Influence of organisational feedback culture in career development through learning processes

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Abstract. The article discusses different elements for establishing a strong feedback culture and its positive outcomes for career development of employees, by summarising different authors and their theoretical knowledge with practical observations that come from working experiences and market studies of the field. Feedback is shown to be linked to career success, and it plays an essential role to the learning process, contributing for skills development and performance improvement of employees. A strong feedback culture represents benefits for both workers and organisations, therefore should be intrinsic to the company's values and objectives, and well implemented in the performance management cycle, so it becomes a routine process. But its implementation must count on both organisational and individual level practices, such as feedback orientation and feedback-seeking behaviour. And one of the best strategic management frameworks to invest in a feedback culture is through learning organisations, where its purpose of collective learning is done through constant feedback.

Keywords. feedback culture, career development, learning organisations

1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the reflection upon the importance that an organisation's well established feedback culture has for the career development of its employees. When searching for how this relation may happen, it's noticeable how rare it is to find recent studies that actually promote a dialogue between scientific data and practical scenarios of organisations worldwide, or that analyses the effects of feedback environments on individual outcomes such as career success, as stated by Cheramie [2]. This difficulty is more noticeable especially when it comes to open source articles, which is concerning, since those are the ones that could mostly reach companies' human resources and be applied in organisational contexts.

And yet, when we analyse the impact feedback has in different dimensions of work - such as employee development, working life quality, career success, social relations at work, leader and subordinate dynamics, and others - we can see the positive effects, both in the academic studies and also in company's internal data analyses. According to Grímsson [3], to be focusing on feedback culture is to invest in a performance management system, career development and continuous learning, and the three areas will be discussed in different organisational aspects along the text.

2. Implementing a strong feedback culture

It's important to highlight that culture is, for Grímsson [3], a complex multi-level construct, relatively stable and built over time, shaped by employees' and leaders' behaviours, values and beliefs. And to narrow it for the feedback context, according to London and Smither [1], "A strong feedback culture is one where individuals continuously receive, solicit, and use formal and informal feedback to improve their job performance. This may be linked to effective policies and programs for performance management, continuous learning, and career development". Therefore, in order to create and maintain a strong feedback culture, it's necessary to focus systematically on three categories of organisational intervention, proposed by the same authors [1] and described below.

First, it is essential to enhance the quality of feedback, which can be done by training leaders on how to provide useful feedback and creating clear behavioural standards and performance measurements, so employees know what's expected from them. The second category is to emphasise the importance of feedback in the organisation, by having leaders acting as role models on giving, receiving and using feedback and ensuring everyone will receive formal and informal feedback, followed by

recognition when improved performance occurs. For the last, the third intervention type is to provide support for using feedback, such as encouraging the feedback discussion in order to clarify expectations and changes, plus providing learning opportunities for employees to act on the feedback.

In summary, what organisations need to do is guarantee leaders and colleagues know how to give feedback, that the feedback given will be useful and constructive for the receiver, and that all people involved in this process have clarity of the importance it has for them and their learning. To discuss further about the emphasis on the importance of feedback, it's essential to assure that feedback will be linked to the organisation's strategic planning and core values, otherwise it will not be properly added to the organisational culture and daily priorities. In this category it's also relevant to demystify feedback rules, in the sense that formal feedback from leaders can be as accurate as peer feedback or informal and spontaneous feedback, and all forms should be encouraged to take place.

As for the enhancement of feedback quality, it has to consider the main elements that configure a quality feedback, which are, according to Mulder and Ellinger [5], the function, form and content of its message, the manner and timing it is provided and the feedback recipient, who, according to Grímsson [3] has to be prepared and willing to act constructively upon the feedback. And as for the support for the process of giving feedback, it's important to focus both on the proper environment, that stimulates open dialogue, no judgement for mistakes and continuous learning; and on the tools necessary to keep a feedback routine. These tools include the rituals for formal feedback, establishing the frequency, channel and rules for feedback giving; tracking methods to follow whether the feedback routine is happening or not, specially on the beginning of the culture implementation; and diagnosis tools to identify and evaluate possible difficulties and comebacks.

a. Individual level practices

When speaking about the implementation of those interventions, it's important to differentiate the role of the company, represented by the human resources and the board of leaders, while promoting feedback culture and the processes needed for it to be well established in the company's daily routine; and the role of the employees themselves, in actions that they must proactively take part on. As said above, the posture of the feedback recipient is a key aspect for the efficiency of the process, and it should also be taken in consideration when analysing the feedback culture implementation.

Keeping that in mind, one important strategy the company should have in order to build a strong feedback culture is to promote feedback orientation [1] in all employees. This is an individual-level construct that consists of multiple dimensions which determine whether a person is receptive to feedback

and guidance from others. The six dimensions proposed by London and Smither [1] are: liking feedback and seeing its positive impact without apprehension; having a behavioural propensity to seek feedback; having a cognitive propensity to to process feedback in a mindful way; demonstrating sensitivity to others' opinions; believing in the value of feedback's insights in promoting effectiveness; and feeling accountable to act on the feedback. It is important to promote feedback orientation because it helps to create a favourable environment for learning and self-improvement based on its relation to openness to experiences. And this would become a cyclic action, since according to London and Smither [1], the individual's feedback orientation would depend in part on the already existent support and climate for learning, so a strong feedback culture can improve feedback orientation, at the same time that a company with feedback oriented employees has a more natural and well established feedback culture.

