COMMUNICATING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK: THE TACTICS MANAGERS USE

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ABSTRACT
Negative feedback is widely regarded as necessary in facilitating performance improvements, though we know little about how managers deliver negative feedback to their employees. Understanding these tactics is important because the delivery of negative feedback can also have unintended consequences on employee behaviour, for example anger and aggression. Qualitative data from twenty semi-structured interviews revealed that managers employed tactics that were largely rational and emotive in nature. Other types of tactics that managers used focused on communication, the physical environment and avoidance. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Negative Feedback, Performance Appraisal
The performance appraisal system plays a central role in facilitating performance improvements through the provision of feedback (Rynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005), particularly during the performance appraisal interview. While communicating negative feedback to employees is needed to bring about performance improvements, it also has the potential to trigger adverse employee reactions (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Tata, 2002). When faced with the task of communicating negative feedback, managers employ tactics to deal with the situation (Lizzio, Wilson, Gilchrist, & Gallois, 2003). The use of certain feedback tactics can enable managers to communicate negative feedback and manage employee reactions effectively (Baron, 1990; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Tata, 2002).

However, little is known about what tactics managers actually use. For example, are managers employing tactics prescribed by guide books about management practice? Do managers use tactics that have not yet been identified by research? Knowing what tactics managers use forms the basis for understanding the effectiveness of different tactics. This has a practical application in the design of training programs, equipping managers to deliver negative feedback and manage employee reactions more effectively. Given that feedback is linked to performance improvements, managers who are well-equipped to communicate negative feedback will play an important role in contributing to the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system. The present research takes the first step in this research agenda by identifying the different types of tactics managers use when communicating negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview.

**Performance Appraisal Interview & Negative Feedback**

Performance appraisals are widely used in organisations as a means of improving employee performance (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Research has largely sought to improve the effectiveness of performance appraisal by promoting accuracy and objectivity in managerial measures and judgments of employee performance (Arvey & Murphy, 1998; Ilgen, Barnes-Farrell, & McKellin, 1993; Milkovich & Widgor, 1992; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). In addition to observing and rating performance, managers also play an important role during the performance appraisal interview. Given that feedback is necessary to ensure performance improvements (Rynes et al., 2005), how managers go about communicating feedback during the performance appraisal interview can also contribute to the effectiveness of performance appraisals. The performance appraisal interview typically occurs at the conclusion of the performance appraisal cycle where the overall rating of performance and performance feedback is formally communicated to the employee (Klein, Snell, & Wexley, 1987). Feedback is information about where an employee’s performance stands with respect to a benchmark. This allows the employee to modify his or her effort and
performance strategy in order to meet the target (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Latham, 1990; Locke & Latham, 2002; Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1990).

In this study, feedback is defined as negative when managers anticipate that their evaluation of an employee’s performance is below the employee’s own assessment of how well he or she has performed. Employees often have an unrealistically positive view of their own performance and are likely to perceive themselves as top performances or above average performers (Meyer, 1980). Managers’ ratings of employee performance, on the other hand, tend to cluster around the mid-point in the distribution (e.g., Lewis, 1998). Furthermore, a forced distribution may be used in some organisations, where there is a fixed percentage of employees that managers have to rate as average or poor performers (Scullen, Bergey, & Aiman-Smith, 2005). An example of negative feedback is when a manager has given the employee an overall average rating, but thinks that the employee is expecting an above average rating. From the manager’s perspective he or she is faced with the task of communicating negative feedback.

Although negative feedback is necessary for improving employee performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), managers are often reluctant (Larson, 1984; Tesser & Rosen, 1975) and uncomfortable (Smith, Harrington, & Houghton, 2000; Villanova, Bernadin, Dahnus, & Sims, 1993) about communicating negative feedback. This is not surprising given that negative feedback can threaten an employee’s ego and face needs, often prompting retaliation, hostility (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Tata, 2002), anger and conflict (Baron, 1988). In Geddes and Baron’s (1997) study, workplace aggression was a problematic employee reaction to negative feedback. For example, spreading unkind rumours about the manager, ignoring the manager, threatening some form of retaliation and physical attacks (Geddes & Baron, 1997).

