Feedback Dynamics and Organizational Citizenship: Integrating Self-Determination Theory with Systems Thinking

Garrett HART

Marymount University, Arlington, VA, USA
gwh94945@marymount.edu

Abstract: Feedback processes and motivational dynamics shape whether employees will willingly exceed formal role requirements. Building on self-determination theory, we argue that feedback that satisfies the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness increases intrinsic motivation. Systems thinking explains how feedback loops influence motivation by reinforcing or balancing cycles. We integrate these perspectives to advance a dual-spiral model in which autonomy-supportive feedback initiates upward need satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior loops, and controlling feedback initiates downward need frustration and withdrawal loops. A synthesis of onboarding, communication, and sales coaching studies illustrates how leadership style, communication symmetry, and structural support moderate loop strength and reveal actionable leverage points for practice. The resulting propositions provide scholars with a testable framework and offer organizations a blueprint for designing ethically grounded, high-engagement feedback systems that sustain discretionary effort.

Keywords: Self-Determination Theory, Feedback Loops, Organizational Citizenship Behavior, Psychological Needs, Systems Thinking

Introduction

Employees' motivation to go beyond their prescribed duties has declined just as organizations are facing increasing pressure to innovate, with recent data showing that only 31 percent of younger employees feel engaged at work (Gallup, 2024). When overall commitment is low, organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), the discretionary support that employees offer colleagues and the company that becomes more valuable, as small, discretionary efforts can add up to sizable performance gains (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). However, when employees perceive that extra effort goes unnoticed or unrewarded, they are more likely to withhold it, costing the company a critical source of adaptive capacity (Gallagher, 2023). This led to the pivotal question that inspired this study: What types of feedback systems reliably convert momentary motivation into sustained citizenship?

Employees do not enact OCB in isolation; rather, they adjust their discretionary contributions in response to cues circulating through reinforcing or balancing feedback loops (Wang et al., 2018). Systems theory treats such loops as drivers that either amplify virtuous cycles or establish counterproductive habits, making them central to organizational learning (Tuyen et al., 2024). Classic quality improvement work has underscored that unmanaged loops quickly deviate from the desired trajectory, whereas well-designed cycles translate insight into disciplined action (Trippner-Hrabi et al.,

2024). Framing OCB within these dynamic structures shifts the research lens from static trait explanations to patterns of reciprocal influence that unfold over time.

Self-determination theory complements this structural view by specifying the psychological conditions—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that encourage employees to go beyond their role expectations, suggesting that citizenship thrives when feedback satisfies these needs (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Experimental evidence has demonstrated that autonomy-supportive exchanges initiate upward loops of mutual commitment, whereas controlling remarks trigger defensive withdrawal (Grenier et al., 2024). Emerging coaching models aimed at Generation Z sales professionals have likewise reported that personalized, choice-laden feedback catalyzes both immediate performance gains and longer-term loyalty (Hart, 2025a). These findings position feedback style as a leverage point linking micro-level motivation with macro-level system behavior.

Despite these insights, feedback research still focuses on cross-sectional overviews, leaving the temporal interplay between motivational states and OCB underexplored (Siswadi et al., 2023). Recent reviews have called for longitudinal studies that trace how need satisfaction and citizenship coevolve in lived workplace contexts (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Conceptual article methodologies, when rigorously executed, can clarify such complex linkages and generate propositions that can be empirically tested (Jaakkola, 2020). In response to this call, we integrate self-determination theory with systems thinking to advance a dual-loop model that explains how feedback quality prompts either virtuous or destructive cycles of OCB.

Problem Statement

Although OCB improves project outcomes and corporate reputation, only 23 percent of employees worldwide report being engaged at work, indicating a decline in the discretionary energy on which OCB depends (Gallup, 2024). Volatile work conditions further reveal how quickly citizenship diminishes when performance feedback does not meet employees' psychological needs, undermining the behaviors that help organizations adapt (Wang et al., 2018). This tension frames the general problem of sustaining OCB amid fluctuating motivational climates and establishes the practical importance of understanding how feedback quality shapes discretionary effort.

