

The Impact of Negative Feedback from Leaders on Proactive Behavior among Employees at Company R

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Abstract: In dynamically competitive organizational environments, the mechanism through which leadership negative feedback influences employee proactivity warrants further exploration. Drawing on affective events theory and self-efficacy theory, this study constructs a moderated mediation model using a sample of 635 employees from Company R. Results indicate: Leadership negative feedback exerts a significant negative influence on employee pro; workplace anxiety partially mediates this relationship; self-efficacy negatively moderates the effect of leadership negative feedback on workplace anxiety and attenuates its indirect negative impact on pro through anxiety. This study provides theoretical foundations and practical insights for optimizing leadership feedback strategies, enhancing employee psychological capital, and boosting organizational vitality.

1. Introduction

In today's fiercely competitive and rapidly changing business environment, enterprises must rely not only on efficient management processes and innovative business models to maintain market leadership, but also on stimulating employees' intrinsic motivation and creativity. Proactive employee behavior—spontaneously taking actions to improve the work environment, solve problems, and drive innovation—significantly advances an organization's innovation capacity and sustainable development^[1], which is crucial for standing out in the marketplace. Simultaneously, employee proactivity effectively enhances overall organizational performance and efficiency by optimizing resource allocation and reducing waste, thereby strengthening operational capabilities^[2]. When enterprises face market shifts and industry transformations, employee proactivity plays a vital role in driving strategic implementation and organizational change^[3]. Collectively, these factors position employee proactivity as a key determinant for maintaining competitive advantage in dynamic market environments.

In today's complex and dynamic organizational environment, leaders, as central figures, exert profound and intricate influences on employees' proactivity through their feedback

methods—particularly negative feedback. Leader negative feedback refers to the instructions, disapproval, or criticism provided by leaders when employees' behaviors or performance fail to meet established goals or standards^[4]. However, frequent or inappropriate negative feedback may generate significant adverse effects. For instance, it can trigger anxiety, diminish self-esteem and competence, erode confidence in one's abilities, and undermine belief in task completion capabilities^[5]. Furthermore, such inappropriate criticism may provoke defensive reactions like anxiety, self-doubt, or passive resistance, adversely affecting career development and organizational commitment^[6].

Workplace anxiety, as a typical negative emotional manifestation triggered by leadership negative feedback, specifically refers to psychological states such as tension and worry exhibited by employees in organizational settings due to perceived potential career threats^[7]. This emotional state leads individuals to persistently doubt their work efficacy while simultaneously reducing their job satisfaction levels^[8]. Based on feedback intervention theory, Hu Jiayue^[9] examined the dual-effect mechanism of negative leadership feedback on employee career development: When negative feedback triggers anxiety and other negative emotions, employees focus their limited psychological resources on coping with stress rather than proactively engaging in behavior. This finding confirms that workplace anxiety plays a key mediating role between negative leadership feedback and employee proactivity.

In studies on leadership negative feedback, while scholars have noted its detrimental effects on employees, few have explored the positive moderating role of employees' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment, belief, or subjective sense of control regarding their ability to perform a specific activity at a certain level. It holds potential moderating influence on how employees interpret and respond to leadership negative feedback. Therefore, this paper adopts self-efficacy as a moderator to further examine its role in regulating workplace anxiety following employees' receipt of negative feedback from leaders. This aims to provide new perspectives and strategies for organizational management and employee development.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Emotional Events Theory

Proposed by Weiss & Cropanzano^[10], This theory posits that individual emotional responses stem from their perception of environmental stimuli and cognitive evaluation processes. When employees receive negative feedback from leaders, such work events are often perceived as emotional stimuli, triggering negative emotional states like anxiety and frustration. These emotional fluctuations then inhibit employees' proactive behaviors through cognitive and behavioral mechanisms^[11]. For instance, anxiety diverts employees' limited psychological resources toward stress coping, reducing the frequency of proactive behaviors. The affective events theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how negative leadership feedback influences employee proactivity.

