"For initiating performance feedback, male managers identified a direct and unilateral approach and female managers a participative approach that progressively escalates in directness."

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND EVALUATION OF FEEDBACK EFFECTIVENESS

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This study investigated factors that influence managers' conceptions and subordinates' perceptions of effective feedback. A social rules perspective was used to operationalize male and female managers' conceptions of effective negative feedback. In the first study, 68 male and female managers identified their optimal strategies for providing feedback to subordinates. Male and female managers endorsed different goals and tactics for giving negative feedback, particularly in terms of levels of participation and directness. In the second study, 116 male and female subordinates evaluated the comparative effectiveness and difficulty of these and other standard approaches to feedback. The female manager strategy was evaluated by both men and women as generally more task and relationship effective but not more difficult to enact.

Keywords: *feedback, social rules, gender, communication competence*

The task of giving feedback to staff in the workplace continues to pose questions and challenges regarding the constituent characteristics of effective feedback strategies and the factors influencing subordinates' perceptions of feedback. In a recent meta-analysis of the efficacy of feedback interventions, more than one third of interventions were found to actually decrease subordinates' work performance, with most verbal feedback interventions resulting in some level of ego threat (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Clearly, not enough is known about the "verbal technologies" of feedback to ensure consistently successful outcomes. The behavior of managers appears to reflect this uncertain state of affairs. Many managers avoid giving negative feedback to staff and report giving feedback as one of the most difficult and unpleasant tasks they must perform (Larson, 1986; Veiga, 1988). Thus, the present study was an attempt to further our understanding of what constitutes effective feedback strategies.

In the sections that follow, we review the literature on approaches to conceptualizing performance feedback, factors influencing feedback choices, and feedback effectiveness. Then, we report two studies focused on identifying the underlying characteristics of effective feedback.

APPROACHES TO CONCEPTUALIZING FEEDBACK

A number of general approaches to conceptualizing feedback may be discerned in the literature. We will focus on three of the most prominent—strategies, tactics, and goals—and will argue that a conceptualization including all three is the most robust model for understanding feedback.

FEEDBACK STRATEGY

The predominant approach to conceptualizing feedback focuses on the general form of the message. Baron (1993) usefully summarized research findings to identify strategies that differentiate destructive from constructive criticism. Much feedback theory is expressed in the form of strategic principles regarding message features, such as the degree to which messages are specific, timely, constructive, or considerate (Baron, 1988; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Maniero & Tromley, 1993). However, such features have been found to strongly covary (Larson, Glynn, Fleenor, & Scontrino, 1986), raising questions regarding their distinctiveness.

At the level of general strategy, two propositions regarding effective feedback can be identified as receiving consistent empirical support. First, effective feedback should contribute to knowledge of performance (Frese & Zapf, 1994) and the nature of the performance gap—that is, the gap between actual and desired performance. Thus, it should provide specific and unambiguous information regarding the task problem and knowledge of the correct solution (Butler, 1987; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Liden & Mitchell, 1985). Second, effective feedback processes should provide opportunities for participation by the receiver (Anderson, 1993). Subordinates may participate in a variety of ways. However, all forms of participation have been found to be strongly associated with subordinate satisfaction (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998).

Geddes and Lineham (1996), in a multidimensional scaling analysis of negative feedback strategies, generally reinforced this

pattern of findings. They identified the following four dimensions of negative feedback: (a) message content (explicit vs. implicit), (b) message style (constructive vs. destructive), (c) knowledge of performance context (high vs. low), and (d) standards of evaluation (inconsistent vs. clear). These dimensions collectively reflect the meta-strategies of providing motivating knowledge of performance and opportunity for participation.

Conceptualizing the interpersonal processes underlying a manager's approach to giving feedback (i.e., his or her feedback strategy) can be aided by framing the intervention as a form of social influence (Baron, 1993) and as a context of negotiation in which the concerns of two parties require balancing (Pruitt, 1998; Rakos, 1991). Interestingly, the primary themes of knowledge of performance and participation parallel the two underlying dimensions of influence strategies identified by Falbo and Peplau (1980): directness and interactiveness. The first dimension, directness, refers to the extent to which a strategy uses a direct or indirect style of influence: in terms of feedback, as assertive and specific versus a roundabout and general discussion of a performance issue or problem. The second dimension, interactiveness, describes the extent to which a strategy is bilateral or unilateral: in terms of feedback, a mutual and interactive definition versus a one-party prescription of the problem and solution.

FEEDBACK TACTICS

An alternative to conceptualizing feedback in terms of primary strategy is to frame a feedback event as a sequence of tactics or choices (Latting, 1992). This is consistent with the act-sequence paradigm of social behavior, which views tactical combinations as a process of linking appropriate sets of acts to achieve strategic objectives (Greene, 1990). Although there is limited knowledge of the ways different tactics are usually sequenced in influence attempts, we do know that most attempts include more than a single tactic (Barry & Shapiro, 1992). For example, Pruitt (1995), in an analysis of negotiation episodes, reported that people typically initiate with either an escalating-contending or a deescalating-

accommodating tactic prior to adopting a collaborating or problem-solving tactic. It may be that just as a consistently preferred order of tactics, or "persuade package" (Schank & Abelson, 1977), has been found for influence attempts (Aquinis, Nesler, Hosda, & Tedeschi, 1994), managers employ or at least endorse as appropriate standard combinations of interpersonal tactics (i.e., a "feedback package") for delivering negative feedback to staff.

However, the issue of tactical combinations in giving feedback has been the subject of limited investigation. One tactical choice that has received limited scholarly attention is the way in which positive and negative elements are sequenced in a feedback message. For example, Davies and Jacobs (1985) described the common approach of "sandwiching" a negative message between positive components (e.g., praise or reassurance) to reduce its impact.

FEEDBACK GOALS

Simply analyzing managers' strategies or combinations of tactics in delivering feedback yields an incomplete understanding of the feedback process. A number of researchers (Berger, 1997; Newton & Burgoon, 1990) have argued the need to better understand interpersonal communication as a strategic act involving the conjunction of objectives (or valued outcomes), strategies (or the general approaches for achieving objectives), and tactics (or specific behaviors and sequences of behavior that comprise strategies). In a similar vein, Geddes and Lineham (1996) called for research that more systematically investigates the relationship or linkage between managers' salient goals and their actual messages in the feedback process.

There has been some limited investigation of managers' goals in the feedback process. Pearce and Porter (1986) identified the conflicting expectations of maintaining a working relationship and improving subordinate performance. Geddes and Baron (1997) similarly, in a factor analysis of managers' concerns, identified two factors: concern for feedback effectiveness (i.e., a desire to improve performance and maintain employees' confidence and self-esteem) and concern for negative reaction (i.e., a desire to minimize aggres-

sive and retaliatory responses). Thus, these findings appear to indicate that the goal domains of negative feedback situations reflect the general functions reported for other strategic communication situations: achieving instrumental objectives, maintaining relationships, and maintaining participants' desired self-image or identity (Clark & Delia, 1979; Lineham & Egan, 1979; Newton & Burgoon, 1990).

