

**FEEDBACK CONCEPTUALIZATION IN ORGANIZATIONS: A STUDY OF
CIVIL SERVANTS IN A NAVY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT LAB**

A dissertation submitted

by

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to

FIELDING GRADUATE UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HUMAN AND ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

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Abstract

The concept of feedback has evolved from behavioral perspectives of reward and punishment to include cognitive and social aspects of motivation and learning. Feedback has historically been studied using objective research methods that deconstruct components of a selected feedback model into individual traits or process steps. This study used a language-based interpretive method of inquiry, based on discourse analysis and metaphor theory, to augment traditional feedback research in organizations.

Using the methods and approaches from discourse analysis, this study surfaced the conceptualization of feedback through the voices of people within the organization. The study created an integrated view into the complex and situational nature of feedback in organizations. The study suggests how metaphors of feedback provide alternatives to traditional conceptualizations of feedback.

The organizational discourse analysis approach chosen for this study can be defined as a meso-discourse level using Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000b) framework and an interpretive approach according to Heracleous (2006). Metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) and the concept of interpretive repertoire (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) guided the interpretation and analysis.

The talk and text of the organization included discourses of feedback content, context, process, motivation, affect, and results. A compelling finding from this study is the

underlying complexity of feedback as conceptualized in organizations. The participants' perspectives provided evidence that the conceptualization of feedback is not uniform across all employees. Participants conceptualized feedback within a complex set of contextual conditions.

Alternative conceptualizations of feedback emerged in the generative metaphor findings. The information processing conceptualization of feedback dominates the feedback literature but other conceptualizations emerged in this study. The generative metaphor of *feedback as a threat* rarely appears in the literature on feedback, although it could provide additional insight into the failure rate of feedback interventions (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). The women participants in the study frequently used feedback to appreciate and often conceptualized *feedback as gift*. *Feedback as nourishment* brought out the dependencies created between supervisor and employees within the organization. Popular feedback practices, such as 360-degree evaluations, reinforce the *feedback as a tool* conceptualization. These alternative conceptualizations of feedback have implications for OD and HR practices.

Key words: feedback, organizational discourse, discourse analysis, metaphor, interpretive repertoire, organizational behavior, generative metaphor

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Dedication

To my mother

Alvina Elizabeth Schwab Pettigrew

who inspired me to keep learning

Acknowledgements

I started this journey of learning in September 2003 unsure of how much effort it would take or ultimately where it would take me. I am sincerely grateful to those who have guided and supported me along the way.

My friend and colleague Keith Ray was there every step of the way. Sometimes we followed the same path and other times we took our own intellectual side roads. This journey would not have been as challenging and fun along the way without you Keith.

My work colleagues Lisa DeSanti, Bob Page, Ruth Draper, and Linda Lou Crosby provided constant encouragement and were generous with picking up the slack when I took time off for my studies. Thank you all for your years of support. I am indebted to friend and technical information specialist Mary Ray for providing me with articles and references throughout the entire learning process. Your professionalism and responsiveness is top notch. Diana Sherrick provided just in time editing support and was willing to read my dissertation after I became weary of it. Thanks, Diana for encouraging me those last few months, I needed it!

To my dear friends Mike and Cheryl Prescott, Sandy and Jerry Bradley, thanks for helping me keep it all in perspective and keeping my husband Dave well fed while I spent weeks studying.

I am fortunate to have met many wonderful people through the Fielding community, especially my littermates from the infamous Chicago OPS. These are relationships I will treasure way beyond the date of my degree. I want to extend a special thanks to those who continually inspired me and laughed with me along the way--Darrin Murray, Craig Horangic, and Rianna Moore.

I am indebted to all my study participants at NAVYLAB (pseudonym) who graciously volunteered for the study and provided me with rich conversations.

I am extremely grateful for the help and guidance from my committee. Dr. Barbara Mink was always generous with her time. I cannot thank you enough Barbara for the wisdom you provided throughout the process. Thanks to Dr. Margo Okazawa-Rey who constantly challenged me to dig deeper. I am very grateful to Dr. Charlie Seashore who inspired me to study feedback in organizations. I thank Dr. Bob Marshak for his comments and thoughts that kept me focused and curious at the same time. He opened up the world of metaphor and organizational discourse for me.

Finally my heartfelt thanks and love to my husband Dave for giving me the space and support to pursue my dreams. Yes, this means I am finally done!

This study gratefully acknowledges the support from a Fielding Graduate University Research Grant.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Conversations containing feedback occur daily at work. Feedback is experienced through formal appraisal processes and in routine work practices. *Can you give me some feedback on this report draft? The boss needs feedback on that proposal. My coworker does not seem to listen to feedback. I need feedback in order to know if I am doing my job correctly.* These are frequent remarks within many workplaces. The concept of feedback is pervasive in organizations. The generally stated purpose of feedback is to improve the motivation and performance of organizational members (Cusella, 1987). Scholars (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003) and practitioners (Folkman, 2006; Seashore, Seashore, & Weinberg, 1997) claim that feedback influences work performance. Yet, feedback interventions within organizations have differing impacts on performance. Based on their meta-analysis of feedback interventions that focused on knowledge-of-results, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) concluded that 38% of feedback interventions produce negative effects on performance.

The concept now commonly known as feedback evolved from research on knowledge-of-results (Ammons, 1956), where humans were provided with a visual signifier of task performance. This established the initial connection between a visual cue and individual performance. Early conceptualization of feedback omitted theories of personality and over time cognitive aspects such as motivation and social aspects such as attribution were added to the conceptualization of feedback (Baker & Buckley, 1996).

Feedback research moved into organizations, and models of feedback became increasingly complex (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Focus shifted from the individual to organizational context and from psychological theories to social psychology theories.

However the forms of inquiry did not necessarily equally evolve in complexity or consider the experience of feedback from the participants' view. There is a potential to augment traditional feedback research methods using methods of inquiry that match the complexity of feedback in organizations.

Traditional feedback research typically assumes a conceptual definition of the concept of feedback. For example, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) defined feedback as "performance information, provided by some outside source, for the purpose of influencing behavior and performance" (p. 130). This definition is heavily influenced by the information processing view of the individual and was adapted from first order cybernetics (Annett, 1969). Beginning with a conceptual definition and then designing research based on the definition leads to knowledge based on a researcher's conceptions of feedback. Research that explores feedback from the participants' perspective provides insight into the contextual, political, and historical subtleties that surround feedback in the organization (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Most feedback studies are quantitative, survey-based, or laboratory experiments designed to develop or test models of feedback in organizations (Ashford et al., 2003; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Feedback research in organizations has lacked a participant orientation, where the actors in the system provide their view of feedback in their own words. This study steps back and explores how feedback is conceptualized in organizations through the language of the actors in the organization.

Augmenting Traditional Research on Feedback

Researchers (Ashford et al., 2003; Lundgren, 2004) admit the complexity of assessing independent associations concerning feedback. Ashford et al. (2003) suggested a change in

tone of the research implying the lens through which feedback is viewed could benefit from methods of positive organizational studies. Lundgren (2004) called for renewed interactionist research that emphasizes the processes of social interaction (Lundgren, 2004). A language-based constructionist approach to feedback research is a response to these calls for different methods of inquiry. Cusella (1987) noted that no studies explore the communication dynamics of feedback administration and further advocated the need for communication-oriented feedback research. The social complexity of the feedback concept requires a similar social complexity in the methods of research. The language-based constructionist research method used in this study complements the traditional methods of knowledge creation for feedback.

This study employs constructionist thinking and language-based research methods. Traditional research on feedback in organizations is based on a priori selection of theories, such as control theory, motivation theory, and goal-setting theory. The researcher's choice of theoretical underpinning guides the method, measurement, and truths that will be made visible (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Researchers create conceptualizations of feedback and project the conceptualizations onto subjects in the form of hypothesis. By contrast, a social constructionist perspective in conjunction with qualitative interpretive methods can be exploratory and form alternative frameworks for understanding common concepts (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). This study explores a conceptualization of an organizational phenomenon, in this case feedback, and takes an interpretive perspective with a practical interest in the meaning-making (Pritchard, Jones, & Stablein, 2004). What are the conceptualizations of feedback and how do they compare to those of feedback scholars? What alternative

conceptualizations of feedback become visible in the language of the actors in the organization?

Significance of the Study

Feedback does not universally improve motivation and performance but management literature and practice continues to advocate feedback in organizations. Organization Development (OD) consultants advocate skill building in giving and receiving feedback as part of leadership development and group interventions (c.f. Dyer, Dyer Jr., & Dyer, 2007; Folkman, 2006; Seashore et al., 1997; Tornow & London, 1998). Scholars in the field of behavioral management advocate feedback as a necessary element to change behavior and improve organizational performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). Managers are encouraged to motivate the workforce using performance appraisal feedback systems that ensure equity, inspire higher performance, and motivate accomplishment of business goals (Pfeffer, 1994, 1998). An internet search on September 7, 2007 yielded almost 17,000 business management books describing methods and techniques for giving and receiving feedback. The sheer popularity of feedback as a topic in the management literature provides reason for more research to understand how feedback is conceptualized in organizations.

This study is significant because it augments the assumptions around feedback in organizations and creates alternative ways to frame the concept of feedback. This creates deeper understanding into how feedback is conceptualized in the organization and perhaps provides rationale for why some feedback processes should be modified or even abandoned in organizations.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study is: *How is feedback conceptualized in organizations?*

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review provides a historical look at the evolution of the feedback concept, feedback research that has led to models of feedback in organizations, and proposes the benefits of a language-based constructionist perspective for this study. The broad fields of organizational discourse and discourse analysis inform this study and specific attention is given to metaphorical conceptualizations within the field of organizational discourse. The review also investigates how conceptualizations of other organizational phenomena have been researched using a language-based perspective. Figure 1 contains the components of the literature that serve as the foundation of the study.

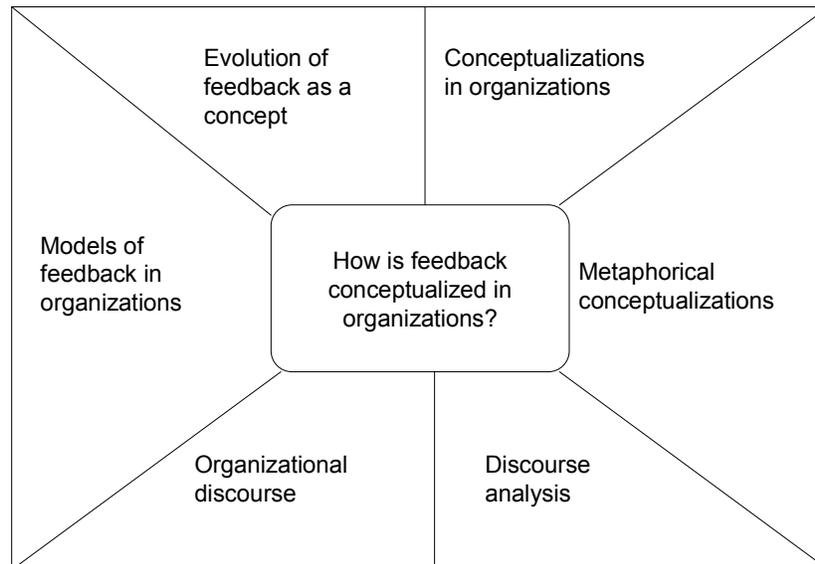


Figure 1. Literature review framework

Evolution of Feedback as a Concept

Since 1900, researchers have conceptualized and studied the impact of feedback on human behavior. Even in the 1700s, managers in factory settings would place symbols of the previous day's output at workstations and believed this encouraged workers to produce more the next day (Baker & Buckley, 1996). The phenomenon was termed *knowledge-of-results* by Robert B. Ammons (1956). From the early 1900s, researchers (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979) and managers (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Pfeffer, 1994) have continued to seek the linkage between knowledge-of-results and performance. Over the years, the concept of what we know commonly as feedback evolved. The concept and research was first heavily influenced by behaviorism and evolved to include cognitive psychology theories. At the same time behaviorists (Skinner, 1938; Thorndike, 1911; Watson, 1913) were at work, sociologists (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) were theorizing about how feedback influences self-concept. The two families of theories have converged in modern feedback conceptualizations in the literature.

From Behaviorism to Knowledge-of-results to Performance

The behaviorists' concept of what had yet to be called feedback was one of rewards and punishment. Radical behaviorists (Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1913) conducted experiments that relied solely on observable human behavior. They avoided any theories that suggested individual introspection as a cause of human behavior. John B. Watson (1913) defended animal experimentation stating that human behavior could be compared to animal behavior. Behaviorists also assumed that complex human behavior was a compilation of simpler behaviors. This assumption permeated the early behaviorist research. Prior to knowledge-of-results experiments, behaviorists studied behavior through experiments that delivered

rewards and punishment. At the turn of the century, Edward L. Thorndike (1898), with his famous cat puzzle box experiment, developed the Law of Effect. Thorndike observed that rewarded behavior tended to recur and punished behavior was avoided, thus forming the Law of Effect. The notion of contingent reinforcement (rewards) in organizations via money, feedback, and social recognition continues in the behavioral management literature (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). Feedback is conceptualized within this context using the information processing and social-self views explained later in this review.

Between 1905 and 1954, researchers conducted experiments (c. f. Helmstadter & Ellis, 1952; Hull, 1939; Mace, 1935) to discern if knowledge-of-results without reward led to performance improvement. Ammons (1956) summarized knowledge-of-results research conducted prior to 1956 and formed several generalizations about knowledge-of-results. The two most notable generalizations were that knowledge-of-results increases learning and increases motivation. Ammons downplayed the effects of rewards and suggested that knowledge-of-results was a reward in its own right. By specifying that knowledge-of-results increased motivation, Ammons interjected a cognitive aspect into the concept, thus expanding the concept beyond behaviorist stimulus-response views. Ammons' summary established that knowledge-of-results leads to performance improvement. Ammons' summary was influential and paved the way for research that would now assume knowledge-of-results (later termed feedback) improved performance. Researchers (Ilgen et al., 1979) turned their attention to the mediating factors that would predict or explain the increases in learning and motivation and the boundaries of occurrence.

Symbolic Interactionism--Looking Glass Self

Around the same time Thorndike (1898) was developing the Law of Effect, Charles H. Cooley coined the concept of the *looking glass self* (Cooley, 1902). Cooley declared that the self is inseparable from social life and that it was through one's perception of significant others' perceptions of oneself that the concept of self develops. George H. Mead (1934) expanded Cooley's notion by stating that self is a product of all social interaction, not just those important to us. By interpreting what others see us as, we develop a concept of what we are. By seeing how others respond to us or provide feedback in social situations we develop attitudes and feelings towards self. This *social-self hypothesis* function of feedback developed separate from the behaviorist and cognitive traditions.

From Motivation to Machine Metaphor

Building from Ammons' generalizations, John Annett attributed two motivational functions to knowledge-of-results (Annett, 1969). The first was an *incentive effect* which refers to enhancing some measure of task performance such as speed or accuracy. The second was a *reinforcing effect* that results in permanent behavior changes, such as the ability to make a correct turn at a choice point in a maze. The incentive effect may be transitory and temporary in nature. For example, an employee might be putting forth more effort before bonus payout time. The reinforcing effect is seen as learning that creates a lasting behavior change. Annett concluded that knowledge-of-results has three principle functions, (a) incentive, (b) reinforcement, and (c) information. Annett dismissed Thorndike's work by stating that the "Law of Effect as the central principle of learning has been rejected on both empirical and logical grounds" (Annett, 1969, p. 169). Although Annett identified several

functions of knowledge-of-results, he was doubtful that the functions could be isolated. In fact, he described motivation as feedback-in-action rather than a separate function.

Annett (1969) proposed a model of human behavior influenced by Norbert Wiener's cybernetic feedback model (Wiener, 1961). Annett claimed that this model included all the aspects of knowledge-of-results. He created a machine-based view of feedback for humans. Feedback as a term originated in engineering with Rosenblueth and colleagues first using it to describe human behavior (Rosenblueth, Wiener, & Bigelow, 1943). Annett synthesized empirical research and theory to argue that the cybernetic concept of feedback applied to all types of human behavior, from motor movement to perceptions of the social environment. His writings formalized the information processing or cybernetic conceptualization of feedback for human behavior. Contrary to Annett, Cusella (1987) argued that knowledge-of-results feedback or outcome feedback significantly differs from knowledge-of-performance or cognitive feedback. Cusella further argued that there are conceptual and empirical differences between motivation and performance and research on feedback omits this distinction.

By the late 1960s, the body of research describing the impact of feedback on human behavior contained contradictory findings, confusing terms, and inconsistencies in the rigor of experiments (Baker & Buckley, 1996). Specifically, the motivational effects of knowledge-of-results and goal-setting were confounded. Locke, Cartledge, and Koeppel (1968) reviewed the knowledge-of-results literature and concluded that knowledge-of-results leads to improved performance only when goals are set and those goals are hard or difficult. In general, researchers during this period did not consider the contextual variables of the feedback situation, focusing instead on the effects of the feedback (Baker & Buckley, 1996).

Feedback research is underpinned by several theoretical concepts such as control theory, goal-setting theory, motivation and learning, and social cognition. Feedback is often included as a component of other theoretical constructs rather than a unique phenomenon. Several models of feedback in organizations have been proposed from reviews of the feedback research. The most often cited models of feedback are discussed next.

Models of Feedback in Organizations

Consequences of Individual Feedback on Behavior in Organizations

Ilgen and colleagues (1979) consolidated key ideas into one broad feedback model for application to behavior in organizations. They declared that few generalizations could be derived from the vast and varied literature on individual feedback and behavior. To remedy this, they proposed a consolidated model of feedback that focused on the social psychological processes. “In contrast to human performance with its base in experimental psychology are the concerns for feedback in organizational settings, which are social psychological in nature” (p. 349). They integrated the human performance and motivational orientations towards feedback and began to add contextual factors. Figure 2 is the graphical representation of their model.

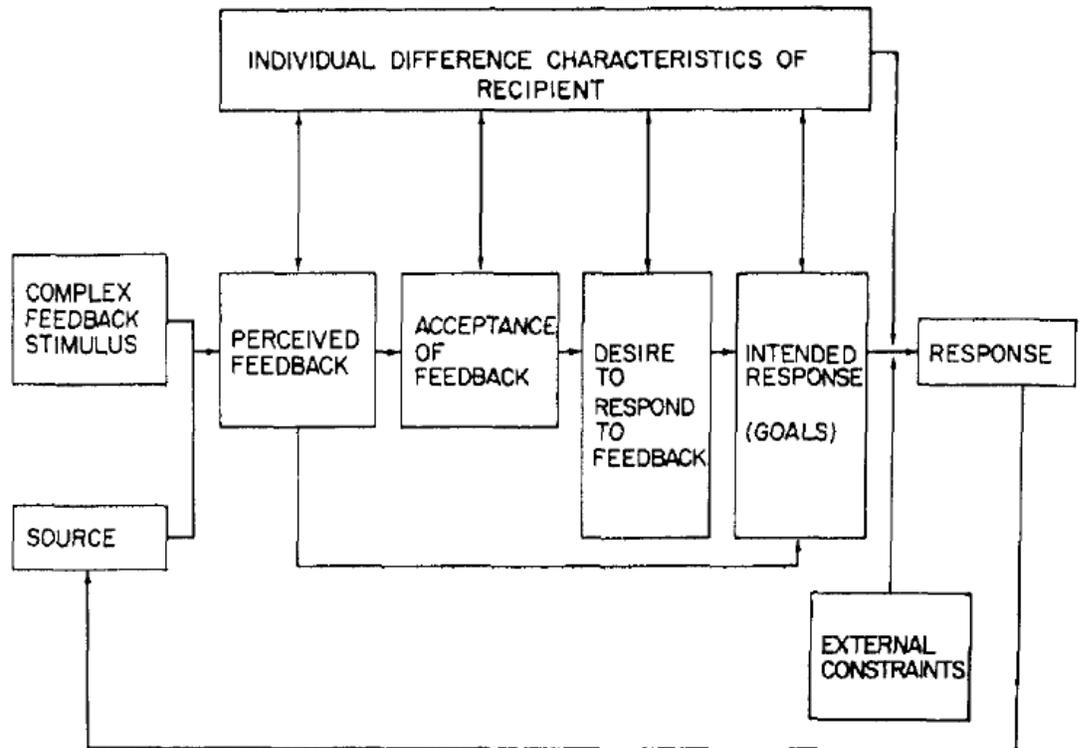


Figure 2. Model of the effects of feedback on recipients (Ilgen et al., 1979, p. 352). Copyright 1979 by American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

Ilgen et al. conceptualized feedback as:

a special case of the general communications process in which some sender (source) conveys a message to a recipient. In the case of feedback, the message comprises information about the recipient. The recipient's perception of the feedback and response to it depends upon his or her personal characteristics, the nature of the message, and characteristics of the source of feedback. (Ilgen et al., 1979, p. 350)

They agreed with Annett that the motivational and informational functions could not be isolated, especially in organizational settings. The sources of feedback include other people, the task environment, and the performer (self). Using a process-oriented perspective, Ilgen et al. divided the individual's feedback process into four stages: (a) perception of feedback, (b) acceptance of feedback, (c) desire to respond to feedback, and (d) intended response. Each of these stages is influenced by characteristics of the source, the nature of the

message, and the recipient's characteristics. For example, feedback perception involves aspects of the source, the timing, sign, and frequency of the message, and self-esteem, locus of control, and expectations of the receiver. Ilgen and colleagues' framework for feedback generated volumes of research that investigated several variables, including recipient response to feedback source, goal-setting, self-esteem, self-efficacy, perception, and feedback sign (Baker & Buckley, 1996).

Feedback Seeking Behavior Model

Ashford and Cummings (1983) illuminated the benefit of feedback for the individual within the organization and proposed another feedback model for feedback-seeking behavior (FSB) in organizations. They claimed that previous feedback research focused on the organization's enhanced performance benefits and ignored the benefit for the individual. This shift in perspective broadened the domain of theories used to understand feedback. If feedback is a resource for the individual, then there are end-products created from this resource that benefit the individual. Symbolic interactionists (Cooley, 1902; Kinch, 1968; Mead, 1934) consider one of the end-products of feedback to be the production of self-concept.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) integrated the symbolic interactionist perspective of self-concept into the motivational factors for seeking feedback. They claimed that individuals are motivated to seek feedback to achieve personal and professional goals. The motivation stems from the desire to reduce uncertainty, develop competence, and defend ego. Figure 3 outlines the FSB.

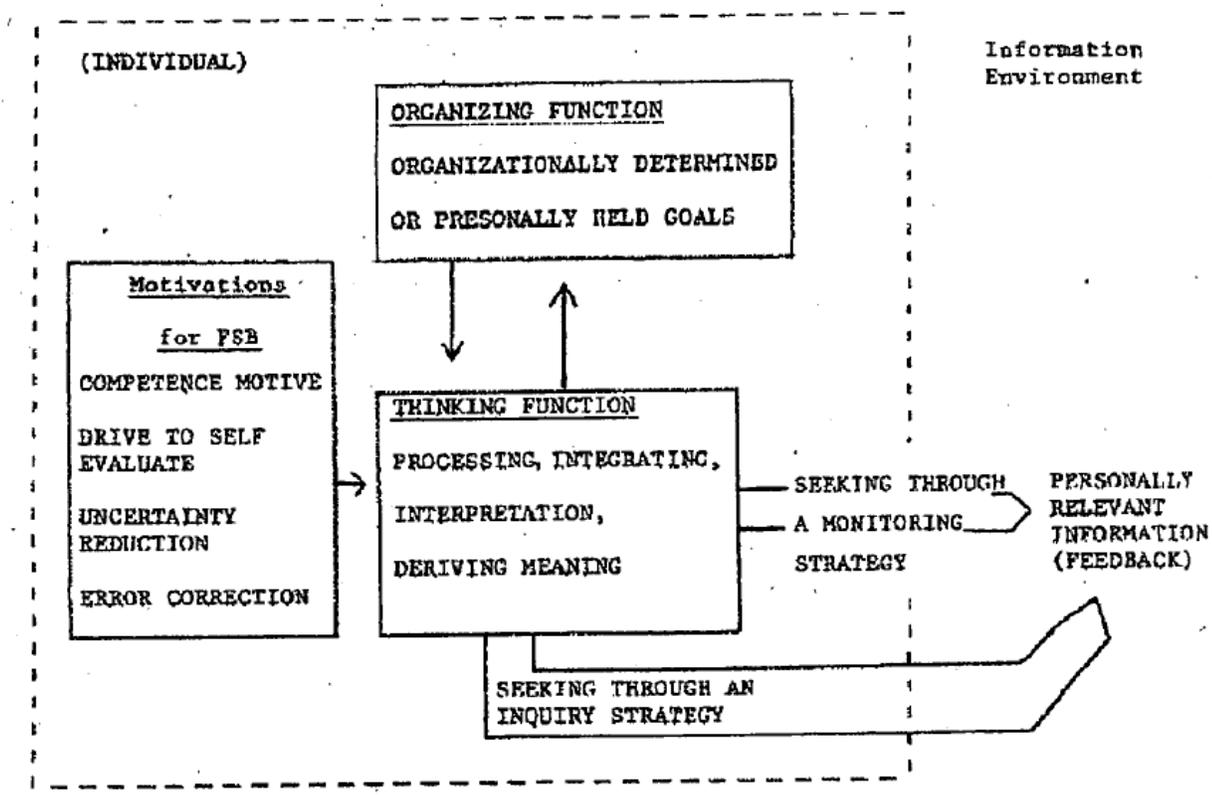


Figure 3. Feedback seeking process. (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 383). Copyright 1983 by Elsevier. Reprinted with permission.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) placed the individual at the center of the process and reviewed feedback conceptualizations from this stance. As an example, using the information processing theory of feedback, the individual is viewed as the receiver and processor of information. Given that feedback is a valuable resource to the individual and the individual is motivated to seek feedback, Ashford and Cummings proposed that the individual will both directly seek (ask for) feedback as well as monitor their environment for personally relevant information. This moved the individual from a passive recipient of feedback to taking an active role in the feedback process. In contrast, Ilgen et al. (1979) viewed the feedback process from an outside perspective and they positioned the receiver as passive. By adding the element of actively seeking feedback, the implications for acceptance of feedback and

response to feedback may also be affected. Someone who actively seeks the feedback received may react differently than when feedback is provided unsolicited.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) used the research by Herold and Grellor (1977) to develop the conceptualization of the types of feedback that people would seek. Herold and Grellor developed an initial construct of feedback for how people appraise their performance in organizations. They conducted brief interviews of working people and asked them “How do you find out how well you are doing your job?” This is a rare example of creating a feedback construct beginning with the voices of the people in the organization. The results of these interviews were then used to construct a questionnaire to further develop the construct of feedback in organizations. From Herold and Grellor’s work they discovered that people received performance feedback through negative feedback from supervisors and co-workers, positive feedback from those above in the hierarchy, positive feedback from nonhierarchical others, internal criteria feedback, and work flow feedback.

Ashford and Cummings’ feedback model incorporated three conceptualizations of feedback: (a) the communication process of transmit and receipt of a message, (b) the recipient as information processor, and (c) the cybernetic perspective of information for error correction. Their primary addition to previous feedback models was that “individuals will actively monitor and seek feedback information with respect to organizationally determined and individually held goals” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 380). This established a research interest in identifying and establishing antecedents and consequences of feedback-seeking behavior.

Ashford and colleagues (2003) summarized the research on feedback-seeking and suggested areas for future research. Their review took for granted that feedback improves

performance, a criticism of earlier reviews (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The outcomes reviewed are not related to changes in performance but rather to the outcomes that stem from the act of seeking feedback. The results are organized according to three motives for seeking feedback (a) image defense and enhancement, (b) ego defense and enhancement, and (c) instrumental. Context or feedback environment was a fourth significant area of recent research. Many antecedents have been explored, for example within the instrumental motive, studies explored the level of uncertainty, sense of control, level in hierarchy, level of spontaneous feedback, role ambiguity, tolerance for ambiguity, learning orientation, credibility of the source, and gap in ability and performance. Ashford and colleagues suggested that the additional research should focus on contextual and cultural influences on feedback-seeking behavior and not be limited to just managers within organizations.

Feedback Intervention Theory

In their critical review of early feedback research, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) contended that the studies summarized by Ammons contained inconsistent operationalizations of knowledge-of-results and some had flawed methodologies. They expanded the knowledge-of-results concept and created the term *feedback intervention* (FI) effect which is defined as “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one’s task performance” (p. 255). Kluger and DeNisi emphasized that Ammons’ generalizations ignored the inconsistencies in the beneficial effect of knowledge-of-results thus leading to false premises for future research. Kluger and DeNisi’s meta-analysis of 131 knowledge-of-results empirical feedback studies indicated that approximately one-third of these studies indicated improvement in performance, one-third had no impact on performance, and one-third resulted in degradations in performance. The

variability in effects on performance justified another look at the potential negative effects of feedback interventions. Kluger and DeNisi advocated that the connection between knowledge-of-results and performance improvement is weaker than researchers assume.

Kluger and DeNisi proposed a broader Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) which is based on goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) and control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982). They stressed the need for a research paradigm for feedback that goes beyond motivation and learning. Researchers also need to suspend their assumption that feedback positively influences performance. To that end, Kluger and DeNisi advised that researchers also consider the feedback effects evident in the research on learned helplessness (Mikulincer, 1994) and social cognition (Bandura, 1991). FIT incorporates some of the components of the feedback model from Ilgen et al. (1979) and added the concept that feedback interventions change the locus of an individual's attention. Figure 4 shows the effects of feedback intervention about self and the consequences for performance.

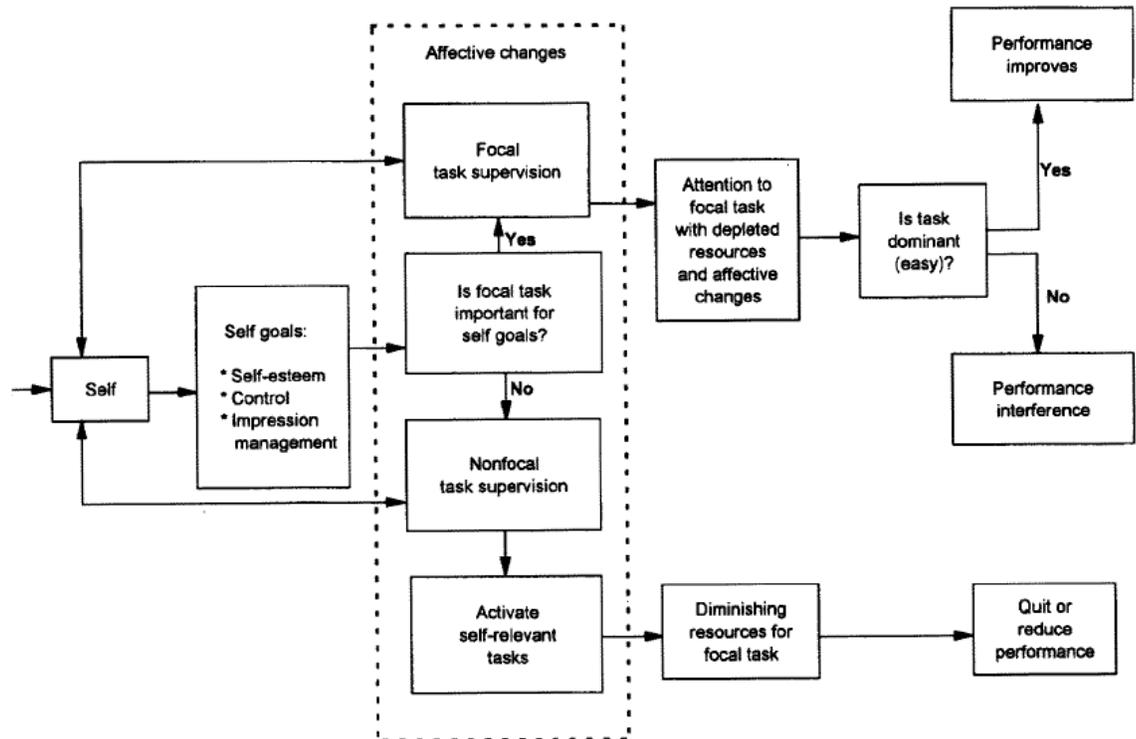


Figure 4. Effects of feedback about self and consequences for performance. (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996, p. 265). Copyright 1996 by American Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

There are five main arguments within the FIT: (a) self-regulation, behavior regulated by comparison to goals, (b) goals and standards are organized hierarchically, (c) attention is limited and only goal-standard attention influences behavior, (d) attention is normally directed to middle of goal-standard hierarchy, and (e) feedback interventions change locus of attention and therefore affect behavior (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). These arguments convey the complexity associated with goal setting as well as the complications in discerning which goals inspire the feedback recipients at the time of feedback. Goals establish the standards through which recipients interpret feedback and the subsequent influence feedback has on the recipient.

Kluger and DeNisi contended that feedback effectiveness decreases as attention moves towards self and away from task. Feedback that draws attention towards the self has negative impacts to performance. They claimed the primary question is not so much one of learning or motivation, as previous feedback models declared, but one of attention management.

Feedback Model within an Educational Context

Studies on feedback are also found in the education field. Feedback within the context of educational settings that focuses on teacher-student interactions has been studied extensively (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These studies focus how the purpose, effects, and types of feedback influence students' achievement and learning. In Hattie and Timperley's synthesis of classroom feedback studies, they conceptualized feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (p. 81). They also claimed that feedback is a powerful influence in the classroom. Based on their synthesis of past research, Hattie and Timperley proposed a model of feedback for teachers to employ. They claimed that this model contains the properties and circumstances that make feedback most effective for learning. Figure 5 is their model of feedback to enhance learning.

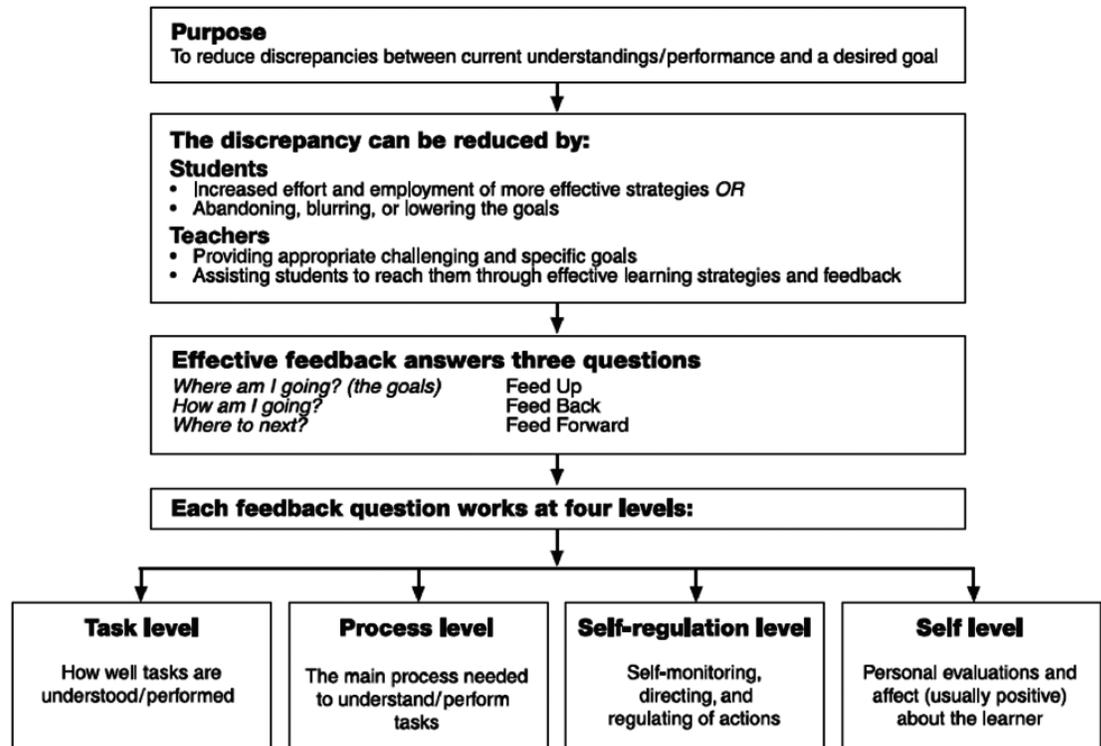


Figure 5. Model of feedback to enhance learning. (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 87). Copyright 2007 by American Educational Research Association. Reprinted with permission.

The model of feedback proposed by Hattie and Timperley uses similar cause and effect factors about the student (e.g., self-efficacy, self-discipline), the message format (e.g., feedback about the task, feedback about the self as person), and the method of delivery (e.g., individually or in a group) that other feedback models mention. They propose that effective feedback answers three questions: Where am I going, How am I going, and Where to next?. After proposing a model of feedback for teachers to employ, the authors continue to explain how there are “thorny” issues surrounding feedback and that there is evidence that teachers do not use feedback enough in their classrooms.

Since the subject of this dissertation is the conceptualization of feedback in organizations, the setting and focus differs from educational studies. Educational research

could have some relevance since one could argue that actors in the organization are often in the equivalent of an educational setting. However, it is not the only setting in which feedback occurs within an organization.

Proposal for Language-Based Constructionist Approach to Feedback Research

Feedback has historically been studied using objective research methods that deconstruct components of a researcher selected feedback model into individual traits or process steps then use surveys and laboratory experiments to isolate and evaluate the influences of individual traits or process steps. For example, Brown, Ganesan, and Challagalla (2001) examined how self-efficacy influences the information-seeking methods (monitoring and inquiry from the FSB model). They used a survey method to collect data from salespeople in Fortune 500 companies. Another example is the study that Tuckey, Brewer, and Williamson (2002) conducted to determine the effects of motives and learning and performance goal orientation of active feedback seeking. They surveyed two populations, government employees and undergraduate students. Nease, Mudgett, and Quinones (1999) used an experimental setting to explore how individuals with varying levels of self-efficacy interpret and accept repeated positive and negative feedback. They used the Ilgen et al. (1979) definition of feedback acceptance in their study. These are just three examples in a plethora of feedback research using traditional methods of inquiry. Anseel (2005) summarized 49 studies on feedback-seeking behavior in organizations. These 49 studies included over 150 different antecedents to feedback-seeking behavior.

David C. Lundgren (2004) summarized the empirical quantitative research on the Mead-Cooley social-self hypothesis. He concluded that there is consistency in the general impact to self-appraisal of significant others' reactions which gives credence to the

hypothesis. He also claimed that the complexities of the social transactions were not yet well understood. He proposed that a reciprocal relationship between the individual and society indeed exists, but researchers need to directly observe the dynamics of the interchanges between people. Feedback research that focuses on the significance of language and social interactions is warranted.

There is a paucity of research in how people in organizations describe their experience of feedback versus how the feedback literature portrays feedback in organizations. One exception to this is Finn's (1996) study of the perceptions of performance feedback received by male and female managers. She used semi-structured interviews to gather data on perceptions then generated a survey from the interview findings to distribute to a larger population.

The understanding of feedback's influence on organizational behavior can be expanded through use of other research paradigms, specifically language-based methods that explore how people in the organization experience feedback. Exceptions to the traditional research methods include Ball and Wilson's (2000) critical study of computer-based performance feedback systems and Chan's (2007) conversational analysis of a manager giving feedback in business meetings. These two studies are explained in more detail in the next section.

Social constructionist approaches to research allow for interpretations that recognize context and emphasize the voice and language of the actors in the situation (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). The perspectives of the actors in the system may provide novel alternatives to the conception of feedback. In constructionist and discourse analysis orientations language creates reality rather than mirrors reality (Alvesson & Karreman,

2000a). The nature of the question as well as the positioning of the researcher and researched contributes to the response. The majority of feedback research emerges from the traditional objective view of knowledge and emphasizes the theoretical models and hypotheses chosen by the researcher over the common and collective meaning making of the organizations' actors. Research that examines the talk and text of feedback in the organization explores alternative ways to conceptualize feedback and augments the research conducted using the traditional research paradigm. Engaging constructionist research perspectives and specifically qualitative interpretive methods such as discourse analysis could expand feedback research.

