

Research Article

THE IMPACT OF FEEDBACK ON EMPLOYEES' WORK MOTIVATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN VIETNAMESE ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the impact of feedback on employees' work productivity in Vietnamese enterprises, particularly in recent work environments that demand rapid adaptation and continuous development. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight employees from various industries, selected using purposive sampling. The findings indicate that both positive and negative feedback can enhance motivation and productivity if delivered appropriately. The combination of skilful communication, cultural context, and personalized feedback contributes to optimal effectiveness. The study enriches the theoretical foundation of feedback within Vietnamese business settings and proposes practical recommendations to assist leaders and employees in utilizing feedback as a strategic tool in human resources management and organizational development.

Keywords: Feedback, work productivity, Vietnamese enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of international integration and rapid digital transformation, Vietnamese enterprises are facing intense competitive pressure. This requires not only investment in technological innovation but also the optimization of human resource management (Nguyen, 2024). Among management tools, feedback from supervisors is considered a critical mechanism with significant influence on employee performance (London, 2014).

However, research suggests that the effectiveness of feedback is not uniform. Positive feedback is generally viewed as enhancing motivation and job satisfaction, yet in certain cases it may lead to complacency or reduced motivation for improvement (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Conversely, negative or critical feedback may promote behavioral adjustment if delivered tactfully and accompanied by clear guidance. Nevertheless, if communicated insensitively, it may generate psychological pressure, reduce motivation, and even impair performance (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

In Vietnam, most studies on feedback focus on educational settings or multinational environments (Dang, Scull, & Chowdhury, 2022). In-depth research examining the impact of feedback on employee work motivation within domestic enterprises remains limited. This research gap is particularly significant in multigenerational and multicultural workplaces, where face-saving norms and communication harmony strongly influence the reception and processing of feedback.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following question: How does feedback in Vietnamese enterprise settings influence employee motivation and performance? To address this question, the research draws upon Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), employing a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with employees across multiple sectors to obtain specific and multidimensional insights.

Academically, the findings are expected to provide additional empirical evidence for theories related to human resource management and organizational communication, while extending understanding of feedback within the Vietnamese cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Practically, the study offers concrete recommendations to help enterprises design and implement more effective feedback strategies, thereby enhancing motivation, improving performance, and strengthening employee engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of Feedback

Feedback within organizations refers to the process of communicating information from managers or individuals to employees with the purpose of evaluating, guiding, or adjusting work performance (London, 2014). According to Stone and Heen (2014), feedback is also an interactive process in which both sender and receiver participate in interpreting, receiving, and responding to information. In human resource management, feedback is regarded as a strategic tool for shaping behavior, maintaining engagement, and promoting work motivation (Baker *et al.*, 2013).

Positive Feedback

Positive feedback is defined as recognition or encouragement to employees when they successfully complete tasks or demonstrate behaviors aligned with organizational expectations (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Cameron and Pierce (2002) assert that this type of feedback fosters feelings of appreciation and enhances job satisfaction. Studies in Southeast Asian enterprises further indicate that positive feedback not only improves short-term performance but also strengthens employee trust and organizational commitment (Goller & Späth, 2023).

Negative Feedback

In contrast, negative feedback focuses on identifying employees' limitations, errors, or behaviors requiring improvement (Ilgen *et*

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al., 1979). When delivered tactfully and accompanied by specific guidance, negative feedback can help employees recognize the gap between current competence and job requirements, thereby encouraging positive change (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). However, if provided in inappropriate contexts or lacking communication sensitivity, negative feedback may generate psychological stress and reduce motivation (Baron, 1988).

Although prior research has established a solid theoretical foundation regarding the role of feedback in human resources management, most studies have been conducted in Western contexts where direct feedback culture is widely accepted. In Vietnam, however, the emphasis on face-saving and interpersonal harmony may produce different outcomes compared to international models (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, qualitative research exploring how Vietnamese employees perceive and process feedback remains limited.

Theoretical Model

This study is grounded in Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) to explain the mechanism through which feedback influences performance, combined with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) to analyze its impact on intrinsic motivation.

