Learning from Evaluation by Peer Team:  
A Case Study of a Family Counseling Organization

Introduction

In the late 1800’s, the typical workplace was characterized by autocratic authority, and supervisory feedback was “random, harsh, and primarily focused on level of output” (Rogers, Rogers, & Metlay, 2002). After the Second World War, more focus was turned to employee motivation and job satisfaction, and regular performance reviews between supervisor and employee became the norm. In the middle of the 20th century, organizations streamlined structures to become more competitive, which in turn created a larger number of direct reports and less time for a manager to observe each report. Therefore, employees were expected to work as teams, communicating more frequently, and relying more on each other to get the job done. As a result of these flattened hierarchies, the reliability of traditional supervisor-employee evaluations was challenged, and, thus, highlighted the relevance of peer feedback (Rogers et al., 2002). Therefore, evaluation from different raters (peers, subordinates, clients) became popular in the 1980’s. At that time, the multirater evaluation approach was mostly used as a higher management professional development tool where higher managers would get evaluated by different raters with the objective to develop their professional skills (Coates, 1998).

Total quality management, developmental feedback, and performance appraisals contributed to the evolvement of multirater feedback (Edwards & Ewen, 1996b). In the 1990’s, multirater evaluation gained credibility and popularity “as a performance management and career development tool in contemporary organizations” (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001, p. 5). At the same time, organizations began to align their feedback processes with the organization’s overall strategic goals, and multirater feedback was designed around those behaviors, competencies, and
characteristics that would lead to the accomplishment of these objectives (Rogers et al, 2002).

Multirater evaluation is characterized as a process during which feedback is gathered from those who work most closely with the employee, primarily supervisor, peers, direct reports, and internal and external customers. Terms used to describe multirater feedback include “360-degree”, “stakeholder appraisal”, “full-circle appraisal”, “multi-rater feedback”, and “multisource assessment”. Three hundred sixty degree and other types of multirater evaluation are typically conducted in an anonymous and confidential manner in most companies applying these employee evaluations. It is usually completed in either “pencil and paper” form or electronically (Atwater & Waldman, 1998; McCarthy & Garavan, 2001; Meyer, 1998). Multirater evaluation conducted in an anonymous and confidential way was found to be generally effective in enhancing employee performance (Edwards & Ewen, 1996b; Pollack & Pollack, 1996). The advantage of peer evaluation as part of 360-degree appraisal is that it gives a much broader perspective than supervisory evaluation alone, which is based on one person’s view of employee performance (McCarthy & Garavan, 2001).

Another form of multirater evaluation has emerged as a result of the popularity of self-managed teams in work organizations (Painter & Smith, 2004; Rogers, Rogers, & Metlay, 2002). Teams have been a growing form of employee involvement and more organizations are using a team approach for production, quality assurance, and employee performance evaluations (Druskat & Wolff, 1999). Team Primacy Concept (TPC)-based employee evaluation is a form of multirater evaluation that involves teams. While the use of self-empowered teams is increasing, the effectiveness of employee evaluations with face-to-face peer feedback has not been fully explored. There is little information on how the face-to-face team approach to evaluation influences learning and performance in the workplace. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to
explore how employees learn from Team Primacy Concept (TPC)-based employee evaluation and how they used the knowledge in their job performance. TPC-based evaluation is a form of multirater evaluation that consists of three components: self-feedback, supervisor’s feedback, and peer feedback. The main difference between such evaluation and other forms of multirater evaluation is that during the TPC-based evaluation, an employee’s professional performance is discussed by his or her peers in a face-to-face team meeting, while other forms of multirater evaluations (e.g. 360 degree evaluation) are usually conducted in a confidential and anonymous manner, often using a paper and pencil format. To purpose of the study was to investigate the process of how an employee learns and applies knowledge gained during TPC-based evaluation to his or her job performance.

Review of Empirical Research

Research done by Atkins and Wood (2002) has provided evidence for the validity of 360-degree feedback when used for leadership development. They researched how well the ratings of 360 degree evaluation predicted those completed by the assessment centers. Results showed that the average of the subordinates, peers, supervisors, and self ratings predicted job performance in accordance with the results generated from the assessment center. Similarly, Smither and Walker (1999) conducted a longitudinal study from 1991 to 1995 hypothesizing that managers who were originally rated poorly by using 360-degree would improve more than other managers who did not use multirater feedback. They also hypothesized that managers who discussed present feedback and went over the previous year’s feedback would experience greater performance improvement than those who did not. The results confirmed all hypotheses and demonstrated that 360-degree feedback can have many benefits to performance improvement. Further, Edwards and Ewen (1996b) conducted a study of faculty members at Arizona State
University to determine the effectiveness of 360-degree evaluation at the institution. They found that following the evaluation, there was an increase in productivity of the faculty and in customer satisfaction ratings. Similarly, Pollack and Pollack (1996) conducted a comprehensive study in order to develop their recommendations regarding the effectiveness of the performance appraisal process. The authors reviewed the appropriate research literature, conducted telephone interviews with members of private and public sector organizations, examined the regulations and practices related to performance appraisals, and conducted focus groups. They found that the feedback was most valuable for employee performance when such feedback data were used in the developmental plans. Overall, the studies showed positive results of 360-degree evaluation in facilitating employee performance.

