TEAM LEADERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH RECEIVING POSITIVE FEEDBACK

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Abstract
The study focused on team leaders’ experiences with receiving positive feedback in an organization. The purpose was to understand how employees without a formal managerial position interpret receiving positive feedback. There are multiple studies regarding feedback in work communities, but not from the experiential perspective of team leaders. The research material was collected by interviewing seven team leaders who worked in a public organization. The research methodology applied and methods used were based on an existential-phenomenological approach. The empirical results consist of seven variants of received positive feedback as experienced by team leaders. Although the variants indicate that receiving positive feedback has favourable effects on team leaders, the effects are conditional. A favourable effect might be realized only if the team leader trusts the feedback giver or if the feedback is experienced to be truly earned. Furthermore, mental closeness with both managers and co-workers improves the perceived reliability of the received positive feedback. The results are similar to previous feedback research with one notable exception. Based on this study, job performance is not related to the received positive feedback as previous research has concluded. Results indicate that positive feedback has many favourable effects but they are mediated by the features of a feedback incident. The existential-phenomenological approach is helpful in understanding a feedback situation as a relation between the experiential worker receiving feedback and the actual work setting including the given feedback.

KEY WORDS: team leader, positive feedback, work community, existential-phenomenological approach, phenomenological method, experience.

Introduction
Feedback in organizations has been studied for many decades (Ilgen, Fisher & Taylor, 1979). Studies have been concerned with the influences feedback has on performance (Becker & Klimoski, 1989; Chakrabarty, Oubre & Brown, 2008; Jawahar, 2010; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991; Oettingen, Marquardt, Gollwitzer, 2012), responses to feedback (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Jawahar, 2010) and the feedback environment (Peng & Chiu, 2010; Steelman, Levy & Snell, 2004; Whitaker, 2011). It is widely recognized that the recipient of feedback is considered to be an active agent (Linderbaum & Levy, 2010; London & Smither, 2002; Krasman, 2010; Whitaker, 2011). This has led to the question of why people seek feedback. To understand the quest for feedback, it
is important to know how people interpret perceived information and associate new information with former knowledge (Ashford, Blatt & VandeWalle, 2003).

Feedback studies from a recipient's viewpoint have focused on the impacts of leader-member exchange on communication satisfaction (Mueller & Lee, 2002), feedback orientation (Dahling, Chau & O'Malley, 2010; Linderbaum & Levy, 2010) feedback received from supervisors (Berlin, 2008; Chakrabarty et al., 2008), the effects of self-regulatory strategies on feedback (Oettingen et al., 2012) and associations of feedback with students' performance and self-evaluation (Plakht, Shiyovich, Nusbaum & Raizer, 2012). Furthermore, feedback environments that emphasize informal aspects over formal ones have been reformed (Steelman et al., 2004), and connections between feedback environment, seeking feedback (Whitaker, 2011) and behaviour in organizations (Peng & Chiu, 2010) have been studied.

The focus of this study on received positive feedback is derived from our everyday observation that people interpret it very differently. Consequently, the effects of given positive feedback may vary a lot. Furthermore, we found it interesting to study interpretations of positive feedback among those employees who work as leaders even though they do not have a formal managerial position in the organization. They are often called team leaders. A team leader is an employee who is responsible for varied information exchange between managers and team members. A team leader is chosen by the team itself for a period of time.

The purpose of this study is to understand how employees who do not hold a formal managerial position in their organization interpret receiving positive feedback. The aim is to describe the core meanings of team leaders’ experiences in receiving positive feedback in their everyday work. The research question is: How do team leaders in a public organization experience the positive feedback they have received in their current work?

The theoretical definition of positive feedback was not established before performing the empirical study because our interpretation of positive feedback considers it to be subjectively experienced. Moreover, being consistent with the research design, we requested that team leaders themselves identify the situations in which they have experienced receiving positive feedback at work. Nevertheless, two restrictions for work situations were set: they must belong to their present work, and the source of positive feedback had to be either from members or outer stakeholders of the current organization.

