The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Feedback Seeking Behavior

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Abstract: The study draws on resource perspective to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and employees’ feedback-seeking behavior and its contingency. Data was collected from 417 full-time employees from the financial companies in China. Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. Results indicated that transformational leadership was negatively associated with feedback-seeking behavior. Core self-evaluations moderated the relationship between them. And with high core self-evaluations, transformational leadership was positively related to feedback-seeking behavior for employees, whereas this relationship for employees with low core self-evaluations was negative. The results present a deeper understanding of how employees weigh various factors in deciding whether to seek feedback within the organization. These findings have important implications for understanding the causes of feedback-seeking behavior under the background of Chinese enterprise culture.

Keywords: core self-evaluations, cost-value framework, feedback-seeking behavior, transformational leadership

1 Introduction

There exists a phenomenon in real organizations: On one hand, it is difficult for supervisors to know the exact moments on the job when each of their staff requires or desires feedback;\(^1\) on the other hand, employees don’t think the feedback they passively received from the organization valuable to their work performance and further career development. Research suggests that many employees have difficulties in obtaining valuable feedback information, as they find themselves in a so-called “feedback vacuum”\(^2\).

Recent research on feedback indicates that employees do not passively wait for feedback during annual performance reviews, but proactively seek feedback during daily interactions at work.\(^2\) Proactively seeking feedback about one’s performance is important because passively waiting to receive this information from others can be ineffective.\(^3\) In this respect, Ashford and Cummings (1983) defined feedback-seeking behavior as conscious devotion of effort toward determining the correctness and adequacy of behaviors for attaining valued end states.\(^6\) Furthermore, feedback-seeking refers to the proactive search by individuals for informal, day-to-day feedback information.\(^7\) In all, with the increase of uncertainty inside and outside the organization, it becomes more and more important for employees to attain feedback about their work performance from surroundings.

Understanding how context in particular plays a contributing role to feedback-seeking behavior is important, because contextual variables are often more amenable to change than individual variables.\(^5\) For example, personality traits such as self-esteem and extraversion are fixed at least in the short-term and physical characteristics such as gender and ethnicity are entirely permanent.\(^8\) The characteristics of feedback source (e.g. feedback from supervisors, feedback from coworkers) influence a person’s propensity to seek feedback about his or her job performance a lot. As a crucial feedback source, leadership has become a hot spot and focus to feedback-seeking researchers; In so doing, these represent an opportunity for future research about how leadership impacts employees’ feedback-seeking behavior and whether or not exists some moderate variables.\(^9\)

This study regarded transformational leadership as a context factor to stimulate feedback-seeking. Nowadays the praise and awe for transformational leaders seems endless.\(^10\) Transformational leadership has become a silver bullet for achieving success in organizations.\(^11\)\(^12\)

Trait activation theory indicated that individuals’ behavior is the consequence of the interaction between personality traits and context. Prior research suggested that individual personalities predicted feedback-seeking behavior. This study investigated a broad personality trait, termed core self-evaluations and examined the moderate effect of core self-evaluations to the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior.
Since Ashford and Cummings (1983) put forward the concept of feedback-seeking behavior, it has been researched for more than three decades of years. However, very few Chinese scholars do this research. Individuals’ feedback-seeking behavior and their home culture are inseparable. In China, high power distance and face cultures make individuals’ feedback-seeking behavior specific.\[13\] Chinese are much sensitive to uncertainties, in addition, high self-esteem and face awareness make Chinese people unwilling to seeking feedback from others, especially by direct inquiry way.\[14\]

Therefore, there is much vital significance to study feedback-seeking behavior under Chinese cultural context. Additionally this study tries to shed light on how transformational leadership influences their employees’ feedback-seeking behavior. In this study, we therefore take the view that individuals value feedback as an important resource throughout their organizational tenure that helps them “produce” goals.\[15\] Thus, understanding how transformational leadership affects employees’ feedback-seeking behavior and how core self-evaluations moderate the relationship between them is an important area for investigation.

Fig.1 presents the research model in this study. The hypotheses and discussion presented in subsequent paragraphs gives the rationale for the three variables.

![Fig.1 Research model](image)

### 2 Theory and hypotheses

#### 2.1 Feedback-seeking behavior

In consideration of the unilaterally traditional organizational socialization tactics, the concept of feedback seeking behavior was proposed from the perspective of individual factors. Feedback-seeking behavior refers to the proactive search by individuals for informal, evaluative information about their work.\[16\] Feedback-seeking can be understood as a process that is comprised of three stages: motivation, cognitive processing, and behavior.\[16\] In addition, feedback-seeking behavior was defined as individuals’ proactive search for evaluative information about their performance.\[17\] Prior empirical research has mainly focused on feedback seeking in the service of fitting in, of adapting to a setting. Feedback seeking about one’s performance can also contribute to dynamic and creative processes and performances.\[18\] Mostly about the feedback seeking behavior research for its basic definition, using Ashford in 1983 put forward the concept of\[19\].

