Providing feedback is one of the most widely accepted psychological interventions for learning and development. The belief that giving feedback to employees is beneficial for individual and organizational performance is also strongly held in organizations. Therefore, providing feedback to employees lies at the heart of a wide range of often costly and time-intensive performance management tools in organizations. However, contrary to these beliefs, meta-analytic evidence shows that feedback interventions do not produce unequivocal positive effects on performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

One line of theoretical work building on this seminal meta-analysis has argued that feedback interventions that direct attention to the self, making feedback recipients think about who they are, should be avoided because they are detrimental for performance improvement (Vancouver & Tischner, 2004). In contrast, another line of theoretical work has sought to understand how the self is implied in feedback processes by drawing on self-motives research in social psychology (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). A central assumption of this line of work is that feedback is essentially a self-related phenomenon and that the effectiveness of the feedback process depends on the dynamics of the self (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Anseel, Lievens, & Levy, 2007). According to this perspective, how people deal with feedback depends on a complicated interplay of competing self-motives, with performance improvement resulting only when self-improvement motives outperform self-enhancement motives.

This chapter builds and extends the self-related perspective on feedback processes by putting future work selves (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012) forward as a mechanism to explain why and when self-improvement strivings may prevail over self-enhancement strivings in feedback episodes in organizations. Drawing on construal level theory of psychological distance (Liberman...
which proposes that psychologically distant situations are construed on a higher level (i.e., using more abstract and central features) than more proximal situations, we propose that future work selves determine the construal level at which feedback is processed. The central premise of this chapter is that a salient future work self is likely to increase the psychological distance when processing negative feedback, thereby shifting the focus to a high-level construal and downplaying self-enhancement strivings relative to self-improvement strivings.

Our chapter is structured as follows. We start by presenting the role of self-motives in understanding feedback interventions. We review previous research in organizational settings and delineate how self-motive activation may guide two key criteria in feedback processes, namely feedback reactions and feedback-seeking behavior. Next, we introduce future work selves and outline how construal level theory of psychological distance can help understand when and how self-improvement motives may prevail over self-enhancement motives. In a next step, we propose how future work selves determine the level of construal people use when seeking and responding to feedback. We provide a model of the feedback process integrating the concepts of psychological distance and future work selves. We end the chapter with practical implications of this new perspective for feedback interventions in organizations.

The Self in Feedback Interventions

Feedback is a key aspect of how employees regulate their efforts and performance in organizations. The most influential models of motivation (i.e., goal striving and self-regulation) in the work environment also attribute a central role to feedback (Locke & Latham, 2004; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Vancouver, 2005). The basic idea is that people need some type of information about their current performance to be able to regulate their behavior at work. Feedback information signals how their actual performance levels may be inconsistent with their goals or perceived performance levels. Such discrepancies may provide the necessary motivational impetus and diagnostic guidance for employees to adjust their effort, work strategies, or their goals.

Although such a process of comparing current states and aspired goals on the basis of feedback information and regulating behavior in response to observed discrepancies may intuitively seem straightforward, research has shown that employees do not always respond to feedback constructively. We distinguish between two major streams of research, depending on feedback phase. As described below, the first stream focuses on how people react to feedback, whereas the second stream concentrates on feedback-seeking behavior.
Feedback Reactions

How people react to the feedback they receive is a key criterion for understanding why feedback interventions are effective, and thus under which conditions they might result in performance improvement. Although feedback reactions vary considerably (Keeping & Levy, 2000), they can generally be classified as affective (e.g., satisfaction with feedback, emotions), cognitive (e.g., perceived accuracy, utility, depth of processing), and behavioral (e.g., discussing feedback, changing behavior) (Keeping & Levy, 2000). Process models depicting the different phases of the feedback process attribute a central place to feedback reactions (Anseel et al., 2015; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). In line with these models, prior empirical research has demonstrated that feedback has an effect on development and performance only if people react positively to it (Anseel & Lievens, 2007; Feys, Anseel, & Wille, 2011; Kinicki, Prussia, Wu, & McKee-Ryan, 2004). As a result of these process models and findings, research sought to identify the characteristics in a feedback intervention that may engender positive reactions in feedback recipients. Hence, a variety of characteristics such as feedback source (Albright & Levy, 1995), feedback specificity (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004), feedback format (Feys et al., 2011), feedback timing (Lurie & Swaminathan, 2009), and feedback frequency (Lam et al., 2011) have been studied. The majority of studies, though, focused on the sign of the feedback (whether it is positive or negative) and its effect at different levels of analysis (such as feedback directed towards teams vs. individuals; DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, Milner, & Wiechmann, 2004; Podsakoff & Farh, 1989; Vancouver & Tischner, 2004).

