Abstract

In this era of knowledge work, employees seeking to develop depend on those around them to highlight their weaknesses and provide constructive criticism. However, would-be feedback-givers are often reluctant to share such critical insight, fearing the relational consequences or conflict that may result. In this paper, we consider the relationship between psychological distance and feedback giving. In contrast to prior research suggesting that psychological closeness should enhance feedback giving by providing a relational buffer from its negative consequences, we propose that psychological distance will improve feedback delivery. Across two studies drawing from the field and the lab, we find that feedback givers who feel more psychologically distant from the recipient are less concerned about harming their relationship and provide more specific feedback. These findings offer a new perspective of psychological distance in the workplace by showing when it may be a force for good.

Research Question & Hypotheses

Can psychological distance promote feedback-giving?

H1: Feedback givers will provide more and more concrete feedback to psychologically distant recipients.

H2: Feedback givers’ psychological distance from their recipient will reduce feedback givers’ relational and emotional concerns about delivering feedback.

Field Study: Context

Sample: 1,717 feedback surveys completed by 387 colleagues at an integrated food agricultural manufacturing company

Independent Variable (psychological closeness): Feedback-giver’s presence in the same unit and location as the feedback recipient.

Dependent Variables:

- Character count
- Word count
- Concreteness (ICC = .822)

LOW concreteness example: "I would like to see [NAME] take ownership of AP. I would like to see [NAME] understand carrying operations very well. I think he could spend more time in other areas to improve even more." (2.5)

HIGH concreteness example: "The story as a whole is compelling, and you got some great quotes to use. But the writing needs to stand out more. You need to frame it as a narrative-style news piece and not hard news. That will help draw in readers." (9.34)

Questions & feedback welcome! Contact Hayley Blunden at hblunden@hbs.edu

Field Study: Results

Independent Variable (psychological closeness):

- Character count
- Word count
- Concreteness

HIGH Analytic Score example: "[NAME] understands canning operations very well. Her planning is great and she has good intentions but her delivery is often lacking and needs much work." (6.80)

LOW Analytic Score example: "Now carefully think about the extent to which [recipient initials] possesses the following traits, and rate [recipient initials] on the traits below.

psychological closeness:

- ambitious, analytic, imaginative, sympathetic, high-strung, insecure, irresponsible, reserved (Haslam, 2005)

Conclusions & Future Directions

In this era of knowledge work, employees seeking to develop depend on those around them to highlight their weaknesses and provide constructive criticism. However, would-be feedback-givers are often reluctant to share such critical insight, fearing the relational consequences or conflict that may result. In this paper, we consider the relationship between psychological distance and feedback giving. In contrast to prior research suggesting that psychological closeness should enhance feedback giving by providing a relational buffer from its negative consequences, we propose that psychological distance will improve feedback delivery. Across two studies drawing from the field and the lab, we find that feedback givers who feel more psychologically distant from the recipient are less concerned about harming their relationship and provide more specific feedback. These findings offer a new perspective of psychological distance in the workplace by showing when it may be a force for good.

Key References


