

Is corporate feedback at stake? A case study at a technology company

O feedback corporativo está em xeque? Estudo de caso em empresa de tecnologia

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Abstract

As an element of the performance management system, feedback has been associated with higher engagement and greater satisfaction of employees because it encourages learning and professional development. This study presents a case study on the feedback experience of employees working for the Brazilian office of an American technology company, whose culture strongly emphasizes such feedback. The findings suggest that feedback is critical for employees to feel valued and committed to achieving the defined goals. Moreover, they also suggest that organizations whose culture promotes feedback can be more successful in engaging people, by promoting psychological conditions of meaning, security, and availability. The findings also show a very clear distinction between the way employees perceive informal feedback – which is welcomed and deemed positive – and formal feedback – which is received with a level of anxiety and distrust in the process, not helping improve performance.

Keywords: people management, feedback, appraisal process.

Resumo

A prática do feedback, componente do sistema de gestão de desempenho, tem sido associada ao aumento do engajamento e da satisfação dos funcionários pois estimula o aprendizado e o desenvolvimento profissional. Este trabalho traz um estudo de caso sobre a experiência com o feedback dos colaboradores da sucursal brasileira de uma empresa americana do setor de Tecnologia, que tem uma cultura muito promotora do feedback. Os resultados não só apontam que o feedback é essencial para que colaboradores se sintam valorizados e dediquem esforços para atingimento dos objetivos definidos, como também sugerem que organizações com culturas promotoras do feedback poderão atingir maior sucesso no engajamento das pessoas, ao promover as condições psicológicas de significado, segurança e disponibilidade. Ademais, os resultados indicam percepções muito distintas entre os feedbacks informais, bem recebidos e considerados construtivos, e os formais, recebidos com ansiedade e desconfiança no processo, não contribuindo para a melhoria do desempenho.

Palavras-chave: gestão de pessoas, feedback, processo de avaliação.

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1 Introduction

While the role of people is increasingly acknowledged and valued for leveraging organizational competitiveness (Davis, 2017), a Gallup (2017) survey revealed an disengaged

workforce, sliding productivity, and decreasing employee commitment. The survey also suggests that only a small share (15 percent) of employees say they are happy with their work. Findings of a survey by Santhanam and Srinivas (2019) show that more than half of the companies say they have a difficult time retaining their top talent at a time they are facing the highest turnover of the past 10 years. This situation is even worse in some specific industries, such as technology, given the rising demand for these professionals (Rooney, 2021).

Feedback has been associated with higher employee engagement and satisfaction. It not only encourages learning and professional development, but also signals that the organization is concerned about the wellbeing of the employees, creating an empathic workplace and investing in employee development (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Elreahil *et al.*, 2019). Lee *et al.* (2019), for instance, found that the transformational leadership style, in which the leader acts as a coach and provides ongoing feedback, has positive impact on engagement and makes team members less likely to leave. The longitudinal study of Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009) also found a positive correlation between resources invested by managers – which include feedback – and the level of engagement of employees. However, even if people wish to have feedback for their own development, a number of studies tell of negative experiences involving feedback in organizations. They include feelings of anxiety and unfairness, of destructive criticism that damages the self-esteem of those receiving it, and of formal procedures that lack any effectiveness or usefulness, all of which lead to cynicism and disengagement at organizations (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Heller, 2017; Murphy, 2020). Accordingly, we see that surveys have contradictory findings on feedback and its impacts and outcomes.

This study investigates this topic using the findings of a research on the feedback experience of a group of employees working for the Brazilian office of an American technology company, which we will call Beta for the purposes of this study. The company's culture encourages and prioritizes feedback, not only by asking leaders to continually engage in this practice with their teams but also by establishing initiatives that reinforce organizational values through the feedback process. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to understand how employees perceive the feedback process and its possible results. This paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, we have the theoretical basis for the study, after which we present the findings before we discuss them from a theoretical perspective; finally, we have the concluding remarks.





2 Literature Review

Baker, Perreault and Blanchard (2013) define feedback as a process in which two individuals communicate; it consists of an assessment of how the individual receiving this feedback performs their work. In the same line, Budworth, Harrison and Chummar (2019) present feedback as a moment of dialog between the leader and subordinates, in which the manager discusses performance expectations and the development possibilities available to the employee. This means that feedback can be considered one of the most important tasks a leader has to perform in order to influence their team and, consequently, the team's performance in different roles and tasks (Mccarthy & Garavan, 2006; Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012).

