Getting to the "Source" of Feedback-Seeking: Impact of Feedback-Seeking on Supervisor Stress

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Abstract

In the workplace, feedback-seeking occurs between two parties - a seeker (e.g. subordinate) who asks for feedback and a source (e.g. supervisor) who responds. This study examines the impact of feedback-seeking on sources' role overload, role conflict, and stress. A survey was conducted of supervisors. Results showed that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to sources' stress. In addition, role overload, but not role conflict, fully mediated this relationship. These findings suggest that feedback-seeking may have a downside for sources. Specifically, if sources are asked for feedback too often, they may fall behind in their work and experience role overload and stress. Recommendations are put forth for preventing feedback-seeking from having a negative impact on sources.

Keywords: feedback-seeking behavior, role overload, role conflict, stress

1. Introduction

In the workplace, feedback-seeking takes place between two parties – a seeker and a source

(Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). The seeker has the role of initiating the interaction and asking the source for feedback. The source has the role of responding to the seeker with feedback information. An example of feedback-seeking is a subordinate (i.e. seeker) asking his or her supervisor (i.e. source) "Is this right?" or "Am I going about this the right way?" (Early, Northcraft, Lee, & Lituchy, 1990). Research has shown that feedback-seeking positively affects the seeker in various ways, for example, by increasing job satisfaction, job performance, and organizational citizenship behavior, and by decreasing turnover intentions (Morrison, 1993; Whitaker, Dahling, & Levy, 2007). Recently, Ashford and colleagues (2018) showed that feedback-seeking also positively affects the organization by increasing corporate financial performance.

On the basis of these benefits, researchers have advocated that feedback-seeking should be supported and promoted in the workplace (Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013; Levy, Cober, & Miller, 2002; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). If this is to occur, it should be important to consider the impact of feedback-seeking not only on the seeker and the organization but also on the source. As noted, sources are the people from whom feedback is sought. Thus, each feedback-seeking interaction requires a source. Despite this, our knowledge of the impact of feedback-seeking on the source is quite limited. It is not well-understood, for example, whether sources like or dislike being sought for feedback or whether they are advantaged or disadvantaged by it. In the two latest reviews of the feedback-seeking literature, Anseel and colleagues (2015) and Ashford and colleagues (2016) noted the lack of research on this topic and urged researchers to devote more attention to it.

A small group of studies has examined the impact of feedback-seeking on sources' perceptions of seekers (Ashford and Northcraft, 1992; De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Sully De Lucque, 2010). For example, Ashford and Northcraft (1992) showed that sources perceive seekers with superior performance history more favorably than seekers with average performance history. It is important to note, however, that the purpose of these studies has not been to understand the impact of feedback-seeking on the source. Rather, it has been to ascertain whether there is any validity to seekers' impression-management concerns that they will be judged negatively by sources if they seek feedback (Morrison & Bies, 1991). It is also important to note that while these studies demonstrate that feedback-seeking affects sources' perceptions, the target of these perceptions has been the seeker. Thus, the matter of how sources are personally and professionally affected by feedback-seeking remains largely unanswered.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to increase our understanding of the impact of feedback-seeking on the source. Specifically, this study will examine the relationship between the number of times sources are sought for feedback (i.e. frequency of being sought for feedback) and sources' stress. In addition, this study will examine the role of two stressors – role overload and role conflict – in mediating this relationship. A model of these relationships is shown in Figure 1. An overview of feedback-seeking theory and research is presented next.
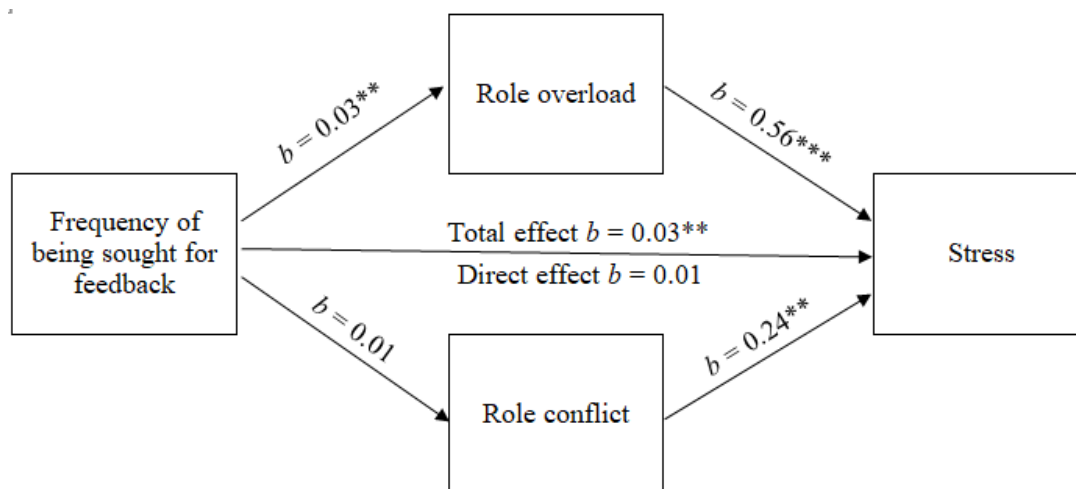
Figure 1. Relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback, role overload, and stress.