An existential-phenomenological approach was adopted as a methodological frame. The existential dimension makes it adequate to figure out a team leader’s personal experience in their actual work setting. Phenomenology is included because of our interest in general experiential knowledge among team leaders. The use of empirical phenomenology allows general meanings or structures of participants’ personal experiences to be grasped and described (Giorgi, 2009; Perttula, Väänänen, Malinauskas, Gudliauskaite-Godvade & Godvadas, 2010). The research material was gathered by open interviews, which is one relevant way to collect empirical data when applying an existential-phenomenological methodology. The use of an existential-phenomenological approach and the related empirical methods has been lacking in previous feedback research.
2. Existential-phenomenological methodology

The existential-phenomenological approach reflected in this study has been elaborated by Finnish philosopher and psychologist Lauri Rauhala. It is an integrative synthesis of Edmund Husserl’s and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology. Existential phenomenology as a methodology is suitable for human and social sciences due to its ontological foundation in the holistic conception of man (see Perttula, 2009a). The term holistic implies that a human being is realized as a unity of existential modes, which in Rauhala’s existential-phenomenological approach are called consciousness, materiality and situatedness. Moreover, the holistic view entails that every existential mode, even though existing only as a unity, has a unique structure (Rauhala, 2005). Methodologically it means that empirical phenomena originating in each existential mode have to be studied according to their peculiar structure (Perttula, 1998).

The phenomenon of this study – positive feedback as experienced in team leaders’ everyday work settings – is grounded in the existential mode of consciousness. The structure of every conscious act is intentionality, which means that human consciousness is always directed towards some object external to the intentional act itself. From the phenomenological perspective, the existential mode of consciousness is manifested as subject-object relationships. In these relationships any object belonging to a person's life situation presents itself to the consciousness as it is given to it. In this conscious act, an object is given meaning (Giorgi, 1997; 2012). Thus, in this study, the term experience is understood as a meaning relation between team leaders, as intentional subjects, and their work settings where positive feedback was received, as the objects.

This phenomenological empirical study follows three methodological principles: firstly, it describes how the object appears to the acting consciousness; secondly, it applies phenomenological reduction; and thirdly, it searches for the essence of the experienced phenomenon under study. In order for the researcher to describe the phenomenon as it presents itself to the research participants, the researcher has to become aware of the knowledge s/he already possesses regarding that phenomenon, and then s/he has to consciously bracket that knowledge. In the phenomenological method this is called the first stage of phenomenological reduction (Perttula, 2009b). When following a phenomenological methodology without an existential orientation, the researcher also aims to bracket her/his conception of man. When adopting an existential-phenomenological methodology, as is done in this study, instead of bracketing the conception of man, the researcher analyses and describes it explicitly (Perttula, 1998). The second stage of phenomenological reduction is referred to as free imaginative variation, in which the researcher searches for the essential meanings of the phenomenon (Perttula, 2009b). Within the existential-phenomenological methodology, this can be done both individually with each research participant and generally with all research participants together (see e.g. Mikkonen, 2005).
3. Empirical research process

3.1. Gathering data

The research data were gathered by interviewing seven team leaders in a public organization. First we contacted the organization’s administration to ask for preliminary permission to interview their employees. Then the team leaders’ manager was consulted, and she proposed that she contact the team leaders to find out who was willing to participate. The manager was told that participation was voluntary for the candidates. Seven team leaders out of twelve were willing to take part. Next, the final permission to execute the research was applied for from the organization, and after getting it, we met the participants to tell them about the study. The purpose of meeting them was to establish personal contact with the interviewees and to clarify how the research would actually take place. At the same time, the interview dates were decided.

An email including information about the interview was sent to each participant a week in advance to orientate them on the subject. The interviews were open ones. A few participants needed more structured guidance to tell about the subject. The length of the interviews varied from 47 to 83 minutes. The total duration of the material was 488 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, including the meaningful changes in speaking voice and paradoxical meanings of words. The length of the transcribed text was 152 pages.

3.2. Analysis

The empirical analysis was based on the phenomenological method developed by Amedeo Giorgi (1985; 1997; 2012). Perttula (1998) has revised the method to be congruent with existential-phenomenological methodology. The revised method has two parts, both including seven steps. The aim of the first part, called ‘individual-specific’, is to form individual meaning networks of the empirical phenomenon studied. The aim of the second part, called ‘general’, is to form a general meaning network of the same phenomenon (see also Perttula et al., 2010). In this study, we utilized this existential modification of the empirical phenomenological method.

