When praise—versus criticism—motivates goal pursuit

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Abstract

Are people more motivated by praise or criticism? In this chapter, we suggest there is no universal answer to this question. Rather, the motivating power of both praise and criticism depends on how people interpret these responses. Building on research on the dynamics of goal motivation, we suggest that praise is motivating when the praised action signals that the individual is committed, whereas criticism is motivating when the criticized action signals that the individual has made insufficient progress. We begin by reviewing the dynamics of motivation, we then explain how these dynamics apply to the motivational power of feedback, and we end by discussing implications.

To motivate behavior, is it better to give praise or criticism? Are people more motivated when they consider successfully completed actions or actions at which they have yet to succeed? A teacher trying to goad a student to work harder can focus on either what the student has done right or what the student has done wrong. Which is the more effective strategy?

Works of several decades (e.g., Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Monin & Miller, 2001) suggest there is no universal answer. How negative versus positive feedback (e.g., feedback that emphasizes missing vs. completed actions) affects motivation depends on other factors. One of these psychological factors is the meaning the actor ascribes to the action—whether the actor represents his or her action as a sign of commitment or a sign of progress (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). People “highlight” a goal—they consistently strive towards that same goal over multiple opportunities—when they believe their actions signal commitment. In contrast, people balance, or juggle between goals, when they see their actions as a sign of progress.

In this chapter, we focus on how this basic insight can be used to understand the motivational power of feedback. Whether the actor sees feedback as a sign of commitment or a sign of progress determines the extent to which positive—versus negative—feedback is motivating. Specifically, positive feedback motivates goal pursuit when it signals an increase in goal
commitment, whereas negative feedback motivates goal pursuit when it signals insufficient goal progress.

First, we review the dynamics of motivation. Second, we discuss how these dynamics explain the motivational power of feedback. Finally, we discuss implications.

The dynamics of motivation

Action representations affect motivation. An action representation is an individual’s interpretation of his or her own behavior, and specifically, whether he or she interprets an action as a sign of commitment or a sign of progress. Commitment is one’s sense that the goal is attainable and valuable (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974). Progress is the sense that one has reduced the gap between the present state and goal completion (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

What do commitment and progress representations look like? People who make commitment representations look at their actions to discern their commitment. They ask, “Does my behavior suggest I am committed to this goal?” They evaluate their confidence in their success as well as their personal attraction to the goal. Following a successful goal-directed action, people who adopt a commitment representation tend to highlight that goal by engaging in further consistent, motivated action. They do this because they believe they are committed, and thus wish to continue to exhibit their commitment towards the goal.

In contrast, people who make progress representations look at their actions to discern their progress. They ask, “Does my behavior indicate I have made sufficient progress?” They assess whether they have done enough or need to keep going. People who estimate progress tend to balance in the aftermath of success (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Fishbach, Koo, & Finkelstein, 2014), replacing the current goal with a different one. The successful action leads people to infer they have made sufficient progress, and thus licenses a switch to an unrelated goal (Mullen & Monin, 2016; Khan & Dhar, 2006).

As an example, people exercise and eat well in order to stay healthy. In one study (Zhang, Fishbach, & Dhar, 2007), gym-goers were shown to have commitment or progress representations of their workouts. Some perceived their workouts as a sign of their commitment to staying healthy, whereas others perceived their workouts as a sign that they were making progress towards the same goal. These different representations predicted people’s eating choices. Gym-goers who perceived exercise as a commitment tended to highlight by eating foods
that were healthy. In contrast, those who viewed workouts as progress tended to balance by eating foods that were less healthy.

The dynamics of motivation applied to feedback

We propose that the impact of feedback, like the impact of past actions, depends on action representations. Interestingly, this proposal runs counter to some motivational theories, which suggest, universally, that positive or negative feedback is more motivating.

Past theories

According to several past motivation theories, positive feedback is universally more motivating than negative feedback (Atkinson, 1964; Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Weiner, 1974; Zajonc & Brickman, 1969). These theories propose that positive feedback, more than negative feedback, increases confidence, outcome expectancies, and commitment, and as a result, motivates behavior. For example, because people desire to be consistent (Bem, 1972), self-perception theory argues that once an action is successfully carried out, this increases the likelihood that it will be carried out again in the future. Self-efficacy theory suggests something similar: that positive feedback increases the individual’s sense of competence, or efficacy, and that this, in turn, increases motivation (Bandura, 1991). For example, in the academic context, successful academic experiences increase students’ self-efficacy, and self-efficacy predicts students’ future academic performance, even after accounting for other key predictors, such as the student’s previous academic performance and other people’s expectations for the student (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Gian, & Concetta, 2001).