Three hundred sixty degree and other types of multirater evaluation are typically conducted in an anonymous and confidential manner in most companies applying this process of employee evaluations. Rogers et al. (2002) conducted research with 45 global companies to uncover the critical factors and best practices with respect to the application of 360-degree feedback. Their research was conducted using a survey method, after which they concluded that confidential and anonymous feedback occurred in 97% of all companies in this survey. The authors believed that maintaining confidentiality and anonymity is an important factor of 360-degree evaluation because a lack of anonymity can lead raters to soften their ratings. Atwater and Waldman (1998) also argue that 360-degree feedback should be collected anonymously and provided to an employee confidentially. According to these authors, “exposure to the feedback in a confidential manner gives [employees] an opportunity to make changes without revealing their weaknesses to others” (Atwater & Waldman, p. 96). This statement begs the question: how could somebody’s weaknesses or challenges be “revealed” when challenges have been already
observed and identified by peer employees? Nonetheless, other sources suggested that feedback should be anonymous and confidential (Brotherton, 1996; Edwards & Ewen, 1996b; Dyer, 2001; Gregory, 1998; London & Beatty, 1993; Vinson, 1996; Wimer & Nowack, 1998).

In recent years, another form of multirater evaluations has emerged. Sixty seven percent of Fortune 1000 companies have used the team approach in organizational functions. These teams (also known as “semi-autonomous work groups”, “self-regulating”, “self-directing work groups”, “empowered teams”, or “self-empowered teams”) appear to be a growing form of employee involvement (Lawler, Mohrman, & Ledford, 1995). Along with the popularity of self-managing teams, some organizations have implemented employee evaluations involving peer feedback in a team setting. At least 37% of companies that use teams in organizational functions involve the teams in employee evaluations (Wellins, Byham, & Wilson, 1991). Team Primacy Concept (TPC)-based employee evaluation is a form of multirater evaluation that involves teams. The distinguishing characteristic of the TPC-based employee evaluation takes a team approach where the feedback is given to an employee in a face-to-face manner, with all the team members present. While the use of self-empowered teams in the evaluation process is increasing, its effectiveness involving face-to-face peer feedback has not been fully explored. Some research described here was conducted with university students rather than employees in work organizations.

Druskat and Wolff (1999) conducted a study of face-to-face team evaluations with a group of university students, and their study revealed a positive effect of such evaluations on participants’ performance. An experimental design was used to examine the immediate and long-term impact of a structured, face-to-face developmental peer appraisal on 294 undergraduates in 44 self-managing work groups, and 217 MBA students in 36 self-managing work groups. The
study results showed that face-to-face peer feedback had an immediate positive impact on open communication, task motivation, group viability, cohesion, and satisfaction among group members. Additionally, the closer to the task deadline a student was, the more effective feedback by group members on his or her performance appeared to be. Overall, the results showed that peer appraisals exerted a positive effect on relationships and task focus, demonstrated an increased influence proportionate to the immediacy of the task deadline, and showed great potential with respect to work teams. However, though the results of the study revealed positive effects of team evaluation on performance, Druskat and Wolff’s (1999) study was conducted with university students and not with members of work organizations. Thus, there is the need to explore the phenomenon within a working environment and to determine the role that such evaluation plays in employee performance.

Conceptual Framework and the Research Questions

The conceptual frameworks of the study were (a) the TPC-based employee evaluation concept (Painter & Smith, 2004), and (b) Kolb’s (1974) experiential learning model. Collectively, these two frameworks provided an understanding of the process of Team Primacy Concept evaluation and how the learning from the process was used to modify job practices.