Kuvaas, Buch and Dysvik (2017) argue that feedback is a multidimensional concept, which comprises the source, polarity, specificity, receptiveness, accuracy, frequency, and timing, as synthetically described in Table 1:

Table 1 - Feedback characteristics

Feedback dimensions	Description
Source	Managers, peers, self-assessment
Polarity	Positive, recognizing strengths and promoting engagement; negative, raising points for improvement and which may not be welcomed
Specificity	Detailing the information received, which is more difficult for abstract tasks
Receptivity	The attitude of the receptor regarding the information received
Accuracy	Feedback information matches reality and is accurate in its details
Frequency	The number of times an employee receives feedback during a given period of time
Timing	The length of time between the task and the feedback

Source: adapted from Kuvaas, Buch and Dysvik (2017).

Buckingham and Goodall (2019) point out that not all feedback is welcomed because the human brain tends to be defensive when facing criticism and therefore ignores the information received. On the other hand, people also mention that when negative feedback is detailed and objective, it can include valuable information for professional development and performance. Indeed, negative feedback should focus on the employee's specific tasks or goals, rather than on information related to that individual's personality (Budworth, Harrison; & Chummar, 2019; Kluger & Denisi, 1996). Positive feedback, in turn, promotes engagement, wellbeing, motivation, and improved productivity (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012). Regarding receptivity, it should be pointed out that feedback is just the first step in the process of development and improved performance. In this regard, providing feedback to unprepared or unwilling recipients would be ineffective (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Moon, 2019).

Moreover, Steelman, Levy and Snell (2004) observe that it is critical for the recipient to trust and believe in the feedback provider, who must demonstrate they are familiar with the work and have valuable interactions with their team members (De Villiers, 2013; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). Receptivity is also associated with the accuracy of the feedback, i.e., the individual receiving feedback must feel that the information shared is accurate and coherently represents their performance (De Villiers, 2013; Knicki *et al.*, 2004). To this effect, Brett and Atwater (2001) add that individuals tend to perceive positive feedback as more accurate and, in the same token, that negative feedback is less so. Therefore, there is a great chance that poorly performing employees receiving negative feedback will more likely reject the information received. Regarding the frequency, Kuvaas, Buch and Dysvik (2017) suggest that frequent feedback is perceived as having a positive impact on how useful this information is. Regarding timing, the closer the feedback is to the respective task, the more positively it is perceived by the employee. This is reflected on the degree of receptiveness, accuracy, and usefulness of information received on their performance (Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2017).

An organizational culture that encourages feedback is also considered critical by Baker, Perreault and Blanchard (2013) and is based on a well-defined organizational mission and the definition of strategic objectives. It is important that employees have a clear vision of the work environment management wishes to create as well as of the expectations related to their performance. These aspects are the foundation to build relationships of trust between leaders and followers, improve creativity and motivation, and promote alignment between the individual and the organization's metrics and goals. When feedback is embedded in everyday management practices and in the development of people in the organization, it can promote a culture that is open to dialog, in which individuals feel they can act without the fear of punishment, in which mistakes are accepted and the focus is more on the future than on past actions (Baker, Perreault, & Blanchard, 2013; West & Kelly, 2018).

Regarding the actors, generally the manager is the provider or source of feedback, while followers are the recipients; however, other sources, such as peers and team members can also be part of the process (Baker, Perreault, & Blanchard, 2013; Budworth, Harrison, & Chummar, 2019). The manager is responsible for representing the culture and the values of the organization during the feedback process. In this interaction, the manager's goal is the support their employees in their professional development and performance (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2017). Steelman and Wolfeld (2018) point out that ideally



managers should be coaches, who go beyond having a single annual performance review and engage constantly with their reports, which creates opportunities for learning and reflection and helps build action plans to achieve the function's goals. It is also important for the manager to be aware of the feelings feedback create in the individuals receiving it.