Other theories predict the opposite. According to these competing theories, motivation arises as a result of the gap between one’s present achievements and the desired end state (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960). Positive feedback, which narrows this gap, is therefore less motivating than negative feedback, which (psychologically) accentuates it. Indeed, according to Cybernetic theory, negative feedback is a more effective motivator than positive feedback because it draws attention to the difference between current and desired states of achievement.
A more nuanced alternative

In contrast to past theories, we propose a more nuanced view. Based on insights from the dynamics of motivation described above, we argue that the motivational power of positive and negative feedback depends on whether it is interpreted as a sign of commitment or a sign of progress. When people interpret feedback as a sign of commitment, positive feedback is more motivating than negative feedback. In contrast, when people interpret feedback as a sign of progress, negative feedback is more motivating than positive feedback (Fishbach et al., 2006).

Why is this? Consider a student whose teacher praises them for their performance on a Spanish oral. If this student interprets the feedback as a sign that they are good at Spanish, and committed to excelling in Spanish, then this positive feedback ought to motivate further studying and Spanish achievement. By contrast, if the student interprets the positive feedback as a sign that they have made sufficient progress, then they will invest less effort in subsequent Spanish assignments, redirecting their efforts towards other goals.

By this same logic, negative feedback ought to increase motivation when it signals progress, but ought to decrease motivation when it signals commitment. Continuing with the same example, a Spanish student whose teacher criticizes them for their performance on a Spanish oral, and interprets the feedback as a sign that insufficient progress has been made, will be motivated to redouble their efforts in order to make further progress. Yet interpreting the same negative feedback as a reflection of one’s commitment will have the opposite effect. Students who interpret negative feedback to mean that they lack commitment—that is, the ability to achieve a goal or the desire to do so—will withdraw effort.

Among other factors, individual differences in commitment and expertise often determine whether individuals see their actions as a signal of commitment or progress (Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2012; Koo & Fishbach, 2008). Because uncommitted individuals and novices feel uncertain about their level of commitment, they use feedback to infer whether they are committed. These individuals ask about commitment and take their successful actions as a signal of commitment (i.e., that they value the goal and can achieve it). Committed individuals and experts, in contrast, already know they are committed, and, therefore, they use feedback to infer progress; that is, they take their action as a signal that progress has been made.

Indeed, empirical evidence demonstrates that among individuals with low commitment—that is, among individuals who tend to adopt a commitment frame—positive feedback is more
motivating. In one study, students who studied for a pass/fail exam to which commitment was low were more motivated when considering the class materials they covered successfully than when they considered the materials they had not yet covered (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). In contrast, among individuals who are highly dedicated—individuals who tend to adopt a progress frame—negative feedback was more motivating than positive feedback. Students who studied for an important exam, and were therefore committed to doing well, reported higher levels of motivation after they considered the materials they have not yet covered versus materials they had covered (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). This pattern has also been found among adults in the workforce. Adults with high professional commitment who receive criticism subsequently demonstrate higher performance on work tasks than those who are praised (Brunstein & Gollwitzer, 1996). Indeed, as people gain expertise—which is to say, as they become more secure in their commitment, and therefore more attuned to progress—they shift from being more motivated by positive feedback to being more motivated by negative feedback. Across one series of studies, people who were less expert in academic subjects, environmental behavior, and beauty regimens were more motivated by positive feedback, yet as expertise increased, people were more motivated by negative feedback than by positive feedback (Finkelstein & Fishbach, 2012).

Other times, praise or criticism is phrased such that it prompts people to interpret their actions as indicative of either commitment or progress (Fishbach & Dhar, 2005). For example, asking people “Do you feel committed” or “Do you feel you made progress” prompted people to generate commitment versus progress representations. Similarly, praise that expresses commitment (e.g., “You’re so good at this,” “That’s not for you”) could potentially encourage people to adopt such an action representation, whereas criticism that expresses progress (e.g., “You’re falling behind”) could likely encourage people to adopt a progress representation.

**When praise is more motivating than criticism**

Past research suggests that when people are in a commitment frame, praise will be more motivating than criticism, yet when people are in a progress frame, criticism is more motivating than praise. As noted above, nonexperts tend to spontaneously adopt a commitment frame, whereas experts tend to adopt a progress frame. Indeed, nonexperts will generally be more motivated by praise than by criticism.
More recent research has tested how positive versus negative feedback affects people’s motivation to learn from the failed or successful experience itself. Thus, whereas previous research examined how feedback affected subsequent goal-related motivation, this more recent research has tested whether feedback affects people’s motivation to continue learn—versus tune out—in an ongoing learning experience. In particular, this research has examined the degree to which praise versus criticism promotes engagement versus disengagement. The general finding is that nonexperts learn more—they stay on task, pay attention, and demonstrate higher levels of learning—when they receive positive feedback, as compared to negative feedback (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019, 2020).