*TPC-Based Employee Evaluation*

TPC-based employee evaluation originated from Garner’s (1988) Total Team Model. The Total Team Model provides a conceptual framework to organize interdisciplinary groups of professionals for peer supervision and promotes collective responsibility for professional growth and clients’ total well-being (Garner). According to Garner, organizations that apply the Total Team Model use team processes to perform many organizational functions, including team evaluations.
Evaluation based on TPC is a structured and detailed performance feedback process by self, supervisor, and peer employees that allows team members to develop strategic plans to improve performance in challenging areas (Painter & Smith, 2004). Because of the TPC culture, which considers a team to be the highest administrative priority, the TPC employee evaluation places responsibility and accountability for the process on the team members. Painter and Smith note that the responsibility and accountability are evidenced by the development of individual improvement goals, followed by specific strategies, and the follow-up on how these strategies are being implemented. Another important characteristic of a TPC-based evaluation is the peer feedback component, carried out in the presence of all the team members at the same time and in one setting. Participation in the evaluation of a team member allows all the team members to recognize that they also face challenges in certain areas. This realization helps form an organizational culture where one’s problems, weaknesses, and challenges can be discussed openly (Garner, 1988).

According to Painter and Smith (2004), The Institute for Family Centered Services advanced face-to-face evaluation based on Garner’s Total Team Model. Using this approach, the employee goes through a sequential process which is as shown in Figure 1.

Firstly, the employee evaluates himself or herself in the four core performance areas—clinical interventions, documentation, collateral relationships, and teamwork—and self-scores using a “low”, “some”, or “high” indicator for competence and accountability for each skill listed in each core area on the evaluation instrument. Each member of the team also completes an evaluation guide for that employee and scores each skill using “low”, “some,” or “high” indicators for competence and accountability. Competence is evidenced by knowledge and transferable skills; accountability is evidenced by enthusiasm and confidence in ability to
perform without close supervision (Painter & Smith, 2004). Each team member then meets
individually with the employee to discuss, one-on-one, his or her strengths and weaknesses in the
four main performance areas. Then during a weekly meeting, team members collectively share
with the employee, in a group face-to-face setting, his or her strengths and challenges in the four
main performance areas. The strengths are identified first, followed by the challenges. As the
evaluation session focuses on only one team member, it can be specific and detailed. This allows
the person being evaluated to gain a complete understanding of how others perceive him or her
performance (Garner, 1988). A supervisor attends this meeting, but does not share observations
and perceptions. The supervisor’s goal at this point is to understand how other team members
perceive the employee who is being evaluated (Garner).

*Figure 1. Team Primacy Concept (TPC) based employee evaluation process.*

The next step involves meeting with the supervisor who evaluates the employee’s skills
and performance in the same four core performance areas. The collective assessments of team
members, the employee, and the supervisor are recorded, and each skill is evaluated using “low”,
“some”, or “high” indicators for competence and accountability. The employee and the
supervisor work together to summarize the strengths and challenges identified from the various
evaluation sources (Painter & Smith, 2004). Using the results, the employee puts together a
developmental plan, including specific goals and strategies to improve performance in
challenged areas. The employee chooses three to four areas that require improvement based on
the challenges identified during the evaluation process. The employee develops an improvement
plan which is presented to the team members for feedback and then the implementation begins
with periodic reporting and review of progress.

*Kolb’s Learning Model*
To map out the learning that occurs throughout the TPC evaluation process, we used Kolb’s (1974) learning model as a conceptual framework. This model, also referred to as the “learning cycle,” explains the process by which individuals and organizations attend to their experiences, understand them, and consequently use the new information to modify their behaviors (Kolb, 1974). In the case of employees in work organizations, his model can be used to understand how employees learn from the evaluation process and how they apply the knowledge gained from the process. The learning cycle includes four elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Kolb describes *Concrete experience* as “feeling and sensing”, and it involves perception of information in an actual situation. *Reflective observation* means reflecting on how the experience impacts some aspects of individual’s life and work. *Conceptualization* is a process during which an individual interprets the events and tries to understand them. Finally, *active experimentation* is implementing and testing concepts learned in new situations.

Since Kolb’s learning model was used to frame the study, the basic and subsidiary research questions were based on “learning” concepts as defined by Kolb, specifically as they relate to (a) concrete experience, (b) reflection, (c) conceptualization, and (c) acting or implementation.

**Research Questions**

The basic research question that guided the study was: “How do employees learn from TPC evaluation and how do they use the knowledge to improve their job performance?” The subsidiary research questions were (a) “How do employees experience TPC feedback from self, supervisor, and peers?” (b) “How do employees reflect on the feedback?” (c) “How do employees plan for changes to their work behaviors?” (d) “How do employees implement self,
supervisory, and peer feedback in performing their jobs?” Answers from these questions can help illuminate how employees learn from the process and how they use the knowledge gained to meet job expectations.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was utilized to explore employees’ experiences of TPC-based evaluation, the knowledge gained from the encounters, and the application of knowledge to enhance job performance. Because the purpose of the study was to explore the process of learning from TPC multirater evaluation from the perspectives of the employees, the qualitative case study approach was best suitable for this exploration. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), “Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (p. 2). For this study, we wanted to explore how employees of one region of an organization experience a unique form of employee evaluation and how they interpreted the learning that occurred from the experience.