In turn, feedback recipients can display a range of feelings regarding the process: individuals can pursue feedback for improvement and to reaffirm their self-perception; receive additional recognition on a job well done; draw the attention of their manager; and gain visibility in the organization to grow in their careers. Additionally, extroverted individuals tend to seek out more feedback and are more receptive to negative feedback. In turn, individuals who are aware that their performance is below expected levels will not ask for feedback very frequently, because they have no desire to hear criticism of the work they are delivering. Moreover, more introverted individuals also tend to avoid feedback interactions. Even so, it is possible to notice that a recipient's motivations regarding feedback go well beyond the simple objective of improving performance, adding a high level of complexity to the experience of each actor involved in the process (Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016).

Regarding the impact of feedback, research has found contradictory results, as mentioned above. Li, Harris, Boswell and Xie (2011) found that feedback could provide more useful information to individuals with less professional experience, for instance, who are still shaping their professional identity. Lee, Idris and Tuckey (2019) and Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2009) pointed out that feedback can boost engagement of people at work. However, the relation between feedback and performance improvement is still not consistently supported in research. According to Murphy (2020, p. 20), not even the new models that assume constant feedback sessions have positive effect: "Put yourself in the place of an employee who feels like the performance feedback he or she gets is inaccurate and biased (i.e., too low). Do you think a new system that features a lot more feedback will seem appealing?" The author adds that feedback has greater impact the first times it is given, but if repeated many times it loses efficacy. The author also points out that the perception that feedback is inaccurate or unfair can have negative results in terms of poor motivation and little willingness to act on the suggestions given.

Khan (1990) argues that studies show that engaged individuals invest physical, cognitive, and emotional energy in performing their tasks. Moreover, this engagement has been associated with positive organizational results (Saks & Gruman, 2014). The level of



engagement of an individual with their work is associated with psychological conditions of (a) meaning; (b) security; and (c) availability, as summarized in Table 2:

Table 2 - Psychological conditions for engagement

Psychological conditions	Description
Meaning	The extension to which an individual can visualize the meaning of their work and feels there is a good tradeoff; the individual feels valued
Security	The possibility of the individual expressing their real self at work, without fearing any negative consequences on their career, status, or image in the organization
Availability	The belief that the individual has the necessary characteristics to perform the work

Source: adapted from Kahn (1990) and Saks and Gruman (2014).

As observed, the feedback process can potentially promote the psychological conditions for engagement because to the extent that the recipient has information on their work and performance expectations, and on the possibilities of future development, the conditions of meaning and availability can be activated; by the same token, if the organizational culture encourages and reinforces an opening for dialog, feelings of psychological security can emerge, leading to greater engagement (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). In this line, Maciel and Camargo (2016) observed that social connections in organizations can create more conditions of meaning, security, and availability to people, which would in turn bring more engagement.

3 Methodological Procedures

This is a case study, which allows for an in-depth understanding of how the feedback process is experienced in an organization that values and encourages the practice as a means of motivation, engagement, development, and, consequently, retention of their staff. The organization selected represents a specific case of organizational culture that emphasizes the practice of feedback, which renders it suitable for this study and to investigate this theme, as described below (Yin, 2015). We should point out that most research on this theme employs a quantitative approach (Beuren *et al.*, 2020; Brett & Atwater, 2001; Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2017; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2009, among others). This means that a qualitative approach could identify possible paths to investigate any contradictions found in the literature.

The respondents were intentionally selected from the sales and customer-relationship departments, which play a critical role in the organization. These areas generate the growth of the business by attracting new customers and maintain the company viable and sustainable by



retaining existing customers and expanding contracts. We also selected respondents with at least 12 months of company time, to ensure they had experienced at least one formal cycle of performance review in the company.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews; participants were assured anonymity in the process. The interviews followed a script using themes reported in the literature, i.e., the characteristics, the actors, and the perceived results of the feedback. Accordingly, the script included questions about their experiences; the impact respondents believed feedback had on engagement and performance as well as on the development of new skills; how they perceived the preparation of the actors for the feedback sessions; and how they perceived the work of managers during feedback sessions. We also collected secondary data. This included Beta’s internal documents that describe organizational management practices; the company’s website, which presents a statement of the vision, mission, culture, and values of the organization; and interviews the CEO gave to the media.

The interviews happened from June to August 2020 and were all recorded, with the consent of the interviewees. These consisted of six men and nine women, with an average age of 32.3 years and average company time of 3.52 years. Six of the interviewees had senior status in the organization. Table 1 below describes the profile of the interviewees. To ensure anonymity, we removed their names and assigned a number to each individual.

