



The Impersonal Touch: Improving Feedback-Giving with Interpersonal Distance

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Abstract

In this era of knowledge work, employees seeking to develop depend on those around them to highlight their weaknesses and provide constructive criticism. However, would-be feedback-givers are often reluctant to share such critical insight, fearing the relational consequences or conflict that may result. In this paper we consider the relationship between psychological distance and feedback-giving. In contrast to prior research suggesting that psychological closeness should enhance feedback giving by providing a relational buffer from its negative consequences, we propose that psychological distance will improve feedback delivery. Across two studies drawing from the field and the lab, we find that feedback givers who feel more psychologically distant from the recipient are less concerned about harming their relationship and provide more and more specific feedback. These findings offer a new perspective of psychological distance in the workplace by showing when it may be a force for good.

Research Question & Hypotheses

Can psychological distance promote feedback-giving?

H1: Feedback givers will provide more and more concrete feedback to psychologically distant recipients.

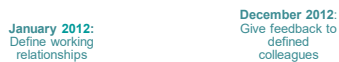
H2: Feedback givers' psychological distance from their recipient will reduce feedback givers' relational and emotional concerns about delivering feedback.

Field Study: Context



Sample:

1,717 feedback surveys completed by 387 colleagues at an integrated food agricultural manufacturing company



Independent Variable (psychological closeness):

Feedback-giver's presence in the **same unit and location** as the feedback recipient

- ✓ 8 locations
- ✓ 36 units
- ✓ 28% of feedback surveys are between givers and recipients in the same unit and location

Dependent Variables:

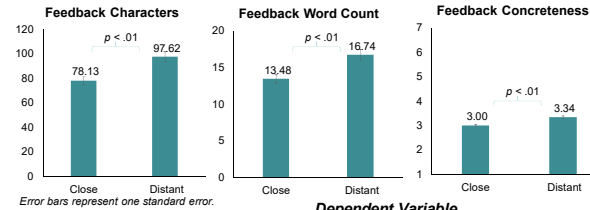
Open ended response: "Do you have any general comments for this Colleague?"

- Character count
- Word count
- Concreteness (ICC = .822)

HIGH concreteness example:
"I would like to see [NAME] take ownership of A/P. I would like to see all invoices entered daily and pending invoices monitored daily. If invoices are not approved within 2 days [NAME] should be contacting Mechanics/Approvers to see why. I would like [NAME] to strive to have invoices paid within 1 week." (6.5)

LOW concreteness example:
"[NAME] understands canning operations very well. I think he could spend more time in other areas to improve even more." (2.5)

Field Study: Results

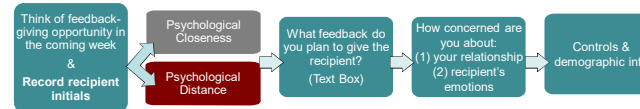


	Character Count			Word Count		Concreteness
	Same Unit & Location (psychologically close)					
Performance		.01		.00		-.08
Number Recipients		-.01		-.01		-.02
Communication		.06		.06		.00
Goal Characters		.00 **		.00 **		.00
Giver Corporate		.48 **		.47 **		.52 *
Recipient Corporate		.12		.11		.14
Giver Female		-.01		-.03		.32 *
Recipient Female		.18 *		.18 *		.20 *
Constant	4.58 **	3.77 **	2.82 **	2.08 **	3.34 **	3.22 **
R ²	.00	.01	.00	.01	.01	.07
n	1,717	1,648	1,718	1,649	1,334	1,276
Model	Negative Binomial		Negative Binomial		Linear	

tp < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01

Employees gave (1) **more** and (2) **more concrete** feedback to psychologically distant colleagues. (H1)

Experiment: Design



Independent Variable:

"Now carefully think about the extent to which [recipient initials] possesses the following traits, and rate [recipient initials] on the traits below.

psychological closeness:

ambitious, analytic, imaginative, sympathetic, high-strung, insecure, irresponsible, reserved (Haslam, 2005)

psychological distance:

contented, even-tempered, relaxed, selfless, simple, timid, uncooperative, unemotional (Haslam, 2005)

Dependent Variables:

- Character count
- Word count
- Concreteness (LIWC Analytic Score; 1-99)

HIGH Analytic Score example:

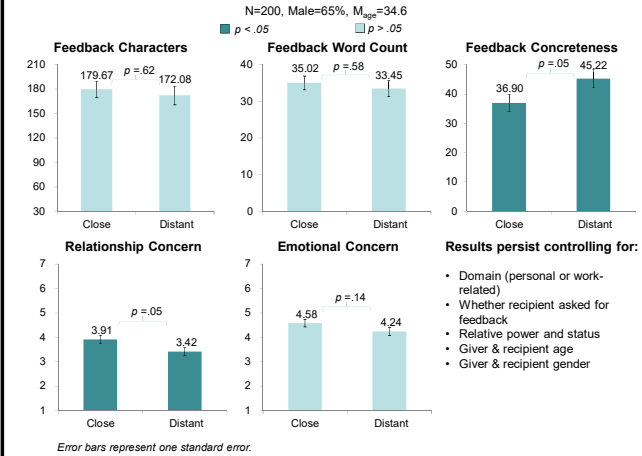
"The story as a whole is compelling, and you got some great quotes to use. But the writing needs to stand out more. You need to frame it as a narrative-style news piece and not hard news. That will help draw in readers." (90.34)

LOW Analytic Score example:

"I have to give her feedback on her work performance. Her planning is great and she has good intentions but her delivery is often lacking and needs much work." (6.80)

- Concerns about relationship with recipient (3 items; $\alpha = .94$)
- Concerns about recipient emotions (3 items; $\alpha = .88$)

Experiment: Results



Feedback-givers who were distanced from their recipients (1) gave **more concrete** feedback and (2) were **less concerned about damaging their relationship with the recipient.** (H2)

Conclusions & Future Directions

- In contrast to prior work suggesting that employees rely on those close to them to provide developmental feedback, we provide evidence that **psychological distance** is associated with **more feedback delivery**.
 - As people tend to **seek** critical feedback from close others more (Finkelstein, Fishback & Tu, 2017), people may be making incorrect assumptions about their most helpful source of developmental insight.
- We offer some of the first evidence that **influencing the way in which a feedback giver thinks about a recipient can affect the feedback he or she provides**.
 - This work highlights the **malleability** of feedback-giver perceptions.
- Our findings provide some of the first evidence of the **potential benefits of psychological distance** in the workplace.
 - Psychological distance may actually serve to benefit colleagues seeking critical feedback to develop, although future work should consider secondary outcomes.

In future work, we are testing our theory with a feedback-giving experiment. This will enable us not only to evaluate whether psychological distance can influence the type of feedback people give, but also to observe from the **recipient's perspective**: (1) whether recipients **perceive a difference** in the feedback they receive, and (2) whether it influences their **outcomes**.

Key References

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