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Strengths-based performance conversations: a randomised trial in the UK civil service

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Strengths-based performance conversations: a randomized trial in the UK civil service

Abstract

Purpose

This study evaluates impacts of training managers in a strengths-based approach to performance conversations on the perceived utility of one-to-one meetings. It also investigates changes in meeting content and subjects' experiences to shed light on causal mechanisms of the intervention.

Design

A cluster randomized trial was conducted in two UK civil service organizations and a non-controlled before-after-study in a third civil service organization. The trial involved 8,843 managerial and non-managerial subjects; the impact evaluation uses data from 2,903 responses across two waves. Sixty-three intervention group subjects provided additional qualitative data.

Findings

The intervention positively affected employees' perceptions of the usefulness of performance conversations for learning and development. Evidence of a similar impact on job performance is weak. The content of conversations changed partly as hypothesized, increasing the focus on employee development and managerial support, but did not reduce emphasis on performance objectives. Improvements appear to be due both to mechanisms proposed by strengths-based theories and generic improvements in line-management relationships, supporting LMX theory.

Practical implications

Strengths-based conversations can add value in public sector contexts by focusing managers and their reports on how the latter optimally perform and foster supportive and developmental relationships. The strengths-based approach did not prompt a less target-driven approach, which may allay managerial concerns about adopting it. The study suggests a discrete training intervention is viable, but an integrated change program is likely to be more effective.

Originality

Prior evidence on the impact of strengths-based performance management practices is limited.

This study presents a large-scale field trial on this within a real-world public sector context and sheds light on causal mechanisms.

Keywords

performance management, strengths-based approaches, Feedforward Interview, performance appraisal, performance conversations

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1. Introduction

Systemic and regular performance management (PM) has long been regarded as a core function of management and central to achieving strategic goals (Aguinis, 2013). However, recent years have seen renewed debate over the effectiveness of its components, including goal setting, appraisal and feedback (Aguinis, 2013; Coens & Jenkins, 2002; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Schleicher, Baumann, Sullivan, & Yim, 2019). This is reflected in practitioner attitudes: despite their prevalence, most managers and HR professionals are dissatisfied with their PM systems (PMSs) (CIPD, 2017; Nankervis & Compton, 2006; SHRM, 2014) and questions prevail over their perceived usefulness (Linna, Elovainio, Van den Bos, Kivimäki, Pentti, & Vahtera, 2012). But whilst the case for overhauling PM is strong, there are gaps in empirical evidence on how PM practices can be improved (Murphy, 2020).

One approach adopted by various high-profile employers with the intent to improve PM (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015; Cappelli & Tavis, 2016; McCord, 2014) is to shift the emphasis from structured performance evaluation to more frequent and richer performance *conversations*. More specifically, a case has been made for performance conversations that take a less directive approach based on coaching (Murphy, 2020; Pulakos & O’Leary, 2011) and prioritize building strengths over fixing weaknesses (Kluger & Nir, 2010). This literature situates PM interactions within strengths-based theory (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Buckingham, 2013; Kluger & Nir, 2010) and a strongly relational perspective informed by leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kilroy, Dundon, & Townsend, 2023; Schyns & Day, 2010). To our knowledge, to date there are only two studies investigating performance outcomes of a strengths-based approach to performance conversations (Budworth, Latham, & Manroop, 2015; McDowall, Freeman, & Marshall, 2014) and none on whether it enhances the quality of manager-employee relationships as theorized.

This paper presents an organizationally contextualized field study of the scope and limitations of strengths-based performance conversations and how line management relationships change as a result. The main study is a partially randomized trial of a training-based intervention in the UK civil service, with outcome measures focused on the perceived usefulness of line management meetings and corresponding changes in the foci of conversation. This is supplemented by qualitative data from participants on the effects of the intervention. The paper contributes to PM theory by (1) evidencing the efficacy of strengths-based performance conversations as a central management practice and (2) providing evidence on its causal mechanisms. It also has managerial implications, drawing insights into the practical application of strengths-based PM.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Critiques of performance management

Appraisals involving periodic evaluation, rating and feedback on employees' performance are an established central component of PMSs, designed to be complemented by goal setting, learning and development opportunities and performance-related pay (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Levy & Williams, 2004). However, concerns over the effectiveness of appraisals are longstanding, dating back over 50 years (Kay & Meyer, 1965). Over the last decade, much debate has focused on overhauling PMSs. The grounds for this include that changes in remuneration strategies have made highly leveraged PM less relevant (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016) so PM is an inefficient use of management resource (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015). Others have gone as far as advocating that PM is ultimately ineffective (Murphy, 2020) and called for time bound regular appraisals to be abolished (Coens & Jenkins, 2002; Murphy, 2020).