The fundamental question in these studies has been whether it is better either to inform employees when they are performing badly and thus provide negative feedback, or to simply give positive feedback to stimulate positive reactions, leading to higher likelihood of subsequent behavioral changes. The evidence for the latter position has been overwhelming. Virtually all studies across different feedback settings examining how people react to positive or negative feedback have found that feedback sign is the strongest determinant of feedback reactions: people are more satisfied after positive feedback, they see positive feedback as more accurate, and report being more likely to act on it (Atwater & Brett, 2005; Brett & Atwater, 2001; Ilies, De Pater, & Judge, 2006). This leads to a paradox for feedback interventions. Although the previously described discrepancy-signaling function of feedback implies that people need negative feedback to regularly update their self-regulation efforts, research findings show that people generally react unfavorably to negative feedback and dismiss it as inaccurate. Thus, employees who do not perform up to standard will most likely receive negative feedback but will react unfavorably to it. Therefore, they will be less likely to act upon the feedback received although they need it the
most. In sum, insights from feedback research pose a conundrum for managers seeking to remedy underperformance in employees through feedback, urging for a better understanding of how to approach employees when giving feedback.

**Feedback-Seeking Behavior**

A strand of feedback research that evolved in relative isolation from the study of feedback reactions focuses on when and how people decide to seek feedback themselves. Employees are not merely passive, waiting for supervisors to give them feedback but are proactively navigating their work environment, seeking out feedback information wherever they can get it and whenever they need it. This line of research depicts feedback seeking as a valuable resource for individuals, because it may facilitate their adaptation to new environments, help them monitor goal progress, and potentially help improve performance (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Studies addressed different aspects of feedback seeking: (a) the method used to seek feedback, (b) the frequency of feedback-seeking behavior, (c) the timing of feedback seeking, (d) the characteristics of the target of feedback seeking, and (e) the performance dimension on which feedback is sought. Although each of these aspects received some attention, most of the literature aimed to understand the antecedents and consequences of the frequency with which employees use two methods of feedback seeking (Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016): inquiry and monitoring. Individuals seek feedback through inquiry when they directly ask others (e.g., their supervisor or co-workers) for feedback. Conversely, feedback monitoring implies scanning the work environment and other people’s behavior in order to glean information that can be used for privately evaluating one’s own performance without directly asking anyone.

It is assumed that deciding on the method to seek feedback results from an internal cost-value analysis, that is, which method brings the most value with the least cost (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). For instance, although inquiry is a useful method to learn how others evaluate one’s performance, individuals often report concerns relating to the risks associated with direct feedback seeking (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). Employees may not want to burden their supervisor or appear insecure to others by seeking feedback. When seeking feedback in public, negative feedback can come at the risk of losing face (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). This makes feedback monitoring the safer option, although the feedback obtained accordingly may be less informative. Conversely, employees may also use feedback-seeking behavior as a deliberate impression-management strategy to convey a favorable image to their supervisor or colleagues. In fact, employees might strategically decide to seek feedback on successes or on certain aspects of their performance where they are aware that positive feedback will follow (e.g., after a successful presentation). Thus, by openly seeking positive feedback and avoiding negative feedback, employees...
may find that strategically managing their feedback-seeking behavior can help them protect their self-esteem while at the same time presenting a favorable image to others (Moss, Valenzi, & Taggart, 2003). Strategically astute employees may also adapt their feedback-seeking strategies in even cleverer ways to match the type of audience from which they are seeking feedback in order to yield optimal results. Ashford and Tsui (1991), for example, found that managers who primarily sought negative feedback from their subordinates were seen as more effective by their subordinates than managers who merely sought positive feedback.

On the basis of this brief discussion, it becomes clear that it is naive to think that people seek feedback solely driven by the desire to obtain accurate diagnostic information for improving their performance. Feedback-seeking behavior results from a complex cost–benefit analysis wherein different motives compete for attention (Anseel & Lievens, 2007; Anseel et al., 2007). This means on the one hand that the feedback obtained from feedback-seeking efforts may not always be the best reflection of one’s performance level. On the other hand, it remains unclear to what extent feedback-seekers will deliberately process the resulting feedback and use it for regulating their performance. It is therefore not surprising that empirical research into the relationship between feedback-seeking behavior and performance yielded mixed results. In a recent meta-analysis of the feedback-seeking literature, Anseel and colleagues (2015) did not find a meaningful meta-analytic correlation between feedback-seeking behavior and task performance, calling for more process research disentangling the different feedback-seeking strategies, their effects on the feedback-giver, and the resulting feedback dynamic. Again, this puts organizations and managers in a difficult situation, echoing the feedback paradox that was observed earlier when discussing feedback reactions. Although textbooks urge organizations to design work environments that encourage employees to seek feedback, a substantial part of these feedback-seeking attempts might be in vain, because they are not oriented towards performance improvement but rather serve ego-protection and impression-management purposes.