Table 1 – Interviewees

ID	Gender	Age	Company time	Position level	Business line
1	Male	29	1.5	Junior	Sales
2	Male	28	4	Junior	Talent
3	Female	25	2.8	Junior	Talent
4	Male	28	2	Senior	Sales
5	Female	31	1.8	Junior	Sales
6	Male	37	2	Junior	Talent
7	Female	31	2	Junior	Sales
8	Female	28	2	Junior	Sales
9	Male	37	3.3	Senior	Sales
10	Female	27	3.9	Junior	Talent
11	Male	43	4	Senior	Sales
12	Female	37	7.9	Senior	Talent
13	Female	33	7.1	Senior	Talent
14	Female	36	5.1	Senior	Talent
15	Female	35	3.5	Senior	Talent

Source: the authors



The interviews were analyzed and coded using the MAXQDA software, following a theme identification progression process of Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006). After 12 interviews, an analysis identified 19 codes, shown below. We decided to have three additional interviews, which did not bring any new codes; as a result, this phase of research was concluded. Following the content analysis road map suggested by Câmara (2013), we engaged in a second phase of exploration of the material, in order to create summary categories and themes, which would group the codes according to the class of event and existing correlations between them. The final categories were: feedback characteristics, the organizational culture and management system, the perception of the manager, and the perception of the self. Below we present the Beta case and the findings of the interviews.

4 Findings

This study was based on the Brazilian office of an American company, which we will call Beta. Founded in 2003 in the California Silicon Valley, Beta is a professional network service with millions of members in close to 200 countries. The company's profits come from solutions that provide privileged access to their database and to the activities of members. According to its corporate vision, Beta believes its professionals are the most important factor to generate value in an organization over the long term.

The competition for talents in Silicon Valley resulted over the years in local companies creating benefits, such as meals prepared by renowned chefs, pantries well-stocked with beverages, snacks, and chocolate, massages, manicures, and laundry services. However, when reviewing job offers, most professionals consider not only the high salaries and perks offered, but also factors such as the transparency of the business strategy, management practices focusing on professional development of staff, and the recognition of their work (Meisenzahl, 2019).

Accordingly, to attract the valley's top talent local companies had to devise human resources policies that promoted a workplace that favored career development of their staff. Mission, vision, culture, and values are the pillars on which such workplaces are built. The five pillars of Beta's corporate culture are: transformation, integrity, collaboration, humor, and results, briefly described below:

Table 3 - The pillars of Beta's culture

The pillars of the Beta culture	Description
Transformation	Personal, of the company, and of the world; it emphasizes the responsibility for building a better world, being authentic, and pursuing innovation
Integrity	Ethics in all operations with the different stakeholders
Collaboration	Value created by the team is always superior to individual value
Humor	Laughing is important to balance the demanding world of work
Results	The permanent pursuit of excellence using clear and actionable objectives

Source: Beta website

According to Beta's CEO, its leaders are chiefly responsible for ensuring the scalability of the corporate culture and values. The managers' key responsibilities are to develop their teams using coaching and teaching; recruit talent to improve their teams and the company; and support team members in their career plans, be it in the company or elsewhere. Beta invests heavily in developing its leaders to ensure that they are able to do the same for their team members. Moreover, one of the pillars to assess the performance of Beta's managers is the level of satisfaction of their team members in relation to the work of the manager. This creates an environment of permanent professional development for all company people, which helps motivate and retain talent.

Beta uses the Objectives and Key Results (OKR) method for performance management, which are revised twice a year. Each employee defines their OKRs in the beginning of each quarter and reviews them with the manager. At the end of each quarter, employees review their own performance in relation to the pre-defined targets, submitting their OKRs and results to their managers. Every six months there is a formal performance review cycle, when assessments are reviewed by a group of managers. There is a calibration process taking place at each management level that includes a review of all reports of that particular group of managers. The objective of the calibration process is to level out manager reviews, in order to try to define better references to the evaluation criteria subject to greater degrees of subjectivity. At the end of the review, employees will have a rating that varies according to their level of achievement, from the lowest ("Failed to meet expectations) to the highest ("Greatly exceeded expectations").

