

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/229810085>

Goal orientations and the seeking of different types of feedback information

Article · December 2010

DOI: 10.1348/096317906X103410

CITATIONS

51

READS

332

2 authors:



[Onne Janssen](#)

University of Groningen

56 PUBLICATIONS 2,721 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Jelle T Prins](#)

Medisch Centrum Leeuwarden

21 PUBLICATIONS 548 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Goal orientations and the seeking of different types of feedback information

Onne Janssen^{1*} and Jelle Prins²

¹University of Groningen, The Netherlands

²University Hospital of Groningen, The Netherlands

Based on the goal orientation model of feedback-seeking behaviour, goal orientations are proposed to influence employees in the type of information they seek from knowledgeable others in the work environment. As hypothesized, a survey conducted among 170 medical residents of a Dutch university hospital showed that a learning-approach goal orientation had a positive relationship with the seeking of self-improvement information and a negative relationship with the seeking of self-validation information. In contrast, a performance-approach goal orientation was negatively related to the seeking of self-improvement information, while a performance-avoidance goal orientation was positively related to the seeking of self-validation information. Unexpectedly, a performance-avoidance goal orientation was also found to be positively related to the seeking of self-improvement information.

Employees in organizations seek feedback information to determine 'the correctness and adequacy of behaviours for attaining valued end states' (Ashford, 1986, p. 466). Obtaining information about how knowledgeable others such as supervisors, peers and subordinates evaluate their achievements can also help them develop a sense of competency (VandeWalle, 2003). Extant empirical research has significantly contributed to our understanding of the function of feedback-seeking in adaptation processes (for an overview, see Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). Notwithstanding, VandeWalle (2003) has recently noted that the picture of many aspects of feedback-seeking behaviour is still incomplete. An important shortcoming is the lack of insight into the role of individual differences in the feedback-seeking process (Herold & Fedor, 1998, 2003; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Another limitation is that empirical research has focused primarily on the frequency with which individuals seek feedback. Too little attention has yet been paid to the notion that individual differences or situational antecedents may influence other dimensions of the feedback-seeking process, such as the type of information that employees seek (Miller & Jablin, 1991; VandeWalle, 2003).

*Correspondence should be addressed to Onne Janssen, University of Groningen, Faculty of Management and Organization, Human Resource Management and Organizational Behavior, Dierenriemstraat 100, Postbus 800, 9700 AV Groningen, The Netherlands (e-mail: o.janssen@rug.nl).

The aim of the present study is to address these two shortcomings by using VandeWalle's (2003) goal orientation model of feedback-seeking behaviour to propose that the individual difference of goal orientation influences employees in the type of feedback information they seek. We build theory and test hypotheses predicting that employees with a dominant learning goal orientation (an orientation toward developing competence) seek information that is useful for improving their personal attributes, whereas their counterparts with a dominant performance goal orientation (an orientation toward demonstrating competence) tend to seek information for validating the adequacy of their personal attributes.

Research has identified monitoring and inquiry strategies for seeking feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). People can observe the situation and behaviours of others to collect information about the self (i.e. monitoring strategy) or can directly ask others for feedback information about the self (i.e. inquiry strategy). To be clear about our focal point, this study focuses on the inquiry strategy of feedback seeking by examining how goal orientation determines the type of information that employees seek from knowledgeable others in the surrounding work environment. Below, we first discuss the concept of goal orientation and then develop hypotheses about how distinct goal orientations lead employees to seek different types of information. We test these hypotheses in a field study conducted among 170 medical residents in a Dutch university hospital.

Goal orientations

Based on achievement goal theory and research (e.g. [Ames, 1992](#); [Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996](#); [Dweck & Leggett, 1988](#); [Farr, Hofmann, & Ringenbach, 1993](#); [Pintrich, 2000](#); [VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997](#)), VandeWalle (2003) proposes two broad classes of personal goal orientations to influence feedback-seeking behaviour processes: a learning goal orientation and a performance goal orientation. Individuals with a dominant learning goal orientation focus on developing competence by mastering new situations and acquiring new skills, whereas persons with a dominant performance goal orientation focus on demonstrating and validating the adequacy of their competence by seeking favourable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about their achievements ([VandeWalle, 2003](#)).