**Self-Motives in the Feedback Process**

To solve the feedback paradox in organizations, we need to gain a better understanding of how individuals’ cognition and behavior in feedback situations are driven by a complex interplay of competing self-motives (Anseel & Lievens, 2007; Anseel et al., 2015; Sedikides, Luke, & Hepper, 2016). Along these lines, an extensive stream of research in social psychology has systematically examined how selecting, processing, remembering, and reacting to information about the self is driven by a subtle mix of underlying motivations. A basic tenet of this domain is that self-evaluation is motivated and serves an ultimate purpose, such as self-enhancement or self-improvement (Banaji & Prentice 1994; Sedikides &
Gregg 2003; Sedikides & Strube 1997). Although we acknowledge that several classifications of these self-motives have been articulated, for the current purpose of understanding feedback dynamics in organizational settings, we propose to distinguish these two broad classes of strivings (see also Ferris & Sedikides, this volume). A first set of strivings, which we call self-enhancement strivings, are concerned with stability through protection and confirmation of the self-concept (cf. Kwang & Swann, 2010, for more subtle distinctions and debate). A second set of strivings, self-improvement strivings, relate to self-concept change through accurate assessment and self-change.

Self-enhancement strivings are the dominant motive when people deal with information in evaluative situations. The desire to think well of oneself is one of the most important and strongest human motivations, with its expressions consistently observed across cultures (Sedikides, Gaertner, & Cai, 2015) and its origins deeply wired in the brain (Cai, Wu, Shi, Gu, & Sedikides, 2016). The self-concept, once formed, is fairly stable and generally positive. Subsequent information inconsistent with the self-concept creates a great deal of discomfort. To avoid this type of discomfort, people go out of their way to seek positive information that confirms their positive self-views, compare themselves with others who are worse off to feel better about themselves, react positively to information that puts them in a favorable light, and generally remember self-related positive information better than self-discrepant information (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). The self-enhancement motive is especially strong in psychologically ‘unsafe’ environments where the positivity of the self-concept is under threat. People who experience a threat to the self-concept (e.g., the mere prospect of receiving negative information) are more likely to exhibit behaviors that would lead to a positive view of oneself to reaffirm the self and establish a feeling of overall positivity (Sedikides, 2012; Steele, 1988).

A second broad group of motives is connected to the ultimate goal of self-improvement. Growth is a fundamental characteristic of human nature, as reflected in many philosophical, cultural, and psychological traditions (for reviews, see Gaertner, Sedikides, & Cai, 2012; Sedikides, & Hepper, 2009), with people generally having a strong drive to seek to improve their traits, abilities, and skills. Evidence for this strong drive towards self-improvement in evaluative situations can be found across different research streams. For instance, cancer patients make upward comparisons when choosing interaction partners among other cancer victims. When asked about their feedback preferences, people openly report a desire for self-improvement feedback (Tuckey, Brewer, & Williamson, 2002). Similarly, young convicted criminals emphasize that they want to receive improvement-oriented feedback from their counselors (Neiss, Sedikides, Shahinfar, & Kupersmidt, 2006). This tendency for self-improvement is most pronounced in non-self-threatening situations and when improvement is
relevant and likely. For instance, in a series of experiments by Trope, Gerven, and Bolger (2003), participants who were either high or low on perceived social ability were granted the opportunity to receive either strength-focused or weakness-focused feedback. In one experiment, participants believed their skills were either modifiable or unmodifiable. In another experiment, participants believed that their ability was either controllable or uncontrollable. Participants low (vs. high) in ability expressed stronger preferences for weakness-focused (rather than strength-focused) feedback when they perceived control over their ability – that is, when they regarded the ability as modifiable or controllable. As demonstrated by this study (see also Gaertner et al., 2012), an important precondition for evaluative information to serve self-improvement purposes is that it provides individuals with accurate information on crucial weaknesses, and thus that it implies negative feedback. When driven by self-improvement motives, people will show an interest in realistic self-assessment by acquiring accurate feedback that may help them in remedying weaknesses for self-betterment.

In sum, each of these two broad categories of motivational strivings is important in guiding behavior and information processing in evaluative situations (Banaji & Prentice 1994; Sedikides & Strube, 1995). A subtle interplay of individual differences (e.g., personal beliefs about modifiability) and situational characteristics (e.g., non-self-threatening situations) modulates the activation and expression of the self-motives and determines which one of the two motives prevails. This brief overview clarifies that insight into the potentially conflicting dynamics of self-enhancement versus self-improvement is crucial to understand the feedback paradox. For people to seek feedback for genuine self-improvement and respond favorably to negative feedback in organizations, underlying self-improvement strivings need to prevail over the typically more dominant self-enhancement strivings. While several individual factors and situational factors may be instrumental in creating such conditions (see Anseel et al., 2007, for an overview), this chapter advances one specific aspect of an individual’s self-concept that may be particularly important in shaping strong self-improvement strivings in work contexts, namely future work selves.