**Negative Feedback Tactics**

Given that communicating negative feedback can often be problematic, managers are likely to employ tactics (Geddes & Baron, 1997; Kim & Miller, 1990; Lizzio et al., 2003). Managers have a plan of how they will approach the task of communicating negative feedback or follow a set of procedures, which they think will help achieve a desired outcome. Tactics that are effective can play an important role in contributing to the effectiveness of the performance appraisal systems by helping to facilitate performance improvements and elicit the desired employee reactions (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Keeping & Levy, 2000; Rynes et al., 2005; Tata, 2002).

Books about how to conduct performance appraisals prescribe a number of tactics that managers should use during the interview. For example, it is recommended that managers provide an action plan to help
employees improve (e.g., Bacal, 2004). How-to guide books also cautions managers against adopting certain tactics. For example, managers should not express empathy and use phrases like, “I know how you feel” (e.g., Grote, 2002). While how-to guide books clearly offer a plethora of dos and don’ts, relatively little is known about whether managers follow such advice when communicating negative feedback.

The academic literature has noted a limited number of tactics that managers employ. For example, managers commonly “sandwich” negative feedback in between positive feedback, in a positive-negative-positive sequence (Davies & Jacobs, 1985; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Lizzio et al., 2003). Managers may also invite employees to express their reaction to the feedback (Lizzio et al., 2003). This cathartic tactic is designed to give the employee an opportunity to resolve interpersonal tensions that arise at the time of the negative feedback (Baron, 1990). Managers may also try to find out the causes underlying the employee’s poor performance (Gioia & Sims, 1986). Another tactic is the use of managerial accounts when delivering negative feedback (Tata, 2002). For example, managers may use a concession whereby they express regret for the negative feedback (Schonbach, 1980). Managers using a concession may say, “I’m sorry to have to tell you this...” In a recent study Waung and Jones (2005) argued that when providing feedback, legitimizing statements where reference is made to norms and guidelines, may be used.

Whilst the academic literature has identified a handful of tactics, these studies examining feedback tactics have not been specifically conducted within the context of the performance appraisal interview (e.g., Baron, 1990; Tata, 2002). Unlike informal day-to-day feedback, negative feedback communicated as part of the performance appraisal interview usually has some consequence for important outcomes such as pay (Jawahar & Williams, 1997; Rynes et al., 2005), possibly exacerbating adverse employee reactions. Different tactics are likely to be used when the negative feedback is informal and largely inconsequential, compared with a performance appraisal interview when valued outcomes are at stake. Therefore it seems probable that managers may use tactics that have not been identified by previous research.

While most studies focus on one or two particular tactics, Kim and Miller’s (1990) study presents a taxonomy of a number of negative feedback tactics managers employ in the context of performance appraisal. For example, work-oriented tactics involves the manager giving the employee instructions about how to perform the task. Managers may adopt altruism-oriented strategies by counselling the employee (Kim & Miller, 1990). However, the taxonomy was generated from existing literature where the tactics manager used had to ‘fit’ the predetermined category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Consequently tactics that have not yet been identified by academic research would be overlooked. For
example, managers may adopt tactics suggested by how-to guide books but are not mentioned in the academic literature. Therefore the present study aims to identify the range of tactics managers use when communicating negative feedback. The following section outlines how data was gathered.

METHOD

Sample
A diverse sample of practicing managers across different industries and sectors was interviewed. The researcher continued to conduct interviews until the tactic set reached a point of saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A total of 20 managers were interviewed for this study, of which 60% were males. This is roughly representative of the gender composition of managers in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Social Trends, 2005), in 2004, there were around 44% of females employed in the highest skill occupations, including managers. Fifty percent of the participants worked in the public sector and were all from the same government agency. Of the remaining managers, 20% were from a mining and natural resource company, 15% worked in an insurance company and 15% were from an accounting firm.