What is less clear is the relationship between goals and strategies in managers' conceptions of effective feedback. A contribution of the present study will be to further elaborate the content of managers' goals in the performance feedback process and the specific behaviors they endorse as being consistent with or expressing their goals. Thus, this study seeks to identify managers' conceptions or schemas of effective feedback in terms of the guiding goals, general strategies, and component behavioral tactics that they endorse. This will enable a more integrated understanding of how managers think about the feedback process.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CONCEPTIONS OF FEEDBACK

Understanding how managers conceptualize effective feedback requires not only a more systematic assessment of goal structures, strategies, and tactical sequences but also for these to be understood in context. Effective feedback may be construed differently depending on the specific characteristics or requirements of the particular situation at hand. Although workplace situations may vary in terms of a wide range of factors, the relative gender and status of interactants (manager and subordinate) have been consistently identified as influencing both the enactment and perceptions of behavior (Carli, 1989; Sagrestano, 1992).

GENDER OF MANAGER

Although there is little direct evidence, there are indicators from other communication domains that male and female managers may

be likely to endorse different approaches to the task of providing feedback. For example, in efforts to resolve conflicts, women generally report that they use "soft" tactics (e.g., personal and affilitative) as a first resort more so than men, who report greater use of "hard" tactics (e.g., pressure and contention) (Carothers & Allen, 1999; Gruber & White, 1988; Offerman & Schrier, 1985; Pruitt, 1998). Relatedly, women in professional settings report that they are more likely to use affilitative (Baker, 1991; Lucas & Lovaglia, 1998) and indirect negotiation strategies (Sagrestano, 1992). This pattern of reported preferences is clearly consistent with Eagly and Johnson's (1996) finding from their meta-analysis of gender and leadership that the strongest evidence for gender differences in leadership style is the tendency for women to adopt a more participative and democratic style and men a more autocratic or directive style.

As well as differences in style, there is also evidence to suggest that women are generally more socially competent (Johnson & Ford, 1993; Smythe & Wine, 1980; Wilson & Gallois, 1993) both in terms of enacted behavior and the analysis of interpersonal contexts. Certainly in studies that have elicited male and female managers' expectations for managing interpersonally difficult situations (e.g., handling an aggressive subordinate) (Wilson, Lizzio, Whicker, Gallois, & Price, in press; Wilson, Lizzio, Zauner, & Gallois, 2001), although there was some overlap or commonality (e.g., rules for politeness, self-control, rationality, and self-defense/expression), male managers simply sanctioned themselves to use formal authority to deal with the issue, whereas female managers expected themselves to employ more interpersonally complex and facilitative modes of intervention. Accordingly, in the present study we expect male and female managers to endorse related but quite distinct goals and strategies for the effective giving of feedback to a subordinate. In particular, we expect that although both male and female managers' optimal approaches would include providing feedback in clear and specific terms (i.e., knowledge of performance), the female manager strategy would evidence a greater emphasis on relationship maintenance and participative processes.

GENDER OF SUBORDINATE

The limited organizational research provides mixed messages regarding the most effective ways to give feedback to male and female subordinates. On the one hand, there is indirect evidence that in situations of potential threat there may be an expectation to be more protective or chivalrous with women (Carli, 1990; Sagrestano, 1992). Relatedly, Wilson and Gallois (1985) found that negative assertive messages were seen as more socially acceptable when delivered to a man than to a woman. On the other hand, questions of subordinate role and task accomplishment rather than gender of the occupant may be more salient considerations for managers. This may be particularly so in contemporary cultural and organizational climates that at the very least espouse equal treatment of both genders. In the single study that directly addressed the role of subordinate gender in performance feedback situations, managers were found to use a consistent approach to giving performance feedback to male and female subordinates (Brewer, Socha, & Potter, 1996). In the present study, we expect both male and female managers to endorse similar goals and strategies for giving effective feedback to male and female subordinates.

EVALUATION OF MANAGERS' FEEDBACK BEHAVIOR

How might male and female managers enacting various feedback strategies be evaluated by their subordinates? Two contrasting views based on different conceptions of the salience of gender in the workplace are proposed. First, it may well be that female managers will be evaluated more harshly than their male colleagues for delivering any form of negative feedback to a subordinate. Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky (1992), in a meta-analysis of research investigating the evaluation of men and women in leadership roles, found a small general tendency for women to be devalued when leading in a stereotypically masculine (i.e., nonparticipative) style. This is consistent with a general pattern from the assertion literature for women enacting negative assertive behavior to be rated

more negatively than men (Rakos, 1991; Wilson & Gallois, 1993). From this gender role spillover perspective (Gutek & Morasch, 1982) (i.e., a carryover into the workplace of gender-based expectations), we would expect that female managers would be more negatively evaluated than men if they deliver performance feedback using a unilateral or nonparticipative strategy.

In extension of this perspective, a gender role congruence perspective would predict, as previously discussed, that male and female managers will identify, in line with traditional gender roles, different strategies for effective feedback. From this perspective we would also expect that male and female managers would be perceived as optimally effective when implementing their own gender-consistent feedback strategies, that is, when they are using a feedback strategy that is congruent with their gender role. Thus, from a gender role congruence perspective, managerially effective behavior is a function of gender-appropriate behavior.

In contrast to these two perspectives, there is also evidence to suggest that gender is decreasingly salient in organizational contexts and that managerial roles are increasingly defined and evaluated in gender-neutral terms (Blum, Fields, & Goodman, 1994). For example, Eagly and Johnson (1990, 1996) found in a meta-analysis of gender and leadership style that gender role differences were less pronounced in organizational contexts. Thus, from a managerial role perspective, which proposes the greater salience of the managerial role over the gender of its incumbent, it can be argued that the strategy itself and not the gender of the manager using it would be the focus of the evaluation. Both gender role congruence and managerial role perspectives will be evaluated in this study.

RESEARCH PROGRAM

This research program involved two studies with the collective aim of better understanding the strategic and contextual factors influencing perceptions of effective feedback. The overall aim of the first study was to identify male and female managers' conceptions of effective feedback. Social rules methodology (Argyle,

1983; Wilson & Gallois, 1993) appears to be a useful way of operationalizing the notion of feedback strategy (or more generally, interpersonal strategy) in terms of what cognitive theorists (e.g., Anderson, 1993) describe as people's "practical knowledge" relevant to a situation. The three-way interaction of situational features, goals, and behaviors can be expressed as contingent production rules (e.g., "In a situation of . . . if you wish to . . . then try . . . .) (Ohlsson, 1996) that delineate the application of behavioral strategies. In this sense, rule-goal sets for giving feedback can also be thought of as relational knowledge schemas or scripts that summarize managers' interpersonal and role-based understandings of appropriate behavior in a specific workplace context (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Baldwin & Sinclair, 1996). Rule-goal sets can be identified at the general level of feedback strategy and at the more specific level of component interpersonal tactics. Thus, we sought to systematically elaborate the sequences of goals and strategic and tactical behaviors that most managers describe as an effective feedback intervention and second, to identify systematic variations in this strategy as a function of the gender of manager and subordinates.