Future Work Selves

Future work selves are “representations of the self in the future that encapsulate individually significant hopes and aspirations in relation to work” (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012, p. 581). Future work selves form part of an individual’s self-concept, the collection of self-conceptualizations that – when activated – shape intra- and interpersonal processes (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Future work selves constitute a type of possible selves, which are self-conceptualizations that reflect not current selves, but hoped for, feared, or expected selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). They represent “self-defining goal[s]” (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006, p. 1677), as personalized representations of aspirations and motives (Markus &
Nurius, 1986). Strauss et al. (2012) proposed that future work selves have three defining characteristics that distinguish them from other types of possible selves. They are: (a) explicitly future-oriented, rather than reflecting selves that the individual could be in the present, (b) positive, desired selves, and (c) specific to work. Given that future work selves are selves that are approached rather than avoided, they are likely to be particularly effective in regulating behavior (Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997). Their domain-specificity implies that they are most relevant to processes and behaviors related to individuals’ working lives (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

Like other possible selves, future work selves have two functions: they “provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954), and they direct future-oriented behavior. Research to date has primarily paid attention to the latter, and has explored the role of future work selves in motivating future-oriented behavior. Specifically, studies have focused on future work-self salience (Guan et al., 2014; Strauss et al., 2012; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015). Future work-self salience refers to the extent to which future work selves are clear and easily accessible (King & Raspin, 2004; Strauss et al., 2012). Future work selves that are salient are more likely to be activated and form part of the working self-concept, the “shifting array of accessible self-knowledge” (Markus & Wurf, 1987, p. 306), and therefore have a stronger influence on behavior. Correspondingly, individuals with a more salient future work self engage in higher levels of proactive career behavior, after controlling for competing concepts such as career identity and future orientation (Strauss et al., 2012). High levels of future work-self salience are associated with greater career adaptability (Guan et al., 2014; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) as well as with greater job search self-efficacy and job search success (Guan et al., 2014). In a field experiment, participants high in future orientation who underwent a training and development intervention designed to increase the salience of their future work self became more proactive in shaping the future of their organization (Strauss & Parker, in press). In a time-lagged study, future work-self salience was associated with a significant increase in meaning in life over the course of three months (Zhang, Hirschi, Herrmann, Wei, & Zhang, 2016). Together, these studies highlight the role of salient future work selves as incentives for future-oriented behavior, and provide support for their contribution to meaningful careers.

The effect of future work-self salience is further enhanced by another quality of future work selves: elaboration (Strauss et al., 2012). Elaboration refers to the degree of detail and complexity in the cognitive representation of a future work self, and is similar to the concept of cognitive complexity (Strauss et al., 2012). Elaboration of selves is typically inferred from the level of detail in their narrative descriptions, controlling for the word count of the narrative (King & Raspin, 2004; King & Smith, 2004; Strauss et al., 2012). On the basis of self-complexity theory, Strauss et al. (2012) argued that more elaborate future work selves which
contain “a larger and more diverse range of features” (p. 583) would have a stronger effect on future-oriented behavior. Self-complexity theory (Linville, 1985, 1987) proposes that when a person’s self-knowledge contains only a small number of independent self-aspects, his or her self-appraisal is more vulnerable to negative feedback regarding these self-aspects (Linville, 1985, 1987). Correspondingly, individuals with a high number of independent self-aspects are better able to attend to negative feedback (Stein, 1994). Although there is considerable debate about the role of self-complexity for individuals’ well-being (McConnell et al., 2005) and about how self-complexity should be assessed (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002), there is substantial support for the notion that affect can spread throughout the self-concept to connected self-aspects (Renaud & McConnell, 2002; for review, see: Koch & Shepperd, 2004; McConnell & Strain, 2007).

This principle also applies to possible selves (Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992). As those with more elaborate future work selves are more able to attend to information that may contradict or threaten their future work self, they are also more able to adapt their plans and plan for contingencies and persist in their future-oriented behavior. In line with these arguments, Strauss et al. (2012) found that future work-self salience was more strongly related to proactive career behavior for research participants who provided more elaborate future work-self narratives.

A growing body of research thus highlights the role of future work selves for future-oriented behavior. In contrast, the second function of future work selves, their role in interpreting and evaluating current self-views (Markus & Nurius, 1986), has so far received little attention. We argue that this function of future work selves is critical for understanding how feedback episodes unfold. Drawing on temporal construal theory (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Liberman & Trope, 2014), we propose that future work selves play an important role in shaping how feedback is interpreted by determining its psychological distance.

**Construal Level Theory of Psychological Distance**

A unique aspect of human cognition is the ability to mentally travel to places and times where one is not physically present (Waytz, Hershfield, & Tamir, 2015). The mental representations people make of pictured objects, events, persons, and actions in other places and times, however, depend on the psychological distance between these targets and themselves. Psychological distance refers to the different ways in which an event, object or any other target can be removed from one’s own experience in the here and now (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The distance can be temporal (i.e., time), spatial (i.e., physical space), hypothetical (i.e., imagining that an event is likely or unlikely), or social (e.g., more similar persons feel socially closer), so that any target that exists beyond oneself is experienced as existing at some psychological distance from the self.
(Liberman & Trope, 2008). Psychological distance increases as a target becomes further removed from one’s own direct experience.