Self-determination theory maintains that feedback that nurtures autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports intrinsic motivation and, by extension, citizenship. However, most empirical studies have modeled feedback as a static antecedent, leaving its evolving influence underexplored (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Recent reviews have noted the scarcity of longitudinal research tracing how motivational states and OCB coevolve over time (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Emerging evidence showing that autonomy-supportive exchanges can trigger upward loops of engagement while controlling remarks provoke downward loops has underscored the specific problem: Scholars and practitioners lack an integrated, time-sensitive framework explaining the conditions under which each trajectory unfolds (Grenier et al., 2024). By synthesizing self-determination theory with contemporary systems perspectives, we address this gap and offer a model of reciprocal feedback cycles that can be empirically tested in this conceptual study.

Self-Determination Theory and Feedback

Self-determination theory posits that motivation exists on a continuum from controlled to autonomous regulation, suggesting that feedback promotes lasting, self-sustained effort when it fulfills the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Empirical work has verified that informational feedback expressed through guidance, choice, and constructive suggestions cultivates trust and self-efficacy, thereby increasing OCB (Roche & Haar, 2013). Conversely, controlling feedback marked by surveillance or a punitive tone frustrates these needs and provokes defensive withdrawal, underscoring the pivotal role of feedback quality in promoting discretionary action (Grenier et al., 2024). Together, these findings clarify the motivational mechanisms that connect feedback style to citizenship outcomes.

Despite the progress already made, most workplace studies have relied on cross-sectional overviews that treat feedback as a onetime antecedent while failing to test how motivational states and citizenship behaviors coevolve across successive interactions (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Emerging practitioner evidence has suggested that autonomy-supportive coaching can sustain engagement among Generation Z sales professionals; however, such conclusions are based on short observation windows, failing to consider longer feedback cycles (Hart, 2025a). Conceptual research has thus called for longitudinal and dynamic designs that can be used to map the direction and strength of feedback loops, which requires analytic methods that can trace reciprocal influences over time (Jaakkola, 2020). Addressing this gap will enable scholars and practitioners to design feedback systems that systematically reinforce upward loops of need satisfaction and citizenship, as explored in the next section on organizational feedback loops.

Feedback Loops in Organizational Systems

Feedback loops are the regulatory circuits that allow open systems to convert experience into coordinated action, enabling organizations to improve on promising innovations or correct destabilizing deviations (Tuyen et al., 2024). Reinforcing loops compound earlier gains by building on prior responses, whereas balancing loops restore equilibrium when performance deviates from targets, making both mechanisms central to adaptive capability (Trippner-Hrabi et al., 2024). Classic inquiries into single- and double-loop learning have shown that managers sometimes correct errors without challenging underlying assumptions, thereby establishing maladaptive routines and underscoring the need to diagnose which loop is operating before prescribing change (Auqui-Caceres et al., 2023).

Citizenship behaviors often become self-driven because productive extra-role acts increase project quality and reputation, which then inspire colleagues to reciprocate, creating an upward loop of discretionary effort (Wang et al., 2018). A longitudinal simulation of challenge stress confirmed that employees continually recalibrate their effort when perceived demands deviate from desired levels, producing observable feedback cycles that shape job satisfaction and OCB trajectories (Chen et al., 2022). Field evidence from intensive onboarding programs has also introduced a temporal dimension, demonstrating that high-frequency, autonomy-supportive check-ins during the first 180 days accelerate mastery and reduce attrition, illustrating how feedback cadence can alter loop strength (Hart, 2025b).

