



FEEDBACK VALENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS: A STRUCTURED LITERATURE REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

Valence of feedback - the sign of the information people receive concerning their own performance - is a well-researched yet theoretically fragmented construct. Even though scholars have been studying feedback for many years, current field-level review studies still characterize the literature on performance-related feedback in terms of inconsistent definitions, isolated theoretical perspectives, and conflicting conclusions as to which valence of feedback (positive or negative) works better for people and organizations. This study is an attempt to systematize the existing literature on the topic of feedback valence by conducting a theoretically-oriented review of academic studies from scientific databases. The purpose of the review is to follow the evolution of the feedback valence concept and identify major theoretical perspectives that scholars used to study it (Feedback Intervention Theory, feedback seeking cost-benefit perspective, self-verification/attribution theory, and social exchange theory). The synthesis indicates that the effect of valenced feedback is highly situation-specific: positive feedback consistently promotes motivation, creativity, and feedback seeking behavior, but negative feedback effect depends on the nature of the relationship, delivery of feedback, and agency of the person receiving it. The paper concludes with the discussion of theoretical, methodological, and situational limitations and suggestions for future research in this area.

Keywords: Feedback Valence, Positive Feedback, Negative Feedback, Performance Feedback, Literature Review

1. Introduction

Among the levers that organizations can use to impact the performance, motivation, and development of their employees, feedback has been one of the most intensely studied (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). One of the practical issues related to feedback, which keeps coming up in the literature on feedback, has to do with the issue of feedback valence, meaning the nature of the feedback provided to an employee whether it is a positive confirmation (performance meets or exceeds expectation) or negative indication of a problem that needs to be solved. In practice, practitioners consider this a straightforward issue, but years of academic research show otherwise (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Anseel & Sherf, 2024).

The interest in feedback valence has evolved concurrently with the development of performance management research, where feedback valence has been examined either as a direct determinant of task performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Goller & Spath, 2024), as a factor fostering employees' creativity and innovative behavior (Zhou, 1998; Hoever et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022), as a precursor of employees' feedback-seeking behaviors (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Anseel et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2026), or as an input for employees' judgments on feedback fairness and justice (Westerman et al., 2014). Nevertheless, two recently conducted extensive reviews of the more general literature on performance feedback – Anseel and Sherf's (2024) 25-year review of feedback literature and Heine, Stouten, and Liden's (2025) systematic review of 173 studies on performance feedback – have come to a similar conclusion about the fragmentation of the field and the generic nature of the definitions of feedback and feedback valence.



It is in response to this fragmentation that this paper presents a structured review of feedback valence, within an HRM/OB domain. The goals of such a review include the following four aspects: (a) the historical development and conceptualization of feedback valence in HRM/OB research; (b) the identification of theoretical paradigms explaining valence effects; (c) the synthesis of the literature on feedback valence's antecedents, consequences, moderators, and mediators; and (d) the identification of conceptual, methodological, and contextual gaps that can form a basis for future research directions. This review is intended to serve both academic researchers looking for a consolidated approach to this literature and HR practitioners in the design of their performance-management systems.

