Integrating Feedback Interventions with Feedforward Interviews: Evidence from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) Nigeria

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Abstract: *Traditional performance appraisals often look backward and can demotivate employees. This paper evaluates an integrated system that pairs feedback interventions (behavior-specific reviews of recent work) with feedforward interviews (strengths-focused conversations about future goals) in MSF Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods design over 6–12 months (N = 39), feedforward interviews clarified future expectations for 97.5% of respondents and were perceived to support skills development and task outcomes. The combined system was rated positively by all respondents and improved motivation for 97.4%. We explain how feedforward complements feedback, outline enabling conditions (goal clarity, recognition, growth opportunities, and credible manager delivery), and provide practical steps for humanitarian organizations to embed real-time feedback and action-oriented development plans.*

Keywords: Feedback interventions; Feedforward interview; Performance management; Motivation; Humanitarian INGO; MSF Nigeria

1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly question the use of annual, traditional performance appraisals because they focus on past deficiencies and rarely provide timely guidance for future work. Such retrospective evaluations have drawn criticism for contributing to job dissatisfaction, perceptions of unfairness, and reduced motivation, as highlighted by several studies. In demanding contexts such as humanitarian operations, staff need clear goals, constructive support, and quick learning cycles. MSF Nigeria revised its performance process to emphasize ongoing feedback and to introduce the feedforward interview (FFI). This study asks whether combining feedback and feedforward improves job performance and motivation relative to feedback alone. We summarize practical insights and evidence from a six–to twelve-month field implementation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

1) What is feedback? Feedback is information about how someone has just performed a task. Good feedback is specific to observable behaviors, timely, and focused on what to repeat or adjust. However, traditional feedback often focuses on mistakes and past events, which can foster defensiveness or a 'deficit mentality' when employees hear only what went wrong without a clear path forward.

2) **What is feedforward- explained simply:** Feedforward is a guided dialogue in which the manager helps the employee recall a recent success, identify the conditions that made that success possible (e.g., clear priority, adequate support, appropriate skills), and then turns those ingredients into a concrete plan for the next assignment. Instead of asking 'What went wrong?', the feedforward interview asks 'What went right, and how can we recreate those conditions?' This keeps the discussion positive, future-focused, and practical.

3) **How feedforward complements feedback:** Feedback examines the present-to-past ('What just happened?') and provides corrective feedback. Feedforward examines the present-to-future ('What should we do next?') and develops a plan based on strengths. When combined, these interactions complete the performance cycle: employees understand recent performance and immediately establish next steps. This combination reduces anxiety, increases psychological safety, and helps employees see a clear pathway to improvement.

4) **Goal setting and self-efficacy- plain language logic:** Goal-Setting Theory posits that people perform better when they have specific, challenging goals and useful feedback. Social Cognitive Theory posits that people act confidently when they believe they can succeed (self-efficacy) and feel safe attempting. Feedforward builds confidence by highlighting successes and translating them into simple, actionable goals. Feedback then provides reality checks and fine-tuning. Together, they encourage motivated effort and learning.

5) **Evidence background:** Research on feedforward interviews outlines their steps and mechanisms (e.g., positive emotions, insight, psychological safety) and reports field evidence of improved performance when managers adopt strengths-based discussions. Studies on continuous, person-mediated feedback have shown higher motivation and engagement than impersonal, computer-mediated messages. This background supports testing an integrated approach in MSF Nigeria.

3. Problem Definition

MSF Nigeria aimed to implement a performance approach that mitigates defensiveness, increase motivation, and provide clear, actionable guidance for future work. The problem with feedback-only systems is their backward focus and the absence of a straightforward mechanism to translate insights into future action plans. The organization introduced an integrated approach—feedback plus feedforward- and

assessed whether staff would perceive greater clarity, skill development, task outcomes, and motivation.

4. Methodology / Approach

Design: Mixed-methods field study across MSF Nigeria. Sample: 39 respondents (75% response from 52 invitations), including supervisors and supervisees across levels; all had ≥1 year of service. Timeline: six to twelve months. Instruments: Likert-type items on clarity of future goals, impacts on performance aspects (goal setting, prioritization, skills development), performance metrics (task completion, quality, target achievement), and motivation; plus open-ended prompts analyzed thematically. Ethics: UNZABREC approval; organizational permissions and anonymity assured.

5. Results

1) **Participation and clarity:** 97.3% (38/39) participated in feedforward interviews at least once in the past year; 97.5% (38/39) agreed that FFIs clarified future development goals and expectations.
2) **Performance aspects:** Respondents reported the strongest perceived impact on skills development (26/39; 66.7% rated 'high impact'). Goal setting showed mixed effects (combined high+moderate+minimal ~51% of responses), and task prioritization was often rated moderate/minimal (~69%), indicating room to reinforce prioritization routines.
3) **Performance metrics:** High perceived impact was reported for task completion (31/39; 79.5%), quality of work (29/39; 74.4%), and achievement of targets (31/39; 79.5%).
4) **Motivation:** The integrated feedback+ feedforward approach was rated positively by 100% (22 'Strongly agree'; 17 'Agree') and increased motivation for 97.4% (28 'Very motivated'; 10 'Moderately motivated').
5) **Observed changes over 12 months:** Staff most frequently cited skill acquisition (~33%) and improved quality (~36%) as noticeable changes.

6. Discussion

6.1 Why the combination works: Feedforward reinforces confidence and psychological safety by building on successes; feedback provides factual cues to adjust. Together, they set specific future goals, encourage quick check-ins, and maintain visible progress- conditions known to motivate effort and learning.

6.2 Practical implications for humanitarian contexts: To strengthen goal setting and prioritization, managers should add a brief monthly routine that confirms the top three deliverables, the support each needs (time, skills, collaboration), and how success will be recognized. Creating one-page development plans after each FFI helps employees prepare for upcoming work and track progress.

6.3 Conditions for success: The perceived credibility of the feedback, employee receptivity, and supportive culture matter. Person-mediated feedback- delivered by a trusted manager- improves motivation and engagement more than impersonal, computer-mediated messages. Recognition and growth opportunities should be woven into conversations to maintain intrinsic motivation.

6.4 Comparison with prior research: The MSF Nigeria experience aligns with studies reporting positive impacts of FFIs on performance and with meta-analytic findings showing feedback can help or harm depending on how it is delivered. Our results emphasize that delivery quality and future orientation are key.

7. Conclusion

An integrated feedback–feedforward system helped MSF Nigeria staff understand what to improve and how to do it. Feedforward clarified future goals and enabled skills growth; feedback grounded discussions in recent realities. Together, they boosted motivation and supported task completion, quality, and target achievement. The approach is practical, low-cost, and well-suited to humanitarian operations where roles are demanding and learning must be continuous.

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