The case for the study was the Southeastern Virginia Region of the Institute for Family Centered Services (IFCS). IFCS is a multi-site organization that provides home-based, family centered counseling to at-risk children and families. It was established in 1988 and is located in 4 states throughout the United States. This organization was chosen because it has been continuously applying TPC-based evaluation for all front line and supervisory level employee teams for 18 years.

Site and Participants

Site Selection. Within the organization, the Southeastern Virginia (SEVA) region was
purposely chosen for the study as it was the best performing region, based on the four core competencies: clinical work, documentation, collateral relationships and teamwork. The rationale for purposive sampling was to select a sample from which most can be learned by identifying criteria that are essential (Merriam, 1998). The best performing IFCS region was chosen so that the organization as a whole could benefit from the experiences and practices that contributed to that region’s success. The case study design was chosen for two main reasons. First, the authors researched the process during which learning occurs. Specifically, the study focused on employees’ experiences, reflection, planning, and action. The case study is a particularly suitable design for researching a process (Merriam, 1998). Secondly, the study focused on a bounded unit, which was the SEVA region. The study participants were performing their jobs in the same environment, had similar job expectations, and had relationships with each other. Case studies differ from other types of qualitative research because they are descriptions and analysis of “a single entity around which there are boundaries” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Thus, a case study was the most suitable research design.

**Participant Selection.** The participants were employees of SEVA region who had at least two TPC-based evaluations during their work history with the organization. The criterion of having at least two evaluations was significant because the developmental plans of subsequent evaluations were reviewed to determine if employees had been successful in implementing their previous goals. Eight employees participated in the study using the following pseudonyms: Joann, Hattie, Sandcofa, Julie, Queen Esther, Laufey, Serena and Wenrobe. The participants included 7 females and 1 male. Their length of employment with IFCS ranged from 1 year, 3 months to 16 years, 5 months; thus the number of evaluations that members had experienced ranged from 2 to 12. Six participants were African-Americans and 2 participants were
Caucasians.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

*Data Collection.* Data for the study were collected through interviewing and written documentation of employee development plans. We conducted the first interview, followed it with a historical review of the development plans for each participant, and concluded with the second interview. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted at the workplace, and lasted for about an hour. We developed and organized the qualitative interview guide based on the research questions. For instance, to explore how employees experience feedback given by peers, the guide contained question such as, “What feelings did you experience during team evaluation when you heard from your peers your challenges in the clinical performance area?” The second phase of the data collection consisted of a review of all of the employees’ development plans to determine how the employee changed work performance from one evaluation period to another. Also, the review of the plans focused on finding patterns that supported or contradicted information reported during the first interview.

*Data Analysis.* The first phase of the analysis was to write a brief case story of each participant to understand their experiences with the phenomenon. Next, we used NVivo7 qualitative research software to analyze and manage the data. Following the initial coding, we retrieved and critically reviewed 66 units of information and compared each unit with others, looking for recurring regularities. Then, the units were grouped to create the subthemes of the study. A subtheme was decided either by a number of participants that agreed on the theme, or by uniqueness of the information (Merriam, 1998). Finally, we grouped the subthemes under eight major themes that represented the findings of the study.

*Limitations of the Study*
The results of this case study were limited to data gathered and analyzed from one region of one organization. Therefore, one should be careful not to generalize the findings to other settings or organizations. In addition, this qualitative study described how employees learned from TPC evaluation to enhance their job performance; it did not intend to determine the degree of correlative relationship between TPC-based evaluation and employee performance. Moreover, the study did not intend to determine whether TPC-based employee evaluation is more or less effective in promoting employee performance than other forms of employee evaluations.

Findings

We have organized the findings around the dimensions of Kolb’s learning model—experience, reflection, conceptualization, and acting—and presented the themes as they relate to each of the dimensions. This study identified eight themes that were representative of Kolb’s learning cycle and formed the learning process model of TPC evaluation (See Figure 2). *Experiencing the TPC Evaluation*

Two themes captured the “experience” dimension of Kolb’s model: (a) relationships and feelings and (b) power dynamics among team members. These themes explained experiences that influenced team members’ learning from the evaluation process.