These distinct goal orientations are based on different implicit self-theories that individuals have about their personal attributes ([Dweck, 1999](#); [VandeWalle, 2003](#)). Learning-oriented individuals tend to hold an incremental theory reflecting beliefs that self-attributes such as intelligence, skills and abilities are dynamic, malleable entities that can be developed. They believe that effort is an appropriate strategy for developing self-attributes. Especially in challenging situations of task difficulty or task failure, they tend to persist and increase effort in order to achieve ability and personal development. Individuals with a performance orientation tend to hold an entity theory reflecting beliefs that self-attributes are fixed, uncontrollable entities that can hardly be developed. In their view, exerting extra effort and working hard often indicate inadequate levels of competence. Therefore, when facing task difficulty or task failure, performance-oriented individuals tend to withdraw from the task, as they believe that continued effort may draw attention to their competency deficiencies which would conflict with their goal of appearing competent (e.g. [Duda, 2001](#); [Dweck, 1999](#)).

Recent research in the achievement goal domain has proposed to bifurcate mastery and performance goal orientations into approach and avoidance versions. That is,

individuals with learning-approach goal orientations are assumed to focus on the development of competence through task mastery and gaining new skills, whereas individuals with learning-avoidance goal orientations strive to avoid deterioration, losing their skill, or leaving the task incomplete or un-mastered (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Likewise, performance-oriented individuals can be motivated either to demonstrate superior competence relative to others and obtain favourable judgments about their achievements (performance-approach goal orientation), or to avoid demonstrating inferior competence relative to others and receiving negative judgments about their achievements (performance-avoidance goal orientation) (e.g. Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; VandeWalle, 1997). As such, approach-oriented individuals tend to pursue beneficial outcomes, whereas avoidance-oriented employees tend to avert detrimental outcomes.

A final point worth noting is that several achievement goal orientations can coexist in a person, so that, for example, trying to develop competency is not necessarily inconsistent with striving to demonstrate competency (cf. Button *et al.*, 1996; Janssen & Van Yperen, 2004; VandeWalle, 1997). Thus, people vary in the extent to which they possess each of the distinct goal orientations. However, following VandeWalle's (2003) goal orientation model, we assume that individuals have a tendency to prefer one particular goal orientation to the others.

Goal orientations and the seeking of different types of information

Employees consider the potential value and cost of feedback seeking when deciding whether they should engage in feedback-seeking behaviour. Regarding the value, empirical research has identified instrumental or expectancy value and impression management value. Instrumental or expectancy value represents the perceived usefulness of feedback information for improving job performance and learning behaviours needed to achieve goals (e.g. Ashford, 1986; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997; VandeWalle, Ganesan, Challagalla, & Brown, 2000), whereas impression management value refers to using feedback seeking as a tool for bringing one's success to the attention of knowledgeable others to create favourable impressions (Ashford *et al.*, 2003; Morrison & Bies, 1991). Regarding the cost, researchers have recognized self-presentation cost, ego cost and effort cost. Self-presentation cost represents the embarrassment felt when asking for feedback may reveal uncertainty and draw attention to performance deficiencies (Ashford, 1986; Fedor, Rensvold, & Adams, 1992; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Employees suffer ego cost when they receive unfavourable feedback about the self (Ashford, 1989), while effort cost refers to the amount of effort that must be invested to obtain feedback information (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983).

VandeWalle's (2003) goal orientation model of feedback-seeking behaviour relies on the assumption that goal orientations influence how employees cognitively interpret the value and cost of feedback seeking. Based on this assumption, we propose that cognitions about these values and costs induced by goal orientations are related to the type of feedback information employees prefer to seek or to avoid. Given their beliefs about competence development, employees with a strong learning goal orientation are likely to focus on seeking information that is useful for improving personal attributes such as knowledge, skills and abilities (instrumental value of feedback seeking). In particular, information about inadequacies and deficiencies has high instrumental value because it points out where competencies are off track and which measures need to be

taken to get them on track again (cf. Tsui & Ashford, 1994). As such, learning-oriented employees are likely to interpret such negative feedback from others as diagnostic information that may improve self-insight and advance self-betterment. This notion is in accordance with the tendency of learning-oriented employees to escalate effort when facing setbacks and difficulties in task performance. Moreover, a survey study by Tuckey, Brewer, and Williamson (2002) found a learning goal orientation to be positively related to a desire for useful feedback information. In addition, VandeWalle and Cummings (1997) found in a scenario study a positive relationship between a learning goal orientation and perceived value of feedback seeking. These lines of reasoning and empirical research findings suggest that a learning goal orientation encourages employees to seek information that can be used for self-improvement.