A systematic review of unintended consequences of PM (Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018) identified categories including strategic behavior or gaming by employees, an illusion of control and impaired social relationships. Specific critiques levelled at PM include concern over the unreliability of performance assessments (Murphy, 2020), employee reactions to feedback and perceptions of

unfairness (Schleicher et al., 2019) and detriment to productive manager-employee relationships (Pichler, 2012).

2.2. Developmental approaches

One explanation for problems in PMSs lies in a central tension in the purpose for which they are used: as an administrative function, to distinguish between employees' performance to inform decisions on pay, promotion and retention; or as a developmental function, to inform employee development and improve performance (Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams, 1989). The intended purpose influences the application: compared to administrative appraisals, developmental appraisals tend to generate stricter assessments (Jawahar & Williams, 1997) and consider a wider range of both positive and negative aspects of performance (Pesta, Kass, & Dunegan, 2005). However, administrative PM is often the dominant form, which can stifle quality feedback for employee development (Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011).

Various authors have argued for making PM less administrative and more developmental, fostering richer performance conversations between managers and their reports and focusing less upon objective assessment and past performance and more on future improvement (Coens & Jenkins, 2002; Murphy, 2020; Pulakos & O'Leary, 2011). For example, Murphy (2020) has argued that evaluative feedback should be limited to when employees request it and 'performance leadership' should center on clarifying responsibilities and plans, coaching employees and supporting wellbeing.

2.3. Strengths-based approaches

A specific approach to developmental people management is a strengths-based approach rooted in appreciative inquiry (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Buckingham, 2013; Kluger & Nir, 2010). The premise is that people instinctively take a deficit-oriented approach to personal development, attempting to address perceived weaknesses, but more effective is to build on existing strengths

and apply them more widely. Focusing on instances of success, rather than failure or weakness, is regarded as more likely to identify and create conditions to improve future performance (Budworth, Latham and Manroop, 2015).

The most salient attempt at strengths-based PM is the Feedforward Interview (FFI) (Kluger & Nir, 2010). The broad steps are to: (1) focus attention on an example of the employee's work that went especially well ('Eliciting a success story'); (2) help them articulate and crystallize what they did to make this a success and other mediators or moderators that contributed ('Discovering your personal success code'); and (3) help them prioritize and plan activities so they can apply their success code more in the future ('The feedforward question'). Inherent in the FFI is an emphasis on enhancing future behavior and performance versus assessing the past (Budworth, Harrison, & Chummar, 2019), further reinforcing the developmental over the administrative aspect of PM.

Such strengths-based approaches to people management appear to be viable: a qualitative study evidenced it as actual management practice in assigning tasks and selecting employees during probation, although not in appraisal (Wijekuruppu, Coetzer, & Susomrith, 2021). There is evidence that they can potentially be transformational, facilitating positive behavioral change (Budworth, Latham and Manroop, 2015) for example, by encouraging job crafting behavior and positive work identities (Mansour, Mohanna, Tremblay, Vandenberghe, & Nogues, 2025).

2. 4. Leader-member exchange in performance conversations

Proponents of FFI also imply that it should enhance manager-report relationships, both "enabling both parties to feel more positive about themselves and about each other" and "fostering bonding" via mutual understanding and psychological safety (Kluger & Nir, 2010, pp. 235, 241). This relates to leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, which builds on social exchange theory to explain reciprocal relationships between leaders and employees. In the context of PM, whilst economic exchange infers reward associated with positive appraisals (Ambilichu, Akaighe, & Pepple, 2024),

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social exchange infers recognition and support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Schyns & Day, 2010) and may be strengthened by other factors, such as meaningful work (Anlesinya & Susomrith, 2025).