Procedure
Managers were invited to participate in the interview through personal contacts in each organisation. Using the snowball technique, each interviewee was asked to nominate other potential interviewees within his or her organisation (Burgess, 1990). To meet the study criteria, the manager had to have some experience in conducting performance appraisals. Once a manager had agreed to participate, he or she was asked to prepare for the interview using the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1970). The manager was asked to recall a specific incident in which the manager had to provide feedback during a performance appraisal interview, and anticipated that his/her appraisal of the employee’s performance would be below the employee’s expectations. Managers were informed that during the interview he or she would be asked to describe this situation and respond to questions about the critical incident.

Over a two month period, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of a number of open-ended questions that asked the manager to describe the situation, how he/she prepared for the performance appraisal interview, what he/she did during the performance appraisal interview and what happened after the performance appraisal interview. Prompts were used to elicit additional detail if necessary. All the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.
Data Coding

The interview transcripts were coded using NVivo, a software package for qualitative data analysis. Using a grounded theory approach, the tactics were emergent from the data without a pre-existing coding schedule (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). If a tactic that emerged from the data was very similar or opposite to a tactic described in the literature, the literature was used to compare the properties of the tactic. In instances where an emergent tactic is already established in the literature, the existing label for that tactic was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), for example “sandwiching” (Davies & Jacobs, 1985). A second independent researcher also coded the interview transcripts. After about every third transcript had been coded, a meeting was held to compare the coding. Where there were differences in the coding, it was discussed by the two coders until a consensus was reached. The number of agreements between the two coders divided by the total number of agreements and disagreements (Miles & Huberman, 1984) resulted with an inter-coder reliability of 83%.

RESULTS

The interview data revealed that managers employed a wide range of tactics when communicating negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview (Table 1). Tactics that are similar in nature are grouped together under the following categories: rational, emotive, communication, physical environment and avoidance. Some tactics managers used targeted to the employee’s sense of rationality, while other tactics appealed to the employee’s emotions. Managers also used tactics that focused on how the negative feedback was communicated, the physical environment where the performance appraisal was held and avoiding the task.

Rational Tactics

Managers used tactics that appeal to an individual’s sense of reason and logic. Negative feedback was presented to the employee in a way that seemed rational, legitimate, objective and reasonable. More than half (60%) of the managers interviewed reported using examples to substantiate the negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview. For example:

It always helps to be able to explain things to people using examples as well because the way you interpret or read a situation may not be necessarily the same way that they are looking at it. So if you can give them fairly precise examples of why you have drawn that conclusion, this is why I think you are not driving this well enough or your communication with this client hasn’t been as
effective as it could have been, and to be able to give some really concrete examples of why you’ve drawn that conclusion can help them to understand.

- Manager #15, Government Agency

Managers attempted to make their evaluation appear more legitimate and objective by referring to a benchmark when discussing the employee’s poor performance. Interview data showed that 35% of managers highlighted that the employee’s performance fell short of the organisation’s performance targets. However, managers were careful that they were not communicating purely negative feedback. By balancing the negative feedback with some positive feedback, managers (40%) tried to appear reasonable and not overly harsh in their evaluation of the employee’s performance.

In addition to making the case for the negative feedback, managers (60%) formulated an action plan to help the employee improve his or her performance in the future. An action plan is a rational and practical way of helping the employee overcome poor performance. For instance:

And then really having a course of action ahead as to what sorts of things can we actually attempt to do about this, so going through the process of saying ok are there things that we can do from a development point of view to increase the skills, to do whatever we need to do to bring this person up to where they need to be? Is there a course I need to send them on? Do I need to give them a specific task to develop those sorts of things? So having a strategy in place at the end of it to say ok this is the situation from the way I see it and this is what I think we need to do to move forward. It’s about then taking some action from where you’re at, at that particular point in time.