To test the relative motivational power of praise versus criticism on in-task motivation, in one study, participants answered a series of binary-choice questions on a new language (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019). In these questions, participants saw a symbol and had to guess the meaning of the symbol when presented with two possibilities. After each question, the participant received randomly determined feedback (“correct” or “incorrect”). Because each question had only two possible answers, the informational value of success and failure feedback was equivalent: both allowed the participant to determine the correct answer. Despite this, participants demonstrated higher levels of learning following praise (positive feedback) than following criticism (negative feedback). Often, those receiving criticism were subsequently paying so little attention that they performed no better than chance level on the recall task. The result of criticism was tuning out and low task commitment.

In another study, telemarketers at a US company completed a series of binary-choice trivia questions on the topic of customer service (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019). Telemarketers who received feedback on correct answers—praise—learned from the feedback at a rate above chance (as demonstrated by learning levels on a posttest). In contrast, telemarketers who received feedback on incorrect answers—criticism—did not learn at a rate that exceeded change—which is to say, they tuned out and did not learn anything from negative feedback at all. This differential effect on learning replicated across other content domains (i.e., linguistic content, social content) and across different samples (field, online). People continued to learn more from praise than from criticism, even when learning from criticism was redesigned to be less cognitively taxing than learning from praise (requiring fewer mental inferences), and even when learning from both praise and criticism was incentivized.
In sum, praise and criticism not only influence subsequent motivation but also on-task motivation—the degree to which people tune in versus let their mind wander off task. The motivational power of praise and criticism depends on how they are interpreted. Given that praise is more motivating in a commitment frame, and a commitment frame is prevalent among nonexperts—it stands to reason that many people, most of the time, are more motivated by praise than by criticism.

**Implications**

The insights above suggest specific recommendations for teachers, coaches, mentors, parents, and anyone else with an interest in motivating others. Supervisors who are unsure whether praise or criticism will be more motivating ought to consider the action representation the target is likely to adopt. Targets in a commitment framework are likely to be more motivated by praise, whereas targets in a progress framework are likely to be more motivated by criticism. To the extent that targets are nonexperts, and thus more likely to adopt a commitment frame, praise will be more motivating than criticism. While the above analysis has clear implications for leadership, one limitation of these recommendations is that using only praises to motivate people with a commitment framework may lead them to miss out on valuable critical information. Indeed, as the experiments above demonstrated, people in a commitment framework often tune out and fail to learn from criticism (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019). Not sharing such information could further increase their blind spot. Criticism often offers qualitatively unique information that is not available in praise—for example, information on missed opportunities, missing actions, gaps, and discrepancies. Praise, which tells people what they are doing right, offers none of this information. Thus, unlike the binary-choice paradigm cited above, in which praise and criticism were manipulated to offer similar information on the “correct” answer, it is often the case that qualitatively different types of information are present in praise versus criticism. Thus, one clear drawback of “matching” feedback to a person’s action representation is that crucial—typically, critical—information will not be shared or learned from.

Is there a way around this problem? In our research, we found one potential answer. In one study, we found that novices—those ostensibly with a commitment framework—were able to learn just as much from criticism as from praise when the criticism was given to someone else
(Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019). Participants in this study completed the same binary-choice questions described above, following which they were randomized to see positive or negative feedback. We examined whether participants learned more from positive versus negative feedback when it was delivered to the self, as well as whether they learned more from positive versus negative feedback when they observed it being given to someone else. We found that participants learned less from failure (vs. success) feedback when the feedback was on their own performance (replicating the effects described above), but they learned just as much from negative (vs. positive) feedback when they were third-party observers, observing the feedback being delivered to someone else. These results suggest an initial solution to the problem of how to get commitment-minded individuals to pay attention to and learn from criticism, just as much as they pay attention and learn from praise.

Surely, there are also others. Another potential solution would be to shift people’s action representations to accommodate the feedback that needs to be delivered. For example, people could be primed to adopt a commitment frame when the coach wants to deliver positive feedback and primed to adopt a progress frame when the coach wants to deliver negative feedback. Above, we discussed several factors that influence action representation (individual differences in level of commitment or expertise, framing questions). Action representations are also influenced by whether people construe their actions abstractly versus concretely (Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006). When people construe their actions abstractly, they are more likely to perceive their actions as expressing commitment, and when people construe their actions concretely, they are more likely to infer progress. It follows that praises will be more motivating when they are presented abstractly (e.g., “you’ve excelled your first year med school”), whereas criticism will be more motivating when it is presented concretely (“you’ve failed a specific exam”).

**Conclusion**

In sum, the motivating power of positive and negative feedback depends on factors outside of the feedback. Praise tends to be more motivating when it is interpreted as a sign of commitment. In contrast, criticism tends to be more motivating when it is interpreted as a sign of insufficient progress. These effects determine overall task engagement as well as the degree to which people tune in (or out) during the specific task on which they are getting feedback.
References