One distinguishing feature of feedback-seeking behavior is that it refers to feedback that is proactively sought. This is in contrast to feedback that is passively received, for example, at the discretion of a supervisor. Another distinguishing feature of feedback-seeking behavior is that it refers to informal – that is, day-to-day – feedback information. This is in contrast to formal feedback such as that received during the performance appraisal.\[5\]

Additionally feedback indicates how others perceive and evaluate an individual's behavior.\[15\] Ashford(1986) suggested that individuals use one of two distinct strategies to obtain information from their environments: feedback inquiry and feedback monitor.\[6\] Ashford (1985) points out that the purpose of individual feedback seeking mainly includes four aspects: (1) to determine the performance of individuals in the present position; (2) to assess the potential of individual ascension; (3) determine the social behavior of individuals in the work environment appropriate or not. (4) to assess individual basic skills and ability enough to do the job.\[15\]

This research mainly studies the interaction between supervisors and subordinates feedback process. And in this study, we define feedback-seeking behavior as individuals’ conscious devotion of effort to seek evaluation information about their behaviors and personal development from their supervisors.

#### 2.2 Transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior

Transformational leadership was defined as a reflection of the traits and behaviors that are necessary for initiating change.\[20\] And transformational leadership refers to those leaders who empower followers and pay attention to their individual needs and personal development, challenge them to be innovative problem solvers, and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes.\[21\] Talking to the components of transformational leadership, it consists of intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, idealized influence (or charisma) and individualized consideration.

Much evidence has accumulated to demonstrate that transformational leadership can increase individuals’ feedback-seeking behavior. Transformational leadership is expected to affect feedback-seeking behavior by decreasing the costs associated with FSB. Through coaching, one-on-one contact, and intellectual stimulation, a perceived transformational leadership style should lower inference, face loss, and effort costs of information seeking.\[22\] When leaders show individualized consideration for their subordinates, the costs associated with seeking feedback decrease.\[23\] In addition, transformational leaders create a context where employees feel safe to speak up and ask for additional information, and by instilling feedback-seeking norms and role modeling, the face-loss costs associated with seeking feedback decrease.\[24\]
2.3 The moderating effect of core self-evaluations

According to Judge et al. (1997), core self-evaluations is a broad, latent, higher-order trait indicated by four well established traits in the personality literature: self-esteem, self-efficacy, neuroticism, locus of control. Core self-evaluations refers to the individuals’ basic evaluations and estimations about their abilities and values. Much evidence has accumulated to demonstrate that the higher the level of individuals’ core self-evaluations, the more confident they will be, the more positive they explain the received information, and they will be more sure about the positive relationship between the efforts and performance, consequently, their self-protection awareness is more weak, and they will be more willing to accept the negative information from the surroundings in the organization. Since the degree of individuals’ core self-evaluations is different, the frequency of feedback they proactively seek should be different. That is to say, the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior has its own individual difference.

A cost-value framework has been used as the dominant theoretical model of most studies on FSB in organizations. The general assumption underlying this cost-value framework posits that employees make a conscious assessment of the costs and values that are associated with FSB. Generally, this cost-value analysis is regarded as the primary determinant of subsequent FSB. Perceived feedback costs contain self-costs, impression-management costs and effort costs. Individuals may feel that others will view their feedback seeking as a sign of low ability or insecurity. Especially, when employees are facing their supervisors, they pay more attention on protecting them from leaving a bad impression.

Individuals with low core self-evaluations aren’t confident with their abilities, and seem more negative. Thus, the more feedback they passively receive from supervisors, the less they proactively seek. Their perceived value of feedback decreases, but perceived costs of feedback increases. They are more fearful to receive negative feedback, particularly from their superiors.

Individuals with high core self-evaluations seemed more optimistic and positive with themselves, and they adopted more positive coping ways dealing with the environmental stress. Thus, they will deal with feedback more positively. Since transformational leaders tend to give their subordinates more feedback by inspirational motivation, idealized influence (or charisma), individualized consideration and so on. Williams et al. (1999) showed unsolicited feedback people passively receive from supervisors is a form of supportiveness, and high core self-evaluations individuals can perceive the value and supportiveness of feedback more; Thus, it will stimulate them to seek more feedback to achieve the objective. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Transformational leadership significantly influences feedback-seeking behavior.
questionnaire to their colleagues to complete. Participants were promised that their individual responses would remain confidential. No names or other well as requests for demographic information. Completed surveys were placed into sealed envelopes and returned to the author in postage-paid envelopes. Four hundred and seventy-four employees accepted and qualified for the survey, of which 417 returned surveys were usable, yielding an effective response rate of 80.19%. Respondents had the following characteristics: 59.5 per cent of the sample was male and 40.5 per cent was female. The average age was 32.3 years with a range of 21 years to 57 years. The average organizational tenure was 7.5 years with a range of 3 months to 32 years. In terms of level in their organization, 79.6 per cent of respondents were entry-level, 12.5 per cent were between entry-level and middle-management, 6.5 per cent were middle-management, 1.4 per cent was senior-management. Given the level of education, 10.1 per cent of respondents were college and below, 84.4 per cent were bachelor, 5.5 per cent were master and above.