According to FIT, the effectiveness of feedback depends on whether it directs attention toward the task (task-motivation) or toward the self (self-related focus). Positive feedback that concentrates on tasks enhances focus, achievement, and motivation. Similarly, negative feedback can be beneficial when constructive and task-oriented. However, when negative feedback excessively targets personal attributes, it may trigger defensive reactions and diminish motivation. SDT proposes that individuals possess three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Feedback may either support or hinder these needs. Positive feedback often strengthens feelings of competence and relatedness. Likewise, negative feedback, if presented respectfully and in ways that preserve autonomy, can foster personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Cultural factors also play a moderating role. Hall (1976) categorizes cultures into low-context (direct) and high-context (indirect). In Vietnam, where harmony and face-saving are emphasized, negative feedback must be delivered tactfully to avoid damaging relationships (Thang & Sanga, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain in-depth understanding of employee perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were selected to ensure guiding questions while allowing participants to freely share experiences and viewpoints (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Participants and Scope

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants had relevant experience in giving or receiving workplace feedback, thereby providing relevant and in-depth data (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Participants included employees working in Vietnamese enterprises across various sectors such as services, manufacturing, and technology. A total of eight participants were selected, each with at least one year of tenure and experience in providing or receiving job-related feedback.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interview protocols developed based on the theoretical framework and literature review. The questions covered perceptions of feedback, experiences with positive and negative feedback, and its impact on work motivation. Interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and supplemented with field notes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process was carried out in three steps. First, the author sent an invitation letter to the employees of the enterprise, clearly stating the purpose of the research and the right to refuse or withdraw at any time without affecting their work. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted from 20 to 30 minutes through online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. Finally, all collected data were coded, securely stored, and anonymized in reporting to protect the personal information of participants (Orb *et al.*, 2001).

Data Analysis

The obtained data was processed according to the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006), including the steps: rereading all the data, coding, identifying themes, and interpreting meanings. Then, the NVivo software was used to support effective data storage and processing.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sending interview summaries to participants for confirmation or clarification, ensuring accurate representation of their perspectives (Birt *et al.*, 2016).

FINDINGS

The findings reveal that feedback in the workplace is not merely a managerial tool but also a powerful emotional experience directly influencing motivation and performance. Three major themes emerged.

Theme 1: Impact of Positive Feedback

Interview results indicate that positive feedback plays a crucial role in reinforcing employees' confidence and work motivation. Many employees expressed that specific praise regarding their achievements or work methods makes them feel recognized, thereby fostering self-confidence and encouraging them to maintain and improve their performance.

"When my manager praised me for completing the project ahead of schedule, I felt very happy and wanted to maintain even higher productivity." (NV03)

"When I was commended for organizing my work efficiently, I felt more enthusiastic and confident in subsequent tasks." (NV07)

Theme 2: Constructive Negative Feedback

Constructive negative feedback is perceived as a "mirror" that helps employees recognize the limitations they need to improve. Some people report that when feedback focuses on the work rather than the person, they tend to be open to receiving it and adjusting their

approach. Conversely, when feedback is delivered too harshly or is judgmental of the person, stress and defensiveness arise, reducing the initial positive effect.

"If feedback points out that my work organization needs improvement, I will adjust. But if it is too harsh, I feel pressured and lose motivation." (NV08)

"Negative feedback will be effective if it focuses on the work, but if it criticizes me as an incompetent person, I will react defensively immediately." (NV05)

This shows that it is not the negative or positive nature of feedback that determines the outcome, but rather the way it is communicated and the goal it aims for.

Theme 3: Communication Style and Cultural Context

Another important finding is the role of cultural context and communication style in the feedback process. Employees working in the Vietnamese enterprises often emphasize subtlety and tact in communication. If feedback is given in a gentle manner that respects their dignity, they feel supported and encouraged. Conversely, direct criticism can easily cause feelings of offense and negatively impact their psychology and relationship with superiors.

Some employees appreciate managers using the "sandwich" principle (positive - negative - positive), because this method makes it easier for them to accept feedback and feel less pressured.