After this calibration, each manager meets with their reports to communicate the results of the ranking and to provide formal feedback. Additionally, a permanent flow of feedback between leaders and reports is encouraged throughout the year. The company's CEO states that open, candid, and constructive feedback fuels transformation, relationships, and collaboration, and supplies information to employees on their performance.



Below we present the findings of the interviews, according to each category identified: feedback characteristics, the organizational culture and management system, the perception of the manager, and the perception of the self.

4.1 Feedback characteristics

This category combines themes related to the different feedback characteristics, such as frequency, information accuracy and specification, polarity, objectiveness, and timing. Informal feedback is quite common in everyday life of Beta employees, who emphasize how important this is for their experience and career development. The level of detail and the objectiveness provided are some of the characteristics most frequently mentioned by the interviewees; they have a direct and positive impact on the experience people have with feedback. When employees perceive that the information received is accurate, specific and impartial, they mention that feedback is more welcomed and helps them understand what has to be done to improve performance. Both positive and negative feedback can potentially increase motivation; important aspects are the way in which information is delivered and the balance between these two types of feedback. Incidentally, they point out that negative feedback is welcomed when it is consistent and leads to action plans. They also reinforce the importance of timing, i.e., when feedback immediately follows a meeting, because this makes it easier to understand the information provided and visualize what must be improved. Below we reproduce some excerpts that illustrate these points.

Table 4 - Examples of statements on feedback characteristics

I believe you have to bring evidence of behaviors. If you want to persuade someone, it is important to say: 'Hey look, that day, in that situation, I felt you could have done something different' (E6).
I rather have negative feedback that develops into an action plan than positive feedback that merely says 'You're doing this well.' Feedback like that throws me off balance more than negative feedback (E4).
I believe that more informal feedback over time helps a lot in achieving better alignment at the end (E1).
Well, I believe that a good frequency is the one we have, like once a week, and the coaching session, which happens every 15 days (E8).

Source: research data

4.2 Organizational culture and management system

This category comprises the themes of freedom of expression, feedback promoting culture, formal performance review procedures, and the use of development tools. Some



interviewees mentioned that they feel confident to be authentic in the workplace and express their individuality, without fear of being prejudiced or harmed. They also believe that Beta really offers an opportunity for open, candid, and constructive feedback. However, some demonstrate feelings of anxiety and are less receptive to criticism, especially when it comes to the outcomes of the calibration process, which they do not understand or trust. As a result, they may disregard the feedback provided during these formal sessions, and they seem to be more concerned about their final rating and whether they stand a chance of being promoted. Some feel that the six-month feedback sessions are mere formalities managers have to follow and they fail to perceive that these sessions are effective contribution to their own development. Moreover, even though the feedback model applied by Beta emphasizes the importance of having an action plan to develop the necessary points, most interviewees claim they did not receive such support to create their plans. Below are some examples of interviewee statements:

Table 5 - Examples of statements on the organizational culture and management system

Beta was the first company where I, as an LGBT individual, could be myself and completely open about it with my boss (E6).
You can be yourself; work is not a place of fear and judgement (E12).
Formal feedback carries this huge weight of the name, of anxiety, of being 100 percent bound in how the organization sees your performance (E3).
I wanted to know whether I would get a raise or not [...], a time of financial recognition, of a higher salary, or uncertain promotions happen during these feedback meetings; they can happen or not depending on your performance (E2).
When all is said and done [...], it was just a formality in which a form had to be completed and entered in the system (E5).
I don't recall any structured plan, I don't think that happened, it was like: 'You have this gap and let do this and that to get around this situation' (E10).

Source: research data.

4.3 Perception about the manager

This category was divided into two main groups of themes. The first concerns the manager's attitude, such as proximity and dedication to the report. The second brings codes related to perceived professional and technical qualification of the manager, which include the professional experience and the preparation for the formal feedback sessions. These two factors create a perception of credibility of the manager, in which a trusting relationship is established between leader and employee.

Being open to dialog was a theme that presented divergent answers. Some mentioned that their managers have always been open to dialog and were willing to explain and provide further information on the feedback whenever asked about it. However, a significant share of



the interviewees felt otherwise. They experienced situations in which those providing the feedback were not open to talk about their ratings; yet this happened only during formal review sessions.