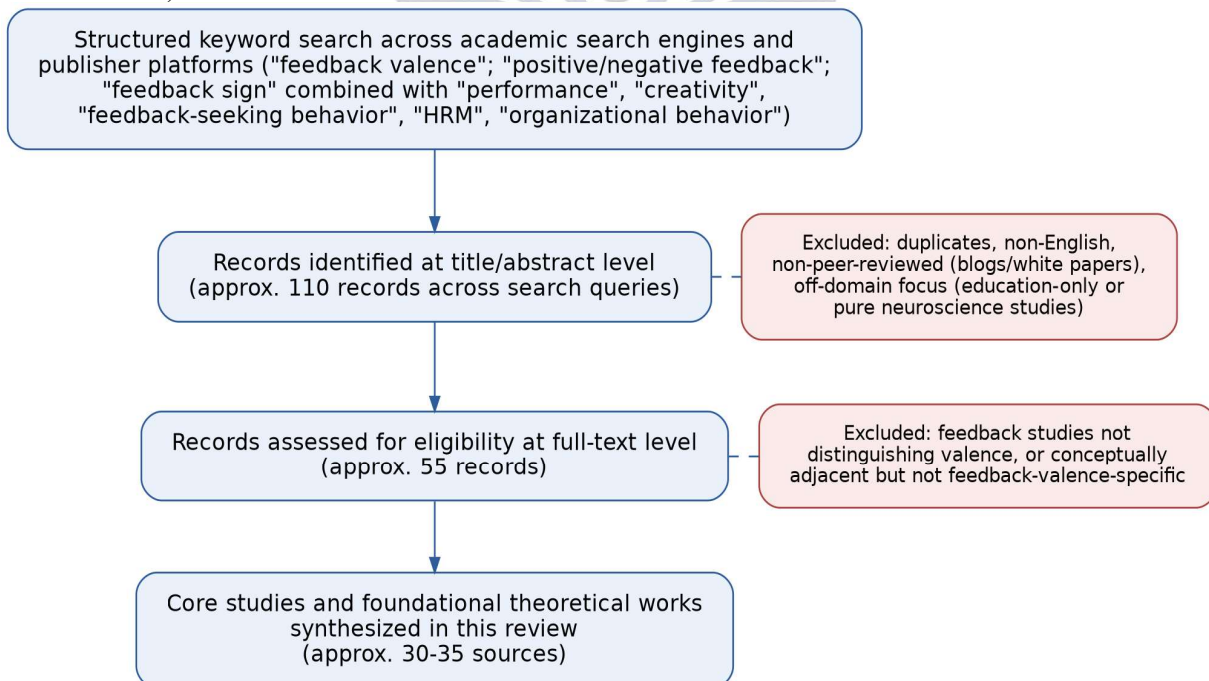
2. Review Methodology

The current review uses a systematic literature searching approach, generally aligned with the spirit of systematic review guidelines (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003), but does not go all the way to performing a systematic review with database indexing and bibliometric analysis (co-citations or keyword co-occurrences, etc.), because this requires access to citation databases like Scopus or Web of Science, which have not been consulted for the preparation of this paper. Those interested in quantitative bibliometric aspects (publication trends, frequency of publication by journal, co-word analysis) should supplement the conceptual review with a separate bibliometric investigation.

The search was conducted using combinations of the terms "feedback valence," "positive feedback," "negative feedback," and "feedback sign," cross-referenced with "performance," "creativity," "feedback-seeking behavior," "human resource management," and "organizational behavior." Abstract and title screening was done followed by full text screening using exclusion criteria of duplicate articles, non-English articles, non-peer reviewed articles (such as blogs and white papers), and irrelevant articles not relevant to the topic of HRM/OB (articles limited strictly to K-12 environment or to isolated neuroscience paradigms that cannot be applied to organizations). Reference lists of selected articles were also checked to get more sources both from the past (foundational articles) and the present time (more recent articles) using backward snowballing strategy. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Structured literature search and inclusion process (illustrative, search-engine based; not a database-indexed systematic review).





This being the case, it should be noted that the current review does not include frequency of journals and years of publications because the inclusion of such information demands complete database searches. The current review is structured according to the topics of conceptualization, theoretical foundations, antecedents, consequences, and moderators of the feedback valence, which is a pattern typical for the modern HRM/OB reviews (Garg et al., 2021; Heine et al., 2025).

3. Conceptualizing Feedback Valence

Valence, in a broad psychological sense, is the inherent positivity or negativity of a stimulus (Frijda, 1986). With regard to work-based feedback, positive feedback provides confirmation that the employee's behavior was satisfactory according to the standard, and negative feedback means that there is a discrepancy between performance and what is desired from the employee (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). While the dichotomy seems clear, researchers in HRM/OB field have long pointed out that the concept of "feedback valence" is used in inconsistent ways in research literature - sometimes indicating the objective direction of the message, sometimes reflecting the subjective perception of feedback favorability, and sometimes erroneously equating it with feedback specificity (Heine et al., 2025; Anseel & Sherf, 2024). The lack of clarity regarding the meaning of the term is one of the reasons why two most comprehensive recent reviews of the literature recommend defining feedback constructs, such as valence, before testing their impact (Anseel & Sherf, 2024; Heine et al., 2025).