"I often see my boss give praise first and then point out areas that need improvement. I find it easier to accept that way." (NV1)

Overall, both positive and negative feedback can enhance motivation and productivity when appropriately delivered. The combination of skillful communication, cultural context, and personalized feedback creates optimal effectiveness.

DISCUSSION

The above research results both reflect similarities and differences compared to previous studies. The findings related to positive feedback are consistent with the research of Bakker & Demerouti (2017), which indicates that positive feedback helps enhance employee satisfaction and commitment, especially when it is specific and timely. This reinforces Deci & Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) regarding the role of competence and social relatedness in promoting intrinsic motivation.

Regarding negative feedback, research results indicate that if presented in a constructive manner, it helps employees recognize weaknesses and improve work performance. However, overly direct negative feedback or feedback focused on the individual triggers defensive reactions and reduces motivation, in line with Kluger & DeNisi's (1996) Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT). Compared to the studies of Kluger & DeNisi (1996) and Baron (1988), a significant difference is that in the Vietnamese context, the cultural factor of "face-saving" makes employees particularly sensitive to the manner in which feedback is delivered. Employees emphasize that a tactful presentation, using the "sandwich" principle (positive-negative-positive), helps them receive feedback more easily and maintain motivation, which is less emphasized in studies conducted in Western cultures.

This study also expands the understanding of the impact of cultural context on feedback reception. Data from Vietnamese employees

indicate that the subtlety in communication and the personalization of feedback determine the extent of its effect on work motivation, which aligns with Hall's (1976) high-context cultural theory and research on East Asian corporate cultures (Thang & Sanga, 2016).

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limitations

Although the study has provided important insights into feedback in organizational communication within Vietnamese enterprises, there remain certain limitations. First, the research scope only focuses on the group of employees and does not include management or leadership levels, thus not fully reflecting two-way interactions and perspectives from the managerial level.

Second, the qualitative research method based on in-depth interviews provides detailed and multidimensional insights, but it also carries the risk of subjective bias from both participants and researchers, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results (Patton, 2015).

Third, the data collection period was relatively short and concentrated in certain enterprises, and therefore has not reflected the variations in awareness and response behavior over the long term or across different industries. In addition, the study has not thoroughly explored the factors of technology and remote working environment – aspects that are increasingly playing an important role in modern organizational communication (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Recommendations

Recommendation for future research

These results open up many important directions for future research. First, expanding the research subjects to include management, leadership, and senior levels within organizations will help clarify the differences in perception and reception of feedback across levels. Second, combining quantitative and qualitative methods can help measure the impact of feedback on motivation and performance, increasing the generalizability and applicability of the findings. Third, studying multinational cultures in the Southeast Asian region will provide a comparative view of the effectiveness of feedback in different cultural contexts, thereby supporting multinational companies in developing effective feedback policies.

Recommendation for enterprises

Based on the research results, Vietnamese businesses need to view feedback not only as a tool for performance evaluation but also as a strategic means to enhance employee motivation and engagement. First, training in professional feedback skills is essential. Training programs should guide managers and employees on how to convey positive and negative feedback constructively, focusing on nuanced language, tone, and appropriate timing, especially in the context of East Asian cultures that value "face-saving" (Hall, 1976; Thang & Sanga, 2016). Second, personalizing feedback based on the competencies, experience, and psychological characteristics of each employee helps optimize effectiveness while strengthening the connection between employees and the organization (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Finally, businesses should build a culture of transparent, frequent, and supportive feedback; for example, creating a two-way feedback mechanism and encouraging employees to share their opinions on how they receive feedback, thereby increasing proactivity, engagement, and commitment at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study clarified the impact of positive and negative feedback in organizational communication on employee work motivation in Vietnamese enterprises, based on data collected through qualitative interview methods. Consequently, feedback, whether positive or negative, can become a driving force to enhance performance if used appropriately. Employees perceive feedback as a two-way process, both helping them recognize their own value and indicating areas for improvement. The combination of appropriate feedback content, a subtle delivery style, and an understanding of organizational culture is the decisive factor in turning feedback into a positive motivator. This affirms that feedback is not merely a human resource management tool but also a deeply human emotional experience that shapes employees' beliefs, motivation, and engagement with the organization.

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