An Examination of Strategies for Encouraging Feedback Interest After Career Assessment

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This study examines how feedback interest after career assessment can be influenced by changing individuals’ beliefs about the importance and modifiability of the various performance dimensions. In an experiment, 82 master students completed a computerized assessment tool developed for assessing managerial potential. Results showed that participants in the experimental condition were more interested in feedback about important dimensions as opposed to unimportant dimensions and were more interested in feedback about nonmodifiable dimensions as opposed to modifiable dimensions. These findings might assist career counselors and organizations in designing strategies that direct feedback interest toward performance dimensions that are most important for their clients’ career or that are most valued in their organization.

Keywords: career assessment; feedback seeking; implicit person theory; in-basket; intervention

An essential component of all employee development activities in organizations is providing employees with feedback about their current performance level (London, 2003). In these activities, it is important to convey the feedback message in such a manner that it assists and motivates employees in taking the necessary steps toward mastering new skills and capabilities (e.g., by taking part in training programs, participating in developmental assessment centers, looking for on-the-job learning experiences). Similarly, for

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career counselors, providing their clients with feedback about their current strengths and weaknesses is a key component of career discussions (Kidd, Hirsh, & Jackson, 2004). Career assessment feedback might assist individuals in taking appropriate career decisions (changing their career orientation, acquiring new skills and abilities). However, a prerequisite for career assessment feedback to have a beneficial influence on individuals’ careers is that individuals have a propensity to attend to the feedback provided.

Indeed, almost all feedback process models have acknowledged that for feedback to be an effective development intervention, employees have to pay close attention to the feedback message provided (e.g., Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Furthermore, a number of empirical studies have demonstrated that feedback should be processed very attentively and that a maximum of cognitive resources are required for feedback to have beneficial effects on motivation, development, and performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Vancouver & Tischner, 2004). Thus, for career assessment tools to be effective feedback interventions, it is of crucial importance that organizations and career counselors ensure that employees’ attention is directed toward the most important components of the feedback message. Given the range of possible dimensions that might be included in assessments (e.g., Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000), not all aspects of the feedback message will be equally relevant to employees. For instance, not all performance dimensions in a feedback message are valued by an organization. Organizations are looking for development of these individual competencies that closely align with the competencies required by their strategic intent (e.g., Huselid, 1995; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Similarly, employees might be interested in feedback about career dimensions that are difficult to improve on or that are of little importance for their own future careers.

These findings indicate that it is of key importance that costly attempts for processing feedback are not in vain and that attention and interest of the feedback recipient is directed toward the most valued performance dimensions. Therefore, the main objective of the current study is to propose and test two strategies that can be used in employee development and career counseling to encourage feedback interest in the direction of specific performance dimensions. Given that this is a relatively new domain in the career assessment literature, we conducted a preliminary, exploratory study with students in a laboratory setting. More specifically, we tested two strategies (i.e., communicating explicit importance and modifiability beliefs) that are proposed to influence students’ feedback interest toward specific performance dimensions after career assessment. As theoretical underpinnings of
these strategies, we draw on recent developments in social psychology about the role of lay beliefs in directing attitudes, judgment, and behavior and on feedback-seeking research in organizational psychology. At a practical level, these two strategies might aid organizations and career counselors in developing more effective feedback interventions after career assessments.

**Theoretical Background**

Employees typically hold implicit beliefs about what is considered good performance in an organization. These lay beliefs of an employee form an individual theory of performance (Borman, 1987) that includes among others the content of the various performance dimensions, how knowledge, skills, and abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) are linked to performance dimensions, which KSAOs are most instrumental for successful performance and how modifiable KSAOs are (Maurer, Wrenn, Pierce, Tross, & Collins, 2003; Schleicher & Day, 1998). We propose that two aspects of individual performance theories will most likely influence the feedback interest of employees, namely (a) beliefs about the importance and (b) beliefs about the modifiability of the different KSAOs. Therefore, to direct feedback interest of employees, organizations should try to influence these beliefs by communicating and making more explicit the common theory of performance that is held in the organization.