- Manager #14, Government Agency

Other rational tactics managers employ included outlining the potential consequences, such as dismissal or demotion, if the poor performance continued (30%) and giving the employee the opportunity to explain the causes for his or her poor performance (20%). When anticipating a problematic interaction during the performance appraisal interview, managers would make sure that another manager was present (15%). Fifteen percent of managers also talked about their own experience as well as show the employee their performance targets.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Tactic</th>
<th>% Mentioning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rational Tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Use examples</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action plan to help employees improve</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balanced feedback</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Refer to targets</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outline potential outcomes of poor performance</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity to explain causes of poor performance</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bring in another manager</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk about own experience and pressures</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do not rehash issues</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask for feedback from employee about self</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of theoretical model</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Emotive Tactics</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Developmental not negative</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role of helper</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empower employees to improve</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Listen to employee</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read body language and provide short break</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunity to respond</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admit discomfort</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Use employee's ambition as leverage</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Express empathy</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impact on others &amp; team</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doing employees a favour</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humour to illustrate point</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Don't appear too prepared to appear sincere</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managerial account - apology</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Tactics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sandwiching</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct approach vs. Indirect approach</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Get employee to talk first</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phrasing of message</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two way conversation</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tone of voice and pace of speech</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start with an ice-breaker</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Idle chat at the end</td>
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<td><strong>Physical Environment Tactics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Quiet private room</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Option of where performance appraisal interview is held</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sitting Arrangement</td>
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<td><strong>Avoidance Tactics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hand ball it to other managers</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email employee instead of face-to-face interview</td>
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Managers (10%) also mentioned that if they had covered a certain issue with employees on numerous occasions when providing informal feedback throughout the year, he or she avoided rehashing the issue during the performance appraisal interview. The following tactics were also used by managers: asking the employee for feedback about himself/herself (5%) and using Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as a framework for helping the employee understand the issue with his or her performance (5%).

**Emotive Tactics**

In contrast to rational tactics, managers also employed tactics that appealed to the individual’s emotions and feelings. Whilst managers are essentially delivering negative feedback, 45% of managers are reluctant to give it that label. Managers preferred to couch negative feedback in terms of ways an employee can improve or an area of development. For instance:

> Yep, you never talk about anything as in negative. You tell them we are identifying an area of opportunity for improvement.

- Manager #5, Insurance Company

Data from the interviews showed that 25% of managers assured employees that he or she was there to help them improve, not just tell the employee that he or she was performing poorly. For example:

> And at the same time you try and help them. The whole purpose is to help the people. At the end of the day, all you are trying to do is to improve the performance of that individual to help them help the company.

- Manager #1, Mining and Natural Resource Company

Managers also attempted to empower the employee to improve his or her performance (25%) and talked about the importance of showing that he or she was listening to the employee (25%). This is reflected by the following quotes:

> But I said to him you’re a pretty strong character and you can pull through this and you just gotta get out there and have a crack. I mean you can take it in one of two ways. You can give up and you can walk away and not achieve anything. Or you can take this on the chin and really start to make some changes.
I wanted the discussion to evolve and I wanted him to also know that I had spent time listening to him.

- Manager #7, Insurance Company

Twenty percent of managers observed the employee’s body language as a means of deciding how he or she would process with the rest of the performance appraisal interview. When employees appeared to be visibly upset by the negative feedback, managers changed the focus of the discussion or allowed the employee to have a short recess before the performance appraisal interview recommenced. Other emotive tactics managers employed include: allowing the employee the opportunity to respond to the negative feedback as a way to “blow of steam” (15%), admitting to the employee that he or she was also uncomfortable in this situation (10%), and using the employee’s ambition as leverage to gain compliance (10%).

Managers also expressed empathy for the employee’s plight (10%), stressed that the employee’s poor performance had an adverse impact on other team members (10%), framed the communication of negative feedback as a way of doing the employee a favour (10%) and used humour to illustrate the point he or she is making about the employee’s poor performance (10%). Demonstrating a genuine interest in the performance appraisal process and the employee’s development (5%), and using a concession, where the manager expressed regret for the negative feedback (5%) were tactics managers reported using.

**Communication Tactics**

Managers employed communication tactics that focused on the order and style in which the negative feedback is delivered, as well as the use of language. Data from the interview showed that 40% of managers used some element of the sandwiching tactic. This tactic involves “sandwiching” negative feedback in between positive feedback, in a positive-negative-positive sequence (Davies & Jacobs, 1985).

For example:

I guess I try to use the sandwich approach you know the praise-criticize-praise.