However, the seeking of self-improvement information might be motivated more strongly through learning-approach goal orientations than learning-avoidance goal orientations. Learning-approach goal orientations differ from learning-avoidance goal orientations in terms of valence of competence. The difference in valence is that learning-approach goal orientations focus on improving competence and achieving personal growth, whereas learning-avoidance goal orientations have the avoidance of loss of competence and deterioration as their focal point of regulatory attention (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Learning-avoidance goal orientations imply two countervailing motivational forces regarding the seeking of self-improvement information. On the one hand, the learning component is likely to motivate employees to seek diagnostic self-relevant information that may have instrumental value for keeping up their knowledge, skills and abilities. However, on the other hand, the avoidance component of this goal orientation is likely to influence employees to interpret unfavourable feedback information about self-attributes as indications of deteriorating competence. In order to protect themselves from this potential ego cost, learning-avoidance-oriented employees can be expected to avoid unfavourable self-relevant feedback information. As these countervailing motivational forces are likely to keep each other more or less in balance, learning-avoidance goal orientations will fail to encourage employees to engage in seeking self-improvement information. Accordingly, we formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. A learning-approach goal orientation is positively related to the seeking of self-improvement information.

Employees with strong performance goal orientations are likely to associate seeking of self-improvement information with self-presentation costs (VandeWalle, 2003). Seeking information to improve one's self-attributes may reveal uncertainty to others and draw attention to competency deficiencies that conflicts with the purpose of appearing competent (performance-approach goal orientation) or the purpose of not looking incompetent (performance-avoidance goal orientation). Moreover, because of their belief that competence is a fixed entity, both performance-approach-oriented and performance-avoidance-oriented employees tend to interpret feedback as a judgment about the self (VandeWalle, 2003). Consequently, they suffer ego costs when hearing about inadequacies in their knowledge, skills and abilities which require improvement. Owing to the associated self-presentation and ego costs, performance-oriented employees should be motivated to avoid seeking information for self-improvement.

Some empirical support for these arguments can be inferred from the above-mentioned survey study by Tuckey *et al.* (2002), in which a performance-approach goal

orientation was found to be negatively related to the desire for useful feedback, and positively related to the desire to protect one's ego from the threat of negative feedback as well as to the desire to avoid creating an unfavourable image. In deviance with their hypothesis, however, a performance-avoidance goal orientation was found to be positively related to a desire for useful feedback. In spite of this deviant finding, we followed our line of reasoning and hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2. A performance-approach goal orientation is negatively related to the seeking of self-improvement information.

Hypothesis 3. A performance-avoidance goal orientation is negatively related to the seeking of self-improvement information.

Since performance goals influence employees to view feedback as a judgment about their self, performance-oriented employees can be expected to seek feedback information that has anticipated value for their ego. More specifically, employees with performance-approach goal orientations have an ego-oriented interest to focus on seeking favourable feedback about successful achievements in order to validate positive self-conceptions about the superiority of their competence relative to others. Seeking positive feedback information is likely to be used by employees with performance-avoidance goal orientations to assure themselves that their competence is not inferior relative to others. Moreover, performance goal orientations may encourage employees to seek affirmative feedback information to draw others' attention to their superior competence (induced by a performance-approach goal orientation) or to their adequate competence (induced by a performance-avoidance goal orientation). These considerations about ego value and impression management value suggest that both performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations can be expected to encourage employees to seek feedback information for self-validation. Accordingly,

Hypothesis 4. A performance-approach goal orientation is positively related to the seeking of self-validation information.

Hypothesis 5. A performance-avoidance goal orientation is positively related to the seeking of self-validation information.

As elaborated above, employees with learning-approach goals tend to seek diagnostic information and even appreciate unfavourable, negative feedback as it has instrumental value for self-insight and self-betterment. This instrumental focus on diagnostic, negative feedback is likely to decrease the tendency of seeking affirmative information for self-validation. It is more difficult to generate a prediction about how learning-avoidance goal orientations will relate to the seeking of self-validation information. On the one hand, the learning component of this goal orientation might encourage employees to avoid the effort cost of seeking affirmative feedback information as it has little instrumental value for maintaining their competence levels. However, on the other hand, the avoidance component might make the ego value of affirmative feedback information salient. That is, learning-avoidance-oriented employees may tend to obtain self-validation information to assure themselves they are not losing competence. These countervailing forces induced by effort cost and ego value are likely to balance each

other to the effect that learning-avoidance goal orientations are unrelated to the seeking of self-validation information. These arguments suggested the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6. A learning-approach goal orientation is negatively related to the seeking of self-validation information.