3.2 Measures
We measured transformational leadership by using the twenty-item scale from the MLQ (5X, Rater Form). All items used a 5-point Likert-type rating scales where “1” equaled “strongly disagree” and “5” equaled “strongly agree”. Furthermore, the scale was complete by the employees to rate their supervisors. The items are scored so that the greater the score, the greater the perceived transformational leadership. A sample item is “Considers me as having different needs, abilities, and aspirations from others” The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the scale was 0.937. Items measuring feedback-seeking behavior were adopted from the scale developed by Ashford. Four items concerning the frequency of feedback-seeing only from supervisors were used, and respondents reported their agreement with the items using five point Likert-type rating scales, with anchors ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. According to identifying characteristics were collected. And the survey instrument included items measuring all variables, as

the context, we changed the expression of the original items, but kept the semantic unchanged. A sample item is “I often seek feedback from my supervisor about my work performance”, The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the scale was 0.782.

Scales for core self-evaluations (6 items) were drawn from past work by Judge et. al. Participants were asked to evaluate themselves on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item is “I am confident I get the success I deserve in life”. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the scale was 0.865.

Prior research has shown that gender, age, organizational tenure, educational level and job position each influence feedback-seeking, therefore they were included as control variables. Each variable was measured with a single item. For example, gender was measured and coded with male as 1 and female as 2; organizational tenure was measured with the following item: “How long have you worked in your current position?” Respondents indicated the number of years and months.

4 Results
Descriptive statistics for the transformational leadership, feedback-seeking behavior, core self-evaluations and control variable are presented in Tab.1. The table provides the mean, standard deviation, correlations and reliability for each of these variables. The results showed that, there exists significant relation among the study variables. The results indicated that there was a negative relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior (r =-0.127, p<0.01). In addition, employees’ core self-evaluations had a negative effect on feedback-seeking behavior (r =-0.287, p<0.01).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>1.405</td>
<td>0.492</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>2.844</td>
<td>1.563</td>
<td>-0.130</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Education</td>
<td>1.954</td>
<td>0.393</td>
<td>0.108</td>
<td>-0.169</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Job position</td>
<td>1.298</td>
<td>0.652</td>
<td>-0.135</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Organizational tenure</td>
<td>2.715</td>
<td>1.298</td>
<td>-0.110</td>
<td>0.866</td>
<td>-0.283</td>
<td>0.363</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transformational leadership</td>
<td>3.394</td>
<td>0.604</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.240</td>
<td>-0.031</td>
<td>(0.937)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>3.422</td>
<td>0.733</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.229</td>
<td>-0.116</td>
<td>0.611</td>
<td>(0.865)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Feedback-seeking behavior</td>
<td>3.105</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>-0.131</td>
<td>0.023</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.044</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>-0.127</td>
<td>-0.287</td>
<td>(0.782)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Note: *p<0.01, p<0.05, N=417.
Tab.2 The moderating effect of core self-evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Step1</th>
<th>Step2</th>
<th>Step3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.126*</td>
<td>-0.121*</td>
<td>-0.124**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>-0.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>0.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job position</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.119*</td>
<td>0.111*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational tenure</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational leadership</td>
<td>-0.142**</td>
<td>0.060</td>
<td>0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>-0.352***</td>
<td>-0.352***</td>
<td>-0.308***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformational leadership × Core self-evaluations</td>
<td>0.155**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.095***</td>
<td>7.710***</td>
<td>8.086***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>0.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001, N=417.

All hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple linear regression, with age, organizational tenure, gender, job position and educational level as control variables. In the first step of the regression, the control variables were entered into the equation as the independent variables. In the second step of the regression, transformational leadership was entered as the independent variable into the equation. Hypotheses 1 addressed the significant impact that transformational leadership may have on feedback seeking, after consideration of the control variables. Results showed that transformational leadership decreased feedback-seeking behavior from supervisors (β=-0.142, p<0.01). Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

In order to test the moderating effect of core self-evaluations on the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback seeking behavior, we conducted the hierarchical regression analysis. In step 1, the control variables, gender, age, organizational tenure, educational level and job position, and the independent variable transformational leadership were entered into the equation. Then, in step 2, the moderate variable-core self-evaluations, was added to the model, in step 3, the interaction of transformational leadership and core self-evaluations was entered into the equation.