The aim of the second study was to understand subordinates' evaluations of the perceived effectiveness of feedback strategies. The male and female manager rule-goal sets identified in Study 1 were used to construct gender-consistent feedback responses. The comparative effectiveness of these and other standard approaches to feedback was systematically assessed in terms of both task and relationship effectiveness and perceived difficulty of enacting.

STUDY 1: IDENTIFYING MALE AND FEMALE MANAGERS' CONCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

The purpose of the first study was to identify the sets of prescriptive and proscriptive expectations (rule-goal sets) that male and female managers endorse for themselves in delivering an optimally effective feedback strategy. We sought to address the following questions: What do managers believe are the most effective ways to provide subordinates with performance feedback? To what extent

do male and female managers agree on what constitutes effective feedback?

Method

Participants. Sixty-eight White middle-class managers (32 men and 36 women) employed in a range of organizations were approached and volunteered to participate. Male managers had a mean age of 34 years (range = 29 to 72 years), with a mean of 14 years of full-time employment (range = 8 to 51 years), and a mean of 7 years of managerial experience (range = 4 to 32 years). Female managers had a mean age of 32 years (range = 23 to 60 years), with a mean of 10 years of full-time employment (range = 3 to 36 years), and a mean of 5 years of managerial experience (range = 1 to 32 years).

Procedure. An initial cross-section of experienced managers known to the researchers from a range of public, private, and community organizations was identified and asked to provide the names of other managers. Each manager was then contacted by phone and invited to participate in the study. Each manager was then sent the questionnaire by mail at their place of work and asked to return it within a 2-week period. Administration time was approximately 30 minutes.

Materials. A questionnaire using an open-ended approach to rule and goal identification was developed, using the methodology developed by Wilson and Gallois (1993). Participants were informed that the researchers were interested in their perceptions, given their managerial experience, of the most appropriate way to give negative feedback to subordinates. They were instructed that there were "no right or wrong or better or worse responses" and were encouraged to be specific and detailed in describing their understanding of an appropriate response. Participants were asked to provide written responses to two vignettes describing the specific situation of "providing feedback to a subordinate." To heighten realism and involvement, the vignettes were worded with participants placed in the manager's role. Responses were gathered

in four, counterbalanced, gender-status situational conditions: (a) male manager (participant) giving feedback to a male subordinate, (b) male manager giving feedback to a female subordinate, (c) female manager giving feedback to a male subordinate, and (d) female manager giving feedback to a female subordinate. Each vignette presented the same situation with the gender of the subordinate varied, as in the following:

> You are working with a (male/female) subordinate on an ongoing work project. After a time of working together, you experience an aspect of (his/her) work behavior as having some negative consequences for the project. You have decided that it's time to raise this issue with (him/her). What do you consider to be the most appropriate and effective way for you to raise this issue with your (male/female) subordinate?

After reading each vignette, managers were asked to describe the process of the interaction in terms of what they should say and do (prescriptive social rules) and what they should not say and do (proscriptive social rules) along with their reasons (social goals) when handling the particular situation. Finally, to ensure that conscious attention was given by managers to the gender of subordinate when formulating their strategies, they were asked to summarily reflect on what, if anything, should be similar or different in their respective optimally effective feedback strategies with male and female subordinates.

Manipulation check. A manipulation check was conducted to establish whether the situational descriptions had made the gender and status of interactants sufficiently salient for participants. Written responses were analyzed for the use of gender-appropriate pronouns (e.g., ask *her* for *her* reaction to your feedback and tell *him* directly) and status descriptors (e.g., the manager). The majority of participants provided either a gender (79%) or status (71%) descriptor in their responses.

Identification and categorization of social rules. The method of social rule analysis developed by Wilson and Gallois (1993) was adopted for the qualitative data analysis. Managers' written responses (what they should and should not say and do and accom-

panying reasons) were analyzed by two raters, one male and one female, who worked independently. Both raters were experienced researchers with a strong background in social rules methodology and communication skills training. The unit of analysis was a rule-goal combination (You should/should not . . . because . . . .) in a particular status-gender situation. Statements considered to convey a common meaning were grouped together. The coefficient of agreement between the two raters was .91 on this task (Cohen, 1960). This process produced 15 clusters of rule-goal statements for female managers and 8 clusters for male managers. To establish that a behavioral strategy was sufficiently shared to be termed a social rule, a criterion of 60% was applied to each of the clusters (Wilson & Gallois, 1993). This meant that for each condition, only those rules nominated by at least 60% of participants as being appropriate to that situation were retained. This criterion reduced the number of rule clusters to 12 for female managers and 6 for male managers.

Results and Discussion

Managers evidenced high levels of agreement (87% to 100%) in their endorsement of these gender-related rule-goal combinations. The rule-goal sets identified by male and female managers for initiating negative feedback are presented in Table 1.

Raters were also instructed to record the sequences in which behavioral strategies were nominated by participants. Each group of male and female managers evidenced a considerable degree of internal consistency in the order of proposed tactics. To some extent, this simply reflected a natural or necessary sequence (e.g., "inviting the subordinate to a private setting" is necessarily an opening tactic, and "deciding on a plan of action" is similarly a logical closing tactic). Eighty-three percent (30 of the 36) of female managers and 81% (26 of the 32) of male managers reflected the general sequences outlined in Table 1. Although six rules were common to both the male and female managers' responses, male and female managers evidenced clear differences in the content, emphasis, and order of the goals and behaviors included in their effective or ideal feedback strategy.