Construal level theory of psychological distance (Liberman & Trope, 2008) explains how any object, event, or action can be mentally represented at varying levels of construal ranging from high to low. A high-level construal is abstract, global, decontextualized, superordinate, and captures the central and defining features of the target. A low-level construal, on the other hand, is concrete, local, contextualized, and includes subordinate and secondary features of the target. Thus, as psychological distance decreases, people form a more concrete, detailed picture of a stimulus, incorporating more secondary features in their mental image. Repeated cognitive associations between psychological distance and high-level construal lead to stronger connections between low-level construal processes and proximal events (in time and space). In contrast, moving from a low- to a high-level construal involves retaining the central features of the target and omitting features that are deemed incidental and peripheral as a result of this process of abstraction (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For example, manipulating whether people think about an event at a high level of construal (such as by asking them to think about the event in “why” terms, which involves thinking more abstractly about the underlying reasons for completing a task), or at a low level of construal (by asking them to think about the event in “how” terms, which involves thinking about the necessary details of performing the task), can influence how far in the future people judge the event to be (Liberman et al., 2007).

Importantly, this relationship appears to be bidirectional. Not only do higher-level construals allow people to consider more distant targets, but distant targets also tend to evoke higher-level construals. For example, a low-level construal of being a leader may reflect the specific behaviors needed to attain the goal of being a good leader (the “means”) such as following up on an important project, or supporting a subordinate struggling to get his/her job done; a high-level construal may instead focus on leadership as a general trait one possesses or on the reasons why being a good leader is a desirable characteristic (Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003). By extracting the gist, the incidental and peripheral information is lost but the central information and its meaningfulness is retained. Thus, changing the psychological distance of an event can also influence how it is construed.

A key assumption of construal level theory is that levels serve to diminish or expand one’s mental horizons across time and space (Liberman & Trope, 2014; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Low-level construals diminish people’s mental horizons and help them immerse in the immediate environment. High-level construals, in contrast, expand their mental horizons and help to also picture stimuli that are removed from the current experience, because they focus on aspects that are central and stable across various contexts. High-level construals are those that remain stable across time and distance. They capture the common
aspects among various manifestations of a given target and ignore specific aspects of the target that may fluctuate depending on circumstances. Whereas low-level thought is highly contextualized and thus favors consideration of proximal targets, high-level thought is less biased by proximity and extends to both near and far targets. Construing distant objects at a higher level creates a representation of the target that traverses psychological distance in a stable way. Hence, even when all of the low-level information about a distant target is available to us, we still tend to construe it at a higher level than if the target was more proximal (Trope & Liberman, 2003), because such a construal will render the representation more applicable in potentially very different contexts. Generally speaking, psychologically close stimuli tend to be construed at lower levels, while distant stimuli tend to be construed at higher levels (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008; Wakslass, Trope, Liberman, & Alony, 2006). So, while being a good leader tomorrow may be construed at a lower level and focus more on the to do list for tomorrow (e.g., checking progress for a project in overtime and planning a meeting with an underperforming employee), the idea of being a good leader in a year should be construed at a higher level and more in terms of why being a good leader is valued in organizations and is generally desirable.

Linking Future Work Selves, Construal Level, and Self-Motives

We propose that people’s level of construal during the feedback process plays a role in determining the strength of the two main self-motives – self-enhancement and self-improvement – when seeking and processing feedback. In line with the previously discussed findings, that in psychologically safe situations where the self-concept is not threatened, we assume people generally hold the abstract goal to learn and grow (Freitas, Salovey, & Liberman, 2001). This means that, when considering and approaching evaluative situations, individuals naturally prefer diagnostic feedback for self-improvement. However, when actually confronted with the concrete feedback situation and the potentially thorny details of it, the sensitivities of the self-concept come into play and the overarching goal of self-improvement needs to make room for the superordinate goal of feeling good about oneself (i.e., self-enhancement).

In terms of construal level theory, high-level construals with an emphasis on abstract goals would thus elicit greater self-improvement motivation than would low-level construals with their emphasis on the present or proximal outcomes. As discussed, high-level construals focus more on the desirability of an end state (i.e., being a good leader), whereas low-level construals focus on the specifics and the means to achieve that end state (i.e., chairing a meeting, following-up on a report). Thus, by increasing temporal distance, the weight of end states may become more pronounced relative to the means to attain that end state.
Indeed, as shown by Freitas and colleagues (2001), individuals chronically using low-level construals had greater interest in downward social comparison to feel better about themselves and less interest in negative feedback. Similarly, Vess, Arndt, and Schlegel (2011) found that individuals with an abstract mindset did not differ in state self-esteem after receiving positive, negative, or no feedback. However, an experimental group induced with a concrete mindset experienced lower levels of state self-esteem following negative feedback, demonstrating that, when processing feedback, high-level construals (relative to low-level construals) make individuals less vulnerable to negative feedback. Thus, we expect people’s level of construal during the feedback process to determine the relative strength of self-motives when processing feedback.