**Importance Beliefs**

In a recent review of feedback-seeking behavior in organizations, Ashford, Blatt, and VandeWalle (2003) identified the instrumental motive to achieve a goal or perform well as one of the most dominant motives of feedback seeking. People seek feedback because it has informational value that can help them to meet goals and to regulate their behavior. For instance, previous research has shown that the higher the importance of goal attainment, the more frequently employees seek feedback (Ashford, 1986). Based on the instrumental motive driving feedback seeking, we expect that increasing or decreasing the importance of specific competencies will lead to more or less interest in feedback about these competencies. This would occur because important traits and abilities are closely associated with people’s goals and ambitions (Pelham, 1991). Important traits are instrumental to achieving long-term desired outcomes; and, thus, diagnostic information about these traits is highly valued (Trope, 1986).
Apart from the feedback-seeking literature, additional evidence about the role of importance can be found in social psychological research on attitudes and persuasion. For instance, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) examined how people consider evidence on an issue when it is of consequence to the person as opposed to inconsequential. People more systematically processed the arguments presented to them when the issue was important and consequential. Furthermore, people sought out more information and were more interested in information about important attitudes as opposed to unimportant attitudes when they were told that they would have to use these attitudes in subsequent judgments (Visser, Krosnick, & Simmons, 2003). Therefore, we expect that highlighting or playing down the importance of specific competencies will lead to the following effects:

Hypothesis 1: People will be more interested in feedback about competencies they are told to be important as opposed to competencies they are told to be unimportant.

At a practical level, it is important to note that this first mechanism for influencing people’s feedback interests is relevant to many feedback situations in organizations. For example, in recruitment and selection, organizations often convey to applicants which KSAOs are critical so that applicants know up front which competencies will play a central role in the selection procedure and in successful job fulfillment. Also, in the context of employee development and career management, organizations benefit from making explicit which competencies are crucial for the organization to sustain its competitive advantage so that people can seek feedback about these competencies and improve on them. Despite its practical relevance, we still do not know whether it is indeed possible to encourage people’s interest in feedback toward competencies that the organization considers to be important.

Modifiability Beliefs

Dweck (1986; see also Dweck & Leggett, 1988) found that people hold lay beliefs about the modifiability of personal attributes and that these lay beliefs or implicit theories have important consequences for directing attitudes, judgments, and behavior. People either believe that attributes are fixed and not modifiable (also known as an entity theory) or that they are modifiable and can be changed and improved on (also known as an incremental theory). Whereas the above-mentioned findings have been found with individuals’ generalized implicit theories, research has also shown that these theories can
be very domain specific. For instance, people can believe that intelligence is fixed, but that certain personality traits are highly malleable (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995; Maurer et al., 2003). Furthermore, research has also shown that these domain-specific lay beliefs can be manipulated by providing individuals with an explicit incremental or entity theory (Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Trope, Gervey, & Bolger, 2003).

One important consequence of this theory is that people with different lay beliefs pursue very different goals in achievement-related situations (Wood & Bandura, 1989). On one hand, people with an incremental theory exhibit a learning goal orientation to develop competence by acquiring new skills and mastering new situations. On the other hand, people with an entity theory pursue a performance goal orientation to demonstrate and validate the adequacy of one’s competence by seeking favorable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about one’s competency. Previous feedback-seeking research in organizational psychology has used this goal orientation framework and found that when people believe traits are modifiable, they tend to seek more feedback: Learning goal orientation has been consistently found to be related to the frequency of feedback seeking (Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2000). However, no studies have provided individuals with information about the modifiability of specific competencies as a way of directing their interest in feedback.

Taken together, this leads to a second mechanism that organizations and career counselors might use to encourage the feedback interest of employees. Specifically, organizations can influence feedback interest by providing employees with explicit modifiability theories for specific competencies. Again, the practical relevance of this mechanism should be clear as it might apply to various assessment, training, development, and career management interventions in organizations. We formulate the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: People will be more interested in feedback about competencies they are told to be modifiable as opposed to competencies they are told to be not modifiable.

Finally, in an exploratory sense, we examined whether importance beliefs interacted with modifiability beliefs in predicting feedback interest across performance dimensions. Dunning (1995) examined the impact of trait importance and modifiability on students’ task preferences and did not find an interaction effect between trait importance and modifiability. Therefore,
no a priori hypothesis was articulated regarding the direction of a possible interaction effect.