TABLE 1: Social Goals and Rule Sequences for Giving Negative Feedback to Male and Female Subordinates

	Initiation Strategy	
Goals	*Female Manager Sequence*	*Male Manager Sequence*
1. You should show respect for your subordinate and prevent embarrassment	1. By inviting the subordinate to a private setting (100%)[a]	1. By inviting the subordinate to a private setting (100%)
2. You give the subordinate an opportunity to self-appraise	2. By setting the scene for a personal project review by inquiring as to their progress on the project (e.g., How is X going? Any issues you wish to raise about X?) (92%)	
3. Maintain motivation and cooperation	3. By putting the feedback in context by initially acknowledging the positive aspects of their work or usual job performance (97%)	
4. Maintain work standards and preserve the relationship (female managers); maintain work standards and cooperation as well as asserting your authority (male managers)	4. By raising the issue of concern (i.e., an aspect of the subordinate's work behavior) without blame or criticism (100%)	4. By directly raising the issue of concern (i.e., an aspect of the subordinates work behavior) without blame or criticism and by being rational and unemotional (100%)
3. Maintain motivation and cooperation[b]		3. By affirming the subordinate's contribution and value to the project to date (87%)
5. Prevent the subordinate from getting upset or feeling hurt	5. By inviting his or her reaction to your feedback (100%)	

	Resolution Strategy	
Goals	*Female Manager Sequence*	*Male Manager Sequence*
6. Maintain your credibility and provide evidence to justify your concerns	6. By specifying examples of the behavior and the negative consequences for the project (i.e., specify behavior and consequences) (94%)	
7. Show you are fair-minded and involve the subordinate	7. By inviting the subordinate to respond to your feedback and give his or her understanding of the situation (92%)	
8. Build ownership and commitment for improvement	8. By inviting the subordinate to give his or her ideas on improving performance or the situation (92%)	
9. Show you value the subordinate	9. By commenting on the subordinates' ideas (88%)	
10. Attempt to improve the subordinate's performance	10. By giving your ideas on improving their performance or the situation (94%)	10. By offering practical guidance or advice by suggesting specific changes the subordinate could make (100%)
11. Get the best outcome for the project and the subordinate (female manager); create an open discussion (male manger)	11. By spending time discussing both sets of ideas (100%)	11. By inviting feedback from the subordinate on your suggestion (91%)
12. Ensure that a change happens in the subordinate's performance	12. By agreeing with the subordinate on a plan of action, including monitoring of progress (100%)	12. Deciding with your subordinate on an implementation strategy and a monitoring mechanism (100%)

a. Represents the percentage of managers endorsing each rule-goal combination.
b. The change in numbering indicates the sequence identified for male managers.

Although there was a systematic difference in the general feedback strategy described by male and female managers, no consistent variation was found in the rules endorsed for appropriate feedback as a function of gender of subordinate. That is, male managers endorsed similar strategies for giving feedback to male and female subordinates, as did female managers. This is consistent with previous findings that subordinate gender does not alter the way in which managers give performance feedback (Brewer et al., 1996). In confirmation of this, both male and female managers, in responding to the final reflective question, consistently reported that there should not be any difference in the most effective way to give feedback to male and female subordinates. Managers, of course, are here endorsing ideal rather than actual behavior.

Male managers' feedback strategy. Male managers generally described a six-step sequence for giving a subordinate feedback on their work performance. Their strategy for initiating or raising the issue included three steps: invite the subordinate to a private setting, directly and calmly raise the issue, and then affirm or reassure the subordinate of their value. The parallel goals endorsed in this phase involved (a) showing respect for the subordinate, (b) maintaining their ongoing work motivation and a cooperative working relationship, and (c) asserting managerial authority in the situation. Their subsequent strategy for resolving the issue included a further three steps: (a) offering practical advice, (b) inviting feedback on the advice, and (c) discussing and agreeing on an implementation strategy. The goals endorsed at this phase strongly emphasized a task focus on improving the subordinate's performance.

Female managers' feedback strategy. Female managers generally described a more elaborate 12-step sequence for giving feedback. Their strategy for initiating the interaction included 5 steps: (a) establish a private setting, (b) make general inquiries regarding work progress and invite subordinate self-appraisal, (c) acknowledge positive aspects of subordinate's work performance, (d) calmly raise the issue of concern, and (e) invite subordinate's reaction. Although female managers shared some of the content goals identified by the male managers (e.g., show respect and maintain motivation and standards), they also explicitly endorsed additional

process goals related to managing the interaction. In particular, female managers were more concerned with managing the context of feedback (e.g., give the subordinate an opportunity to raise the issue first) and the subordinate's reaction (e.g., prevent hurt and anger). Also, in contrast to male managers, female managers endorsed a strategy of affirming the subordinate's value prior to giving negative feedback.

The female managers' strategy for resolving the issue included a series of cycles of interaction around the tactics of problem analysis (e.g., specify behavior and consequences and then invite subordinate's perspective), problem solving (e.g., invite the subordinate to give ideas for improving the situation and then comment on these ideas and give your own), and action planning (e.g., spend time discussing both sets of ideas and agree on a plan of action). Once again, whereas male and female managers shared a concern with task outcomes, female managers also explicitly endorsed goals related to the use of participative and evidential processes for the building of subordinate's ownership and commitment.

The male and female approaches vary in both directness and interactiveness. The male manager's strategy for initiating the interaction is consistently direct (direct, person-specific discussion of performance issues) and unilateral (the manager defines the process and the problem). Although in terms of interactiveness the female manager's approach to initiation is consistently bilateral (mutual definition of process and problem), there is variation in levels of directness. The initiating strategy is indirect at the outset (a general discussion of issues), which then progresses to more direct engagement (specific discussion of the performance issue).

Summary of Study 1

In terms of methodology, the present findings confirm the utility of a social rules approach as a means of developing an integrated description (in terms of goals, strategies, and tactics) of interpersonal processes in general and feedback processes in particular. In terms of situational analysis, previous findings regarding the underlying structure of the context of giving feedback (e.g., Geddes & Barron's [1997] description of the dual managerial concerns of feedback effectiveness and managing negative reactions) have

been systematically elaborated by identifying not only the present range and sequence of salient situational goals but also linkages between goals and strategies. The relative content of the male and female strategies is consistent with previous findings for women to adopt both more participative and indirect approaches to work intervention (Eagly & Johnson, 1996; Sagrestano, 1992). The female manager strategy of "putting the feedback in context" (Rule 3) can be understood as a preventive intervention to reduce affective reactions resulting from self-oriented or meta-task processing of the feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). However, given the relative interpersonal sophistication of the female manager's strategy, the strategy may be or at least be seen to be more difficult to implement successfully.

The purpose of this first study was to document and analyze the expectations or goal-rule sets endorsed by male and female managers as characterizing effective feedback to a subordinate. Two distinct strategies were identified that although related to some extent, evidence key differences at the levels of both guiding goals and behavioral strategies. The necessary next step is, of course, evaluation of the comparative effectiveness of these strategies.

STUDY 2: EVALUATING THE RELATIVE EFFECTIVENESS OF MALE AND FEMALE MANAGERS' EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK STRATEGIES

The purpose of this second study was to systematically evaluate the perceived effectiveness of a range of strategies for giving feedback. The strategies endorsed by male and female managers were compared to three other strategies designed to reflect the range of potential managerial responses in this situation. One end of this feedback strategy continuum was a unilateral, negative feedback only strategy, and the other was an avoidant strategy involving a general inquiry but no feedback. A third strategy (feedback plus empathy) represented a balance between these extremes. Comparisons were made in terms of the task and relationship dimensions of effectiveness and the perceived level of difficulty in enacting each strategy. The following predictions were made.

