



## FEEDBACK TECHNIQUES – IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION

*Original scientific paper*

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Received: 2023/01/10

Accepted: 2023/03/28

### ABSTRACT

*Giving and receiving information about employee performance is something that happens every day within an organization. This process of assessment has a clear goal: to clarify the level of performance the employees have to achieve and the steps they have to undertake to achieve the performance standards. In a normal business environment and a positive organizational culture, they both share their views and perceptions without any barriers and try to do that positively, not threatening, irritating, or judging each on their views. Our article analyses the use of the sandwich feedback technique in public administration as one of the sectors where organizational culture and climate differ from those of the business environment and where the spread of messages is more complicated. Connected to this, we analysed if this technique is the most appropriate technique for communicators who want to transform the business environment and culture.*

**Keywords:** *Employee, performance, feedback technique, interpersonal relation, performance standards*

### INTRODUCTION

Leaders are asked to have a strategy when working with others. As part of this strategy and their duties, they have to appraise the performance of the staff members or deliver messages about their performance. The messages they deliver as part of their assessment can be both positive and negative. They often face situations where they have to deliver negative feedback. However, how can leaders share negative messages on employee performance and use them as motivation for transforming the public administration's services for the citizens and improving the performance standards the employees have to achieve? How can transformative leaders spread these messages to the employees and simultaneously

motivate them to give a better performance? If the goal is to improve employees' skills and abilities to achieve the established organizational performance standards, then the messages have to be delivered positively while developing a bilateral communication process that stimulates the positive responses of employees and makes possible mutual conversation on how to avoid mistakes and achieve a higher level of performance. The question is how to spread these messages creatively, that is in a manner that will build confidence and take into consideration the emotional response, personality, and integrity of the workers and, at the same time, make them take the messages seriously and think positively

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about how they can improve their performance and achieve the required performance standards. The sandwich feedback method has been viewed as an appropriate method, though not by all scholars, for creatively delivering negative messages and bringing the manager and employee into a communication space that can produce a higher level of confidence and open dialogue on values and standards the employees have to achieve. However, if continued over time, the reaction to supervisory-initiated positive reinforcement soon becomes “What have I done wrong now?” and workers become anxious waiting for something bad to inevitably happen since the positive comment has become a precursor to criticism (Bergen, Bressler and Campbell, 2014). As employees receive messages about their performance, some of which might be negative, this makes things more complicated. Delivering negative messages is a difficult process not only because it affects the leaders and employees but also because it might cause different reactions and initiate rumours or protests inside the organization. That is why, as research has shown, managers feel uncomfortable about delivering negative feedback (Moss, Sanchez, and Heisler, 2004), and employees receiving them are affected in a negative way (Sigvardsson and Marthouret, 2016). Both sides would like to avoid situations in which they would be obliged to deliver or receive such messages. However, if sharing criticism is inevitable, is there any possibility for leaders to share criticism in a supportive way and help organizations become more citizen-oriented and stimulate employees to achieve better levels of performance?

### Material And Methods

The very first dimension that our article takes into consideration is what happens in public administration when it comes to feedback messages and how the top-level management of the state administration in Kosovo delivers them to the employees. For this purpose, we first analysed the status of the feedback technique within the state administration: Was this the most often-used technique that public administration managers used to deliver negative performance feedback and to receive feedback from the employees? Concerning this, the article analyses the impact the use of this technique has on the interpersonal relations between managers and civil servants. The crucial point is to observe whether public

administration managers believe that by using this technique, the staff will be motivated to generate a positive response, or that they use this and other techniques to create psychological pressure, avoiding the fact that this procedure is a complex interpersonal interaction and can harm subsequent performance.

The second dimension is to assess the connection between feedback techniques, specifically “the sandwich”, and the leader’s communication style and behaviours. The aim is to examine if the sandwich technique can be used “uniformly” in all situations and by all leaders, or if it differs according to a manager’s style and communication profile. The third dimension of our study is the correlation of negative feedback with positive ones in public administration. The aim is to analyse whether sharing criticism with positive messages can impact the perception of public servants about leadership values and if it helps them to create a strong correlation between a positive response and better performance or if it destroys employees’ positive perceptions of the common values of the organization and further damages their relationships within the organization. Finally, as the fourth dimension, the article discusses the use of this technique in specific business environments (Kosovo), where the leadership is still facing two big challenges: the transformation of the economic system from a state-controlled to a free economic market and the transformation of the leadership from servant leadership to transformative or transactional leadership.