Postmodern and interpretive approaches to organization science have been proposed (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Deetz, 1982; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996; Hassard & Parker, 1993) and are becoming more prevalent (Jablin & Putnam, 2000). In social constructionism, language is seen as formative rather than representational (Shotter, 1993). In other words, language is a way of doing things, a social practice, rather than just a transmission medium. Social constructionist inspired approaches to research include numerous varieties of discourse analysis. Proponents of discourse analysis state the multi-disciplinary "treasure trove of concepts, frameworks, and perspectives for organization studies (Heracleous, 2006, p. 20)" as an advantage. A discourse-analytic approach encourages researcher reflexivity. Since language is viewed as constructive, it becomes clearer that the study results do not simply report the data but also tell a story from the researcher's perspective. The next section explains why the field of organizational discourse informs this study.

Organizational Discourse

Organizational discourse research is an expanding field of inquiry that seeks alternative ways to explore the complex processes and practices that create organization (Grant, Hardy, Osrick, & Putnam, 2004). Examples of organizational phenomena studied through discourse analytic approaches include organizational change (Anderson, 2005; Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Marshak, 1993), organizational conflict (Kusztal, 2002), strategic development (Laine & Vaara, 2007), participation (Musson & Duberley, 2007), workplace time commitments (Kuhn, 2006), occupational hazards (Scott & Trethewey, 2008), and gender (Ashcraft, 2004) to name just a few. Organizational discourse pulls from a broad variety of disciplines, associated methodologies, and epistemological perspectives (Grant et al., 2004). Consequently, there are many perspectives to consider for the purposes of this study. As with many concepts influenced by multiple and sometimes conflicting disciplines, discourse is an often overused and under defined term (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b). The definition of discourse for the purpose of this study is taken from Heracleous (2006).

collections of texts whether oral or written located within social and organizational contexts that are patterned by certain structural, inter textual features and have both functional and constructive effects on their contexts. In this sense, language can be seen as the raw material of discourse, and individual texts are both manifestations, and constitutive, of broader discourses. (p. 2)

This definition situates the talk and text within the social context of the organization, an important aspect for the purposes of this study. With this definition of discourse, it is assumed that the context of the organization has a mutual relationship in that, how feedback is conceptualized both influences and is influenced by, the context of the organization.

This study explores a conceptualization of an organizational phenomenon, in this case feedback, and takes an interpretive perspective with a practical interest in the meaning-making (Pritchard et al., 2004). What are the conceptualizations of feedback and how do they compare to those of feedback scholars? What alternative conceptualizations of feedback become visible in the language of the actors in the organization? The purpose is to connect the knowledge of feedback created within the traditional objectivist paradigm to knowledge created using a constructionist language-based paradigm, alternatively termed a discourse-analytic approach. For the purposes of this study, the broad definition of discourse analysis is the “related collection of approaches to the systematic study of discourse which share the assumption that language does not simply mirror reality but that it brings into being situations, objects, social identities, and relations between people and groups of people” (Hardy, 2001). This broad definition frames the context of the study to include not only the concept of feedback as the object of study but the identities and relationships that surround feedback conceptualization in the organization.

Feedback Studies within Organizational Discourse

Feedback studies included in the organizational discourse genre include two studies of instances of feedback in organizational settings: Chan (2007) studied discursive strategies for giving negative feedback, and Ball and Wilson (2000) studied computer-based performance monitoring strategies.

Chan (2007) did a micro-level conversational analysis of a manager in a meeting giving feedback to employees. This study illuminated various discursive strategies used by the manager when giving negative feedback. Chan analyzed the video and audio recordings from six business meetings. The meetings were normally scheduled work meetings so were

considered naturally occurring discourse in the workplace. Chan's analysis drew upon conversation analysis, social constructionism, politeness theory, and a community of practice framework. The study revealed the manager using three different discursive strategies in providing negative feedback. One request was made in a polite and face-saving way. In another request, the manager uses authority initially then mitigates the directive style later. Finally a request was made by the manager in a very authoritative and face-threatening way. Chan situates each of these discursive strategies within context and discusses the dynamic interactions included in each example.

Ball and Wilson (2000) take a critical view of computer-based performance management (CBPM), a form of feedback, using Potter and Wetherell's (1987) interpretive repertoire approach. An interpretive repertoire is a "culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places, and tropes" (Wetherell, 1998, p. 400). Often interpretive repertoires are organized around metaphors or figures of speech. People use interpretive repertoires "to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 138)

Ball and Wilson (2000) incorporate a critical viewpoint by drawing upon Wetherell's (1998) updated argument for interpretive repertoires within critical discursive social psychology. Rather than feedback being a focus, Ball and Wilson highlighted the influence of local discursive systems in interpreting the organizational discourses at play. Two large financial services companies in the UK were studied that both implemented a similar technology for CBPM. Each of these organizations was multinational and employed over 30,000 people.

The first research site was a debt collection department in one of the organizations. The department consisted of six teams with seven people on each team with all the teams being managed by one manager with two assistants. Eleven interviews were conducted and included employees at the managerial, supervisory, and clerical levels. Two of the six teams were represented in the interviews. The work in the debt collection department consisted of calling debtors and securing payment. All work was monitored via the computer system.

The second research site was the credit-card division of a national clearing bank. The work in this department consisted of processing credit-card vouchers to ensure the correct amounts were charged to customers. The credit-card division was composed of three teams of 45 people with two office managers and an overall manager. Almost all non-supervisory level employees came from an employment agency. Senior operators and managers were bank employees. Eleven interviews were conducted that included all levels except the most senior manager who was new to the department. As at the first site, all the work was computer monitored with the main activity involving data entry of information into vouchers.

Ball and Wilson observed the work spaces and daily interaction of employees at each of the sites. They noted the distinctions between the two sites. The debt collection department had managers in full view interacting with employees. The work was self-paced with operators selecting files from a pool of cases assigned to them. The computer would automatically dial the debtor as the operator read the file. In the credit-card division the manager was hidden from view and had little interaction with the employees. Most employees also had an on-site employment agency supervisor to go to with problems rather than a bank manager. Performance information on data entry statistics was available to

supervisors and fed back to the teams each morning with problems being the focus of attention.

Extracts of talk from interviews were the discursive data. Four interpretive repertoires emerged. In the first case, repertoires of empowerment and life-in-work were evident. The empowerment repertoire contained patterns of talk about self management, proactivity, choice, and freedom. The life-in-work repertoire included patterns of positioning of gender, age, pastimes, and personal preference bringing each of these into the work realm. In the second case, repertoires of legitimate authority and power-through-experience were evident. The legitimate authority repertoire was flavored by patterns of discipline, rules, negative instruction, and inflexibility. The power-through-experience repertoire was termed a resistant repertoire where figures of speech that included tenure and knowledge of the job were evident. The power-through-experience repertoire was contrasted to the life-in-work repertoire for positioning the role of managers in the organization. Ball and Wilson argued that the repertoires were different in each case due to organizational context and further that the disciplinary power associated with the first case was more rehabilitative and reformatory and in the second case more repressive. Ball and Wilson's study cautioned managers to consider the possibility that performance monitoring technology may create more problems than it solves. They concluded that the context within which CBPM is implemented influenced the degree of resistance from the workers.

Challenges in Organizational Discourse Research

The body of research using discourse analysis to study organizations is growing (Grant et al., 2004). Along with that growth come arguments on how best to approach this linguistic turn to organizational research (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000b; Fairclough, 2005;

Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2001). Deetz (2003) expressed concern about the shallowness of some studies that look at text “without looking through discourse to see the specific ways the world is produced” (p. 425). Without this deeper inquiry, researchers are missing new ways to think through problems and explain organizational life. The on-going challenges in organizational discourse analysis are summarized by Hardy (2001) into four primary focus areas: (a) data and theory, (b) text and context, (c) structure and agency, (d) reflexivity and pragmatism.

For the data and theory area, the researcher’s challenge is the selection and analysis of the large volumes of text available in organizations. Large selections lead to cumbersome and labor intensive data management efforts. The researcher must also make decisions on how much the text speaks for itself and to what degree other theories inform the interpretation. For the text and context area, the researcher must choose the balance between focusing only on the text and situating the text within local and broader contexts. Arguments on either extreme nullify the advantage of discourse as a methodology. Taking out all context means studies are devoid of the ability to examine what is brought into being and for whom. Putting in too much context may only confirm the researcher’s assumption about what is happening and submerge the text. The debate on structure and agency is evident in arguments within the discourse analysis community (c.f. Fairclough, 2005). Researchers are challenged to determine the degree to which they ascribe to the social constructionism perspective. Do people do discourse or does discourse do people? Finally researchers are challenged to enhance reflexivity yet struggle to do so within the limitations of traditional research publications.

The next two segments of the literature review situate the study within the field of discourse analysis and explore how metaphorical conceptualizations, an emerging perspective within organizational discourse, inform this study.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a way of knowing for understanding organizational life, a lens for seeing and understanding on-going events (Jablin & Putnam, 2000). A discourse analysis of how people talk about feedback in their organization illuminates how feedback is conceptualized in a specific setting. The experience and language of the actors within the context are elevated above the language and assumptions of the researcher, which is a key argument for this study. Rather than impose and search for a pre-defined conceptualization of feedback, the actors within the organization provided the conceptualization. For this study, the actors within the organization provided the talk and text but the analysis was still conducted through the researcher's interpretive lens that in essence means the researcher constructed additional levels of meaning based on her analytic interaction with the actors' conversations and documents.

Since discourse analysis is multi-disciplinary, determining the level and method of discourse analysis can be confusing. Within discourse analysis, theory and method are intertwined (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). Several authors have provided frameworks in an attempt to organize the variations in discourse analysis. The next sections provide detail on three of these frameworks, Wood and Kroger (2000), Alvesson and Kärreman (2000b), and Hercleous (2006) and locates this study within these frameworks.

Wood and Kroger (2000) outlined the most relevant varieties of discourse analysis for addressing questions about social practice. These included conversation analysis (CA),

critical discourse analysis (CDA), and discourse analysis in social psychology (DASP).

Discourse analysis is not only method but also a perspective on the nature of language.

Within discourse analysis, the basic shift is to talk as action rather than description, talk is the event of interest with variability appreciated both within and between people. CA is the most micro analytic and can be considered talk-in-interaction. CA examines the turn-by-turn utterances of conversation. This approach was too detailed for this study since the object of interest is a concept and not individual social interaction. CDA is used to explore social issues and social problems. The question of interest for this study is not posed as a social problem so CDA was not chosen. DASP includes a spectrum of concepts derived from social psychology. Within DASP is a concept of interpretive repertoires which is defined as “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). A repertoire is often organized around metaphors and figures of speech. Once identified, the repertoire is further examined for what function it serves. This is the level of analysis that matches the context and focus of this study on feedback conceptualization. Specifically, this dissertation explored the figures of speech and metaphors in talk and text surrounding feedback in the organization. These figures of speech and metaphors expose varying conceptualizations of feedback. The implications (or functions) of the various conceptualizations were then examined and discussed.

Alvesson and Karreman (2000b) placed variations of discourse analysis along a level of context dimension. This framework is termed discourse-laddering with the ladder rungs as micro-discourse, meso-discourse, grand discourse, and mega-discourse. At the *micro-discourse* rung there is heavy attention to detail in the linguistic analysis and the context of

interest is at the interpersonal level. The *meso-discourse* level notches up the level of detail and the situational context. This may include context within an organization or community and may focus more on patterns with the speech. The *grand discourse* and *mega-discourse* rungs connect the language in use to larger societal structures such as race, gender, and management practices (c.f. Alvesson, 1998).

This study is at the meso-discourse level, examining the concept of feedback within the context of a specific organization and between work roles in that organization. The analysis attended to the range of terms, metaphors, and figures of speech. The meso-discourse approach is “relatively sensitive to language use in context but interested in finding broader patterns and going beyond the detail of the text and generalizing to similar local contexts” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000b, p. 1133). This is a slightly larger context than the micro interaction between individuals but not making gross categorizations to general organizational or societal influences on the conceptualization of feedback.

Heracleous (2006) defined four approaches to discourse analysis which include interpretive, functional, critical, and structural. The interpretive approach encourages an in-depth understanding from the actor’s frame of reference and assumes that language constructs social and organizational reality. The functional approach assumes the actors have an instrumental use of language to achieve their ends. Discourse is a tool at the actor’s disposal. The critical approach assumes that power-knowledge relations are linguistically communicated, historically situated, and embedded in social practices. It further assumes that subjects are dominated by the discourse and associated social practices. The structural approach combines the action orientation of interpretive and functional approaches and places the subject as an active agent. It is an integrative approach that bridges the structure

and agency dualism. The integrative approach is appealing for this study but appeared to require a longitudinal view of the discourse, which this study did not attempt to produce. This study was interpretive in approach since it highlighted the actor's conceptualization of feedback through the interpretation of the researcher.

Metaphorical conceptualizations, discussed next, are another approach to organizational discourse that provided a theoretical foundation to integrate individual and collective conceptualizations of feedback.

Metaphorical Conceptualizations

This study explored alternative conceptualizations of feedback as construed through the talk and text of the actors in the organization. These conceptualizations augment those conceptualizations that dominate the traditional feedback literature. Metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) provided a well-suited theoretical foundation for how alternative conceptualizations may be explored in an organization. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) stated that metaphor is central to all thought and is fundamentally how people make sense of the world. They claimed that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (p. 5). They explained how systems of metaphors are constructed through shared lived experiences. The habitual use of metaphor solidifies coherence in social systems. Systems of overlapping metaphors connect experience with abstract concepts. Metaphors enable understanding through comparison of one domain of experience in terms of another. For example, *work is a game*, provides a way to understand an organization as a place that contains players, rules, winners, losers, and strategy. Lakoff and Johnson expanded their original work by emphasizing the conceptual nature of

metaphor. That metaphor is “not a mere matter of words” but is also “about conceptualization and reasoning” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 245).

There is a significant stream of literature on metaphor in organizational analysis (Grant & Osrick, 1996). Metaphor explores the relation between language, thought, and meaning (Inns, 2002). Metaphor “uses language to tie the unfamiliar and abstract to the familiar and concrete” (Osrick, Putnam, & Keenoy, 2004, p. 107). Koch and Deetz (1981) advocated metaphorical analysis to explore conceptualizations. They argued that members in an organization share social reality so analyzing the naturally occurring talk in the organization provides insight into what is thinkable and doable within the social context of the organization. Hogler, Gross, Hartman, and Cunliffe (2008) suggested that metaphors provide a rich means of synthesizing and overcoming the dualities of self and world and objective and subjective. Cornelissen (2004) explained the constitutive properties of metaphor as an “emergent meaning structure” (p. 712). In other words, meaning emerges from the blending of the meaning of the target and source of the metaphor. In the example of *work is a game*, work is the target and the source is a game. Meaning now emerges when the aspectual qualities of a game enable seeing the organization in a new light.

Several complex organizational concepts have been explored using metaphor. Morgan (1997) offered alternative ways to see organizations using metaphor. Marshak (1993) applied metaphorical analysis to organizational change. Dunford and Palmer (1996) revealed the root metaphors underpinning the rationale for downsizing in organizations. Fleming (2005) used metaphors to dispute the dominant view of cynicism as resistance to corporate culture management. Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn (2001) derived five different metaphors for teamwork across cultures. They interviewed employees across geographical

locations in six multinational corporations. They then analyzed the interview transcripts for words that represented metaphors and grouped them into five metaphors for teamwork (military, sports, community, family, and associates). They then compared the metaphors within and between the cultures to conclude that people in different countries hold different definitions of teamwork. A final example is the study conducted by Ollilinen and Calasanti (2007) that examined the metaphors used by members of self-managed work teams. They found that the family metaphor frequently emerged in the interview data and that this metaphor reinforced gendered roles within the work teams.

This is not an exhaustive list of the organizational studies using metaphors, but it does provide ample justification for using metaphors as part of this study. The concept of feedback in organizations has not been researched using metaphor theory. This study adds to the rich set of organizational studies that have used metaphor theory.

Conceptualizations in Organizations

This study explored how feedback is conceptualized in an organization through the text and talk of the actors in the organization. It is reasonable to determine if other studies have looked at how a frequently used term or concept is conceptualized in an organizational setting. Two studies are reviewed here.

Luiz Alcione Albandes Moreira (2002) explored how the terms *organization*, *manager*, and *management* were conceptualized within a group of management teachers in a Canadian business school. Moreira used a discursive narrative methodology underpinned by a social constructionist perspective. This social constructionist perspective says that discourses create organizations rather than simply describe them. In the first phase, Moreira selected a set of management text books and selected concepts and phrases that represented

the most often mentioned concepts for the conceptualization of organization, manager, and management. In a written questionnaire, the study participants, in this case 20 management teachers, selected the 10 most pertinent concepts to their conceptualization of organization, manager, and management. They were then asked to list any other concept that they felt was pertinent but omitted from the original list. The next phase of the study consisted of two types of interviews. The first type of interview began with a generative question “What is your opinion of the basic mission of the Business School?” The researcher then asked follow-on stimulus questions to induce the participants to talk about their conceptualizations of organization, manager, and management. The second type of interview created real-life-anchored fictional narratives. Moreira wanted to generate more naturally occurring narrative to expose the participants’ conceptualizations. Two situational statements were used to prompt the narrative. In each, the participant was asked to place himself in a situation where a former student approaches him in a casual atmosphere, such as a coffee shop, introduces herself, and asks to sit down. The participant is then asked to produce the results of that conversation, in as much details as he or she can. The researcher encouraged the participant to produce detail and to not just speak in linear terms, but to act out the conversation from both the teacher and student perspective. Moreira stated that the interview process generated rich empirical material, much more so than the written questionnaire, to the point that “the research would seem impoverished if the research documents constituted the only empirical material” (p. 92). Moreira’s study went beyond exploring the conceptualization and spoke to how the teachers infuse values into the conceptualization and reproduce them, thus taking the study into a critical discursive perspective. Moreira’s analysis also explored the interrelatedness of the three terms of interest. Moreira concluded that the teachers used four

ways to establish, socialize, and reproduce the concepts of organization, manager, and management: (a) via idealtypification, (b) relying on heavy editing, suggesting an allegorical text, (c) as internally ambiguous, and (d) as a political statement. Explaining each of these terms is beyond the scope of this literature review, the study was included as an example of a similar approach to research the conceptualization of an organizational phenomenon.

This study on the conceptualization of feedback employs a similar discursive interpretive perspective to Moreira's, but includes only one term of interest: that is, feedback. This study extends the traditional research on feedback rather than examine the implications of the broad field of Organization and Management studies as Moreira did.

Another example of a study that explored a conceptualization took place in an educational setting. Daniel Brillhart (2007) explored how teachers conceptualize the task of teaching as part of his case study of a public high school in the midwest United States. Brillhart's study used a constructivist paradigm, where individuals construct meaning from interaction with their worlds. It was important for Brillhart to understand the teachers' concept of teaching within the actual context of teaching as well as explore how their personal and professional experiences have shaped their conceptualization of the task of teaching. Brillhart employed an ethnographic research method that placed the researcher in a position to observe the teacher in context. Ten teachers participated in the study and the researcher collected data throughout an entire school year by observing teachers and talking with them about their practice and thoughts about their work. Brillhart emphasized using the voices of the teachers as a way to explore their conceptualization of the task of teaching. Brillhart conducted a set of two interviews with each of the teachers throughout the year where he used prompting questions such as "Describe what you considered a good teacher

when you were studying education in school” and “Draw a picture of how you view teaching, explain it as best you can.” Brillhart formed conclusions then conducted comparisons to former studies. The three primary conceptualizations included teaching as rooted in relationships, teaching as learning about self, and teaching as contextual and experienced knowledge. This study is similar to Brillhart’s with the emphasis on elevating the voice of the participants and by exploring conceptualizations through language use. A difference from this study is that Brillhart’s uses a constructivist, vice constructionist perspective that focused more on each individual’s conceptualizations based on the metaphor that each teacher is a black box that is shaped by interactions with his or her environment.

Summary

The concept of feedback has evolved from early behavioral perspectives of reward and punishment to include cognitive and social aspects of motivation and learning. The concept of feedback is often included as a component of other theoretical concepts rather than a unique phenomenon. The information processing view of humans became dominant in the professional literature on feedback and led to the term *feedback* that exists in today’s organizational vernacular. Several authors have proposed models of feedback based on various conceptualizations (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; , 1979; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) along with associated research agendas.

Ilgen et al. (1979) formulated the first broad model and advocated research in organizations. Ashford and Cummings (1983) highlighted the benefit of feedback for the individual and developed a feedback-seeking model. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) critically reviewed early feedback research and developed a feedback intervention theory to shore up

weaknesses they found in early research. Hattie and Timperley (2007) reviewed feedback in educational settings and proposed a model of feedback for classroom settings.

Feedback has historically been studied using objective research methods that deconstruct components of a researcher selected feedback model into individual traits or process steps. Traditional research methods are surveys and laboratory experiments intended to isolate and evaluate the influences of individual traits or process steps. Few studies examine how people in organizations describe their experience of feedback versus how the feedback literature portrays feedback in organizations. The understanding of feedback's influence on organizational behavior can be expanded through use of other research paradigms, specifically language-based methods that explore how people in the organization experience feedback.

Organizational discourse is an expanding field of inquiry into organizational phenomena. It provides approaches and perspectives for language-based constructionist inquiry into the conceptualization of feedback in the organization. Two organizational studies (Ball & Wilson, 2000; Chan, 2007) using discourse analysis touch on the topic of feedback. The concept, rather than the process, of feedback has yet to be explored using a discourse-analytic approach. The study for this dissertation is similar to these two studies in that both take a constructionist and discourse analysis view. This study differs in that feedback as a concept is the focus of inquiry rather than the close examination of specific instances and processes of feedback.

The discourse analysis approach chosen for this study can be defined as meso-discourse level using Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000b) framework, an interpretive approach according to Heracleous (2006), and using concepts and methods from DASP in Wood and

Kroger's (2000) terms. Specifically this study used the methods for finding the interpretive repertoires as defined by Potter and Wetherell (1987) within the context of work roles within a single organization.

Metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) is congruent with the interpretive repertoire concept from DASP. Both use figures of speech as a means of interpreting the meaning people make of social reality as well as creating social realities. Conceptual metaphors and the meanings constructed from their overlapping use provide cohesive understandings of complex concepts. Feedback is an example of a complex concept embedded within the social context of an organization. Metaphorical analysis provided a second level of interpretation of the findings from this study.

The conceptualization of other terms and concepts, such as management and teaching, have been studied using language based approaches (Brilhart, 2007; Moreira, 2002). These studies provide evidence of the richness of understanding created through interpretation of the talk of the actors in the organization.

Feedback in organizations has been conceptualized in the literature using an information processing metaphor and objective inquiry methods. This study uses a language-based interpretive method of inquiry, based on discourse analysis and metaphor theory, to augment the traditional feedback research in organizations.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This is a qualitative-interpretive language-based case study using two varieties of organizational discourse analysis to explore how feedback is conceptualized in organizations.

Setting

The study was conducted within a Navy research and development facility in the United States. The pseudonym for the name of the organization is NAVYLAB. NAVYLAB is responsible for acquiring and maintaining Navy and Marine aircraft and associated systems. The employees at NAVYLAB do a variety of technical work, including research, product development, contractor oversight, product testing, troubleshooting of deployed products, pilot training, and operations of land, air, and sea-based test facilities. The employees come from a wide range of skills and professions including engineers, scientists, technicians, military officers, enlisted personnel, and support staff. The number of full-time civil service employees is approximately 3,000.

The study was restricted to civil servants currently employed within NAVYLAB. Although the organization supports the military, the majority of the workforce is non-military. The study omitted active duty military employees since they operate under different personnel rules and policies. Only subsets of the civil servants interact on a regular basis with the military employees. The civil servants within the organization are all subject to the same rules and regulations. At the time of data collection, the civil servants were just beginning the training for transition to a new personnel performance management system. The transition was scheduled to be complete 1 year after the data collection. In contrast, the military personnel operated with different processes and procedures for performance feedback and have significantly different experiences from the civil servants in the workplace. The

workforce also contained about 2,000 contractor employees from various companies. The contractor employees were not included in the study since gaining permission to include them would have required a permission letter from the human resource director for each of the companies.

NAVYLAB is located in a small remote community in the United States with the associated aspects inherent to a small community. Everyone tends to know everyone else and social relationships are maintained in and outside of the work environment. The organization is the primary employer in the surrounding area. The organization is part of larger systems command within the Navy that has installations all over the United States. Employees work and team with Navy employees at the other installations, called sites. In some cases, supervisors may live at a different location and teams may also be formed across the locations. The participants for this study all came from a single local community and none were from the other related installations. Other details of the organization's context that were mentioned by the study participants are explained in more detail as part of the findings in chapter 4.

Research Design

The empirical material gathered for the discourse analysis was oral and written text from the organization. Discourse analysis is best suited for naturally occurring text and talk in the organization (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The research design included two types of data collection. The talk of the organization was gathered from focus group discussions on feedback and the text of the organization was gathered from existing documents and manuals that referenced feedback. The focus group discussions were planned and coordinated specifically for the study and therefore were not pure naturally occurring talk. I designed the

prompting questions for the focus group discussions to elicit as close to a natural discussion as possible amongst the study participants. The written text for the discourse analysis consisted of documents available on the internal intranet that reference feedback such as the strategic guidance document, and work-team process and procedure manuals.

Group Discussion Design

The employee discussions took place with groups of people who performed similar roles in the organization. For discourse analysis, the number of participants in the study is not as important as the number of language instances that will be analyzed (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The key is to identify the sources of the discourse of interest and be mindful to select those that might present different versions yet hold something in common (Wood & Kroger, 2000). By segmenting the group discussion process by organizational role, I was able to do analysis of similarities and differences by role. I selected groups that have clearly defined boundaries and different practical experiences yet broadly cover a majority of the roles within the organization. Table 1 is a summary of the groups.

Table 1

Groups of Participants

| <i>Identifier</i> | <i>Role Description</i> | <i>Other criteria for this group</i> |
|-------------------|---|---|
| a | New professional employees where this was their first job out of college | Less than 5 years in the organization. Member of one of the new employee development programs. All had a 4-year degree. |
| b | Mid-career new employees that have worked in at least one other company prior to this job | Less than 5 years in the organization. |
| c | Technical role, non-supervisor, non-lead position | At least 1 year in the role |
| d | Support role, non-supervisor, non-lead position | At least 1 year in the role |
| e | Functional management role, first or second level supervisor of a technical function | At least 1 year in the role |
| es | Functional management role, first or second level supervisor of a support function | At least 1 year in the role |
| f | Technical program lead role, responsible for product development of some type. | At least 1 year in the role |
| g | Department head or other senior executive manager | At least 1 year in the role |

The group discussions were designed to create a conversational atmosphere. I co-designed the employee group discussion meeting agenda with two internal OD consultants. The discussion prompting questions and discussion checklist are included in Appendix A. I observed the group discussions and took field notes. The internal OD consultants facilitated the group discussions. The facilitators encouraged the participants to converse and interact with each other during the discussions. This was intended to create social interaction and generate more naturally occurring talk about feedback rather than a structured interview. I

observed rather than facilitated in order to gather additional data and to limit my influence of the conversation. I was able to be reflective in the process of the group discussion and note personal reactions to the discussion. The discussions varied in length from 1 to 1 ½ hours. Some groups had more interactive discussions than others groups did. Overall, the design and prompting questions generated rich and useful talk.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

I solicited the participants of the group discussions through the organization's e-mail system. I created special distribution lists for each of the groups. I created these distribution lists by reviewing organizational charts and obtaining employee information such as on-board date, area of assignment, and personnel classification from human resources. The e-mail message used to solicit employee participation is included in Appendix B. As employees volunteered to participate, I talked with them over the phone or sent an email to determine the participant's role in the organization and obtain informed consent (see Appendix C and D). I originally used the script to follow up with interested people over the phone or in person. I then switched to e-mail for responding to interested participants, as the e-mail process was quicker and allowed the potential participants time to review the informed consent information on their own time. I explained to volunteers that their participation was voluntary, and that I would not disclose to anyone if they chose to or chose not to participate.

I invited the employees who completed informed consent forms to the discussion sessions. At any time during the process up to the start of the group discussion, employees could opt out of the research study. No employees chose to opt out after arriving for the group discussion.

Only government civil service employees were included in the study. This excluded active duty military and contractor employees from participation. Through conversations and e-mails with the employees, I determined what role the employees held and if they had been in the role for at least 1 year. If employees did not currently hold any of the roles of interest or the employees had not held the role for at least a year, I thanked them for their interest and explained that the study did not include their current role or they did not have the required length of time in the role. I intended to limit the number of participants per group to 7 but did not obtain over 7 participants per group so did not implement stand-by lists.

Each group had 4 or 5 participants. The study included a total of 36 participants, 20 women and 16 men. I received a total of 69 responses to the e-mail solicitations. Of the respondents, 38 participants fit the study criteria, were available at the time of the group discussions, and agreed to participate. Two participants did not show up at the agreed upon discussion group time due to last minute schedule conflicts so they were not included in the study.

Originally, I planned to have 7 groups but received enough responses from the functional manager role to include another group of supervisors of support functions within the organization. Groups a, b, c, d, f, and g all had a mix of men and women. Group e contained all men and group es contained all women. I did not ask participants to identify ethnicity or race.

Data Collection and Management

I collected a dozen documents and messages from the organization that referenced feedback. The complete list of documents is included in Table 2. These included personnel system training materials, strategic guidance documents, employee development checklists,

feedback workshop materials, organizational surveys, and team feedback forms. If participants mentioned documents during the group discussions, then I located copies of those documents for analysis.

Table 2

Documents Collected for the Study

| <i>Document Description</i> | <i>Mention Feedback? (Yes/No)</i> |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Product Team Values Document | Yes |
| Performance Management Training Manual for Employees and Supervisors | Yes |
| New Hire Website and Orientation Materials | No |
| New Hire Tour and Program Evaluation Form | Yes |
| Job Announcements (various internal) | No |
| E-mail message from Admiral on Organizational Values | No |
| Internal OD workshop feedback forms | Yes |
| Department Values Document | Yes |
| Strategic Plan | No |
| Office Personnel Management Climate Survey | Yes |
| Human Resource Grievance Procedures Memo | No |
| Internal OD Feedback Workshop materials | Yes |

The discussions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. I scrubbed the transcripts to mask the participant identities and references to the organization. Names used within the group discussions were changed. The participant names were coded to indicate participant number and group identifier, for example, P6Gg means study participant 6 and group g. Wood and Kroger (2000) advocated that the analysis begins with the transcription, by recommending that the researcher do the transcription. Potter and Wetherell (1987) admitted the time involved in transcription and noted it may not always be advantageous for the researchers to do the transcription themselves. They suggest having a professional transcriptionist create the original transcripts. For this study, I

compared each transcript to the original audiotape several times to correct errors in the transcription.

At the conclusion of the analysis phase, I invited the participants to a session where I presented my draft findings and solicited reactions on the findings. In particular, I listened to hear if people heard their voices and perspectives in the findings. They indicated that they did and even mentioned that they recognized some of the figures of speech in the metaphorical analysis. I inquired directly about the metaphors I had derived from the figures of speech to gauge if I had interpreted their use of the figures of speech in a way that made sense. After this discussion I did revise some of the original findings in the metaphorical analysis.

Analysis Methods

Rather than a rigid sequential procedure, discourse analysis involves repeated and iterative readings and interpretations of the text. I began the process using an open coding process after reading through the transcripts several times (Strauss, 1987). I then anchored an interpretation at some point and formed an interpretative question. For example, an anchoring interpretive question would be: *Do the conversations include categorizations of types of feedback?* Categorization is a discursive practice used by people to make meaning with others (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002). I then took the interpretative question outward into other segments then came back in to form another level of interpretation. For example: *What are the types of feedback people mention in the conversations? What are the types of feedback mentioned in the documents?* I discarded some interpretations while keeping and refining others. The final interpretations became the frames described in the findings chapter. This became the first level of analysis for the study. Proponents of discourse analysis call it more of a craft than a structured method (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000). The

analysis approach for this study included a set of strategies to enable me to see multiple interpretations. The original discourse-analytic strategies were selected from those included in Wood and Kroger's (2000) text and were revised throughout the analysis process. The iterations of analysis are described below, but before I get to those a few more words about my approach to this particular discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis differs from other forms of qualitative analysis on several dimensions (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis focuses on the structure and content of the discourse itself, where traditional qualitative analysis focuses on the content to develop themes and categories. Traditional qualitative analysis tends towards exclusive coding and counting the occurrences assigned to a code. Discourse analysts look at content and also focus on how the content is structured through grammar, speech patterns, and other linguistic notions. For example, when are claims made, when are questions used, what pronouns are used. I also specifically looked for figures of speech within the segments where *feedback* appeared as a word. In the purest forms of social constructionist inspired discourse analysis, the categories or themes identified relate to social functions. I did not take a rigid social constructionist stance in the analysis. Some of the categories derived from this analysis relate not to social functions but to themes in the content of the discussion. Discourse analysts must take care not to categorize too early in the process or use pre-determined categories. Per the discourse analysis perspective, I did not use pre-determined categories and ended up not using initial coding schemes. Discourse analysis assumes that multiple interpretations are possible and discounts the validity check of inter-rater reliability. In other words, a segment of the conversation may map to one or more interpretive frames. Discourse analysts claim there is no one true interpretation of the empirical material pointing to the plurivocality of the

method (Grant et al., 2004). The second level of analysis was conducted using metaphor theory. More details of that analysis are included in the introduction to the metaphorical conceptualizations in chapter 4.

To summarize, I performed two primary levels of analysis for this study. Each level included iterative interpretations of the text and talk to identify *what is said* in addition to *how it is said*. The second level of analysis, which included the metaphorical conceptualizations also suggested *what saying it that way does or creates* in the organization.

As mentioned previously, I performed several iterations of analysis. The list below describes the primary iterations in the approximate sequence in which they occurred.

1. Performed initial reading to verify accuracy of the transcription and removed names and other utterances that might disclose the participants or organization.
2. Open coded initial categories that emerged from the data (Strauss, 1987).
3. Identified sets of terms used to describe feedback, metaphors about feedback, figures of speech around feedback.
4. Selected a few of the terms and conducted a modest analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000). This analysis was subsequently discarded since the selection of terms was not responding to the research question, in particular to the *in organization* context. For example, “comfort level” was a term I originally analyzed then discarded.
5. Identified another set of categories that kept the focus on the context of organization.
6. Identified broad patterns and themes across these categories.

7. Developed a set of frames from the patterns for more detailed analysis and interpretations.
8. Developed interpretation questions for each of these frames, then took each frame separately and reviewed all the transcripts and documents again for evidence that supported the interpretation question.
9. Selected the frames that generated compelling interpretations and discarded others.
10. Selected the transcript segments that provided evidence of the compelling interpretations.
11. Identified figures of speech in the selected segments.
12. Identified similarities, differences, and patterns across the figures of speech.
13. Identified metaphors from the patterns, identified the interpretive repertoire for feedback. These appear in the format *feedback as _____*. In the metaphorical conceptualization findings.
14. Identified the surface, deep, and generative metaphors of feedback (Schön, 1993)
15. Added my interpretation of the metaphors to construct a cohesive storyline of the conceptualization, including what identities were created, and any differences in the respective role groups. I did compare between groups to see if some metaphorical conceptualizations were contained in some groups and not others.
16. Verified that the interpretations are grounded using warranting criteria discussed below.

Analysis Warranting Criteria

Some traditional reliability and validity criteria, such as inter-rater consistency, do not hold for discourse analysis. Using a discourse-analytic perspective, there are multiple interpretations that can be created from empirical material. Conventional criteria which rely on the assumption of one true objective view of a world do not apply (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Criteria have emerged in the discourse analysis communities that I applied to this study. These include trustworthiness, soundness, coherence, plausibility, fruitfulness, and moral criteria (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

The trustworthiness criteria include orderliness and traceability to the empirical material. The analysis procedures and iterative pathways were documented along the way and are included in the analysis section of the dissertation. This allows readers a transparent view of the process.

The soundness criteria include demonstration of the iterative interpretations leading up to an overall claim. This differs from traditional grounding of qualitative analysis in that the mini interpretations along the way using excerpts is required instead of just an example excerpt of the overall claim. Soundness also must include a participant orientation. The interpretations must be present within the discourse. For example if a participant mentions that a previous statement creates a problem, then the analyst treats the statement as creating a problem. The soundness criterion is met by tracing each finding to excerpts in the transcripts.

Coherence is a criterion that ensures the collection of claims is put together in a well-developed argument. It has more of a researcher orientation than the participant orientation under soundness. Coherence includes accounting for descriptions of alternatives that were ruled out in the analysis. The coherence criteria are met in the analysis chapter of the

dissertation in the comparison of the findings to the models of feedback in the literature review.

Plausibility refers to whether or not the claims are persuasive, bring clarity, and yield insight. Plausibility often involves comparison to other works and is evident in the analysis chapter of the dissertation.

Fruitfulness is a criterion that emphasizes future work and possibility, whereas plausibility is a comparison to past work. Fruitfulness is exemplified by novel explanations that suggest productive re-framings of old issues and create new connections to previously unrelated issues. Fruitfulness is evident in the discussion section of the dissertation.

As for the moral criteria, the research should provide helpful problem re-framing and should suggest ideas on possible future action. This should be done in the language and experience of the participant orientation and is in the discussion section of the dissertation.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter documents the findings from the discourse analysis of the talk and text gathered for the study. The data gathered provided many avenues of analysis due to the richness of the group conversations. The research question guided and provided a focus for the analysis: *How is feedback conceptualized in organizations?* Discourse analysis is a craft with the premise that many interpretations are possible and that the process is highly iterative (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The findings are arranged into three main sections. The first section contains descriptions of the organization's context that influence the conceptualization of feedback. These are distinct from how feedback is conceptualized yet related based upon the references to these contextual aspects in the participant conversations. The second section contains the first level of analysis of how feedback is conceptualized. The findings are presented as a set of overlapping interpretive frames. The frames were derived from what participants said in their conversations along with what I found in the documents that referenced feedback. The third section contains a second level of analysis that looked beyond what the participants said to the meaning made. Metaphors are used to generate a flow of experience within each metaphorical conceptualization. This is the level of analysis which demonstrates the plurivocality of the discourse-analytic approach.

The transcript excerpts included in this chapter are modified versions of the verbatim transcripts. I removed the extra utterances, such as repeated words and "um's," for readability. I edited the comments such that the integrity remains intact. When a "..." appears within a sentence it means words were removed. When a "..." appears between paragraphs in the excerpt it designates a different segment of the conversation or a different group's

conversation. The participant identities have been masked, as explained previously, using a numeric identifier combined with the group identifier. For example, P23g is participant 23 that participated in role group g. I masked all the proper names that appeared in the excerpts. Brackets indicate the removal or replacement of a term that may have identified the participant or the organization.

Organization Context

Since this study took place within an organization, it is important to note aspects of the organization's context that may influence how feedback is conceptualized. The contextual aspects I present here are strictly those mentioned in the participants' conversations. I have expanded the description of the contextual aspects based on my knowledge of the organization. Since participants brought these elements into the conversation, I assume that these contextual elements are relevant for the conceptualization of feedback in the organization.

Military Organization and Chain of Command

The organization's purpose is to provide the military with new weapon systems while maintaining and enhancing the capability of existing weapon systems. While small subsets of the employees interact with the military on a regular basis, all employees are aware of the mission of the organization. The military personnel assigned to the organization arrive and rotate out in 2-year or 3-year cycles. The career civil servants experience dozens of military rotations during their tenure. An admiral is assigned as the top manager of the organization and comes on-board with his own style, tone, and agenda. The top civil servants may remain in their jobs for several years and work with many admirals. The civil servants understand the military chain of command and at the same time, they understand that their careers are

not typically impacted if they bypass or even ignore the official military hierarchy.