2.2. Attribution Theory

Attribution theory was proposed by psychologist Weiner^[12]. Research indicates that individuals' perceptions of causal relationships in events and their attribution patterns influence their emotional states and subsequent behaviors. In organizational management contexts, when employees tend to attribute failure to competence deficits, they often experience anxiety and reduced self-efficacy, leading to diminished work motivation. attributing failure to insufficient effort may stimulate improvement motivation, enhancing work engagement and proactive behavior; attributing negative

outcomes to external factors may trigger organizational dissatisfaction but has a relatively minor impact on proactive work behavior. This finding elucidates the psychological pathways at work in negative feedback situations and provides theoretical support for developing differentiated management interventions.

2.3. Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory, proposed by Bandura^[13], posits that an individual's belief system regarding their capabilities moderates behavioral motivation patterns and challenge coping strategies. As a core driver, this variable can promote proactive behaviors such as seeking feedback and voluntarily undertaking additional tasks—examples of organizational citizenship behavior^[14]; Lou Ming et al.^[15] demonstrated the moderating effect of self-efficacy between perceived supervisor support and proactive socialization behaviors. Specifically, when employees possess higher self-efficacy, perceived supervisor support is more likely to translate into positive organizational behaviors. This finding corroborates Bandura's theory and offers critical insights for organizational management practices.

2.4. Leadership Negative Feedback and Employee Proactive Behavior

In dynamic competitive environments, enterprises must leverage employees' proactive behaviors—such as innovative problem-solving—to enhance organizational adaptability and market competitiveness. As a management tool, leadership feedback, particularly negative feedback, warrants in-depth exploration of its influence mechanisms on employee proactivity. Existing research indicates this influence exhibits dual characteristics, predominantly negative. First, from the perspective of affective events theory, negative leadership feedback—as a typical workplace event—triggers negative emotional responses in employees. When employees attribute such feedback to stable personal deficiencies, this internal attribution pattern intensifies their negative emotional experience. Although some studies suggest that under specific conditions—such as high-quality leader-member exchange^[16], negative feedback may exert positive motivational effects under specific conditions such as high exchange quality or employees' tendency toward positive attribution. However, empirical research on service-oriented state-owned enterprises demonstrates that in organizational environments emphasizing standardized management, the inhibitory effect of negative feedback on employee proactivity is more pronounced and prevalent^[17]. In summary, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Leadership negative feedback exerts a significant negative influence on employee proactivity.

2.5. Mediating Role of Workplace Anxiety

The mechanism through which leadership negative feedback influences employee proactivity via workplace anxiety can be understood through three stages: emotional triggering, anxiety maintenance, and behavioral inhibition. As a negative work event, negative feedback directly triggers anxiety responses. For instance, in standardized service management settings, managers' immediate corrections of service details frequently expose employees to negative feedback scenarios. When receiving negative evaluations from leaders, employees often experience anxiety, shame, and other negative emotions. These emotional responses consume cognitive resources, plunging employees into self-doubt and significantly reducing their willingness to proactively solve problems or propose innovative suggestions. Liu Si's^[17] EEG study confirmed that high anxiety significantly reduces prefrontal cortex activity. This chain mechanism—"negative

feedback-workplace anxiety-behavioral inhibition”—is further amplified in state-owned enterprise contexts by the interplay of hierarchical management, high-frequency negative feedback, and institutional rigidity. It provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how leadership behavior influences employee performance. In summary, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: Workplace anxiety mediates the relationship between leadership negative feedback and employee proactivity.