The first question of interest in this study was: How salient is a manager's gender to a subordinate's perception of his or her effectiveness when delivering negative feedback? Two competing explanations are proposed here. As previously discussed, from a gender role congruence perspective we would expect that male and female managers would be evaluated by both men and women as more effective when enacting the feedback strategy based on their same gender rule-goal sets than when using the opposite gender rule-goal sets (i.e., a male manager enacting a male rules-based feedback strategy would be evaluated as more effective than when enacting a female rules-based strategy and vice versa). Contrastingly, a managerial role perspective suggests that the managerial role itself, more so than the gender of the person in it, is the primary focus for subordinates. From this perspective, we would expect that the more interpersonally sophisticated feedback strategy based on the female manager's rule-goal set would be evaluated as more effective by both men and women than the feedback strategy based on the male manager rule-goal set and all other feedback strategies.

Consistent with findings regarding the selective devaluation of women in leadership roles when acting authoritatively, it was proposed that:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Female managers will be evaluated as less effective than male managers when employing a negative feedback only strategy.

Consistent with the absence of variation of strategies based on the gender of receiver in Study 1, it was proposed that:

> *Hypothesis 2:* The perceived effectiveness of a manager's feedback strategy would not vary as a function of gender of subordinate or receiver (i.e., feedback strategies delivered to male and female subordinates would be evaluated similarly).

Given the relative complexity of the female manager strategy, it was proposed that:

> *Hypothesis 3:* The female manager strategy would be perceived as more difficult to implement than other strategies.

Given the avoidant nature of the no feedback strategy, it was proposed that:

Hypothesis 4: The no feedback strategy would be seen as the least difficult to implement.

Method

Participants. One hundred and sixteen White, middle-class participants (53 men and 63 women) undertook the study. Participants were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs and participated to gain course credit. Participants were not in any courses taught by the researchers and participated in the study in out-of-class sessions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were required to have at least 6 months' work experience. Male participants had a mean age of 26 years (range = 18 to 58 years), with a mean of 4.5 years of work experience (range = 6 months to 27 years). Female participants had a mean age of 23 years (range = 17 to 45 years), with a mean of 3.4 years of work experience (range = 6 months to 24 years). All were employed in white-collar occupations.

Stimulus materials: Video scripts. A script was written to operationalize the initiation and resolution stages for each of the five feedback strategies, resulting in 10 total scripts. The scripts were then validated by a panel of three expert raters (one male and two female raters) experienced in communication skills training to ensure an accurate representation of each strategy. Raters evaluated how well the scripts represented the male and female manager rule-goal sets and strategy descriptions of the three comparative feedback responses. Adjustments to scripts were made in accord with raters' feedback. The male and female manager strategies (see Table 2) were based on the sequences of behaviors (rule-goal sets) identified in Study 1 (see Table 1). The feedback only strategy emphasized task behavior and was based on the feedback only message component of the male and female managers' strategies in the initiation phase, for example:

> I've asked you here because there is an issue with the Housing project that I'd like to talk to you about, your style of contribution to team meetings. In the past few meetings you have been making some fairly forceful statements about the direction the project should take. The concern I have is that some of the junior team members seem to be holding back, and saying a lot less in meetings. This is an issue that I think is important and I would like to see addressed.

The feedback message plus empathy included the aforementioned response plus validating or empathic statements (e.g., "I understand meetings can be frustrating. I appreciate that this may not be easy for you."). The general inquiry/encouragement but no feedback strategy comprised an indirect or general approach to the issue emphasizing relationship behavior (e.g., "How are things going? Any issues? If there are any problems feel free to talk to me.").

Validity check. Prior to its use in this study, a further validity check was conducted on the male and female manager feedback strategies to ensure their perceived social appropriateness (i.e., that each in fact represented a response strategy that would be endorsed as appropriate for male and female managers). For this check, 25 men and 30 women with at least 1 year of work experience were each presented respectively with the written descriptions of the strategy endorsed by male and female managers and asked to rate its appropriateness as a feedback strategy for a manager of their own gender (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very*). Mean responses confirmed the perceived appropriateness of both responses ($M = 5.9$, $SD = 1.1$ for the male manager strategy; $M = 6.2$, $SD = 0.9$ for the female manager strategy).

Four variations of the standard feedback situation developed in Study 1 were constructed as combinations of the relative gender and status of interactants (i.e., male manager, male subordinate, female manager, and female subordinate). For each gender-status situation, five feedback strategies (negative feedback only, no feedback, negative feedback plus empathy, male manager strategy, and female manager strategy) were presented as ways to first initiate discussion (initiation stage) and then to resolve the issue (resolution stage). Thus, 20 separate and specific vignettes (5 Feedback

Strategies Each With 2 Stages of Interaction × 2 Gender of Manager × 2 Gender of Subordinate) resulted from the combination of variables (e.g., a male manager adopting a negative feedback only approach with a female subordinate). Responses were delivered by two White male and two White female actors matched for age and judged by the same panel of raters to be generally equivalent in facial attractiveness. The setting and clothes were designed to represent a typical office environment. Actors were filmed facing each other in a seated position with the gender of both clearly discernible. Following each interaction, participants in the role of observer were presented with a freeze frame of the interactants (to keep the situational characteristics salient) while they rated the response. Both sections of each video vignette were introduced by a female narrator:

> This is Mike (shot of manager). Mike is a manager. He is working with Julie, who is his subordinate, on an ongoing work project. Mike has become aware that an aspect of Julie's work behavior is having some negative consequences for the project. He has invited Julie into his office for a discussion. In the first part we show you the strategy that Mike uses to initiate the discussion with Julie. Please rate this initiation strategy, using the scales provided. In this next part, Mike and Julie continue their discussion, with Mike outlining his problem-solving strategy. Please rate this continuation strategy, using the scales provided.

Procedure. Participants viewed the videotape (2 practice vignettes followed by 20 random experimental vignettes) and rated the initiation and resolution components of each of the five feedback strategies for each vignette on a 9-point scale (1 to 3 = *not at all*, 4 to 6 = *moderately*, 7 to 9 = *very*) for task effectiveness, relationship effectiveness, and level of difficulty. For the initiation phase, task effectiveness was assessed by asking, "How effective do you think [e.g.,] Mike's (i.e., the manager's) approach is in raising the issue?" The resolution or problem-solving phase was assessed by asking, "How likely would [e.g.,] Julie (i.e., the subordinate) be to consider changing her behavior with this approach?" Relationship effectiveness for both phases was assessed by asking, "How effective do you think this approach is in contributing to a good working relationship?" For both phases, difficulty was

TABLE 2: Dialogue for Male and Female Managers' Feedback Strategies

Female Manager Strategy
Initiation Phase

Manager: Hi Julie, how are things?
Subordinate: Fine thanks, Lee.
Manager: That's good. I was wondering how things are going with the Housing project? Are there any issues from your point of view that we need to address?
Subordinate: No, not really. It's going okay as far as I can tell.
Manager: Okay. I know you've been working hard on the project and I appreciate the contribution that you've been making.
Subordinate: Thanks.
Manager: Julie, there's one issue that I'd like to talk to you about, and that relates to the project meetings. As you know, the project team is made up of a variety of people, some with more experience than others in this type of work. You are one of the more experienced people on the team. In the past few meetings, you've been making some fairly forceful statements about the way we should proceed, and making some good points. But my observation is that the less experienced people seem to be holding back and contributing a lot less than they used to. What's your sense of the situation?