*Relationships and feelings.* The findings indicate that relationships among employees and the feelings that resulted from such relationships played a significant role that facilitated or hindered learning from the evaluation process. This theme is supported by the following subthemes: (a) anxiety before and during team meeting, (b) honesty and openness, (c) feelings of appreciation and acknowledgement, and (d) personal relationships.

*Figure 2.* The themes of the study.

Participants consistently remarked that the TPC process is anxiety producing for most
employees, specifically, the evaluation component where an employee is evaluated by his or her entire team. As Laufey shared,

> When you go through the first initial evaluation, I think it makes you nervous – because it kind of puts you in a situation where you can feel somewhat vulnerable if you have not experienced that process before.

However, it appeared that the anxiety that employees experienced was not overwhelming, and anxiety levels got lower as employees increased their time with IFCS and experienced more annual evaluations.

In describing their experiences with the process, the study participants noted honesty in providing feedback and openness to hearing challenges to be significant prerequisites to the TPC evaluation process. For instance, Joann shared,

> When people can give you honest feedback, whether it’s strengths or challenges, and they can be bold enough to say, “You know, I just see some things that you may need to work on,” to me that’s caring enough about me to let me know what I need to work on.

The degree to which TPC employee evaluation plays a positive role in improving job performance and professional development apparently depends on the levels of honesty and openness among those involved in the process. The findings suggest that the more honest the feedback giver is, and the more open the feedback receiver is, the more the feedback receiver can benefit from the information. McCarthy and Garavan (2001) likewise observed that the employee’s acceptance to feedback is an important prerequisite to effective peer evaluation.

Further, the employees in this study perceived information provided in a face-to-face setting to be as honest and open as confidential and anonymous feedback would be. This finding is significant as it contradicts many studies in the literature (Brotherton, 1996; Dyer, 2001; Edwards & Ewen, 1996b; Gregory, 1998; London & Beatty, 1993; Vinson 1996; Wimer & Nowack, 1998) indicating that only confidential and anonymous peer feedback would be
reflective of true peer perceptions. For instance, Dyer (2001) stated that raters’ confidentiality must be protected because “they have taken a risk in giving data, and they must be able to enjoy anonymity” (p. 3). Vinson (1996) believed that “the promise in anonymity helps convince people that they can be candid” (p. 2). In this case study, we found that feedback delivered in a face-to-face manner was believed to be honest, candid, and reflective of employees’ true perceptions.

However, we believe that TPC works best within an organizational culture that promotes teamwork and openness between members on an on-going basis. This type of employee evaluation has been applied and cultivated at IFCS for the past 18 years. If such were not the case, it is quite likely that employees would find continuous discomfort with such an evaluation approach.

The findings also revealed that positive feedback delivered in a team setting leaves team members feeling appreciated and acknowledged. For more senior employees, evaluation by their peers allowed them to feel acknowledged for their expertise. For more novice employees, positive acknowledgement in a team made them feel validated for their performance. For instance Joann noted,

> It makes me feel really good that people appreciate what you bring and what expertise you bring to the team, and it also lets you know that people appreciate some of the things you do, and sometimes you don’t even realize that you’re bringing that piece.

Garner (1988) similarly noted that an important benefit of evaluation by team members is the ability for the team member to receive appreciation for his or her contributions to the team. Likewise, Santeusanio (1998) in his experimental implementation of 360-degree evaluation in his school district found that multirater evaluation stimulates collegiality.

Another significant finding of the study was the importance of personal relationships among team members. The findings demonstrate that relationships among team members are viewed as a significant facilitator in delivering effective feedback, especially feedback around
challenges. The participants thought that closer personal relationships did not inhibit them from providing open and honest feedback to their peers. On the contrary, several participants noted that closer personal relationships, extending beyond the work environment, facilitated even more open and candid feedback on their peers’ challenges, as the evaluator knew and was better able to assess his or her peer’s strengths and challenges. According to Wenronbe,

> I would probably know them a little more and so probably the feedback would be easier to give, because this person knows that evidently you’re coming from the heart because they’re a friend of yours. So it’s not like you’re just trying to pick or to get at them. So I think that it’d be easier with a personal relationship.

This finding is significant as it offers evidence of a different role that personal relationships play in providing peer feedback than the role addressed in the literature. For instance, Bettenhausen and Fedor (1997) found that peers tend to rate their employee peers higher if they have friendship or personal relationship. Similarly, these same authors determined that participants would have a fear of negative consequences or repercussions when providing a peer with a negative feedback. Contrary to Bettenhausen’s and Fedor’s findings, the participants of this study indicated that closer personal relationships did not inhibit the delivery of honest and candid feedback from team members.

