Seeking feedback not always sufficient for stimulating creativity

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It is widely believed that seeking feedback from colleagues, managers, friends and family enhances employees' creativity. But this is not always

the case—a positive effect depends on the work environment. This is the conclusion of new joint research study led by UvA work and organizational psychologist Roy Sijbom. The team's findings were recently published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

Many people believe the notion that obtaining external [feedback](#) about one's ideas is essential for increasing creativity. For example, entrepreneurs are encouraged to engage customers in order to ascertain whether their business model is viable and academics attend conferences to obtain feedback on their research results. An implicit assumption is that individuals who have obtained feedback will also actually be able to utilize it.

"The idea is simple: Seeking feedback from different sources – also known as feedback source variety – benefits creativity since it leads to a greater diversity of viewpoints," says Sijbom. "And the more diverse the viewpoints, the more it benefits one's creativity because by combining and integrating all the different viewpoints new perspectives will emerge that in turn will result in more creativity. The question, however, is whether these beneficial effects always occur."

The researchers examined how specific characteristics of the immediate [work environment](#) influence the relationship between feedback source variety and creative performance. They focused on two elements that are typical for contemporary work environments: the perceived rate of change of performance standards (performance dynamism) and the extent to which employees feel they have sufficient time to develop creative ideas at work (experienced creative time pressure). "We discovered an exponential relationship between the search for input from a variety of feedback sources and [creativity](#), but only when [performance standards](#) within an organization are changing and when a relatively low creative time pressure is experienced," says Sijbom.

Sijbom offers several recommendations: "The most important is that when an organization stimulates feedback seeking, it needs to ensure that the work environment is optimal enough to utilize the benefits of feedback. In a more concrete sense, organizations can, for example, consider using feedback workshops in which employees are encouraged to reflect on diverse feedback and equipped with techniques and strategies on how to incorporate feedback in their daily work. In addition, managers should not only stimulate their employees to actively cultivate relationships with potential feedback sources within and outside the organization, but also provide sufficient time to process the feedback obtained from these relationships."

The research project consisted of two studies. In the first study, the researchers used online questionnaires to obtain data from 1,031 employees who work in consultancy. In the second study, 181 'caretakers' – nurses and other care professionals – in hospitals were asked to complete a survey, but the creative achievements were assessed by their direct managers.

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