

# We Underestimate Others' Desire for Feedback



Nicole Abi-Esber<sup>1</sup>, Jennifer Abel<sup>1</sup>, Juliana Schroeder<sup>2</sup>, & Francesca Gino<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Business School, <sup>2</sup> UC Berkeley Haas School of Business

## Introduction

We all avoid giving feedback to others, like telling someone they have food in their teeth, or that their presentation style needs work. We show that this is because people underestimate how much others want this constructive feedback (although they report wanting to receive constructive feedback themselves). We find that this underestimation is mediated by misunderstanding the costs and benefits of receiving feedback.

## Pilot: We avoid giving feedback

Out of 212 people approached and asked to take a survey, only 4 people (2%) told the researcher she had chocolate on her face

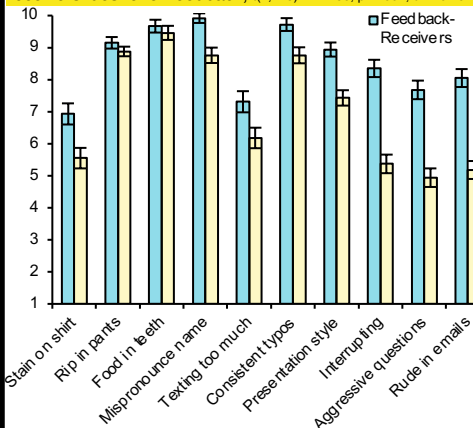


## Experiment 1: We underestimate others' desire for feedback

**Design:** random assignment to feedback-giver or feedback-receiver condition

**DVs:** "How much do you think your colleague would want to be told (giver) vs. "How much would you want to be told (receiver)"

Across 10 scenarios, ranging from food-in-teeth to being rude in emails, feedback-givers underestimated feedback-receivers' desire for feedback,  $t(2,175) = -11.56, p < .001, d = -0.49$ .



## Experiment 2: Underestimating with recalled feedback

**Giver example**

"I saw someone walk out of the bathroom at work with toilet paper on the back of her fuzzy sweater. I didn't say anything. Other people were looking and not saying anything either."

**Receiver example**

"After a formal meeting, I realized the seat of my pants had a large rip down the middle. I was so embarrassed. I tried to remember if anyone was standing behind me who might have noticed."

Again, givers significantly underestimated receivers' desire for feedback,  $t(398) = -2.98, p = .003, d = -0.3$ .

## Experiment 3: Underestimating with close friends on Zoom

**Design:** recruited close friends & romantic others to give feedback, random assignment to feedback-giver vs. receiver condition

**DVs:** Predicted vs. reported desire for feedback

Replicated main effect, and found support for mechanisms: givers **underestimated benefits** to receiver (value of feedback, relational benefits), and **overestimated costs** (discomfort)

**Most common feedback:**

Texting too much

Not doing chores

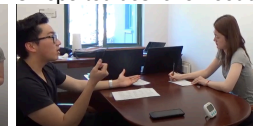
## Experiment 4: Underestimating in a public speaking contest

**Design:** in-person, randomly assigned to give a speech (receiver), or give feedback (giver)

**DVs:** Predicted vs. reported desire for feedback



Speech



Feedback

Again, givers underestimated receivers' desire for receiving feedback on speech,  $t(202) = -6.48, p < .001$ .

Mediated by underestimating **benefits** of feedback, and overestimating **costs**



Lastly, **feedback matters!** Receiving more feedback was associated with better final speeches,  $r = .24, p < .05$