Participants mention that the military has a way of doing business. For example, decisions are made at the top and issued down into the organization with the expectations that the order will be implemented. Therefore, feedback upward is not expected or typically solicited in a military organization. The civil servants respect the military uniform and this may influence how they provide feedback to military personnel. New hires in the organization note that military and former military personnel are more direct and blunt with their feedback.

Employees in general do not expect feedback to be sugarcoated or delayed when military personnel initiate it. Some participants mentioned hesitating when asked to provide feedback to top military personnel. However, when it comes to product feedback, the engineering groups noted that the feedback is critical to ensure a successful product that ultimately will be used by military personnel.

Small Community that Challenges Authority

The organization is located in a small remote community. People work together and then often socialize after hours with the people they work with. They run into each other at community events, school functions, and local stores. This creates the conditions for informal networks and word travels fast about successes, failures, and opportunities. Close relationships as well as frequent interactions provide more opportunity for feedback exchanges. The community has a reputation for attracting people who are technically capable and tend to challenge authority and bureaucracy. People at the other sites refer to the people who work in this organization as rogues and mavericks. People in this organization are known for being honest, candid, and dedicated to the organization's mission. They take pride in being able to get the job done in spite of the bureaucracy.

Matrix Organization Structure

In the early 1990s, the organization switched to a matrix organization structure, called the Competency Aligned Organization (CAO). The competency groups, called CAO by the employees, contain the subject matter experts in a particular function (or competency) and the Integrated Product Team (IPT) groups are responsible for cost, schedule, and performance of the products. Every employee is assigned to a competency (or CAO). Product teams then hire people from the competencies to populate the IPTs. The matrix-aligned organization is not consistently implemented and there are many tensions created because of the structure. Integrated product teams are typically co-located in the same building but competency supervisors are often not co-located with the employees they supervise. Employees tend to identify and become loyal to a product line and not the functional competency to which they are assigned. This creates the conditions where feedback is often solicited by supervisors who are not co-located with the employee. Since employees are assigned to teams, the supervisor may only interact with employees because of official supervisory requirements and not check in with them on the daily work.

First Level of Analysis--Interpretive Frames--How Findings Are Presented

The findings are presented using several interpretive frames to organize the resulting analysis of how feedback is conceptualized in organizations. Table 3 displays the summary of findings. A frame is a category of discourse that emerged from my interpretation and helped me make meaning of the data. The analysis was an iterative interpretive process that became more detailed and focused with each iteration. The interpretive focus is the question I used to focus my analysis for the iteration applicable to the frame. The choice of frames is my construction of these data and not the only organizing framework that applies. These

frames include conceptualizations of the content of feedback, the process of feedback, the motivation to provide feedback, the affect of feedback, and the results of feedback. These interpretive frames emerged from the data during the analysis process. These frames provide a somewhat segmented presentation of the findings, and some of the complexity is lost by presenting the results this way. To highlight the underlying complexity and integrate the interpretive frames, I included a segment that conceptualizes feedback as complex and multi-faceted. In the complexity segment, I weave together the previously presented interpretive frames.

Table 3

Interpretive Frames--Summary of Findings

| <i>Frame</i> | <i>Interpretive focus</i> | <i>Findings</i> |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Content | What is feedback on or about? | About the job About the product About the career About me About the organization About issues or problems Attributes of content |
| Process | How does feedback happen? | Formal processes In-person planned processes Natural processes |
| Motivation | Why is feedback given or not given? | Something about the requestor or receiver Expected outcome Something about me as provider Context of expectations: Work culture Position, experience, and responsibility Proximity Relationship |
| Affect | Why do people like or dislike feedback? | Like feedback when or because Dislike feedback when or because |
| Result | What does feedback result in, create, or do? | Knowledge about and for self Action Feelings or attitudes towards other Nothing |
| <i>Integrating Frame</i> | <i>Combination of above</i> | <i>Findings</i> |
| Complex | What complex conditions surround feedback? | Situation differs for each person Considerations differ for each person Unique episodes Implicit rules Supervisory relationship |

Content--Feedback On or About What

One interpretive frame for the conceptualization of feedback is the topic or purpose of the feedback. Types of feedback that describe topic or purpose appear in the group discussions and in the documents from the organization. Participants mentioned or referenced several types of feedback in their conversations. I analyzed the documents and discussions for references and descriptions of types of feedback in the organization. Participants make claims as to what types of feedback are appropriate, what types of feedback are expected, what types of feedback are more difficult or less difficult to provide, and what types of feedback are useful or used. Documents from the organization describe what types of feedback supervisors should provide when evaluating employee performance. Samples of organizational climate surveys contain the types of feedback solicited from all employees. Types of feedback may be performing different purposes within the organization. From my analysis of the documents and conversations, I derived six different types of feedback: (a) feedback about the job, (b) feedback about the product, (c) feedback about my career, (d) feedback about me, (e) feedback about the organization, and (f) feedback about issues or problems.

Feedback About the Job

Participants discussed feedback that is about the job or tasks in the organization. This includes distinctions of informal on-the-job feedback as well as official performance feedback. Feedback about job expectations and subsequent performance evaluation is the type of feedback that appears in the personnel training manuals for supervisors. Participants in the group discussions claim to provide, need, and use feedback about expectations for job performance.

Informal on-the-job feedback. One participant shared that he liked feedback, especially since he took a new job in the last 6 months, after having been in the same job for over 10 years. He said that feedback is critical to understand what is right or wrong for the job.

P15Gf: Well actually, I like feedback. Actually, I like it a lot, because when I don't get it, it's kinda, "Okay, am I doing this right or wrong? Is there anything particularly?" I did a job change here, about 6 months ago. Went from a job where I'd been for 10 years--12 actually 14, knew everything, to a job where I know practically nothing. So, in a situation like that, feedback is not only welcome, but it's critical. Most people want to do a good job. They want to hear if there's something that they're doing wrong, or could do better. They want to hear that.

Participants sometime seek feedback to determine if they are doing the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way. In another conversation, a participant claimed that feedback is owed to the employees in order for them to understand what to do. She shares the story of asking her supervisor for feedback to see if she is on the right track and as a reality check.

P52Gb: I think supervisory feedback is great. I think it is owed to the employee actually. They're not going to know. The supervisor has a vision of what is supposed to be happening, they have tried to communicate it to you and as the employee you are doing what you think you are supposed to be doing so it is vital that you have that feedback, good, bad, or whatever. And it's kind of back to the government after 7 months, oh yeah, I was doing something the other day and I looked at my supervisor, am I even on the right track? And she's oh yeah, you are doing fine. Okay. So I guess we are doing okay. So even something as simple as that it is a good thing. You are just sort of, okay, I think this is what I am supposed to be doing so you are bopping along thinking, okay, reality check, are we on the right thing, so I think it's a vital thing that they have to have.

Feedback about the job includes what the job entails, when they are supposed to do the job, and specifics of how a job is accomplished. One participant shared how she values feedback especially if she is working on something and is stuck or gets feedback on how to accomplish the task with less effort.

P5Gc: I kind of agree with P10Gc. That you know, especially, I find that I value feedback, especially if I am trying to work on something or I'm stuck or I'm doing it a really poor way that it could be done a lot easier with a lot less effort. You know, I value people coming up and giving me feedback and saying, "Hey why don't you try this way or have you thought about going about that way?"

Participants speak in ways that characterize feedback about the job as necessary and useful and at the same time not always available. In particular, newer employees tell stories that express their desire to have more direction on job expectations, and feedback on how the employee development program works. One participant, who was part of the new employee development program, states that in order to succeed in the program you need to be a self-starter because you do not get a lot of guidance about how to find the mandatory development tours. She goes on to explain how they should really tell you how to do this when you come into the organization.

P7Ga: I would have to say, for somebody who is coming into this organization, that they'd have to be because that's a really good experience from what she's coming from. But you really have to be a self-starter because when I came here, I mean, my supervisor was somewhat helpful. I mean, he got me here. He was like, "Hey," and then you're on your own. I mean, you need to go and find your tours and nobody really describes how you do that. And I remember I was 5 weeks in and I still hadn't gotten a tour and it was difficult. It was really difficult and you really have to get out there and I almost think that in the first week or 2 weeks that you're here they really should tell you how to do this process. Because I think, by and large, that a lot of the people that come here are engineers and scientists and they have difficulty integrating with society to begin with and so now you're telling them to go and find another job, when you've got a job.

Later in the same conversation, another participant claims that there is not enough feedback in the program and that it would nice if someone showed new employees how to go about getting tours. Others in the discussion agree with her.

P6Ga: I think it'd be nice if maybe, uh, the first couple weeks you're here for the [new employee development] program they --

P8Ga: Took you under their wing a little bit?

P7Ga: They need to do that.

P6Ga: They maybe showed you what in the world you're supposed to do after you get your tours with your classes. There's no feedback in that program. It's a good idea, but I think there's a lot of stuff they're missing.

P8Ga: There's a lot of--I agree.

P7Ga: They need to babysit you for like a month and then you can go on and stay here for 20, 30 years, but I think they should give you a month of really just taking you around as a group or something.

P6Ga: Yeah. Supervisors don't necessarily know because they didn't go through it.

Official performance feedback. The official method for evaluating employee performance is another component of feedback about the job. The organization expects supervisors to provide regular standard performance evaluations. Participants referenced the official performance evaluation process.

P38Gg: Maybe it started about 24 years ago, and the [personnel performance] system really formalizes a lot of the feedback, and it says hey, you're going to meet with your employees four times a year. You're going to have a performance plan in place. You're going to this, you're going to that. And most of the organizations I've ever been involved in, the Research Group, does that very well, and continues to do that.

The training manual for the personnel performance system says that employees are expected to provide timely and constructive feedback (formal or informal) to others, identify feedback measures that provide information for assessing priorities, and seek feedback on their own performance. The training materials focus on defining job performance and evaluating employees periodically. Employees are expected to have yearly performance plans and supervisors are to review the plans with employees at least twice a year. Supervisors assign numerical or comparable ratings for each employee on each performance area annually. These ratings are a type of feedback to the employee. The new employee

development programs contain development checklists that are completed by the development tour supervisors. These checklists contain items related to job performance.

Participants cite the organization's expectations in the conversations then often caveat that the process varies between supervisors.

P45Ges: Even though our organization says that this is what happens, that you do a performance plan, and so you have your performance reviews, in many, many cases it doesn't happen. Unless you, sometimes, as the employee, pursue that and push your boss to do it for you.

Supervisors see it as their duty to provide performance feedback but the quality of the feedback varies. This employee emphasizes the lack of supervisory attention to the official feedback process.

P17Gf: No, they conduct them twice a year as required. But the feedback is, "Here's the form. Sign it." There's zero content or anything back to me at all of, "This is good, bad, this is ugly." "Here's a form. Sign it. Doing a good job. Thanks a lot." Nothing specific at all. Now, perhaps that's because of my seniority uh--and role within the organization, being that mine is pretty unique. Uh, I don't work with NAVYLAB. I work with foreign government. So that aspect of it is pretty much, I'm essentially on my own. My CAO supervisor has zero knowledge of anything, other than what I put them on cc of the report to my foreign customer. So, there's no involvement whatsoever from my CAO aspect.

Participants stated that they rarely received regular performance feedback from their supervisor. Participants shared experiences of varying supervisor involvement and commitment to the official performance evaluation process.

P5Gc: I really had to rely on my technical supervisors to provide feedback when it comes to [performance review] time to my branch head and what not and I had one technical supervisor that was always on travel and was really busy and that wasn't a priority for him so I don't think my branch head ever got any feedback from him. She just got my input so that's kind of frustrating.

...

P10Gc: My experience has been different.... My experience has been that my branch head, I provide to them the people that I work for and branch head has gone and talked to them in-depth about what I'm doing and she was, she's, she retired at, she

was very concerned about how I was doing. Give me information about opportunities to advance further, what training I could get or where people are doing what. And she seemed really concerned about what I was doing and really interested in getting an accurate picture of what I was doing by talking to various people that I worked for. So, I found it to be a really positive experience.

One participant shared how she was surprised to hear that many people did not have the regular performance evaluation that her supervisor provided.

P26Ges: When I first worked here, I thought what a great place; I get an evaluation every quarter and I have a performance plan and my boss sits me down and goes over it and tells me how perfect I am every year, because I am almost perfect--but not quite. And I thought it was a great thing--I loved it. And then I was in a class in town and almost everyone in the class worked on the base, either for the government or for a contractor, and I was the only one in the room who got that. And I went, "Doesn't everyone do that? Isn't that required?"

P43Ges: It depends on your boss.

Participants often provided rationale for why supervisors would or would not provide an employee with performance feedback. Official performance feedback appeared to be a necessary and in some cases ignored component of feedback in the organization. Feedback about the job includes informal and formal feedback methods and is one way feedback is conceptualized in the organization.

Feedback About the Product

Feedback about products or services is a type of feedback that participants mention in their conversations. In particular, they speak of customer feedback for a product or service as well as internal reviews and inspections. One participant explains feedback as a cycle that enables product teams to quickly refine and deliver revised products to the end user, in this case the war fighter.

P24Ge: When I think of feedback I think of a couple of different things. Of course I immediately jump to performance feedback but I jump away from that really quick. I go to more customer feedback and feedback as far as war fighter feedback. Our ultimate customer is the war fighter and one thing that NAVYLAB has is a very

strong legacy of doing war fighter feedback. Where, you know--you work closely with someone in the fleet who needs something really bad and you come running home and you get a bunch of smart people together and you come up with this great idea and you go give it to them. And it's not right but it's way closer than anything they've ever had and then they give you feedback and say, "Well that's not what I meant. I meant this." And you run home and do that and you know, this really tight loop where the customer is giving feedback and ideas are going back and forth and that to me is a real benefit, it's really good to be able to work to actually see your product being used by someone who it actually makes a difference with them.

Another participant speaks of using customer surveys to obtain feedback on the service her group provides.

P2Gd: See, with me, I guess I figure feedback is a canned survey. That's because I have customer feedback forms, and that's what I just think that they are--a canned survey.

Feedback on the product or service relates to quality, responsiveness, performance parameters, outcomes, and product requirements. Participants characterize this feedback as a constant and necessary part of the organization.

Participants also mentioned internal evaluations of products, such as peer reviews and milestone reviews.

Facilitator: A couple of you mentioned technical feedback. Could you say a little bit more about how that works?

P15Gf: Informally, well, not always. Of course, we have processes and procedures in the BTU. The ... readiness reviews and milestone reviews, you know, so you have some formal feedback that occurs during those, but a lot of the most valuable, uh at least in my experience, feedback occurs informally. You know, hallway discussions and that type of thing, which I think is--milestone reviews are good for kind of setting a direction and pace, and an area to focus on. But as far as efficiency goes, the hallway talks are obviously more informative.

P17Gf: Yeah, as you say, the technical reviews are at various milestones, at various stages in the program, is a formally defined timeframe. And yet you're right, you have the formal feedback of this is what the program's doing, which is a reflection of the individuals' efforts on the program. So that's one level. P15Gf's right, the fact that the unofficial comments or the snickers, give you a secondary feel for the reality of it.

...

P64Gc: On a software level, I mean, inspections are a way of life. That is formalized feedback and I recently read that in fact, AIPT is going to what's called paired programming because it's a continuous feedback loop rather than have the formalized and therefore more frightening inspection of, okay, here's my software, you guys all look at it and now you tell me what you've found that was wrong with it.

The process for providing feedback through these methods is often officially documented in procedures. Participants described these feedback processes as formal and expected within the organization.

Feedback About my Career

Feedback about career opportunities and ways to advance emerged in the participants' conversations. When prompted to tell stories about feedback in the organization to someone who might be interested in working in the organization, the first response often related to opportunities. This initial response to the prompting question also suggested that the participants wanted to create a positive view of the organization to those outside the organization. One participant stated that there are a diverse set of opportunities in the organization, and that people are routinely providing feedback on what is going on in an area, where there might be problems, and where the good opportunities are. Another participant added that people get feedback through informal networks about possible career opportunities. In the same conversation, mentoring surfaced as a concept related to feedback in the organization. Mentors provide information on opportunities for broadening one's career. Participants stated that feedback about what people or groups to connect with as well as what people or groups to steer away from was useful.

P21Gg: I think the organization is so diverse, and there are just endless opportunities. You know--I'm doing cost analysis now. I was a radar engineer for 25 years, and--and there is just such diversity of opportunities. People move throughout their careers here. They get experience in different areas, and the informal feedback system

throughout the base community uh is alive and well. You will routinely gain feedback about what's either going on in an area, where problems are, where good opportunities are. I interview [potential new employees]. I go recruit every year, and even in that small community I tell them look, once you get there, finding tours, for instance is not as hard as it might sound, because there's this little community of people saying "Hey, go talk to so-and-so. I went and talked to them. They have an opening later on, or they've got this opportunity or that opportunity." And so I think the informal feedback mechanism is very strong. It's kind of like the Internet. It's not real organized, but it's very efficient and effective.

P36Gg: Yeah, and I want to build on what the two of you have said then. P42Gg, you talked about personal feedback, and good feedback in the form of rewards when you've done something well, and if you haven't done something well I, I think we have a pretty strong system of supervisors, friends, mentors bringing folks in and giving them feedback on things that didn't go well and why. The mentoring is not very formal, but just because this is such a close-knit community, I think the mentoring is still pretty strong, and you get from whomever you're associated with feedback on what you've done. And if it isn't personal, you know, here are some opportunities here, those networks are giving you feedback on that particular program, that particular code, and that set of work. I think there's a really, again it's a small community and a networking place that we live in, but I think there's all kinds of opportunities depending on what you want to hear about to hear what people have to say about it.

The subtleties of how to navigate the politics of the organization is another type of career feedback. Participants mentioned feedback about learning how to act in certain situations and how the acts may affect one's career. One participant shared how she did not know how to act when attending a meeting at headquarters, and another participant went on to explain the nuances of the different work locations, and that someone will provide feedback after a meeting if you did or did not act appropriately. Acting properly in high visibility situations may affect careers.

P2Gd: On the whole military thing, I think that is a problem with how to act because when I went to the east coast, I didn't know how to act properly. And I just talk. If somebody asks a question, I talk; I don't wait to be asked to talk a lot of the time. And everybody was just like taken aback, and then when they figured out I was from NAVYLAB, they were like oh, she's—[laughter] I guess that is what NAVYLAB like fosters in a small community, is that you can just say whatever you need say that could either help or hinder either way--a process.

P58Gd: When you say east coast, there's actually two east coasts. The ABC site part, which generally is kind of on par with us and then there's Headquarters part and sometimes you can't tell which meeting you're in. But there's a different protocol at the Headquarters part, much more position and rank-oriented than ABC site part. You just have to remember where you're at. But there are times when you're sitting in the room with the Commander of NAVYHQ there. And the Commander pretty much personally expects you to say something if you need to say something, but I guess I would say everybody else around him is just in shock if you say something that didn't go through your chain of command, or something that your boss should have said. And so, but the Commander today would want you to say that.

P2Gd: Right.

P58Gd: I'm not saying every Commander would want you to say that, it depends on who that Commander is. So part of the trick is just understanding those dynamics, and that just comes from pain. Someone will tell you after the meeting, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that." And that's a good thing. Uh, and you just have to remember those kind of things that someone will tell you over a beer, you know over at Gilligan's Island, you shouldn't have done that. That's a good thing.

Participants indicated that feedback about career opportunities is appropriate and appreciated within the organization. One participant portrayed the organization as better than other organizations since everyone provides new recruits with many opportunities and feedback about career choices.

Facilitator: You are talking about feedback mechanisms. And I was curious what you meant by them.

P50Gb: Feedbacks how are you doing? I mean, where can you go, what's your next opportunities. You know, in an outside company, you won't see that. You won't see somebody telling you hey, there is a job over here that is opened up that is gonna be a nice one. Good, can I go take a look at that. Here you have. Everybody does, everybody helps you with that. A lot of different ways. If I hear that somebody has got an IT job that needs a real good guy, say, hey P56Gb, you know, if this thing over here is opening up, HR does that, I mean excellent ways to communicate things. And for a young person, I don't think they can appreciate that going in.

Feedback About Me

The facilitator asked participants to consider what they would think, feel, or do if someone within the organization approached them and said they had feedback for them. Most

often, this elicited a conversation on feedback framed from a personal perspective. Feedback about “me” includes how a person interacts with others, personality traits, appearance, and indications of a person’s skills or abilities. Participants discussed and debated the appropriateness of feedback about a personality trait or how someone is by nature.

P10Gc: There’s different types of feedback, some of it is appropriate, some of it isn’t.

Facilitator: What kind would be appropriate, do you think?

P10Gc: Something that’s, uh, along that pertains to your work or where it is implied that you want feedback. I think it is also appropriate if you are doing something that is really disruptive to the group and you should probably know about that. But I think if it’s more of an opinion type thing or a personality type thing, then it is not appropriate, so it’s a real fine line because let’s say someone doesn’t bathe enough. I mean, this is a weird example. Even telling somebody, “Hey you stink. Take a shower.” You know, how would you handle that?

Some participants claimed this feedback is only appropriate if the behavior is truly egregious or if the person would be able to change. Participants suggested that some inherent characteristics were unchangeable and should be forgiven or worked around in the organization. In this conversation, participants talked about how interpersonal feedback provided to highly skilled technical people with limited interpersonal skills could create a loss in productivity.

Facilitator: Earlier, P58Gd you made a distinction between technical and personal. Could you say a little bit more about that?

P58Gd: Technical and functional are things that relate to, more specifically, how you do your job or what’s involved in your job. Personal feedback is more about how you do your job and how you relate to other people, how you might be able to do that better. I think there’s a distinction between the two. I mean, you can have what I call the hermit people--they’re technically top-notch but they can’t stand up and talk to anybody. Okay. And so giving feedback to that person, the feedback has to be specifically for whether or not you want some change in the interpersonal skill thing--maybe you can’t change it but you might want to be giving that person some tactics to use--like take valium first before you go to your review. And the technical thing is about hey, there’s some new stuff coming out in your area and you need to go over to the UC extension and pick up all of these pamphlets and read them. Okay. So there’s

two different kinds. And they're substantially different. I think they are substantially different. And if you mix them, the person receiving is gonna get really confused. You don't want that hermit kind of person to take that interpersonal feedback and think it has something to do with their technical skills.

Facilitator: What might happen if that occurs?

P58Gd: Well the person may think am I doing my technical--who better than me is looking at my work and finding flaws in it? And it's gonna cause a cycle of probably self-examination and it's not going to be really efficient. Because you want that technical person to believe they're working on the right thing and just move forward and not have this self examination. That's the job of some other people.

P59Gd: Their productivity.

Participants claimed they have difficulty providing feedback they viewed was of a personal nature and often stated it was inappropriate feedback within the organization. 'Feedback about "me" contains personal information' is one way of how feedback is conceptualized in the organization.

Feedback About the Organization

Feedback about the organization including the policies, initiatives, systems, and climate is another type of feedback from the conversations. Feedback on the organization also appears in the documents and surveys distributed to employees. For example, an Office of Personnel Management (OPM) survey solicited feedback on the organizational climate which included diversity, teamwork, work life balance, work environment, employee involvement, customer orientation, supervision, leadership and quality, communication, training and career development, fairness and treatment of others, readiness to reshape the workforce, performance measures, rewards and recognition, use of resources, strategic planning, and innovation. Participants used skeptical and critical phrases when discussing feedback about the organization. Many participants indicated their skeptical responses were based on experience. When the facilitator asked participants what would happen if they were

asked to provide feedback on a new commander's guidance, they claimed that while this feedback is often solicited, they are skeptical that the feedback was heard or used. One participant said that upper management says thank you for the feedback then does totally the opposite of what you suggested.

P65Gc: But based on my experiences, if you gave them feedback they would say, thank you, but we are doing this and it would be totally opposite. And it would be because they had already decided, but they were told to ask for feedback.

P5Gc: Yeah, and I wonder sometimes, like for example, NMCI feedback because sometimes you get a user survey on what you think, I wonder what they do with that and if really your feedback makes any difference at all on how they handle things because I don't really see any improvements but--

P67Gc: You have to look at what they are soliciting feedback, they're soliciting feedback on the technical, on the performance of the technical people fielding your problems. They're not asking about how well the system works as a whole. They don't, I've never been asked and that's, was my case example also. When they had the dog and pony over here and we were told that NMCI was coming, I went over there to see what was coming down and I talked to the rep. And said, "well when are you guys going to come talk to us and see what we need locally?" And he said, "Oh, that decisions already been made." So, yeah, feedback is valued at the local level only probably.

P10Gc: Well, if I got that question, I would be surprised because it goes against the culture in the military culture, it is a hierarchy and the person in charge, it flows top down, not bottom up. So, I would find that question highly unlikely and I would probably not take it seriously because that's not how the military makes decisions. Or at least from the culture that I've seen, so I find that to be a very strange question.

This group went on to discuss a particular computer technology system in the organization as an example. Another group laughed and a participant said based on his experience absolutely nothing would happen since the feedback would go into the ether.

Facilitator: So imagine that your supervisor or lead has just presented the new commander's guidance and says that the commander is asking for feedback. What do you think would happen?

<overlapping conversation and laughter>

P24Ge: I think laughter.

P22Ge: If experience is anything, absolutely nothing. Feel free to comment all you want because it'll just go in the ether somewhere.

Participants claimed that managers see it as their duty to solicit feedback about the organization and employees are expected to respond. Participants had few expectations that the feedback would be acted upon. One group told stories of feedback being used, but only when the circumstances were right, in this case an alignment of the relationships in the chain of command. In the same conversation, they also told stories of feedback being ignored which caused them to stop providing feedback.

P21Gg: I'm not sure of the question. How would I respond if I was asked to provide feedback on the commander's intent?

Facilitator: That could be one way to think of the question.

P21Gg: Okay. It depends on the commander. I worked for a two-star admiral in the Pentagon who was a Rickover selectee, and he didn't question anything he did. You just said "Yes, Sir," and he did it, including not popping popcorn in the hallway because he didn't like the smell. Okay? Other commanders like Admiral A when he was here were just--I would not have had any problem at all. It is truly dependent on the person.

P36Gg: Yeah.

P38Gg: Absolutely true.

P36Gg: Well you know one thing you have to remember is that things are received at different levels in very different ways. If you're told by your boss "A," and you're relatively high on the chain, you know that they've got a bigger picture that they're trying to deal with, so the best you can do is try to get yourself in line. When you're further down, it's just like another person with another bunch of stuff, and most of those people filter out as much as they possibly can, so you kind of have to consider the source, figure out what you're supposed to do with that information, and then you know--kind of act accordingly.

...

P38Gg: Put yourself back 3 years ago. Would it have worked under Admiral C?

P36Gg: No. No.

P38Gg: Absolutely not.

P36Gg: In fact it wouldn't have worked under the whole chain.

P42Gg: The chain. That's my point.

P36Gg: The chain would not have done that.

P42Gg: Exactly.

P38Gg: Absolutely true. They would have all said suck it up and just do it.

P36Gg: Yes.

Feedback About Issues or Problems

Participants mentioned feedback about issues or problems that affect individuals or groups in the organization. Supervisors told stories of how they listened to and dealt with issues or problems that employees brought to their attention. One supervisor told the story of an employee coming to see her early in the morning to discuss an issue within her work group.

P42Gg: I think it's all action-oriented for us, and we spent 2 ½ years kind of revamping our organization and getting the trust back, and people wanting to work there again. And so we've had an open-door policy. Most of the people know that I come in at 6:30, and so I've actually had DG3s and whoever come in my office at 6:30 in the morning, and just cry because the work environment is bad. You know-- something is going on in their group. Nobody is taking action on it for a number of reasons. Either they're not comfortable with the supervisor. The supervisor sees it a little bit differently. They're busy with Navy ERP implementation. So the fact that I will step in and talk to the managers, let them know what's going on, and I actually get personally involved to change the situation and make it better, has built a lot of trust. Because even though that DG3 technician may not have wanted anybody to know, she came and saw me at 6:30 on Wednesday morning. When it gets taken care of a week later, she will tell people, you know and that built a lot of trust, because I think that in our organization there was a feeling for a long time that nobody cared what was going on at the working level. My opinion having been there before and a lot of the people know I started out way down at the bottom, uh without them, nobody here would get a paycheck. Nobody here would get their travel vouchers processed. Work would come to a halt without those entry-level technicians. And so for me, building trust in the organization has all had to do with action. You know, taking

action and getting personally involved and letting them know I do care if you're happy, so.

Another participant described how he would hold "open bitch" sessions within his team in the military to deal with issues and problems. Another supervisor described how she spends part of each morning walking around the building becoming aware of the problems or issues that her employees are dealing with on a day-to-day basis.

P50Gb: Normally I don't wait for them to come to me. I normally go to them. In the military, I had a-a process called the open bitch session which was every two- open complaints session.

...

P26Ges: If you happen to walk by when someone is ready to take a sledgehammer to their printer, then you know that they need equipment. And it might be someone who is afraid to ask or they don't want to bother you or something. So now you know. And if you take care of it, the next day someone is installing a new printer on their desk, then they're kind of like oh, wow, that's a good thing. And I think that's the best thing about walking around. We have two little buildings and I had to move over to the building I don't like so much this last year, so I kept my coffee maker in the other building. So the first thing I do is put down my bag in my office and pick up my coffee cup and go next door. And, so I get my coffee and then I walk around and talk to everybody in that building, and then I come back through my building again and then I go and sit down and then sure enough I run out of coffee and I get up and do it again, you know? So I walk into the work area and they'll go oh, I have a question for you. Oh, I have a question for you. And I can just stop by and I've got my coffee, thank God, so I can take care of that while I'm answering questions in the morning. That's my favorite part of the day.

Participants indicated that feedback about issues or problems was feedback that the providers expected them to act upon.

Attributes of Feedback Content

Participants used dichotomies when describing feedback that I call attributes of feedback. Participants distinguished formal feedback from informal feedback. Some examples of this distinction occurred in the following conversation.

Facilitator: A couple of you have mentioned the distinction between formal and informal. What makes something formal or informal when I'm giving you feedback?

P59Gd: I think formal is like during performance appraisals that you've gotta write out and say okay, through your last quarter please give me some feedback, you know, on these certain people and what they've done in the last 3 months or something. It's kinda like that is a kind of a formal thing--it's gonna be written up. Informal is just--basically just issues.

...

P2Gd: Yeah, right. Or when you're called in or called out on a meeting--in a meeting or after a meeting or that kind of thing, it gets more formal.

...

P60Gd: In addition to that, I think, um, who it's coming from--the rank of the individual. The higher up it's coming--you know, the person that's initiating the feedback, if it's coming from a fairly high individual, I would just consider that formal versus my peer or somebody that I -- you know. I think the rank of the person has something to do with that.

...

P58Gd: I think it's environmental. It's the context that the feedback is given in, regardless of the rank of the person. Even if it's a co-worker. That the context the delivery is put in that makes it formal or informal.

Participants also made the distinction of positive feedback and negative feedback, as shown in the excerpt below.

P58Gd: And especially with negative. It's very easy to give positive feedback, okay--

P60Gd: Right.

P58Gd: It's hard to give negative feedback. And if it's negative feedback about someone's personality it's very difficult. And, you know, I think you're really challenged to do that. It depends on how much you want to improve and if you have a stake in it and you feel it's worth the risk of doing it, you probably should do it. But ideally, it should never get to that point.

Participants also made a distinction between technical feedback and personal feedback.

Facilitator: Earlier, P58Gd you made a distinction between technical and personal. Could you say a little bit more about that?

P58Gd: Technical and functional are things that relate to, more specifically, how you do your job or what's involved in your job. Personal feedback is more about how you do your job and how you relate to other people, how you might be able to do that better.

Some added a third distinction of information or neutral feedback. Participants did not all agree on what these attributes meant, but often used the terms to amplify their conceptions of feedback.

Process--Feedback How

Another frame of conceptualization is the participants' conversations on *how* feedback occurs in the organization. Participants discussed how feedback *does* happen along with preferences of how feedback *should* happen. These preferences included implicit rules concerning the process of feedback. In the conversations, participants referred to training that included feedback techniques, such as the power of positive feedback. Participants also speculated about how people prefer feedback. Some statements attributed characteristics to humans in general, other statements attributed preferences to groups or identities, for example engineers or introverts or supervisors. The performance evaluation handbook described how supervisors should deliver feedback to employees in the organization. I have placed the interpretations of how feedback occurs into three categories, (a) formal processes, (b) in-person processes, and (c) natural or common processes.

Formal Feedback Processes

Formal feedback processes tend to be structured, objective, impersonal, and written. Formal processes include feedback solicited through on-line surveys, provided in letters of appreciation, formal recognition or awards, and inspections, reviews, and appraisals. Feedback is typically structured, pre-formatted, and has rules associated with who can and

cannot provide or be the recipient of the feedback when using these processes. One participant relayed a story of how a simple request for recognition became tangled in the official chain of command. In the same conversation, another participant adds that giving rewards and awards in the organization is difficult because some people feel excluded.

P41Gf: Actually, I have a story of one of the ... since he knows that NAVYHQ three star, emails him directly about something he suggested they put their guys in for an award. So he went straight via our direct three star, but then there's like tripping and falling all the way back down the hill. There's all the admirals and SESers below him had to figure out how to make this work. So, it's kind of--the feedback was there to do it, but the chain of command and essentially the command structure got in the way of the feedback that he thought that he was supposed to put in for. And, you know, Admiral A personally asked him to put this in, but when he went directly to him, everybody between him, between the [mid level manager] and the admiral kind of got their feathers ruffled because they had no idea this was coming and so.

Facilitator: What were the responses from them?

P41Gf: Well, because he wrote, "FJ, thanks, Mickey," at the end, so it came back. He needed a chain of command. And AD was out of the country. He was in Panama when it happened, so he comes back to 20 phone messages and 50 emails, of everybody above him trying to figure out how to correct this, a guy at NAVYLAB that was rogue. Ultimately, I think they got their award, but it's one of those--it's funny, the way NAVYLAB mentality is on personal relationships, versus NAVYHQ's chain of command structure, where you step on so many toes if you don't go through them, and they get cc'ed on your emails. You know.

Facilitator: So Admiral A received it okay though.

P41Gf: Yeah, he was all good with it. You know essentially he went back to his EA and Mr. Top SES and said take care of it. It's the take care of it where boom, everything dumped back downhill. It goes from one person to one person, back to two, back to the world. Why is this guy sending emails directly to the admiral? It's kind of humorous when you think about it. But it's just--you're in a military structure. It's not like in private industry.

P19Gf: My sense is that rewards, or awards, are difficult in this environment. You're always hurting some people's feelings. Somebody's always feeling like they should have been a part of it and was left out. Or it's not what that individual wants to receive, or it's not interpreted in the way intended.

Feedback is routinely solicited through on-line surveys in the organization, or as one participant mentioned “they spam us in our e-mail.” These surveys often protect the identity of the individual that completes the survey. Some demographic information including location, department, age, and role is collected, as was done in the OPM survey. Participants claimed that anonymous surveys about managers may elicit more honest feedback.

P43Ges: My experience is I've asked for feedback before and I always feel like people are afraid to really tell you in your presence what--you know, because they don't know how you're gonna take it and they might be less, some people are more comfortable than others. But I did one time have a==it was like a 360-degree feedback mechanism thing where you send it out to all your employees and then it's anonymous and all the employees come and then in this forum you get to see feedback about your leadership style. And I think people are way more honest in that than they'd ever be in a face-to-face environment. Even if you have good relationships with them, it's still kind of awkward. You know, and right now, we do that once-a-year thing or the once-a-quarter thing, depending on how that works for you. And still I don't think we train people to do it very effectively and I don't think we put in place tools to do it very effectively and I don't think it happens a lot up.

Participants expressed skepticism that survey data about organizational issues or systems causes any change, as mentioned in the section on feedback about the organization.

Participants told positive stories of providing survey-based feedback to a particular individual, say a manager or a co-worker.

P64Gc: I was recently asked for feedback on one of my co-workers by one of my co-workers. He actually was taking a class where the feedback was gathered and then um, names were taken off and it was compiled data that he was presented with. And I felt good doing it and I was real glad when he came back from the class, he was very happy about what he gained from it, because like you, he found it to be an enlightening experience in a lot of ways. So on a co-worker level, I don't think there is much of an issue.

They told more negative stories when the survey-based feedback concerned a particular change initiative or system within the organization.

P64Gc: An email that's just blanket everybody. I appreciate your feedback and everybody would say, okay, if I have time, I'll get around to it.

P65Gc: But based on my experiences, if you gave them feedback they would say, thank you, but we are doing this and it would be totally opposite. And it would be because they had already decided, but they were told to ask for feedback.

P5Gc: Yeah, and I wonder sometimes, like for example, NMCI feedback because sometimes you get a user survey on what you think, I wonder what they do with that and if really your feedback makes any difference at all on how they handle things because I don't really see any improvements but—

Participants talked about recognition and award processes in the organization. Some participants expressed dismay at the difficulty or absence of formal positive feedback processes.

P43Ges: I did have one thought, though, which is off the subject of this subordinate/coworker/supervisor thing. I think, as a whole, our organization is pretty bad at showing positive feedback to the organization. I mean, our teammate appreciation thing, it's so hard in this organization, even when you try to do an award of some sort, it just feels so forced and so hard. The award paperwork, all the rules about how you can reward someone. You know, I just don't think we do a very good job in this. And even if somebody like Mr. SES stands up and says, "You guys are all doing a great job--we're so proud of you," do you think everybody really feels that that was directed at--what do you think? I mean, I didn't feel that way. It was like right, you say that but when we want this and we want this or--you know what I mean? So I just had that click when you said that because really I don't think this organization is very good at positive feedback.

Others relayed stories of appreciative feedback processes gone bad, those that created a negative reaction in the organization.

P41Gf: And actually, this last security inspection they did out here, they called out three ladies as the best persons doing their job. And one of them's in my office, and she was mad, because last year, the people they gave accolades to were crappy, and everybody else knew it. So now they're going, "Okay, last year, they shouldn't have picked them. This year they picked probably the right ones." But she's like, "Well now you're comparing me to somebody that was bad." I actually told them before the thing, "Just say what they did." Not the person, but essentially the best practices they did. Let everybody will figure out who it is. Not put a name, because then it's like, "Well I did better than she did, and I did better than she did." So it's huge. Now it's been 3 weeks since then, and there's still rumblings in the hallway of, "Why did they pick--?--you know. Awarding people and rewarding people's tricky, because fair doesn't mean equal. That's the problem. Fair doesn't mean equal.

Participants used humor when describing how formal awards for length of service were delayed past the length of service milestone or poorly delivered with misspelled names.

P45Ges: I mean I even had to go and ask my organization, are you still giving out the 30-year pins? I haven't seen mine yet and I've got 31 in now, so I thought maybe I'd just ask. You know? [laughter]

P43Ges: Or you get two. You've already got one.

P45Ges: Oh, we've got a couple of 15's left over from another presentation--take those babies. [laughter]

P48Ges: P43Ges kept sending my certificate back because my name was halfway on the line.

P43Ges: They couldn't print her name on the line right.

P45Ges: Well, they spelled mine wrong when they gave me mine.

Participants indicated that attempts to formalize positive feedback were superficial at best and harmful at worst. Participants in one conversation referenced the annual teammate appreciation day as an event that is staged and phony.

P40Ges: What does positive feedback look like? It's not teammate appreciation. [laughter] Because people really don't like that because it's all phony. It's something that's staged once a year.

Formal feedback processes also include the inspections and reviews conducted for products or programs. The reviews have a well-defined structure with entry and exit criteria and occur at specific times in product development. Periodic status review meetings are another example where formal feedback, typically on a product or project, occurs.