More specifically, as seen, one of the dimensions of having a feedback orientation is the behavioural propensity to seek feedback - or, in other words, the feedback-seeking behaviour. This involves seeking performance information in order to reduce uncertainty, to improve one's opportunities for advancement and to appear conscientious and concerned about one's task performance [2]. According to the Cheramie [2], by seeking feedback, two main objectives may be pursued: first is the expectation alignment, through which employees can reduce uncertainty regarding their task performance and, if needed, alter their behaviour, and second is signalling, since feedback provides cues as to the behaviours which are most valuable in the company, so both objectives will lead the employee to achieve more career success according to the organisation's parameters. In this scenario, the organisation's role is to invest in communication and expectations alignment, in order to facilitate the feedback-seeking behaviour from employees, stimulating them to pursue performance information in a proactive way.

For the last, another employee's attitude that should be recognised and stimulated by the company is investing in their self-awareness, in order to deeply understand one's own characteristics, potentialities and limitations, and also the most adequate learning methods from which one can interpret and apply the feedback received. Therefore, these three practices should be considered as both individual and organisational responsibility, where the individual character of feedback orientation, feedback-seeking behaviour and self-awareness, that come from one's willingness and attitude, ought to be promoted by the organisation, by stimulating and creating a favourable environment for it to flourish.

b. Feedback use in performance management cycle

Beyond that, the implementation of a feedback culture must be intrinsic to the performance management cycle, since one of the most targeted

consequences of feedback are performance improvement and inserting them in the performance management cycle contributes a lot to establish the process and routine needed to build a strong feedback culture. In this case, though, the discussion applies only for formal feedback, which occurs in a systematic manner and it's usually associated with performance evaluations. Those are touchpoints that should occur regularly in companies, in order to track the evolution of one's job, but their relevance as a formal feedback practice only shows up when it's used properly as a development tool, since the evaluations should be done in a complete and accurate way, so they can influence on establishing the new performance parameters of the next cycle.

These complete and accurate performance evaluations may be understood as quality feedback processes. And in order to achieve it, the feedback process can be divided into three moments: the first one is elaborating the feedback, when the leader must observe their employees and collecting relevant data for the feedback. In this moment, the most important elements to be taken into account are its purpose and message content: whether it is objective (without personal judgements and related to the company's expectations), structured (follow a train of thought, pointing out how the employee did or did not meet these expectations) and actionable (so it can be properly implemented in an action plan, where the employee can use the feedback in order to improve their performance, knowing what to do and even from who to learn, if applied).

The second moment is communicating the feedback, where it has to take into account the manner and timing it is provided and the feedback recipient, as said by Mulder and Ellinger [5]. This means that the formal feedback can't happen in any time or place, it should have a proper scheduled moment for it, following predetermined moments in the performance cycle, so both interlocutors are prepared for the process to take place. The communication should happen in an respectful and direct manner, but also must consider all the cultural and individual differences of the people involved, in order for it to be effectively understood. The third and last moment should be implementing the feedback, where the feedback recipient is able to process it properly and later put into action all the learning, using opportunities provided by the organisation. This moment involves the two last stages established by London and Smither [1] when they discuss the performance management cycle, which are processing and using the feedback. To process it is to interpret the feedback, understand its value, deal with emotions and believe in its consistency; and to use the feedback is to both set goals and track the progress of its implementation through additional feedback [1]. This enables the employee to actually go through the feedback purpose, which is to lead to improvement and learning; but it can only be done in organisations that promote the proper environment for it.

c. Learning organisations

According to Gomes et al [8], learning organisations are focused on collective learning and knowledge management, seeking for continuous expansion of its creative potential and promoting a systemic framework, in order to achieve satisfactory and engaging results. For London and Smither [1], those organisations are also known for their capability to adapt to changes from the external environment, by updating their practices and structures in order to foster learning. The authors also point out that learning organisations are enhanced when learning is reinforced by team members, when innovation is rewarded by the company and when the organisation provides resources to enable self-development - which is where the feedback culture takes part, promoting employees' personal and professional development and continuous learning.

Joo and Park [7] discuss a framework proposed by Watkins and Marsick that is composed by seven qualities of a learning organisation: creating continuous learning opportunities; promoting inquiry and dialogue; encouraging collaboration and team learning; establishing systems to capture and share learning; empowering people to have a collective vision; connecting the organisation to the environment; and using leaders who model and support learning at all levels (individual, group and organisational). Those characteristics make learning organisations strongly correlated to feedback culture, especially because the promotion of open dialogues create an adequate environment for giving and receiving feedback, which becomes the core of the strategy to implement all the learning perspectives.