$** = p < .01. \quad *** = p < .001.$

2. Overview of Feedback-Seeking Theory and Research

In contrast to feedback that is passively received – for example, at the discretion of one's supervisor or during the performance appraisal – feedback-seeking reflects feedback that is proactively sought. Ashford and Cummings provided the original conceptualization and test of feedback-seeking (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, 1985). Since that time, research on the topic has proliferated and a number of literature reviews have been published (e.g. Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Ashford, Blatt, & Vandewalle, 2003; Ashford et al., 2016; Crommelinck & Anseel, 2013; Madzar, 1995).

Feedback-seeking can be understood as a three-stage process (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). In the first stage – motivation – individuals become motivated to seek feedback. Various motivations have been identified such as the instrumental motive (i.e. seeking feedback to determine if one's work is correct) and the image-enhancement motive (i.e. seeking feedback to show off work that one knows is correct) (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Nakai & O'Malley, 2015). In the second stage – cognitive processing – individuals weigh the costs and benefits of seeking feedback and decide upon their feedback-seeking strategy. Examples of costs are effort costs (i.e. how much energy individuals expect they will need to expend in order to seek feedback) and inference costs (i.e. how inaccurate individuals expect the feedback they seek will be) (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). In the third stage – behavior – individuals carry out their decision using feedback-seeking tactics. Examples of tactics are direct inquiry (i.e. asking for feedback straightforwardly) and indirect inquiry (i.e. asking for feedback surreptitiously by using hinting, joking, and roundabout questioning) (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Miller & Jablin, 1991).

The majority of research on feedback-seeking has focused on identifying its antecedents which can be grouped into three categories – characteristics of the seeker (e.g. personality,