Participants stated that these review processes are expected and conducted on a regular basis. They also suggested that the more valuable feedback occurs in side discussions and off-line at the formal reviews.

Facilitator: A couple of you mentioned technical feedback. Could you say a little bit more about how that works?

P15Gf: Informally, well, not always. We have processes and procedures in the BTU. The ... readiness reviews and milestone reviews--so you have some formal feedback that occurs during those, but a lot of the most valuable, uh at least in my experience, feedback occurs informally. You know, hallway discussions and that type of thing, which I think is--milestone reviews are good for kind of setting a direction and pace, and an area to focus on. But uh--as far as efficiency goes, the hallway talks are obviously more informative.

P17Gf: Yeah, as you say, the technical reviews are at various milestones, at various stages in the program, is a formally defined timeframe. And yet you're right, you have the formal feedback of yeah, this is what the program's doing, which is a reflection of the individuals' efforts on the program. So that's one level. Uh, and yeah, P15Gf's right, the fact that the unofficial comments or the snickers, give you a secondary feel for the reality of it.

P41Gf: The gut feeling.

P15Gf: Yeah, where you really are.

P41Gf: Yeah, the truth.

Facilitator: This would be like in meetings?

P17Gf: Yeah, or in sidebar conversations. I've been in both situations where somebody throws a chart on and just all but laughter come out, uh-uh whatever the bullet point that they're trying to make it. Some of it's serious and some of it not so--some of it humorous, but other, you know, and the undertone is, "No, you didn't get it." Then the sidebar element of "This needs some help."

Peer reviews of in-process products are another example of a formal feedback process. Peer reviews involve a critique of an individual's product, in this case a software program. Participants claimed that some work groups or some individuals had more or less acceptance of these reviews. As participants discussed feedback about an individual's contributions or behaviors, participants added more descriptions of context or how individual work group cultures affected feedback. Identities and human traits also came into conversations around peer-reviews, such as being introverted or extraverted.

P64Gc: On a software level , I mean, inspections are a way of life. That is formalized feedback and I recently read that the AIPT is going to what's called paired

programming because it's a continuous feedback loop rather than have the formalized and therefore more frightening inspection of, okay, here's my software, you guys all look at it and now you tell me what you've found that was wrong with it. And stuff like that, the paired programming is basically a continuous feedback loop. You literally have two people sitting at one computer and um, the statistics on the productivity and stuff like that is much higher and one of the things that one of the positives is it removes that stuff, that formalized inspection. So I think part of that is engineers tend to be more blunt and if there is negative feedback and it is blunt, it is usually harder to take. So—

P10Gc: I also am a software, I'm in a good software group now, just you know, you are mentioning with your group and the inspections are done in a non-threatening way, you know.

...

P67Gc: If it's done right.

P10Gc: Yeah, but and some of the research type departments where the people are kind of doing their own thing and interact a little bit, um, I don't find as much of a comfort or willingness to give feedback to each other and there is more of a sense of you know, this is all mine. I'm not gonna share anything with anybody because I am afraid they are going to take it away from me or something like that. So, I think it depends on the type of work you are doing and the type of group you are with. And the social comfort of the person that's being asked.

P64Gc: In my own, comparing this job and my last job, culture played a big part in the comfort level of providing feedback. The previous group, they basically never held inspections on anything because they were very much in to "this is mine, this is my software." And they really didn't want anybody else to look at it. So yeah, culture does play a big, big part.

Facilitator: P65Gc, what's your experience around that?

P65Gc: It seems like I can recall vaguely sometimes co-workers asking for feedback, um, usually it's been part of the [performance review] process where everyone, not everyone, but a few people are asked to, you know, their supervisor and you decide, okay, these people are the ones I work with. They know what I'm doing so they are the appropriate ones to ask for feedback. That type of thing, and I didn't have any problem giving it. It was a more formalized process than maybe what was insinuated earlier, I don't know. But, it's, I think it's a good thing to do. I think some introverts don't want their weaknesses exposed, I guess, and wouldn't appreciate it, but I think most people um, even the closeted engineer types, they like to keep learning even if it is learning about themselves. So, I think it's a good thing.

In-Person Planned Processes

Participants provided examples and stories of feedback that relayed implicit rules about how feedback should be provided or is provided in one-on-one conversations.

Participants suggested that feedback conversations should be planned and rehearsed. If a feedback conversation needs to occur, the feedback provider should plan what to say and be careful about what he or she says.

P48Ges: I think it's something that, especially if the relationship is not--I mean even if it's just a boss to employee type of relationship, you know, and there is nothing difficult there in the relationship, you still are careful about what you're going to tell your boss. You want to make sure that, like you said, you take the time to evaluate what you're going to say and how you're gonna say it. You're just not gonna come out and say, "Gee, I really think you're not a good supervisor." You've gotta come out and say, give examples and give feedback that's gonna be taken not from a personal perspective but from a constructive perspective and potentially provide some examples of situations that maybe have gone astray where they could improve. So it's still--no matter who you're giving that feedback to, whether it's your boss or somebody else, you need to be careful and plan ahead on how you're gonna provide that.

The person who provides the feedback should know the audience or receiver and consider what phrasing will work to cause the feedback to be heard and accepted. The time and place of the feedback is also important. Feedback should be provided in private for the most part and without delay.

P42Gg: I have always gone with the--I will tell all my bosses this, and I have no problem. Behind these closed doors, I'm going to tell you exactly what I think. You're going to do with that data whatever you want, but when I walk out of these doors, I will salute, aye-aye and go with the decision that you make. And I will support that. And it's funny because, Mr. SES had actually just asked me kind of that question about 2 weeks ago, and he said "Now be honest." And I said "When haven't I been?"

...

P28Ge: Specific feedback has to be, the way I see it, has to be in private.

The training manual for the personnel performance systems states that supervisors should approach feedback conversation as crucial conversations that require planning.

Several conversations included descriptions of embedding positive feedback along with negative feedback or using the power of positive feedback. Supervisors mentioned learning to provide feedback using these techniques and that the techniques sometimes failed to produce the desired outcome.

P22Ge: There's the one as well where we're all told--you know--to put things in as positive light as possible for people to accept them but there's this kind of pitfall where you're trying to correct someone's behavior--you're trying to do it in a positive way and then they take that as an indication that you think they're doing okay, and it almost has to be so customized to the individual. You really have to know the person and I think when it comes to supervision that's the tough thing is staying in the job long enough with the same people long enough to really understand their--their quirks and things like that. There's this one guy that, uh, uh, he didn't work in my branch but I also have a project that I--that I manage and he--he worked on that. And you know--everything we did this year--that burned a ton of money, put us behind schedule or required a ton of rework and everything else was a direct result of this guy--continuing to take on responsibilities that we neither wanted to take on nor that he had the talent to -- to execute. And so it was just a constant bail out process that just kept running us farther and farther behind yet--every time I've tried to--you know--kind of--uh you know--give him some nice form of that thing from Top Gun where he says, you know--"You're writing checks your butt can't cash" type of thing--um it's met with some kind of laughter and I don't know if it's nervous laughter or if he just doesn't understand what I'm trying to tell him, but--even as I get more forceful he's, he's, he's not getting it. And I'm not to the point yet where I revert back to Neanderthal management and just start yelling in his face but I'm kind of wondering, it's like well if I did that what would I get out of it? [laughter] Maybe I'd get something out of it.

P28Ge: That's a tough situation.

Facilitator: P34Ge, what are your thoughts?

P34Ge: This conversation has got me back to when I was starting supervision late '90s and the pitfalls of negative or positive feedback. A guy who really on one hand wanted to get better at what he was doing, had a limited skill set, and I was doing the--trying to do the power of positive feedback thing and it just blew up in my face, didn't work at all. And at the end of the day, I should have reverted to really, really blunt honesty a lot earlier than I should--than I did. He's got a new supervisor now.

He's doing okay but there's a lot to be said for honesty as opposed, dialing honesty as opposed to supportiveness.

Supervisors spoke of the dangers of mentioning positive with negative and in some cases provided personal examples of when they did not hear the negative feedback when a supervisor combined it with positive feedback. Participants mentioned that as humans we tend to pay more attention to and hear the positive feedback and therefore accept it while at the same time not hear the negative.

P29Ge: I think one of the ways that we get wrapped around that axle is again trying to be nice. Obviously, the Neanderthal works for some people but for most people I'm not sure that it really does. But I think what--at least I've caught myself doing from time to time is when I have to provide somebody some corrective feedback I end up telling them all the good things that they're doing. "Hey this is great. You're doing this good. Oh, by the way here's this other little thing that you need to do as well." If it's really a minor thing that might work, but a lot of times what happens is they hear all the good stuff and the little bit of bad stuff you throw in there on the side goes in one ear and out the other and they focus on the good stuff, which is I mean just probably human nature. We all want to hear the good stuff that we're doing. So I think you have to be careful in that light. It's a balancing act with most employees because you don't want to go in Neanderthal style and demoralize them and totally bring them down and have them put their feet up on their desk and cross their arms and, "Well I'm not going to do anything for that idiot." So again it's situational. You have to figure out the employee and figure out the appropriate corrective action for that employee to encourage them to do better without discouraging them.

...

P15Gf: Well, it's the old adage: honey works better than vinegar if you're trying to draw flies. People are more receptive to positive feedback, and also they seem to be more receptive to negative feedback if you can couch it in terms of, "So, you do this really well, and you could do it even better if you improve in this area somewhat, do it a little bit differently."

Another set of in-person feedback rules surround the tone of delivery. Several participants mentioned needing to use tact, be diplomatic, be nice, sugarcoat, be gentle, and ease into it.

P59Gd: I take those to different levels. It's like if they are willing to risk it and ask you kinda what you think, you know, you kind of gently go in there and throw a few things out and see how they take it and then if they're taking it and you're comfortable in discussing some of these things, you know, maybe there's something that's really been bothering you, you know, you wait until you can get that level when both of you are very comfortable with it. So I just wait and see what level I'm at for giving feedback.

P60Gd: And I think, too, for that kind of feedback you need to be comfortable with each other because you don't want the uh, I hate to keep bringing this up, but you don't want, you know, retribution or something for something that you might say. So if they open the door and say they're open for feedback--you know, I'd like to be diplomatic; if I have something to share that I didn't know how to, but I'd like to be truthful enough to share if there's something that I feel like I need to share. And I've done that and I don't know if it's helped me or hurt me, but you know, I tried to be honest.

...

P55Gb: Oh, well, would, actually I would have a problem if there was negative feedback to give because I am like the most non-confrontational person in the whole world. So I would have a hard time doing it. I think I would do it, but I would try to sugar coat it as much as I could just because that's my personal way of doing things.

Others mentioned the need to be direct, candid, open, and not sugarcoat.

P41Gf: My competency supervisor. I'm open and honest with her all the time, so it would be no different. Organizationally, you see a lot of organizational problems the same way, so I think it would be an open candid conversation. As for her feedback, what I've been doing also, give her feedback what I think she needs to do. So I think I'd be okay.

...

P38Gg: That was exactly what that was all about, and he wasn't expecting us to sugarcoat it. He wasn't expecting us, I mean, we put some things on the table that were really--you know these are the issues. These are the problems we have. This is how this organization is viewed by the other organization, and this is where we sit, and this is what we--and oh, by the way, we know we're doing the right thing, so how do we keep on doing this and not, you know. So the feedback is there, and the loop is there and they're listening.

Participants mentioned that feedback should be specific with examples and include only what has been observed.

P17Gf: I'd be frank and fearless, tell them--and I'm a proponent of providing positive feedback when I quote catch them doing something good. So that kind of feedback is constant. But if there's areas they need to improve, yeah, I'd tell them, "Focus on these two areas." I wouldn't give them a laundry list of 10. I'd give them two things to do.

P19Gf: I routinely find myself providing feedback. And as P17Gf said, I do it small segments, focus on the good. Give them maybe a couple of areas to work on if there are any. And I always thank them for the opportunity.

Training materials from a feedback workshop delivered by an internal OD group included slides that said people should share their concerns, feelings, and fears when having a feedback conversation. These process rules did not appear in the group discussions.

Several people explained how they personally would approach providing feedback to someone who asked for feedback. They often spoke from a personal perspective when talking about these in-person rules.

P59Gd: What I really like to do is if somebody does come to me and ask me about that, I've been okay--they want some information, they want it very gentle. So you're saying--I don't want to just come right out there and just both and give them all the bad news. I like to structure it to where you can say well yeah, an observation--kind of that is what the census is and I've heard that from other people and this and that. I always try to put like a personal side on it to say--I mean, if it was me, I was kinda doing that--I'd make some personal suggestions just for me and basically let them know that's only my opinion and, you know, throw the big thing out there first, what the negative comment was, and then start working on it and saying yeah, if it was me doing that I might want to change this or that. But you know, get the big thing that's scary for them, get that all out there and starting smoothing it out and see if you can't help them solve something.

Several mentioned that they would ask the person to self-assess first before providing feedback, even if the person approached them soliciting feedback.

P6Ga: I think a lot of times if it's a coworker coming to you for feedback on something--there are some things that maybe you shouldn't give them feedback on and you should say, "Well, maybe you should go--you know, this person might be a better person to ask about it". Just depending on what the situation is. But, yeah, a lot of times saying, "Well, what do you think? How do you think you're doing?" is a good way to see what they're really looking for. Because sometimes they'll say one

thing and they don't necessarily--you think one direction and they're thinking another direction

Natural Processes--Without using the word Feedback

Participants mentioned that feedback as a conversation subject creates anxiety and apprehension. That using the term feedback raises defenses and causes people to think something negative or bad has happened. Participants mentioned how feedback should occur through the normal daily course of things, in everyday interactions, in relaxed ways of going about the job. If the word *feedback* is used, it means that a situation has gotten out of hand, that something negative has transpired that needs to be talked about in a certain way and taken care of in order to continue. It is almost as if feedback as a word implies escalation of a situation, raising it to another level of attention.

Facilitator: So, imagine your supervisor or team lead says they have feedback for you, what do you think, feel, or do in that case?

P64Gc: To me that is very situational because I mean, if your project is falling apart things are going really bad and your supervisor comes and says, I have feedback for you, of course, my first thought is, obviously I'm the problem here.

P65Gc: Sometimes just using that word carries certain connotations with it too. If they come in and say like, the projects falling apart or you're stuck and you don't know where to go and they come in and say, "Hey, we need to work on this. Let's brainstorm, here are some ideas I thought of." That's going to sound totally different than come into my office, I have feedback for you.

P5Gc: I need to talk to you.

P65Gc: Yeah, yeah.

Facilitator: If that occurs, what does that bring up. If they say, I have some feedback for you?

P65Gc: It's like okay, I didn't ask for any feedback, did I? Why are you giving me feedback.

P10Gc: Kind of putting you one the defensive.

P65Gc: Yeah, yeah. Put you on the defensive.

Supervisors mentioned that they would get a sense of what is going on, or feedback from their employees, by informal personal visits. Some supervisors explained how they walked around and visited with employees to get feedback on issues and problems. They viewed these interactions as friendly, natural, and useful. One participant described feedback as a dialogue that should naturally occur on a day-to-day basis.

P58Gd: I think ideally, you want a situation where you don't have to have a dialogue about feedback, I think you should just be day-to-day operations--know what everybody's doing well enough so you don't have to ask the question.

Motivation--Why Give or Don't Give Feedback

Participants discussed situations, circumstances, and reasons for why people do or do not provide feedback in the organization. I analyzed the conversations for references and examples that stated why feedback is or is not provided. From this analysis, I derived four categories: (a) something about the requestor or receiver, (b) expected outcome for other(s), (c) something about me, and (d) context of expectations.

Something About the Requestor or Receiver

When prompted with the question, "Imagine a co-worker or supervisor approaches you and asks for feedback on his or her performance what would you think, do, or feel," many participants stated that their perceptions or assumptions about the requestor would influence the response. Participants state that if someone solicits feedback, it makes it easier to provide feedback. They considered a request for feedback an expectation that the requestor wants the feedback. If the assumption is that the person wants feedback, then the responder is more willing and feels more comfortable providing feedback.

P59Gd: I get right on it. No, I like when people ask me that because then I feel that they want some information. So I try to deal with that individual and how I can

assess whatever they're doing and hopefully give them some good feedback. I mean, I don't want to just come right in there and just, you know, just really say some bad things and like this is really awful. You know, you do try to be pretty diplomatic about the whole situation and ease into it and sort of a good and bad kind of a thing and make them feel comfortable enough.

...

P52Gb: I think if they take the time to come in and ask you, you owe them the time to be honest with them and give them the feedback on what you, what you, like you said, what you've seen, what you, I ran into that today with the situation that came up, but at the same time, I don't always wait for them to come ask me for feedback if something's going on.

Participants talked about how they also considered the motive of the requestor.

Considerations included, do they really want the feedback, has the requestor been told to ask for feedback, will they act upon the feedback, and are they asking only to justify a point or position.

P50Gb: I know supervisors do a lot of things in the background that they have to do, but it's a loaded question if he comes in and asks you that.

...

P48Ges: I sometimes hesitate on some of the feedback when they're looking for feedback to try and stress a point that they're making. For example, if it's a performance issue or if they're truly just looking for feedback on something that they want to learn more about or truly get my input on it, then I don't have any issues or any hesitation doing that. You know, sometimes you have people that are there to say geez, you know, validate my story and make it stronger type of thing. So I don't like to feed into that, for example.

...

P48Ges: And I think you're skeptical about what they're gonna do with the data once they get it. I mean, have they shown in the past that they're gonna do anything with it for example? You'd be more likely and more inclined to tell them how you feel if you see action on the other side. If they're just there for the sake of asking and you know it's going to go in a big, dark hole again, well you're not gonna spend too much time on it. So it's really the level of commitment on the other end as one perceives it and from the past history. And again, it's how you feel working within that working relationship. If the Admiral came in and asked me a question--again, I'd probably tell him but I'd be a little hesitant, that you know I probably would tell him how things

have been, especially in an area that I'm very familiar with--I would let him know that.

Participants claimed that perceptions of how the person would react was another consideration for whether they would provide feedback. Participants hesitate to provide feedback if they sense the person will fall apart, is not listening, or in attempts to provide feedback in the past they felt shut down. These are all perceptions about the other person that mediate if feedback is provided.

P48Ges: Most of the time if it's just, you know, how am I doing, what do I need to improve on--you know, as managers we have to do it every quarter, um you know, providing that information. It's hard sometimes to, to tell these people, gosh, you're just not on the right track. It is hard; some people take it well because they take it as a learning experience and let's move on from there. Other people just fall apart in front of you. And that's what makes it difficult, when they cannot take it. So you have to be prepared again to know that the--and then you always get surprises, the one you didn't expect to fall apart on you did, so it's how do you handle that.

...

P29Ge: I've had supervisors where I would not even hesitate to tell them exactly what I thought, no punches pulled or anything. "This is what works. This is what doesn't work." I've had other supervisors where--like you say--think very carefully about how you phrase the feedback and put it in the proper context so hopefully they understand it without taking offense to it and walking it off.

Expected Outcome for Other(s)

Participants claimed to be more willing to provide feedback when they felt they could be helpful in creating a positive outcome for the organization, a better product, or help another person. Participants shared that even if the feedback would be difficult to deliver, if they felt a decision could cause harm then they would provide the feedback to the decision-maker. They feel a sense of responsibility to help the organization. Participants expressed duty and responsibility to do the right thing, to add value, and to make things better.

P43Ges: I think the impact on others in addition to yourself makes a difference as to your willingness to say it too, for me personally. If it's all about me and something

that's a problem for me and the feedback is about something between us. So at the end of the day, the feedback is given and whether it's accepted or not accepted, there's really no impact other than now this person knows how I felt versus a bad decision that will impact others. And therefore it's kind of a responsibility to provide that kind of feedback because it's not personal feedback, it's--you know what I mean? So there's still cases where I won't give the feedback even now, because you look at it and you kinda weigh whether in the long run there's any advantage to it.

P48Ges: Yeah, you do. You still look at it. But if there's something that, for me, really is--I see it going in the wrong direction in my mind, like I said, something that I can't just walk away from and take off, because if something happens at the other end and I didn't take any steps toward trying to make it the other direction, then I wouldn't be happy with myself. If it's going to bother somebody because I said it, I'm sorry. But I can handle that more than being able to walk away with the guilt of not ever having said anything. Then I don't feel like I'm doing my job.

Participants discussed how being able to help another person with his or her job, help the other person learn, or enable another person to succeed motivated them to provide feedback. Participants said they liked to provide feedback when they felt they were being helpful and they liked being asked for feedback.

P36Gg: I think it would be fun, and actually we take an advantage because most of our senior leaders, at least the ones I've been lucky to work with have asked "How did you think that went? How do you think I'm doing?" Even at performance evaluation time when they give us the dump, I have had them say "What do you think, how am I doing?" So that's just a fun opportunity, I think.

...

P59Gd: I get right on it. I like when people ask me that because then I feel that they want some information. So I try to deal with that individual and how I can assess whatever they're doing and hopefully give them some good feedback.

On the contrary, participants indicated they would hesitate to provide feedback if they perceived there would not be any action resulting from the feedback. In particular, if the feedback was about the organization or an issue, participants stated they would be more likely to provide feedback if they trusted the feedback would be used or acted upon.

Facilitator: So imagine that your supervisor or lead has just presented the new commander's guidance and says that the commander is asking for feedback. What do you think would happen?

...

P29Ge: Yeah, I think most of us when we see--most of us that have been around for a long time when we see an email like that or a request like that it's like yeah right, okay. If I was to reply directly back and say, gee Admiral so and so this is what I really think, of course, now you got yourself up there with a target on your back and I think most of us realize that nothing's really going to come of it and so most of us throw it in a bit bucket because we have more important things to do and we realize that that feedback is not ever going to amount to anything.

Facilitator: P34Ge, your thoughts?

P34Ge: I mean it--I think was interesting the body language change that happened around the table when the question got asked.

P28Ge: Who's going to take it seriously?

Something About Me as Provider

Participants shared many self-considerations that would cause them to or prevent them from providing feedback. Considerations included personal risk, time, ease or difficulty in giving the feedback, comfort level, skills, and ability.

Participants discussed how providing feedback in the organization is risky.

Participants mentioned that they consider the possibility for repercussions or retribution for providing feedback.

Facilitator: So imagine your supervisor or team lead walked into your office and asked you for some feedback on his or her performance, what would you think, feel, or do?

P65Gc: Feedback on the supervisors performance?

Facilitator: Um-hum.

P65Gc: I'd be a little surprised first and then I'd say, oh, I'd wonder if they would really want it and then I would say okay, here's my chance and I'd be honest.

P5Gc: I think I would be a little bit taken back because it's not really the culture here. I did an internship before I came here and the company had a 360 degree feedback program so you got to rate your supervisor. And everyone rated their supervisor and obviously you got rated by your supervisor and that was just what people expected as part of the culture and they all accepted it. And it was, you know, normal and a big deal, but I think if my supervisor came to me here, I would kind of wonder what was going on or what their ulterior motive was. And why they wanted it and how is this going to affect me and I would probably, I would try to be honest, but I have a feeling I would sort of slant things or sugar coat things.

Facilitator: Because?

P5Gc: Just because I would be worried about any repercussions or what they are going to do with this information.

Others claimed that they did not feel there would be retribution, yet by mentioning the potential for retribution, implies it is part of their conceptualization of feedback in the organization. Feedback could create repercussions, but for them personally it has not. If the person to whom they were providing feedback was in a supervisory chain, participants consider how it will influence future performance evaluations.

P60Gd: I agree with, what P58Gd was saying that, you know, with it being a small community that you do know your manager maybe a little bit more than you would in a big corporation or something, and so what I was thinking about when you were talking though, is a--there's a environment of trust. You know, I don't fear sharing feedback or whatever because I trust that you're gonna accept it and take it at face value or whatever. So there's no, fear of retribution or whatever like that. So there's an element of trust too.

...

P56Gb: Yeah, definitely have a trust feeling like you mentioned that you have to have, you have to have that relationship to be very honest with them. If you don't have that, like I had one recently that, you know, I didn't know him that well and as certain things I had to make sure that I approached him a certain way, you know, if there was an issue or a certain problem because I wasn't sure on how he would respond. You know? So, the way you approach him I think that's why, at least the system sometimes puts anonymous buffers in there. Where they will say, you know, go to this web page and tell me about your supervisor or whatever, [laughter] you know, don't sign your name on this, only this is optional type thing. Because, probably a lot of people feel where they can't approach their supervisor and I think having those anonymous areas, I must have did a study recently. I'm not sure where

or what, I don't know if it was a class, but we--we actually did that with our lead, our project lead or whatever. And we inputted you know, how you thought did the A, B, C, D questions. I myself struggle with approaching him because I think of like, okay, my next review are they going to smack me down a little bit because you know, I'm kind of, you know, I think everybody probably, I imagine everybody.

If the feedback was anonymous, some participants explained that they would be more likely to provide honest feedback. Another personal risk area was potential damage to the relationship the participant has with the individual.

Facilitator: You say risk. What is it that's being risked?

P2Gd: The relationship.

P60Gd: Yeah, I was gonna say that--your relationship with that person.

P2Gd: I mean, we've bonded with these people for however long in one job, and when their relationship break down at work, it just makes, you know, going to work Monday even harder and staying all day even harder, I think.

Another self-consideration is the time it takes to provide feedback. Participants mentioned that feedback takes time and that when they were busy at work, feedback was not a priority. Especially if the participant perceived the requestor's motives were not genuine. Feedback also has a timing component. If the moment for feedback had passed, that it was too late, then participants indicated they might not give the feedback.

P29Ge: I would say it also depends on--the timing depends on the type of feedback you're giving.

P28Ge: Yeah.

P29Ge: If it's a, "Hey, you're doing a great job, keep up the good work," passing in the hall by the water cooler or at the coffee pot or whatever is probably appropriate for that.

P28Ge: Right, yeah, that's different.

P29Ge: If you're providing feedback looking for corrective action then usually a little privacy, a little bit of, quiet time where people aren't running around and they can stop and digest what you're having to say is probably appropriate.

P22Ge: Prime the pump a little bit.

P28Ge: Yeah.

P28Ge: Specific feedback has to be, the way I see it, has to be in private.

P24Ge: Also the person has to be listening. I mean sometimes it's like you got four things, four balls you're juggling it's like now is not the time to talk about the fifth ball [laughter] where there may be another time where it's like a lot easier occasion or something.

P28Ge: Right.

P22Ge: The hard thing to deal with is when you've--you've gotten a thing that requires an immediate action and the guy is busy and you know you don't want to bother him because he's busy but at the same time if too much time goes by--ahh--it's not worth it.

Participants discussed the ease or difficulty of providing the feedback as another consideration. Easier feedback for the provider, telling someone he or she did a good job for example, would be more likely provided than having a conversation about corrective action. If feedback is easy for them to provide, they are more likely to give the feedback.

P58Gd: It's hard to give negative feedback. And if it's negative feedback about someone's personality it's very difficult. And I think you're really challenged to do that. It depends on how much you want to improve and if you have a stake in it and you feel it's worth the risk of doing it, you probably should do it. But ideally, it should never get to that point.

P60Gd: I think there's always a risk involved too because it's real easy to share positive feedback, but the negative feedback, let's say dealing with a person's time and attendance or that kind of thing, if they came to you and asked you for feedback, I would be more apt to share the positive and maybe a little reluctant to share some of the negative because there's a risk. I'm not sure--do you really want to know or, you know--because sometimes people ask you and they really--they don't expect you to, you know. So I think, um, trying to feel, do you really want to know or--you know, because you're opening up a can of worms.

Many participants mentioned comfort level as a contributing factor for deciding to provide feedback. Comfort level includes many aspects including comfort with their skills in feedback, comfort with the other person, comfort in their role in the organization, comfort

with their expertise or experience, comfort with the topic of the feedback, and comfort due to being older and more assertive. Participants indicated that certain groups of people, such as engineers, were less comfortable with providing feedback. Participants discussed the lack of social skills present in the scientist and engineers and that this should influence the type of feedback provided.

P10Gc: And some engineers are not comfortable expressing feedback. You know, a lot of engineers can be reserved and not very open about talking about feelings in that regard. So, it might make some people really uncomfortable. I don't find it uncomfortable, but I have asked sometimes, I've asked certain people and I say, well, you know, you want to give me feedback and I can see there was a really big reluctance because that is not something they are used to doing.

...

P58Gd: I mean, you can have what I call the hermit people--they're technically top-notch but they can't stand up and talk to anybody. Okay. And so giving feedback to that person, the feedback has to be specifically for whether or not you want some change in the interpersonal skill thing--maybe you can't change it but you might want to be giving that person some tactics to use--like take valium first before you go to your review.

Some participants explained they would provide feedback now, due to their experience and maturity, when they may not have provided it in the past. In one conversation, participants agreed they provide more feedback now than they did earlier in their careers.

Facilitator: So you mentioned that earlier in your career, you might not have done that.

P48Ges: No.

Facilitator: I think, P45Ges, you said something very similar. And I see some heads nodding. What changed for you, such that earlier in your career you would hesitate and now you feel more comfortable in giving your supervisor feedback.

P48Ges: I think for me, it was just experience, age, and then the fact that okay, you're not gonna fire me over what I think now, you know?

P43Ges: You know you're not gonna get fired in this organization--[laughter]

P48Ges: Before, I was--I say when I hit my 40s, I thought well, I'm sorry if you don't like me was kind of the button or the light that went off for me, you know? I am the person I am and I do have the right to express my feelings and my opinions. And sure, there are times where in the past I probably felt a little more intimidated. It's not because of my position now, it's just really from a personal perspective--I don't think it has anything to do with my position. It's just now I feel from a personal perspective more willing to say, "Well I'm sorry if you don't like it but this is how I feel and I have to live with the decision because you're involving me in a decision, and I don't agree with it." And whereas before, I would have tried to give my points of view but maybe not try to sway somebody the other way, but just I don't know that I would have even said it before.

Context of Expectations

Participants discussed many aspects of the context or situation for feedback that influenced whether or not they provided feedback. Most conversations included mention of “depends on the situation” or “it is situational.” Participants conceptualize feedback as something situated within a context or set of complex conditions. The contextual aspects carry explicit or implicit expectations for providing feedback. The contextual aspects mentioned by participants include: (a) work group culture, (b) position, experience, and associated responsibility, (c) proximity to the person, and d) relationship.

Work group culture. Participants claimed that work groups have difficult cultures. Some of the work group cultures are more conducive for feedback than other work group cultures. Feedback is more likely to occur in safe and supportive work environments. If participants sense a hostile or mean work environment, they are less likely to provide feedback. Participants described personal experiences with different work groups and used the term *culture* to explain why feedback is provided or not provided.

P10Gc: Yeah, but and some of the research type departments where the people are kind of doing their own thing and interact a little bit, I don't find as much of a comfort or willingness to give feedback to each other and there is more of a sense of you know, this is all mine. I'm not gonna share anything with anybody because I am afraid they are going to take it away from me or something like that. So, I think it

depends on the type of work you are doing and the type of group you are with. And the social comfort of the person that's being asked.

P64Gc: In my own, comparing this job and my last job, culture played a big part in the comfort level of providing feedback. The previous group, they basically never held inspections on anything because they were very much in to "this is mine, this is my software." And they really didn't want anybody else to look at it. So yeah, culture does play a big, big part.

Position, experience, and responsibility. Another contextual aspect is the feedback provider's position within the organization and the responsibility associated with that position. Examples from the conversations are that: (a) supervisors are expected and required to provide feedback to employees, (b) competent or experienced people may get less feedback, and (c) younger people are not expected to provide feedback since they are too new or do not know enough. Participants stated that if they were not the right person to be providing the feedback, they would not provide it. A newer employee stated she would be less likely to provide feedback because she was new and inexperienced.

P8Ga: Honestly, my first reaction would be, "Why are you asking me?" Because what--what input, what power do I have to--I can give you my ideas, but who's to say they're even going to go anywhere? So that would be my--I'd tend to be a little skeptical that I would even matter in that realm of things.

Participants explained how more experienced people may be getting less feedback because they have a certain credibility or seniority.

P17Gf: Now, perhaps that's because of my seniority and role within the organization, being that mine is pretty unique. I don't work with NAVYLAB. I work with foreign government. So that aspect of it is pretty much, I'm essentially on my own. My CAO supervisor has zero knowledge of anything, other than what I put them on cc of the report to my foreign customer. So, there's no involvement whatsoever from my CAO aspect.

Participants in one conversation explained how feedback from a non-supervisor would not be expected and they might take offense if a non-supervisor provided feedback.

The sense was "who are you to be providing me with feedback."

P60Gd: Because the other thing, too, is if you're not my boss, why are you coming in telling me anything?

Likewise, one participant shared a current situation in which she was not providing feedback to an employee because she was not the supervisor even though she had concerns about the person's performance on the job.

P60Gd: I've got a situation right now, and I don't want to get off track, where the office manager, she comes in between 8:30 and 9:00 and she leaves between 3:00 and 3:30. I don't think she's ever worked a 9-hour day since she's been there. But I'm not a supervisor and she hasn't asked me for any feedback. So it's like, what do I do? Do I just warn her that you know, you need to watch your time or do I mention it to her supervisor to say hey, have you noticed. So I've been kinda toying with what do you do in that situation? Do you even broach it? I'm sure he's noticed. Why he hasn't said anything to her, I don't know. But--then it's like you know, mind your own business.

P59Gd: I would think it would be up to the supervisor to identify that.

P60Gd: To address it.

P59Gd: Me, personally.

Supervisors indicated they are required to provide feedback and that there was an official process to do so. The personnel system handbook and training materials also state that the supervisor is expected to provide feedback to employees on a periodic basis.

Proximity. Participants discussed how they consider proximity to a person when choosing to provide feedback. Proximity can be physical location or supervisor-employee or co-worker relationship. Participants said they would provide feedback to a co-worker since they were close enough to the person to know him or her and that it would be more difficult to provide feedback to a supervisor. One participant said she would provide feedback to the admiral because of her proximity given her role in the organization. Another participant mentioned level in the organization and geographic distance as a factor in providing feedback.

Facilitator: Now imagine your co-worker asks you for feedback on his or her performance. What do you think, feel or do?

P15Gf: It's still a reasonable question. Co-workers are easier to talk to than supervisors, because they don't hold a hammer on you.

...

P45Ges: I have to say that if I'm in a situation where I have Mr. SES--I've actually had situations from time to time, if Admiral A is here, he'll usually pop in and I might have an opportunity to tell him. I really don't have a problem saying, "You know sir, one of the things that concerns me is that,"--we talked about what's the people thing--I would be able to say that because I work with these people, my relationship is at a different level than "a big majority" of the work force. And I don't feel intimate with them, but I certainly am on a very different level with them.

...

P36Gg: This is what's great about being at the top of your organization. I mean this is what's truly great, because if you haven't already in this NAVYLAB sort of environment figured out that the best you can do is be absolutely honest and candid and there is by now at this level, you've gotten some political savvy, so you don't say now this is really stupid. But it is fun. The harder part is asking somebody to tell them about yourself. But it is fun to have somebody say "What did you think about that, and give me your feedback," and then you to be able to say "Here's what I observed, and this might help you." You're in a really good position to do that, and if you have that kind of a relationship, and most of us do. Now east coast, west coast it's a little more challenging for you because there is some animosity, but if your relationship is, well, there is a difference, you know. But if your relationship is good, that is a wonderful thing.

Relationship. Most conversations included discussions of how the quality of the interpersonal relationship influenced whether or not feedback occurred. Participants stated that relationships that they considered good and open created the conditions for providing feedback. Participants made claims as to the nature of the relationship they had with a supervisor or a co-worker. They often contrasted this with other examples of poor relationships that would cause them anxiety and subsequently they would provide less feedback.

P40Ges: It depends on the relationship that you have with that supervisor; I've been there and I've done that. So if you have a relationship with that supervisor that you feel that you can share openly, then that person will receive what you have to give them. I solicit that from the people in my branch. I ask them for feedback. And I don't call it complaints, I just say what type of concerns do you have that I may address, and that I can better serve you. And I ask that of my customers as well-- what is it that I can do? I need this so that I can better serve you. And from the employees, what can I do or what is it that I am doing that you're pleased with that you want me to keep doing? So it depends upon that one-to-one relationship that you have with the--be it supervisor or the employee.

....

Facilitator: Let me switch to another question: imagine your supervisor walked into your office and asked you for some feedback on his or her performance. What would you think, feel or do?

P15Gf: Well, it's a reasonable question.

P19Gf: My first reaction would be, "Oh my god!" I haven't connected with this CAO supervisor at all. Every single conversation is, we miss. She has no interest in who I am or what I'm about. She allots 5 minutes of her time for me--and I go, "What a waste."

If the relationship exists and is good then they will provide feedback and the feedback will be more direct, more honest, and about a real issue. At the same time, participants state that if they provide feedback then the relationship can be damaged or broken. The training manual for the performance evaluation process, states that "your relationship with your supervisor is the lifeblood of performance management, and an organization's success depends to a great extent on the quality of the dialogue and the relationship between you and your supervisor." This demonstrates that the official documentation in the organization also provides evidence of the importance of relationship and feedback.

Affect--Why Like or Dislike Feedback

Participants discussed situations, circumstances, and reasons for why people do or do not like feedback in the organization. I analyzed the conversations for references and

examples that explained why people like or dislike feedback. There are many similarities to the analysis results on why people give or do not give feedback. However, there are also some nuances about reactions to feedback in this analysis that I considered important to how feedback is conceptualized in the organization.

Like Feedback When or Because

Participants said they liked feedback when it helps them do their job, when they learn about themselves, when it is expected, and when it is from the right person. Participants imply that people want to do a good job and they receive personal satisfaction from knowing they are doing a good job.

P43Ges: I don't want to dominate the conversation, so if I'm talking too much, shut me up. But I had one example that popped into my head which is why I thought of that is the other day my boss--we were just in conversation and he goes I just wanted to tell you I'm so glad I hired you for this job because you're the right person for this job. And that meant more to me, actually, in terms of--it just made me feel so appreciated and valued, and I've never had a supervisor just pick up the phone say that to me my whole entire career--in 25 years. I've had some who've made me feel not, but um, to me, was just wow--they're glad I'm here and they're glad they hired me to do this job. You know, that to me felt like really better than a certificate, better than a coffee cup, than a light stick, a lunch pail or whatever.

...

P17Gf: Feedback is important, at all stages of the career. Certainly at the beginning of the career, when you have young and growing personnel, but even at the senior level, as we are at. Not from a tangible standpoint, but from a personal satisfaction standpoint as well.

When feedback enables them to do a good job, they appreciate and value the feedback.

Information about how to do the work is especially important for those people new to the organization or new to a job.

P15Gf: Well actually, I like feedback. Actually, I like it a lot, because when I don't get it, it's kinda, "Okay, am I doing this right or wrong? Is there anything particularly--?" I did a job change here, about 6 months ago. Went from a job where I'd been for 10 years—12 actually 14, knew everything, to a job where I know

practically nothing. So, in a situation like that, feedback is not only welcome, but it's critical. Most people want to do a good job. They want to hear if there's something that they're doing wrong, or could do better. They want to hear that.

One supervisor explained how she solicits feedback from employees and customers to better serve them. Another participant tells a story of how he would have liked feedback that was more direct because he did not realize how bad he was doing. He felt more direct feedback would have prevented him from being removed from his job.

P40Ge: I solicit that from the people in my branch. I ask them for feedback. And I don't call it complaints, I just say what type of concerns do you have that I may address, and that I can better serve you. And I ask that of my customers as well-- what is it that I can do? I need this so that I can better serve you. And from the employees, what can I do or what is it that I am doing that you're pleased with that you want me to keep doing?

...