### Research Questions

To analyse the use of the sandwich feedback technique in public administration and its impact of it on employees’ performance and achievement of the performance standards, we organized our research into three main research questions: Is the sandwich feedback technique an efficient instrument for delivering negative messages to employees, not frustrating them, and pushing them to achieve a better performance standard? Is this technique connected to the leaders’ communication styles?

Conversely, can this technique be used only by managers who are more worker-oriented or even by those who are upward vertical communicators? Is there any difference between using this technique in business and public administration?

## Hypothesis

To answer the research questions, we have underlined two main hypotheses:

**H1.** Applying the sandwich feedback technique can improve employees' skills and abilities to achieve the established organizational performance standards if the following criteria are met: The feedback messages are delivered positively and creatively. The feedback builds confidence and stimulates a positive response from the employee. The manager takes into consideration the emotional response, personality, and integrity of the workers and makes it possible for a mutual conversation to occur on how to avoid mistakes and how to achieve a higher level of performance.

**H2.** Applying the sandwich feedback technique in public administration has a strong impact on the interpersonal and intercultural relations between the managers and civil servants when the following criteria are met: The managers and staff agree that the sandwich feedback technique is a complex interpersonal interaction and are ready to engage in discussions in a positive manner. The employees accept the technique of delivering negative messages together with positive ones and accept the impact of it on their self-evaluation process. The employees agree that the sandwich feedback technique is a process for achieving some objectives and goals, such as standards of performance. They accept that this technique is a more balanced technique, which makes them feel more comfortable and gives them less anxiety; it is known that the sandwich feedback technique might be very problematic with transformational leaders, whose approaches are empathetically determined.

## METHOD

Concerning the abovementioned aims and knowing that the sandwich feedback method is a very complex interpersonal interaction that can have a negative impact on subsequent performances, the researcher had to take into consideration that the interpersonal relations, communications styles of the top managers and techniques used by them to ensure that their subordinates generate positive feedback are decisive for the success of this technique. To analyse these dimensions, the direct observation of the researcher in the place was important. That's why we developed a combined research method. First, a structured questionnaire was designed and sent to all top-level managers of state institutions (national assembly, state government,

ministries, national agencies and other institutions). As it was not our intention to prove feedback theories or analyse the feedback techniques used by employees, we concentrated on the techniques used by managers to deliver negative messages together with positive ones and their impact on employees' self-evaluation. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with some selected top-level managers as a tool for analyzing the complexity of the process and further analysing the chosen method of delivering messages and getting feedback. The managers were selected based on their past performance-evaluation process and represented the gender distribution of the top-level managers in-state public administration.

### Techniques of Sharing Negative Messages in a Supportive Way

A feedback technique, according to Webster's dictionary, is a way of giving information to someone to improve their performance. The way leaders choose to communicate negative feedback to employees is very important, as it affects their interpretation of and response to the feedback (Harms and Roebuck, 2010). For this reason, every research on the effects of using this technique has to take into consideration the fact that the conversation between the manager and employee includes interpersonal relations (Jug, Jiang, and Bean, 2018) and is majorly dependent on the manager's communication skills and behaviours. According to (Parkes, Abercrombie and McCarty, 2013) the feedback sandwich positively impacts performance, and in an ideal world, a subordinate would accept corrective feedback with an open mind (Manzoni, 2002). When we talk about the techniques of sharing criticism or negative messages, we also talk about the performance assessment process and the ways leaders choose to provide information to employees about their performance. To do this, they take into account some values and goals. The values they have in mind usually are the standards of performance to be achieved, which might serve as a key framework for evaluating a person's behaviour and achievements. The goal might be different, but all of them focus on improving employee performance by minimizing the gap between the organizational values or performance standards and the individual performance of the employees, because the performance appraisal of managers is one of the most complex and controversial human resources technique (Roberts, 2002). Therefore, the way leaders choose to connect negative messages with positive