The credibility in existential-phenomenological research lies with the researcher’s ability to grasp the core of the phenomenon as experienced by participants. Parallel to it, respondent validation can be used, as was done in this study, by sending the personal individual meaning network to each participant for self-evaluation (see e.g. Spinelli, 1989). The researcher’s systematic self-reflection in performing this method is of crucial importance as well as to bring forth the detailed methodical procedure of analysis, which is presented step by step as follows.
The individual-specific part of the method

**Step 1:** The researcher becomes acquainted with the transcribed description as open-mindedly as possible. To get the first grasp of the phenomenon in its entirety, the researcher begins to bracket knowledge s/he already has about the phenomenon to promote the differentiation of the experiential meanings of the research participant and her/himself as a researcher.

**Step 2:** The researcher forms classifying themes referring to the central objects of the experiential phenomenon. The classifying themes of received positive feedback were formed separately for each participant. In total, eleven classifying themes were formed: work, general meaning of positive feedback, positive feedback from clients, positive feedback from supervisors, positive feedback from co-workers, positive feedback from work, effectiveness of positive feedback, attitude towards positive feedback, being a team leader, personality, and the self as a worker.

**Step 3:** The researcher divides all transcriptions into meaning relations. A meaning relation is the unit of the research material that includes one experiential meaning of "something" related to the phenomenon. The entire research material is divided into meaning relations.

**Step 4:** The researcher transforms the meaning relations into transparent and unambiguous language. The meaning relations are transformed through phenomenological reduction, so that the focus is on the essence of experiential meanings. Using phenomenological reduction means that the researcher continues bracketing existing knowledge about the phenomenon; furthermore, s/he uses so-called imaginative variation in order to discover the necessary and sufficient meanings of each meaning relation. Finally, every transformation as described by the researcher is based on intuitive evidence grasped while applying phenomenological reduction.

**Step 5:** The researcher places the transformations into the classifying themes. Each transformation is included in suitable classifying theme.

**Step 6:** The researcher constructs an individual meaning network for each classifying theme. The aim is to find the relations of individual experiential meanings in the context of each classifying theme. As a result, the researcher constructs theme-specific meaning networks that facilitate the construction of individual meaning networks in the next step. In this study, forming the theme-specific meaning networks was begun but not finalized because it appeared that it would not serve the construction of individual meaning networks.

**Step 7:** The researcher forms the individual meaning networks. All seven individual meaning networks were formed so that they described the experiential phenomenon of positive feedback received by team leaders in a comprehensive way. From the existential viewpoint, the individual meaning networks can be regarded as empirical results. The method being existential-phenomenological, individual meaning networks are considered not as results, but as a necessary transition for proceeding further to form general empirical knowledge about the phenomenon.
The general part of the method

Step 1: The researcher adopts an attitude towards the general description. The individual meaning networks are perceived as proposals of the general meaning network.

Step 2: The researcher divides the proposals into meaning relations and transforms them into a general form. This step is similar to steps three and four in the first part, except now the language of the meaning relations is transformed so that the individuality of meanings is removed.

Step 3: The researcher forms the organizing themes. Organizing themes are formed separately for each proposal of the general meaning network. In this study, thirteen organizing themes were formed: positive feedback from supervisors, positive feedback from co-workers, positive feedback from clients, positive feedback from self, restrictions of receiving positive feedback, the effect of positive feedback, attitude towards positive feedback, effectiveness of positive feedback, own action, cooperation, different forms of positive feedback, being a team leader, and work.

Step 4: The researcher places the transformed meaning relation proposals into organizing themes. Each proposal is included in a suitable theme one after the other.

Step 5: The researcher constructs the general meaning network proposal for each organizing theme. The aim is to construct theme proposals one theme at a time by paying attention to the core meanings of the theme.

Step 6: The researcher constructs tentative general meaning networks. Each proposal gets the form of a tentative general meaning network, that is, a coherent description of the phenomenon as a whole rooted in a particular individual meaning network. Hence, seven tentative general meaning networks of the positive feedback received by team leaders were constructed in this study.