- Manager #19, Government Agency
Similarly 40% of managers interviewed talked about the use of either a direct and indirect approach towards delivering the negative message. The following quotes illustrate the contrast between a direct and indirect approach when communicating negative feedback:

So there is no use beating around the bush, you tell them what’s taken place

- Manager #1, Mining and Natural Resource Company

I just say, how do you think you can improve? Do you think there are any areas you can improve in? They’ll say no and I’ll say well what about interaction with your team members? And then they’ll start maybe explaining.

- Manager #9, Accounting Firm

Before revealing his or her evaluation of the employee’s performance, managers (35%) tried to gauge the employee’s expectations by asking the employee to discuss his or her self-appraisal. This gave managers a clue about the areas where his or her evaluation differed from the employee’s own. This is reflected by the following quotes:

Apart from the usual greetings and all that, I open up by giving the person the opportunity to say how they feel that they had been going during that part of the period and get them to do some talking initially without me indicating what I think. So the first thing is to get them talking about how they feel, whether they think they need to improve or what areas are causing them concern etc, etc.

- Manager# 16, Government Agency

Twenty percent of managers were careful about how they phrased the negative feedback. In an attempt to get the message across to the employee, managers may repeat the message and phrase it in several different ways. Managers (15%) also explained that it was important for the performance appraisal interview to be a two-way interaction whereby the employee also participated in the discussion concerning his or her performance.

Managers were mindful of the tone of their voice and how fast they were speaking (10%) when communicating negative feedback. To put the employee at ease managers started the performance
appraisal interview with an ice-breaker (10%). When concluding the interview managers (10%) reported that they engaged in idle chatter about non-performance related topics to signal the end of the interview.

**Physical Environment Tactics**

Physical environment tactics are choices managers made about the location of where the performance appraisal was conducted and the seating arrangements for the interviewer and interviewee. Thirty percent of managers ensured that the performance appraisal interview was conducted in a quiet private area that was away from the employee’s work area. For example:

> We have a separate meeting room that we go into, so it’s private from everyone else.

- Manager #16, Government Agency

In an attempt to put the employee at ease, managers (10%) gave the employee the option to decide the venue of the performance appraisal interview and made a point to sit around the table instead of on either side of the table (5%).

**Avoidance Tactics**

Managers also used tactics to sidestep the task of having to actually communicate negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview. Ten percent of managers avoided the task of delivering negative feedback if the performance appraisal interview was conducted with another manager. For example:

> Previously I had done it with other managers and I sort of sat back and let them do it…. The ones that you know are going to get teary, I don’t want to do them, I’d hand ball it off.

- Manager #9, Accounting Firm

In an extreme situation, where there was constant poor performance and a poor working relationship throughout the performance cycle, one manager (5%) conducted the performance appraisal interview via email.

**DISCUSSION**

Negative feedback is needed to facilitate performance improvements but at the same time it can the potentially to trigger unintended employee reactions that can be problematic. The tactics that managers
employ when delivering the negative feedback can play an important role in bringing about performance improvements and reducing unintended employee reactions. This study has taken an initial step towards identifying what tactics managers use when communicating negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview. In the following section, the findings of this study are discussed with reference to its implications for research and practice.

Results of this study suggest that managers do adopt tactics prescribed by guide books. Books on how to conduct performance appraisal often encourage managers to use rational tactics such as providing examples and developing an action plan (e.g., Bacal, 2004). These recommendations have been well adopted by managers, particularly when negative feedback was involved in the discussion. It appears that guide books prescribing best practice have had significant influence on managers when they communicate negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview (Abrahamson, 1996). However, managers also employed tactics that how-to guide books recommend against using. For example, some managers expressed empathy towards the employee. Given that how-to guide books advice managers not to use such tactics, employing such tactics may have an adverse effect on employee reactions.