Method

Procedure and respondents

The hypotheses were tested in a field study conducted among medical residents in a Dutch university hospital. With its 7,500 employees and 1,300 beds, this hospital is one of the largest in The Netherlands. The hospital closely cooperates with the faculty of medical sciences of the university to which it is related, and takes a leading role in scientific research and the development of new treatments and forms of care. The sample of respondents is highly appropriate for the present study because medical residents have to perform in complex achievement situations. This means that they have to meet a complex set of job demands that are related to their medical work, training and socialization. Therefore, actively seeking feedback is important for medical residents to obtain information about how relevant constituents, such as their supervisors, peers and nurses, perceive and evaluate their behaviours and achievements.

We mailed questionnaires to all 310 medical residents of the hospital and asked them in an accompanying letter to participate in the research. Participants filled out questionnaires at home and returned them via pre-paid return envelopes. Out of the 310 medical residents who received a questionnaire, 170 questionnaires returned complete and usable resulting in a response rate of 55%. From this final sample of respondents, 53% was female. The average age of the respondents was 31.3 years ($SD = 3.25$) and the average duration of their training was 3 years ($SD = 1.51$).

Measures

Goal orientations

Employees' learning and performance goal orientations were assessed using a 20-item scale developed by Biemond and Van Yperen (2001). This scale is based on measures developed by Elliot and McGregor (2001) and Van Yperen and Janssen (2002). On a seven-point scale ranging from (1) *not at all important* to (7) *very important*, the respondents indicated how important each of the five performance-approach, five performance-avoidance, five learning-approach and five learning-avoidance goal orientations were to them. To gain some indication of construct validity, we conducted a principal component analysis to test the model of four distinct dimensions of goal orientation. Table 1 presents the results of this analysis as well as the formulations of the items. A four-factor model emerged in which the items loaded highly on the appropriate factors. The scales achieved appropriate levels of internal reliability: .91 for performance-approach orientation, .78 for performance-avoidance orientation, .84 for learning-approach orientation and .71 for learning-avoidance orientation.

Table 1. Results of principal component analysis of goal orientations^a

Items	Factors			
	1	2	3	4
In my work, it is important to me that . . .				
Performance-approach goal orientation				
I achieve at higher levels than others	.83			
I perform better than others	.84			
I am more competent compared to others	.87			
I receive better performance appraisals than others	.87			
I am the best	.84			
Performance-avoidance goal orientation				
I make no bad impression on others		.67		
I do not lose my face in front of others		.65		
I do not look incompetent towards others		.68		
Others do not think I am doing badly at work		.75		
Others do not think I achieve at lower levels than they do		.83		
Learning-approach goal orientation				
I can develop myself			.71	
I perform tasks from which I learn a lot			.82	
I can establish competence			.87	
I feel I am improving			.67	
I can learn as much as possible			.83	
Learning-avoidance goal orientation				
I perform tasks with little risk of failure				.65
I perform tasks I entirely control				.67
I have to do a task I am certainly able to manage				.79
I have to do tasks that are easy to perform				.80
I make no mistakes				.52
Eigenvalue	4.70	2.41	3.32	1.98
Percentage explained variance	23.51	12.04	16.64	9.89
Cronbach's alpha	.91	.78	.84	.71

^a Cross-loadings are lower than .27 and are not shown.*Type of information sought*

Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements about the seeking of self-improvement feedback information and five statements about the seeking of self-validation feedback information from knowledgeable others in the workplace. These 10 items were developed for the current study. Responses were provided on a five-point scale, ranging from (1) *strongly disagree*, to (5) *strongly agree*. Table 2 presents the item formulations as well as the results of a principal component analysis in which the seeking of information for self-improvement and the seeking of information for self-validation emerged as two distinct dimensions. These results reflect our assumption that self-improvement and self-validation information are two different types of information sought by employees. Cronbach's alpha was .73 for the seeking of self-improvement information, and .86 for the seeking of self-validation information.