Step 7: The researcher constructs a general meaning network. If it appears possible, one network that includes the core contents of every tentative general network is constructed. In this study, it was not pertinent because of the variation in the tentative general networks. If it were applicable, it would be possible to construct a relevant amount of general meaning networks that would grasp the essential variation of the phenomenon studied. In this study, the variation in phenomenon appeared to be rich, so the decision was to construct a distinct general meaning network from every tentative general meaning network. Therefore, all seven types or variants of general meaning networks of the phenomenon are described in the empirical results as follows.

4. Results of team leaders’ experiences of received positive feedback

Variant 1: The amount of received positive feedback is sufficient. In addition to verbal feedback, work itself gives positive feedback when work is done really well. The importance of the verbal positive feedback is very high when the employee is insecure about her know-how or if the work itself does not give much positive feedback. Then, verbal positive feedback is experienced as encouraging. If work cannot be done in the most efficient way, the received positive feedback regarding that work is
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not necessarily considered as deserved. Work is done well despite the received positive feedback. Positive feedback is important in spite of who gives it. The credibility of positive feedback grows when it is received face to face. In order to feel that the received positive feedback is good, its content has to be congruent with one’s own opinion. Because work is done for the clients, positive feedback from them is deemed valuable. A lot of positive feedback is received from the clients. Positive feedback energizes the worker, reinforces one’s own image as an important employee and positively affects well-being at work and the way the employee approaches her work. Besides individually, receiving positive feedback is important at the team level because it strengthens team spirit and brings shared successes. Positive feedback motivates the worker if it is received rarely. However, a large amount of positive feedback decreases motivation by indicating that there is nothing to improve. In addition, the credibility of positive feedback, especially from supervisors, decreases when one receives it too often. Moreover, the favourable effects of positive feedback are weakened when it is received routinely about the same things, when it is perceived as a consolation or when the requirements of work clearly exceed the worker’s own resources. Especially positive feedback received from the supervisors enhances well-being at work and better’s one’s own image as an employee. The experienced mental closeness with the supervisors strengthens the credibility and favourable effects of the positive feedback received from them. On the one hand, considerable trust and respect expressed by supervisors are extremely significant and important types of positive feedback. On the other hand, significant positive feedback creates a lot of pressure because an employee must prove to be worthy of the praise in the future, too. In a period of being a team leader, the supervisors become closer and mutual trust and open interaction grow. That is why positive feedback received from supervisors is felt to be stronger and more genuine than before the time as a team leader.

Variant 2: The amount of received positive feedback is sufficient. Positive feedback cheers up the recipient’s mind, communicates respect and improves work motivation. It feels best when it concerns some big accomplishments, although there are not many of them. The attitude towards positive feedback does not change much during the years working for the current employer. Although it is nice and important to get positive feedback regardless of who the feedback giver is, it is not the most essential thing in working. Received positive feedback is experienced to be genuine when the reason for receiving it can be identified. The closer the feedback giver is emotionally, the more believable the positive feedback is. Close co-workers also receive non-verbal positive feedback from each other. Furthermore, supervisors’ flexible and understanding behaviour towards an employee is experienced as positive feedback. Behaviour is reciprocal so that the better the employee considers supervisors’ expectations towards herself, the more the supervisors pay attention to the employee and the work they have done. Supervisors’ busy work must be taken into account when considering the amount of positive feedback received from them. One gets closer to supervisors after becoming a team leader. A cheerful and energetic attitude towards working and other work-related, valuable characters contributes to receiving
positive feedback. At work, one is hard working and motivated in spite of the received positive feedback. To enjoy working in the work community is positive feedback in itself because the employees create their community’s work atmosphere. When the team receives positive feedback it is always jointly deserved among team members. One feels she gets positive feedback from clients when the clients take notice of the employee’s work and want to interact with her. Positive feedback from clients must be deserved. By paying attention to clients’ needs, an employee can expect reciprocal consideration from clients. Receiving positive feedback is experienced when one is considered to be a hard-working and competent employee and others want to keep her as a part of the work community. Work gives positive feedback to its doer when the worker is pleased with the work that she has done.