**Power dynamics among team members.** The subthemes that comprise the theme of power dynamics are (a) conflict among team members and (b) seniority of team members. Non-adherence to preparation for the one-on-one meeting between the giver and the recipient of feedback can cause a conflict between the evaluator and the team member who is being evaluated. A giver and a receiver of feedback may have different perceptions of job expectations and not clarifying these perceptions before the team evaluation can cause an open argument or hidden tension during team evaluation. Additionally, the self perceptions of a feedback recipient may be different from that of the feedback giver, and the recipient may not be psychologically
prepared to receive negative unexpected information on their performance, and this may create conflict. Three of the participants interviewed—Sandcofa, Hattie, and Wenronbe—described experiences of conflict during a team evaluation. All three conflict experiences occurred when participants received surprisingly negative feedback during the team meeting that was not delivered to them during the individual meeting with the peer.

Seniority (or length of employment with the company) may also cause a power imbalance during the evaluation process. Feedback perceived by senior employees seems to be more valued by both the novice and the more senior employees themselves. Serena, who was employed for just over a year noted,

So they [senior team members] have a lot to pull from and a lot to draw on. Whereas for me, this may be my first resistant family, whereas they’re looking saying, “I’ve had so many resistant families.” So, I really can look up to them and respect what their experience is. That is extremely helpful when you have an FCS who has been doing this for seven years.

From the organization’s perspective, a team member’s ability to provide feedback is not linked to his or her length of time in the organization. Findings of this study indicate that contrary to this ideal, in reality, seniority plays a significant role in the perceived value of an employee’s feedback. In addition, it is very likely that newer employees do not have strongly-formed relationships with more senior team members. Thus, this factor may also place a lesser perceived value on the novice’s feedback. In regards to the previously-discussed theme of “relationships among team members”, it is safe to say that the stronger relationships formed among novices and more senior team members, the more value would be ascribed to a novice’s feedback.

*Reflections on TPC Feedback*

In this study, we identified two themes that represented the “reflection” stage in Kolb’s
experiential learning model. These concepts, (a) protecting self-image and (b) reflection facilitated by the situation, provide insights into the process of reflection on TPC-based evaluation.

Protecting self-image. The study revealed that the receiver of the feedback takes information and filters it, especially information that highlights the challenges. Thus, in a sense, a recipient of the feedback protects his or her self-image by reflecting back on challenges provided by a peer, and identifies with those challenges that are most meaningful. For instance, Hattie noted,

> I would examine for myself what I need to work on and what I don't need to work on. If I got the information and it was something that I knew within myself that I needed to work on, then I would be open and honest about that with them.

The theme of “protecting self-image” can be associated with Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. Conflicting ideas upset the balance between a person’s perceptions of self and others’ perceptions of the individual, thus creating a psychological discomfort. A person experiencing such discomfort tries to reduce the imbalance (McElrath, 2004). The participants of the study tended to reduce the imbalance caused by the different information from the self-feedback and the peer feedback. In essence, if an employee had conflicting information between self-evaluation and peer evaluation, the employee filtered the feedback of a peer and accepted those feedback pieces that appeared to most resemble elements of the self-evaluation or those that are aligned with the supervisory feedback.

Reflection facilitated by the work situation. The findings demonstrated that a specific work situation may serve as a trigger for employees to reflect back on peer or supervisory feedback. “A specific work situation” can be the clinical situation or a problem of client families. It can also encompass a situation in a team environment. In some cases, it was a key word or a
reaction of a client in a work situation. Participation in evaluation of other team members also facilitated reflection on one’s own performance. The study participants remarked that while they were evaluating other team members, they also reflected on their own strengths and challenges.

For instance, Joann noted,

> When you’re hearing other people’s challenges, or when you are giving someone their challenges, it is also a reflection of you, too. You may see that this person needs to turn in their notes in more on time, more often than they do, and so it may be something that you yourself are working on. So, it may just be a reflection. So, I think it helps you as well as the person you’re giving information for just hearing his strengths and challenges.

McCarthy and Garavan also noted that “employees can change behavior merely by becoming aware of the behaviors that are rewarded in an organization” (2001, p. 17).

**Conceptualization of TPC Feedback: The Mindframe and the Timeframe**

The theme of the mindframe and the timeframe identified in this study represents the “conceptualization” stage in Kolb’s experiential learning model, providing insights into how the study participants made meaning of TPC feedback. We identified two subthemes that comprised “mindframe and timeframe”: (a) mental schemes, and (b) utilizing timeliness or deadlines for task completion.