Table 2. Results of principal component analysis of the seeking of different types of information^a

Items	Factors	
	1	2
I ask for feedback:		
Information for self-improvement		
To learn how I can master tasks	.77	
To learn how I can improve performing my work	.72	
To get information about how I can solve problems	.69	
To improve my knowledge and capabilities	.65	
To set more appropriate goals for myself	.64	
Information for self-validation		
Because I like to hear I am doing fine in my work and training		.86
To hear from others I am doing well		.85
To get compliments so that I feel good		.83
To reassure everything goes well		.77
To strengthen my self-confidence		.68
Eigenvalue	2.34	3.39
Percentage explained variance	23.87	33.87
Cronbach's alpha	.73	.86

^a Cross-loadings are lower than .25 and are not shown.

Covariates

To control for the possibility that socio-demographic differences in the predictor and outcome variables might lead to spurious relationships, *gender* (1 = male, 2 = female), *age* (in years) and *training years* were entered as covariates in the analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Means, standard deviations and zero-order Pearson correlations among all variables in this study are presented in Table 3. As can be seen, moderate correlations were found between the four distinctive goal orientations. The statistically non-significant correlation between the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation information indicates that respondents viewed self-improvement and self-validation information as two different types of feedback information that can be sought in the workplace.

Testing hypotheses

Hierarchical regression analyses consisting of three successive steps were conducted to test the hypotheses. In the first step, the socio-demographic variables were entered as covariates to control for relationships with the goal orientations and types of information sought. In the second step, we included the four goal orientations to test their hypothesized effects on the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation feedback information. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Univariate statistics and Pearson correlations among the variables^a

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.54	0.50								
2. Age	31.35	3.25	-.10							
3. Training years	2.99	1.51	-.04	.54***						
4. Learning-approach goal orientation	4.33	0.51	-.07	-.15 ⁺	-.12					
5. Learning-avoidance goal orientation	2.93	0.71	.12	.02	.19*	-.15 ⁺				
6. Performance-approach goal orientation	2.75	0.83	-.18*	.10	.06	.12	.12			
7. Performance-avoidance goal orientation	3.70	0.60	.23**	-.04	-.14 ⁺	.22**	.09	.30***		
8. Seeking of self-improvement information	3.82	0.59	.26***	-.26***	-.29***	.37***	-.10	-.14 ⁺	.24**	
9. Seeking of self-validation information	3.04	0.83	.12	-.06	-.11	-.09	.13 ⁺	.05	.37***	.13

^a *N* = 170.⁺ $p < .05$ (one-tailed significance); * $p < .05$ (two-tailed significance); ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed significance); *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed significance).

Table 4. Results of regression analyses

Step and variables entered	Seeking of self-improvement information		Seeking of self-validation information	
	1	2	1	2
(1) Gender	.24***	.16*	.11	.01
Age	-.12	-.09	.01	-.02
Training years	-.21*	-.16	-.12	-.08
(2) Learning-approach goal orientation		.31***		-.17*
Learning-avoidance goal orientation		-.03		.09
Performance-approach goal orientation		-.17*		-.06
Performance-avoidance goal orientation		.16*		.40***
R ² change	.15***	.13***	.03	.16***
Adjusted R ²		.26***		.15***

Standardized regression coefficients are reported, $N = 170$.

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed significance); ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed significance); *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed significance).

Seeking of self-improvement information

As expected, the seeking of self-improvement information was found to be positively related to a learning-approach goal orientation (Hypothesis 1), not related to a learning-avoidance goal orientation and negatively related to a performance-approach goal orientation (Hypothesis 2). Contrary to what was predicted in Hypothesis 3, we found a positive relationship between a performance-avoidance goal orientation and the seeking of self-improvement information.

Seeking of self-validation information

As expected, the seeking of self-validation information was found to be positively related to a performance-avoidance goal orientation (Hypothesis 5), negatively related to a learning-approach goal orientation (Hypothesis 6) and not related to a learning-avoidance goal orientation. We found no significant relationship between a performance-approach goal orientation and the seeking of self-validation information, whereas a positive relationship was predicted (Hypothesis 4).