Variant 3: Positive feedback cheers up the recipient’s mind, communicates respect and supports both well-being at work and work satisfaction. Received positive feedback must feel deserved in order to feel good. The favourable effects of positive feedback get stronger when in addition to receiving positive feedback the feedback incident includes other kinds of cheery conversation. That happens often with clients. Particularly in the beginning of the career, positive feedback strengthens self-confidence and one’s trust in her abilities. Positive feedback also makes it possible to work towards the right goals and supports the development of the employee by highlighting good working methods. Work gives positive feedback to the employee when the work is experienced as being well done. Then the worker also praises herself. Positive feedback is important in spite of who gives it. The most important thing is the trust in the feedback giver’s words. Positive feedback feels particularly good when it is unexpected, although the first reaction might seem to be constrained. Received positive feedback that concerns work is most valuable and reliable when the recipient knows the feedback giver to have baselines for the work from which the positive feedback is given. The employee expects to get positive feedback regarding the kind of work tasks that are rare and clearly observable. If she does not get it, she feels that her work is valueless to others and her expectations towards receiving positive feedback go down. It is best not to get too much positive feedback, so that the significance and credibility of that feedback do not suffer. The favourable effects of positive feedback become weaker when the feedback is received about an action that the recipient herself does not appreciate. Favourable effects also become weaker when doing a favour is a prerequisite for positive feedback. The size of a work community affects the amount of received positive feedback: in a small work community, reaching the person who has deserved positive feedback happens quickly. Positive feedback is received about the features that the feedback giver appreciates in their own behaviour. Positive feedback from co-workers makes cooperating with them pleasant. Co-workers also know the work about which they give positive feedback because they do the same job. Positive feedback received from close co-workers is convincing because they are trustworthy and feedback is conveyed together with emotions.
Variant 4: Received positive feedback strengthens self-confidence and well-being at work. It also communicates respect and points out the work tasks that are done well. The amount of received positive feedback from co-workers is sufficient. Among other things, co-workers give positive feedback by showing satisfaction with the team leader. Friendships will develop between some co-workers in a long-term employment relationship. Co-workers who are also friends give and receive positive feedback in a more personal way than mentally distant co-workers. The amount of positive feedback received, especially from the clients, grows as the years of employment increase. The better the clients get to know the employee serving them, the more they give positive feedback like praises and sympathy to the employee. Most of the work-related feedback is received from clients. Because the work is done for the clients, positive feedback received from them has the biggest influence on well-being at work and on the experienced value of work. Clients see an employee’s working methods and content of her work. Therefore the positive feedback received from them is extremely genuine and strengthens the employee’s confidence in her own abilities. The amount of positive feedback received from supervisors is small. It is wanted and deserved more. Positive feedback is received from them only when some big work task has been carried out successfully. The reasons for feedback’s rareness are supervisors’ busy work and personality differences. When one does not get along very well with a supervisor, the feedback received from that supervisor arouses suspicion. When the personality matches the supervisor’s personality, the positive feedback received feels genuine and the amount sufficient. The shorter the time between work performance and the positive feedback received concerning that performance, the better the feedback feels. It is better to get positive feedback directly from the feedback giver than from a third party so that the time between giving feedback and receiving it stays as short as possible. It is nice to carry out the team leader’s task as a spokesperson when the assignment is to take the positive feedback received from supervisors to other team members. That kind of feedback informs the team about good work and strengthens the team’s belief in themselves. These are the times the team leader feels joy on behalf of the whole team.

Variant 5: The attitude towards positive feedback does not change much during the time at their current work. The amount of received positive feedback is dependent on the working environment and the nature of their work. Positive feedback from work is received through others’ friendly behaviour and different kinds of attention. The attention communicates satisfaction. Because of the busy working environment it is understandable that only a little positive feedback is received. Getting praise is never the purpose of work. The most natural positive feedback is received from co-workers. They give positive feedback the most of all feedback givers. In addition to direct words, co-workers give positive feedback by reminiscing and talking about the feedback recipient’s previous successes. From close co-workers one also gets non-verbal positive feedback through behaviour. Supervisors give positive feedback the least. The reason for that might be that they are not aware of the actual situations where the workers have succeeded. Receiving positive feedback from a supervisor indicates that the employee has fulfilled the expectations the supervisor has of her. Supervisors give positive feedback not only by verbal communication but also by
showing trust in the employee. During the employment years, supervisors become closer to the employee, which makes it easier to communicate with them and makes the positive feedback received from them more pleasant. Positive feedback is important in spite of who gives it. It cheers up the recipient, communicates respect, enhances well-being at work and strengthens the recipient’s confidence in her own abilities. Although positive feedback from small work tasks feels good, the most delightful feeling comes when the positive feedback is received from big and demanding tasks. The encouraging effect of positive feedback is important especially in the beginning of a career when it helps to remove unnecessary insecurity.