The perception of honesty or a genuine intention of the manager to provide feedback is perceived as a factor of positive influence in the experience of the employee; but there are variations in those reports. Moreover, the consistency between what the provider of feedback does and what he or she asks to be done also impacts the feedback experience. In other words, employees expect to see a positive example of what is being asked in the feedback. Otherwise, they will have a negative feedback experience, and feedback information may be ignored.

The proximity and the time dedicated by the manager to the whole process are also mentioned by many interviewees, who highlight the positive impact on the process. Interviewees believe it is critical that managers are well acquainted with each team member and their work in order to provide relevant feedback.

The managers' professional experience is another important issue for the employees' perceptions of the feedback quality. Seniority and previous experience in the position are recognized as relevant factors in order to be able to provide better experiences to their reports.

The company reinforces the importance of being prepared for formal feedback sessions; however, reports about that varied among interviewees: some feel their managers are very well prepared for the feedback sessions, but others mention that their managers failed to dedicate sufficient time to prepare for the feedback process.

Both the attitudes as well as the training of the managers reinforce the perception of trust in the provider of feedback, which increases the receptivity of the feedback and positively impacts the overall feedback experience. The table below exemplifies these findings:

Table 6 - Examples of the perception about the manager category

All my experiences at Beta [...] were amazing. There's nothing, absolutely nothing that can be said about not being open to or receiving some feedback negatively, say some criticism (E6).
I see a lot of people on the manager seat just doing things to check the box. But you notice that this is not something genuine, not the person wishing to give feedback, because that person really wants you to develop and grow. That individual is just carrying out a task, something the manager has to do because they are a manager (E12).
Depending on the individual, that person who does everything wrong, you know. That person comes up to you and gives you feedback they have absolutely no authority to give... In your mind you couldn't care less, it's not possible. I have experienced this here at Beta (E12).
I think that if you don't trust, [...] if you haven't bonded, that feedback will just go in one ear and out the other. I think it won't be welcomed, it will be interpreted as an insult (E3).

Source: research data.



4.4 Perception of self

This category brings the interviewees' perceptions of their own role and engagement in the feedback process. We created three groups of themes: the attitudes of feedback recipients, preparing for the formal session, and the results brought by feedback.

Regarding attitudes, the interviewees presented a high level of receptiveness to feedback, even to receiving criticism. Yet anxiety is also a feeling present in their accounts and is expressed by a feeling of nervousness that precedes the formal feedback session during the six-month review. The process involves questions related to promotions and financial recognition.

It was possible to identify a positive influence of the level of seniority in the feedback experience. Employees who define themselves as mature are less anxious when it comes to feedback. They also mention they feel more at ease to question the information received, demonstrating they are more open and candid in their feedback conversations with their managers.

We also observed a degree of inconsistency in how well people were prepared. On the one hand, we have those who follow the company's recommendations and gather information on their deliveries and targets during the period and mentally prepare themselves to be open for what will be said during the session. On the other hand, some interviewees admitted to no preparation at all.

Interviewees acknowledge that the feedback process as a whole is very relevant and well-structured in the organization and, in this way, it is also a way of demonstrating that they are valued and that their development matters. Moreover, at different times, they recognize how the feedback practice at Beta reinforces the engagement of the employees with the organization. Yet we should also point out their feelings in relation to negative feedback given by managers without any objective bases and lacking the necessary context to make such criticism constructive. In these cases, such feedback has a negative impact on the level of motivation. But, in general, people did not establish a direct relation between feedback and improved performance in specific tasks. Even so, some interviewees mention the positive indirect impact of feedback on their performance, because there is more motivation and energy to work when they feel that the organization and managers are concerned about the professional development of people.



Table 7 - Examples of the perception of self

It leaves us somewhat anxious, a lot more in relation to calibration than to the perception of my manager coming...(E8).
Sometimes during formal feedback you hear things you haven't heard before. Wow, but why didn't you
I believe that the more mature you are the more you have a vision of your work, and for me a feedback n
You want to work for a company that values you for what you are and for the things you do. One w
Today I feel I learned a lot more with the noes, with the clients that did not work out, to change the

Source: research data.

5 Discussion

Currently the practice of feedback between leaders and followers has been used by organizations pursuing greater engagement and satisfaction of their workforce (Lee *et al.*, 2019; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2019).