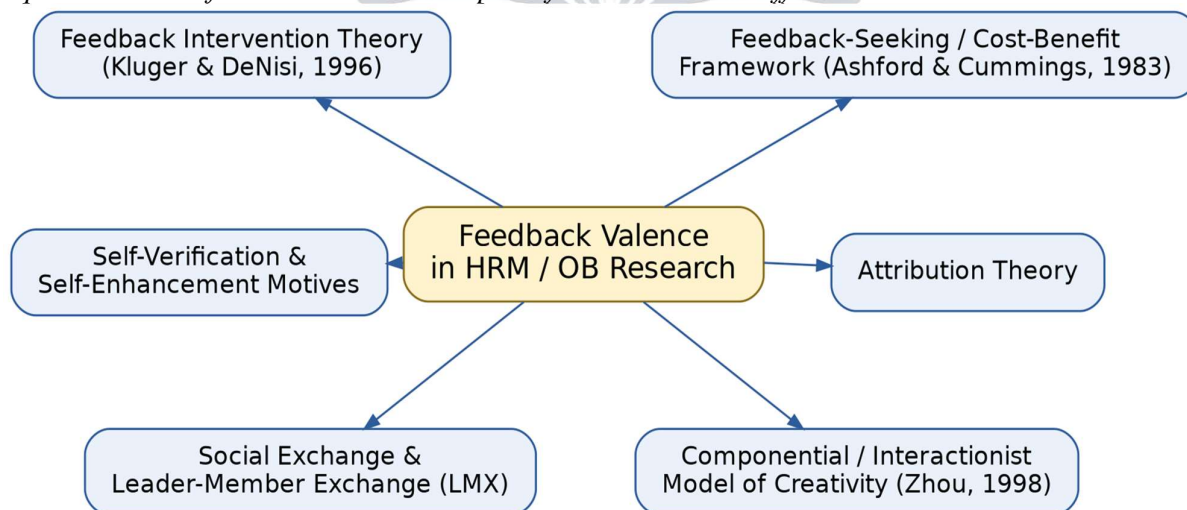
Another important differentiation to be made is the difference between feedback valence as delivered (which refers to the actual signal of the message conveyed objectively by the sender) and feedback valence as received (which refers to the subjective evaluation of feedback by the receiver, which can differ from the actual intention of the sender depending on the mode of delivery, medium used, or nature of the relationship between the two) (Westerman et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2015). There are also other researchers who differentiate between feedback valence and feedback style (informational or controlling, for example), both of which affect one another.

4. Theoretical Foundations

Feedback valence research in HRM/OB draws on a relatively wide set of theoretical traditions, reflecting the construct's relevance to motivation, self-regulation, social exchange, and creativity research alike. Figure 2 maps the six theoretical anchors most consistently used across the reviewed literature.

Figure 2

Principal theoretical foundations used to explain feedback valence effects in HRM/OB research.



4.1 Feedback Intervention Theory

Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) by Kluger & DeNisi (1996) has continued to be the most dominant theory, following a meta-analysis of 607 effect sizes based on over 23,000 observations. Feedback



intervention has been found to have positive effects on performance, but more than a third of all the effects analyzed were negative and could not be accounted for on the basis of feedback polarity. FIT postulates that feedback diverts the attention of the individual among three different hierarchies of self-regulation: task learning, task motivation, and meta-task/self levels; and feedback of either polarity works best when it keeps attention focused on the task.

4.2 Feedback-Seeking and the Cost-Benefit Framework

The seminal paper by Ashford and Cummings (1983) viewed feedback not just as what managers give to employees but rather as a resource for which employees look, comparing the informational value of feedback to its costs regarding ego, effort, and inference. Since negative feedback is considered more ego costly than positive feedback, it follows that employees who receive more positive feedback are more prone to feedback seeking, whereas the anticipated negative feedback might actually deter employees from looking for feedback (Anseel et al., 2015).

4.3 Self-Verification, Self-Enhancement, and Attribution Processes

The second parallel stream utilizes self-verification and self-enhancement as well as attribution theory to provide reasons why negative feedback is discounted by the receiver. Employees attribute good feedback to themselves in terms of competence and effort, while bad feedback is attributed to factors outside themselves or factors that are unstable, and hence create self-serving attribution biases that result in negative feedback not changing the desired behavior (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

4.4 Social Exchange and Leader-Member Exchange

Since most of the feedback at work is provided by the boss, both social exchange theory and LMX theory are especially important when it comes to understanding why negative feedback is accepted and not rejected. Feedback provided in a high-quality, trusting relation between a boss and a subordinate will be more likely accepted no matter its valence, while the same feedback in a low-quality LMX relation will be either ignored or hurt the relationship even more (Zheng et al., 2015; Heine et al., 2025).