2.6. The Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

Employees with high self-efficacy exhibit greater psychological resilience. When confronted with negative feedback, they are more likely to engage in challenging appraisals rather than threatening appraisals, attributing negative feedback to specific situational behaviors rather than perceived competence deficits. In hierarchical organizational settings with frequent negative feedback, employees with high self-efficacy avoid erosion of self-efficacy by cognitively distinguishing between "correcting behavior" and "denying competence." When confronted with stringent corporate performance evaluation systems, they strengthen their belief in problem-solving capabilities and reduce their perception of negative feedback as threatening. When confronted with negative feedback of equal intensity, employees with high self-efficacy maintain confidence in their ability to accomplish innovative tasks. For instance, within the standardized service framework of bureaucratic organizations, they propose personalized service improvement plans rather than ruminating on failure, thereby suppressing negative emotions. In summary, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: Self-efficacy negatively moderates the positive effect of leadership negative feedback on workplace anxiety.

Based on the above assumptions, this study constructed a theoretical model, as shown in Figure 1.

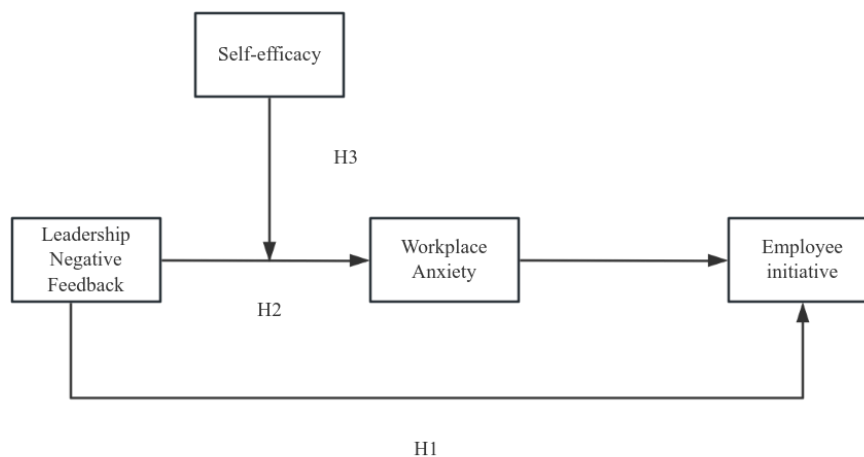


Figure 1: Theoretical Model.

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Collection

As a service-oriented enterprise under a state-owned enterprise, R Company's SOE

organizational attributes shape unique leader-employee interaction patterns. Therefore, this study selected 635 employees from R Service Company and its subsidiaries as research subjects, collecting data through questionnaire surveys. The survey was distributed online via Qwixx and collected data. The questionnaire included employees' basic personal information, work experience feedback, proactive behaviors at work, self-efficacy, work-related anxiety, and open-ended questions about the company. Measurements employed a five-point Likert scale, with each item rated on a 1–5 scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The survey was administered in March 2025, with 508 questionnaires distributed and 456 valid responses collected, yielding an 89.76% response rate.

3.2. Sample Analysis

Following data collection, detailed distribution analyses were conducted for gender, age, position, and tenure. Results are presented in Table 1. These data provide the basic characteristics and distribution of the sample, revealing a slight female majority, relatively even age distribution skewed toward younger and older employees, a clear bias toward frontline staff in position distribution, and a significant proportion of employees with shorter tenure. This information is crucial for understanding the fundamental profile of the workforce and conducting further analytical research.

Table 1: Sample Analysis.

Item	Category	Frequency (Persons)	Percentage (%)	Item	Category	Frequency (Persons)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	223	48.9	Position	Entry-level employee	385	84.4
	Female	233	51.1		Middle Manager	70	15.4
					Senior Management	1	0.2
Age	18-25 years old	152	33.3	Time since joining	Less than 1 year	153	33.6
	26-35 years old	102	22.4		1-3 years	161	35.3
	36-45 years old	98	21.5		3-5 years	45	9.9
	46 years old and above	104	22.8		5+ years	97	21.3

3.3. Reliability Testing

Reliability tests were conducted for all scales in the questionnaire, with results shown in Table 2. Specifically, the scales measuring negative leadership feedback, employee proactivity, workplace anxiety, and self-efficacy all exceeded 0.7, demonstrating good internal consistency and providing assurance for subsequent analyses in this study.