The study participants shared that following TPC evaluation, they put conscious effort into overcoming their performance challenges. Each employee develops his or her own thinking frame on how to improve job performance in the identified challenging areas. The underlying pattern behind the “thinking frame” is that employees “invest” mental energy in identifying the situations where they can perform better, and in actually carrying through their actions to improve in these challenging situations. While the participants used different descriptions of their “thinking frames,” all of them referred to a pattern of how they organize the knowledge in their memory. For instance, for Wenronbe, it is “burning goals” into memory, while Serena
elaborated on how she develops “a mental plan”. Serena shared,

And then, where is the resistance? Is my challenge with their resistance because of them or is it because of something within me? And then, I just have a mental plan. Sometimes I write it down, but I’ll have a plan. When I go to these people, how am I going to handle this resistance? So it helps me mentally to come up with a plan for individual clients as to what I’m going to do to meet this resistance.

This finding is supported by Gagné and Medsker (1996) who put forth the idea that a person organizes his or her newly gained knowledge into “schemata”. These authors maintain that schemata are the generic organizing ideas or “knowledge structures underlying knowledge of specific objects, events, and actions” (p. 90). In essence, the schemata, or thinking frames identified in this study represent and underlie how the knowledge gained from the evaluation is organized in one’s long-term memory. Gagné and Medsker also explained that schemata can take the form of “plans and goals” (p. 91). This finding is significant as it provides insights on how employees organized the internalized feedback in their long-term memory. Further, this finding provides some empirical support to Gagné’s and Medsker’s theory.

We also found that the employees used deadlines for task accomplishments, especially those having to do with the completion of paperwork. The deadlines that employees place for themselves or external deadlines that are given by regional administration are important as they help employees plan while simultaneously serving as a reminder for accomplishing a task.

**Implementing TPC-Based Feedback**

There were two concepts identified in the study that represented the “active experimentation” stage in Kolb’s experimental learning model. One is the positive “accountability to self and clients”, meaning that a sense of accountability served as a catalyst in the implementation phase. The other, “unresolved challenges,” had a negative connotation and hindered the implementation of TPC feedback, meaning that unresolved on-going challenges,
such as documentation completion, slowed overall performance improvement. Finally, the study identified the additional concept of “ongoing feedback” that related to the four study domains: experiences, reflection, conceptualization, and implementation.

*Accountability to self and clients.* The participants identified accountability to self as a major catalyst for performance improvement. Also, most of the participants interviewed described accountability to self intertwined with accountability to client families that they served and accountability to the other collaborative agencies in the community. Serena shared how she wants to perform her best,

I need for me to do a good job, and so, therefore, I’m very accountable. Where I fall short, I know that I do, and I’m honest about it, and I don’t make excuses. I need to do a good job, not only for the company but for me. I need to do a good job for me, as well as for the clients that we serve.

Covey (1988) also believed that personal accountability is one of six conditions facilitating employee job effectiveness. He stated that when employees have a clear, upfront understanding of what is expected of them, they are in the best position to keep themselves accountable.

Overall, concerning the implementation phase, each participant identified a number of developmental goals that they attained during their employment with the organization. This was also supported by their developmental plans. They also attributed the attainment of their performance goals to the overall TPC evaluation process. All the participants spoke of how at some point in their employment with the organization, their team members and supervisor challenged or supported them towards more effective job performance.

Furthermore, the participants were able to identify specific job tasks that they were performing better following a TPC evaluation. A review of the developmental plans supported the participants’ reports of performance improvement. The data suggested that they gradually
improved their performance, particularly in teamwork and clinical work areas. For instance, at her 90-day evaluation in 2005, Laufey had a challenge identified by team members as “chairing team meetings”. She did not have that same challenge at her one-year evaluation as she had improved her skills as a chair of the team. As I explored with Laufey the process of improving her skills of chairing team meetings, she explained, “I felt like I succeeded in meeting my comfort level in being able to do that.”

Similarly, in her 1998 developmental plan, Wenronbe had a goal of increasing clinical skills working with sexual offenders. This same goal no longer appeared in her development plan in 1999. Not only had she increased her clinical skills of working with sexual offenders, she also became a co-facilitator of a sexual abuse treatment group. As she noted,

It was very difficult because I felt like, it's worse enough you hurt a child, but to hurt your own child… And so [team members] were confronting me on that, because I would always avoid getting cases that involved sex offenders. But, believe it, now I'm the co-facilitator of the sex offender treatment group and working on my license.

Similarly, Julie, at her 90-day evaluation in 2005 had a challenge of meeting her productivity goal as measured by clinical billable hours with client families. She attained her goal of meeting her clinical productivity before her first year evaluation.