4.5 Componential and Interactionist Models of Creativity

In the creativity literature, for instance, Zhou (1998) demonstrates the interaction effect between feedback valence, feedback delivery style, and task autonomy on creativity. That is, the combination of positive feedback, which is informational, and high autonomy results in the highest levels of creativity. Further studies extend this idea to the team level, suggesting that it is even more complicated at the team level because positive feedback improves creativity by reducing relational conflict within the team (Hoever et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2022).

5. Antecedents of Feedback Valence Effects

Instead of being a characteristic that is inherent in the message itself, how feedback valence is realized in practice is dependent on certain antecedent conditions regarding the feedback source, receiver, and task. Table 1 presents the most commonly found antecedent conditions in the reviewed literature.

Table 1

Antecedents shaping the emergence and effects of feedback valence in HRM/OB research.

Category	Illustrative Antecedents	Representative Studies
Feedback characteristics	Supervisor communication/delivery style; leader-member exchange quality; perceived supervisor credibility	Zheng et al. (2015); Heine, Stouten, & Liden (2025)
Recipient characteristics	Goal orientation; self-esteem; feedback orientation; achievement orientation	Zhou (1998); Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett (2015)
Feedback delivery / channel	Face-to-face vs. digital/text delivery; synchronous vs. asynchronous channel	Westerman, Heuett, Reno, & Curry (2014)
Task and context characteristics	Task autonomy; task interdependence; team vs. individual level; time pressure	Zhou (1998); Liu, Xiao, & Wang (2022)



Organizational / cultural context	Remote work arrangements; national/organizational culture; feedback vacuum in flexible work settings	Liu, Wang, & Wang (2026); Anseel & Sherf (2024)
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6. Consequences of Feedback Valence

The consequences of feedback valence reported across the HRM/OB literature can be grouped into performance-related, creativity/innovation-related, motivational, and relational/behavioral outcomes, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Reported consequences of positive versus negative feedback valence.

Outcome Domain	Pattern Reported	Representative Studies
Task performance	Positive feedback shows a consistent favorable effect; negative feedback's effect is inconsistent and depends on moderating conditions	Kluger & DeNisi (1996); Goller & Späth (2024); Heine, Stouten, & Liden (2025)
Creativity and innovative behavior	Positive feedback generally more conducive to creativity than negative feedback, especially under informational delivery and high autonomy	Zhou (1998); Hoefer, Zhou, & van Knippenberg (2018); Liu, Xiao, & Wang (2022)
Feedback-seeking behavior	Frequent positive feedback is associated with greater subsequent feedback-seeking; anticipated negative feedback can suppress it	Ashford & Cummings (1983); Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett (2015); Liu, Wang, & Wang (2026)
Recipient creativity under negative feedback	Effects of negative feedback on recipient creativity vary by direction of feedback flow and relationship context	Kim & Kim (2020)
Fairness / justice	Positive feedback and richer delivery channels	Westerman, Heuett, Reno, & Curry (2014)