P22Ge: I know I'm a real hard case when it comes to--to stuff like that. I got ousted from a job one time and I thought I was doing everything the department wanted me to do. I was having what I thought was fruitful discussions with my boss. I thought he was onboard with what I was doing. He had written a note to my previous boss saying, "How do I get through to this guy?" But the--the bottom line was, was that he was so obtuse that--that I couldn't figure out what he was doing, what he wanted me to do and, of course, I'd been successful in everything I'd done on this program and he was kind of a new supervisor to me in that respect, so it's kind of like well I've been successful so why would I do anything any different--you know--absent some real indications? What he really needed to say to me was, "If you don't do this exactly this way, the department is going to fire you." And I needed to hear that but it just wasn't there. A couple months later they got rid of me. But if he'd have said that I would have probably gone off and sulked for a little while. I'd have been good and red in the face mad and however I would go and kind of analyze my own performance and come back and say, "Okay, yeah I understand."

Feedback provides an opportunity to correct mistakes and know what to work on.

Participants indicated they liked feedback that made them realize something about themselves they otherwise would not become aware of.

P5Gc: I agree with that. I think, I would work on constructive criticism. I would say, I noticed whatever and this may help or you know, try to point out resources they could use if they are having difficulty. But kind of on the flip side, I took a class last

year, one of the seven habits class and as part of it you were supposed to go out and gather feedback from our peers and also our supervisor. And then that was all compiled into a report we got and I found the information invaluable cause it pointed out some things that I didn't even notice or realize and I was able to learn a lot so I think it's really beneficial when you can provide feedback, especially to your coworkers and it has helped me out a lot. And I wish there was more of that.

A related conversation point was made that if a person no longer needs information about how to do the job, he or she may be less receptive to feedback.

P41Gf: I think a lot of it depends on where you're at in the food chain, too. If you're already--if you're already topped out, and you're not ever going to get promoted any more, you may not be responsive to anybody's feedback. Then it's a personal, internal thing that you have to either respect the person that's giving you the feedback, you know or just discount it, because you don't respect their opinion.

Participants indicated they liked feedback when they expected the feedback.

Participants shared examples of using feedback processes in classes that solicited feedback from peers and supervisors. These feedback processes established the expectations that they would be receiving feedback from multiple sources.

Many conversations included talk of who participants expected or liked to receive feedback from. Participants explained that they appreciated feedback from supervisors, especially if supervisors provided feedback early enough for them to take action prior to the end of the performance year.

P60Gd: Because I appreciate you coming to me with feedback, even though it's unsolicited, if you're my supervisor, instead of waiting on my quarterly appraisal, to sit down and say okay I noticed that you were late, you didn't come--you know. Don't stock up all that. If you've got something today, I appreciate you coming in and saying it. And so I would receive that.

Another participant explained that the appropriate people to provide feedback are those that he works with who know what he is doing. Another participant explained that she thought feedback from those who saw her do her work and had offices close to her meant more than receiving feedback from peers that were not co-located with her.

P65Gc: It seems like I can recall vaguely sometimes co-workers asking for feedback, um, usually it's been part of the [performance review] process where everyone, not everyone, but a few people are asked to, you know, their supervisor and you decide, okay, these people are the ones I work with. They know what I'm doing so they are the appropriate ones to ask for feedback.

...

P40Ges: It depends on where you are in the organization. Because for me, who are my coworkers? The people that I'm co-located with I consider as my coworkers. If you call, if you consider other branch heads as my peers here, we're not even co-located. So a coworker for me could be John Doe, right next door to me; JR., we're in the same building. So if they came to me and offered feedback, I would be more receptive to their feedback than I would be, say, from Cathy or Dylan, because they don't sit with me and they don't see my day-to-day. So they're familiar with what you're supposed to be doing, but these people here know what I'm doing. So the feedback that I get from JR. or John would be more valuable to me than it would be from Cathy or Dylan.

Dislike Feedback When or Because

Participants said they disliked feedback when the feedback caused hurt, they did not expect the feedback, the feedback exposed their weaknesses in front of others, the feedback would be difficult to correct or deal with, and that feedback implied negative and bad. One participant spoke of how she would dislike feedback if she perceived the provider was just being mean.

Facilitator: Another question. Imagine your coworker approaches you and says they have some feedback for you. What do you think, feel or do?

P2Gd: If it's good, I'm thankful; if it's bad, I think they might be being mean, because I didn't ask for it. You know? If you want constructive criticism, honestly, you do ask for it; you say what am I doing wrong here? But if they come after you and say mean things, I guess I would probably take it pretty personally.

Another participant expressed the amount of effort she put into self-reflection and responding to feedback.

P19Gf: I'm one of those people who doesn't like having the spotlight shined on me. So formal feedback, which I've now had twice in the last 6 months, is exceedingly difficult. Because I start off with probably being harder on myself than the other

people are. And then, my feelings get hurt. And then, I get to the point of understanding perhaps where they're coming from. And then I find myself wanting to over correct, or try and make it right with everybody in every area, which then just makes me nuts. So I don't think I've figured out how to do it very well yet.

Participants explained that if someone used the word feedback with them they became anxious and expected the worst. Participants state that they may be uncomfortable when a supervisor provides them with feedback and at the same time, they recognize that the feedback is appropriate.

Facilitator: So, imagine your supervisor or team lead says they have feedback for you, what do you think, feel, or do in that case?

P64Gc: To me that is very situational because I mean, if your project is falling apart things are going really bad and your supervisor comes and says, I have feedback for you, of course, my first thought is, obviously I'm the problem here.

P65Gc: Sometimes just using that word carries certain connotations with it too. If they come in and say like, the projects falling apart or you're stuck and you don't know where to go and they come in and say, "Hey, we need to work on this. Let's brainstorm, here are some ideas I thought of." That's going to sound totally different than come into my office, I have feedback for you.

P5Gc: I need to talk to you.

P65Gc: Yeah, yeah.

Facilitator: If that occurs, what does that bring up. If they say, I have some feedback for you?

P65Gc: It's like okay, I didn't ask for any feedback, did I? Why are you giving me feedback.

P10Gc: Kind of putting you one the defensive.

P65Gc: Yeah, yeah. Put you on the defensive.

P5Gc: Unless it's [performance review] time, if someone said that to me, I would probably assume negative first, uh, oh, what came up, what did I do wrong that he has to come grab me right now and talk to me about this.

Facilitator: What do you think, P67Gc?

P67Gc: Very uncomfortable, but the times it has happened to me, it wasn't inappropriate. I didn't like it, it wasn't comfortable, but it wasn't inappropriate.

Participants attributed a dislike of feedback to a person's personality or a group's attributes. For example, one participant claimed that introverts may not appreciate feedback because it exposes weaknesses but even engineers might like to learn about themselves. Another participant explained how engineers might not be comfortable expressing feedback.

P65Gc: That type of thing, and I didn't have any problem giving it. It was a more formalized process than maybe what was insinuated earlier, I don't know. But, it's, I think it's a good thing to do. I think some introverts don't want their weaknesses exposed, I guess, and wouldn't appreciate it, but I think most people even some of the closeted engineer types, they like to keep learning even if it is learning about themselves. So, I think it's a good thing.

...

P10Gc: And some engineers are not comfortable expressing feedback. You know, a lot of engineers can be reserved and not very open about talking about feelings in that regard. So, it might make some people really uncomfortable. I don't find it uncomfortable, but I have asked sometimes, I've asked certain people and I say, well, you know, you want to give me feedback and I can see there was a really big reluctance because that is not something they are used to doing.

Feedback Results In or Creates or Does What

Another frame of conceptualization is the participants' conversations of what the result is or what happens because of feedback in the organization. I reviewed the conversations for stories and examples of what feedback resulted in. Most conversations included results expressed as effects at the intra-personal or inter-personal level. Lack of results or change was most often discussed when the feedback was on or about the organization's issues. Participants declared that feedback upward to the traditional hierarchy has minimal effect, no effect, or in some situations perceived to have negative effect. I have grouped the feedback results into four categories: (a) knowledge about and for self, (b) action, (c) feelings or attitudes towards other, and (d) nothing.

Knowledge About and For Self

Participants indicated through examples and stories that feedback caused self-reflection, self-realization, self-awareness, enlightened them about something they previously were not aware of, and in some cases caused confusion. One participant mentioned how a feedback process from peers helped her become aware of something she needed to work on. Another told a story of how when she provided feedback to a co-worker he expressed gratitude for making him aware of something he could work on.

P5Gc: I took a class last year, one of the seven habits class and as part of it you were supposed to go out and gather feedback from our peers and also our supervisor. And then that was all compiled into a report we got and I found the information invaluable cause it pointed out some things that I didn't even notice or realize and I was able to learn a lot so I think it's really beneficial when you can provide feedback, especially to your coworkers and it has helped me out a lot. And I wish there was more of that.

P64Gc: I was recently asked for feedback on one of my co-workers by one of my co-workers. He actually was taking a class where the feedback was gathered and then names were taken off and it was compiled data that he was presented with. I felt good doing it and I was real glad when he came back from the class, he was very happy about what he gained from it, because like you, he found it to be an enlightening experience in a lot of ways. So on a co-worker level, I don't think there is much of an issue.

Participants explained how feedback made them think about themselves and that it caused them to check in with others to validate the feedback.

P52Gb: But anyway, for what it was worth, you listen, but at the same time you have to consider the source and is it, all feedback is good. But is it really valid or is this the person that is jealous of you or is out to get you and is going to tear you down, because ____ hey, do I do this? Okay, thanks. So you can validate it or did you notice this about me? Okay, great. You haven't, okay.

...

Facilitator: So for the rest of you, how does that work if a coworker wants to give you feedback. How would you react?

P45Ges: I would take it.

P43Ges: I appreciate it.

P45Ges: I mean yeah, if somebody's got constructive feedback for you, yeah, I can't imagine not taking it.

P43Ges: Believing it or not may be the--

P45Ges: Yeah, you don't know what you're gonna hear.

P43Ges: You have to validate the feedback and then you decide whether you're gonna act on it or not. But the feedback is always welcome because then you think about maybe that is true, or something.

P45Ges: And it does help you to take that step back.

P26Ges: I mean, someone might actually tell me I wasn't perfect and I might get upset about it and I might stop and think to ask them in what way. It must be some little thing I'm doing and get some clarification on it. And then my typical reaction would be to thank them and then go think about it for a day or two and then maybe I'd want to ask them questions or ask their advice well I'm thinking. If people perceive me as being unapproachable, as you said, it might be because I do this, then what if I try this instead or something else and ask them for more input. I would find it valuable. When I do performance reviews I always ask people to comment on my leadership style and skills, especially since I'm still new at it.

One person mentioned that her supervisor gave her feedback that she was intimidating. This comment from the supervisor caused confusion, especially when the supervisor did not mention it again. It caused the participant to wonder what in her behavior caused others to see her as intimidating.

P19Gf: What struck me about that question is, my first feedback, as a government person, was that I was intimidating. So I needed to work on being less intimidating. Okay, roger that.

P41Gf: You're intimidating?

P19Gf: Yeah. Roger that, I get that. Okay. What do I do about it? How's that going to affect future performance evaluations?

P19Gf: It came up that one time. It's never come up since, so apparently, I rectified it.

P41Gf: Maybe that day you were intimidating.

Participants claimed they felt relief and encouraged when someone indicated they were doing the right thing on the job. Feedback resulted in an awareness that they were “on the right path,” “headed in the right direction,” “knew what direction to take,” and indicated an area to focus on. Feedback provided knowledge of what to do next and what not to do next. One participant stated how helpful feedback is when starting a new job, that without feedback he would not know if he was doing the right thing.

P15Gf: Well actually, I like feedback. Actually, I like it a lot, because when I don't get it, it's kinda, "Okay, am I doing this right or wrong? Is there anything particularly--?" I did a job change here, about 6 months ago. Went from a job where I'd been for 10 years—12 actually 14, knew everything, to a job where I know practically nothing. So, in a situation like that, feedback is not only welcome, but it's critical. Most people want to do a good job. They want to hear if there's something that they're doing wrong, or could do better. They want to hear that.

Newer employees lamented about the lack of feedback about how things worked and expressed frustration when feedback was absent. Another participant said he considered it positive when he received feedback from a co-worker that he was unapproachable. This was something he had not considered about himself. After he received that feedback, when he found himself in a situation where he would normally tell a person to wait, he immediately responded to the person's request.

P56Gb: I've gotten feedback before where somebody says, no, somebody came to me and says, “You know, P56Gb, you're not very personable. You're not here, no you're unapproachable.” And I go I am? [laughter] You know. This was years ago and I was like, wow, am I putting off that you know, they were giving me feedback and I was like wow, am I like that? So I actually took it as good positive feedback, I mean, you know, even though it was like somebody else told me, it took me by surprise, so man, I got to make an effort to do that. And another thing was like, you know, are you too busy for this or that because I'm kind of like a help desk to everybody. You know, where people are coming in boom, boom, boom and you know, where sometimes you seem like you aren't responsive to the setting or whatever you know, of if people's needs, you become almost like a doctor because you are like, everybody comes and explains your problem, their problem and you got to listen to it.

You know, like even simple things like, you know, my hard drive isn't working and this thing is blinking on the screen or something so I have to listen to that. And so I used to get feedback like, well, you are not responsive to this. So, I said, you know what, I'll make a change. Cause I took that as positive even though it was kind of like, it seemed like it would be negative the person telling me. You know like, in our response you are not doing this and I said, well, I took it as a challenge, I'm like, okay, from now on, I'll change my policy. You know, so right now, let's deal with the present, you know, let's put it off. You are right here, right now, let's go take care of it. So I get up and say, let's go take care of this. Show me what's going on and we can fix it now instead of putting it off and so I took that feedback, you know, from peers or whoever and kind of turned it around, so, you know, but maybe not everybody is going to take it that--they might take it personal.

When prompted to consider what they would think, feel, or do if someone approached them and said they had feedback, or when they had experienced feedback, participants often laughed or made an initial light-hearted comment. I interpreted this to be nervous anxiety created when participants considered what feedback implies about them. In one conversation, participants exchanged opinions about a 360-feedback process. One participant indicated she wants to know how to make herself better, and the other participant expresses concern about having others point out weaknesses. This conversation indicates that feedback is conceptualized as resulting in knowledge about one's self.

P42Gg: Well I'm always looking for something to work on to make myself better, and so actually we're getting ready to do--

P36Gg: A 360?

P42Gg: A 360 for Amy and I. You know--Amy is like "Why would you want to do this?"

P36Gg: I'm kind of with Amy. Do we really want to know what they're going to say?

P42Gg: I do, because I'm always, again, if someone is not dishing up dirt on me, I want to know.

P36Gg: Don't you think you know where your weaknesses are, though?

P42Gg: I hire people to make sure that they--

P36Gg: Yeah, so knowing those things?

P42Gg: But still, but then I still have to work at that. You know, I just, I don't know. It's like that constant improvement thing, you know? So.

Action

Feedback also results in action or change--in a product, in behavior, and towards others. Some supervisors mentioned using feedback for corrective action. These participants conceptualize feedback as causing a correction. As mentioned in the excerpt above, receiving feedback that he was unapproachable resulted in a change in behavior in a similar situation. Customer feedback results in changes to a product or service as told by the participant when he explained the feedback loop between engineers and the warfighter. Feedback on an issue within the organization can result in changes to a policy. Feedback creates an awareness of an opportunity to fix something, do something better or different, to solve a problem. All of these examples indicate that feedback is conceptualized as resulting in action.

P24Ge: Our ultimate customer is the war fighter and one thing that NAVYLAB has is a very strong legacy of doing war fighter feedback. Where you work closely with someone in the fleet who needs something really bad and you come running home and you get a bunch of smart people together and you come up with this great idea and you go give it to them. And it's not right but it's way closer than anything they've ever had and then they give you feedback and say, "Well that's not what I meant. I meant this." And you run home and do that and you know, this really tight loop where the customer is giving feedback and ideas are going back and forth and that to me is a real benefit here and it's really good to be able to work to actually see your product being used by someone who it actually makes a difference with them.

...

P50Gb: We would have this session where I walked in and you could only address three issues and they could be personal. They could be policy. They could be whatever you want, but you have three issues. And I was allowed to respond to those three issues without any attribution. I was allowed to, it was all them against me okay. On the leadership side of the house. That meeting was then followed by another hour for all people below that rank to come into my office and address any other issues that they wanted.

...

P28Ge: Well you pay attention more to it if it comes from your supervisors, but I mean it doesn't mean you don't act on the feedback you get from your employees but it has a different level you try to fix them as soon as possible but when it comes to new employees then you think about it and okay talk to your employees. It takes time to fix them because you're trying to improve the working environment or resolve the situation. But when it comes from your supervisor you just right away--you know--you start working on it. That's my, I mean the level of response is different.

P29Ge: For myself if it's a senior employee or subordinate or whatever I almost take their feedback more seriously than maybe my supervisor. Obviously if your supervisor says, "This is screwed up you need to fix it," yes sir and we go and fix it. But as far as general feedback, general, "Hey why don't we go do something XYZ" I generally put more stock into what my people would tell me other than--rather than my supervisor.

Feedback can result in negative action or consequences. Several conversations included participants expressing concern about retribution or getting in trouble for providing feedback. Some relayed stories of physical consequences, for example having to do push-ups, when feedback was provided to a superior in a military setting.

P24Ge: And, you don't get in trouble like you do in the military as much. I have a guy who used to be in the military and he tells a story of doing push-ups because he accidentally talked to someone up the chain [laughter] and it was like he'd gone around the guy accidentally. It wasn't anything intentional but he was doing push-ups with his legs on the desk. I mean I've never had to do that in going around the chain.

References to being a trouble-maker indicate that providing feedback can cause trouble. Trouble is also an action resulting from feedback. Feedback can cause people to shut down or stop saying something, which is also an action or change. One group shared a story of how an admiral's response (feedback) to their questions and information caused them to stop providing feedback.

P38Gg: I think what happened in the past, the last admiral we had here we didn't -- we weren't as honest with him.

P36Gg: Right. Well, we tried at the beginning though—

P38Gg: Because we knew. We knew what would happen if you were.

P36Gg: Yes.

P38Gg: It's like okay, so do I--

Facilitator: What would happen?

P36Gg: We tried at the beginning, and when you try and you're--

P38Gg: Shut down.

P36Gg: Slapped down, shut down like well "That's not the way it needs to be or you need to bring me more data."

P38Gg: "You're living in the 90s." That was the answer. And this was said--this was said--at an all-hands type of--I shouldn't say "all-hands." All leadership meeting, someone raised their hand and said "You know, the problem we have today is our engineers are working doing paperwork, and paperwork you can read all the books you want to about how to high jump and it's not going to teach you how to high jump. You have to try it. You have to work it out. You have to," and the response from our admiral at that point was "You guys are living in the 90s. You don't understand. You don't get it. You don't." Okay, I guess we don't get it.

P36Gg: And variations--

P38Gg: Just keep on shoving the paper at us then because that's all we can do.

P36Gg: And variations of the same kinds of questions. Actually very different questions, but the very same kind of answer, because I was in many, many meetings on different topics and BRAC was a big--biggie, the same answer was "You guys don't get it. Get on board." And if that's always the answer, you stop.

P38Gg: If you want to shut down feedback—

P36Gg: Yeah.

P38Gg: It's a good way to do it.

P42Gg: The other thing though, he would say "Get on board," but he never told us what to get on board with. It was not clear what he wanted us to get on board with, and I know with us, he just wasn't here very often. We worked around him.

Feelings or Attitudes Towards Other

Participants spoke about how feedback influenced their feelings or attitudes towards others. They also speculated that feedback could harm relationships, especially if that feedback was unsolicited. Participants stated they appreciate when someone provides them feedback, and many indicated they would thank the person providing the feedback.

Participants used the words grateful and appreciative. One participant shared a recent story of a supervisor calling her up and telling her that he was very glad she had the role she did, that he knew he had selected the right person for the job. She said this feedback made her feel valued and appreciated, much more than any formal letter or recognition ever did.

P43Ges: But I had one example that popped into my head which is why I thought of that is the other day my boss--we were just in conversation and he goes I just wanted to tell you I'm so glad I hired you for this job because you're the right person for this job. And that meant more to me, actually, in terms of--it just made me feel so appreciated and valued, and I've never had a supervisor just pick up the phone say that to me my whole entire career--in 25 years. I've had some who've made me feel not, but um, to me, was just wow--they're glad I'm here and they're glad they hired me to do this job. You know, that to me felt like really better than a certificate, better than a coffee cup, than a light stick, a lunch pail or whatever.

Several participants mentioned how in one particular work group, the group lead provided positive feedback and personal recognition to everyone on the team while walking around the building. Team members in this work group stated how much they liked the group lead, expressing how the positive feedback affected their feelings and attitudes.

P64Gc: And actually, working in AIPT right now, Jean Harlow, is the IPT lead and she's always giving positive feedback and you are absolutely right, the culture in that organization is so different than almost anywhere else I have ever worked in the 99% of it, I think, is because she is like that. She is just always on a personal level, on a group level, on a team level, she's just always giving positive feedback.

Just as positive feedback creates positive affect, negative feedback or unsolicited feedback creates negative affect. People mentioned hurt feelings, anger, sulking, betrayal,

and annoyance as results of receiving feedback. In some conversations, participants discussed how they might discount the feedback provider or change their opinion of the person based on the feedback the person provided. Participants expressed skepticism based on what they knew of or thought about the source of the feedback. Some feedback carried more value based on opinions of the source. Most conversations included examples of how relationships could be changed, either positively or negatively by feedback. One participant indicated how his letting loose the fire hose of feedback created bad feelings that took more than a year from which to recover.

P24Ge: I think constructive feedback is situational because I have provided feedback that I thought was constructive and positive and it was interpreted as negative, damaging, parochial, and then I feel bad because then my motives were--but I mean I provided what I thought was positive feedback, the kind of feedback that I would want to get if I was that person. The specific example I'm thinking of it was with an air force customer and the air force customer, I mean it did several years worth of damage to our relationship--you know--just that one.

P28Ge: Because of that?

P24Ge: Yeah, because of that. I mean I provided feedback and he had asked for feedback and--I just--you know--he needed a cup of water and I hooked up the fire hose and turned it on.

Nothing

Feedback also results in nothing, no change, or defensive explanation with no change. While one might argue that defensive explanation is itself an action, from the participants' perspective the result is no change.

This category occurred most often in conversations about feedback on the organization, including initiatives, new processes, new systems, or new structure. Participants stated receiving numerous surveys soliciting feedback on the organization. My analysis of the survey e-mail messages and the actual survey questions confirmed that

feedback about the organization is solicited on a regular basis. The OPM survey solicits feedback about organization climate including communication, teamwork, and supervision. When asked what would happen if the team lead or supervisor presented the new commander's guidance and asked for feedback, the first response was often a humorous quip, along with an explanation that feedback on items at that level of the organization were often ignored. The participants speculated as to why they would be asked and then see no action. Some claimed it to be the nature of a military organization, others reasoned it was because decisions had already been made and the feedback was simply a formality without intent to change.

P64Gc: An email that's just blanket everybody. Uh, I appreciate your feedback and everybody would say, okay, if I have time, I'll get around to it.

P65Gc: But based on my experiences, if you gave them feedback they would say, thank you, but we are doing this and it would be totally opposite. And it would be because they had already decided, but they were told to ask for feedback.

P5Gc: Yeah, and I wonder sometimes, like for example, NMCI feedback because sometimes you get a user survey on what you think, I wonder what they do with that and if really your feedback makes any difference at all on how they handle things because I don't really see any improvements but--

P67Gc: You have to look at what they are soliciting feedback, they're soliciting feedback on the technical, on the performance of the technical people fielding your problems. They're not asking about how well the system works as a whole. They don't, I've never been asked and that's, was my case example also. When they had the dog and pony over here and we were told that NMCI was coming, I went over there to see what was coming down and I talked to the rep. And said, "well when are you guys going to come talk to us and see what we need locally?" And he said, "Oh, that decisions already been made." So, yeah, feedback is valued at the local level only probably.

P10Gc: Well, if I got that question, I would be surprised because it goes against the culture in the military culture, it is a hierarchy and the person in charge, it flows top down, not bottom up. So, I would find that question highly unlikely and I would probably not take it seriously because that's not how the military makes decisions. Or at least from the culture that I've seen, so I find that to be a very strange question.

In addition to feedback about the organization, no change could also be the result of feedback to an individual about himself or herself. Some participants indicated that feedback would not influence them if the feedback were from a person they did not respect or provided in a way that was inappropriate. One participant said she would ignore it or let the feedback roll off her back. The result would be no change.

P65Gc: Well, there's some coworkers like in my job there's like three or four people that I work closely enough with that I would think that they would have an idea even to give me feedback. Anyone outside that circle, I guess, I would be more suspect.

P64Gc: Do you know John Smith? Do you remember him? Well, if he came and gave me feedback, I would probably just ignore it.

P67Gc: Exactly.

P64Gc: I mean, he was the type of person that did everything possible to be the most socially unacceptable and politically incorrect person there is. And he reveled in that role. So, if he gave me feedback, it usually just rolled off my back, but if it was pretty much anybody else, I would listen to it.

When approached with a suggestion for changing a process or procedure in the organization, some participants provided examples of how they would need to explain why that particular change would not work. Supervisors indicated the need to listen and empathize with the inefficient processes or non-operational systems that could not be changed or improved. The supervisors wanted to be able to champion or carry the ideas forward yet were also hesitant to take all ideas forward. Some supervisors expressed that employees could either bang their head against the wall to change the process or just deal with the process as is.

P38Gg: But just listening, listening and commenting on is good enough. As long as you're saying "Hey, I understand what you're saying. I feel your pain. I'm with you on this. Here's what we really have to do, and-and I'm sorry I got to do it too." It's like NMCI. That's the answer. I feel your pain. I got one too.

P36Gg: Although you can do it kicking and screaming. You can take your people's stuff and champion it up. If their idea is better and we've done this a lot with command staffing and NMCI, here is what I suggest will work better for you, knowing what the end state is, and if you do enough of that and actually are successful a few times, then they truly get that you have their--you're listening and--and it's not--you're not just giving them air time.

...

P43Ges: We had an experience--there was a guy that did a tour through our organization last year, and he had feedback on everything. Everything. I mean it didn't matter what it is--NAVYHQ shouldn't be doing this and we're gonna fight and at some point you're like you know, you can fight this battle, hit your head on the wall, just be quiet when you go hit your head on the wall all day because you're not gonna get anywhere with this, and it's just this constant--nobody wanted his feedback because it wasn't helpful feedback it was just annoying feedback because you knew you couldn't do anything. I know he got the opportunity to give his feedback--you know who I'm talking about, right? And it was like would you just stop? So non-constructive feedback I think is taken less well from anyone, even though people have the right to give feedback. But you do need to kind of pick and choose your feedback, because otherwise nobody will listen to anything you say. So I've seen it extremely both ways.

Feedback is Complex

Feedback is conceptualized as multi-faceted and complex in the conversations. The findings so far have been presented somewhat piecemeal using interpretation frames of content, process, motivation, affect, and results. While these frames did emerge from data during the analysis, I am aware that my own conceptualization influenced the framework or categories developed from the analysis. In this section, I integrate many of the previously presented frames, highlight the situational complexity of feedback, and present the complexity using the participants' conversational sequences.

Consider the transcript excerpt from Group d.

Facilitator: Imagine your co-worker asks you for feedback on his or her performance, what do you think, feel or do?

P59Gd: I get right on it. No, I like when people ask me that because then I feel that they want some information. So I try to deal with that individual and how I can

assess whatever they're doing and hopefully give them some good feedback. I mean, I don't want to just come right in there and just, you know, just really say some bad things and like this is really awful. You know, you do try to be pretty diplomatic about the whole situation and ease into it and sort of a good and bad kind of a thing and make them feel comfortable enough.

P58Gd: I think ideally, you want a situation where you don't have to have a dialogue about feedback, I think you should just be day-to-day operations--know what everybody's doing well enough so you don't have to ask the question. And I guess I would put the feedback thing in two areas; one is the technical, functional--that certainly should be the everyday thing. You shouldn't even have to not, I mean ask about that. The other one, which is a little bit more difficult, is about how someone personally is doing their job and if your supervisor is a good supervisor. That kind of feedback is a little bit harder because it becomes personal. And especially with negative. It's very easy to give positive feedback, okay--

P60Gd: Right.

P58Gd: It's hard to give negative feedback. And if it's negative feedback about someone's personality it's very difficult. And, you know, I think you're really challenged to do that. It depends on how much you want to improve and if you have a stake in it and you feel it's worth the risk of doing it, you probably should do it. But ideally, it should never get to that point.

P60Gd: I think there's always a risk involved too because it's real easy to share positive feedback, but the negative feedback, let's say dealing with a person's time and attendance or that kind of thing, if they came to you and asked you for feedback, I would be more apt to share the positive and maybe a little reluctant to share some of the negative because there's a risk. I'm not sure--do you really want to know or, you know -- because sometimes people ask you and they really--they don't expect you to, you know. So I think, trying to feel, do you really want to know or--you know, because you're opening up a can of worms.

P59Gd: Yeah, but I think that that point, if they have approached you--

P60Gd: And asked--

P59Gd: And you're basically going how far do you want me to discuss this? I mean, I can take a little bit and if you're good at that, fine; if you want more details, if you want me to be as truthful as I possibly can, I'll give it. I'll voice my opinion. But that's on them. Maybe they only want to hear a little bit and maybe that's enough, and it's too much or something. But maybe they--maybe because of the rapport you have with that person they're saying, "Yeah, I'll hear maybe just a little bit more." So you kinda, it just depends on, you know, what the personalities are and how much they really want to get into this.

P2Gd: And I think the context is really different. If they've just heard something bad, like say from their supervisor, and they want either justification or nullification of what they said and they come to you in that way, you're more likely to talk differently than if it's just kinda out of the blue—hey--

P59Gd: Absolutely. It's all communication.

Facilitator: You say risk. What is it that's being risked?

P2Gd: The relationship.

P60Gd: Yeah, I was gonna say that--your relationship with that person.

P2Gd: I mean, we've bonded with these people for however long in one job, and when their relationship breaks down at work, it just makes, you know, going to work Monday even harder and staying all day even harder, I think.

P59Gd: And the trust factor.

P2Gd: Uh-huh. 'Cause if they feel betrayed by you or if you feel betrayed by them if it goes the other way, that's what I would say the risk is.

P58Gd: The risk is something you have to manage. In other words, you don't want to describe every wart on someone's butt, but if it's big enough you may want to tell them they have a wart. And so you have to manage that risk and ask yourself what are you trying to accomplish with the feedback and is it worth what you're trying to accomplish. You certainly don't want to do it mean-spirited--

P60Gd: Maliciously, or--

P58Gd: Nobody's perfect. People aren't perfect and you don't want to get into this game of identifying peoples' flaws to them. They probably already know that they have those flaws. But the feedback has to be constructive and it has to be purposeful. So if you keep that in mind, I don't think you're gonna run down this trap of should you or shouldn't you. You just have to ask yourself. The point of my context, I think, is really important. The environment that you're exchanging the feedback, whether it's some stressful environment or someone just got a negative comment from a supervisor and you're trying to confirm whether or not the supervisor is right or whether their perspective is right. And that's a different context than just sitting down and just talking about gee, we ought to do this better or we ought to do this better. It's a different thing. So it's--it's generally, it's just how you measure it and you have to think about it. It's just not something--

P59Gd: What I really like to do is if somebody does come to me and ask me about that, I've been okay--they want some information, they want it very gentle. So you're saying--I don't want to just come right out there and just both and give them all the

bad news. I like to structure it to where you can say well yeah, an observation--kind of that is what the census is and I've heard that from other people and this and that. I always try to put like a personal side on it to say--I mean, if it was me, I was kinda doing that--I'd make some personal suggestions just for me and basically let them know that's only my opinion and, you know, throw the big thing out there first, what the negative comment was, and then start working on it and saying yeah, if it was me doing that I might want to change this or that. But you know, get the big thing that's scary for them, get that all out there and starting smoothing it out and see if you can't help them solve something.

When prompted to respond to “Imagine a co-worker asks you for feedback on his or her performance, what would you think, do, or feel?” The participants engage in a conversation that exemplifies the nuances and complexity of the conceptualizations of feedback in the organization. The first participant talks about her desire to provide good feedback to be helpful yet wants to be diplomatic with the process. The next speaker makes the distinction between technical and functional feedback and stresses that feedback should be a day-to-day communications process. He also goes on to say how personal feedback is more difficult to deliver and how the provider needs to consider his or her stake and risk in the feedback process. The next speaker elaborates on the reluctance to share negative feedback in the workplace. The first participant then goes on to share her desire to be truthful yet be mindful of how the other person is responding to the process. The next speaker mentions context. She speculates what motivates the person to solicit feedback. She considers what that person may just have experienced at work to cause him or her to ask for feedback. The conversation continues with the topics of relationships and trust and the affects of feeling betrayed by the feedback. Finally, the participants discuss personal motivations and conditions they each consider for the situation.

Using this excerpt as an example, each feedback situation can be conceptualized as a unique episode where several considerations are relevant for the provider and the requestor.

There is a complex conditional logic at play for each person in the situation. As well, what constitutes the situation differs for each person. Three possible conditions for providing feedback that I mentioned in the findings section on why people give or do not give feedback include: personal risk, motivation of the requestor, and the work environment or setting. For each situation, one or another of these conditions may become the prime consideration that guides action, the prime condition may differ for each person involved in the episode, and each situation creates a different set of conditions. The conditions for each situation cannot always be determined beforehand, and a plan cannot be formed for each combination of conditions. The participants' conversations indicated that they do conceptualize feedback situations as complex and situational. This is why developing a set of rules for providing feedback intended to apply to all situations in an organization becomes problematic.

Another example of the conditional complexity is from Group c.

Facilitator: So imagine your supervisor or team lead walked into your office and asked you for some feedback on his or her performance, what would you think, feel, or do?

...

P10Gc: I think you made a good point. A lot of the experience a person has here working depends on who their branch head is. There are some branch heads that are very supportive and nurture their employees and there are other branch heads that are very difficult to talk to and that you really have to work hard to try to get them to know you. And also, that may not be as interested in all of the aspects of what I think a branch head should be doing. So, I think, it's kind of, I mean if the branch head is asking if this is like a basewide thing where everybody wants to get feedback as to what the branch heads are doing, I think it would be difficult to get an objective look at things, because depending on where you are working and who you are working for the situation is different. The openness to hearing things and the safety in trying to say what you really think about their performance. It's kind of interesting because the base is in some sense is really big and it's like having a whole bunch of little tiny companies, you know, with their own cultures and depending on where you work you get a different type of rating, a different type of bonuses and different sense of how much opportunity you might have you know, for growth and doing interesting work.

When prompted with the question “Imagine your supervisor or team lead approaches you and asks for feedback on his or her performance what would you think, feel, or do?” One participant explains the contextual conditions that she considers are who the supervisor is and how supportive is he or she, if the supervisor is easy or difficult to talk to, and how well does he or she know you. She goes onto explain that it depends where you work and who you are working for. She also speaks about whether it is safe to speak up or really talk about performance in that situation.

Here is another example is from Group c.

Facilitator: So what if your coworker approaches you and says they have some feedback for you? What do you think, feel, or do?

...

P64Gc: I mean, he was the type of person that did everything possible to be the most socially unacceptable and politically incorrect person there is. And he reveled in that role. So, if he gave me feedback, it usually just rolled off my back, but if it was pretty much anybody else, I would listen to it.

P67Gc: Just mutual respect, you know, there are people that I would just ignore.

P10Gc: I was gonna say something, but I forgot. I think there is different ways of looking at the feedback. It depends. It's situational. In what it is, why they are giving you feedback, if it is something that you expect, but if it's not something you expect, I think a lot of times that's rather presumptuous of the person to give you feedback unless you are doing something hideously terrible, I don't think it is appropriate. Usually someone asks for feedback then it's okay. But like in the normal course of things like if you are doing a project and someone comes back to you and says, oh, how about this or that, that's normal feedback but I'm thinking more in terms of you personally in terms of your habits or uh, how you work with other people or something like that, that would be kind of, that would indicate that something was maybe way off. Does that make sense?

When prompted with the question “So what if your coworker approaches you and says they have some feedback for you? What do you think, feel, or do?” One participant explains the conditions for this situation to include: why is he or she giving you feedback, is it something

you expect, what do you presume about the person if it is not something you expect, her own assumptions about providing feedback when not asked, and what feedback is considered normal or appropriate. In this example, the participant expresses some implicit rules about what people should or should not do in the work environment that influences her conceptualization of when feedback should or should not be provided.

Tensions may be created when people's implicit rules about feedback are incongruent with each other's and they attempt to provide feedback. Tensions may also arise when an individual's implicit rules are incongruent with what the organization espouses. For example, one product team's values document states that

“Feedback will be used as a tool for personal, professional, and team growth. Feedback is intended to be constructive. Feedback should be given in a timely fashion. Feedback should be presented in an environment, at a time, and in a manner that is constructive. Feedback should be given directly by the parties involved, and not by a third party or committee. Feedback is omni-directional--both up and down, and side to side.”

If a person comes into this organization believing only certain people should be providing feedback and that feedback from others should only be provided when solicited, a tension may arise if the new employee is offered feedback that he does not expect. The person offering the feedback may be doing so to remain congruent with the organization's espoused values about feedback.

In Group e, supervisors are talked about the plusses and perils of embedding negative performance or corrective action feedback within positive feedback.

P29Ge: I think one of the ways that we get wrapped around that axle is again trying to be nice. Obviously, the Neanderthal works for some people but for most people I'm not sure that it really does. But I think what--at least I've caught myself doing from time to time is when I have to provide somebody some corrective feedback I end up telling them all the good things that they're doing. “Hey this is great. You're doing this good. Oh, by the way here's this other little thing that you need to do as well.” If it's really a minor thing that might work, but a lot of times what happens is

they hear all the good stuff and the--the little bit of bad stuff you throw in there on the side goes in one ear and out the other and they focus on the good stuff, which is I mean just probably human nature. We all want to hear the good stuff that we're doing. So I think you have to be careful in that light. And it's a balancing act with most employees because you don't want to go in Neanderthal style and demoralize them and totally bring them down and have them put their feet up on their desk and cross their arms and, "Well I'm not going to do anything for that idiot." So again it's situational. You have to figure out the employee and figure out the appropriate corrective action for that employee to--to encourage them to do better without discouraging them.

The participant, in this case a supervisor, states that trying to be nice and tell a person the good things they are doing when the intent is really to provide feedback that they need to change their behavior causes problems. The participant then goes on to say how coming across as a Neanderthal manager will not cause the needed change either and may backfire by creating apathy. The supervisor explains how people are different, and that as a supervisor, he needs to consider how to encourage employees to do better without discouraging them. This example highlights the complexities introduced by the supervisory relationships in organizations.

In Group f, the facilitator asked "How is it different if your supervisor gives you feedback?" and the participants' conversation shows the nuances created in the supervisory relationship.

P15Gf: Put a little more weight on it, probably. Just from the fact that he's your supervisor. And, you're supposed to be making at least some attempt to satisfy him. Whereas feedback from a co-worker, you can pretty much take it or leave it. It doesn't--it's a career affecting performance enhancement, maybe it would be more valuable than a supervisor. But you have to take it seriously, good or bad.

P41Gf: I think a lot of it depends on where you're at in the food chain, too. If you're already--if you're already topped out, and you're not ever going to get promoted any more, you may not be responsive to anybody's feedback. Then it's a personal, internal thing that you have to--you know--either respect the person that's giving you the feedback, you know--or just discount it, because you don't respect their opinion.

Facilitator: P19Gf?

P19Gf: What struck me about that question is, my first feedback, as a government person, was that I was intimidating. So I needed to work on being less intimidating. Okay, roger that.

P41Gf: You're intimidating?

P19Gf: Yeah. Roger that, I get that. Okay. What do I do about it? How's that going to affect future performance evaluations?

P19Gf: It came up that one time. It's never come up since, so apparently, I rectified it.

P41Gf: Maybe that day you were intimidating.

