance assessment of each employee. Each peer was selected on the basis of opportunity to observe an employee's job performance on an ongoing basis, and a thorough understanding of an employee's role/tasks. In most

instances, peers provide more valid performance assessments than supervisors, subordinates, or self-appraisals (Latham & Mann, 2006).

The performance appraisal instrument was a seven-item Behavioral Observation Scale (BOS; Latham & Wexley, 1977) derived from a job analysis involving the firm's senior management team ( $n = 6$ ) and six employees chosen randomly by the human resource manager. Sample items include "This individual completes projects before deadlines" and "This person actively finds ways to improve this business." The items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale where 1 = almost never and 5 = almost always.

A BOS was used for two reasons. First, previous research has shown that it is a reliable and valid assessment instrument (Tziner & Kopelman, 2002). Second, the organization's current appraisal instrument was trait-oriented and hence might have led to a Type II error when analyzing the data—that is, concluding erroneously that the FFI was ineffective in improving job performance. BOS data were collected four months following the FFI, as appraisals are done quarterly in this company.

### Perceived Fairness

Perceptions of fairness are an important determinant of the success of any PA intervention (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). This is because the effectiveness of a PA interview can be altered by the perceived fairness of the message (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998; Reilly & Aronson, 2009). Consequently, a measure of fairness was used as a covariate in the present study.

The measure of fairness was adopted from the Colquitt et al. (2001) study of procedural justice. A sample item from this five-item scale is "My manager solicits my input prior to evaluating my performance" (1 = never; 5 = always). This is a measure of general fairness perceptions. Respondents were not asked to specifically consider the performance evaluation or the feedback interview. The data were collected after an employee received the PA or the FFI.

## Results

### Reliability

The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha for the seven-item BOS was .73. The coefficient alpha of the five-item scale that assessed fairness was .83.

### Hypothesis

The raw mean performance rating was 3.30 (SD = .32) for employees in the feedforward condition and 3.14 (SD = .42) in the traditional feedback condition. An

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analysis of covariance was conducted with manager and employee perceptions of the manager’s fairness as the covariate. The manager was a covariate because employees were nested within managers in this sample.

The analysis revealed a significant difference in performance between the employees in the feedforward versus the feedback condition ( $F = 8.26, p < .001$ ). Cohen’s  $d$  measure of effect size was .41.

The Pearson correlation between performance and justice was not significant ( $r = .28, p = .13$ ), indicating independence between these two factors. However, the addition of justice as a covariate strengthens the association between feedforward and performance. This is an indication of a suppressor effect. Suppressor variables are covariates that have essen-

tially no correlation with the outcome, but through their inclusion increase the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Based on this finding, the relationship between feedforward, justice, and performance was analyzed further.

A hierarchical regression model was used to test for a suppression effect. In step 1, the feedforward and justice variables were entered into a regression where performance was the dependent variable. In step 2, an interaction variable was added—namely, justice crossed

TABLE I		Hierarchical Regression Analysis		
Variable	B	SE B	B	
Step 1				
Feedforward	4.00	1.30	.56*	
Perceptions of justice	.28	.16	.33	
Step 2				
Feedforward	4.2	1.30	.59*	
Perceptions of justice	.42	.57	.49	
Feedforward × perceptions of justice	.42	.33	.86	

Note: \* $p < .05$ .

with feedforward. The results are shown in Table I. In the model that contains the interaction variable (model 2), the magnitude of the relationship between feedforward and performance is enhanced ( $B = -.59, p < .01$ ), yet the effect of justice on performance remains statistically insignificant. This is support for a suppression effect.

Suppression occurs when the addition of a confounding variable to the statistical analysis increases the magnitude of the relationship between an independent and dependent variable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). In this case, the statistical removal of the effect of justice perceptions reduces the noise of the confounding variable (MacKinnon, Krull, & Lockwood, 2000). This is consistent with the expectation that justice has an effect on the relationship between feedforward and performance due to the importance of perceptions of fairness in the performance appraisal interview.

## Discussion

The theoretical and practical significance of the present field experiment is that it is the first to compare the effect on job performance of the feedforward interview with a traditional performance appraisal interview. The finding that the FFI increased performance four months later, relative to the performance appraisal where the emphasis was on feedback rather than feedforward, suggests that the effect of the FFI is a relatively enduring one. Thus, the present results indicate that the FFI should prove useful for human

resource managers who are searching for ways to increase the performance of their organization's human resources over and above that of the traditional performance appraisal process.