While construal levels may naturally fluctuate as individual characteristics or situational triggers influence them, we propose that a key concept that chronically guides individuals’ level of construal across feedback episodes is the salience of their future work self. Put in other words, by means of increasing temporal distance, salient future work selves should increase the willingness of employees to seek and receive unpleasant but useful negative feedback. When future work selves are salient, feedback will be interpreted not in relation to the current self, but in relation to a future self. Salient future work selves increase the psychological distance of feedback, resulting in the adoption of higher-level construals (Liberman & Trope, 1998). Individuals with salient future work selves will be more concerned with taking steps towards attaining a desirable end state and, in line with high-construal, predominantly focus on why that is important. This may help overcome the potentially vulnerable specifics of the feedback episodes, which might lead individuals to focus on the concrete details (e.g., an obnoxious colleague, a hurtful email) as implied in low-level construal.

In support of this idea, studies showed that individuals who are asked to envision a distant future self, experience significantly lower levels of distress when reflecting on a recent negative event, primarily because they focus on the transitory nature of their current situation (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk, 2015). For example, in one study, undergraduate students reflected on their performance on a recent midterm exam and were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In the future-self condition they were asked to envision what they “might be doing” and how they “might be spending their time” 10 years in the future, while in one control condition they were asked to focus on the near future and in another control condition they could use a personally preferred coping strategy. Participants in the future-self condition who received low midterm scores reported lower levels of negative affect than low scorers in the control conditions. This effect was mediated by a focus on the changing and impermanent nature of the exam result (Bruehlman-Senecal & Ayduk, 2015, Study 3). Likewise, when choosing activities to work on, people generally favor feeling good about themselves in the immediate future over pursuing meaningfulness, which they only favor in the distant future. However, by focusing
participants’ attention on the future – by increasing the temporal distance to
days, weeks, and years – the relative weight shifts from pleasure to meaningful-
ness (Kim, Kang, & Choi, 2014).

In a similar vein, a salient future work self is likely to increase the psy-
chological distance when processing negative feedback, making it appear more
transitory and impermanent by shifting the focus to a high-level construal with
its emphasis on the desirability of the abstract end goal implied in the future
work self. Thus, when approaching a feedback situation with a salient future
work self, we expect that self-enhancement concerns (e.g., distress associated
with negative feedback) will be downplayed relative to self-improvement striv-
ings (e.g., a preference for diagnostic feedback). Indeed, when future work
selves are made salient, people become focused on building future resources
rather than on protecting their current resources (Strauss & Parker, in press).
They are thus likely to evaluate feedback not in relation to their current self, but
in terms of its implications for their future.

At first sight, these arguments seem to go against some findings in the self-
enhancement literature. Several studies have shown that people are particularly
self-enhancing in how they think about themselves in the future. For instance,
research on unrealistic optimism suggests that people overestimate the chance
of positive events happening to them and underestimate the chance of nega-
tive events happening (Weinstein, 1980). Combining construal-level and
self-enhancement theory, Heller, Stephan, Kifer and Sedikides (2011) asked
participants to imagine themselves in the near versus distant future. Across three
experiments, they found that individuals’ predictions of their affect (Experiment
1), traits (Experiment 2), and naturalistic concepts (Experiment 3) in the dis-
tant future were more positive than predictions of one’s self in the near future.
Similarly, Stephan, Sedikides, Heller, and Shidlovski (2015) showed that posi-
tive self-attributes were more prominent in distant predictions than in near
predictions. So, it seems that, when thinking about oneself in the future, time
distance leads to more positive future selves, and these are thus more guided by
self-enhancement strivings, which seems to run counter to the position articu-
lated in this chapter.

However, both perspectives are not inconsistent with each other and can be
reconciled. First, the perspective in this chapter emphasizes that future work
selves, once they are formed, will guide interpretation and evaluation of current
self-views. It is indeed likely that these future work selves are overly (and even
unrealistically) positive as suggested by self-enhancement research. However,
when the future work self is salient, we believe that the high-construal lev-
els associated with it will instigate a self-improvement motive for processing
feedback in the present situation. Thus, one of the implications of our line of
thinking is that predictions made from the present about the future self will
be guided by a self-enhancement motive, whereas a salient work self in the
future may instigate a self-improvement motive for the present. Although such a
pattern might seem speculative at this point, it is consistent with the findings of Freitas et al. (2001) and Belding et al. (2015), showing that high-level construals, in comparison to low-level construals, lead to more openness and acceptance of negative diagnostic information in feedback situations. Also in support of this perspective are two recent experiments demonstrating that individuals highly considerate of future consequences experienced higher levels of energy in the present when imagining their distant (rather than near) future self (Stephan, Shidlovski, & Sedikides, in press). Second, both perspectives might also be reconciled by considering moderators that will determine when people choose to tactically self-enhance or self-improve in feedback situations. The next section does exactly this by proposing a model for guiding future research in this area.