Technical data are insufficient to close loops; relational processes determine whether information is trusted and acted upon. Two-way communication that invites sensemaking reduces resistance to change by signaling respect for employee voices (Daly

et al., 2003). When internal messaging is symmetrical, with leaders disclosing their intentions and listening attentively, engagement increases, and reinforcing loops are more likely to sustain positive momentum (Men et al., 2020). Organizations with strong feedback systems establish norms for asking, receiving, and applying input, ensuring that insights gained through monitoring are quickly transformed into shared learning rather than silenced discontent (London & Smither, 2002). The convergence of data, dialogue, and action thus determines whether feedback loops trigger cumulative gains in citizenship or spiral toward disengagement, establishing a foundation for the integration of motivational perspectives, as discussed in the next section.

Integrating Self-Determination Theory With Feedback Loop Perspectives

Feedback simultaneously serves as a psychological trigger and a structural regulator. Hence, the same exchange that satisfies or frustrates needs can also initiate the reinforcement or balancing of cycles within the wider system (Grenier et al., 2024; Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Recognizing this dual role is crucial because models that separate motivation from structure cannot explain why identical feedback practices sometimes yield opposite behavioral trajectories.

When employees receive informational guidance that offers them choices and a constructive challenge, they experience greater competence and autonomy, driving upward loops of change-oriented OCB (Zampetakis & Arvanitis, 2024). Continuous reflection and coaching, which are embedded in the SPIRIT model, illustrate how such autonomy-supportive exchanges transform individual realizations into improved collective performance, reinforcing the cycle with each iteration (Hart, 2025d; Olafsen & Deci, 2020).

The same dynamics operate in the opposite direction: Feedback perceived as demeaning or coercive frustrates psychological needs, prompting defensive withdrawal that causes supervisors to exert more control, accelerating a downward loop of disengagement (Grenier et al., 2024; McAnally & Hagger, 2024). If left unaddressed, these loops can turn momentary mistakes into entrenched patterns that erode citizenship and undermine system resilience. Ethical blindness exacerbates these downward loops, as leaders focused on external metrics may overlook the moral tone of their feedback, inadvertently rewarding behavior that conflicts with stated values (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2013; Johnson, 2025). Designing feedback systems thus requires considering embedded values and the motivational states they evoke.

Advancing this concept requires methodological pluralism that combines longitudinal designs with conceptual synthesis to capture reciprocal influences over time and across levels (Creswell, 2023; Jaakkola, 2020; Stringer & Aragón, 2021). This approach could help show how feedback quality, need satisfaction, and organizational citizenship coevolve, providing a stronger foundation for evidence-based interventions.

Methodology

We employed an integrative review design to develop a conceptual framework that combines feedback loops, self-determination theory, and OCB. This approach was selected because it allowed for synthesizing empirical and theoretical sources into a coherent explanatory model rather than merely summarizing prior findings (Creswell, 2023; Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019).

Searches were run on Scopus, Web of Science, ABI-INFORM, and Google Scholar. The Boolean string was ("feedback loop*" OR "performance feedback") AND ("organizational citizenship" OR "citizenship behavior") AND ("self-determination theory" OR "autonomy support"). Searches were limited to peer-reviewed items

published in English between 1990 and 2025. The automated search produced 145 records; duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts were screened, resulting in the selection of 48 items for full-text review. Twenty-two items met all inclusion criteria after quality assessment. Three seminal works identified through backward snowballing provided foundational anchoring, despite being published before the electronic era, while the remaining 19 items supplied contemporary evidence and were topically relevant (Snyder, 2019; Stringer & Aragón, 2021).

A single researcher conducted reflexive, theory informed thematic analysis rather than open coding, using SDT and LMX as sensitizing lenses while allowing inductive patterns to surface (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). No intercoder reliability was calculated; rigor was maintained through an audit trail, reflexive memos, and iterative codebook refinement (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Haq et al., 2023). Themes were interpreted against autonomy, competence, relatedness, and leader member relationship quality, avoiding predefined systems loop models (Deci et al., 2017; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015).