Table 2: Reliability Test Results.

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Negative Leadership Feedback	4	0.879
Employee Initiative	7	0.932
Workplace Anxiety	6	0.955
Self-Efficacy	6	0.884

3.4. Validity Testing

The validity test results of this study are shown in Table 3, indicating that all scales possess good construct validity. Specifically, the KMO values for each scale were significantly higher than the standard threshold of 0.7, and Bartlett's sphericity test reached statistical significance. Therefore, the measurement tools employed in this study demonstrate adequate validity, ensuring the reliability of subsequent data analysis.

Table 3: Validity Test Results.

Scale	Number of Items	KMO Value	Degrees of Freedom	Significance
Negative Feedback on Leadership	4	0.802	6	0.000
Employee Initiative	7	0.900	21	0.000
Workplace Anxiety	6	0.914	21	0.000
Self-Efficacy	6	0.886	21	0.000

3.5. Variable Measurement

This study's questionnaire design treated leadership negative feedback, employee proactivity, workplace anxiety, and self-efficacy as continuous variables, measured using a five-point Likert scale. Each item featured scoring options ranging from 1 to 5, corresponding to "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." The scales determined based on the specific circumstances of this study's subjects are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Scales for Relevant Variables

Scale	Item
Negative Feedback from Leaders	1. My leader's feedback makes me feel my work performance falls short of expectations. 2. My leader's feedback makes me feel pressured or uneasy. 3. My supervisor's feedback makes me worry about my career development. 4. My manager's feedback makes me doubt my own abilities.
Employee Proactive Behavior	1. I proactively seek ways to improve my work to adapt to changes. 2. I proactively take on additional work tasks. 3. I proactively report to my supervisor and share my ideas and suggestions. 4. I proactively assist colleagues in resolving work-related issues. 5. I proactively learn new skills to enhance my professional capabilities. 6. I will proactively stay informed about the company's goals and development updates. 7. I will proactively participate in team or organizational activities, contributing my ideas and efforts toward team objectives.
Workplace Anxiety	1. I worry that my work performance won't meet my manager's expectations and that I'll receive negative feedback. 2. I worry my performance might negatively impact the team's overall results. 3. I worry about being unable to complete assigned tasks. 4. I feel anxious about uncertainties in my work. 5. I feel tense and uneasy about the pressure at work. 6. I worry that my performance evaluation will affect my career development.
Self-Efficacy	1. I believe I can effectively handle challenges at work. 2. I am confident in achieving my set work goals. 3. I believe I can find solutions to problems. 4. I believe I can adapt to changes in my work. 5. I am confident in maintaining a positive attitude when facing difficulties. 6. I believe I can achieve success through hard work.

4. Empirical Analysis of Negative Feedback from R Enterprise Leaders and Employee Proactive Behavior

4.1. Main Effect Test

To investigate whether a linear relationship exists between negative feedback and employee proactivity, this study employs linear regression analysis. The regression equation is established with leadership negative feedback as the independent variable and employee proactivity as the dependent variable:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 CV \quad (1)$$

Y represents the dependent variable (employee proactivity); X represents the independent variable (supervisor negative feedback); CV denotes the control variable (age, gender, position, tenure); β_0 is the constant term; β_1 and β_2 are the coefficients.

The main effects regression results are shown in Table 5. Model 2 indicates that in Company R, characterized by stringent standardized service requirements and prominent bureaucratic management, negative leadership feedback exerts a significant negative impact on employee proactivity ($\beta = -0.468$, $p < 0.01$), with an explanatory power of adjusted $R^2 = 0.238$. This suggests that for every one standard deviation increase in negative leadership feedback, employee proactivity decreases by 0.468 units. This effect is further amplified in Company R's context of frequent negative feedback. $R^2 = 0.238$, indicating that each one-standard-deviation increase in negative leadership feedback reduces employee proactivity by 0.468 units. This effect is amplified in scenarios with frequent negative feedback at Company R. Thus, negative leadership feedback significantly diminishes employee proactivity levels, validating Hypothesis 1.