Resolution Phase

Manager: Julie, here's how I suggest we approach this issue. Why don't I start by firstly being as specific as I can about what I've observed in the meetings, and then you can give your reaction to that, and your understanding of the situation. Then, I'd particularly like to start with your ideas before I make any suggestions, to work out what we can do to improve the team situation. How does that suit you?

Male Manager Strategy
Initiation Phase

Manager: Hi Julie, how are things?
Subordinate: Fine thanks, Lee.
Manager: Julie, I've asked you here because I'd like to talk to you about some concerns I'm having with the Housing project, about your style of contribution to team meetings. In the past few meetings, you've been making some pretty strong comments about the direction that the project should take. As one of the more experienced people on the team, that's fine, but the concern I have is that some of the more junior team members seem to be holding back, and saying a lot less in meetings. Don't get me wrong, I think you're doing a good job on the project, but we need to improve the situation.

Resolution Phase

Manager: Julie, I think there are a couple of practical things you can try that will help the situation. Can I start the discussion by offering a few suggestions from my experience, and then you can tell me what you think might work?

assessed by asking, "How difficult do you think it would be for a manager to respond in this way?" To control for potential response

bias, the poles of the rating scales were reversed after every five situations. To control for potential order effects, approximately half of the participants viewed a second videotape with the experimental vignettes presented in reverse order. Administration time was approximately 1 hour.

Results

To test the hypotheses regarding the comparative effectiveness of feedback strategies, $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 5$ repeated measures MANOVAs were conducted with participants' evaluations of task and relationship effectiveness as the dependent variables. Participants' ratings of the initiation and resolution stages were analyzed separately. For both analyses, the between-subject independent variable was gender of participant (male or female), and the within-subjects independent variables were gender of manager (male or female), gender of subordinate (male or female), and response type (negative feedback only, no feedback, negative feedback plus empathy, female manager strategy, and male manager strategy). To test hypotheses regarding the comparative difficulty of implementing feedback strategies, separate $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 5$ repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted on participants' ratings of the difficulty of performing feedback strategies at the stages of initiating and resolving the situation. A number of procedures were employed to ensure the robustness of findings: the more conservative Pillai's criterion to evaluate multivariate significance and the interpretation of the more conservative multivariate statistics rather than the averaged within-cell statistics (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). A preliminary analysis was conducted to test for the potential effect of actor attractiveness on participants' evaluations. Participants' ratings of the effectiveness of the same responses delivered by each of the four actors were compared using analysis of variance procedures. No significant differences were found in evaluations of actors' responses.

Initiation phase. A significant main effect was found for feedback strategy, $F(8, 106) = 56.39$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = .81$, power = 1.00; but not for gender of participant, gender of manager, or gender of subordinate. Univariate tests indicated the main effect for feedback strategy was consistent for ratings of both task, $F(4, 452) = 46.18$, $p <$

.01, and relationship effectiveness, $F(4, 452) = 66.69$, $p < .01$, with moderate effect sizes of .29 and .37, respectively.

With regard to the research question assessing the comparative merits of a gender role congruence (that male and female managers would be evaluated as more effective when enacting strategies based on their own gender rule-goal sets) and a managerial role perspective (that the more sophisticated feedback strategy based on the female managers rule-goal set would be evaluated as most effective by both men and women), follow-up Tukey's analyses ($p < .01$) provided confirmation of the greater salience of organizational role compared to gender in the evaluation of feedback strategies. That is, the female manager feedback initiation strategy was evaluated by both men and women as more task and relationship effective than the male manager strategy and all other feedback strategies.

No support was found for the gender role congruence perspective, with both male and female managers being evaluated as more effective when delivering feedback using the female rule-based strategy. Inspection of the means shows that the female initiation strategy was evaluated in the high range of the 9-point scale (M = 7.31 for task, M = 7.18 for relationship effectiveness). The male feedback strategy was evaluated at the upper end of the moderate range of the scale (M = 6.09 for task, M = 5.59 for relationship effectiveness). The other feedback strategies were also evaluated in the moderate range (see Table 3). A significant two-way interaction was found between gender of participant (observer) and feedback strategy on ratings of both task, $F(4, 452) = 6.58$, $p < .01$, and relationship effectiveness, $F(4, 452) = 4.42$, $p < .01$. Independent samples t tests using a Bonferroni adjustment (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989) revealed that female participants evaluated the female manager feedback initiation strategy as both more task (M = 7.6 vs. 7.0) and relationship effective (M = 7.5 vs. 6.8) than did male participants. Thus, although both genders perceived the female strategy as the most optimally effective response to the situation, female participants evaluated their own gender-consistent response as more effective than did male participants.

No support was found for the hypothesized (Hypothesis 1) gender-based selective devaluation of female managers (i.e., that female managers would be evaluated as less effective than male managers when employing a negative feedback only strategy). Instead,

TABLE 3: Male and Female Participants' Ratings of the Task and Relationship Effectiveness of Five Feedback Strategies

	Initiation Phase								*Resolution Phase*							
	Task Effectiveness				*Relationship Effectiveness*				*Task Effectiveness*				*Relationship Effectiveness*			
	Male		*Female*		*Male*		*Female*		*Male*		*Female*		*Male*		*Female*	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Female strategy	6.96	1.08	7.60	0.85	6.81	0.97	7.49	0.82	6.62	1.07	7.15	1.09	6.80	1.02	7.49	0.95
Male strategy	6.22	1.31	5.98	1.40	5.59	1.27	5.77	1.34	5.60	1.19	5.96	1.27	5.50	1.20	5.92	1.43
Feedback only	5.68	1.36	4.89	1.37	4.79	1.21	4.32	1.25	4.73	1.37	4.06	1.21	4.30	1.27	3.67	1.18
Feedback and empathy	5.83	1.21	5.43	1.08	5.21	1.12	5.10	1.06	5.07	1.27	4.63	1.23	4.81	1.16	4.56	1.22
No feedback	4.54	2.02	5.38	2.13	5.44	1.91	6.04	1.75	3.98	2.05	4.27	2.12	5.18	2.01	5.50	1.99

female managers were evaluated similarly to male managers when employing a unilateral, feedback only strategy. The proposition that the perceived effectiveness of a feedback strategy would not vary as a function of gender of subordinate (Hypothesis 2) was supported. That is, feedback strategies were evaluated at similar levels of task and relationship effectiveness when delivered to either male or female subordinates.