Tab.2 shows the moderating effect of core self-evaluations on the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior. Hypotheses 2 predicted a significant interaction effect between transformational leadership and core self-evaluations on feedback-seeking behavior. As expected, step 3, in which the interaction effect was added to the equation in order to predict feedback-seeking behavior, was significant (β=0.155, p<0.01). Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

In order to interpret the moderate effect, we followed the procedure proposed by Aiken and West (1991).[37] The graphical representations of the significant interaction effect is depicted in Fig. 2. CSE represents core self-evaluations, and TL represents transformational leadership. The dependent variable in this fig.1 is feedback-seeking behavior. As expected, transformational leadership was positively related to feedback-seeking behavior for employees with high core self-evaluations, whereas this relationship for employees with low core self-evaluations was negative. These results confirmed Hypotheses 2.

5 Conclusions and discussion

5.1 Findings
Research has shown that feedback-seeking leads to many beneficial outcomes including higher job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior, and lower turnover intentions.[38][39] What influences people to engage in feedback-seeking? The purpose of this study was to increase our understanding of the role an individual’s context may also play. This study focused on transformational leadership.
All of the hypotheses put forward in this study were supported. Results showed that transformational leadership decreased feedback-seeking behavior. As the resource metaphor suggested that feedback is a valuable resource to individuals for achieving various objectives such as increasing job performance; Consequently, when individuals deem they do not have adequate feedback, they value more of this resource and seek out more for acquisition from others; it also suggested that the more feedback people passively receive through carrying out their work activities, the less additional feedback they will require or desire and therefore seek. Thus, transformational leaders are used to giving feedback to their subordinates and leave little room for employees to seek additional feedback.

In addition, core self-evaluations moderated the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior.

In summary, the results of this study show that the higher level transformational leadership employees perceive their supervisors, the less they seek feedback from supervisors. However, employees with high core self-evaluations intend to seek more feedback when they perceive higher transformational leadership of their supervisors; by contrast, employees with low core self-evaluations avoid seeking feedback from their supervisors when they perceive the higher transformational leadership, cause feedback-seeking is a costly activity.

5.2 Limitations

Despite the findings, this study has its limitations. First, since the data were self-reported, there is a chance respondents were biased in providing their responses. In order to reduce the likelihood of this occurring, this study adopted some procedural remedies from Podsakoff et al.’s (2003). In the introduction of questionnaires, participants were promised that first; their individual responses would remain confidential. No names or other identifying characteristics were collected. Second, they were told that there are no right or wrong answers. Third, they were asked to respond honestly to all the survey items.

A second limitation is that there is a chance the relationships were influenced by common method bias. Podsakoff et al. (2003) reported that put the dependent variables before the independent variables when designing the questionnaire was a good way to reduce common method bias. Thus, in the survey, the feedback-seeking items appeared before the transformational leadership items. In addition, we carried out a Harmon’s one-factor test to test the common method bias. When all 35 items representing eight feedback-seeking items appeared before the independent variables when designing the questionnaire, the amount of variance explained by one selected factor is 20.2%. Thus, while common method bias cannot be ruled out completely, the results of the Harmon’s one-factor test suggest it was not present in the data.

A third limitation of the study is that the data were collected cross-sectionally. Causal research requires that the independent variable occur prior to the dependent variable. While it is logical to assume that transformational leadership precedes feedback-seeking behavior, causation can only be inferred from the relationships found in the data. Future research should retest the hypotheses using a design that allows causality to be more conclusively determined such as a longitudinal field survey.

5.3 Theoretical and practical implications

This study contributes to the research area of transformational leadership, core self-evaluations and feedback-seeking behavior. In contrast to prior research, this study examined the negative effect between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior by viewing feedback as an important resource. There is of great significance to investigate feedback-seeking from a resource perspective. And based on Chinese cultural context, individuals’ feedback-seeking behavior has its own specific. The relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking presents a situation where people seek feedback less frequently because they appear to have a lower requirement or need for it.

It should be noticed that, employees who perceive higher transformational leadership intend to passively receive more feedback, and it may make them value the additional feedback less, then they proactively seek feedback less. Therefore, organizations should understand that the lack of feedback-seeking behavior is not indicative of something detrimental and allow it to proceed without remediation. The moderating effect of core self-evaluations to the relationship between transformational leadership and feedback-seeking behavior presents a situation where people seek feedback less frequently because they have lower core self-evaluations. It would be helpful for them if organizations provide a more opening environment to reduce the self-cost of feedback-seeking.

Finally, the findings of this study have implications for organizations interested in using feedback management behavior to improve organizational performance. In management practice, people should be aware of the value employees attach to their feedback, and supervisors should pay more attention on giving more constructive feedback and make feedback-seeking encouraged.

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Leadership Quarterly

Effectiveness.