Variant 6: The amount of received positive feedback is big. It strengthens self-esteem as an employee, provides information about work tasks done well and also gives courage and betters self-confidence at work. As a result of positive feedback, the sense of self-efficacy grows, which encourages further self-development. In the long run, positive feedback received from others enhances one’s abilities to encourage and praise oneself. One repeatedly experiences feelings of joy as the feedback incident is reminisced afterwards. When self-esteem is low, one feels received positive feedback is not deserved. But in the long run, positive feedback strengthens the self-esteem and one starts to feel the feedback is deserved. It is better to get positive feedback directly from the feedback giver than from a third party, so that the feedback stays in its original form. In order that received positive feedback is accepted, the content of feedback has to be congruent with the employee’s own opinion. If the received feedback does not feel deserved, it causes sadness rather than good feelings. One could start to question the positive feedback received when there is too much of it. An employee must be self-determined to receive positive feedback from work successes. One becomes mentally stronger when one can show one’s skills and they are noticed due to their usefulness. Positive feedback also highlights good working methods. Positive feedback is received from clients but giving it is not their job. The experience of one’s own significance is toughened when positive feedback is received from other team members. Positive feedback among co-workers improves the work climate, work motivation and work satisfaction. From close co-workers one can get non-verbal positive feedback in addition to verbal feedback. It is nice to deliver and partake in the positive feedback received from supervisors with other team members when the feedback concerns them all. This kind of task of a team leader makes her feel useful. The team leader carefully and accurately shares the positive feedback that is meant for the whole team. Positive feedback received from supervisors makes them approachable and relaxes the interaction with them. It is better to receive positive feedback from them face to face than from a third party. Receiving positive feedback from supervisors is rare.

Variant 7: The amount of positive feedback received is sufficient. It is delightful to get it. It creates feelings of satisfaction towards oneself and one’s own work. In spite of who gives it, it is equivalent. Most of the positive feedback received is verbal and from other people. The feedback that does not come from others comes from the work itself when the worker is pleased with the work she has done. All the positive feedback received has been genuine. The regularity of receiving positive feedback is not important and the
temporary lack of it does not have negative effects either on the employee or the work. The work is done well and in a joyful manner in spite of the amount of positive feedback received. When a critical attitude is taken towards oneself and one’s actions, one does not praise oneself. Positive feedback received from others indicates that the work is done well and the expectations of the feedback giver have been fulfilled. The amount and content of received positive feedback is dependent on the working environment and the nature of the work. When there is competition for positive feedback in a work community, it is hard to accept it jointly. Receiving personal positive feedback is easier by nature, because it does not cause competition. The reaction to unexpected positive feedback is not natural, but confused. However, unexpected positive feedback sticks in the memory. In addition to verbal feedback from close co-workers, one also gets non-verbal positive feedback through behaviour. Among others, co-workers give non-verbal positive feedback. This can be seen, for example, in the way they pay attention to the team leader’s work by changing their own actions to match the team leader’s work. Positive feedback is not received much from co-workers. The positive feedback received from supervisors is very direct and the feedback incident with them is temporally short. One might recall the positive feedback received earlier when one sees the feedback giver. The feedback giver is recognized if the positive feedback received from her has been significant in some way.