7. Moderators and Mediators

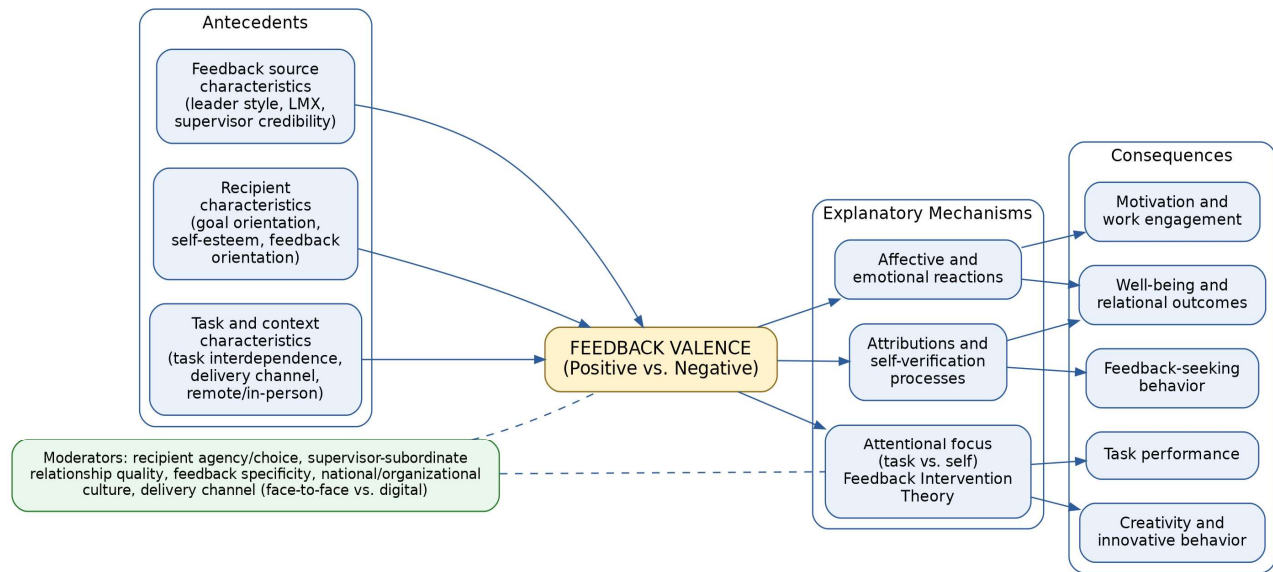
An increasing number of research go beyond comparing only the valences of positive and negative feedback and look at the context when they are useful. One of the most consistent moderators is the quality of the relationship (LMX): negative feedback in good relationships is more tolerable and productive for improving employees' performance than in poor relationships (Zheng et al., 2015; Heine et al., 2025). The combination of task autonomy and feedback style moderates the valence-creativity effect, with informational (and not controlling) delivery of feedback reinforcing the value of positive feedback (Zhou, 1998). In team settings, creative time pressure moderates the effects on valence-to-conflict and valence-to-creativity relationships, with positive feedback fostering team creativity in situations of less time pressure (Liu et al., 2022). The communication channel itself is a moderator of the perceived fairness of feedback, with more rich and synchronous channels (e.g., face-to-face or telephone calls) being perceived as more fair than lean channels (e.g., text messages) irrespective of the valence of the feedback (Westerman et al., 2014).

Various mediators found in the literature include self-regulation (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), self-serving attribution biases regarding the source of the feedback, emotions elicited by the feedback, and, at the group level, relationship conflict, which acts as a mediator in the link between feedback valence and team creativity (Liu et al., 2022). The figure below shows how these antecedents, mediators, moderators, and outcomes have been incorporated into one conceptual model.



Figure 3

Integrative conceptual framework of feedback valence antecedents, explanatory mechanisms, moderators, and consequences in HRM/OB research.



8. Discussion: Advancing Research on Feedback Valence

8.1 Conceptual Gaps

The two most recent reviews of the performance-feedback literature share one critical conceptual issue that needs to be addressed: The generic concept of "feedback" and "feedback valence" varies from study to study with regards to whether the valence is defined by the feedback message itself, the interpretation of the message, or even the evaluation of performance as measured (Anseel & Sherf, 2024; Heine et al., 2025). The same applies to the analysis in this particular review of the subset of literature on feedback valence.

8.2 Methodological Gaps

Most research on feedback valence employs designs based on single sources, cross-sectional or experimental periods of short duration (Zhou, 1998; Liu et al., 2022), which makes it difficult to draw causal conclusions on how repeated exposures to positive or negative feedback influence performance and motivation over time. Experimental designs of longitudinal and field experiments like those employed by Goller and Spath (2024) in the realm of professional sports are still relatively uncommon in regular HRM/OB environments.