gender) (Krasman, 2010; Miller & Karakowsky, 2005), characteristics of the source (e.g. expertise, leadership style) (Madzar, 2001; Vancouver & Morrison, 1995), and characteristics of the context (e.g. organizational structure, job characteristics) (Gupta, Govindarajan, & Malhorta, 1999; Krasman, 2012). Much less research has focused on identifying the consequences of feedback-seeking which can also be grouped into three categories – consequences for the seeker (e.g. job performance, job satisfaction) (Morrison, 1993; Whitaker et al., 2007), consequences for the organization (i.e. corporate financial performance) (Ashford, Wellman, Sully De Luque, De Stobbeleir, & Wollan, 2018), and consequences for source (i.e. sources' perceptions of seekers) (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Sully de Lucque, 2010). Figure 2 summarizes the existing feedback-seeking literature and shows the contribution of the current study to this literature.
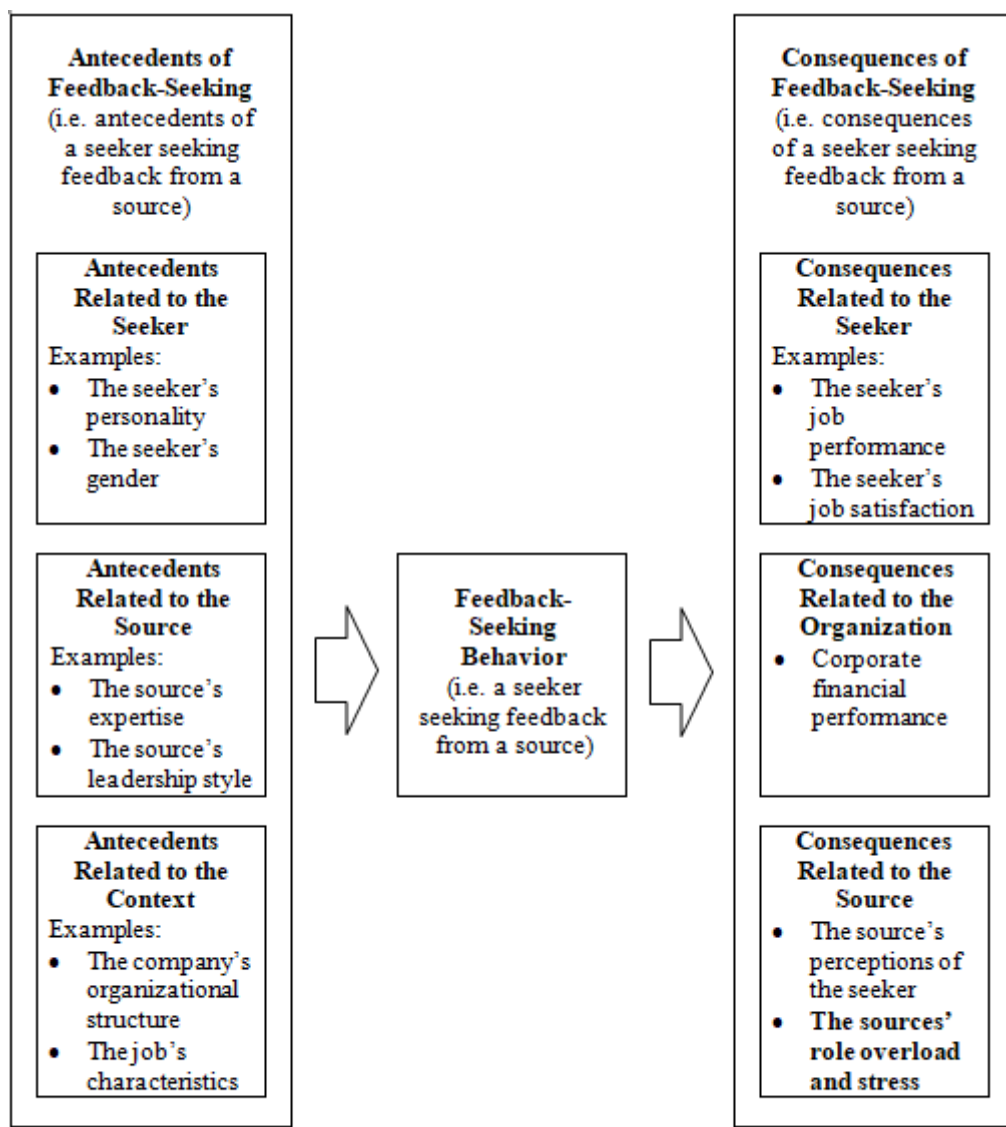

Figure 2. Summary of feedback-seeking literature and contribution of current research.

Note. The contribution of the current study appears in bold in the bottom right corner.

3. Hypothesis Development

Having provided an overview of feedback-seeking theory and research, hypotheses will now be developed about the relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress through role overload and role conflict. First, the relationships between role overload and stress and between role conflict and stress will be established. Following this, the relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and role overload will be discussed. Last, the relationship between role conflict and stress will be discussed.

Stress is "a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, and behavioral changes" (Baum, 1990, p. 635). According to the response-based theory of stress, stress occurs in response to stimuli known as stressors (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). Research has identified many different types and categories of stressors (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005). Two such stressors are role overload and role conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Role overload occurs when a person has too much to do in the time available (Kahn et al., 1964). An example of role overload is a delivery driver having too many packages to drop off before the end of day. Role conflict occurs when a person faces competing demands simultaneously (Kahn et al., 1964). This makes it difficult for the person to satisfy one set of demands without sacrificing the other(s). An example of role conflict is a doctor being told by the walk-in clinic manager to see more patients per hour but the doctor wanting to spend more time with each patient. The positive relationships between role overload and stress and between role conflict and stress have been well-established by research. Individual and meta-analytic studies have shown that role overload and role conflict each contribute to stress (Conley & Woosley, 2000; Coverman, 1989; Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006).