5. Theorizing experiences of received positive feedback

Results show that positive feedback has favourable effects for a team leader's emotions and views as an employee and of one’s own work. This supports previous knowledge about how positive feedback is easily accepted (Bell & Arthur, 2008; Ilgen et al., 1979) in that it maintains a person's self-image (Ilgen et al., 1979). However, the results display that positive feedback may have positive outcomes only if a recipient experiences that she deserves the feedback (variants 1, 2, 3 and 6). Similarly, it has been observed that among individuals having low self-efficacy the acceptance of positive feedback decreases as it is received repeatedly. The reason presented is that positive feedback is incompatible with the person's self-efficacy, and further, that positive feedback appears inaccurate to them (Nease, Mudgett & Quinones, 1999). Thus, positive feedback does not necessarily have the effects the feedback giver expects because the recipient’s personal experiences can prevent acceptance of the feedback (Ruohotie & Honka, 1999; see also Ilgen et al., 1979).

The results illustrate that to accept feedback as being positive, either a recipient’s personal experience must be congruent with the feedback (self-verification) or a recipient has to trust the expertise of the feedback giver (variants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6). This is confirmed by the classic review of Ilgen et al. (1979), as well as Collins and Stukas (2006), Jawahar (2010) and Brett and Atwater (2001). In line with the current study, the previous results (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Collins & Stukas, 2006) suggest that people are more likely to accept self-inconsistent feedback when it is received from high-status sources (e.g. high-status therapist, boss or peers). However, there are also studies proposing that self-enhancement has a stronger impact on feedback expectations (Hepper, Hart, Gregg & Sedikides, 2011) and acceptance (Anseel & Lievens, 2006; Bell & Arthur, 2008) than self-
verification. In those studies, self-enhancement refers to the motive of accepting the favourable feedback. Therefore, positive feedback, as such, would have a stronger effect than consistency between content of the feedback and the recipient’s self-image. The results of this study do not support this interpretation. However, the mechanisms of the effects of positive feedback may be complex as was seen in the Greller and Parsons (1992) study. It appeared that when task feedback is favourable, recipients pay less attention to feedback from others, and when task feedback is unfavourable, they pay more attention to feedback from others.

Our results imply that positive feedback enhances a recipient’s self-confidence or her confidence to work (variants 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6). It is congruent with the finding that rewarding feedback from a manager provides supportive feelings simultaneously to the followers’ self-efficacy and to the confidence towards their own work (Berlin, 2008). However, high-quality positive feedback may be associated with overestimating one's own performance (Plakht et al., 2012).

Work, in itself, is a source of positive feedback when a team leader is pleased with the work done (variants 1, 2, 3 and 7). This relates to the finding that task feedback is associated more strongly with self-rating than feedback from others. It is concluded that the strongest predictor of constructive self-evaluation is positive task feedback (Greller & Parsons, 1992). Task feedback is discovered to be positively related to job satisfaction and to diminishing feelings of role ambiguity. Even though self-feedback concerning job performance is rated as a more useful and consistent feedback than task feedback, it did not predict job satisfaction (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001). In this study, however, neither self nor task appeared clearly as the most important feedback source. Herold and Parsons (1985) suggest that sources of task and self should not be seen as separate but rather as a “stimulus complex” formed together. More recently, Andrews and Kacmar (2001) found that self-feedback and task feedback have different kinds of relations, which indicates that the two sources should be seen as separate. The possible interpretation is that receiving task feedback depends on an individual’s tendency to be internally oriented towards feedback (see Herold, Parsons & Fedor, 1997).

The results displayed how mental closeness with co-workers makes received positive feedback more credible (variants 2, 3, 4 and 5). The same effect took place in the manager-team leader relationship (variants 1, 4 and 5). Our findings are in line with the results about the importance of a close relationship between the feedback giver and the recipient and the effectiveness of received positive feedback (Berlin, 2008; see also Ilgen et al., 1979). Experienced credibility towards a feedback source is associated with the satisfaction regarding feedback received from that source (Steelman et al., 2004). These results can be understood in the context of the leader-member exchange theory. According to the theory, leaders form different kinds of exchange relationships with their employees. Depending on the relationship, an employee can be either an in-group or out-group member. In-group members have high-quality exchange relationships with their leader while out-group members have low-quality relationships. It has been discovered that in-group members of leader-member exchanges were the most satisfied with personal feedback and supervisory communication (Mueller & Lee, 2002).
The results indicate that the experience of receiving positive feedback does not necessarily have an effect on job performance (variants 1, 2, 5 and 7). Work is done well regardless of the positive feedback. This finding differs with several prior results that showed the association with positive feedback and improved job performance (Becker & Klimoski, 1989; Chakrabarty et al., 2008; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991; London, Larsen & Thisted, 1999), with clinical performance, and with grades of students (Plakht et al., 2012). Oettingen et al. (2012) noticed that received positive feedback can be transformed into a successful performance when the recipient takes part in mental contrasting after receiving positive feedback. Mental contrasting influences commitment to future goals. It starts with imagining a desired future will happen, for example, a person will achieve a goal. Then she concentrates on the obstacles in her present reality that are preventing the desired future. Expectations for success regulate the impacts mental contrasting has on commitment (Oettingen, 2000; Oettingen et al., 2012). Smither, London and Reilly (2005) stated in their review that improved performance caused by feedback depends on a recipient’s individual characteristics and perceptions of the given situation. To conclude, the employee herself makes the evaluation between received feedback and her job performance. Causal or predictable connections between received positive feedback and job performance do not exist.