Method

Participants

The participants \((N = 82)\) were final-year students at a university in Belgium from diverse disciplines: psychology, medical-social sciences, economics. The participants were recruited during a final-year course on Human Resource Management and received extra course credit for participation. Participants had an average age of 23.1 years \((SD = 1.8)\); 73\% were female \((n = 60)\), 27\% male \((n = 22)\). We did not dispose of information about ethnic background of the participants. However, the large majority of students taking this course typically are White.

Design

We used a 3-factor experimental design containing a between-persons factor, consisting of the experimental versus the control condition, and two within-person variables that were manipulated in the experimental condition, Importance (high vs. low) and Modifiability (high vs. low).

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a computerized in-basket exercise that simulated daily work activities of a plant manager in a paint manufacturing firm. In-basket exercises are often used in development and career counseling contexts in organizations (Thornton & Cleveland, 1990). The in-basket exercise used was developed by Tett, Steele, and Beauregard (2003; see also, Anseel & Lievens, 2006). They developed this computerized in-basket to measure four elementary managerial competencies that are included in a recently developed competency taxonomy (Tett et al., 2000): coordinating, decisiveness, problem awareness, and information management.\(^1\) Completing the computerized in-basket took participants on average about 1 hr. On completion of the in-basket, participants were told that there would not be time enough to receive feedback about all competencies. Therefore, participants were asked to indicate about which competencies they were most interested to receive feedback. Finally, participants received a feedback report with
quantitative and narrative feedback about their performance on the in-basket. At the end of the session, participants were asked to report their general comments about the computerized in-basket in writing.

**Importance and Modifiability Manipulations**

Participants were randomly assigned to either a baseline (control) condition \((n = 41)\) or the experimental condition \((n = 41)\). In the baseline condition, participants were introduced to the computerized in-basket exercise and were given a short definition of the four competencies measured in the in-basket. After that, they immediately started working on the in-basket. In the experimental condition, participants were also introduced to the in-basket and also received a short definition of the four competencies. However, prior to working on the in-basket exercise, people listened to a briefing that was given under the pretext of better informing participants about the background of the different competencies measured in the in-basket.

At this point, participants in the experimental condition were instructed about the supposed importance and modifiability of the four competencies. Each of the four competencies was put high or low on the importance and modifiability dimensions.

The importance manipulation was adapted from Butler (1993) and Dunning (1995) and consisted of the following instruction:

> Being tested on the abilities **Problem Awareness** and **Coordinating** might be of interest to you. Several studies have shown that these competencies determine managerial effectiveness in professional careers. Therefore, tests that measure these two competencies often appear on business schools entrance exams and selection tests for junior managers. Conversely, **Information Management** and **Decisiveness** are not that important in determining managerial effectiveness. Although they are nice to have, they are not of overriding importance. Therefore, these competencies are seldom tested in business schools entrance exams and selection tests for junior managers.

The modifiability manipulation was adapted from Dunning (1995) and Trope et al. (2003) and consisted of the following instruction:

> **Coordinating and Information Management** are two managerial competencies that are easy to acquire. They are two of the most changeable, least stable managerial abilities around. Research shows that these two competencies can easily be improved by learning, experience and intensive practice. Conversely,
Decisiveness and Problem Awareness are two managerial competencies that are hard to acquire. They are two of the most stable, least changeable managerial abilities around. Research shows that these managerial competencies are closely related to innate intelligence and personality. Therefore, they are very hard to develop by practice.

As a summary of the manipulations, participants were presented with a figure depicting the four competencies on the importance and modifiability dimensions. Finally, participants were told they could start working on the in-basket exercise.

Measure

Interest in feedback. After completing the in-basket exercise, participants were told that they would have the opportunity to go through a feedback report generated by the computer. However, as there would not be enough time for participants to review the report in its entirety, they were asked to specify those parts they most wanted to examine. The interest in feedback measure was taken from Trope and Neter (1994; see also Trope et al., 2003). Participants were asked “How interested are you in your performance on each of the 4 competencies?” They indicated how interested they were in their performance on the in-basket exercise for each of the 4 competencies on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all interested, 7 = extremely interested).