However, very few studies focus specifically on the experience and the role of followers in the feedback process (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, Blatt, & Vanderwalle, 2003; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). Going back to the objective of our study, i.e., “how the employees of Beta perceive the feedback process and its possible results,” we can say that, in general, the interviewees understand that the process is very relevant for their development, especially when carried out under the conditions suggested in the literature, meaning the manager leading such reviews being familiar with those being reviewed, providing accurate information as well as evidence, preparing themselves for the sessions, and being open to dialog (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; Kuvaas, Buch, & Dysvik, 2017). When this happens, they recognize feedback as a factor of motivation and engagement to the extent that they feel challenged to improve their deliveries. Moreover, the findings show that a workplace that fosters the exchange of information via feedback brings the psychological conditions of meaning, because people can visualize the meaning of their work and feel valued; of security because they feel they can express themselves authentically; and of availability because people believe they have the desired characteristics for the work (Saks & Gruman, 2014). This way, the effectiveness of the feedback process and, therefore, of the performance management system as a whole, will be facilitated and expanded.

Moreover, we see that if any of the elements recommended by the literature for an effective feedback process is absent, the entire experience becomes negative. This is illustrated with, for instance, the lack of opening or of preparation of the manager (De Villiers, 2013). To this effect, another aspect that draws our attention is the fact that most of the negative points



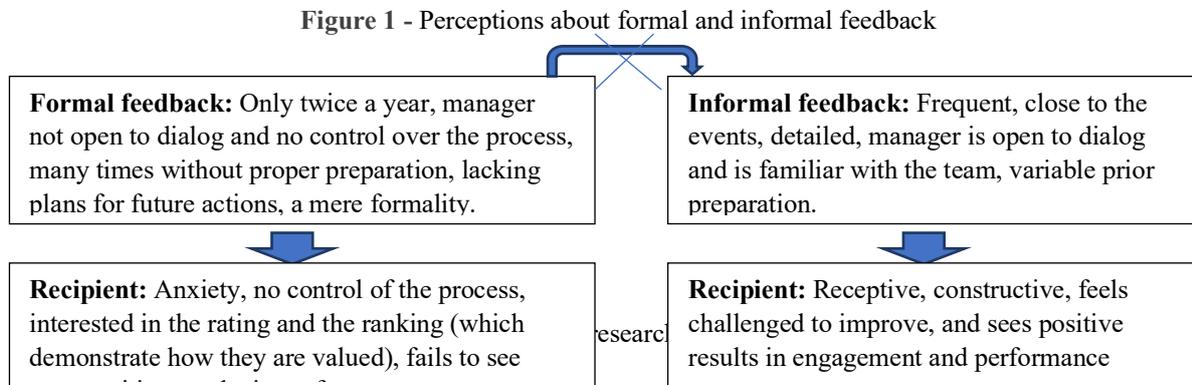
mentioned refer to the manager or to the process, especially to the result of the calibration process, which many times surprises and disappoints them. This suggests the interviewees do not feel empowered to question and to convey their point of view. Additionally, interviewees not always manage to associate the results of the feedback with improved performance. Maybe this happens because the action plans designed to develop competencies are not carried through, which can leave the entire process “unfinished” in a proper way. And it prevents the receiver of the feedback from making this connection between feedback and improved performance.

We should point out that people have mentioned ambiguous feelings about feedback, regardless of its polarity. For instance, negative – but constructive – feedback is considered important for the development process and for motivation with the work, but it needs to be justified and contextualized by the individual providing such feedback. On the other hand, positive feedback given just as a formality is not welcomed. Accordingly, there seem to be some important points regarding feedback. People want honest and constructive feedback to grow and to improve their performance; but they also want to have good ratings in their calibration process, which is associated with promotions and salary rewards; individuals like informal and frequent feedback, which suggest ways to improve performance, but they also feel anxious during the formal feedback session and with the calibration process. This ambiguity, which is discussed in the literature by Buckingham and Goodall (2019) as well as by Murphy (2020), reinforces the idea that feedback should not be used to meet such different objectives as promotions and financial rewards, on the one hand, and learning and competence development, on the other hand. Finally, if the entire process was clear, transparent, and continuous, the result of the formal appraisal process should not be a surprise to anyone, as stated by E3 (Table 7).