**A Future Work Selves Model of the Feedback Process**

In Figure 13.1, we provide a heuristic model of the feedback process integrating aspects of psychological distance and future work selves to inspire and guide research in this area. In this model, we depict the feedback process from the perspective of the feedback-seeker or feedback-recipient, leaving out the role of the feedback-giver for reasons of brevity. In line with recent models (Anseel et al., 2015; Ashford et al., 2016), we link both feedback-seeking and feedback reactions phases, as it can be assumed that self-motives that are activated during one phase of the feedback process will also be influential in the other phase (Anseel et al. 2007; Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

The most defining element of this model is the role of future work selves. As previously discussed, the salience of the future work self should determine the
construal level, and, accordingly, the prevailing self-motive during a feedback episode. However, reviews of research on future selves suggest that salient future selves will only guide cognition and behavior in the present under specific conditions (Oyserman & James, 2009, 2011). On the basis of these insights, we further extend current theorizing on the role of future work selves in the feedback processes and propose that relevance, attainability, and perceived controllability are moderators that determine the effects of future work selves on construal level. The rationale underlying these three characteristics is that each of them will amplify the relative desirability of end goals (high-level construals) and diminish the relative threat associated with the means (low-level construals) to get there.

First, high salience will trigger a high-level construal and self-improvement striving only if people experience that feedback is relevant to their future work self. People may easily be tempted to embrace flattering feedback about relatively unimportant tasks. However, this should not be the case for feedback that is strongly connected to one’s future work self, because such feedback is highly instrumental for realizing one’s future work self (Sedikides, 1993). In support of this idea, Destin and Oyserman (2010) showed that, if participants saw their current behavior as connected to their future self, the effects on behavior (e.g., effort in education) were stronger. Second, individuals need to be convinced that their future work selves are attainable (see also Vancouver, Alicke, & Halper, this volume). When an individual sees no opportunities to attain a desired end state, the effort and pain of receiving negative feedback loom larger. Indeed, people feel less threatened by negative feedback about remediable weaknesses than by negative feedback about fixed weaknesses (Belding et al., 2015; Green, Pinter, & Sedikides, 2005; Trope et al., 2003). Oyserman and James (2009) further proposed that the relationship between the attainability of a future self and its impact on behavior would be reversely U-shaped. Salient future work selves that are certain to be attained irrespective of one’s performance or those that are unlikely to be attained no matter how much effort one exerts are unlikely to influence performance. Thus, although attainability of future work self should strengthen self-improvement strivings, if attainability is too evident, individuals could be tempted to self-enhance to avoid the concrete threats of the feedback situation. Third, being in a position wherein one has control over progress toward a future work self should lead to more decisions and behaving in a manner consistent with high-level versus low-level construals. Controllability refers to the belief that one’s own actions can change the course of future events, and is associated with higher willingness to take action in order to improve one’s situation (Oyserman & James, 2009). When presented with negative feedback, people who do not believe they have control over progress towards a future work self will be tempted to attend to positive feedback that does not hurt their self-esteem. Indeed, perceived control increases interest in feedback that diagnoses weaknesses and decreases interest in feedback that diagnoses strengths (Fujita, Yaacov, Liberman, Levin-Sagi, 2006; Trope & Neter, 1994).
Our model further implies that the construal levels and associated self-motives may impact a wider range of feedback actions than has been studied to date. First, we propose that, through high-level construal, a salient future work self should impact different feedback-seeking choices. More specifically, we expect that salient future work selves will lead employees to seek more process feedback than outcome feedback, as the former is more diagnostic for evaluating one’s current standing and improving performance. Similarly, as directly inquiring for feedback allows for less biased information compared to feedback monitoring, people with salient future work selves should be more likely to use inquiry as a strategy to seek negative feedback, while monitoring will be reserved for following up on positive feedback to control whether one is still on the right track. As high quality sources guarantee more useful feedback, individuals with salient future work selves should also be more likely to make connections with high quality sources. Furthermore, because salient future work selves provide direction and help focusing people on progress towards these value end goals, people will prefer self-referenced feedback that provides information on progress relative to previous performance. Similarly, salient future work selves will detract people from game-playing and impression-management concerns. This means that people will prefer timely feedback, delivered at the time that is most instrumental for improving performance. In contrast, due to low-level construal without salient future work selves, individuals may be more strategic in their seeking of feedback, showing sensitivity to the concrete details of the feedback situation, such as the public present or the feedback that is to be expected.

Second, assuming that seeking feedback leads to a positive response of the feedback-giver (Anseel et al., 2015), individuals will respond differently to feedback depending on the salience of a future work self. We propose that this will determine the depth of feedback processing. When approaching feedback, an almost reflex-like embrace of favorable information and dismissal of unfavorable information triggers reactions (e.g., satisfaction, emotions, defensive attitude). However, if sufficient motivation and cognitive resources are available, people will proceed to a next cognitive phase, wherein they evaluate the veracity of the information by comparing it with possible selves (e.g., who they ideally might be). If motivation and cognitive resources are still sufficient, this is followed by a third phase of deep cognitive elaboration, assessing the cost and benefits of further pursuing this type of feedback (Swann & Schroeder, 1995). A salient future work self should provide the impetus for this deeper processing of feedback, leading to more reflection, higher feedback acceptance and sharing of the feedback received with others to gauge its accuracy. Given that a salient future work self leads to high-level construal level, the desirability of the end state will be emphasized, leading to higher motivation to actually use the feedback for self-improvement.