The Conceptual Model and Propositions

Building on the integrative review, we propose a conceptual model that explains how feedback quality and OCB interact by mutually reinforcing or mutually weakening cycles. The model comprises two primary loops and recognizes moderating factors.

The Autonomy-Supportive Loop

Structured, informational feedback that offers guidance, choice, and constructive commentary satisfies the need for autonomy and competence, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation and prompting employees to go beyond their formal role requirements (Olafsen & Deci, 2020). Onboarding studies have demonstrated that dialogue-based feedback, which invites questions and shared goal setting, accelerates learning and encourages voice behaviors, confirming that early autonomy support drives discretionary action (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Estok, 2022). These findings position supportive feedback as the initial catalyst in a virtuous cycle that links psychological need satisfaction to OCB.

As employees act on their increased motivation by helping colleagues, volunteering for additional tasks, or suggesting process improvements, supervisors interpret these behaviors as signals of commitment and respond with even more autonomy-supportive feedback, thereby reinforcing the upward loop (Hart, 2025b). Over successive iterations, this reciprocity fosters a climate of shared responsibility, where citizenship behaviors both reinforce and are reinforced by high-quality feedback, a dynamic supported by evidence that trust-based exchanges strengthen cooperative norms across teams (Roche & Haar, 2013).

Proposition 1: Autonomy-supportive feedback initiates an upward loop in which need satisfaction mediates the positive relationship between feedback quality and OCB. Subsequent displays of citizenship prompt supervisors to provide further autonomy-supportive feedback, thereby intensifying the loop.

The Controlling Loop

Feedback perceived as coercive, such as public reprimands, micromanagement, or unilateral directives that diminish autonomy and competence, reduces motivation and discourages discretionary effort (Gallagher, 2023). These toxic exchanges also erode psychological safety, prompting workers to withhold citizenship behaviors and

disengage from team learning (Johnson, 2025). Laboratory evidence has shown that need-frustrating cues trigger defensive withdrawal and decrease OCB, initiating a downward loop that distinguishes controlling cycles from those that support autonomy (Grenier et al., 2024).

Once citizenship decreases, supervisors often respond by increasing oversight, which employees perceive as greater control. This intensifies their need frustration and accelerates the loop toward attrition (McAnally & Hagger, 2024). Meta-analytic research on feedback culture has revealed that climates that emphasize compliance over dialogue exacerbate this pattern by discouraging upward voices and mutual adjustment, ultimately turning short-term corrections into long-term disengagement (Siswadi et al., 2023).

Proposition 2: Controlling feedback initiates a downward loop in which need frustration mediates the negative relationship between feedback quality and OCB, and reduced citizenship behaviors elicit increasingly controlling feedback from supervisors, strengthening the loop.

Moderating Factors

Leadership orientation dictates how feedback is interpreted and thus determines whether feedback loops increase or decrease discretionary effort (Men et al., 2020). Ethical leaders who model transparency, fairness, and humility increase psychological safety and the motivational benefits of autonomy-supportive exchanges (Johnson, 2025). Conversely, authoritarian directives suppress upward voices and accelerate the controlling loop by signaling that compliance is valued over dialogue (Gallagher, 2023).

The channel through which feedback is delivered also shapes relational warmth; for instance, synchronous video conversations preserve nonverbal cues and build trust in hybrid teams (Canca, 2020). In contrast, asynchronous dashboards may communicate data but seldom convey empathy, increasing the risk that employees will misinterpret messages intended to support autonomy (Estok, 2022). Two-way symmetrical communication offers a corrective by allowing for clarification and joint sensemaking, thereby strengthening reinforcement loops (Daly et al., 2003).

Structural routines such as scheduled check-ins, continuous improvement cycles, and structured onboarding give feedback loops a predictable cadence that fuels momentum (Cummings & Worley, 2015). Cultures that value feedback encourage employees to seek, process, and act on information rather than avoid it (London & Smither, 2002). A longitudinal onboarding study revealed that daily micro-sessions, followed by weekly discussions over the first six months of employment reduced early turnover and reinforced autonomy-supportive dynamics (Hart, 2025b).