4.2. Mediating Effect Test

Table 5: Empirical Analysis Results.

Variable	Employee Proactive Behavior					Job Anxiety	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 5	Model 6	Model 4	Model 7
Gender	-0.029 (0.076)	-0.020 (0.068)	-0.033 (0.068)	0.029 (0.066)	0.017 (0.060)	0.097* (0.055)	0.092* (0.051)
Age	-0.082** (0.035)	-0.047 (0.032)	-0.055* (0.032)	-0.026 (0.031)	-0.025 (0.030)	0.058** (0.026)	0.051** (0.024)
Position	-0.481*** (0.110)	-0.448*** (0.098)	-0.418*** (0.098)	-0.426*** (0.096)	-0.426*** (0.094)	0.059 (0.080)	-0.066 (0.074)
Onboarding Time	0.052 (0.039)	0.028 (0.035)	0.031 (0.035)	0.022 (0.034)	0.019 (0.033)	-0.025 (0.028)	-0.017 (0.026)
Leadership Negative Feedback		-0.468*** (0.043)	-0.429*** (0.046)		-0.231*** (0.054)	0.618*** (0.035)	0.467*** (0.036)
Squared term of negative leadership feedback			0.214*** (0.082)				
Workplace Anxiety				-0.535*** (0.044)	-0.383*** (0.055)		
Self-Efficacy							0.303*** (0.035)
Negative Leadership Feedback*Self-Efficacy							-0.105** (0.039)
F	6.304	29.488	26.043	36.966	35.069	66.001	68.518
Adjusted R ²	0.045	0.238	0.248	0.283	0.310	0.417	0.510
VIF	1.182	1.012	1.141	1.027	1.733	1.012	1.059

Note: * indicates $p < 0.1$, ** indicates $p < 0.05$, *** indicates $p < 0.01$; values in parentheses are standard errors.

Mediation results are presented in Table 5. Model 4 shows that negative leadership feedback significantly positively influences workplace anxiety ($\beta = 0.618$, $p < 0.01$). Model 5 indicates that workplace anxiety significantly negatively affects employee proactivity ($\beta = -0.535$, $p < 0.01$). After introducing the workplace anxiety variable into Model 2, the regression results of Model 6 show that workplace anxiety exhibits a significant negative effect ($\beta = -0.383$, $p < 0.01$), while the absolute value of the coefficient for negative leadership feedback increases ($\beta = -0.231$). This result indicates that workplace anxiety partially mediates the relationship between the two variables, supporting Hypothesis 2.

To validate the robustness of the mediating effect, this study employed repeated sampling tests using the Bootstrap method. Results are presented in Table 6, showing that the indirect effect value of negative leadership feedback influencing employee proactivity through workplace anxiety was -0.249, with a 95% confidence interval of [-0.327, -0.175]. This interval did not include zero. This result further confirms the partial mediating role of workplace anxiety between negative leadership feedback and employee proactivity, providing stronger validation for Hypothesis 2.

Table 6: Bootstrap Mediation Effect Test Results.