Discussion

The current study proposes that the individual difference of goal orientation influences employees in the type of feedback information they seek from knowledgeable others in the work environment. As hypothesized, the present survey results revealed that employees with stronger learning-approach goal orientations focused more on the seeking of self-improvement information and less on the seeking of self-validation information. Learning-avoidance goal orientations were found to be unrelated to either type of information sought. The pattern of relationships found for performance goal orientations was more complex. Specifically, performance-approach and performance-avoidance goal orientations appeared to have opposite relationships with the seeking of

self-improvement information. As predicted, results showed that a performance-approach goal orientation tempered the seeking of this type of information. However, contrary to what was expected, the seeking of self-improvement information appeared to be encouraged by a performance-avoidance goal orientation. Furthermore, the predicted positive relationship between performance goal orientations and the seeking of self-validation information was found for the avoidance dimension but not for the approach dimension of this goal orientation.

To date, research in the field of feedback-seeking has primarily focused on the frequency of feedback seeking and neglected the notion that employees may differ in the type of feedback information they want to obtain. Another lack of insight concerns the role of individual differences in the feedback-seeking process. The current study addresses these shortcomings by proposing that employees may focus on different types of information when they seek feedback from knowledgeable others in the workplace. More specifically, we built theory and provided empirical evidence on how the individual difference of goal orientation influences employees in the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation feedback information. As such, this study underscores the need for research on how personal and situational antecedents influence not only the frequency with which employees seek feedback but also other dimensions of the feedback-seeking process, such as the type of information sought.

The present study found the seeking of self-validation information to be positively related to the avoidance dimension of a performance goal orientation but unrelated to the approach dimension of this goal orientation. The approach and avoidance dimension of a performance goal orientation differ from each other in terms of the valence of competence. That is, performance-avoidance goal orientations motivate employees to avoid looking incompetent to others, whereas performance-approach goal orientations have the demonstration of superior competence to others as their focal point of regulatory attention. Apparently, it is the fear of failure rather than the desire to show superior competence that drives employees to seek self-validation feedback information. Prior research suggests that individuals with performance-approach goal orientations have more confidence in their abilities and are more positive and optimistic about their performance than individuals with performance-avoidance goal orientations (Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Lee, Sheldon, & Turban, 2003). Possibly, these higher levels of self-confidence and optimism make performance-approach-oriented employees less worrisome about their competence and therefore less directed at seeking self-validation feedback.

VandeWalle (2003) suggested that the approach and avoidance dimensions of performance goal orientations have similar influences in the feedback-seeking process. Contradictory to this suggestion, the present study found the avoidance and approach dimension of this goal orientation to have opposite relationships with the seeking of self-improvement information. That is, as expected, we found this type of information sought to be negatively related to a performance-approach goal orientation. However, unexpectedly, a performance-avoidance goal orientation appeared to be positively related to the seeking of self-improvement information. Although the latter finding was unexpected, it is in line with a study by Tuckey *et al.* (2002) showing a positive relationship between a performance-avoidance goal orientation and a desire for useful information. These convergent findings suggest that individuals with a performance-avoidance goal orientation have a tendency to focus on the instrumental value of self-improvement information and to neglect the potential self-presentation and ego cost associated with the seeking of this type of information. Apparently, the fear of

performing worse than others encourages performance-avoidance-oriented employees to seek feedback information not only for self-validation purposes but also for improving their achievements. As such, the seeking of self-improvement information seems to be a strategy for these employees to regulate their fear of failure thereby putting aside concerns about self-presentation and ego costs.

As with all research, this study has some limitations that should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design of the present study did not allow us to test the direction of causality among the goal orientations and the seeking of different types of feedback information. The results are vulnerable to opposite or bi-directional relationships due to the possibility that feedback seeking might shape goal orientations. However, there are some arguments against this possibility of reversed causality. Goal orientations are conceived as rather stable personal characteristics fostered by self-theories about the nature and development of personal attributes people have (Dweck, 1999). In contrast, the seeking of feedback is a typical context variable found to be dependent upon the individual difference variable of goal orientation (VandeWalle, 2003; VandeWalle & Cummings, 1997). Moreover, theory and empirical research have persuasively presented goal orientation as a major cause of cognitions, perceptions and behaviours in achievement situations (e.g. Barron & Harackiewicz, 2000; Button *et al.*, 1996; Farr *et al.*, 1993; Pintrich, 2000). Hence, goal orientation can be considered as an antecedent rather than a consequence of feedback seeking. Nonetheless, longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to provide evidence of causation.

A second limitation concerns possible common method variance in the relationships between the self-report measures of goal orientation and type of information sought. However, it is hard to imagine that the respondents in this study would artifactually have caused the differential pattern of relationships for learning and performance goal orientations with the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation feedback information. Moreover, the results of the principal component analyses indicated satisfactory discriminant validity for both the distinct dimensions of goal orientations and the different types of information sought. These considerations temper concerns that common method variance might be a major problem in this study.