Some of the tactics that manager reported using in this study were also consistent with those documented in the academic literature. Like the cathartic tactic noted in Baron’s (1990) study, managers also reported giving employees the opportunity to respond to the negative feedback and vent his or her feelings. The use of managerial accounts was also used as a tactic when communicating negative feedback (Tata, 1998). However, while Baron found that the use of the cathartic tactic resulted in adverse employee reactions, Tata’s study showed that the use of managerial accounts promoted desirable employee reactions. This suggests that managers are using a wide range of tactics, some of which are effective and some of which are likely to exacerbate adverse employee reactions. Without systematically evaluating the impact of the tactics, managers may unwittingly use tactics that do not help promote the effectiveness of performance appraisals.

However, managers also employed tactics that have been not identified by existing research or recommended by guide books. The use of a grounded theory approach provides flexibility in generating new categories emergent from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Tactics prescribed by guide books tends to assume that managers are neutral actors who are interested in communicating negative feedback in the most efficient way in order to help employees improve performance. While managers may not always be able to avoid the organisation’s formal performance appraisal system (Fried, Tiegs, & Bellamy, 1992), data from the interview shows that some managers try
to avoid the task of personally communicating negative feedback or even avoid communicating negative feedback in a face-to-face performance appraisal interview. This is not surprising given that managers are reluctant (Larson, 1984; Tesser & Rosen, 1975) and uncomfortable (Smith et al., 2000; Villanova et al., 1993) about communicating negative feedback.

**Practical Implications and Future Research**

When communicating negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview managers adopt a variety of tactics. Managers employ tactics that previous research has found to be useful in promoting positive employee reactions and those recommended by how-to guidebooks. However, managers also used tactics that research has found to be ineffective and how-to guidebooks recommend against using. Given that tactics can contribute to the effectiveness of performance appraisal by facilitating performance improvements and elicit the desired employee reactions, it is important to systematically evaluate the tactics that managers employ. Future research could investigate how employees react to the tactics managers use when communicating negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview, in order to identify the tactics that are effective. This would have a practical application in the design of training programs equipping managers to deliver negative feedback effectively (Waung & Jones, 2005).

**Limitations**

The findings of this study should also be considered in light of the limitations. Firstly, managers who participated in this study were recruited via a snowball sampling strategy. There is the issue of bias associated with this sampling strategy. The use of a random sample of managers in future studies is recommended. However, given that communicating negative feedback is a situation that often causes managers discomfort (e.g., Smith et al., 2000) there is some level of trust generated though recruiting participants through a snowball technique (Social Research Update, 2004). This can increase the likelihood that managers would share their experiences openly and honestly.

Secondly, the managers were asked to provide a retrospective description of a critical incident where he or she had to communicate negative feedback. Accuracy from retrospective data can be problematic. However, several steps were taken in order to improve accuracy of the critical incidents reported. Prior to the interview managers were asked to spend some time recalling the details of the incident that he or she would talk about during the interview. During the interview managers were asked and promoted to give a great level of detail about the situation. Flanagan (1970) argues that if full and precise details are provided, it can be assumed that the critical incident recalled is accurate. Future studies can overcome this limitation by other research methods such as observations.
Thirdly, given that the tactics were self-reported by managers the findings of this study may be influenced by social desirability. However, it should be noted tactics such as avoidance were reported even though it does not seem socially desirable. Identifying the tactics managers use from the perspective of the employee in future research would be useful in addressing this limitation. Finally, inherent in the critical incident technique is the potential that the tactics reported are not representative of the tactics managers would generally employ in other instances involving negative feedback. In spite of this limitation, the advantage of focusing on critical incidents is that the salience of the event can enable managers to identify the behaviours more accurately compared to an average, everyday event (Flanagan, 1970). In future, however, managers can be surveyed about how often they use the tactics generated from this study.

Conclusion
The aim of this study was to identify the tactics that managers employ when communicating negative feedback in the context of the performance appraisal interview. Results of this study revealed that managers adopt a wide range and variety of tactics when delivering negative feedback during the performance appraisal interview. Managers used tactics prescribed by practitioners’ guide books and the academic literature. Additionally managers also employed tactics that have not previously been identified by research or prescribed. Understanding what tactics managers use when communicating negative feedback is an area of research that can potentially help improve the effectiveness of performance appraisals.
REFERENCES