Third, we expect that acquiring high quality diagnostic feedback, processing it to a deeper extent, and displaying higher motivation to use it will lead
to fundamentally different work outcomes in comparison to feedback episodes without salient future work selves. A stronger engagement with feedback for self-improvement should more likely lead to behavior change and improved work performance (Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009). By seeking feedback from diverse sources and sharing feedback with others, people with salient future work selves will develop better social connections with colleagues, both in- and outside their work environment. In contrast, in absence of a salient future work self, people may react negatively to feedback, attributing negative information to the feedback source. This may result in shooting the messenger, leading to tensions in the workplace or even hostile reactions towards colleagues who give negative feedback. However, feedback interactions driven by self-enhancement might also have a positive side in comparison to feedback episodes driven by self-improvement. Repeated exposure to positive feedback and dismissal of negative feedback may lead to higher self-esteem and overall well-being in the short run. In contrast, people with salient future work selves whose self-improvement efforts do not yield noticeable results may respond to chronic negative feedback by changing their future work selves, giving up on aspirations and dreams (Carroll, Shepperd, & Arkin, 2009; Strauss & Kelly, in press). Finally, researchers may benefit from taking the iterative nature of feedback into account. The outcomes of one feedback episode may very well be the antecedents of the next feedback episode. For instance, better task performance may lead to more positive feedback in a next feedback interaction. Similarly, changes in content and salience of future work selves may be the result of one feedback intervention and may guide construal level and self-motives in a next feedback episode. Longitudinal studies that examine the dynamics among future work selves, construal level, and self-motives during the feedback process are an interesting avenue for future research.

**Practical Implications for Feedback Processes at Work**

Given the ineffectiveness of many performance management systems (Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011) and the aforementioned feedback paradox (London, 2015), our future work-self perspective approach would have implications for feedback practices and interventions in organizations. We draw two such implications below.

A first implication of the future work-self perspective is that in feedback interventions more emphasis should be put on the future (rather than the current) self of the feedback recipient. This is because employees are encouraged to think about their future and how feedback could help them in realizing their hoped-for selves. This also means that the future work-self perspective challenges a common held notion and golden standard in feedback manuals, namely: focus on “behavior” instead of on the “person” (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).
We acknowledge that a future work-self perspective draws more attention to the person instead of the behavior. However, we also stress that the change is less drastic than it might seem at first sight, because future work selves reflect hopes and aspirations in relation to work. Clearly, asking someone to think about such hopes and aspiration cannot be equated with criticizing and attacking the “person” (which might be typical of traditional performance appraisal interviews). Viewed in this light, our propositions provide a different spin on what to understand under “behavior.” That is, a future work-self perspective conceptualizes a person’s behavior in a future-oriented aspirational work perspective.

As a second implication for practice, concrete instruments and approaches should be made available and/or developed that enable employees to think about, explore, and identify their future work selves. These instruments should make employees’ future work selves more salient because under these conditions the effects of future work selves are more powerful. Regarding such instruments, the feedforward interview (Budworth, Latham, & Manroop, 2015; Kluger & Nir, 2010) is a good place to begin. Here, employees are asked to think about their positive work experiences (“success stories”) instead of their negative ones (“what went wrong”). The latter are typical of the “bread and butter” of traditional performance appraisal interviews. In addition, the feedforward interview elicits conditions (“personal success code”) that should make it more likely for employees to find themselves in these positive and engaging contexts in the future. In many cases, the feedforward interview results in the identification of situational conditions that are different from the actual work situation and that might be more productive for both the employee and the organization.

Kluger and Nir (2010) posited that the feedforward interview “supports the creation of innovation within the self as it reawakens often dormant, yet vital voices that represent one at one’s best. By reawakening these voices and inviting them to take center stage, other and even opposing voices must update their responses and hence a new inner dialogue is triggered and innovation is created within the self” (p. 242). This statement illustrates that the feedforward interview fits well with the logic underlying future work selves. So, if organizations adopt a feedforward interview, we posit that employees be encouraged to identify their future work selves, thereby increasing their salience.

Concluding Note

Although seeking, giving, and receiving feedback is central to organizational life, organizations and their leaders keep struggling with how to effectively give feedback to employees. Providing feedback is sometimes thought of as a mission impossible for organizations because the employees that need developmental feedback the most are the ones that shy away from feedback, provoking a continuous tweaking of feedback applications in organizations. For instance, a recent management hype in contemporary business environments is
“reinventing performance management” (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015). A plea is made for organizations to abandon performance appraisals and replace them with informal feedback processes with the aim of making feedback more easily accessible and usable for employees. To develop effective feedback interventions, we posit that organizations need to understand that the feedback paradox in the workplace (London, 2015) is reflective of a more fundamental psychological tension between self-enhancement and self-improvement strivings in individuals. Along these lines, this chapter proposes a new perspective to help self-improvement prevail over self-enhancement in seeking and receiving feedback. In particular, our integration of future work selves research with psychological distance and self-motives theories should further inspire feedback theory, research, and practice.

**References**


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