The practical significance of this field experiment is that the training required to teach managers how to use the FFI is relatively short. In the present field experiment, the duration of the training of 13 managers was only two-and-a-half hours. The training shifted the role of the manager from a judge or critic of an employee's past performance to appreciative inquiry of what an employee will do in the future. Hence, the emphasis is on feedforward for behavioral intentions/goals.

Theoretical explanations for the effectiveness of this technique include the following. Locke and Latham's (2002, 2013; Latham & Locke, 2007) goal-setting theory states that feedback moderates the likelihood of goal attainment because the feedback informs an individual whether a different strategy is needed or more effort is required. The feedforward process leads to the setting of a high performance goal(s). Gollwitzer's (1999) theory of implementation intentions states that goals accompanied by implementation intentions on tasks that are complex for an individual lead to a higher rate of goal attainment than goal setting alone. An implementation intention is a mental link that is created between a specific future situation and the intended goal-directed response. An implementation intention commits the person to the goal-directed behavior once an appropriate situation is encountered. The FFI makes managers aware of an employee's self-set goals, thereby allowing managers to aid an employee in finding situations appropriate for goal pursuit (e.g., committee assignments, job rotation, task forces).

Organizational justice theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998) states that in addition to being fair, a leader must be seen as fair in order to be effective in improving the job performance of subordinates. Consistent with this theory, the FFI emphasizes voice on the part of an employee relative to that which occurs in a traditional performance appraisal

interview (Kluger & Nir, 2010). This is because the employee is in control of the effective incident that is recalled and the intentions/goals set based on recollection of a specific critical incident. Voice has a positive effect on an employee's perception of both procedural and distributive justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). By asking an employee to apply the lessons learned from a past success to a future one, a manager is able to move away from a deficit or remedial model of performance management. By eliminating a manager's role as judge/critic, bias, whether real or perceived, is no longer an issue for an employee.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

The limitations of this field experiment are at least fourfold. First, individual differences were not taken into account as possible moderator variables of the FFI's effect on job performance. Future research should examine whether the FFI is more effective with employees who have a promotion versus a prevention focus, or managers who hold incremental versus fixed entity beliefs. Heslin, Latham, and VandeWalle (2005) found that only managers with incremental beliefs were predisposed to coaching their subordinates. Self-efficacy should also be assessed. Heslin and Latham (2004) found that it moderated the effect of feedback from subordinates on a manager's job performance. Self-efficacy may moderate the extent to which an employee has confidence that high performance can be executed in the future stemming from self-discovery during a FFI.

Second, mediating variables of the FFI and job performance were not explored. Variables (e.g., voice) in organizational justice theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998), because of the emphasis of this theory on perceived fairness, should be investigated. Other likely mediating variables of the positive effect of the FFI on employee performance are the

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setting of specific high goal(s) and implementation intentions. Research has already shown that goal setting mediates the effects of feedback on performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). It is likely that it acts similarly with feedforward.

Third, only the managers in the firm were randomly assigned to conditions. In a laboratory experiment/simulation, random assignment would have included both the manager and the subordinates. In the present experiment, internal validity was decreased in favor of external validity. The FFI should also be investigated under simulated organizational conditions that include random assignment of participants to a control group. A control group was not possible in this study because both company policy and the government require an assessment of employee performance.

Fourth, the performance measure was taken only once—namely, four months after the FFI. This is because the firm wanted to apply the FFI to all employees. The effect of the FFI on job performance, including increasing contextual performance and decreasing counterproductive performance, needs to be assessed over longer time periods to assess the extent to which the effect endures.

In general, this field test of the FFI technique demonstrates that it is possible to increase performance among employees using this performance management technique. When viewed in combination with the work done by Bouskila-Yam and Kluger (2011) who found that FFI improved manager–subordinate relationships, FFI shows potential for mitigating some of the negative effects of the traditional performance appraisal interview process. While others have challenged the utility of performance feedback interviews, these two studies are the first to demonstrate an alternative to the dominant view on how to conduct appraisal interviews in practice.

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