When sources are sought for feedback, they are called upon to engage in various acts such as listening to the seeker's request, assessing the seeker's work under request, responding to the seeker with feedback, and possibly engaging in further conversation (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Because feedback-seeking is initiated at the discretion of the seeker, sources may be in the midst of other work when they are approached and hence interrupted (Jett & George, 2003). Consequently, after a feedback-seeking interaction has ended, sources may need to engage in further activities to restore themselves to the position they were in prior to being sought for feedback (Jett & George, 2003). Scholars have referred to such periods as "resumption lags" (Altmann & Trafton, 2004, p. 43). For example, a source may need reread a document he or she was taken away from or calm down from a seeker reacting adversely to his or her negative feedback (Smith, Harrington, & Houghton, 2000).

These two sets of activities – responding to feedback-seeking requests and returning to work following feedback-seeking requests – take time from a source's workday. Since feedback-seeking occurs spontaneously, sources are invoked to expend this time on demand, as feedback-seeking requests arise (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). When this occurs, sources have less remaining time in their workday to complete their outstanding work. As a result, sources should experience role overload. In support of this, research has shown that unplanned and unscheduled meetings contribute to supervisory stress (Brim, 1983; Im, 2009).

Research in the interruptions literature provides further support. For example, Baethge and colleagues (2015) developed a theoretical model in which they proposed that interruptions cause time pressure which in turn causes strain. Galluch and colleagues (2015) showed that subjects in the high interruptions condition experienced more role overload and stress – as measured by the alpha-amylase hormone in their saliva – than subjects in the moderate interruptions condition. Baethge and Rigottib (2013) showed that interruptions were positively related to time pressure which was positively related to feelings of irritation.

In addition to contributing to role overload, frequency of being sought for feedback should also contribute to role conflict. As noted, when sources are sought for feedback, they are called upon to assess a seeker's work and to respond with feedback. Such responses are likely to contain positive feedback as well as negative feedback (Larson, 1989). While positive feedback may be easy for sources to respond with, negative feedback may be more difficult because of the mum effect. The mum effect reflects people's reluctance to transmit negative news to others (i.e. people keep mum) (Tesser & Rosen, 1975). Research has shown that people's delivery of negative feedback is influenced by the mum effect (Cox, Marler, Simmering, & Totten, 2011). Specifically, studies have shown that when faced with having to provide negative feedback, people delay or they distort the feedback to make it more positive or they refrain from giving it altogether (Fisher, 1979; Yariv, 2007). Various reasons have been identified to explain why the mum effect occurs. For example, people may worry that relaying negative feedback will harm their relationship with the person or that the person will have an adverse emotional reaction or that the person will seek out revenge by evaluating them negatively in return (Fisher, 1979; Yariv, 2007).

Based on the above, being sought for feedback should present sources with competing demands (Larson, 1989). On the one hand, sources have the role expectation of responding to seekers with timely and accurate feedback. On the other hand, as per the mum effect, sources should want to avoid responding with negative feedback because of the potential negative repercussions. Accordingly, being sought for feedback should invoke role conflict for sources and the more sources are sought for feedback, the more role conflict they should experience.

Taking all the above into account, frequency of being sought for feedback should be positively related to stress through role overload and role conflict. As discussed, frequency of being sought for feedback should be positively related to role overload because the impromptu nature of feedback-seeking should leave sources with less time to finish their work. In addition, frequency of being sought for feedback should be positively related to role conflict because sources should feel obligated to respond but not want to respond with negative feedback. Finally, prior research was brought forward to show that role overload and role conflict are each positively related to stress. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to stress and that role overload and role conflict mediate this relationship.

Hypothesis 1: Frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to stress.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress is mediated by (a) role overload and (b) role conflict.

4. Methodology

4.1 Respondents

Data were collected in Canada via a survey of full-time working supervisors. A total of 120 surveys were distributed and 109 useable surveys were returned yielding a response rate of 91%. The gender of the sample was 34% male and 66% female. The average age was 49 years. The most common industry was government (96%). The average organizational tenure was 12 years. The average job tenure was seven years. Most respondents were at the level of middle-management or higher (95%). On average, respondents worked 46 hours per week.