A third limitation is that the sample consisted of medical residents from a university hospital. As medical residents have to meet both work and training demands, they have to perform complex jobs. Job characteristics and particular organizational factors might vary with respect to the importance of feedback seeking for adequate job performance. Therefore, generalization of the present results regarding employees performing other job duties in other types of organizations awaits further empirical examination.

A fourth, theoretically important, limitation is that this study focused on the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation feedback information and omitted from consideration other types of information. Given the bifurcation of mastery and performance goal orientations into approach and avoidance dimensions, individuals primarily concerned with avoiding loss of competence (learning-avoidance goal orientation) might prefer obtaining information about noticeable decrements or declines rather than information about self-betterment. Likewise, individuals with performance-approach goal orientations might prefer obtaining information showing they perform better than others, whereas individuals with performance-avoidance goal orientations might prefer seeking information showing they do not perform worse than others. Thus, future research might develop a more comprehensive typology of different kinds of feedback information that employees might seek in the workplace, and might

explore how the distinct goal orientations differentially relate to these different information types.

Finally, this study did not consider how different sources of feedback might influence the effects of employees' goal orientations on the seeking of self-improvement and self-validation information. Employees can seek information from different sources of feedback in the workplace, such as leaders, colleagues and subordinates. A study by [Janssen and Van Yperen \(2004\)](#) showed that employees with stronger learning-approach goal orientations developed and maintained higher-quality exchange relationships with their leaders, whereas leader-member exchanges were of lower quality for employees with stronger performance-approach goal orientations. Owing to the higher-quality leader-member exchanges, employees with stronger learning-approach goal orientations were found to be more effective on the job. These findings suggest that employees with different goal orientations differ in the extent to which they approach and utilize their leaders as sources of job-relevant feedback information. Thus, information from different sources of feedback seems to represent different values and costs for employees with different goal orientations. Therefore, goal orientations can be expected to interact with sources of feedback in their effects on the type of feedback information employees seek. Future research is needed to explore how sources of feedback shape the role of goal orientations in the feedback-seeking process.

The findings of the current study suggest some practical implications. Training programmes can help employees to become aware of the nature and impact of their goal orientations underlying the type of information they seek from knowledgeable others in the workplace. Specific interventions can be focused on changing self-theories and attitudes towards competence development so that employees are more likely to seek self-improvement feedback in the performance of their job duties (cf. [VandeWalle, Brown, Cron, Slocum, 1999](#)). As a result, employees might learn that seeking unfavourable feedback has highly instrumental value for self-insight and self-betterment, as it points out where their behaviours and performances are off track and which measures can be taken to get them on track again (cf. [Tsui & Ashford, 1994](#)).

This study contributes to the literature by showing that employees differ in the extent to which they seek self-improvement and self-validation feedback information in the workplace, and that these differences in type of information sought are associated with the individual difference of goal orientation. We hope that the study reported here inspires researchers in the feedback domain to develop more comprehensive typologies of feedback information that can be sought, and to identify other personal and contextual factors that influence the seeking of different information types. Moreover, future research might begin to explore how distinct types of feedback information that are obtained differentially relate to consequences such as job effectiveness and personal well-being.

References

- [Ames, C. \(1992\). Achievement goals, motivational climate, and motivational processes. In G. C. Roberts \(Ed.\), *Motivation in sport and exercise* \(pp. 161–176\). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetic Books.](#)
- [Ashford, S. J. \(1986\). Feedback seeking in individual adaptation: A resource perspective. *Academy of Management Journal*, 29, 465–487.](#)
- [Ashford, S. J. \(1989\). Self-assessments in organizations. In L. L. Cummings & B. Staw \(Eds.\), *Research in organizational behavior* \(Vol. 11, pp. 133–174\). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.](#)