The results reveal that non-verbal positive feedback, such as behaviour and gestures, are received from close co-workers (variants 2, 5, 6 and 7). In the communication literature, much of the communication is said to be non-verbal. Gestures are best understood in the specific situational and cultural context (Rayudu, 2010). The results also indicate that the working environment and the nature of work may regulate the amount of positive feedback (variants 3, 5 and 7). The construct of the feedback environment as presented by Steelman et al. (2004) implies the amount of feedback to be dependent on different facets. One aspect of the feedback environment is source availability, which consists of the amount of interaction an employee has with her supervisor or co-workers and how easy it is to get feedback from them.

6. Discussion

The aim was to find out how team leaders in a public organization experience receiving positive feedback in their everyday work settings. Results indicate that the experience of receiving positive feedback at work is connected to its particular situational context. Even though the study confirmed that positive feedback has multiple favourable effects, the majority of the effects are mediated by the features of the feedback incident. Giving relevant positive feedback requires overcoming the distinctions made between the receiver (experiencing subjects) and the working environment (the object of the experience). The strength of the existential-phenomenological approach is to open up theoretically how an experiential person is a situated person. In feedback research this means that the relevant research questions focus on the actual feedback situations as a whole: the experiential effects of given feedback on workers as situated and experienced persons in their actual work settings.
Team leaders do not have a formal organizational position of manager, but they do have the position of leader given by the group members themselves. Results illustrate the core experiential structures of received positive feedback in this kind of leader position in an organization. These core structures can be interpreted as ties between team leaders and certain situational features of their work. From this perspective, any positive experience in an organization is like glue that is forming and re-forming working communities, creating belongingness and reinforcing mutual trust. Congruent with this interpretation, results show that received positive feedback may attach team leaders more to managers than to the group members without whom the position of the leader would not even exist. Positive feedback has the power to bring people together.

The results also show the limits of this positive power. The willingness of team leaders to accept and receive positive feedback appears to be crucial. The key to this seems to be the experienced closeness to the feedback giver. More research is needed about the mechanisms that underlie how experiences of close relations are formed in organizations. Based on this study, giving or receiving positive feedback is not the origin of the close relationships. Something experientially essential between persons is occurring before the positive feedback can be truly effective.

While several studies have concluded that positive feedback is associated with improved job performance (Becker & Klimoski, 1989; Jaworski & Kohli, 1991; London et al., 1999; Chakrabarty et al., 2008) or task performance (Oettingen et al., 2012; Plakht et al., 2012), it is notable that this was not found in our study. It shows that when studying received positive feedback as an experienced phenomenon, positive feedback is not necessary for good job performance. The motives of performing a team leader's work well are not external—given positive feedback is not required. However, the motive of good job performance is neither internal nor subjective. Grounded in the results of this study, the effects of positive feedback are intervened by a recipient's personal interpretation or evaluation of the feedback. In our view, this interpretation should not be considered as a subjective or intrinsic motive. Preferably, the motive for good job or task performance lies in the holistic relations between the intentional person and the factual setting she is working with. The motive to perform well, then, is relational, and the aim of positive feedback is to facilitate these relations.

References


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TEAM LEADERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH RECEIVING POSITIVE FEEDBACK