4.2 Measures

Frequency of being sought for feedback. Consistent with Morrison (1993), frequency of being sought for feedback was measured by having respondents report actual frequencies. This provides more accurate data than having respondents rate a scale that ranges from "very infrequently" to "very frequently" which can be interpreted differently by each respondent. Respondents were asked how often they are asked for feedback by their subordinates (item 1), coworkers (item 2), and supervisors (item 3). The answers to this three-item scale were summed to arrive at a total number of times sources are asked for feedback. Respondents could answer in number of times per day or in number of times per month or in number of times per year. All answers were converted to number of times per day. A sample item is "In total, how many times are you asked for feedback by all your subordinates? You can answer in number of times per day OR number of times per week OR number of times per month. Please give an exact number, not a range."

Role overload. Role overload was measured with Netemeyer and colleagues' (1995) three-item scale ($\alpha = .81$). Each item was rated from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). A sample item is "I have more obligations than I can handle during the time that is available".

Role conflict. Role conflict was measured with Rizzo and colleagues' (1970) eight-item scale ($\alpha = .87$). A sample item is "I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others".

Stress. Stress was measured with Bernas and Major's (2000) 12-item scale ($\alpha = .95$). Each item was rated from 1 (= strongly disagree) to 5 (= strongly agree). A sample item is "I feel stressed by my job".

Control variables. Based on research showing gender differences in stress (Matud, 2004), gender was controlled for and measured with a single item.

5. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations for the variables. The hypotheses were tested with Model 4 of PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

Bootstrapping was set at 5,000 samples and a 95% confidence level was chosen. Frequency of being sought for feedback was entered as the independent variable, stress was entered as

the dependent variable, role overload and role conflict were entered as mediators, and gender was entered as a control variable.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to stress. Based on the results of the total effect, this hypothesis was supported ($b = 0.03$, $p < .01$). Frequency of being sought for feedback explained 8% of the variance in stress. Hypothesis 2a predicted that role overload mediates the relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress. Results showed that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively and significantly related to role overload ($b = 0.03$, $p < .01$) and role overload is positively and significantly related to stress ($b = 0.56$, $p < .001$). The confidence interval for the indirect effect did not contain zero (indirect effect = 0.02, $CI = [0.005, 0.03]$). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported. Hypothesis 2b predicted that role conflict also mediates the relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress. Results showed that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively but not significantly related to role conflict ($b = 0.01$, $p = $ ns) and role conflict is positively and significantly related to stress ($b = 0.24$, $p < .01$). The confidence interval for the indirect effect did contain zero (indirect effect = 0.003, $CI = [-0.001, 0.01]$). Thus, Hypothesis 2b was not supported. Finally, because the direct effect between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress was non-significant ($b = .01$, $p = $ ns), role overload fully (rather than partially) mediated the relationship. Table 2 shows these results.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Intercorrelations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	1.67	0.48	-				
2. Frequency of being sought for feedback	10.12	8.14	.09	-			
3. Role overload	3.61	0.87	.06	.27**	(.81)		
4. Role conflict	3.43	0.76	-.13	.11	.41***	(.87)	
5. Stress	3.45	0.82	.07	.27**	.72***	.47***	(.95)

$** = p < .01$. $*** = p < .001$.

Note. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients appear along the diagonal. Gender was dummy-coded 1 = male, 2 = female.

Table 2. PROCESS Results

	Role Overload		Role Conflict		Stress		Total Effect	
	b	t	b	t	b	t	b	t
Control variable								
Gender	0.07 (0.17)	0.39	-0.22 (0.15)	-1.42	0.09 (0.11)	0.81	0.08 (0.16)	0.48
Independent variable								
Frequency of being sought for feedback	0.03 (0.01)	2.80**	0.01 (0.01)	1.23	0.01 (0.01)	1.27	0.03 (0.01)	2.88**
Mediators								
Role overload	--	--	--	--	0.56 (0.07)	8.08***	--	--
Role conflict	--	--	--	--	0.24 (0.08)	3.15**	--	--
Model summary information	$R^2 = .07$		$R^2 = .03$		$R^2 = .56$		$R^2 = .08$	
	$F(2, 106) = 4.13*$		$F(2, 106) = 1.62$		$F(4, 104) = 33.33***$		$F(2, 106) = 4.41*$	

$* = p < .05.$ $** = p < .01.$ $*** = p < .001.$

Note. Standard error of the predictors are provided in parentheses. Gender was dummy-coded 1 = male, 2 = female.