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants in the experimental condition were asked to rate the perceived importance (1 = not important, 7 = very important) and modifiability (1 = very hard to modify, 7 = very easy to modify) of the four managerial competencies at the start and at the end of the session (thus, before and after the manipulation). In support of the manipulation, a repeated measures ANOVA with the importance ratings of the competencies as dependent variables indicated that participants rated coordinating (M = 5.76 vs. 6.32, p < .001) and problem awareness (M = 6.11 vs. 6.41, p < .01) as more important after the manipulation than before the manipulation, whereas decisiveness (M = 6.00 vs. 4.65, p < .001) and information management (M = 5.87 vs. 4.22, p < .001) were rated less important after the manipulation than before the manipulation. A repeated measures ANOVA with the modifiability ratings as dependent
variables indicated that coordinating ($M = 5.14$ vs. $6.11$, $p < .001$) and information management ($M = 5.90$ vs. $6.24$, $p < .05$) were rated as more modifiable after the manipulation than before the manipulation, whereas problem awareness ($M = 4.02$ vs. $3.30$, $p < .01$) and decisiveness ($M = 3.87$ vs. $3.13$, $p < .01$) were rated less modifiable after the manipulation than before the manipulation, indicating that the modifiability manipulation was also successful. Thus, the pre- and postassessment of participants’ perceptions demonstrate strong support that the manipulations were successful in changing people’s importance and modifiability beliefs in the intended direction.

**Involvement and Demand Characteristics**

Participants completed an additional questionnaire measuring their involvement in the in-basket exercise based on six items on a 7-point scale, with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale included items such as, “The background information we received was realistic,” “I was motivated to perform well on this exercise,” and “I received sufficient information to perform well on this exercise.” The mean for this scale was $5.70$ ($SD = .63$, $\alpha = .70$), suggesting that participants, in general, were involved in this session.

We also disposed of an indication of possible demand characteristics. When asked about their general comments after the session, none of the participants in the experimental condition wrote down a comment that was in any way related to the manipulation or the nature of the competencies. All comments concerned possible improvements in the in-basket exercise (e.g., less items, different layout, more process feedback) or dealt with their aspirations of becoming a manager, indicating that demand characteristics probably might not be a main concern in the current study.

**Hypothesis 1**

Our two hypotheses were analyzed using ANOVA with Importance and Modifiability as the within-persons factors, and Baseline condition as the between-persons factor. The dependent variable consisted of the feedback interest measure. The descriptive statistics for the specific managerial competencies across the two conditions are given in Table 1. Feedback interest in the baseline condition reflects general interest in feedback about the competencies without any influential information, whereas feedback interest in the experimental condition reflects the influence of the importance and modifiability manipulations.
Hypothesis 1 posited that people would be more interested in feedback about competencies they are told to be important as opposed to competencies they are told to be unimportant. As can be seen in Table 2, we found a significant Importance x Condition interaction effect, $F(1, 80) = 42.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$. Table 3 presents mean feedback interest based on the Importance dimensions for the baseline and the experimental condition. A planned comparison indicated that people in the experimental condition were more interested in feedback about the important competencies as compared to the unimportant competencies, $F(1, 80) = 60.44, p < .001$. Then, to examine whether these differences were not caused by a priori differences in feedback interest, we compared feedback interest in the experimental condition with feedback interest in the baseline condition. A planned comparison indicated that people were less interested in feedback about unimportant competencies in the experimental condition as compared to feedback interest in these same competencies in the baseline condition, $F(1, 80) = 12.42, p < .001$, as can be seen in Figure 1. Conversely, people were more interested in feedback about the important competencies in the experimental condition as compared to feedback interest in these competencies in the baseline condition, $F(1, 80) = 13.91, p < .001$. As shown in Figure 1, a reversal in feedback interest took place in the experimental condition. The competencies that received least feedback interest in the baseline condition received most feedback interest in the experimental condition. All of this provides support for Hypothesis 1 and rules out the possibility that the differences found were due to a priori differences in feedback interest.

### Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Feedback Interest in Specific Managerial Competencies in Baseline and Experimental Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Interest ($N = 82$)</th>
<th>Baseline Condition</th>
<th>Experimental Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decisiveness</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Management</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Awareness</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating</td>
<td>5.85</td>
<td>1.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $n = 41$ in both conditions.
Hypothesis 2 stated that people would be more interested in feedback about competencies they were told to be modifiable as opposed to competencies they were told to be nonmodifiable. As shown in Table 2, we found a

### Table 2
**Analysis of Variance for the Full Factorial Model With Feedback Interest as Dependent Variable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition (C)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2.87*</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within subjects</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance (I)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42.06**</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifiability (M)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.70**</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I x M</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I x M x C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1.61*</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a. Equals the mean square error.  
*p < .01. **p < .001.

### Table 3
**Mean Feedback Interest for the Importance and Modifiability Dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Interest (N = 82)</th>
<th>Experimental Condition</th>
<th>Corresponding Baseline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>6.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifiability</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *n = 41 in both conditions.*

**Hypothesis 2**

Hypothesis 2 stated that people would be more interested in feedback about competencies they were told to be modifiable as opposed to competencies they were told to be nonmodifiable. As shown in Table 2, we found a
significant Modifiability x Condition interaction effect, $F(1, 80) = 14.70$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$. We first looked at the within-persons effects in the experimental condition. People in the experimental condition were more interested in feedback about the competencies that were said to be nonmodifiable as compared to the competencies that were said to modifiable, $F(1, 80) = 24.88$, $p < .001$. Thus, as can be seen in Figure 2, the effects of the Modifiability manipulation were in the opposite direction as was expected. This pattern was confirmed when we compared feedback interest in the baseline and experimental condition. On one hand, people were more interested in feedback about those competencies that were said to be nonmodifiable as compared to
the baseline condition, $F(1,80) = 5.15, p < .05$. On the other hand, participants were less interested in feedback about those competencies that were said to be modifiable as compared to the baseline condition, $F(1, 80) = 4.55, p < .05$. Again, a reversal in feedback interest in the experimental condition could be observed as compared to the baseline condition, but not in the hypothesized direction. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Table 2 also reports that the Importance and Modifiability manipulations did not interact to predict feedback interest. The Importance x Modifiability x Condition interaction effect was not statistically significant, $F(1, 80) = 2.20, p > .05$. Finally, to explore whether there were gender differences in feedback interest, we also conducted all analyses with gender as an additional between-subjects factor. We did not find significant interaction effects between Importance x Condition x Gender, $F(1, 78) = .16, p > .05$, Modifiability x Condition x Gender, $F(1,78) = 1.36, p > .05$, or Importance x Modifiability x Condition x Gender, $F(1,78) = 1.98, p > .05$, indicating that in general men and women expressed similar feedback interests across treatments.

**Discussion**

In recent years, a new perspective in feedback research has emerged, attributing a more prominent and active role to the feedback recipient in the feedback process (for a review, see Ashford et al., 2003). The current study contributes to this research stream by examining how people’s attention is directed to performance feedback after completing a career assessment.

Our findings suggest that strategies to communicate specific aspects of a desired theory of performance might be effective in influencing feedback interest. First, as demonstrated by the manipulation checks, participants’ lay perceptions about the importance and modifiability of specific performance dimensions significantly changed after they received information about these dimensions. Second, participants who received information about the modifiability and importance dimensions exhibited significantly different feedback interest patterns than participants who did not receive information about the underlying dimensions of the competencies. A reversal in feedback interest could be observed in the experimental condition as compared to the baseline condition, illustrating the strength of these strategies. This seems to suggest that individuals’ lay beliefs or implicit theories are indeed one of the main factors underlying feedback interests.

Although affecting lay beliefs was successful in influencing feedback interest, the direction of change was not always as hypothesized. First, the
The effect of highlighting or downplaying the importance of specific dimensions on feedback interest was in the hypothesized direction. Individuals were more interested in feedback about competencies from which the importance was highlighted as compared to competencies from which the importance was played down, thus confirming previous social psychological research that demonstrated how importance beliefs guide cognition and behavior in self-evaluative situations (e.g., Pelham, 1991).