8.3 Contextual Gaps

One such contextual variable is the "feedback vacuum" that has developed because of the move towards remote/hybrid work and has been addressed by previous valence research just now (Liu et al., 2026). Another one is the means through which the feedback is communicated, i.e., whether the communication takes place face-to-face, via phone, through text or using the new technological trend of AI-generated or AI-mediated feedback (Westerman et al., 2014). The issue of cross-national/cross-cultural differences in understanding and utilizing feedback valence has also not been explored sufficiently in the

9. Future Research Agenda

Expanding on these knowledge gaps, four specific research areas emerge as especially fruitful avenues to pursue future feedback valence research in HRM/OB. First, more precise and standardized definition and operationalization of feedback valence is required, so that cumulative theorizing about feedback valence could occur in the light of recent literature reviews that called for greater consistency in this respect (Anseel & Sherf, 2024; Heine et al., 2025). Second, further research is required for understanding the temporal dynamics of feedback valence impact on employees and the reversal processes by designing longitudinal studies rather than using mainly one-shot designs; for instance, the field experiment conducted by Goller and Spath (2024)



in professional sports is quite unique and needs to be applied to mainstream HRM/OB areas. Third, with the increased use of digital platforms and AI-driven feedback by companies, the impact of the interaction between feedback valence and automated feedback, and the buffering role of the relational factors (e.g., LMX), which mitigate the negative impact of feedback from human supervisors, should be considered, especially given the evidence that informing employees that the feedback was generated by an AI algorithm has its own negative impact on performance regardless of the accuracy of this feedback (Tong, Jia, Luo, & Fang, 2021). Lastly, replication studies using samples from other cultures and sectors, most of which have been taken from North American, European, and Chinese contexts, would be useful in establishing the boundary conditions for generalizability of valence feedback effects in the field of global HRM/OB research, following the previous call for modeling culture, including individualism/collectivism, as a moderator for feedback seeking and responses to negative feedback (Sully De Luque & Sommer, 2000; Stone-Romero & Stone, 2002).

10. Implications for HRM Practice

For HR specialists and managers, this literature review implies that the selection between positive and negative feedback must not be considered a dichotomous choice. The advantages of positive feedback in terms of motivation, need for feedback, and creativity seem to be relatively stable, and this feedback type can be used with less relational conditions (Anseel et al., 2015; Zhou, 1998). The use of negative feedback may be justified in the correction of the performance but such feedback becomes effective if certain conditions exist in a supervisor-subordinate relationship (Zheng et al., 2015; Heine, Stouten, & Liden, 2025, who state that negative feedback needs specific moderating conditions or high-quality supervisor-subordinate relationship in order to become effective while positive feedback increases performance regularly), if the content and style of delivering such feedback is clear and informative (Zhou, 1998; Park et al., 2019) and if the channel of delivering feedback is appropriate (Westerman, Heuett, Reno, & Curry, 2014). Organizational leaders who develop the performance management system, 360-degree feedback process or manager training program must pay attention not only to the encouragement of balanced feedback but also in the development of the relational and delivery context- namely, trust, specificity, and channel richness- within which negative feedback can become constructive.

11. Limitations of This Review

There are a number of weaknesses associated with this literature review. Firstly, and foremost, it is a structured narrative synthesis with the use of the search engine instead of a systematic review involving a comprehensive search of indexed databases that could give full publication numbers, frequencies of journals cited, and co-citations of articles; these can only be provided upon direct access to citation databases that were not employed for writing this manuscript. Secondly, the search conducted for this literature review involved exclusively the sources written in the English language and reviewed by peers. Thirdly, as a thematic synthesis and not a meta-analysis, this literature review provides no effect sizes of the effects of feedback valence.

12. Conclusion

The valence of feedback may be one of the most intuitively obvious but empirically complex constructs in the study of HRM and organizational behavior. Over forty years of research has found that positive and negative feedback are more than simple opposites in their effects on performance, creativity, feedback-seeking, and well-being, depending on the agency of the receiver, the nature of the relationship, the style of delivery, and the surrounding organizational culture of feedback interaction. Contemporary overviews of the state of the field have indicated that the science of work-based feedback has not yet reached a stage of cumulative knowledge, while the construct of feedback valence, in particular, continues to be plagued by inconsistent definition. The current overview was an attempt to clarify what is known about the phenomenon of feedback valence in the context of HRM/OB research, to uncover the theoretical basis of this construct, and to outline a research agenda for the future.

Author's Contributions

All authors participated in ideation, development, and writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement



The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. The confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were guaranteed throughout the research process.

Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The authors are committed to transparency and will provide detailed methodological information and analysis protocols upon request.

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