This study’s findings also suggest that frequent and informal feedback fosters a culture of openness to dialog, which favors more authentic and even more innovative behavior because people will not be afraid to make mistakes. That is, we can say that this practice has indirect and positive effects on desirable organizational results (BUDWORTH; HARRISON; CHUMMAR, 2019). The points of attention refer more to the formal process: the lack of consistency in preparing for feedback, by both managers and recipients, as well as the lack of structured action plans and the follow up that allow for competence development and convert into performance and results improvements. Moreover, for the interviewees, there is a clear difference between the experience of everyday informal feedback, a situation in which they feel



there is open dialog and the challenge to improve, and the formal appraisal session, when they even feel suspicious of the results of the process, of which they have little or no control. Figure 1 summarizes these perceptions:



Therefore, as shown in this figure, apparently there are quite distinct perceptions in relation to both types of feedback. In the informal type, they feel they are learning and developing, and that the organization and the manager are concerned about people. But it is in formal feedback where individuals feel they are recognized and valued by Beta, by means of ratings and promotions. However, if formal feedback is not consistent with their own expectations, the psychological conditions of meaning, security, and availability are no longer present, which has a negative impact on engagement, as suggested by the study. It also seems that the interviewees fail to make the connection between the two types of feedback, or at least this connection does not seem clear to them. This could suggest that the formal process depends on other variables – such as the relationship among managers, for instance – not considering only the individual merit of employees. Moreover, if the action plans for development are not carried out, there is a feeling that the entire evaluation and feedback process follows only a logic of control and monitoring, trying to identify and adjust any deviations from the planned goals (MURPHY, 2020).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In terms of contributions, this study brings two important avenues for theory and practice. One is the perception among the interviewees of their role in the process and the other is the perceived difference between formal and informal feedback received. For organizational practice, a point of attention is the need to clarify the role and the accountability of the individuals being evaluated, who seem to be placing a large share of the responsibility for the

process on the managers handling this process. Therefore, in the same way that managers are prepared and trained to apply the review and hold the feedback sessions, followers should also have a better understanding of how they should prepare themselves, and demand from the reviewers an action plan and a follow up on it, i.e., having a more proactive role in this process. We also recommend clarifying better the connection between the formal and informal feedback processes, so that the individuals being evaluated perceive a higher degree of credibility in the formal process and thus have greater trust in this process, which could create more engagement and reduce turnover, as pointed out by Lee *et al.* (2019). Our suggestion follows West and Kelly (2018) to hold at different times the sessions used to discuss past performance, including implications on promotions and rewards, and those discussing development, including future actions and follow-up.

In terms of contribution to the theory, this study reveals that by attributing a larger share of responsibility for the process to the rater, the individual under appraisal also considers the relation of power between them, understanding that they cannot change the results of the calibration and preferring to have a more passive attitude. This jeopardizes communication, which should be critical to feedback and learning. Thus, we question to what extent the manager or rater could simultaneously play the role of a coach for learning and development, as suggested by Murphy (2020). This study also reveals the different roles played by formal and informal feedback, as well as the impacts they have on the experience and on the results perceived by those reviewed, which had not been identified in the literature. These points can be addressed in future research.

We should also point out that the average age of the interviewees was 32.6 years. These are individuals that could fit the definition of Generation Y, which has been known to pursue feedback and learning (REIS; BRAGA, 2016). This is a generation more open to feedback than prior generations. Accordingly, future research could approach the theme from the perspective of more mature professionals. It would also be interesting to understand how managers and reviewers feel about feedback interactions. This perspective could provide an interesting contribution because the review of the literature and the interviews place a large burden on management when we talk about the experience with feedback and the engagement of employees. Moreover, if leaders are the communication channel between employees and the organization and it is their role to motivate and engage team members, it is critical to understand if these managers, first of all, are adhering to these demands and if they are engaged with



management practices and policies of the organization. Finally, with the changes in work brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as hybrid work and remote work, a new line of research opens up on the adequacy of the existing performance review and feedback processes in such scenarios.

Regarding the limitations of this study, we could mention the number of interviewees in the organization, as only two business areas were selected, for the reasons explained above. Additionally, this study was restricted to an organization with very specific practices on feedback. This means that our findings should be viewed with caution before being transplanted to other organizational contexts.

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