Path	Effect Type	Effect Size	BootSE	LLCI	ULCI
Leader Negative Feedback → Employee Proactive Behavior	Direct Effect	-0.229	0.055	-0.337	-0.122
Negative Leadership Feedback → Workplace Anxiety → Employee Proactive Behavior	Indirect effect	-0.249	0.039	-0.327	-0.175

4.3. Moderation Effect Test

To examine the moderating effect of self-efficacy on the relationship between negative leadership feedback and workplace anxiety, the study included negative leadership feedback, self-efficacy, and the interaction term between negative leadership feedback and self-efficacy as independent variables, with workplace anxiety as the dependent variable in a regression model. The regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 W + \beta_3 XW + \beta_4 CV \quad (2)$$

The results of the moderation effect test are shown in Table 5. Model 7 indicates that the interaction coefficient between negative leadership feedback and self-efficacy is -0.105 ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that self-efficacy exerts a negative moderating effect between negative leadership feedback and workplace anxiety, thus supporting Hypothesis 3. To further validate the moderating effect, a simple slope analysis was conducted, with results shown in Figure 2. The analysis indicates that self-efficacy significantly negatively moderates the impact of negative leadership feedback on workplace anxiety. Findings suggest that within R Company's high-intensity feedback environment, enhancing self-efficacy significantly mitigates the psychological impact of negative feedback, thus confirming Hypothesis 3.

To further validate the moderating role of self-efficacy, a mediation test with moderation was conducted. Results are shown in Table 7. Compared to low self-efficacy, high self-efficacy significantly attenuated the indirect negative effect of leadership negative feedback on employee proactivity through workplace anxiety, with an indirect effect difference of $\Delta = 0.060$ ($p < 0.05$) and a 95% confidence interval of [0.013, 0.107] (excluding 0), indicating a significant difference

between the two groups. In summary, as self-efficacy increases, the strength of the indirect effect of negative feedback gradually weakens, validating the buffering role of self-efficacy in the anxiety transmission pathway. Hypothesis 3 is supported.

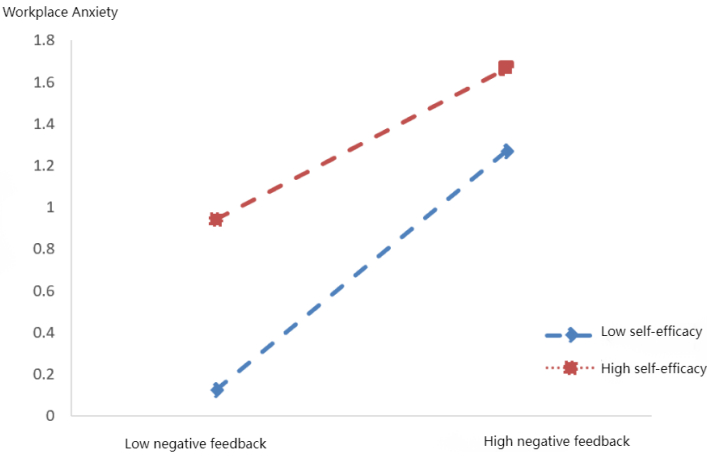


Figure 2: Simple Slope Analysis of Self-Efficacy Moderating Effect.

Table 7: Mediational Test Results with Moderation.

Moderator Variable (Self-Efficacy)	Effect Size	BootSE	95% Confidence Interval	
			LLCI	Upper Confidence Limit
Low self-efficacy (M-1SD)	-0.223	0.036	-0.290	-0.150
Medium self-efficacy (M)	-0.189	0.030	-0.250	-0.134
High Self-Efficacy (M+1SD)	-0.163	0.029	-0.228	-0.110

5. Recommendations

Based on research findings, organizations should recognize the profound impact of leadership feedback methods on employee psychology and behavior. Managers are advised to prioritize contextual and constructive feedback delivery, avoiding frequent, generalized negative evaluations. Establishing institutionalized positive feedback mechanisms and fostering an open communication environment can alleviate employee anxiety and stimulate proactive engagement.

Additionally, organizations should systematically implement psychological capital development programs. These include training, coaching, and success experience accumulation to enhance employees' self-efficacy. Employees with high self-efficacy demonstrate greater psychological resilience and attribution regulation abilities, effectively buffering the negative impact of critical feedback. This enables them to maintain positive behavioral orientation within standardized, high-demand service management environments.

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