- Ashford, S. J., Blatt, R., & VandeWalle, D. (2003). Reflections on the looking glass: A review of research on feedback-seeking behavior in organizations. *Journal of Management*, 29, 773-799.
- Ashford, S. J., & Cummings, L. L. (1983). Feedback as an individual resource: Personal strategies of creating information. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 32, 370-398.
- Barron, K. E., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2000). Achievement goals and optimal motivation: A multiple goals approach. In C. Sansone & J. M. Harackiewicz (Eds.), *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: The search for optimal motivation and performance* (pp. 229-254). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Biemond, J. M., & Van Yperen, N. W. (2001). *Generalized achievement goal orientation: Development and validation of a questionnaire*. Paper presented at the WAOP-Conference 2001, Tilburg, The Netherlands.
- Button, S. B., Mathieu, J. E., & Zajac, D. M. (1996). Goal orientation in organizational research: A conceptual and empirical foundation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 67, 26-48.
- Duda, J. L. (2001). Achievement goal research in sport: Pushing the boundaries and clarifying some misunderstandings. In G. C. Roberts (Ed.), *Advances in motivation in sport and exercise* (pp. 129-182). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. Ann Arbor, MI: Psychology Press, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 256-273.
- Elliot, A. J. (1999). Approach and avoidance motivation and achievement goal. *Educational Psychologist*, 34, 169-189.
- Elliot, A. J., & Church, M. A. (1997). A hierarchical model of approach and avoidance achievement motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 218-232.
- Elliot, A. J., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (1996). Approach and avoidance achievement goals and intrinsic motivation: A mediational analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 461-475.
- Elliot, A. J., & McGregor, H. A. (2001). A 2 × 2 achievement goal framework. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 501-514.
- Farr, J. L., Hofmann, D. A., & Ringenbach, K. L. (1993). Goal orientation and action control theory: Implications for industrial and organizational psychology. In C. L. Cooper & I. T. Robertson (Eds.), *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 8, 191-232.
- Fedor, D. B., Rensvold, R. B., & Adams, S. M. (1992). An investigation of factors expected to affect feedback seeking: A longitudinal field study. *Personnel Psychology*, 45, 779-805.
- Herold, D. M., & Fedor, D. B. (1998). Individuals' interactions with feedback environment: The role of domain-specific individual differences. In K. M. Roland & G. R. Ferris (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resource management* (Vol. 16, pp. 215-254). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Herold, D. M., & Fedor, D. B. (2003). Individual differences in feedback propensities and training performance. *Human Resource Management Review*, 13, 675-689.
- Janssen, O., & Van Yperen, N. W. (2004). Employees' goal orientations, the quality of leader-member exchange, and the outcomes of job performance and job satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 368-384.
- Kluger, A. N., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: A historical review, meta-analysis and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119, 254-284.
- Lee, F. K., Sheldon, K. M., & Turban, D. B. (2003). Personality and the goal-striving process: The influence of achievement goal patterns, goal level, and mental focus on performance and enjoyment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88, 256-265.
- Miller, V. D., & Jablin, F. M. (1991). Information seeking during organizational entry: Influences, tactics, and a model of the process. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 92-120.

- Morrison, E. W., & Bies, R. J. (1991). Impression management in the feedback-seeking process: A literature review and research agenda. *Academy of Management Review*, 16, 522-541.
- Pintrich, P. R. (2000). The role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 451-502). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Tsui, A. S., & Ashford, S. J. (1994). Adaptive self-regulation: A process view of managerial effectiveness. *Journal of Management*, 20, 93-121.
- Tuckey, M., Brewer, N., & Williamson, P. (2002). The influence of motives and goal orientation on feedback seeking. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 75, 195-216.
- VandeWalle, D. (1997). Development and validation of a work domain goal orientation instrument. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 57, 995-1015.
- VandeWalle, D. (2003). A goal orientation model of feedback-seeking behaviour. *Human Resource Management Review*, 13, 581-604.
- VandeWalle, D., Brown, S. P., Cron, W. L., & Slocum, J. W. (1999). The influence of goal orientation and self-regulation tactics on sales performance: A longitudinal field test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84, 249-259.
- VandeWalle, D., & Cummings, L. L. (1997). A test of the influence of goal orientation on the feedback-seeking process. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 390-400.
- VandeWalle, D., Ganesan, S., Challagalla, G. N., & Brown, S. P. (2000). An integrated model of feedback seeking behavior: Disposition, context, and cognition. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85, 996-1003.
- Van Yperen, N. W., & Janssen, O. (2002). Feeling fatigued and dissatisfied or feeling fatigued but satisfied? Employees' goal orientations and their responses to high job demands. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45, 1161-1171.

Received 16 December 2004; revised version received 19 January 2006

Copyright of Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology is the property of British Psychological Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.