LMX argues that effective leaders build a detailed picture of employees, allowing them to better cater to employee needs with appropriate resources and rewards for their organizational contribution through their efforts, attitudes and knowledge (Afshan, Serrano-Archimi, & Akram, 2022). Further, different styles of line management have a strong influence upon reciprocity in line management relationships and thus employee performance (Kilroy, Dundon, & Townsend, 2023). Thus, beneficial styles include supporting employee development, including through coaching behaviors; in the context of regular interactions, these are argued to motivate and enable performance. Existing research suggests leadership styles influence the outcomes of PM: for example, an overly rigid application of PM can be perceived as unjust and prompt resignations (Lepistö & Lepistö, 2024); whereas transformational leadership reinforces the relationship between strong PMSs and innovative work behavior (Bauwens, Audenaert, & Decramer, 2024). Further, Van Woerkom and Kroon's (2020) observational study evidenced a relational dimension to strength-based appraisals, with improvements in perceived supervisor support and motivation to improve performance explained by a strength-based approach helping fulfil workers' need for relatedness.

2. 5. Research questions and hypotheses

To our knowledge, there are only two studies that assess the impact of strengths-based performance conversations using experimental design. McDowall, Freeman, and Marshall (2014) found that FFI was advantageous for developing self-efficacy (confidence in role tasks) and achieving goals, compared to traditional feedback ; and Budworth, Latham, and Manroop (2015) suggest that employees' job performance was rated higher if their managers had been trained in FFI four months prior. This study builds on this evidence by investigating the impact and mechanisms of a developmental strengths-based approach designed to improve the efficacy of

PM. The intervention is to take PM closer to “a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization” (Aguinis, 2013, pp. 2-3).

The overarching research questions are: (a) what is the impact of training managers in a strengths-based approach on the effectiveness of performance conversations or appraisals; and (b) what do changes in the nature or content of managerial conversations reveal about the causal mechanism of the intervention and how it shapes manager-report relationships.

Usefulness of performance conversations

Our investigation complements and extends existing studies in various ways, including the identification of *how* performance conversations change (in terms of ‘content’) and conducting investigation at a much larger scale, using a greater variety of methods. Utilizing the construct of perceived usefulness of PM (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Linna et al., 2012) we hypothesize:

H1: An intervention to foster managers’ use of a strengths-based approach will enhance the usefulness of performance conversations for (a) employees’ learning and development, and (b) employee performance.

Our second hypothesis considers whether greater impacts accrue from a more holistic organizational change program, where training is complemented by other development opportunities, better communication and changes to HR policy. For instance, Budworth, Latham, and Manroop (2015) trialed a 2.5-hour FFI training intervention and whilst such discrete training interventions have practical advantages, their success may be moderated by the wider organizational climate, including shared understanding of organizational policies, practices and norms (Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2013).

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H2: A holistic intervention centered on strengths-based performance conversations will have greater impact than a discrete training intervention.

Content of performance conversations

Within H1, there is an assumption that training content can be replicated by managers in the workplace, but this is not guaranteed and outcomes may be achieved in ways difficult to observe. For instance, following training in a strengths-based approach to PM, managers may not adopt the specific elements of the training, but instead make other potentially related changes – for example, taking a less directive approach, or discussing non-work topics – that also contribute to LMX and thus enhance performance.

To gauge the extent to which training in a strengths-based approach translates into workplace practice and understand by which mechanisms any benefits accrue, it is important to understand changes occurring within PM conversations. To unlock this ‘black box’ we first explore whether manager behaviors change in ways postulated by theory and training in strengths-based PM translates into PM conversations as intended. Although, as van Woerkom and de Bruijn (2016) note, a strengths-based approach to PM does not preclude discussion of underperformance, we can expect some shift of emphasis. Thus:

H3: A training intervention to foster strengths-based performance conversations results in (a) decreased discussion of performance targets; (b) increased focus on employee development; and (c) increased discussion of how managers can best support employees.

Secondly, we consider potential alternate behavior changes that may lead to improved reciprocal relations, but are not necessarily postulated by theory and modelled in strengths-based training:

H4: An intervention to foster strengths-based performance conversations results in: (a) decreased discussion of non-performance related work issues such as updates or plans; (b) increased discussion of non-work topics, such as social chat or challenges at home; and (c) increased discussion of employees work challenges.

We supplement these hypotheses with inductive enquiry into how a strengths-based approach to PM affects line manager relationships, and whether it helps create a 'zone of reciprocity' theorised by LMX to ensure effective PM (Kilroy, Dundon, & Townsend, 2023).

3. Methodology

This article presents a cluster randomized trial of two overlapping interventions designed to embed strengths-based performance conversations in real-world organizational settings. This was supplemented by qualitative interviews to shed further light on the intervention process.