P19Gf: Yeah, I was having a bad day. Supervisor feedback, I think for me, depends on my relationship with the supervisor. If I respect them, then I'm going to value more what they say. I also think where you are in the food chain's going to impact it. I also think consistency and honesty, and presentation by the person giving the feedback's going to play a role in it. The fact that that never came up again made me go, "Okay, what does that really mean?"

Facilitator: P17Gf?

P17Gf: I think they've covered it pretty well. It's dependent on the situation, and as P15Gf says, you have to take the feedback from a supervisor more seriously, because if you do have career left, and want more [bonuses and raises], that's going to mean something to your pocketbook, as opposed to just personal improvement that peer level would give you. But it's entirely dependent on the supervisor, and their style and capability as well.

One participant said they would put more weight on a supervisor's feedback since it may affect his performance rating, and another participant added that it would depend on where you were in your career, if you were not expecting to get a promotion you may ignore more of the feedback. He went on to say that, each person would consider the feedback differently including the level of respect the person has for the supervisor. Another participant added a story of feedback she received from a supervisor then goes onto explain that for her it depends on the relationship she has with her supervisor. The final participant added that it is dependent on the situation and the supervisor's style and capability.

Group e had a similar conversation where participants discussed how the conditions created by the supervisory relationship cause them to shift their response to feedback.

Facilitator: How is getting feedback from your superior different or the same as getting it from a subordinate?

P28Ge: Well you pay attention more to it if it comes from your supervisors, but I mean it doesn't mean you don't act on the feedback you get from your employees but it has a different level--you know--you try to fix them as soon as possible but when it comes to new employees then you think about it and okay talk to your employees. It takes time to fix them because you're trying to improve the--the working environment or resolve the situation. But when it comes from your supervisor you know--you just right away--you know--you start working on it. That's my, I mean the level of response is different.

P29Ge: For myself if it's a senior employee or subordinate or whatever I almost take their feedback more seriously than maybe my supervisor. Obviously if your supervisor says, "This is screwed up you need to fix it," yes sir and we go and fix it. But as far as general feedback, general, "Hey why don't we go do something XYZ" I generally put more stock into what my people would tell me other than--rather than my supervisor.

P28Ge: That's what I mean actually. I mean if it's not serious your supervisor wouldn't come to you and say, you know--okay--"We have an issue here. Let's go and fix it." But it's in general—

P24Ge: I tend to do the same thing.

In Group b, when asked about providing feedback to a supervisor, a participant shared that the supervisory relationship mediated what type of feedback he would provide. It would also mediate how much he would disclose in the exchange.

P50Gb: In a heartbeat. In a heartbeat, I would give them my feedback in a heartbeat, sure. And I think that's kind of easy. You got to be positive when you do it though. You are in jeopardy of saying the wrong thing. But, and I think you can critique or applaud all of his work. You just have to be careful by-by talking about the positive things first. You know, these are the positive things. And then if things aren't, well, you know maybe we could see an improvement in this. You know, we are little confused down here. We are not really sure why you don't have a handle on your training program. You know, why do we have to do things two or three times over? Or why, you know, those kind of things. I mean, could you look into that? I mean, you don't have to, but it would help us. You know, I mean, I see your role as, as you're mentoring us, you know, and we should come to you for guidance and you

know, or make a recommendation for a change. But I don't think you can tell the supervisor much more than that because then you get into a quagmire of you are trying to tell me what my job is. Oh no, not trying to do that, not me. But, you know, we could see something different and I think he should be looking on for what you see. I know supervisors do a lot of things in the background that they have to do, but it's a loaded question if he comes in and asks you that.

All of these examples indicate the complexity introduced into the conceptualization of feedback due to the supervisory relationships present in the organization.

Second Level of Analysis--Metaphorical Conceptualizations

Metaphors are another form of conceptualization (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) and appear in the language in the participants' discussions. Other organizational topics, such as organizational change, have been explored using metaphors (Marshak, 1993). Metaphors are figures of speech that contain implied comparisons to something other than the topic of discussion. Tsoukas (1991) claimed that metaphors encourage new ways of thinking about complex organizational phenomena. Metaphor interpretation acknowledges the "continuous flow of experience" while literal discourse analysis tends to segment experience (Tsoukas, 1991, p. 581). The frame interpretation explained previously uses the literal language approach and resulted in useful, yet segmented frames of how feedback is conceptualized. The metaphor approach augments the literal approach and provides a holistic conceptualization of feedback in the organization through the voices of the participants. The metaphors also provide a way to compare and contrast conceptualizations and expose how different groups' conversations emphasized different metaphors.

I used an inductive approach to metaphor analysis. I reviewed segments of the transcripts that contained the word feedback to look for figures of speech and then grouped these figures of speech into an initial set of metaphors. I then reviewed the complete transcripts, moving outward in my analysis, to search for additional evidence of the initial set

of metaphors as well as other metaphors that could contribute the conceptualization of feedback in the organization. I then identified what feedback could be conceptualized as within the context of the metaphor. I then created a story of the implications of this metaphor within organization. I use quotes from the participant's conversations to ground the storyline of the metaphor and add my interpretations of the metaphor, creating some phrases and identities that fit the metaphor but do not exactly appear in the participants' conversation. In other words, I began the analysis searching for surface figures of speech and moved to deep metaphors to construct the generative conceptual metaphors of feedback (Schön, 1993). Surface metaphors are literal figures of speech used. Deep metaphors are derived from the collection of literal phrases. The deep metaphor may never be explicitly mentioned but the deep metaphor accounts for the "centrally important features of the story" (Schön, 1993, p. 149). Generative metaphors then generate new perceptions, understandings, and explanations. Once something is seen as similar to something else, additional repertoires of meaning are created from the comparison. For this reason I equated the interpretive repertoire as explained by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and selected as the type of discourse analysis for my study, to the generative metaphor as defined by Schon (1993). I did not review the documents for metaphorical feedback conceptualizations since official documents in an organization typically do not contain metaphorical language. Table 4 shows the summary of the analysis. The explanation (story) of each conceptualization of feedback (generative metaphor) grounded in the participants' conversations, follows.

Table 4

Metaphorical Conceptualizations of Feedback

| <i>Concept of Feedback (Generative Metaphor)</i> | <i>Deep Metaphor In Use</i> | <i>Sample Figures of Speech</i> |
|---|-----------------------------|--|
| Feedback as a guide | Journey | Going in right/wrong direction Over the course Take steps (back or forward) Setting direction and pace Don't know where to go Avenue to travel On the right road or right path Gone astray Tell you to go to hell and make you look forward to the trip |
| Feedback as a threat | Battle | Put you on the defensive Take offense and walk-off No punches pulled Blew up in my face Target on back Personal attack Slapped down Catch up with you Get out of hand Hide things Get killed when you challenge |
| Feedback as a gift | Social or Relational | Exchanging the feedback Give and receive More valuable, equally valuable Generous with praise Not what they wanted to receive Take it or leave it Knowing what to give out Offer and accept Take it and say thank-you |
| Feedback as a built-in mechanism. Feedback as a tool. | Mechanical or Machine | Corrective action Prime the pump Wrapped around the axle Put finger on the button Feedback mechanisms Shut down See what level you are at Fix it Continuous feedback loop Constructive feedback |

| <i>Concept of Feedback (Generative Metaphor)</i> | <i>Deep Metaphor In Use</i> | <i>Sample Figures of Speech</i> |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Feedback as nourishment, nurturing | Ecological or Biological | Work climate Helping people grow Nurturing environment Hard to swallow Use it as something to grow on Take care of young personnel Food chain Took you under wing Pecking order Digest what is said Feedback will dry up |

Feedback as a Guide

Feedback is conceptualized as a guide or a “way of going” in the organization. The career or task is the journey, with the employee being the traveler. The organization is also on a journey and has a direction. Alternatively, the organization can be a world with a culture. People travel to different cultures both within and between organizations. Supervisors or bosses are guides, with top managers being guides that are more experienced. Guides know more about the pathway ahead than do those who are embarking on the journey for the first time.

In NAVYLAB, the department heads would be the most experienced travelers, perhaps even mountain climbers that have had a successful journey. One department head noted that it was great “being at the top of your organization.” and noted that she interacts with others who had been on a similar journey.

P36Gg: Well, and again, we’re dealing mostly with leaders who have worked their way up through the organization. They’ve been in all those roles. They’ve seen mistakes and they don’t want to be at the top making mistakes, so.

Department heads acknowledge that mentors provided them with guidance and know the way since they may have taken a similar path.

P21Gg: Right. I think that just the culture of this organization, you are going to be mentored whether you want to be or not.

P36Gg: True. By many people, maybe.

P21Gg: Somebody is going to pull you aside to say “Don’t go that way. Do it this way. Try this. Already been there, done that. Go a different direction.”

The experienced travelers, now guides for others, may think they know the correct path and may see guidance (feedback) from those not yet to the top as an unreliable shortcut. In this example, a department head explains his response to someone providing him with feedback on a task. In this instance, the department head has been told by his upper management that the task needs to be performed in a particular way.

P38Gg: So if you were to say to that person, the first one, what I heard was you were told you’re going to do it this way, and you listen to that person who said “Well, we can do it that way too.” The other possibility could be “You know I hear you. You’re right, that could be a shortcut. That could make our response easier we could do it that way, however. I’ve been told that we have to do it this way, and unless you have a strong argument that this way is going to lead to bad answers” or whatever.

P36Gg: Right, right. And in some cases maybe this guy’s way is better and then your job is to go upstairs with his idea.

In another example of upward feedback, a mid-level manager, explained why guidance provided upward in the organization gets lost. As a mid-level manager, he is a guide to those above him but is not always recognized as a guide.

P34Ge: Right. You can have the greatest idea in the world but they’ve got so many other strange things going on that we know nothing about that it gets lost in the noise and creative criticism, feedback, better directions for the organization never get recognized or they get recognized but never acted upon.

Employees may see themselves as knowing the way, having a clearer sense of direction, but their directions are not followed or they may not offer them if they do not think they can be a guide, and the organization ends up taking similar paths that lead to nowhere.

The support supervisors, all women in this case, feel obligated to let employees know if they are on the right track. They are responsible guides taking employees on a journey,

being aware of those that may be falling apart. They also want to know if they are on the right path and will push uphill to get the guide's attention. They feel a sense of duty to guide the organization in a different direction if the current direction may cause harm. A similar sense of obligation to guide and be guided was not as evident in the technical supervisors' conversations, all men in this case.

P48Ges: Yeah, you do. You still look at it. But if there's something that, I see it going in the wrong direction in my mind, something that I can't just walk away from and take off, because if something happens at the other end and I didn't take any steps toward trying to make it the other direction, then I wouldn't be happy with myself. If it's going to bother somebody because I said it, I'm sorry. But I can handle that more than being able to walk away with the guilt of not ever having said anything. Then I don't feel like I'm doing my job.

P48Ges: You know, as managers we have to do it every quarter, you know, providing that information. It's hard sometimes to, to tell these people, gosh, you're just not on the right track. It is hard; some people take it well because they take it as a learning experience and let's move on from there. Other people just fall apart in front of you. And that's what makes it difficult, when they cannot take it. So you have to be prepared again to know that the and then you always get surprises, the one you didn't expect to fall apart on you did, so it's how do you handle that.

P45Ges: Even though our organization says that this is what happens, that you do a performance plan, and so you have your performance reviews, in many, many cases it doesn't happen. Unless you, sometimes, as the employee, pursue that and push your boss to do it for you. I've been pretty fortunate throughout my career and had I've pushed it. I'm a pushy person. Assertive I like to call it. But that is true, but I think that it really is important for people to be able to have that because it does give you, I wouldn't call it a stairway, but the avenue that you're trying to travel. It helps give you that perspective that you know, am I on the right road or have I branched off here and am not aware of it. And so I think the feedback that we do need to give and then for our managers is that we do an injustice to ourselves as an organization if we're not doing that for our folks for all of us because are we on the right path, are we going where we're supposed to go as an organization.

The product leads in NAVYLAB are responsible for delivering a product and are required to conduct formal reviews of the product. These reviews are called milestones, another example of the journey metaphor. The milestone reviews set a direction and pace for the product, and act as a guide for the product lead and the team. The milestone reviews also

provide management with the location of the product, where the product is along the journey. At the review, the product leads map out a path forward. Below are excerpts from the product lead conversation about milestone reviews.

P15Gf: Milestone reviews are good for kind of setting a direction and pace, and an area to focus on. But as far as efficiency goes, the hallway talks are obviously more informative.

P15Gf: And you tell them where you are in the program, what the issues are and so forth.

P19Gf: So the milestone reviews end up being a chance for them to get together and talk, and figure out a path forward, or where there's more commonality between what they're doing than they anticipated.

Employees, in this case those performing either support functions or technical functions, used the *feedback as a guide* conceptualization when talking about tasks. Completion of a task is a destination or goal. They noted that they appreciate progress indicators, being shown paths that require the least amount of effort, and hearing guidance that keeps them moving or indicates they need to change direction. Even direct, perhaps negative feedback can be delivered in a way that makes people continue to enjoy the journey.

P5Gc: I kind of agree with P10Gc. That you know, especially, I find that I value feedback, especially if I am trying to work on something or I'm stuck or I'm doing it a really poor way that it could be done a lot easier with a lot less effort. You know, I value people coming up and giving me feedback and saying, "Hey why don't you try this way or have you thought about going about it that way?"

...

P60Gd: You know. There was no bottom line as far as how far do I have to go so I'm in the middle and I can't get out of it. So I keep going, it's like how much further do I go?

P2Gd: Yeah, it's a lot better when they tell you your progress.

P60Gd: It would really be nice to know where I'm going.

...

P64Gc: There is that old adage about put in, fill in the blank, is the person who can tell you to go to hell and make you look forward to the trip.

For mid-career employees that have worked in occupations outside of civil service, the world of civil service is new to them, yet somewhat familiar. They have fellow travelers that help them find their way. These fellow travelers can be co-workers or bosses. They understand that the type of guidance received depends on the independence of the traveler. More independent and achievement oriented travelers can be provided with a sense of direction and let loose. Other travelers may need to be led by the hand to reach the destination.

P55Gb: I think getting to P56Gb, as far as feedback goes, I kind of feel like I'm, and P56Gb too, I'm sure, P50Gb, we've been in the contractor world, and things are a lot different, but again, they're the same. But I think as a contractor, I got a lot of feedback because you know we had to fill out what we are doing every month and what kind of progress we made on our task and that type of thing.

And I have seen that progress into the civil service world within my little group at the [group name removed] because I feel like my boss as well as my co-workers give me the feedback that I need, for the most part, you know. If I have just really screwed up something, went on the complete wrong path, they'll just, somebody would speak up and say, P55Gb, you didn't go the right way.

....

P55Gb: You know, if you are the type of person that has to be guided every step of the way, I think your feedback is going to be a little different and I think your supervisors are going to treat you differently from your feedback because they're having to prod you a little bit maybe.

Feedback as a guide is a relatively neutral conceptualization of feedback. It does not imply a goodness or badness. Some guides are helpful and knowledgeable and some guides are not. This metaphor assumes or needs goals and destinations clearly defined. A guide can only be helpful if the journey has a purpose and direction. There is an assumption that some paths are better than others are and perhaps only one correct path in some situations. Career

paths are an example of a phrase that fits with this metaphor. All role groups had evidence of this metaphor so implications are that it is a metaphor in use throughout the organization.

Feedback as a Threat

Feedback is conceptualized as a threat within the organization and within this metaphor, feedback is primarily negative and harmful. Feedback content and the process of feedback can be an attack, a weapon, a dangerous substance, and a way to cause damage. Because feedback is a threat, it is associated with risk, fear, and anxiety. Using such a weapon may result in backfire and repercussions. One must be prepared for such attacks and plan in advance for them. Here a supervisor talks about soliciting feedback.

P40Ges: Tread lightly, but you still need that feedback though. And I tell people that if you ask people for feedback, be ready to accept whatever comes back at you. You can't always take it personally because you're not gonna always hear what you want to hear and it may not be the positive. So if you get something that's unkind to you, don't take it personally. You asked for it. So take it and use it as something to grow on. And then if it's something that you felt like it was a personal attack, then maybe you'd want to just sit there and evaluate it first before you talk to that person. Because you don't want to create something or you don't want to further damage the relationship.

This supervisor tells a story of how the feedback process is dangerous and causes violent reactions, in this case an employee metaphorically “unloading” and “coming at him.”

P22Ge: Anybody ever had somebody unload on you during a performance review, [laughter]--you know gently or not? I did performance reviews for the very first time a while back and I've got a senior guy, very senior guy and ... so he got what I thought was reasonable and during the review he kind of unloaded and he's like, “Well you obviously don't know anything about what I'm doing and you need to work harder at understanding my work” and all this kind of stuff. And I was kind of like, “Whoa.” And you know I just kind of sat back and took it all in but I'm still kind of scratching my head. I didn't really respond a whole lot but now that I look at it, it's like but if I took your suggestion I wouldn't have time for any of the rest of the stuff I'm supposed to do. That's why you're a [highly paid employee] so I don't have to do that level of supervision with you. I'm I'm still kind of struggling with uh, how to deal with that this coming year. Cause I know, it's probably going to come at me again.

Some participants were very graphic in their use of weapon and threat metaphors for feedback. The first excerpt is an example of how you should not give feedback to someone who lacks presentation skills. The second excerpt is an example of feedback an employee would like to provide about the organization.

P58Gd: And you shouldn't hit people on the head with a 2x4 to go up and make presentations when it just freaks them out. So that's, I think, a distinction.

...

P17Gf: From a organizational standpoint, and I'll beat the hell out of the competency for this, is in the last four years, there's been two department level meetings, zero division level meetings, and not a single branch meeting for communication or feedback of what the organization's doing.

....

P17Gf: And then if they ask for follow up, give me specifics, and then I'd unload, with the same kind of thing.

Use of the weapon (feedback) may be justified if someone is doing something terrible, especially if he or she is are causing harm to someone or something.

P10Gc: I think, there is different ways of looking at the feedback. It depends. It's situational. Uh, in what it is, why they are giving you feedback, if it is something that you expect, but if it's not something you expect, I think a lot of times that's rather presumptuous of the person to give you feedback unless you are doing something hideously terrible, I don't think it is appropriate.

Attacks not only occur on employees but also on products or presentations that are subject to reviews called "murder boards" in NAVYLAB. Here technical supervisors discuss the murder board process.

P22Ge: Get several of us together and start going through the message that we wanted to put out. And murder boards like that are pretty helpful really to kind of get down, almost probing the psychology of, why are we doing this and what's that message you want to put out and all those types of things.

...

P24Ge: My own experience with murder boards, I mean we've had them over the years but for a year I was a contractor and on the contractor side they really murder board proposals and the words on the paper they're analyzing.

...

P29Ge: From my perspective, the technical feedback we give to one another is significantly easier to provide and to receive than personal ones--where somebody gives me a presentation to red line or whatever or a proposal to red line, I have no qualms about getting out the red pen and butchering it up.

When feedback is a threat or attack, attackers approach the victims or enemies such that they do not scare them or allow them to escape. Sometimes shields, like anonymous buffers or third parties, protect the feedback provider from identification and becoming subject to a counter attack.

P21Gg: No, that's not how I would expect somebody to approach me.

P36Gg: Somebody wants something from you P42Gg.

P21Gg: That's not how I would expect somebody to approach me if they had positive feedback. What I would expect was "Hey, you know, you did a great job. This is really working well." But when somebody says "I've got some feedback for you," it's uh-oh, ok.

P38Gg: That's like close the door.

...

P56Gb: I didn't know him that well and as certain things I had to make sure that I approached him a certain way, if there was an issue or a certain problem because I wasn't sure on how he would respond. You know? So, the way you approach him I think that's why, at least the system sometimes puts anonymous buffers in there. Where they will say, you know, go to this web page and tell me about your supervisor or whatever don't sign your name on this, only this is optional type thing.

Approaching someone with a raised weapon (in this example the weapon is exposed by using the word feedback) evokes defensives and heightens awareness of what is about to happen. With feedback conceptualized as a threat, a feedback recipient questions the motive of the potential attacker. If the recipient does not know the person or trust the person providing feedback then defensives rise even further.

Facilitator: Say more about that. What is it about the word? [feedback]

P58Gd: it puts up peoples' defensive mechanisms.

P60Gd: It does; it puts you on the defensive.

P59Gd: It does.

...

P60Gd: Because I think first of all it wasn't solicited, I didn't ask you for it. So you're almost, you know, throwing it at me without me being ready for it. And then secondly, to say the word feedback, it does have a negative connotation to it, you know? So it puts you on the defensive. It's like I don't know if I'm gonna receive this for you or not, because what are your motives? You know, you're telling me this but are you telling me this to be honest with me or are you telling me this because you're pissed off at something and you're trying to ruin my day too.

If an employee conceptualizes feedback as a threat and the supervisor has not established a trusting relationship with the employee, then a supervisor providing feedback is similar to a stranger approaching with a weapon raised. Feedback from a supervisor that the employee does not yet know and trust is suspect within this metaphor.

There are also risks associated with delivering threats or using weapons. Participants in all the roles represented in this study were aware of the risk. Threatening (providing feedback to) a supervisor or the top manager may result in retribution or punishment. With feedback as a threat, potential attackers (feedback providers) will avoid issuing the threat when the attacker knows he or she could lose something because of the attack. Those who see themselves as being attacked can ward off the weapon, deflect it and feel good about having survived.

P42Gg: I look at the feedback that we're getting, because there was a lot of pressure for our NAVYLAB [dept head] to say we're working it--

P36Gg: Suck it up, yeah.

P42Gg: ... and she didn't. So she took a risk. Admiral B and Mr. SES took a risk, and Admiral A took a risk by going to ASN.

...

P60Gd: I think there's always a risk involved too because it's real easy to share positive feedback, but the negative feedback, let's say dealing with a person's time and attendance or that kind of thing, if they came to you and asked you for feedback, I would be more apt to share the positive and maybe a little reluctant to share some of the negative because there's a risk.

...

P5Gc: I think I would be a little bit taken back [if a supervisor asks for feedback] because it's not really the culture here. I did an internship before I came here and the company had a 360 degree feedback program so you got to rate your supervisor. And everyone rated their supervisor and obviously you got rated by your supervisor and that was just what people expected as part of the culture and they all accepted it. And it was normal and a big deal, but I think if my supervisor came to me here, I would kind of wonder what was going on or what their ulterior motive was. And why they wanted it and how is this going to affect me and I would probably, I would try to be honest, but I have a feeling I would sort of slant things or sugar coat things.

Facilitator: Because?

P5Gc: Um, just because I would be worried about any repercussions or what they are going to do with this information.

Since feedback is risky and potentially volatile, it should be handled with care and by people qualified and experienced enough to handle it. Conceptualizing feedback as a volatile substance or weapon explains why supervisors, qualified to handle it, should be the ones that provide feedback. Co-workers and subordinates, not qualified to handle the weapon, should be discouraged from providing feedback until they are properly qualified. In the first excerpt, employees discuss who should provide feedback. In the second excerpt, a supervisor tells a story of when feedback “blew up in his face.”

P60Gd: I've got a situation right now, and I don't want to get off track, but, um, where the office manager, she comes in between 8:30 and 9:00 and she leaves between 3:00 and 3:30. I don't think she's ever worked a 9-hour day since she's been there. But I'm not a supervisor and she hasn't asked me for any feedback. So it's like, what do I do? Do I just warn her that you know, you need to watch your time or do I mention it to her supervisor to say hey, have you noticed. So I've been kinda toying with what do you do in that situation? Do you even broach it? I'm sure he's noticed.

Why he hasn't said anything to her, I don't know. But then it's like you know, mind your own business.

P59Gd: I would think it would be up to the supervisor to identify that.

...

P34Ge: This conversation has got me back to when I was starting supervision late '90s and the pitfalls of negative or positive feedback. Um, a guy who really on one hand wanted to get better at what he was doing, had a limited skill set, and I was doing the trying to do the power of positive feedback thing and it just blew up in my face, didn't work at all. At the end of the day, I should have reverted to really, really blunt honesty a lot earlier than I should--than I did. He's got a new supervisor now. He's doing okay but there's a lot to be said for honesty as opposed, dialing honesty as opposed to supportiveness.

Taking the metaphor further by placing the feedback as a threat within a battle metaphor extends the conceptualization. The organization is the battlefield, anyone working in the organization is a potential target and a potential threat. Potential targets hope to remain unseen and may even point to others as better targets. Peace results from two strategies, diplomacy or conquest. Feedback can be positioned within each of these strategies. Participants mentioned needing to be diplomatic and tactful when delivering feedback, especially to those in power positions. Likewise, some of the supervisors mentioned resorting to becoming the conqueror, Attila the Hun, or becoming more primal like a Neanderthal to deliver feedback. Since the organization is the battlefield, if the desire is to deliver non-threatening feedback or have a peacekeeping conversation, the diplomat may choose a neutral venue, like a restaurant or bar.

P22Ge: Admiral D one time said something that I've always done but he finally put kind of a stamp on it that I remember. He always says, "Speak truth to power." That being said you still got to tread a little bit lightly or at least tactfully with regard to it just because some people just don't take feedback or actually I guess the term actually would be probably criticism very well so if the feedback involves criticism one has to be very diplomatic.

...

P22Ge: We're all told to put things in as positive light as possible for people to accept but there's this kind of pitfall where you're trying to correct someone's behavior--you're trying to do it in a positive way and then they take that as an indication that you think they're doing okay, and--it almost has to be so customized to the individual. You really have to know the person and I think when it comes to supervision that's the tough thing is staying in the job long enough with the same people long enough to really understand their--their quirks and things like that. There's this one guy that he didn't work in my branch but I also have a project that I manage and he worked on that. And you know everything we did this year that burned a ton of money, put us behind schedule or required a ton of rework and everything else was a direct result of this guy--continuing to take on responsibilities that we neither wanted to take on nor that he had the talent to execute. And so it was just a constant bail out process that just kept running us farther and farther behind yet--every time I've tried to--give him some nice form of that thing from Top Gun where he says "You're writing checks your butt can't cash" type of thing--it's met with some kind of laughter and I don't know if it's nervous laughter or if he just doesn't understand what I'm trying to tell him, but even as I get more forceful he's not getting it. And I'm not to the point yet where I revert back to Neanderthal management and just start yelling in his face but I'm kind of wondering, it's like well if I did that what would I get out of it? Maybe I'd get something out of it.

...

P58Gd: Yeah, it would have to be a non-feedback connotation and might give them some other recommendation if it was informal. I would take it out of the work environment and just--do it at Applebee's or something.

The threat metaphor of feedback is a rather negative conceptualization of feedback.

Participants frequently use this metaphor in their conversations. Discussion group e, comprised of all men, contains the most evidence of this metaphor. These participants were supervisors of technical functions within the organization. However, all group discussions have some evidence of the metaphor. The newly hired employees (group a) in their first professional job contained the least evidence of this conceptualization. However, they commented on how the work in the organization is potentially dangerous. They experienced work assignments that tested the capabilities of rocket motors, bombs, and other explosive weapons. They articulated the need for physical safety and emphasized the need for feedback when learning this type of work to avoid a work-related accident or injury. This potentially

indicates the situated symbolic nature of this particular metaphor (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004). Since the organization is a military research and development facility, knowledge of battlefields, combat, and enemy threats are woven into the work performed. Feedback is situated within this environment and the symbolism of a threat may be partially constructed due the organization's context. The feedback as a threat metaphor may dominate due to the organization's context. The military context also creates a discourse that influences the conceptualization of feedback. I distinguished the military references in the conversation as a discourse rather than a metaphorical conceptualization and explained the discourse as part of the organization context at the beginning of this chapter. The military references were not in the same genre as the metaphors. In general, with some exceptions, when participants referenced military figures of speech, there were not using the figures of speech as metaphors, but instead explained something that *is* rather than something that *is like* something else. For example, when using the term warfighter, the participants meant an actual marine or sailor deployed in combat, it was not a figure of speech to explain something *like a warfighter*.

Feedback as a Gift

Feedback is conceptualized as a gift and as gift giving process within the organization. Gifts are given and received, offered and accepted, exchanged, and at times rejected. Feedback conceptualized as a gift is more often positive feedback but participants commented being grateful for getting feedback of any kind, positive or otherwise. Anyone can give or receive a gift, although some people may feel more obligated to provide gifts for special occasions. People feel it is inappropriate to not appreciate the gesture of gift giving. Here are some excerpts from NAVYLAB that describe receiving the gift of feedback.

Facilitator: So for the rest of you, how does that work if a coworker wants to give you feedback? How would you react?

P45Ges: I would take it.

P43Ges: I appreciate it.

P45Ges: I mean yeah, if somebody's got constructive feedback for you, yeah, I can't imagine not taking it.

...

P50Gb: I always like the feedback. I mean, you ought to be grateful that you are getting it.

People give gifts to establish a connection, develop a bond, mend a wrong, and appreciate an effort. People differentiate between gifts that have deep meaning and gifts that are superficial tokens of appreciation. The better someone knows someone, the more personal the gift becomes. Discussion group es, supervisors of support functions, and all women provide the most vivid and literal conceptualization of feedback as a gift. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

P40Ges: What does positive feedback look like? It's not teammate appreciation. [laughter] Because people really don't like that because it's all phony. It's something that's staged once a year. And when the people in my Branch, they just, because we see each other almost every day and ones I see them every week. But when teammate appreciation comes around, I don't go put little things on their desk. But when their birthdays come up or something comes up, then positive feedback is--today I got a report from one of the people in my Branch that I asked for last week and he was late. But instead of focusing on him being late, I looked at the way he laid out his accomplishments and wrote him back and said, "how awesome. This is your first report for me--you did a fantastic job." And he wrote back and said I really do appreciate the feedback. Here we are talking about feedback--you know, I really appreciate that. So just a kind word, and it doesn't have to be very much. I go to the Dollar Tree a lot and I pick up little stuff and I go and say, "Well guess what, this is your thing today." And it doesn't matter who it is, but positive feedback happens all the time. It's not something that we have to have a special occasion to celebrate. Because the employees pick up on that and they know that--that you're not for real.

P45Ges: Yeah. You're absolutely right and--I get excited about it. And I don't mean to dominate the conversation. I get excited about things like that because I try to do

that in our office and it's like if I know that we've had a particularly stressful kind of week, you know, more so maybe than the others, I'll maybe stop at the store and I'll pick up a little bouquet of flowers and I'll put one on Jody's desk and one on Carrie's desk. Jody, she brought in a little package of cookies yesterday--even though everybody's trying to become smaller people and we're trying not to eat, it's like she said, "Oh, I just saw these and I just thought we need that." I'm like, great, you know? So we all had a cookie. We didn't worry about the calories, we didn't talk about it, we just great--we had a cookie, we shared our cookies. And I try to do that for them because I think that is so important to let people know how much you really do appreciate what they do. And Jody's always telling me, she goes, "P45Ges, you don't get as much of the feedback, you give us stuff."

Gifts are given by and to people for a reason. People expect to receive gifts at special times and from special people. Gifts from special people hold true meaning and value, typically more meaning than those handed out by strangers. When feedback is conceptualized as a gift, people prefer the source of the feedback to be someone they know or who knows them and expect the feedback to be more personal. Second hand feedback much like a second hand gift is often not as valued and appreciated.

P40Ges: It depends on where you are in the organization. Because for me, who are my coworkers? The people that I'm co-located with I consider as my coworkers. If you call, if you consider other Branch heads as my peers here, we're not even co-located. So a coworker for me could be John Doe, right next door to me; JR., we're in the same building. So if they came to me and offered feedback, I would be more receptive to their feedback than I would be, say, from Cathy or Dylan, because they don't sit with me and they don't see my day-to-day. So they're familiar with what you're supposed to be doing, but these people here know what I'm doing. So the feedback that I get from JR. or John would be more valuable to me than it would be from Cathy or Dylan.

...

P45Ges: I think, and too--I agree with P40Ges, it's really important--the feedback that I receive from the people that are working directly with me and that I interact with and associate with has true value and meaning to it, versus my supervisor. She really--she knows I run the [name removed] office, she knows I put together agendas and I do this sort of thing, but she has never sat in my office, she doesn't really have a clue what goes into the day-to-day process that we put into the work that we do out of my office. And so to get feedback from her, even when I have my performance review, I don't really get feedback on my--oh, you're doing a great job, you're doing a great job. That's because that's what she gets from, fortunately, all the managers that

she goes out--because I always give her the list--she goes out and queries all the managers, I mean those are the people that I work for and with. And fortunately, you know, I get great reviews from these folks.

Gift giving is associated with appropriateness. Some gifts are more appropriate than others. It is more appropriate to accept gifts from some people than from others. People who offer a gift may be viewed as presumptuous to have even made the offer. In other cases, the giver may not know what type of gift to give, or you may give a gift that he or she wants and makes the assumption the receiver would like the same thing. Other people might ask a person what he or she wants before they select an appropriate gift.

P10Gc: Yeah, it happens. I think the thing a person has to be careful is whether or not you come across as just being presumptuous and arrogant in bringing this up to the other person. That's my only concern.

...

P65Gc: It's like okay, I didn't ask for any feedback, did I? Why are you giving me feedback.

...

P24Ge: My biggest problem with feedback is knowing what feedback to give out. You know--I'll know that something is not right but I won't know what's not right.

...

P24Ge: I have the same thing where--where I try to treat people how I want to be treated and then I will receive feedback and I'll go sulk and you know--and everything. And then about 2 days later I realize, no that was the right feedback and so then I start giving feedback in that same way with the realization that it's going to take a couple of days of sulking and everything and then they're going to come back around.

...

P6Ga: I think a lot of times if it's a coworker coming to you for feedback on something--I think your response really--there are some things that maybe you shouldn't give them feedback on and you should say, "Well, maybe you should go--you know, this person might be a better person to ask about it"--just depending on what the situation is. But, yeah, a lot of times saying, "Well, what do you think? How do you think you're doing?" is a good way to see what they're really looking for because sometimes they'll say one thing and they don't necessarily [want that].

The timing of gift giving (feedback) is also important. Gifts are expected at certain times, and if they arrive too late people can think less of the gift giver and of the actual gift.

This excerpt contains story of delayed gift giving (feedback) in the organization.

P45Ges: And you know, to me, an example that just got me today. We got asked, that the three of us in my office, they want to set up an appointment for us to come over--and I'll share this in here because it goes no further--that Mr. Smith, he wants to give us a letter of appreciation before he goes out the door. What do you think that means to me? Mail it to me, Mr. Smith You know? I've got work to do. You haven't bothered in all the years that I've been working under you, you haven't taken the time or effort to come over and even really--I think he's been in our office maybe twice in all the years that I've been there--so am I supposed to feel really, like all of a sudden like whoa, I'm getting a letter of appreciation from Mr. Smith. It's like just mail it to me. And you know, this is probably these kinds of things roll through my mind. This will, I will keep mulling this over, I will think about this and think about this, and I will make a decision on whether I will say something to my management that here is an example folks, of what we do to our people. Now why is it okay? Is it to make Mr. Smith feel good, because you know, he hasn't done it before so as he's going out the door he's gonna give us all letters of appreciation? Whoopee-ding. Why bother? Don't do it for me. That, or mail it to me--you know whatever. And to me that's just another piece of what our organization does in so many things. I mean I even had to go and ask my organization, are you still giving out the 30-year pins? I haven't seen mine yet and I've got 31 in now, so I thought maybe I'd just ask. You know? [laughter]

P43Ges: Or you get two. You've already got one.

P45Ges: Oh, we've got a couple of 15's left over from another presentation – take those babies. [laughter]

P48Ges: P43Ges kept sending my certificate back because my name was halfway on the line.

P43Ges: They couldn't print her name on the line right.

P45Ges: Well, they spelled mine wrong when they gave me mine.

P43Ges: Just don't even give it to her.

Gifts are valued less when the receiver assumes that the giver was told to provide a gift. The act of gift-giving is less sincere when the receiver feels the process is delayed, it may even seem like a hand-me-down.

P65Gc: Many times I have seen the positive feedback coming down from a star, a general or admiral up above and it just flows down. You know, it didn't originate with your supervisor or the one above him or the one above him, it just came all the way down. They just passed it down. It's like they can't give a positive feedback without being told to, from someone above them.

P5Gc: And then usually by the time you get that letter or whatever it's like months and months after you did whatever.

When gift giving is perceived to be sincere and genuine, people feel appreciated, valued, and respected. They remember the gifts for a long time to come. They place valued gifts in plain sight to remind them of the moment as well as the meaning behind the gift.

People decorate offices and homes with gifts.

P43Ges: I don't want to dominate the conversation, so if I'm talking too much, shut me up. But I had one example that popped into my head which is why I thought of that is the other day my boss--we were just in conversation and he goes I just wanted to tell you I'm so glad I hired you for this job because you're the right person for this job. And that meant more to me, actually, in terms of--it just made me feel so appreciated and valued, and I've never had a supervisor just pick up the phone say that to me my whole entire career--in 25 years. I've had some who've made me feel not, but um, to me, was just wow--they're glad I'm here and they're glad they hired me to do this job. You know, that to me felt like really better than a certificate, better than a coffee cup, than a light stick, a lunch pail or whatever.

...

P26Ges: Any day you can use a pat on the back and I know how much I appreciated them when my former boss gave them to me. Before I was a supervisor, I trained some other people and there would be a stack of books on my desk--would you check these; I'd do a QA on their work. And just giving back the books--the sticky note would have a sticker on it and the word perfect or something and I still see that note on her desk and it's all dog-eared and dirty and coffee stains on it. And I see it and I go--I think that made a difference to her. She really appreciated that. So it just reminds me--I don't necessarily do sticky notes and stickers so much, but when someone sends me an email and says I got a new person to volunteer to be a storyteller, then I just write back EXCELLENT in all caps and you know, I'm so

pleased. And you know even if I'm not right there with them, it's still a pat on the back. I think those are more important and more personal than, um, teammate appreciation days.

In gift exchanges, people often look for equity in the gifts. They may set spending limits so that everyone obtains a gift of equal value. If a person receives a gift and another person expects to receive one but does not, feelings are hurt because people feel excluded. People may also accuse others of brown nosing to get a better gift.

P19Gf: My sense is that rewards, or awards, are difficult in this environment. You're always hurting some people's feelings. Somebody's always feeling like they should have been a part of it and was left out. Or it's not what that individual wants to receive, or it's not interpreted in the way intended.

...

P41Gf: Awarding people and rewarding people's tricky, because fair doesn't mean equal. That's the problem. Fair doesn't mean equal.

...

P64Gc: Just one final thing. The, because the admiral doesn't know a lot about what's going on, it's been my experience that sometimes the admiral gives that recognition to people that the coworkers go why did that person get anything? Yeah and in that case, it can actually be a negative thing because it's seen as, you know, that person is obviously a good brownnoser so they get the what, they get the bennies for being that.

Cultures are created through gift giving. The process of gift giving creates enthusiasm, anticipation, and joy. People look forward to the next exchange and think of what they might give and what they might receive.

P5Gc: But I mean, they could give more positive feedback too and I mean, it seems like we all assume when they say feedback it's a negative thing. It's the culture, maybe if they worked on more positive feedback then people would appreciate it more and they wouldn't dread feedback.

P64Gc: And actually, working in AIPT right now, Jean Harlow, is the IPT lead and she's always giving positive feedback and you are absolutely right, the culture in that organization is so different than almost anywhere else I have ever worked in the 99% of it, I think, is because she is like that. She is just always on a personal level, on a group level, on a team level, she's just always giving positive feedback.

...

P45Ges: But it's just--I feel like it sort of brings us closer as a group, although three of us. But that's our group. And it's for me, I get as much pleasure out of doing it for them as--they don't have to come and set something on my desk, we just have the joy of doing it--it's fun.