Unresolved challenges. This theme is represented in the implementation phase of the process and includes the ongoing challenge of completing clinical documentation within the timeframe called for by the organization. This theme, as depicted in Figure 2, adversely influences the implementation developmental plans following the evaluation. Most of the participants remarked that they found it difficult to complete their clinical documentation within the stipulated timelines. Some of them said that they procrastinated and lacked organization. One participant said that she lacked the skills, such as time management and organizational skills,
necessary to carry through this task effectively. As for external barriers, participants identified short time frames for completing paperwork and the difficulty of getting all necessary information from families during those short time frames. This unresolved challenge was found to be one of the major barriers to learning and performance improvement among participants.

*Ongoing feedback.* The concept of “ongoing feedback” relates to all four domains of the study (Figure 2). The study found that feedback from peers and supervisors was an on-going practice. During weekly team meetings, individual members would present their cases and receive clinical strategies on how to approach families and other collaborating agencies in the community. For instance Laufey noted,

> You don't just look at this evaluation stuff twice a year. We are always talking about it and we're always talking about our collateral relationships and the four different areas of clinical service, and what could be considered strengths and challenges.

The literature on TPC culture points out that ongoing and direct team feedback provides an opportunity to increase individual and team competence in providing family systems treatment (Painter & Smith, 2004), which is a form of family therapy. McCarthy (2000) and Garner (1988) also pointed out that effective feedback needs to be frequent and on-going, and it should not be limited to an annual review session.

Discussions, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of the study was to explore the process of employee learning from Team Primacy Concept evaluation—a multirater evaluation with a team approach. The study also sought to examine how the participants applied the knowledge gained from the experience to improve their job performance. The findings have added to the literature on multirater evaluation and have highlighted the process of evaluations using peers as a significant component of the process.
Previous research indicated that multirater evaluation played a positive role in performance improvement. Seiler (2005) found that 360-degree evaluations drive continuous performance improvement. and Ewen (1996b) also determined that 360-degree evaluation was effective in promoting employee performance. The present study expanded that knowledge base by demonstrating that multirater evaluation that involves face-to-face team feedback also plays a positive role in facilitating employee job performance.

Further, the findings support those of previous studies (Dominick & Reilly, 1997; Erez, Lepine, & Elms, 2002) on the positive role that teams play in job performance. Erez, Lepine, and Elms found that relative to teams that relied on external evaluations, teams with peer evaluations displayed higher levels of workload sharing, voice, cooperation, performance, and member satisfaction. Similarly, Dominick and Reilly (1997) in their study with graduate and undergraduate students determined that team members who gave and received behavioral peer feedback demonstrated effective team behavior more frequently than participants who did not give or receive feedback. Thus, the team evaluation approach tends to positively influence performance improvement, not only among graduate students, but also among employees in work organization.

Until now, most research studies exploring employee evaluations and performance used a quantitative approach to determine the correlative or predictive relationship of performance improvement, employee evaluations, and other variables. These studies lacked a focus on the performance improvement process itself, namely how employees learn and implement their learning—from the time they receive feedback to the time they take action to implement the corrective suggestions from the feedback. This study has provided insights on the process of how employees learn from TPC-based feedback, and how they use this knowledge to enhance their
job performance. The study findings also have provided some valuable insights regarding the practice and process of TPC-based employee evaluation at the Institute for Family Centered Services. While this study has specific implications for that organization, we focus our attention on the study’s implications for the process of multirater evaluations in organizations in general.

*Implications and Recommendations for Team-Based Evaluations*

While the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other cases, other organizations may learn from the experiences at IFCS. Thus, the recommendations that are outlined below for other organizations should be interpreted with caution. However, for those organizations that choose to develop a culture similar to the team culture at IFCS, the following recommendations could be of benefit to those organizations:

First, overall, a team-based employee evaluation plays positive role in facilitating learning as it relates to multirater employee evaluation. Therefore, this particular finding can inform the organizations that consider applying evaluations involving face-to-face employee feedback in a team setting. As the literature and the findings of this study suggest, a strong team culture should be in place before this evaluation approach can be implemented. Thus, before employee evaluation with a team component is applied, it is advisable to first develop a strong team culture. Additionally, an organizational structure must be in place that would support this form of evaluation

Second, it appears that TPC-based feedback is perceived by employees as honest and open as feedback handled in a confidential way. Thus, for organizations that have a developed team culture with trust among team members and that wish to change to a face-to-face team evaluation, a pilot test should first be done to test its feasibility. This approach is recommended before a large-scale change of the organizational process is implemented, so that organization
could address barriers and resolve difficulties, if any, during the pilot phase.

References


Gregory, S. (1998, August 8). Too many cooks? When everyone has a say, job reviews can be