ones or use a transparent strategy and speak directly to their staff is a matter of managerial perception. Usually, they use this technique being convinced that it is a more balanced technique and makes the employees feel more comfortable and gives them less anxiety (Schwarz, 2013). However, this is not the only factor that must be taken into consideration. Organizational culture is different in different nations and countries, and there are cultural differences across organizations owned and managed by individuals of different nationalities (Bhaskaran and Sukumaran, 2007). The common values in which the majority of the people believe and the ways by which these values are shared and communicated are often dependent on the level of interpersonal relations and intercommunication between the leaders and the staff. In optimistic societies, it is well accepted if you package criticism with a positive approach and messages. The organizational culture may impose a positive approach, and the culture's strength and balance will have direct positive effects on effectiveness (Panagiotis and Panagiotis, 2016). However, this is not always the case in European societies. In these societies (including the traditional organizational culture and climate), leaders usually build a very strong communication personality, and they prefer to use a direct style to communicate their perceptions, even if they have to deliver negative perceptions. By communicating and promoting the organizational vision to their subordinates and by getting their acknowledgment of the vision, it is possible to influence their work

behaviour and attitudes (Tsai, 2011). In the Balkans, this relationship is much more complicated due to historical and cultural perceptions. Therefore, an organization's culture imposes a kind of interpersonal relationship that has to be taken into consideration. The others might be more empathetic and may have cultivated more interpersonal relations with the staff. As (Bass, 1985) have underlined, managers with transformational characteristics and behaviour, such as individual consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and idealized influence, are more predisposed to create a positive climate and deliver messages more positively, by taking into consideration employees' characteristics and behaviour, soliciting followers' concerns and ideas, and inspiring, influencing and motivating employees to achieve higher performance standards.

The third important factor is the business environment, organizational climate, and business circumstances. Organizational culture and climate might influence the technique used by the leaders, but the way by which they communicate their feedback is a matter of the personal communication style and techniques that leaders have developed through the years. Rarely are these premises in contrast with each other. The perceptions of the leaders about the role and place of a specific technique to motivate employees are very important, as negative feedback is not always effective in generating improvements in employee performance (Brown and Kulik, 2016).

Table 1. The sandwich feedback a three-step process of sharing criticism in a supportive way

Three Steps	Guidelines	Example
<u>Step One</u> Appreciate the person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ Share a statement of recognition for some quality, ability, or talent this person brings to the group that is <i>valuable</i>.</li> <li>□ When the person’s value is secure, he or she is less likely to be defensive.</li> <li>□ This recognition must be sincere, or it will not have value.</li> <li>□ Define the “strength that is over done”, what is the sincere compliment you can give a strength the person possesses that when overdone becomes the weakness you want changed.</li> </ul>	I really am grateful that you are so open and direct with me. I trust that you are not going to hide things, so we can talk them out.
<u>Step Two</u> Challenge the Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the behavior you want to have changed.</li> <li>• State how it is not supportive to you and to the relationship between you.</li> <li>• Challenge the behavior, do not pass judgment on the person.</li> <li>• Use the Five Levels to be precise and complete.</li> </ul>	<p>Facts: When you start to talk while I am still talking, Thoughts: I think you are not listening to what I am saying, Emotions: and I feel frustrated. Importance This is important to me because I respect that, as my supervisor you are the one who makes the decision. I have information you really need for making the best decision.</p> <p>Action/Expectation: I want to find a way that we can each be heard, without “fighting for air time.”</p>
<u>Step Three</u> Support Constructive Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask what you can do to give ongoing support to help make this change.</li> <li>• Ask what they would like you to do to remind them if you notice the old behavior reoccurring.</li> <li>• Get the person to identify a specific behavior, word, or phrase you can use, which they agree will be supportive.</li> </ul>	What could I do that would remind you if I ever notice this happening again?