Resolution phase. As for initiation, only a significant main effect was found for feedback strategy in the resolution phase, $F(8, 106) = 58.82$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .82$, power = 1.00. This was again consistent for ratings of both task, $F(4, 452) = 81.14$, $p < .01$, and relationship effectiveness, $F(4, 452) = 97.76$, $p < .01$, with moderate effect sizes of $\eta^2 = .42$ and .46, respectively. Follow-up Tukey's analyses revealed a pattern of findings generally consistent with that of the initiation phase of the interaction. Once again, the female manager strategy was evaluated as more relationship effective ($p < .01$) than were all other feedback strategies. The female manager strategy was perceived as more task effective (i.e., resulting in a subordinate considering behavior change) than the feedback only, feedback plus empathy, and no feedback strategies ($p < .01$). However, although the mean task effectiveness ratings were higher for the female ($M = 6.90$) than for the male ($M = 5.79$) manager strategies, this was not significant at a .01 criterion for significance. Once again, a significant two-way interaction was found between gender of participant (observer) and feedback strategy on ratings of both task, $F(4, 452) = 6.58$, $p < .01$, and relationship effectiveness, $F(4, 452) = 4.42$, $p < .01$. Independent samples t tests using a Bonferroni adjustment revealed, consistent with findings for the initiation phase, that female participants evaluated the female manager feedback resolution strategy as both more task ($M = 7.15$ vs. 6.62) and relationship effective ($M = 7.49$ vs. 6.80) than did male participants.

Once again, no support was found for gender-based evaluations of managers' use of feedback strategies (Hypothesis 1). Consistent evaluations of feedback strategies across both male and female subordinates were also confirmed (Hypothesis 2). The male manager feedback strategy achieved better comparative evaluations in the resolution than in the initiation phase of the interaction, being eval-

uated as more task and relationship effective than the feedback only and no feedback strategies and as equally effective as the feedback plus empathy strategy.

Levels of difficulty. The ANOVA on ratings of difficulty of the feedback initiation strategies found significant main effects for type of feedback initiation strategy, $F(4, 111) = 12.65$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .31$, power = 1.00, and participant gender, $F(1, 114) = 8.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$, power = .84. In terms of the perceived relative difficulty of the five initiation strategies, Tukey's post hoc analyses indicated, as predicted (Hypothesis 4), that the no feedback strategy ($M = 3.23$) was perceived as the least difficult to perform ($p < .01$) compared to the male strategy ($M = 4.15$), feedback plus empathy ($M = 4.27$), feedback only strategy ($M = 4.26$), and the female strategy ($p < .05$) ($M = 4.11$). Clearly, avoiding the issue is seen as a comparatively easy option. Importantly, contrary to prediction (Hypothesis 3), the more complex and optimally effective female strategy was not evaluated as more difficult to implement than the other feedback strategies. Consistent with gender-related notions of interpersonal competence, men rated all feedback initiation strategies as more difficult than did women (*M*s = 4.28 vs. 3.77).

Results of the ANOVA for ratings of difficulty of the feedback resolution strategies paralleled findings for the initiation phase, with significant main effects for feedback strategy, $F(4, 111) = 10.73$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .28$, power = 1.00, and gender of participant, $F(1, 114) = 7.57$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$, power = .78. Once again, the no direct feedback strategy was rated as least difficult ($M = 3.10$). Similarly, men once again rated all strategies as marginally more difficult than did women (*M*s = 3.9 vs. 3.5).

In summary, the female manager feedback strategy was evaluated by both men and women as overall the most effective approach to maintaining a good working relationship in both the initiation and resolution phases of a feedback intervention. The female strategy was also evaluated by both men and women as the most effective way to "raise the issue" and as more likely to result in a subordinate considering changing his or her behavior than the feedback only, feedback plus empathy, and no feedback strategies but not the male manager strategy. Whereas both men and women generally

saw the female manager strategy as optimal, women evaluated this strategy as more task and relationship effective at both phases of the interaction. The male manager feedback strategy was evaluated by both men and women as equally task and relationship effective compared to the feedback only, feedback plus empathy, and no feedback strategies in the initiation phase. In the resolution phase, the male manager strategy was seen as more effective than the feedback only and no feedback strategies and equally effective as feedback plus empathy. Apart from the self-evident finding that not giving feedback is the least difficult strategy to implement, the other strategies were seen as being of similar difficulty. Men generally rated all feedback strategies at both initiation and resolution phases as slightly more difficult to implement than did women.

Discussion

Findings in Study 2 provide little support for the influence of the gender of a manager on subordinates' evaluations of feedback strategies. That male and female managers were evaluated as equally effective when implementing each of the different feedback strategies (from the avoidant no feedback strategy to the more unilateral feedback only approach) suggests that for participants, the salient feature in their appraisal of the situation was the status of the manager's role rather than the gender of the incumbent. This is consistent with the argument that contexts that provide strong cues to guide judgments regarding role-appropriate behavior (e.g., in the present situation, a manager having formal responsibility for the performance of a subordinate) neutralize gender-based expectations (Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Wagner & Berger, 1997).

Contrary to Eagly and colleagues' (1992) finding of a devaluation of women when interacting relatively autocratically, women in the present study were not selectively devalued (i.e., seen as less effective) when employing a unilateral feedback only strategy. This may in part reflect an evolution of attitudes in the workplace. It has been argued that as women increasingly occupy organizational positions of higher status (e.g., manager), there will be a corresponding decrease in gender-based evaluations of workplace behavior (Sagrestano, 1992). Cross-gender consistency was also

evidenced in the pattern of evaluations as a function of the gender of receiver. In Study 1, managers did not endorse feedback strategies specific to the gender of the subordinate, and in Study 2, observers did not differentiate the relative effectiveness of a range of strategies when delivered to either male or female subordinates. Previous general investigations of gender of receiver effects (Carli, 1989, 1990) might suggest that a more direct or forceful approach would be more effective with men or that in situations of potential threat there may be a need to be more protective (i.e., less direct) with women. However, gender of receiver was found not to be salient in the present study.

A paradox inherent in the present findings concerns the relevance of gender. On the one hand, as the aforementioned findings indicate, gender is not particularly relevant to evaluations of the effectiveness of feedback strategies, with men and women generally agreeing on the relative effectiveness of the various feedback strategies. On the other hand, as evidenced by the findings of Study 1, gender is very relevant to identifying effective feedback strategies. That female managers identified the most effective feedback strategy and that men, while not able to do so, were able to recognize the "added value" of the female strategy when it was presented to them perhaps reflects the relative demands of the distinct tasks of producing versus recognizing an effective response. That women were able to identify the most relationship effective strategy is consistent with a general pattern of findings regarding their greater interpersonal competence (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1988; Smythe & Wine, 1980; Trower, Bryant, & Argyle, 1978; Wilson & Gallois, 1993). That men in turn were able to recognize the female strategy as generally more effective than their own perhaps reflects their increasing awareness that the contemporary managerial role should emphasize collaborative and participative behaviors (Cawley et al., 1998; Pleck, 1995). However, whereas both genders did view the more participative female manager strategy as generally more effective, the finding that women evaluated the female manager strategy as even more task and relationship effective than did men suggests that cross-gender agreement regarding "optimal feedback strategies" is relative rather than absolute.