Second, emphasizing the modifiability or nonmodifiability of specific competencies resulted in a feedback interest pattern that was in the opposite
direction as was expected. Individuals were more interested in feedback about nonmodifiable competencies as opposed to modifiable competencies. This is surprising as previous research indicated that people are driven by self-improvement concerns and seek more feedback when they believe traits are modifiable (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; VandeWalle, 2003). One possible explanation is the activation of a self-assessment motive instead of a self-improvement motive in an assessment context. In the current study, it is plausible that participants were not highly motivated by self-improvement strivings because they knew they would not be assessed again on these competencies in the immediate future. Instead, the ambition to obtain a management position in the future might have instigated a self-assessment motive. In this case, the nonmodifiable competencies might provide more diagnostic information about their potential as future managers.

Implications for Practice

The current findings have important practical implications for organizations developing effective employee development practices and career counselors conducting effective career assessment and discussions. First, they can assist organizations in designing strategies that direct employee feedback seeking toward the specific performance dimensions that are valued in the organization. Organizations are increasingly designing various human resources practices (e.g., performance appraisal, compensation, selection, and training systems) to encourage the development of the KSAOs or competencies that are highly valued in the organizations. The current study demonstrates that, as an additional mechanism, organizations can also encourage feedback interest to develop highly valued KSAOs or competencies in their organization. This can be done by circulating mission statements on a wide scale (e.g., on the intranet), by emphasizing important competencies in recruitment advertisements, performance appraisal approaches, and employee development plans and by consistently and explicitly promoting employees based on important competencies.

Second, the findings obtained might also be crucial for career counselors because they might help them to encourage their clients to pay attention to feedback about those competencies that are of key importance for advancing their careers. By emphasizing before the career assessment, that specific competencies are important for their future careers and are difficult to acquire, career counselors might ensure that their clients’ attention is directed to those performance dimensions that are essential for their development and
career. This can be done by straightforward communicating to their clients which competencies are most important and explaining why they are important. However, recently more elaborate and effective interventions have been developed that have proven to be useful in changing individuals’ implicit beliefs about their abilities and competencies (e.g., Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005; Latham & Budworth, 2006). More specifically, these interventions are based on self-persuasion techniques such as verbal self-guidance, counterattitudinal reflection, counterattitudinal idea generation, counterattitudinal advocacy, and cognitive dissonance induction (Aronson, 1999). These techniques might be a useful influence tactic for career counselors because the resulting message comes from a source that people almost always consider credible, trustworthy, respected, and liked, namely, themselves.

Limitations

The current study is not without limitations. A first concern deals with generalizability. It should be acknowledged that some organizational realities could not be simulated. For instance, participants were master students and may have had little at stake when participating in the career-assessment session. However, it should be noted that the current study was set up to be a preliminary, exploratory test of the two proposed strategies; and thus, the results of the current study should be interpreted with some precautions. Future research might want to replicate the findings obtained in an organizational setting with actual employees. A second limitation is that we did not counterbalance the competencies over all the experimental manipulations. However, by including a baseline condition and a manipulation check, we ensured that the observed changes in feedback interest can be attributed to the manipulations.

Note

1. In a pilot study, 60 master students rated their standing on the four managerial competencies relative to their fellow students on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (bottom five percent) to 10 (top five percent). A one-way within-subjects ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the self-ratings on the four competencies, $F(3, 57) = 1.77, p > .05$, indicating that participants on average would have the same performance expectations about the four competencies: coordinating ($M = 6.10, SD = 1.28$), decisiveness ($M = 5.90, SD = 1.24$), problem awareness ($M = 5.77, SD = 1.21$), and information management ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.26$). This is important because previous research has shown that performance expectations influence ego costs associated with feedback seeking and, thus, might influence people’s feedback interests.
References


Frederik Anseel received his PhD from Ghent University, Belgium, and is currently assistant professor at the Department of Personnel Management and Work and Organizational Psychology at the same university. His current research interests mainly focus on strategies for enhancing feedback interventions in organizations. His work has been presented at several international conferences and has appeared in American Psychologist, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, British Journal of Management, Applied Psychology: An International Review, Educational and Psychological Measurement and Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology.

Filip Lievens is professor at the Department of Personnel Management and Work and Organizational Psychology at Ghent University, Belgium. In 1999, he earned his PhD from the same university. His current research interests focus on alternative selection procedures (e.g., assessment centers, situational judgment tests), high-stakes testing, and organizational attractiveness. He is the author of more than 50 articles and 100 presentations at international conferences. His articles appeared in the Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Applied Psychology: An international Review, and International Journal of Selection and Assessment.