The leaders have to take into consideration more than one factor and, consequently, using only one technique for appraisals is not without problems today (‘Performance Appraisal Systems’, n.d.). When they talk to others, they want to get information back. Therefore, they will use the best strategy available to be assured that their employees will respond properly and will deliver feedback on their negative messages, which is not a very simple feat. Good leaders take care to not undermine an employee’s feedback. They should be sure that employing the sandwich feedback technique will be appropriate as per the expectations of the subordinates. Usually, employees resist changes

that managers might require of them and like to continue with the same behaviours and work attitudes, though their managers might require them to push themselves to achieve another level of performance. According to (Ringold, 2002), one of the most important reasons might be that people do not want to be influenced; they are motivated to resist persuasion. Thus, delivering negative messages but positively, not following your intent, can frustrate them. There are a lot of employees who don’t want to get positive and negative messages packed together using the sandwich technique, as they consider this as a game for the leaders to say bad things while concealing them

behind positive messages. They like to directly get to the negative messages so that they can prepare and demonstrate an effective feedback strategy.

The Obstacles to Being “a Perfect Technique”

As mentioned, the sandwich feedback method is a very complex process, as it includes descriptive information regarding employees’ performance and has a clear intention: to improve the future performance of the employees, making them understand the gaps and failures of achieving performance standards. That makes the process very complex and creates permanent pressure on managers as well as employees. Leaders should be sure that by using this technique, the employees will be motivated to generate positive responses to achieve better performance standards and not the opposite that is misinterpreting their messages or further increasing the psychological pressure on employees. One thing is clear, the tactics that managers use to deliver negative feedback to their subordinates are still not very clear (Brown and Kulik, 2016), and they have to find a way to deliver these messages and, at the same time, get positive feedback from the employees in the existing organizational culture and climate. This includes all the factors mentioned in Part 3 of the article. However, that pushes into a crisis the sandwich technique as well, as the results are often dependent on the personality of the employee and the manager, the interpersonal relations they have, the climate and culture, as well as on the communication style of both parties. That’s why some scholars are not in favour of using this technique always for delivering messages (Wood, 2013). For some other scholars, this technique may undermine the relationship between the managers and staff. (Schwarz, 2013)

has listed some reasons why the “sandwich approach” doesn’t work and must be avoided. According to the abovementioned scholars, this technique increases anxiety among the staff during the feedback process. As this process requires a strong personal relationship, it is feared that giving positive messages before sharing negative ones could give the staff the perception that you are trying to package negative performance comments with positive ones and just postponing the “criticism”. They would rather accept direct negative messages instead of receiving them just after a “good word”. This might be a problem for transformational leaders, whose approach is empathetically determined. They usually work transparently and have close relations with others. Trying to “package” the feedback between the two relaxing and encouraging parts of the sandwich might create, on the part of the leader, a perception of insincerity, lack of transparency, and a non-empathetic relationship with the staff. Therefore, a lot of people would prefer to get direct and transparent feedback, instead of a packed one in a “sandwich”.

RESULTS

In public administration, specifically in Kosovo, the key role in delivering the performance assessment belongs to the first administrative leader, which can be the Secretary-General (in ministries), the heads of the executive bodies, or the heads of departments. From the crosstabulation table (Table 2), we see that communication of the performance of the staff is done “often” or “very often” and this is a good indicator of the communication within the company being efficient and the managers and employees being able to remedy possible problems and finding solutions faster.

Table 2. Crosstabulation

	How often do you communicate with your staff about their performance?		Total
	3	4	
Your position: Secretary General	18	0	18
Executive Director	10	1	11
Other	0	39	39
Total	28	40	68

If we analyse the feedback techniques in terms of gender, we see that males communicate “very often” with their staff about their performance, whereas females communicate “often” with their staff about their performance.

Table 3. Communication in terms of gender (male)

	How often do you communicate with your staff about their performance?		Total
	3	4	
Sex: Female	23	0	23
Male	5	40	45
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>68</b>

To realise the regression, the factorial weight of all our questions needs to be realised first.