6. Discussion

In the workplace, feedback-seeking takes place between two parties – a seeker who asks for feedback and a source who responds. While research has shown that feedback-seeking is beneficial to the seeker and the organization, little is known about its impact on the source. This study examined the impact of feedback-seeking on sources' role overload, role conflict, and stress. A survey was conducted of full-time working supervisors. Results showed that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to sources' stress. In addition, sources' role overload, but not sources' role conflict, fully mediated this relationship. These findings suggest that feedback-seeking may have a downside for sources. Specifically, if sources are asked for feedback too often, they may fall behind in their work and experience role overload and stress. Accordingly, organizations should consider the impact of feedback-seeking on the source in making decisions about facilitating feedback-seeking in the workplace. Such decisions should not be based solely on the consequences (i.e. benefits) for the seeker and the organization. This study contributes to our knowledge of the impact of feedback-seeking on the source which to date has been lacking.

Despite its findings, this study has some limitations. First, because the data were cross-sectional, causality can only be inferred. Second, because the data were self-reported, respondents' answers may have been biased. To counteract this, Podsakoff and colleagues' (2003) recommendations to make the survey anonymous and to instruct respondents that there are no right or wrong answers were followed. Third, because all the data were collected in the same survey, common method bias may have affected the data. To counteract this, Podsakoff and colleagues' (2003) recommendation to place the variables in the survey in reverse causal order was followed. Thus, in the survey, the items for stress appeared first, the items for role overload and role conflict appeared second, and the items for frequency of being sought for feedback appeared last. Last, the findings of the study may not be fully generalizable to all employees in all organizations.

Role conflict was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress based on the mum effect. While role conflict was related to stress, frequency of being sought for feedback was not related to role conflict. One explanation could be that there is a distinction between negative feedback that is given on one's own volition (e.g. as part of supervision) and negative feedback that is given in response to being asked (i.e. as part of feedback-seeking). Perhaps when people are asked for feedback, they feel they have greater license to respond with negative feedback and are less concerned about negative repercussions (i.e. the mum effect). Future research should examine whether the mum effect is influenced by these different circumstances of giving negative feedback.

In addition to the above, future research should examine whether feedback-seeking has other consequences on sources. For example, if the spontaneity of feedback-seeking makes it difficult for sources to finish their work, being sought for feedback may hamper sources' job performance. Prior research has shown that role overload is negatively related to job performance (Beehr, Jex, Stacy, & Murray, 2000) and this study showed that frequency of being sought for feedback is positively related to role overload. Thus, it could be that frequency of being sought for feedback is negatively related to job performance through role overload.

Future research should also examine whether certain variables moderate the relationships found in this study. For example, source conscientiousness may strengthen the indirect relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and stress by strengthening the direct relationship between frequency of being sought for feedback and role overload. Because conscientious people are meticulous and detailed-oriented, conscientious sources may take longer to assess seekers' work and deliver their feedback response (Costa & McCrae, 1992). As a result, they may have less remaining time in their day and experience greater role overload and stress.

Finally, future research should examine whether feedback-seeking has positive consequences on sources. For example, being sought for feedback may facilitate experiences in which sources feel competent (since others are asking for their advice) and in which sources feel they are making a contribution (since they are helping others). According to Meyer and Allen

(1997), both these sets of experiences are amongst the strongest predictors of affective commitment. Thus, being sought for feedback may contribute to sources' affective commitment.

In terms of practical implications, organizations should consider the consequences of feedback-seeking on the source in making decisions about facilitating feedback-seeking in the workplace. Specifically, in addition to considering the positive impact of feedback-seeking on the seeker and the organization, organizations should take into account the potential negative impact on sources' role overload and stress. In order to prevent a negative impact, several recommendations are put forth: First, organizations should conduct job analyses to ensure sources have sufficient time in their workday to answer feedback-seeking requests. Second, organizations should ensure staff are recruited, oriented, and trained effectively in order to minimize unnecessary feedback-seeking requests. Third, organizations should have seekers and sources work out feedback-seeking contracts in which they specify when and how feedback-seeking will occur. For example, a subordinate and supervisor may decide that the subordinate will try to seek feedback from a coworker first or try to constrain his or her requests to set times during the workday. Fourth, organizations should encourage staff to seek feedback only if they are uncertain about their work rather than to fulfill other motives such as showing off good work to sources in order to impress them (Nakai & O'Malley, 2015). Last, organizations should train sources in how to answer feedback-seeking requests concisely yet effectively.

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