How people respond to challenging situations involves in part a tension between what may be effective and what is feasible. Thus, a highly effective approach (e.g., the female strategy), if also regarded as highly difficult, may remain as little more than an aspirational ideal. The male and female manager strategies were constructed as gender-based benchmarks or aspirational statements of what "should be done" to achieve effective outcomes. Consideration of ratings of difficulty provides a complementary sense of feasibility, or what people perceive could be done given constraints of interpersonal competence and self-management. That the most effective and clearly more sophisticated female manager strategy was rated as no more difficult for a manager to use than the other less effective responses suggests its practical utility in the context of training. It may well be that the female strategy is indeed more complex (perhaps because of the cognitive load associated with pursuing multiple goals simultaneously) (Geddes & Lineham, 1996). However, because it is based on strategies that are concerned with reducing potential threat and defensiveness to subordinates (i.e., interactive participation and gradual escalation of directness of feedback), it may be no more emotionally and behaviorally demanding than the other more direct strategies. Given the persistent issue of managers avoiding giving feedback because of its perceived difficulty or consequences (Veiga, 1988), a strategy that is highly effective but not necessarily more difficult to use may be a useful addition.

Given that men and women evidenced a high degree of consensus that the female manager strategy would be the most effective approach for a manager of either gender to follow, particularly in initiating the feedback communication, it is important to identify the features that appear to differentiate it from the other strategies. The female manager strategy can be clearly distinguished from the other four strategies in terms of levels of interactiveness and directness (Falbo & Peplau, 1980). It is consistently bilaterally interactive across both the initiation and resolution phases. In addition, it is interactive actively and explicitly (e.g., inquiry) rather than passively and implicitly (e.g., allowing space). The other strategies in which feedback is actually provided are either exclusively (feedback only) or predominantly (male strategy) unilateral. The female

manager strategy also appears uniquely to involve a gradual escalation of directness: a sequence of initially indirect (i.e., general inquiry) and then direct (i.e., raising the issue) processes. The other strategies in which feedback is given (feedback only and feedback plus empathy) both utilize a consistently direct approach (rapid escalation), and the no feedback strategy is consistently indirect.

Consistent with this, the female manager strategy also differs in the type, number, and ordering of its elements. In the initiation phase, for example, it involves a four-step sequential process: (a) ask for the subordinate's perspective, (b) affirm his or her standing, (c) address the issue, and then (d) ask again for the subordinate's perspective. In contrast, the male manager and feedback plus empathy approaches to initiation more simply involve two steps of address and affirm or address and acknowledge, respectively. Both systematically differ from the female strategy in that feedback is given (i.e., the issue is directly addressed) in the absence of the preparatory activities of asking the subordinate for his or her perspective and affirming the subordinate's standing. Although it is not possible within the constraints of the present design to be definitive about the unique or additive contributions to perceptions of effectiveness of each of these response components, it would seem that the type and amount of status and relationship-focused interaction prior to the feedback message itself may be a strategic choice in framing or initiating the intervention. This is consistent with Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) emphasis on designing feedback interventions that actively manage subordinates' meta-task (or self-oriented) processing of the interaction.

However, it is important not to overstate the apparent differences between the feedback strategies endorsed by male and female managers. Although the female manager strategy was considered optimal, the male manager strategy was by no means rated as ineffective. In fact, it was consistently rated in the moderate range of the scale and achieved the second highest means for effectiveness across the five strategies. That the male and female manager strategies were not seen as significantly different in their capacity to cause subordinates to "consider changing their behavior" (although the female strategy achieved consistently higher means)

probably reflects their greater similarity in the resolution phase than in the initiation phase.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Present findings have the potential to contribute to training interventions aimed at enhancing managers' interpersonal capabilities in a number of ways: First, the identified goal-rule sets provide a useful process tool (i.e., an accessible "scaffolding") (Bruner, 1986) for explaining the dynamics of specific communication contexts to learners and in particular a richer way of operationalizing the notion of interpersonal strategy. Second and closely related, the identification of managers' benchmark or ideal schemas for effective feedback provides the basis for making explicit the tacit dialectics that function in training contexts. For example, these may include the dialectics between what people feel they should do (obligation) and what they feel they are able (ability) or want to do (preference) in a situation or between present notions of correct behavior (i.e., theoretical ideals) and personally held ideals (or personal theories). Strategic conversations that seek to make such dialectical tensions explicit and discussable may facilitate not only more thoughtful integration of values and action but also consequently transfer and maintenance of learning (Lizzio, Wilson, & Gallois, 1993). Third and importantly, establishing the comparative efficacy of various feedback strategies provides managers with an empirical basis to inform choices regarding preferred approaches.

Finally, it is important to clarify that we are not proposing a "single right answer" approach to developing interpersonal competence. The female manager strategy will not always be the preferred choice for giving feedback; questions of context will necessarily influence choice of strategy. Although at the level of content learning present findings indicate that all things being equal, feedback strategies that reflect certain characteristics will be seen as more effective, more importantly at the level of process learning, this

study has identified ways to operationalize concepts of contextual sensitivity and strategic choice. Providing managers with frameworks that enable reflection on their choices and the situations and schemas that inform them addresses the more fundamental task of meta-learning of communication competence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations of the present studies should be noted in future studies on feedback. First, ratings were by means of single-item measures; future research should use validated scales to assess interpersonal effectiveness. In addition, because present findings were based on evaluations of videotaped vignettes in a manipulated setting, there would be significant practical and theoretical value in seeking to replicate these findings using actual manager-subordinate dyads in the field. Finally, the cultural context and seriousness of the feedback issues should be varied in assessing the generalizability of our findings.

In addition to the aforementioned, this research program can be advanced in three ways. First, there would appear to be significant practical benefit in systematically identifying the gap between managers' ideal notions of effective feedback and their likely or actual behavior in the same situation. Clarifying the gap between ideal and actual behavior (in Argyris & Schon's [1974] terms, the gap between espoused theory and theory in use) would enable the design of targeted training interventions. Second, although the present study has confirmed the overall effectiveness of a particular feedback strategy, the relative contribution of various feedback tactics (e.g., self-appraisal, reassurance, and inquiry) within such a strategy requires further clarification. Finally, although the present study has focused on the process of giving downward feedback (from manager to subordinate) in a vertical relationship, organizations are placing increasing emphasis on horizontal interdependencies (i.e., self-managed teams in flatter structures) and on subordinates providing feedback to managers (upward feedback). Whether

the rule-goal sets for initiating performance-related concerns with colleagues are similar to those identified in the present study is a matter for future investigation.

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