Table 4. Factorial Weight

Questions	Factorial weights
Would you like your criticism to be “packed” with praise for your values or bluntly delivered?	.871
If you give a negative evaluation only after praising the other for their performance so far, you do it because of either of the following:	.848
What was the perception of the employees when you used the sandwich technique (praise-criticism-praise)?	.810
Is it important for you to communicate the negative evaluation together with positive messages (to balance the message)?	.777
Do you think that giving negative reviews/evaluations can improve the performance of the administration?	.768
Have you seen improvements in the performance of your subordinates after providing negative feedback on their performance?	.726
What is your message before moving out?	.911
Are you influenced by interpersonal relationships in the way you convey appreciation for the work?	.877
How difficult is it for you to share your dissatisfaction with your employees?	.781
If you were in another institution, in another organisational culture, would you use the “sandwich” technique again?	.762
Does constant criticism undermine the credibility between management and staff?	.743
What is the usual reaction towards the administration in response to negative criticism/messages?	.672
If you have given a negative critique/evaluation, do you allow your subordinates to give justifications?	.910

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

From the factorial weight analysis, we see that all the questions are acceptable, considering that their values are above 0.7, except the question “What is the usual reaction of the administration to negative criticism/

messages?” which had a factorial weight of .672. The correlation test was performed to see the correlation between the variables before the regression analysis and the testing of our hypothesis.

Table 5. Correlation

	Feedback Technique		Sandwich_feedback_technique
OPS	.910	IIRBM	.901

From the correlation analysis, we can see that we have a strong correlation.

Table 6. Regression: Hypothesis I

	B	Sig.	R Square	Collinearity Statistics	F	H I
				VIF		
(Constant)	-.058	.604	0.828	1.000	316.790	Yes
OPS	1.317	.000				

Dependent Variable: Feedback Technique. Source: Authors

From the analysis, we see that R<sup>2</sup> is 82.8%, showing that the independent variables indicate that the variance of the dependent variable is 82.8%. This is a high percentage and means that there are no other variables out of the model that will be able to explain this. Additionally, the F-test shows that we have a stable model because its value is 316.780. This is a high value that shows the stability of the

model. It is important to mention that we don't have collinearity in our model, and its value is 1.000, thus lower than 3.000. The independent variable influences the dependent variable; this means that applying a feedback technique can improve the employees' skills and abilities to achieve the established organizational performance standards. The first hypothesis of our study is thus proved.

Table 7. Regression: Hypothesis II

	B	Sig.	R Square	Collinearity Statistics	F	H II
				VIF		
(Constant)	1.471	.000	0.812	1.000	285.53	Yes
IIRBM	1.208	.000		6		

By analysing Table 7, we see that we are dealing with a significant variable showing that the sandwich feedback technique applied in public administration has a strong impact on the interpersonal and intercultural relationships between managers

and civil servants. Additionally, the R<sup>2</sup> is 81.2%, which is a good percentage; the F-test value is high and shows that our model is stable. The second hypothesis of our model is thus proved.



## DISCUSSION

The research gives us a clear perception of the communication techniques that top-level managers of public administration employ to provide negative feedback. Additionally, the paper analyses the opinion and declarations of top-level managers on how they apply the sandwich feedback techniques in their institutions and how they realize it. However, the study doesn't give us a clear answer about the employees' perception of the sandwich feedback technique. Do they like to directly receive negative messages through a technique that allows them to get a message and answer it, or do they agree that these messages are packaged in a sandwich (even though the meeting would still be criticism and negative feedback on performance) are detrimental? The study focuses on public institutions only and doesn't include the private sector. Other studies can focus on private institutions by analysing the effects of the sandwich feedback technique on employees' performance or how this technique helps managers get things done in the right manner.

## CONCLUSIONS

Even though there is a perception that delivering negative performance evaluation messages together with positive ones has an impact on interpersonal relations, we found that this doesn't happen everywhere, and it neither increases fear and anxiety nor undermines the motivation of the staff and their job performance, because the interpersonal relationships the managers have with their staff members are part of inter-cultural relations and are affected by the cultural background and behaviours. So far, in some cases, the use of the sandwich technique might directly affect the maintenance of job performance and job motivation. This is the case with Kosovo Public Administration, where intercultural and interpersonal relations are very sensitive and can play a crucial role in the exit strategy that managers use in their conversations with their staff members. The study shows that applying this feedback technique can improve an employee's skills and abilities to achieve the established organizational performance standards. This technique can also offer an effective method for top-level managers to address the concerns within an organization and improve interpersonal and intercultural relations between managers and civil servants, considering the high impact this technique has according to our findings.

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