Feedback as a gift is a positive conceptualization of feedback. Through this metaphoric lens appreciation, rewards, recognition, and everyday exchanges are the highlighted feedback episodes. Givers and receivers exist at all levels in the organization. This metaphor brings the person-to-person relationships and connections to the forefront. Feedback as a gift is situated with a larger relational or social metaphor of support and connection. Within this metaphor people experience the positive aspects of feedback more than the negative aspects. The group discussion comprised of all women contained the most evidence of this metaphor. Most of the stories related to feedback as a gift, the examples of personal appreciative feedback, had women as the primary actors. Looking at the conversations as a complete set, this metaphor appears less frequently than the feedback as a threat.

Feedback as a Tool

Feedback is conceptualized as a tool and built-in mechanism in the organization. The organization is a machine with employees as parts. Employees must find a fit in the organization to be able to function at optimum performance. The machine as well as each part has performance parameters. Feedback is used to evaluate the machine's and the individual part's performance. The built-in mechanisms function as diagnostic tools that identify which parameters are within specifications and which are outside of the specification and need to be corrected.

P56Gb: It seems like you got to have, it has a lot of different things to offer, but the people that excel in this have sort of a skill set. You know, people that kind of they take care of business. If you're that kind of person that takes care of business, can work on your own, self-motivated and if your interest is to climb this corporate ladder or climb the ladder, the opportunity is there. If you are the type of person that is not that type of person, you could probably still find a fit, but it seems like it's more geared toward that.

...

P29Ge: Okay. I guess from my perspective when I hear talk about feedback or think about feedback my initial reaction is we're talking performance. How is a person doing? What can they improve in? What are they doing well? ... I would describe the feedback scenario that's built into the [personnel performance system] and how I have witnessed over the years that that particular system, although it's not perfect, is significantly better in providing feedback to the employees than the standard GS system that there is built-in mechanisms in there that when used appropriately does provide a significant amount of feedback to the to the employee. I guess that's where I would start the conversation.

...

P36Gg: Okay, so what I heard you say was what would I tell them about how we take in information and give it back, and I'll use part of P38Gg's answer in that it's a pretty small community in the work environment, and in the living environment. We all over time have a lot of connections, and so formal feedback, just like any business we have mechanisms for that, but there are a lot more informal feedback mechanisms, because you know people, and you have some networks that you can use to say "Hey, this is what I thought about that." That kind of goes around. But we also have formal feedback mechanisms in the organization: your supervisory chain, groups sessions generally where you just have working sessions about "What did you think? What did you think?" That kind of stuff.

Within NAVYLAB, the performance parameters for the employees are established in the annual performance planning and review cycle that is part of the personnel performance review system that participants mention in their discussions.

With the diagnostic data now available, the next step is to identify possible corrective actions to optimize the performance. Feedback is a constructive tool to fix the broken parts. This may involve getting your hands on the broken part to fix it. Any employee can be a

mechanic and provide feedback as a tool in the form of advice to fix a problem. However, one participant suspects that men may play the mechanic role more so than women may.

P28Ge: Well I mean--like corrective actions. I mean constructive feedback--if there is things that aren't going right I mean you don't criticize. You just give options and, you know, you lay down the options and you and your supervisor go through those options one by one and see how to--resolve the issues you're talking about--for the benefit of the organization and--

...

P59Gd: It's become an issue that's bothering somebody and you need to get your hands around it and solve it and then get on.

...

P56Gb: I was talking to somebody about it and they, where they didn't seem like the person in charge knew what they were doing so you don't, you know, so they've come to you and say, how can I get this person to notice what I'm doing? And so, you kind of have to give them that kind of feedback, well, try this. You know, I just kind of go with kind of a guy approach where, you know, just fix it you know, don't want to talk, [laughter] here's the fix. Go right to the fix, you know, here's the fix. You do this. This is the answer. You know maybe, offer [advice] it's a guy/girl thing sometimes. I've had conversations with people, guys and girls and it's like we just want to fix the problem. Here's the fix right here. You know, I'm just offer up one fix, maybe two fixes and say, [laughter] this is it. This is how you fix it. You know, and it might be wrong, way off base, maybe I don't even answer your question, I don't know, but that's kind of how I approach it.

The tool works easiest when it is applied incrementally, tweaking the part so that performance can be re-checked. The tool is only useful when applied at the correct point and using the correct technique.

P19Gf: I think it needs to be actionable. I think it works better if it's kind of like what P15Gf was saying, where it's a tweak. You're not asking for a drastic change: you're talking about incremental, small kind of changes. That's always much easier.

...

P21Gg: The feedback is only as useful as the credibility that goes with where it comes from, and how it's used. It's just like in a technical system. Maybe you don't pick the right feedback point. The system doesn't work well. If you pick the right feedback point, it will optimize and run better than you could have ever expected.

This now creates a performance feedback loop that runs through the parts of the system. In this case the loop is established between the supervisor and employee. The loop may span too much distance and have too many delays to make the diagnostic useful.

P56Gb: Yeah, I think it is a good idea as far as the three things, your kind of, your question, think feel and do. I think it's a good idea to get some feedback from your supervisor for sure, otherwise, you don't know how you are doing. You know, and the feeling basically part of it would be, you know, if it is negative or positive, you know how I would feel about it if it is negative, I would you know, try to correct the action. And if it's, if I'm capable or if it's positive, I would thank that you know that person for providing me with that. And actually the do part of it is basically try to fix the wrong and just keep working hard to make the right better is I think how I would approach feedback from my supervisor, you know. Uh, the only thing that is kind of weird, like we all work in this area is that you know, you might work for an IPT or project but then your supervisor is somebody else sits a mile and a half away is giving you a performance review and he's giving you a review based on what somebody else says.

...

P64Gc: One of the things that I've tried to just deal with over the course of my time here is that when I first started here, my immediate supervisor was also my technical lead. It made life a lot easier because feedback was right there. Talk about feedback in the loop, I mean, he was right there. And he knew what I was doing and I knew what was supposed to be done and it was a lot easier then before the matrix management came along and now my branch head is in a building, I don't know, 3 miles away from where I work and he doesn't know what I do.

In other cases, the feedback loop is created with customers. The continuous diagnostic cycle functions to improve the products created by the machine.

P24Ge: When I think of feedback I think of a couple of different things. Of course I immediately jump to performance feedback but I jump away from that really quick. I go to more customer feedback and feedback as far as war fighter feedback. Our ultimate customer is the war fighter and one thing that NAVYLAB has is a very strong legacy of doing war fighter feedback. Where, you work closely with someone in the fleet who needs something really bad and you come running home and you get a bunch of smart people together and you come up with this great idea and you go give it to them. And it's not right but it's way closer than anything they've ever had and then they give you feedback and say, "Well that's not what I meant. I meant this." And you run home and do that and you know, this really tight loop where the

customer is giving feedback and ideas are going back and forth and that to me is a real benefit, it's really good to be able to work to actually see your product being used by someone who it actually makes a difference with them.

Tools used inappropriately or destructively, like a wedge in a machine, can shut down machine operations, including the feedback mechanism itself. If the feedback mechanism shuts down, then workarounds are implemented.

P38Gg: If you want to shut down feedback--

P36Gg: Yeah.

P38Gg: --it's a good way to do it.

P42Gg: The other thing though, he would say "Get on board," but he never told us what to get on board with. It was not clear what he wanted us to get on board with, and I know with us, he just wasn't here very often. We worked around him.

If you use the tool based on old data rather than the most recent diagnostic you may damage the part or machine. The damage may take years to recover correct. If the tool is not used based on performance data or a tool is inadvertently dropped into a machine when it is opened up, this creates unsafe conditions and someone may get hurt.

P41Gf: My deputy and I, we always give each other feedback. Feedback's one of those it's a sensitive thing, because you can get years and years of trust, that trust relationship, and then you say something that kind of puts a little wedge in the trust factor. It could be hard. So it can sometimes take years to fix those--one wrong word out of your mouth, and you can screw up years and years of relationship building. So it's since you open yourself up for all sorts--all kinds of hurts, by giving feedback that's not based on some professional, measurable, something that you've agreed upon before. If it's just an off the cuff assessment of what they're doing at the time, the problem is, when you do that, a lot of it, you're bringing in personal feelings. You know--the whole world is coming to that decision, a lot of times, it's not based on what's happening then. You didn't get a good night's sleep. Your kids goofed up. You know. Your car died. You put the wrong color socks on. Whatever's going on that day. I had a blue and a black sock on this morning, so I had to go home and change, get on with work. But it's like, all the things you bring in from life come into what you may say. And it's--something that sparks a feedback point, and then you dump your--you know, dump whatever you feel that day on them, and it's not good.

Managers are, in general, the primary operators of the machine. They can start up or shut down the machine as well as start up or shut down the feedback mechanism of the machine. At times, other parts of the machine, or other operators, such as employees can or should be able to stop operations to correct a problem.

P29Ge: Exactly those are the two I was going with. [laughter] Somebody would have sent this up to the admiral, executive director, and said, "Time out guys. This is not working for us. This is the wrong system at the wrong time. It needs to be fixed." And everybody would have said, "You know what you're absolutely right. Put the brakes on and let's fix this." Now what's happened is, "Gee thank you for your opinion. Get back to work and make it work. We don't want to hear any more."

P24Ge: Yeah, stop complaining.

P29Ge: Yeah, stop complaining.

Machines and the parts of a machine benefit from periodic diagnostic check-ups. The diagnostic check-ups are part of the built-in feedback mechanism. These are called organizational surveys if the check-up is for the organization. They are called performance reviews if the check-up is for employees. Most diagnostics, regular or unscheduled, requires that the part, in this case the employee, be taken off-line. The check-ups happen in a supervisor's office rather than as part of the day-to-day operations. If for some reason the part cannot be taken off-line, because the production must continue, the check-up (feedback) may not occur.

P38Gg: Maybe it started about 24 years ago, and the [personnel performance system] really formalizes a lot of the feedback, and it says hey, you're going to meet with your employees four times a year. You're going to have a performance plan in place. You're going to this, you're going to that.

...

P52Gb: I think one of the first things you could share with them would be that we have a demo program that we are currently working under and it's a pay for performance system so there are built in checks that you are supposed to be getting feedback built in at different points throughout the years so it's designed you work well you are supposed to be getting paid for that performance, as opposed to the non-

performer. And when I was here previously it worked really well, it's been a while since I've been here and it could change by the time I get ready for another round of it, we'll be in a new program so there's still pay for performance.

...

P29Ge: If you're providing feedback looking for some, corrective action then usually a little privacy, a little bit of, quiet time where people aren't running around and they can stop and digest what you're having to say is probably appropriate.

P22Ge: Prime the pump a little bit.

...

P29Ge: I ran into that just this last week had an emergency. A person needed some supervisory feedback for a corrective action but I never had the opportunity to give it to him because there was an emergency and he was running 25 different directions and--by the time the emergency settled down it was too late.

Reviews can be conducted from all angles, in other words 360 degrees, to get a more comprehensive and accurate diagnostic and to identify possible defects or flaws in an employee. A similar diagnostic, called a peer review, occurs for products.

P43Ges: But I did one time have a – it was like a 360-degree feedback mechanism thing where you send it out to all your employees and then it's anonymous and all the employees come and then in this forum you get to see feedback about your leadership style. And I think people are way more honest in that than they'd ever be in a face-to-face environment. Even if you have good relationships with them, it's still kind of awkward. You know, and right now, we do that once-a-year thing or the once-a-quarter thing, depending on how that works for you. And still I don't think we train people to do it very effectively and I don't think we put in place tools to do it very effectively and I don't think it happens a lot up.

...

P29Ge: See I look forward to it. I actually solicit it. I try to go by every quarter and then do the 360-degree feedback and say, "How am I doing? What do I need to fix? What do I need to work on?" And--and what I find is a lot of times if I stop and I look at it from 30,000 feet it's like, wow they're right. They happened to put their finger on the button that I was missing because I was too close to it. And for me personally I enjoy it.

...

P64Gc: Yeah, I mean it's actually called a formal peer review. That's part of the name. It's designated to be a formal thing because it's part of the engineering process, it get signed, it get's dated. It gets put in the log, you know, all those things, that's what makes it formal.

P67Gc: How do you handle the defects found is specified.

P64Gc: Right, all those things.

P67Gc: How you verify the defects are corrected.

P10Gc: Yeah, everything is logged and documented and you have to go all the way through and fix the defects where as if you are going informally it's up to you what you want to do.

The machine metaphor and the mechanistic mode of thinking underpins the basic concept of organization (Morgan, 1997). Feedback is one of several tools and built-in mechanisms of the organization as a machine metaphor. The official systems of employee performance planning and review exist within this conceptualization of feedback. Supervisors, top managers, and those that have been supervisors in other organizations used this metaphor most frequently in the conversations. Because of their official supervisory role, supervisors have received the most training on how the organization should operate and how the official feedback processes work. Each discussion group included some use of the feedback as a tool metaphor. The concept of feedback in the literature evolved from knowledge-of-results, a performance based concept, with the actual term originating from the field of cybernetics. Cybernetics concepts are part of engineering curricula. Participants with an engineering degree may conceptualize feedback using this metaphor more frequently than participants without engineering degrees do. The conceptualization of feedback as a tool is an action-oriented conceptualization, one that highlights the use of negative feedback to identify gaps in performance such that action can be taken to close the gap. Feedback as a tool de-emphasizes the human behavior and social aspects of feedback.

Feedback as Nourishment or Nurturing

Ecological and biological metaphors create an image of the organization as ecosystem within which the employees (inhabitants) live, grow, and develop. Different groups within the organization are like habitats with unique environments. Inhabitants can move between groups. Feedback is conceptualized as nourishment or the process of nurturing within this metaphor. The type of feedback (nourishment or nurturing) varies between groups. The relationship between inhabitants is a food chain and professions within the organization are like different species.

P10Gc: Okay, I would discuss the work opportunities here how that it's different from a regular company in the sense that there is a lot of different areas and people can shift around throughout their career. I talk about the opportunities for growth, for further education and then also the lifestyle. Because, I think the lifestyle here is a big part of what it is like to work here and the climate.

...

P41Gf: I think XX does feedback different than other groups. I think probably since most people in XX are IPT leads, that you've already kind of senior in the organization, you've already proved yourself on what you can do. So I think there's less feedback from the top than there normally would be at a worker-manager relationship. Cause if you go to the [performance review boards], you see different groups get different feedbacks. I think the lower you get in the food chain, the more written down feedback there is, which can be bad, because I didn't do a performance appraisal on a person this past year. Because of my lack of feedback, they went to reconsideration and they got--got the rating and return, so bad on me. But since it's a cultural thing that nobody else in XX is doing--well, at least doing the performance plans and feedback stuff.

Feedback as nourishment helps employees grow and is vital for healthy development. The supervisors have the most amount of responsibility for proper nourishment. They are the primary caregivers and nurturers within the ecosystem. There are natural laws (regulations) that ensure employees receive proper care. Employees need feedback when it is available and they are hungry, supervisors should not stock up or only feed at certain times.

P52Gb: You know, some of the hardest feedback you will get will be the stuff that will help you to grow the best, but at the same time, there are some people that will never give you the chance to [grow].

...

P52Gb: I think supervisory feedback is great. I think it is owed to the employee actually. They're not going to know. The supervisor has a vision of what is supposed to be happening, they have tried to communicate it to you and as the employee you are doing what you think you are supposed to be doing so it is vital that you have that feedback, good, bad, or whatever.

...

P50g: But in between all of that the whole management is structured to make sure that you get that, either by regulations or by self imposed programs that we need to take care of, this person because they are an investment, unlike a company who has a lot of rotation. We are not looking for a lot of rotation. Now, we do get rotation within programs, within entities, within your commodities. I mean, you move around. But theoretically, every time you move, you should be stronger as you move to the other program, experience from this one help the other guy just kind of keeps rolling and you grow as time goes on.

...

P60Gd: Because I appreciate you coming to me with feedback, even though it's unsolicited, if you're my supervisor, instead of waiting on my, the quarterly appraisal, to sit down and say okay I noticed that you were late. ... Don't stock up all that. If you've got something to day, I appreciate you coming in and saying it.

The next excerpts contain more literal figures of speech related to feedback as nourishment.

Feedback needs to be *digested* and can be *hard to swallow*. The fact that someone will take you *under their wing* is an example of feedback that nurtures and protects. In some cases, mentors (protectors) may not be as protective or nurturing as the employee needs.

P29Ge: If you're providing feedback looking for some corrective action then usually a little privacy, a little bit of, um--quiet time where people aren't running around and they can stop and digest what you're having to say is probably appropriate.

...

P24Ge: And maybe that's where if one of my colleagues or a peer came to me with specific feedback about me it--it's because it got really bad and that's probably why I'm so scared. If I just go out and say "What could I do better" that's like tiny feedback and I can deal with that. It's like, if--if I know my peers and if someone came to me and said, "P24Ge, I have some feedback for you," it's not feedback like this because if they have feedback like this they wouldn't even bother or they would just say, "Hey P24Ge" you know--whatever. But if they came like that it's feedback like this and that's hard to swallow.

...

P21Gg: Somebody is going to--there's going to be somebody to pull you aside to say "Don't do that way. Do it this way. Try this. Already been there, done that. Go a different direction." Somebody is always going to take you under their wing. Sometimes that's a good thing. Sometimes that's a bad thing. Some people view themselves as highly valuable mentors, and maybe they're not quite as valuable as they view themselves.

Younger inhabitants (new hires) require more care and feeding. Examples of this metaphor frequent the conversation of the new hires where this was their first job out of college. New hires were discouraged when they were left on their own, to fend for themselves. The species, called engineers and scientists, are even more likely to require additional support. New hires were aware of how many others were born (hired) at the same time they were. Some new hires experienced more or less nurturing depending on the group.

P7Ga: I would have to say, for somebody who is coming into this organization, that they'd have to be because that's a really good experience from what she's coming from--but you really have to be a self-starter because when I came here, I mean, my supervisor was somewhat helpful. I mean, he got me here. He was like, "Hey", and then you're on your own. I mean, you need to go and find your tours and nobody really describes how you do that. And I remember I was 5 weeks in and I still hadn't gotten a tour and it was difficult. It was really difficult and you really have to get out there and I almost think that in the first week or 2 weeks that you're here, they really should tell you how to do this process because I think, by and large, that a lot of the people that come here are engineers and scientists--and they have difficulty integrating with society to begin with--

...

P4Ga: Because I was in a bunch of--when I came here, there were five other people coming in with me and the next week there were twenty. And the year before, they'd hired 108 people and I came in a year where there was 130 people hired.

P6Ga: Oh, wow.

P4Ga: And so--and then, there was this lull for 3 years, and this year, we're bring back those same numbers, 120, 130. So--

P6Ga: Yeah, 119 this year.

...

P12Ga: Well, I'm in a different intern program. Our program does things a little differently. Well, it's very similar. You know, we have the four tours per year but they're actually very, I'd say--I guess they're very nurturing towards us. I guess maybe it's because we're such a small group. We're not like, you know, the [new engineers and scientists] What are there? Like 500 by now? So, I'm in the [business financial management] program and there's only 15 of us so they set up our tours for us and they're very proactive about it.

Supervisors are aware of the amount of effort required to care for so many young at one time. They worry about having all of them survive (not leave the organization). Supervisors are also aware of the need to be gentle and caring, to remember what it was like to be young and unaware and to be mindful of influencing the attitudes of the younger employees.

P41Gf: That's one of my concerns with feedback with hiring a bunch of new people, is having new people having mentors, either official mentors, or just mentors ad hoc, to be able to provide feedback if we hire a whole bunch of [new scientists and engineers], who's going to take care of them? It's like birthing 10 babies at once. How are you going to take care of all of them? And the thing is, if you don't give them feedback, if you don't take care of them, then they'll leave. So I think it's imperative for all of us to start thinking about these young kids we hired that we're all super busy, but you've got to take time for them. If not, they won't feel valued, and then they're gone, so.

P19Gf: Another thing we've done at the [group name removed] is, because of our growth, we had to hire like 18 people in the last 12 months. That meant we had to make an investment and choices on how we bring in new people. So everybody's assigned a buddy, and that's their first line of resource for answering questions, assistance, making them acclimated. We have a check in list that tries to give them the quick once over. And then there's usually somebody else, like a product leader ... who's also trying to look out for them.

...

P40Ges: We were just talking about that earlier, with a, when we look at [enterprise resource planning--ERP] and the people who grew up through the [business financial management group], we grew up as [business financial managers], we know what we don't know. But people who we are hiring as [interns] and we are putting them in there and they are using ERP, it's great because they don't have anything else to compare. They don't know that they don't know that they are wrong.

P40Ges: And I was telling the people in my branch. We've got to get over it. Because we are much older and we keep looking at what, comparing the new ERP to what we used to have, and because we have the knowledge to know that this line of accounting does not go with this line of accounting, but we have to somehow be gentle in teaching our young people because they don't know. So, that's what we are here for is to mentor them about the laws. But the system, they don't have a problem with that system because they don't have anything else to compare it with.

Engineers and scientists are a rare, unique, and valued species with the NAVYLAB ecosystem. As a rare breed, engineers and scientists require additional protection from the environment. The environment should remain safe and easy for them. Nourishment (feedback) should fit their nutritional needs so they can remain productive.

P58Gd: And the interpersonal thing, sometimes people just don't have those things in them--that's not in their DNA.

P59Gd: Social skills.

...

P59Gd: Exactly. Because you, you have this scientific professional careers here, and jobs here, so you're getting really unique people. And so you've got this really unique people and maybe there's--

P58Gd: Some of them are weird.

P59Gd: They really are.

P58Gd: They're down-right weird, yeah.

P59Gd: But the criteria that we're asking for for a certain type of job, here they come. So you've gotta deal with their personality. But, you know, the product that you're gonna get out of them--you'll do everything you can to get them to work and keep the environment nice and easy for them.

...

P64Gc: Well, in the beginning it was, my life was a lot easier because I didn't have so much administrivia and part of that was because my boss was right there and things like I have to do my own time now. I have to keep track of charge objects. I never did that in the beginning. ... in some respects, you know, it makes me more accountable for my time and things like that, but at the same time, take care of all those accountability administrative things takes away from my work. You know, I can't be doing software development if I'm fighting with the SAP system which has taken me a long time sometimes. So that aspect of it, I think it's a lot different. It puts so much more on the individual to do things that we didn't have to do before. Things that were just taken care of before. And on the one hand, like I said, it was a lot nicer then because I could just focus on doing my technical job and I didn't have to worry about all that administrative stuff.

Some types of feedback (nourishment) are not appropriate for this species. In particular, interpersonal feedback is not something they should get unless their interactions threaten others in the species. Engineers and scientists are aware that they are being groomed to fill important roles in the organization.

P10Gc: There's different types of feedback, some of it is appropriate, some of it isn't.

Facilitator: What kind would be appropriate, do you think?

P10Gc: Something that's, along that pertains to your work or where it is implied that you want feedback. I think it is also appropriate if you are doing something that is really disruptive to the group and you should probably know about that. But I think if it's more of an opinion type thing or a personality type thing, then it is not appropriate, so it's a real fine line because let's say someone doesn't bathe enough. I mean, this is a weird example. Even telling somebody, "Hey you stink. Take a shower." Uh, you know, how would you handle that?

...

P4Ga: Well, I'm—they--because you're getting groomed to be up in that position when you're in the [new employee development] program--and so they're going to give you workloads like that when you're really close to getting there. And they--and so they want to see if you can handle it.

Supervisors, branch heads in NAVYLAB, support and nurture employees differently. Not all supervisors are alike. Employees understand that the type of support they receive depends on the supervisor.

P4Ga: Your branch head, if he's a really good branch head, wants to take care of you--"Are you getting your promotions. Are you feeling like you're being successful?" I think that's been, like, a status quo of about every single branch head or program manager I've seen.

...

P10Gc: I think you made a good point. A lot of the experience a person has here working depends on who their branch head is. There are some branch heads that are very supportive and nurture their employees and there are other branch heads that are very difficult to talk to and that you really have to work hard to try to get them to know you.

Within this conceptualization of feedback, the age and maturity of the employees matters. Career civil servants are the wise elders in the organization. Younger employees recognize that they are not as knowledgeable as the elders, yet are eager to help when asked. They hesitate to offer feedback (nurture) others that are older.

P41Gf: Right. That's why we, as career civil servants, are the long-term truth sayers.

...

P4Ga: And everyone's senior above me is old enough to be my mom and dad so it's like, "Hi, mom. Hi, dad," you know.

P4Ga: It's interesting, but, at the same time, they have so much you can draw on too. I think that's a big advantage because you're like if you were to ask this approach, you know, they'd tell you this nice long story about how they would do it and stuff like that. I think that's sometimes pretty cool.

P6Ga: Yeah. That is really awesome. But sometimes they come to you going, "Hey, you're fresh, you're new. What do you think? This is how I usually do it is there another way?"

Older, more senior employees, reminisce about their growth and maturing process. They recognize they benefited throughout their lifespan from the support and nurturing they

obtained when they were new to the organization. The ability to provide feedback, nourish others, is also part of the growth process.

P45Ges: I think for me it was sort of the same as P48Ges was saying. It's a growth process, a maturing process. Because I think I was always pretty self-assured of myself but I just think when you're first coming into the workforce, when I first came on the base – from almost day one I had just supportive people that I worked with and for the most part, throughout my lifespan on the base--because I've worked in various areas – I've been very fortunate to do a lot of different things.

...

P40Ges: One of the things we talked about and I was thinking about and P45Ges brought it up is how are you able to approach somebody now when you weren't able to approach them maybe years ago. And it's a level of maturity because as you grow and I've grown in my job--as we grow then we develop the confidence that we need in order to say this isn't the right way to proceed to do something. And why--tell them why. And then if you're comfortable and you have that confidence in what you're saying--you know that you can back up what you're saying--then you can move forth and know that regardless of how they accept it or not, that you've done your part. So it's a growth process.

The work environment is like the habitat in ecology. The nature of the work influences the type of environment, which influences the type of nourishment possible. Some environments enable nourishment, others are more harsh and make it more difficult. Some groups easily adapt to the changes in the nature of the work. In some environments, resources are scarce and people are reluctant to share. Feedback is easier in environments that are safe and non-threatening.

P67Gc: I basically feel the same thing P64Gc did, but only think I would add is I have lots of comfort with local management. I find the working environment non-threatening and I would be comfortable giving fairly honest feedback.

...

P67Gc: Well, again, we have a group I'm in and the groups I have been in, they have a very nurturing environment and that wouldn't be any problem on either side. And the tendency in our group, I think, would be to try to get positive feedback. Positive criticism.

...

P10Gc: I also am a software, I'm in a good software group now, just you know, you are mentioning with your group and the inspections are done in a non-threatening way, you know.

...

P10Gc: But you know, I have worked in other more researchy kinds of environments I mean, I think software developing is different because it's a very team oriented, you know, constantly improving because the field itself is constantly changing.

...

P10Gc: Yeah, but and some of the research type departments where the people are kind of doing their own thing and interact a little bit, I don't find as much of a comfort or willingness to give feedback to each other and there is more of a sense of you know, this is all mine. I'm not gonna share anything with anybody because I am afraid they are going to take it away from me or something like that. So, I think it depends on the type of work you are doing and the type of group you are with. And the, uh, social comfort of the person that's, uh being asked.

...

P64Gc: In my own, comparing this job and my last job, um culture played a big part in the comfort level of providing feedback. The, uh, previous group, they basically never held inspections on anything because they were very much in to "this is mine, this is my software." And they really didn't want anybody else to look at it. So yeah, culture does play a big, big part.

Feedback as nourishment within the biological and ecological metaphor creates dependencies between roles in the organization. It places more responsibility with the supervisors to take care and nurture employees and likewise employees expect more care and feeding throughout their life in the organization. Age and experience influences the credibility of the feedback within this metaphor. The nature of the work as well as the nature of the environment or culture of the work group influences the feedback process. Within NAVYLAB, the engineers and scientists emerge as a privileged group within this

metaphor. Other groups exist to ensure this group thrives and produces. All role groups used this metaphor and conceptualized feedback as nourishment. However, the new hires and technical non-supervisors used this metaphor more frequently than other groups. The work world is a new environment for the majority of the new hires so use of this metaphor is congruent with their situation. The engineers and scientists in the technical non-supervisory group, experience care taking daily as the non-engineers and scientists they work with support them in their technical efforts.

Overlapping Conceptualizations

Within NAVYLAB, the participants used five primary metaphorical conceptualizations of feedback. The conceptualizations are not mutually exclusive, in that participants often used one or more in the same conversation. In the following excerpt, feedback is conceptualized as a tool and a threat. The threat conceptualization is situated within an *environment*--part of the biological or ecological metaphor, and the engineers are like a species within that environment.

P10Gc: I think it's really important how you give that feedback. If you are giving it from a point of view of your intent is to help the other person improve their skills or effectiveness, so in that sense it's a really good tool, but if it's a group where people are not very open and they are resentful it could be used as a method of attacking someone else. Instead of making the environment a better place, they could make it, they could use it as a way of making it an even more hostile place. So I think the environment and whose asking and what they're intent is and who they are asking it from is important. And some engineers, um, are not comfortable expressing feedback. You know, a lot of engineers can be reserved and not very, uh, open about talking about feelings in that regard. So, um, it might make some people really uncomfortable.

In the analysis and discussions chapters, I compare these metaphors to the metaphors contained in the academic literature on feedback and further explore the overlapping

purposes of the metaphors, the implications for each of these metaphorical conceptualizations.

Summary

These findings indicate that feedback is conceptualized in organizations from a variety of frames. The talk and text of the organization included discourses of feedback context, process, motivation, affect, and results. The most compelling finding from the interpretive frames of this study is the underlying complexity of feedback as conceptualized in organizations. The participants' perspectives as captured in the group discussions provided ample evidence that the conceptualization of feedback is not uniform across all employees. Participants conceptualize feedback within a complex set of contextual conditions. These conditions come together and are applied differently for each person within each feedback episode.

Alternative conceptualizations of feedback emerged in the generative metaphor findings of this study. The generative metaphor of feedback as a threat rarely appears on the literature on feedback, although it could provide additional insight into the failure rate of feedback interventions (Kluger & DeNisi, 1998). The women participants in the study frequently used feedback to appreciate and conceptualized feedback as gift. This also significantly differs from traditional conceptualizations of feedback in organizations. Feedback as nourishment brought out the dependencies created between supervisor and employees within the organization. The social constructionist perspective underpinning this study, in particular the metaphor analysis, enabled alternate conceptualizations for feedback to emerge.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I continue the analysis process through comparison of the interpretive frame findings from NAVYLAB to models of feedback in the literature. This analysis satisfies the coherence and plausibility warranting criteria as explained in chapter 3.

Comparison to Feedback Models in the Literature

One of the challenges of my analysis is to be able to compare and contrast my findings with the feedback conceptualizations present in the scholarly literature. How do the conceptualizations within NAVYLAB compare to those in the scholarly literature? What meaning do I make of the similarities and differences? Do the scholarly discourses of feedback “live” within the organization? To do that analysis, I needed to convert or translate the feedback theories from the traditional objectivist paradigm into a constructionist language-based paradigm. What I chose to do was look at the text used by the key theorists to conceptualize feedback and do a similar discourse analysis. The limit of this comparison is that there is no social interaction or synchronous conversation as part of the empirical data. Journal articles are constructed within a particular context, there are rules about what is academically appropriate phrasing, how to use scholarly voice, and so forth. For the purposes of my comparison, I am taking the writings to be the naturally occurring talk of the feedback theorists.

I am narrowing my analysis to selected writings that are most cited in other feedback studies and one recent publication of the power of feedback in educational settings. Since a significant amount of feedback research stems from these references, I am assuming the conceptualization of feedback from these authors flows into a majority of the feedback research informed by these models. Since conceptualizations shift over time (Inns, 2002), I

have also included in the comparison a recent journal article of a feedback model for educational settings.

Comparison to Ilgen Model of Feedback

Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor developed a model of feedback (hereafter referred to as the Ilgen model) based on a review of feedback research from the human performance literature and motivation literature (Ilgen et al., 1979). The authors published this model in 1979 and created it from a review of the feedback studies from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The Ilgen model outlines human performance and motivation, theoretical relationships and variables for feedback for the individual in an organization. The authors claim that it is not quite a theory of feedback but rather a model to organize the discussion of the literature.

As mentioned in chapter 2, the Ilgen model is a process-oriented model that divides the process of feedback into four stages, perception, acceptance, desire to respond, and intended response. The Ilgen model proposes that each of these stages is influenced by characteristics of the source of feedback, characteristics of the feedback message, and characteristics of the recipient. The question that guides the next stage of this analysis is “How is the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB similar and different from the conceptualization of feedback in the Ilgen model of feedback?” Table 5 presents a summary of the comparison.

Table 5

Comparison of Ilgen Model of Feedback with NAVYLAB

| <i>Ilgen--Feedback Model Elements</i> | <i>Evident in the Conceptualization of Feedback in NAVYLAB-- Which Frames</i> | <i>Noteworthy Distinctions</i> |
|---|---|--|
| Feedback is a process with stages Perception Acceptance Desire to Respond Intended Response | None | These stages are not part of the conceptualization in NAVYLAB. |
| Characteristics of the source | Motivation, Affect | Quality of interpersonal relationship is a significant consideration in the feedback process |
| Nature of the message | Process, Motivation | How the message is delivered including formality, preparation, and tone of the message is missing. |
| Recipient's Characteristics | Content, Process, Motivation | Recipient's role or relationship to source is missing |
| Implications for Feedback in Work Environments (p 366-8) | | |
| Source should be credible through competence and/or have interpersonal relationship | Yes | |
| Negative feedback not accepted, help by being more specific | Yes | |
| Increasing the frequency of feedback may cause people to feel a loss of control | No | |
| Feedback is infrequent in most workplaces | Yes | |
| Individuals react differently to feedback | Yes | |
| Feedback is effective if it changes behavior | Yes | |

The conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB does not include the stages of the feedback process as noted in the Ilgen model. The information processing perspective is not in the language of the participants in the groups' discussion or in the text of the documents that reference feedback in the organization.

The conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB does include components related to the characteristics of the source of the feedback, primarily in the motivation for why feedback is given or not given. The Ilgen model emphasizes the credibility of the source as the characteristic that influences how feedback is perceived and accepted. The dimensions of source credibility considered in the Ilgen model include expertise, recipients' trust in the intention of the source, and consistency of the feedback with the role held by the source. These characteristics plus several more appear in the findings for the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. In particular, the quality and consideration for the interpersonal relationship between the source and recipient is part of the conceptualization of the feedback in NAVYLAB that is omitted from the Ilgen model. The authors of the Ilgen model suggest that in order to establish credibility the source should establish an interpersonal relationship but go no further in emphasizing the significance.

The conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB does include elements related to the characteristics of the message as defined by the Ilgen model. In the Ilgen model the key characteristics of the message that influence the feedback process are timing, sign, frequency, consistency, and inclusion of specific incidents. All of these elements appear in the process frame of the findings for NAVYLAB. Supervisors also mentioned that the timing of feedback was a consideration for them when deciding to give or not give feedback. This appears in the motivation frame of the findings. The sign of the feedback, whether it was

positive or negative, was part of the conceptualization in NAVYLAB. Participants told stories of how mixing positive and negative feedback produced unintended results. Some participants concluded that positive feedback was easier to provide and easier to hear. The frequency of the feedback, that is how often it is provided, was mentioned also, specifically within the context of not getting enough feedback as a new employee. As for the specific incident element of the message, some participants claimed that providing specifics was necessary for the feedback to be effective. What is missing in the Ilgen model is the tone of the message and all the other contextual elements related to the process of how feedback happens in the organization. These include the conceptualizations discussed within the formal, in-person planned, and natural processes of feedback. The Ilgen model focuses on task performance feedback and assumes three sources of feedback supervisor or peer to employee feedback flow, a self-feedback flow, or a non-human external source of feedback.

In general, the characteristics of the recipient are elements of the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. The Ilgen model generalizes the characteristics of the recipient as *the frame of reference of the recipient for the job performance setting*. The recipient is seen as the processor of information about his or her past performance in the Ilgen model. The Ilgen model assumes that the information processed by the recipient is conceptualized by the recipient as a source-and-message couplet. The NAVYLAB findings did not include this pairing in the conceptualization of feedback.

In the Ilgen model, another frame of reference for the recipient is the extent to which feedback serves as a reinforcer for the recipient in achieving his or her goals in the workplace. While the NAVYLAB findings do not use the word goal explicitly, there is a similar conceptualization in the content frame of the findings. Here the NAVYLAB

participants' conversations as well as the text of the training manuals conceptualize feedback as a way to know if the employee is being successful in the workplace. Participants found feedback useful when it indicated if they were doing the right thing at the right time. Participants found feedback beneficial for identifying career opportunities, another type of goal.

Feedback in the form of rewards to incentivize performance is another frame of reference for the recipient according to the Ilgen model. Participants mentioned rewards and formal recognition as examples of how feedback happens in NAVYLAB. The motivating influence of these types of feedback were mixed tending towards neutral and negative in NAVYLAB. The Ilgen model also acknowledges the complexities associated with positive and negative incentive rewards in the organization and that each individual will have different reactions to feedback based on a wealth of individual characteristics. A distinction not apparent in the Ilgen model is the recipient's relationship and potential power or influence over the source. The Ilgen model tends to assume that the source always has power over the recipient and not the other way around.

The Ilgen model also includes personality variables, such as locus of control and self-esteem, as part of the recipients' frame of reference for feedback. In NAVYLAB, the motivation frame includes examples of attributes of the receivers, for example, whether they are introverted or extraverted or if they will fall apart upon receiving negative feedback.

The authors of the Ilgen model propose some implications for feedback in the work environment. These are included in Table 5 along with an indicator if these implications were present in the conceptualization of feedback in NAVLAB. Most of the implications for

feedback did appear as suggestions from the study participants but cannot be claimed to be part of every person's conceptualization of feedback.

Finally, three elements of the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB are not evident in the Ilgen model. First, the Ilgen model focuses on job or task performance and does not consider the other types of feedback included in the content frame. Feedback in the Ilgen model is not conceptualized as information about the organization or as about personal characteristics of the individual or as having personal and technical distinctions. Second, the process by which feedback happens is not part of the Ilgen model. The Ilgen model does not make any distinction between formal feedback processes, in-person planned processes, and natural processes of feedback. Thirdly, the Ilgen model does not consider the perspective of the provider of feedback. The model focuses on the recipient of the feedback. All the findings related to the motivation to give or not give feedback in the organization is not covered in the Ilgen model. The exception to this is that the authors do mention that supervisors dislike giving feedback to employees.

Comparison to Feedback Seeking Behavior Model

For the purposes of this discussion and to be consistent with the authors, I call this the Feedback Seeking Behavior (FSB) model of feedback. Ashford and Cummings (1983) leveraged the definition of feedback derived by Herold and Grellor (1977) and augmented the Ilgen model of feedback by conceptualizing how the individual benefits from feedback in the organization. FSB promotes the concept that the recipient of feedback is not a passive information receptor but instead is an active agent in seeking feedback to meet his or her goals.

With FSB, Ashford and Cummings suggested some main theoretical components to argue why and how individuals seek feedback in organizations. For the next stage of this analysis, I compare these theoretical components to the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. The question that guides the next stage of this analysis is “Does the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB include the theoretical components of the FSB model?” Table 6 summarizes this analysis. Several of the prompting questions in the group discussions contained references to individuals soliciting feedback (see Appendix A). Therefore, the concept of active feedback seeking and the context of it occurring within the organization were established in the discussions. Without these particular prompting questions, participants may not have discussed as much information about the conditions and context for feedback seeking.