These contingencies interact with organizational ethics because leaders who focus excessively on external metrics can overlook the moral tone their feedback conveys, inadvertently rewarding compliance at the expense of integrity (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2013). In contrast, leadership that involves clarifying ethical implications encourages exchanges that respect dignity and thus strengthen the autonomy-supportive loop (Johnson, 2025).

Proposition 3: High levels of psychological safety, ethical leadership, and symmetrical communication strengthen the autonomy-supportive loop while weakening the controlling loop, underscoring the moderating influence of context on feedback dynamics.

Discussion

In this paper, we advanced motivational and systems scholarship by positioning feedback as a dynamic mechanism that coevolves with discretionary behavior,

answering recent calls for longitudinal, cross-lagged work on self-determination theory and the extension of system dynamics models with need satisfaction variables (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Wang et al., 2018). By reframing feedback quality as a driver of reinforcing or balancing cycles, the model shifts the theoretical focus from onetime effects to recursive patterns that unfold over time and across levels.

The synthesis of communication and change literature revealed that feedback loops are effective only when formal structures, such as review cycles and improvement routines, are complemented by trusting, two-way dialogue (Cummings & Worley, 2015; Daly et al., 2003). Empirical illustrations of bottom-up collaboration have demonstrated that employees actively shape the loops that influence them, emphasizing agency rather than passive reception (Hart, 2025c).

Methodologically, we showed how integrative reviews can synthesize disparate avenues of research into a coherent framework, reinforcing the recommendation that conceptual synthesis is necessary for theory building (Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019). The structured search and coding protocol used herein offers a replicable path for scholars who wish to map complex, multilevel phenomena.

Practitioners can apply the insights provided in our paper by institutionalizing high-frequency, autonomy-supportive exchanges, beginning with daily micro-sessions during the first two weeks of employment and continuing with weekly dialogues through day 180, emphasizing reflection, a focus on behavior, and the co-creation of shared goals (Estok, 2022; Hart, 2025b). Combining such routines with warm, synchronous channels will nurture reciprocity and drive the upward loop of citizenship (Men et al., 2020).

Dashboards that track early indicators, such as time to proficiency and six-month retention, establish accountability. However, leaders must be mindful of the ethical tone of their metrics to ensure that efficiency targets do not inadvertently endorse controlling practices that reduce engagement (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2013; Gallup, 2024; Johnson, 2025).

Future research should test the model's propositions using longitudinal, mixed-methods designs to examine how feedback quality and organizational citizenship trajectories interact across sectors, cultures, and digital contexts (Creswell, 2023; Stringer & Aragón, 2021; Zampetakis & Arvanitis, 2024). Such studies would refine our understanding of motivational loops and equip organizations to cultivate environments where feedback and citizenship mutually reinforce sustained performance.

Conclusion

Autonomy-supportive feedback satisfies employees' need for competence and choice, initiating upward loops of OCB, while controlling interactions frustrate these needs and trigger withdrawal, underscoring the pivotal role feedback quality plays in shaping motivational trajectories. By combining self-determination theory with systems thinking, we recast feedback as a loop that coevolves with employee actions, offering a dual-loop framework that clarifies why similar practices can produce different outcomes. Thus, scholars are invited to view citizenship as both a cause and a consequence of relational exchanges.

Future investigations should adopt longitudinal, mixed-methods designs to track feedback and citizenship over time and across contexts, answering current calls for dynamic inquiries into workplace motivation. Conceptual synthesis techniques refined in recent methodological guides could provide a road map for extending the model and integrating emergent variables such as digital channel richness and the ethical climate. Rigorous testing of these concepts could increase theoretical precision and equip practitioners to build feedback ecosystems that nurture sustained engagement rather than brief compliance.

Acknowledgement

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