Feedback, then, becomes one of the tools with which learning organisations will become and maintain themselves as ones, where employees development become company development, and all the knowledge acquired and transferred will benefit directly company's results, both by the innovation and adaptation to external context and by higher organisational commitment, that accordingly to Joo and Park [7] grows as employees perceive higher organisational learning cultures and receive more feedback from their supervisors.

3. Consequences of a strong feedback culture

As a result of a strong feedback culture, there are many positive consequences for employees and companies. When speaking about learning organisations, Gomes et al [8] advocate that this strategic management framework is the best way to transform people in a competitive advantage for the company, by investing in their development and skills improvement - which can be done, among other strategies, by implementing a strong feedback culture.

In addition to that, having a feedback culture allows the company to be constantly improving their processes and products, both in quality and productivity, which leads to innovation and success for the company. One example of that is seen when studying tech companies: it's noticeable the value they give to feedback, usually working in sprints that are constantly monitored and diagnosed to identify mistakes, learning opportunities and potential improvements, which makes their process very efficient.

Besides that, feedback culture may also provide company growth in results, because performance improvement is one of the core consequences of it, since employees will be constantly improving their abilities and task executions. This can cause an escalation of better operational and financial results; and also growth in other assets, such as people, since the employees will be developing, some new leaders may be emerging, and their company's commitment should also get higher, so they will be returning all this growth to do a better job, hence becoming even more a competitive advantage.

a. Career development

When speaking about the positive consequences for workers, it's also undeniable the impact a feedback culture has on their career development. The biggest impact is related to expectations alignment, because when employees have clarity about what is expected of them, both in performance and behaviours, they are able to align their career with the company's values and strategic objectives. This connects directly with results, performance indicators and cultural fit, since the work and developmental goals will be done targeting the right context and purpose, in a more structured and monitored manner, that will even prevent an employee from getting an unexpected dismissal for bad performance, for example.

Beyond that, all the personal and professional growth promoted by learning organisations with strong feedback culture is a direct benefit for employees, who can focus on their development and skills improvement. Besides, when looking at social development, a feedback culture may also contribute to networking, where one can connect with the people they give and receive feedback from, such as team workers, peers and others, building a network of people who seek personal and professional development. For the last, one positive consequence for career development is satisfaction and working life quality, since the employee that knows better what they are doing well or not well enough will allow them to have a more fluid work, where reduced uncertainty will provide a less stressful job during their daily activities.

b. Career success

Satisfaction may be seen during the career development of an employee benefited by a feedback culture, but this is also understood as an intrinsic career success according to Cheramie [2], a subjective construct defined by feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment with one's career. This is one of the components to career success, together with extrinsic success, which is defined by objective achievements, such as increased payment, promotions and status. As discussed by the author, feedback may have a significant role in one's career success (e.g. accumulated outcomes or achievements resulted from one's work experiences), since individuals that seek feedback are actively searching for improvement in their career circumstances and performance, which can lead to more career satisfaction and increased pay or promotions. Besides that, Joo and Park [7] identified in their study that contextual factors, such as organisational learning culture and developmental feedback, contributed to career satisfaction and organisational commitment, where the highest career satisfaction was shown when employees perceived that their organisation provided a better learning culture.

4. Conclusion

In summary, it's highly relevant that companies invest in creating a strong feedback culture, in order to improve their processes and results through the development of their employees skills and performance. Feedback will have a big impact in people's learning process, and it should be promoted by leaders, human resources strategies and company's values and objectives; but it also has to come from individual initiative, such as feedback-seeking behaviour, especially because one's intrinsic and extrinsic career success is directly related to their proactive behaviour in the search for opportunities of growth and self-improvement. According to Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera [4], the feedback provided by leaders works as an important tool for career support, which is a key factor of employees' career development.

And in this scenario, one of the best strategic management frameworks to be implementing a feedback culture is creating learning organisations, where their main objective is to acquire, transfer and manage knowledge through the collective learning process. By implementing a feedback culture, the organisation stimulates a development-oriented process that culminates in learning, behaviour change, and performance improvement [1]. But it is important to implement this culture both in the organisation's rituals and values, and in the routine, structure and systems, such as the performance management cycle. This way it is possible to transform the feedback culture in a strong and well established process, by training leaders and employees on how to give and receive feedback, offering the tools needed for it and stimulating feedback orientation in all people involved. With quality feedback the individual is able to make good use of it, for example, as said by London and Smither [1], developing a more accurate performance, setting

achievable goals related to company's expectations of them, learning and applying new behaviours, and others. And this represents a positive consequence for their career development, especially linked to performance improvement, and career success, as when it comes to satisfaction and possibilities for increased pay or promotions, as discussed in the previous sections.

For the last, although this article aims to deepen the connection between theory and practice in the organisational context, it's understandable that some challenges will be faced, such as the fact that in companies it's hard to actually apply all these directions and standards in the described way, so the main goal for those interested in implementing feedback culture should be first to understand its importance and their company's own internal and external context, in order to try to build it one step at a time, according to priorities and possibilities available. Also, one limitation of this paper is that it is a qualitative analysis based on literature review, critical thinking and market experience, but further investigations are necessary to complement and validate methods described. This is just a primary discussion that aims to stimulate further studies and continuous learning.

5. References

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