Table 6

Comparison of Feedback Seeking Behavior Model to NAVYLAB

| <i>Ashford and Cummings--Feedback Seeking Behavior (FSB) Theoretical Component</i> | <i>Evident in the Conceptualization of Feedback in NAVYLAB-- Which Frames</i> | <i>Noteworthy Distinctions</i> |
|--|---|---|
| Feedback: | | |
| Reduces uncertainty | Content, Motivation, Result, Affect | None |
| Useful for the individual | Motivation, Affect, Result | None |
| Creates self-concept | Content, Result | None |
| Serves as a signal or cue | Content | None |
| Creates competence | Content, Result | None |
| Raises ego defenses | Motivation, Affect, Result, Complex | None |
| Is used by individuals to achieve social goals (not just performance goals) | Result, Motivation, Complex | Interpersonal relationships mediate feedback giving also. |
| Feedback seeking strategies: | | |
| Monitoring | None | Distinction in strategies not evident in NAVYLAB. |
| Inquiry | Complex, Motivation | |

In NAVYLAB, the conceptualization of feedback includes the benefits that feedback provides for individuals to know how the work should be performed and how well they are performing the work. The content, motivation, result, and affect frames include tales of how employees want to know how to be successful in their job. New employees in particular want

to know what they should be doing and if they are doing the job well. Information as to which way is best or which path to take imply that feedback reduces uncertainty by reducing the number of choices in the moment. This is all congruent with feedback having an uncertainty reduction function as FSB proposes. The motivation, affect, and result frames also highlight the conceptualization that feedback is useful for the individual. As providers and recipients of feedback, people mention feedback as a way to help others and to become more knowledgeable about themselves. The creation of self-concept also seems to be relevant for the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. Participants stated that feedback does result in self-reflection and self-awareness. The degree to which feedback about a person as a person should be present in the organization was debated in the group discussions. Feedback about me as a person was often assumed to be negative and imagining getting that type of feedback often resulted in some anxious laughter in the group discussions.

The cueing or signaling function of feedback was also evident in the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. The cueing or signaling function, as explained by Ashford and Cummings, said that feedback when given to employees helps them decide where to devote effort. Feedback cues may indicate if a person will get a promotion or be eligible for an upcoming opportunity. In the content frame of the findings, the examples of feedback about career and opportunities seem to be congruent with the cueing function of feedback.

The competence creating function of feedback was evident in the content and result frames for NAVYLAB. The conceptualization is that feedback does perform the function to help people become competent in their role. Supervisors talked about feedback allowing

them to serve employees better. Employees in new jobs said they relied on feedback in order to become competent in their new job.

The ego defensive motivation factor in feedback seeking is the first theoretical element in FSB that highlights the complexity of feedback as a personal resource. In NAVYLAB, the participants alluded to the presence of ego defense mechanism in the motivation, affect, result, and complex frames. Participants said they considered whether requestors would want to hear feedback that was contrary to what they believed about themselves. They also spoke of potential retribution if they provided feedback upward that was contrary to what the managers thought or wanted to hear about themselves. Image management and ego defense was also evident in the anxious tone of the conversations prompted by having the participants imagine someone approaching them with feedback. Several participants conceptualized feedback as something negative and feared the worst.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) stated that “individuals seek feedback on issues beyond those for which organizational leaders feel they should provide regular reviews” (p. 378). They add that since the organization is a social setting, individuals may have goals for their interactions with others. In NAVYLAB, the maintenance and building of interpersonal and professional relationships was clearly part of the conceptualization of feedback. Participants said they considered if feedback would harm a relationship and that the quality of interpersonal relationships mediated the motivation to provide feedback. The FSB model proposes that people seek feedback to achieve social goals as well as performance goals. The need to maintain interpersonal relationships may be a social goal that affects the motivation to give feedback as well as solicit feedback. Likewise, in the NAVYLAB content frame, feedback on issues related to the organization and work environment are valid and important

types of feedback. While FSB is a model of feedback seeking, the conceptualization that feedback goes beyond what is provided in regular reviews is relevant beyond feedback seeking behaviors.

The strategies for feedback seeking in FSB include *monitoring* (observing others) and *inquiry* (asking for feedback). The concept of asking for feedback was part of the discussions in NAVYLAB and is promoted in the performance management training manuals. Asking for feedback directly is a valid and important strategy for understanding one's performance in NAVYLAB. However, the participants told stories that convey the complexity associated with soliciting feedback. Ashford and Cummings (1983) conceptualized these complexities in three categories of costs associated with feedback seeking: effort costs, face loss costs, and inference costs. Effort costs include the amount and type of effort including the availability and number of the sources of feedback and the amount of attention required to obtain the feedback. Face loss costs are an interpersonal phenomenon when directly asking for feedback since it is a public event. The seeker may attribute various risks to his image and that of others by asking for feedback. Inference costs include the interpretation necessary to make meaning of any particular feedback episode or piece of information. In the inquiry strategy, this includes the history, motives, and feelings generated in the feedback process. In NAVYLAB all of these costs were evident in the explanations of the situational complexity associated with feedback. In NAVYLAB these costs were not limited to feedback seeking but were also included in the motivation frame as to why feedback is given or not given. The participants in this study would not categorize the costs using the terms effort, face loss, and inference nor would they use the term cost to explain the complexities. Instead, they provided stories that implied one should sugarcoat or soften feedback. This sugarcoating then creates

an inference cost for the seeker according to the FSB model. Seekers need to sift through the sugarcoat to get to the meaning of the feedback. They also provided explanations of the time and effort required to plan for providing feedback to employees. Face loss costs were evident in the stories told of allowing managers to save face by providing certain feedback in private behind closed doors so they would not embarrass the person.

The monitoring strategy for feedback seeking was not evident in the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. The conceptualizations of feedback pertained to direct forms of feedback or feedback that occurred directly in natural interactions. None of the discussion prompting questions would have set the context for the monitoring strategy of feedback seeking, so this may explain the absence of this in the group discussions. The documents included as part of the analysis did not include any references to observation of others as a form of feedback. The distinction between inquiry and monitoring strategies for seeking feedback was not in the conceptualization for feedback in NAVYLAB. The process frame from NAVYLAB includes how feedback happens but does not make the same distinctions as the FSB model.

Finally, the context of expectations that are in the motivation frame in the NAVYLAB findings are missing from the FSB model. In a later review of feedback seeking studies, Ashford et al. (2003) suggested that a future area of study is all the contextual variables that surround feedback in the organization. Also omitted from the FSB model are the conceptualizations for *providing* feedback in the organization. I would not expect these to be included in the FSB model since it explicitly focuses on feedback seeking behaviors.

Comparison to Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT)

For the purposes of this discussion and to be consistent with the authors, I call this Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT). Kluger and DeNisi (1996) argued that the lack of coherence in the volume of feedback research as it relates to performance is because there is no general theory of feedback effects on performance. As noted in chapter 2, there is no theory dedicated to feedback; instead several theories, such as control theory and goal setting theory, contain the concept of feedback as a component. Kluger and DeNisi performed a meta-analysis of all the feedback research related to knowledge of results or performance feedback. They restricted their definition of feedback to external agents as the source of feedback. Kluger and DeNisi criticized researchers for assuming that feedback delivered by an external agent always improves performance.

FIT is constructed with language based in a mechanical or machine metaphor. Some of the mechanical figures of speech used throughout the article include calibrate, standards-gaps, feedback-loops, activated response, action regulation, attenuated response, and velocity. The nature of the meta-analysis performed by Kluger and DeNisi emphasized statistical measures and quantitative scientific methods. The authors criticized many studies for omitting control groups in the feedback studies that used experiments. The authors assume that human systems can be contained, controlled, and influencing variables managed to provide scientific proof. This model was clear in the use of mechanical metaphor that searches to confirm predictable and generalizable outcomes of human behavior. At an abstract level of comparison to the conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB, a similar complexity of feedback is evident in FIT; however the explanation of the complexity in FIT loses the connection to the human experience of feedback. Embedded within the explanations

of the FIT schematics are hedging statements that allude to the complexity that cannot be explained through the detailed schematics. From the article, I extracted some elements of conceptualizations that are worth comparing to the NAVYLAB conceptualizations. The question that guides this comparison is “Are the claims that comprise the FIT evident in the NAVYLAB conceptualization of feedback?” The extractions are stated as claims about feedback as that is typically language used within the article. These are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7

Comparison of Feedback Intervention Theory to NAVYLAB

| <i>Kluger and DeNisi--Feedback Intervention Theory Component</i> | <i>Evident in the Conceptualization of Feedback in NAVYLAB--Which Frames</i> | <i>Noteworthy Distinctions</i> |
|---|--|---|
| Feedback comes from an external agent and is about task performance | Content, Process | Types of feedback beyond task performance. Sources of feedback include self as well as external agents. |
| Feedback's effect on performance varies | Result | |
| Feedback affects the locus and level of attention, and can shift attention to the external agent providing the feedback | Result, Motivation, Affect | |
| Feedback induces affect | Result, Affect | |
| Feedback is not likely to be ignored because any feedback has potentially serious implications for the self | Result, Complex | Feedback can be ignored when source is not credible or when provided upward. |
| Effects of feedback are never as simple as motivational processes suggest | Complex | |
| Feedback has interdependent and overlapping processes. The cues of the message, nature of the task performed, and situational and personality variables all mediate feedback's effect on performance. | Complex | |

FIT restricts the definition of feedback to task performance feedback and feedback provided by an external agent. In NAVYLAB, the conceptualization of feedback did include task performance as well as types of feedback beyond task performance. In particular,

feedback about personality and interpersonal characteristics was evident in NAVYLAB. In NAVYLAB feedback in the form of self-assessment was present in the performance appraisal training manuals. In other words, the self is also a source of feedback. Participants discussed the concept of having people assess their performance prior to providing feedback if someone solicited feedback. Feedback in NAVYLAB includes more than task performance and more than just external agents providing feedback.

In NAVYLAB the results of feedback do vary and it is not a given that feedback positively influences performance. The NAVYLAB conceptualization of the varying effects of feedback, and that feedback does not always induce positive effects is congruent with FIT. The FIT authors recognize that there are psychological benefits of feedback that are outside the FIT because these benefits do not influence performance. In NAVYLAB, participants mentioned how they were relieved to hear they were doing the right thing and that feedback can be reassuring to them.

FIT emphasizes the potential shift in attention that feedback induces. The authors claim that attention management is a component that is missing from other models of feedback. In NAVYLAB, participants expressed a dislike of feedback if they did not expect the feedback. Having something occur that was not expected causes a shift in attention. FIT also proposes that if the shift causes a focus on self rather than the task, then the cognitive complexity increases for the individual, causing him or her to perform worse. In NAVYLAB, the discussions of the benefits and consequences of personal versus technical feedback are congruent with a shift in attention component. In the motivation to give or not give feedback, participants said they considered if the person would take the feedback personally or if it would be taken at a professional level. The NAVYLAB conceptualization of feedback does

contain an awareness of how feedback that creates a focus on self creates something different for the individual. Evidence in the results frame suggests attention may shift towards the person who provided the feedback. Participants described how their attitudes, feelings, or relationship towards others is influenced by feedback. This is congruent with the FIT proposition that feedback induces affect. Participants in NAVYLAB talked about sulking or being angry when experiencing unexpected negative feedback.

The FIT authors claim that feedback will not be ignored because it has implications for self. In NAVYLAB, participants relayed how feedback from someone in an influential position could not be easily ignored. However, they also shared stories of feedback being ignored when they provided it and claimed to have ignored feedback directed towards them.

FIT proposes interdependent processes and variables that influence feedback's effect on performance. The authors acknowledge that the complexity of feedback is not well represented in the schematic diagrams for FIT, as some of the nuances are not easy to portray in a diagram intended to simplify the concept. The stories in the complex frame of the NAVYLAB findings expose the complexity of feedback in the organization.

Comparison to Power of Feedback for Learning Model

Hattie and Timperley (2007) provided a conceptual analysis of feedback and proposed a model of feedback to enhance learning. They proposed teachers use this model in classrooms to provide effective feedback. For the purposes of this discussion, I call this the Power of Feedback (POF) model. Since the POF model is intended for classroom or educational settings, it is not expected that it would contain all the aspects of feedback in an organization.

The comparison of the NAVYLAB findings to the POF model focuses on the elements of the proposed model. The question that guided this comparison is “Are the elements of the POF model evident in the NAVYLAB conceptualization of feedback?” The summary of this comparison is in Table 8.

Table 8

Comparison of Power of Feedback for Learning Model to NAVYLAB

| <i>Hattie and Timperley--Effective Feedback Model Elements</i> | <i>Evident in the Conceptualization of Feedback in NAVYLAB--Which Frames</i> | <i>Noteworthy Distinctions</i> |
|--|--|--|
| Effective feedback answers three questions: Where am I going? (Feed up) How am I going? (Feed Back) Where to next? (Feed Forward) | Result, Content, Process | The wording in the questions correspond to the journey metaphor. |
| Feedback work at four levels: Task Level Process Level Self-Regulation Level Self Level | Content, Process | Agreement that praise at the self level is not effective feedback. |

The results, content, and process frame in NAVYLAB contain evidence of effective feedback that correspond to the three questions in POF. Employees want to know if they are headed in the right direction, and if they are doing it in a way that is expected as well as efficient. Participants said feedback was useful when it helped them do their job better. Feedback on opportunities for their career corresponds to the where to next. Most noteworthy is that the journey metaphor appears in the wording of these questions. This is the only model of the selected four that contains language related to the journey metaphor.

The task level of feedback corresponds to the feedback about the job or the product in the content frame of the NAVYLAB conceptualization of feedback. The process level is evident in the content frame as well as when participants state that feedback is useful when it indicates how they should do the work. The self-regulation level in POF includes the ability to self assess. In NAVYLAB, the self-assessment process is a requirement of the performance management system. One of the findings in the content frame in NAVYLAB is *feedback about me* which equates to the self level in the POF. The authors advocate that the least effective feedback is at the self level. Praise of students is included in this level. A similar conceptualization appears in NAVYLAB when participants discuss the formal reward and recognition process as being superficial and at times de-motivating. The praise or formal recognition processes have little influence on employees' performance.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

This study explored how feedback is conceptualized in organizations by examining the text and talk in a particular organization. Drawing from discourse analysis and specifically organizational discourse and metaphor theory, multiple conceptualizations of feedback emerged. Some of these conceptualizations are congruent with the conceptualizations in the professional literature. Conceptualizations different from those in the literature also emerged.

Implications of the Information Processing Model of Feedback

The prominent metaphor that underpins the most researched feedback models in organizations is the information processing metaphor. Within this metaphor feedback is a message that is sent, accepted or rejected, and processed by an individual, who then takes action or not based upon how he or she deciphered the message. *Feedback as a message* was not a prominent conceptualization of feedback in NAVYLAB. Feedback as a message occurred infrequently in the conversations. This is an interesting conclusion from this study and creates follow-on questions. Should the models of feedback used to research feedback in organizations be congruent with the conceptualization of feedback within the organization? Might the hypothesis generated from the information processing models of feedback be limiting the knowledge creation about feedback in organizations? The way feedback is examined may prevent researchers from understanding the actual experience of feedback in the organization.

A key conclusion from this study is that there are an infinite number of combinations of factors that can influence feedback. The *feedback is complex* interpretive frame provides ample evidence of this using the voices of the participants. This is also evident in the

volumes of feedback research that segment and strive to study individual factors or subsets of factors. The models of feedback proposed by researchers are attempts to simplify and generalize the feedback process as well as understand it in order to influence the effectiveness of feedback. Traditional feedback research seeks for a comprehensive, integrated, and effectiveness-oriented model to apply within organizations. This is similar to how communication was often conceptualized using a conduit metaphor (Axley, 1984), which implied that if the messages were crafted appropriately and the channel was open, simply sending a message into the channel would result in effective communication. Performing micro-analysis of independent feedback variables in social systems may not be productive. Traditional objective research methods are congruent with the conduit and information processing metaphor, where messages can be isolated and studied while limiting external influences. Inquiry methods that mirror the complexity of the phenomena of interest provide alternative perspectives. This study successfully used discourse analysis and metaphor theory to explore alternative conceptualizations of feedback. Holistic approaches that consider the individual conditional complexity of the feedback episodes may serve future research efforts.

Implications Using the Alternative Conceptualizations

Feedback as a tool within the machine metaphor is present in NAVYLAB and particularly pronounced in the official performance management practices. Recently the OD network group on the professional networking site LinkedIn discussed “Why does everyone hate employee evaluations and what can we do about it?” This sentiment is likely wide spread. The advertised benefits from regular performance evaluations are not always realized in organizations. Supervisors lament about the difficulties associated with the review

processes, in NAVYLAB the supervisors explained the paradox of wanting to provide useful feedback yet being constrained by the personnel rules of what you could and could not tell an employee in a performance appraisal. Performance review processes are situated within the basic metaphor of the organization as a machine, yet employees see themselves as more than components of a machine. If HR professionals considered what the *feedback as a tool* conceptualization creates in an organization, this may lead to modification or abandonment of certain personnel practices that are now considered “best” practices.

Feedback as a guide within the journey metaphor is noticeable in the educational literature on feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) highlighted this metaphor when claiming that effective feedback answers three questions “Where am I going?” “How am I going?” and “Where to next?.” Goal setting as advocated by Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham (1981) becomes pronounced within this conceptualization of feedback. The organization on a journey is a basic conceptual metaphor within organization science (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Given the neutral yet useful tone of this conceptualization of feedback, it may server managers, educators, and OD practitioners well.

Feedback as a threat dominates in several dimensions within NAVYLAB. The nature of the work and context of the organization likely contributes to this conceptualization. The dangerous nature of feedback is somewhat downplayed within the models of feedback in organizations. In general, feedback is advocated as a necessary and useful feature for organizations and to improve employee performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). Kluger and DeNisi’s (1996) conclusion from their meta-analysis is the exception to this assumption. They clearly articulated that up to one-third of feedback interventions related to task performance actually harm performance. Ashford et al. (2003) acknowledged that feedback

seeking is mediated by the perceived threat to the self, which they called ego-defense. However, they did not speak to the organizational level and consider what may result when *feedback as a threat* is a collective conceptualization within the feedback-seeking environment. The dangerous and threatening conceptualization of feedback is worth noting for OD practitioners who advocate feedback. Those who advocate and implement feedback practices in organizations might benefit from considering if *feedback as a threat* is widely held conceptualization prior to implementation.

Feedback as a gift may be a gendered conceptualization of feedback. The women participants in NAVYLAB used this metaphor most frequently and it emerged clearly from the conversation that involved only women. This conceptualization may be underplayed or hidden from the dominant male culture of the NAVYLAB organization. This conceptualization enables the social and relational connections within the organization. Fletcher (1999) found that these sort of relational practices often went unnoticed in organizations yet served useful purposes. *Feedback as a gift* is essentially absent from the professional literature on feedback. This conceptualization exposed how the official reward and recognition practices in the organization inadequately serve the purpose to appreciate and encourage employees. The quality of the relationship was often mentioned as a mediating influence for feedback in the organization. Encouraging the *feedback as a gift* conceptualization may improve the quality of relationships within an organization, thus leading to more open and honest feedback practices.

Feedback as nourishment or nurturing exposed the various identities created as related to feedback in the organization. This conceptualization surfaces the need for supervisors to be active and present in the employee's career growth. This conceptualization

emphasizes age and experience differences within the organization. It also made clear the privileged or somewhat pampered role that engineers and scientists assume in NAVYLAB. The *feedback as nourishment or nurturing* metaphor was not prominent in any of the feedback models from the literature. This may be another case where a shift in the researchers' conceptualization of feedback may lead to the incorporation of other theories of feedback in organizations.

The alternative conceptualizations provide vivid insights of the experience of feedback in the organization from the perspective of the actors in the organization. Figure 6 is a summary of the generative metaphor conceptualizations of feedback and the purposes of feedback as concluded from this study.

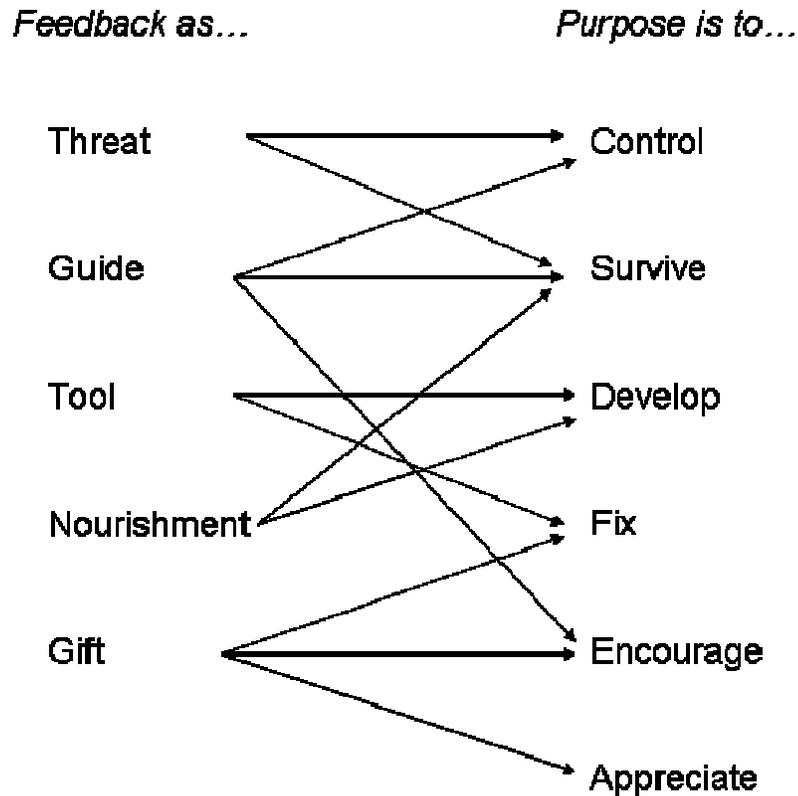


Figure 6. Generative metaphors of feedback along with purpose.

This summary highlights the overlapping purposes of feedback and that a conceptualization does not necessarily lead to an unequivocal understanding of the purpose of feedback.

Feedback as a threat may serve a survival as well as a control purpose. Feedback as a guide may control the path an employee takes, enable survival in the organization, and encourage an employee to take more steps in the journey. Feedback as a tool may serve to develop or fix the employee. Feedback as nourishment enables an employee to survive as well as grow and develop. Finally, feedback as a gift may fix something gone awry, encourage someone, and serve as a token of appreciation. Feedback practices need to consider the conceptualizations present in the organization and that these may differ for each organization.

Implications for Feedback Practices in OD

OD practices might benefit from considering the alternative conceptualizations of feedback. Marshak and Grant (2008) suggested that new OD practices such as organizational discourse approaches can expose “alternative and competing realities” (p. 9) in organizations. Practitioners can listen for language that might indicate what generative metaphors of feedback exist within the organization. Metaphors are context-sensitive in that the context of the organization impacts the metaphors in use as well as the social realities created through use of the metaphors (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004). For example in NAVYLAB, a military discourse as well as an engineering discourse creates a specific organizational context.

Feedback interventions also may have emerged from metaphorical conceptualizations. The field of OD, as well as Human Resources, contains discourses that firmly root some of the popular practices. For example, a 360-degree feedback tool exists with a machine metaphor of the organization with feedback conceptualized as a tool to help the individual improve. If the primary metaphor in use in the organization is feedback as a threat, then implementation of a 360-degree feedback mechanism may cause the tool to become a weapon. Instead of identifying gaps in performance, employees may perceive that multi-source feedback surveys are intended to harm certain individuals. This social reality is created through the conceptualization of feedback as a threat. There is evidence that not all 360-degree feedback interventions are successful (Smither, London, & Reilly, 2005) with some employees experiencing them as a threat (Funderburg & Levy, 1997).

If feedback is conceptualized as a gift, then the recipients of a 360-degree feedback survey may yearn to identify the giver, so that they can appropriately thank them for the gift.

Alternatively, they might want to demonstrate that they are using the gift as intended. Where feedback is a guide, a survey-based 360-degree feedback instrument may seem irrelevant without some type of destination or goal defined by the individual or by the organization. The feedback should be guiding the employee somewhere, on a right path. If feedback is nourishment, the richness of the feedback might be critical. Here more qualitative in depth comments may have more meaning than the results from a stale quantitative survey. These are intended to be example considerations for an OD practitioner, not a conclusion about the use of 360-feedback interventions. The purpose of this discussion is to describe how generative metaphors expose alternative frames for viewing feedback and how OD practitioners might benefit from the alternative views. This provides a practitioner with additional frames from the ones they may have learned or experienced.

Context Sensitive Feedback Research

This study as well as traditional feedback research agrees that feedback in organizations is complex. The meaning made of the word feedback has evolved over time, both in the literature and in organizational settings. The meanings of words are context sensitive and this calls for research practices that account for context. For example, all the models of feedback reference a source of feedback. The original conceptualization for source emerged from the cybernetic information processing metaphor that feedback initiates from a specific location. Within the various metaphors, the source now embodies a variety of characteristics. For example, with feedback as a threat, the source is the attacker, the motivation of the attack is prominent in the conceptualization. For research done in the contexts with the conceptualization of feedback as a threat, the motivational attributes of the source may become more important than other source attributes. With feedback as a gift, the

relationship attributes of the source may become more important than other source attributes. One can now see how any generalizations of the importance of feedback source attributes can be context-sensitive. The participants in this study describe this complexity in their conversations about feedback in the organization.

Limitations

This study does not suggest that feedback conceptualizations can be generalized to all organizations. This study assumes that organizational discourse is situated symbolic action (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004). These conceptualizations of feedback are situated within the context of the individual and the organization. In this study, the conceptualizations are situated within a military discourse as well as a professional engineering discourse, considered meta level discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000b) that also exist outside of the organization. A more localized discourse is that of a small cohesive community, those individuals who have spent more time in the community may conceptualize feedback differently from those who just arrived. Other organizations may have different prevalent discourses that influence the conceptualizations of feedback. Therefore, the conceptualizations of feedback found through this study may not occur in other organizations. Likewise, organizations situated within a similar context may have similar metaphors. Since this study took place in an organization in the United States, the conceptualizations of feedback are inherently western or even North American.

I assume that my consulting experience within this organization contributed to the interpretation of the text and talk. Some readers may view this as a limitation however; it also enabled the addition of contextual depth to the discourse under analysis. Other readers may create different interpretations of the talk and text of this organization.

The prompting questions used for the group discussions may have influenced the figures of speech generated in the group discussions. However, this was minimized when conversations between participants created new conversational topics, related but not specific to the prompting question. This conversation flow occurred in most but not all of the discussion groups. As mentioned previously, the discussion groups were created specifically for the purposes of the study and therefore cannot be considered true *naturally occurring talk* within the organization.

Future Research

In addition to the implications posed in the above discussion, there are other potential avenues for future research. From a social constructionist perspective, feedback could be termed a specific type of discursive practice that would benefit from a dialogical inquiry method such as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 2007). Gordon and Stewart (2009) suggested that performance appraisal interviews would benefit from communications-based research. An inquiry into the patterns of communication in feedback episodes and what is created from those patterns would expand the knowledge of feedback in organizations.

The concepts of the source and receiver in the information processing view of feedback might benefit from a revised framing based on positioning theory (Harre & van Lagenhove, 1999). Within feedback episodes, individuals are co-creating their social positions in respect to each other. For example, feedback in an episode where two people position themselves as student and teacher plays out differently than an episode where two people position themselves as collaborative learners. Participants consistently mentioned the

quality and impact to the relationship as mediating the feedback process. There is potential for inquiry that explores the relationship as socially constructed through feedback episodes.

Additional research could expand the metaphorical conceptualizations and include examination of root metaphors in feedback and the origins of the words used (Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2000). Further discourse analysis of metaphors for feedback used in Organization Development and Human Resource texts and the implications for practice would be useful. The analysis could further examine the hegemonic dimensions of the metaphors and implications for organizations.

The addition of studies in other organizations would add to these findings and explore if or how conceptualizations of feedback vary across organization and organizational contexts. This would provide more insight into the influence of organizational context on the conceptualization of feedback. Crafting designs that expose alternative conceptualizations based on culture, gender, ethnic, racial, and other diversity considerations would also be beneficial.

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Appendix A: Group Discussion Design and Checklist

Feedback Conceptualization Research Group Discussion Process Agenda for Facilitators

Room Setup and Pre-discussion

- Arrange the tables in a hexagon or in some way that the participants can easily see each other.
- Check recorder battery level.
- Check recorder SD card capacity.
- Check recorder mic level – set to high.
- Researcher will greet each person as they show-up to welcome them, invite them to sit at the table, respond to any questions they might have, and keep track of who is showing up.
- Once everyone is there, Researcher will say that everyone expected is present, that we're ready to start, this is final opportunity to withdraw from the study, as I'm going to turn on the recorder now and turn over the discussion to "Lisa or Keith" the facilitator.
- Pause if anyone says they want to withdraw until they leave the room.
- Researcher will turn on the recorder, place it in the center of the discussion group, and move off to the side of the room.

Beginning of Discussion

- Facilitator welcomes the group, introduces himself or herself briefly, and invites others to do the same, by asking for them to share their name, current role in the organization, how long they have worked at NAVYLAB, and how they came to work here.
- Facilitator reminds the group that the discussion will run between 1 and 1.5 hours.
- Facilitator states that they will provide some prompting questions, and that the intent is for the participants to have a conversation amongst themselves. The facilitator will also encourage everyone's participation.
- Lead into the discussion with the opening prompting question.

Frame 1. Imagine that you are talking with a friend that just graduated from college that is interested in applying for a job here at NAVYLAB and he or she is curious about feedback in the organization.

What stories would you tell them from your own or other's experience?

Frame 2a. Imagine your supervisor or team lead walked into your office space and asked you for some feedback on his or her performance.

What would you think, feel, or do?

Frame 2b. Imagine your co-worker asked you for feedback on his or her performance.
What would you think, feel, or do?

Frame 3. Imagine that your supervisor or team lead has just presented the new commander's guidance and he or she says the commander is asking for feedback.
What do you think would happen?

Frame 4a. Imagine your co-worker approaches you and says they have some feedback for you. What would you think, feel, or do?

Frame 4b. Imagine your supervisor or team lead says they have feedback for you.
What do you think, feel, or do?

Frame 4c. (Only for leads/supervisors) Imagine a subordinate of yours says they have feedback for you. What do you think, feel, or do?

General Facilitator Guidelines

Use exact wording for initial prompting questions.

Use your intuition on follow-up questions to get at more depth of meaning.

Limit the amount of "uh-huh, yes" and other utterances to improve readability of transcript and to encourage participants to talk with each other rather than to the facilitator.

Invite more silent participants into the conversation.

Discourage a single person monopolizing the conversation.

Encourage people to interact with each other in the conversation.

Cover all four frames (feedback in general, performance feedback, feedback to above, feedback on self, feedback from below, feedback from peers)

Watch the time.

Bring people back to the conversation if feel they have gotten really off the topic.

Wrap-Up

- Facilitator transitions to wrap-up either because of time or lull after all frames have been discussed.
- Close up final stories or comments.
- Researcher will come in and thank the group for participating, remind them that she will contact everyone when the data analysis is ready to be shared, and that they should feel free to contact her with any questions they have before then.
- Researcher reminds the group to respect the confidentiality of each other, and that when referring to the discussion with others to not mention who said what within the discussion.
- Turn off the recorder.

Appendix B: E-mail Soliciting Participants

My name is Joan Goppelt and I am a member of the [OD group and org name removed]. I am also a graduate student at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California and am working on my dissertation.

I am conducting a study on how the concept of feedback is discussed and written about in organizations. I am using [org name removed] as my research site and government employees as the population of interest.

I am inviting you to participate in this research project and join in a group discussion about feedback in [org name removed]. Your participation is completely voluntary. The group discussion will last from one to two hours and will be scheduled during normal work hours.

If you are interested please contact me at [email address] or via phone at [phone number]. As soon as I hear from you I will contact you and provide more details about the study including the level of participation and the schedule.

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Cheers,

Joan

[org contact info removed]

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Feedback Conceptualization in Organizations

1. You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Joan R. Goppelt, a doctoral student in the School of Human and Organizational Development at Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. This study is part of Joan Goppelt's Fielding dissertation studies and is supervised by Barbara P. Mink, Ed.D. This research involves the study of how feedback is conceptualized in organizations by exploring how people working in them talk about feedback.
2. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an employee in the organization being studied and currently hold a role that is included in the study and have held this role continuously for at least the past year. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary.
3. The study involves your participation in a discussion on the topic of feedback. The group discussion will last between 1 and 2 hours. You will participate in a group with up to six other participants. Your participation will not require you to discuss anything of a personal and confidential nature. The group discussion will occur during normal work hours.
4. The group discussion will be facilitated by a member of the [name of internal OD group removed]. The Researcher (Joan Goppelt) will be observing the discussion and taking research notes.
5. The group discussion will be audio recorded. The recording and subsequent transcription will be used only for this research study. The transcription will not identify by name who is speaking. Any names that are uttered during the discussions will be replaced with a code name in the transcriptions used for analysis and in excerpts used in the dissertation and other publications. The digital recording and original transcription will be stored in a secure locked cabinet in the Researcher's home office in [city and state removed]. Recordings of the group discussion will be listened to only by the Researcher, Faculty Supervisor, transcriber who has signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement, and the [internal OD group name removed] facilitator who has signed the attached Professional Assistance Confidentiality Agreement. The transcriber will not retain any of the recordings or transcribed material. The recording and original transcription will be destroyed by Joan Goppelt approximately five years after the study is completed.
6. At the beginning of the group discussion, the [internal OD group name removed] Facilitator will remind you and the other participants to respect the confidentiality of each other and not attribute any comments to individuals when discussing the meeting with others not in the group.
7. The Researcher and [internal OD group name removed] facilitator will not divulge to anyone in the organization which employees participated in the study or which did not.

8. The informed consent forms and other identifying information will be kept separate from the data. All data that identifies participant will be kept in the Researcher’s home office in [city and state removed] in a secured file cabinet. Any records that would identify you as a participant in this study, such as informed consent forms, will be destroyed by Joan Goppelt approximately five years after the study is completed.

9. The results of this research will be used in completing my dissertation. The study as a whole, or in parts, may possibly be published subsequently in journals, books, or both.

10. The risks to you are considered minimal. You may develop greater personal awareness regarding what the concept of feedback means to you as a result of your participation in this research. There is very little likelihood that you may experience some emotional discomfort during or after your participation. Should you experience such discomfort, please contact the Researcher, Joan Goppelt. You can also contact the Civilian Employee Assistance Program (CEAP): [names and phone numbers removed]

11. You may withdraw from this study without negative consequences. If you participate in the group discussion your comments will be included in the research data set and cannot be excluded. Should you withdraw before the group discussion begins to be recorded, your data up to that point will be eliminated and destroyed.

12. The Researcher may choose to exclude you from the study after you volunteer to participate. Conditions that may contribute to this are a change in your current role in the organization or the inability to schedule a group discussion time that meets your work schedule.

13. No extra compensation will be provided for participation. Since your participation occurs during normal work hours your regular salary and employee benefits apply.

14. After the data analysis phase is complete you will be invited to, but not required to attend, a 2 hour session where the Researcher will present a summary of the findings. If you cannot attend or prefer not to attend the session, you may request a copy of the summary results by contacting Joan Goppelt. If you do attend, you will be attending with any others who participated in the research. In other words if you do attend, participants not in your group discussion will know you participated in the research.

15. If you have any questions about any aspect of this study or your involvement, please ask the Researcher before signing this form. You may also contact the supervising faculty if you have questions or concerns about your participation in this study. The supervising faculty has provided contact information at the bottom of this form. If at any time you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Fielding Graduate University by email at irb@fielding.edu or by telephone at 805-898-4033.

+++++

I have read and understand the above informed consent and I volunteer to participate in this study.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT (please print)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

FACULTY SUPERVISOR

Barbara P. Mink, EdD
Fielding Graduate University
2112 Santa Barbara Street
Santa Barbara, CA 93105
805-687-1099

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER

Joan R. Goppelt
[contact info removed]

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agree to participate in this research. Return one to the Researcher and keep the other for your files. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains the right to access to all signed informed consent forms.

Appendix D: Script for Contact Conversation with Potential Participants

I originally used the script to follow-up with interested people over the phone or in-person. I then switched to e-mail (shown below) for responding to interested participants, the e-mail process was quicker and allowed the potential participants time to review the informed consent information on their own time.

Phone or in-person script

1. Introduction. Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this study. I want you to know that your participation is completely voluntary. I want to ask a few questions about your current role in the organization, answer any questions you might have, further discuss your participation, and have you read an informed consent form. If you decide to participate, I will have you sign the informed consent form. Please feel free to interrupt me and ask questions throughout this phone call (or meeting). At any time if you decide you would rather not participate just let me know and we'll end our conversation. I will keep your interest in the study completely confidential.

2. First of all, are you a government civil service employee?
[If yes continue, if no, explain the population of interest is only government employees so they are not a candidate. Thank them for their interest in the study and end the conversation.]

3. I am looking for government employees that currently hold certain roles with the organization. I am going to describe each role and then discuss which (if any) of roles you would consider your current primary role in the organization.

The first two roles have to do with relatively new hires into [org name removed].

- a. Enrolled in the [new employee development program] and employed by [org name removed] less than 5 years.
- b. Employed at [org name removed] less than 5 years and a mid-career employee, meaning you held a similar job in an organization other than [org name removed] before coming to [org name removed].

The remaining roles are for employees who have been with [org name removed] for longer than 5 years.

- c. Employed in a technical, non-supervisory role. Work as a scientist, engineer, technician, or logistician directly involved in product development, product test, or research.
- d. Employed in a support, non-supervisory role. Work as a business financial manager, security coordinator, office manager, corporate operations IT professional, total force readiness (HR) staff, quality assurance specialist, configuration manager, and comptroller staff.

- e. Employed as a competency manager, as a section head, branch head, or division head.
- f. Employed as a lead on a product team, as a product team lead, chief engineer, deputy product lead, block manager, task team lead, and acquisition product lead.
- g. Employed as an executive manager, as a department head, associate department head, or member of the Senior Executive Service (SES).

[Through discussion I will collaboratively arrive at agreement with the potential participant on the role they hold. If it turns out they do not fit any of these categories as defined I will thank them for their interest and explain that their particular role is not included in the study. I will explain that if the study is modified to include their role, I will contact them again to see if they are still interested.]

- 4. Given that we have decided you currently hold the role of [role title here], have you held this role for at least the past year?
[If yes continue, if no thank them for their interest and explain that I am interested in people who have held their current role for at least a year.]
- 5. If you choose to participate in this research I will keep your participation confidential, however you will be part of a group discussion so others will know of your participation and I cannot guarantee confidentiality nor will there be anonymity within the discussions.
- 6. [If I currently have 7 confirmed participants for this role, I will explain this and ask if they would be willing to be on a stand-by list in case someone drops out of the study, if yes then I will give them a copy of the informed consent form, see if they have any questions. If and when I contact them to participate and they still wish to participate, I will ask them to sign the informed consent. I will thank them for the interest and let them know how and when I will next contact them.]
- 7. Here is a consent form that explains more about the details of the study. Please take some time to read through it now and I will answer any questions you might have.
[handout consent form, or e-mail or fax if a phone conversation, and respond to questions]
- 8. [If they choose to participate, let them know the approximate timeframe for the group discussion, and ask how they would prefer to be contacted for the scheduling. Thank them for volunteering for the study. If they choose not to participate, thank them for their interest and time they took to talk with me today.]

E-mail script:

Thanks for responding. I am looking for government employees that currently hold certain roles in the organization, so I need to know a bit more information to determine if you are a candidate:

1. Are you a government employee?
2. How long have you been employed by [org name removed]?
3. If less than 5 years as government with [org name removed]:
 - a) did you work for a local [org name removed] contractor and then move into a government role or
 - b) did you come from another company or organization outside the [org name removed] community or
 - c) is this your first job or
 - d) something else not covered in a, b, c.
4. What role do you currently have in [org name removed]?
5. Would you be available to participate in a 1.5 hour group discussion on [date]?

I'm also enclosing a form that contains more details of the study. If you would still like to participate or have questions after reading the form please let me know!

[enclosed informed consent form with the e-mail]