3.1. Diagnostic research

The study was conducted in three large UK public sector organizations, including two administrative government bodies ('ADMIN1' and 'ADMIN2') and a department predominantly providing front-line public services ('SERV1'). ADMIN1 and SERV1 employed in the region of 40-60,000 employees each; ADMIN2 employed under 5,000 employees. To understand the organizational contexts and inform the study design at inception, we conducted diagnostic interviews and focus groups with 50 central civil servants and staff from participating organizations and secondary analysis of official documents. Data capture and analytic method were as described for *Implementation and process evaluation* (below). Table 2 presents a summary of respondents.

PM processes prior to intervention were broadly uniform across these organizations, as the central body Civil Service Learning (CSL) has responsibility for learning and development for all civil servants. This included the use of guided distribution performance ratings, implemented to prompt

greater differentiation in staff performance levels. In line with existing research (Schleicher et al., 2019) the consensus was that employees considered this approach unfair and responded negatively. Variations between the three organizations included the frequency of expected one-to-one meetings and performance reviews differing between, and within, organizations; and we also observed perceived differences in PM climate. In ADMIN1, one-to-one meetings were generally seen as developmental discussions and explorations of work issues; in ADMIN2 they were seen to be more focused on work and delivery than on the development of individuals; and conversations in the SERV1 tended to be more hands-on, addressing immediate performance issues, but also providing emotional support.

3.2. Interventions

Our study includes two overlapping interventions grounded in the theory discussed above:

specifically, attempting to embed a future-focused, strengths-based approach to performance conversations that reinforces positive LMX, yet still exists within a PM paradigm. Interventions were tailored to meet practical organizational concerns via consultation with employers. First, we designed a scalable half-day training workshop, adapted from Kluger and Nir (2010) to include the three steps of FFI, to advocate and develop manager capability in strengths-based performance conversations. This was delivered by professional facilitators in SERV1 and by staff through a train-the-trainer model in ADMIN1. Second, ADMIN2 conducted a wider intervention, in which the strengths-based intervention formed part of a holistic organization-wide change program. Other interventions within the program included: broader training workshops on PM, handling difficult conversations, the use of language, and unconscious bias; and changes to HR policy, including simplified objective setting and the removal of formal annual reviews including the guided distribution rating scale.

3.3. Impact evaluation sample and procedure

To minimize bias in assessing impact, we conducted a cluster randomized controlled trial of the FFI training intervention in SERV1 and ADMIN1. Thirty-seven business units in ADMIN1 and SERV1 were grouped within 11 strata (organizational divisions and geographical areas) and randomly allocated to treatment or control. Randomization was clustered to avoid contamination effects from intervention to control. This was supplemented by a non-controlled before-after study of the holistic intervention within ADMIN2, where randomization was not possible because all staff underwent the change program. The ADMIN2 study is thus observational not experimental, but we use the ADMIN1 and SERV1 intervention groups to provide some comparison. The study involved 8,843 subjects across managerial and non-managerial roles, including 4,533 employees from ADMIN1, 2,810 from SERV1; and 1,500 from ADMIN2.

To assess intervention impacts, an online survey of employees was conducted across treatment and control groups, at baseline prior to intervention and four months later in ADMIN1 and SERV1, and at baseline and ten months later in ADMIN2.

3.4. Measures

A bespoke survey questionnaire was developed by the researchers in consultation with HR managers in the participating organizations, tested for face validity with peers and managers in the organizations. For our primary outcomes, we utilized the construct of perceived usefulness of PM, which assumes that employees subject to PM practices can make a valid judgement about the extent to which they are useful or not for different aspects of their work (Brett & Atwater, 2001; Linna et al., 2012). Drawing on Linna et al's (2012) measure of the perceived usefulness of PM, we developed two items on the utility of PM meetings for employees' (a) learning and development

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and (b) performance.¹ To assess changes that occurred within PM conversations, we analyzed employees' accounts and developed items on the frequency with which PM meetings covered various topics, including employees' performance, development and needs, other organizational information, and non-work topics.²

3.5. Analytic strategy

Outcome measures were taken from ~~reports-employees~~ regarding their meetings with their managers, rather than from the managers ~~themselves~~, who underwent the intervention group training. ~~to thus~~ avoiding the risk of self-reporting bias from ~~training managers' participants'~~ intentions to implement their ~~learn~~training. However, managerial employees were surveyed about their meetings with their own managers and the clustered nature of the trial meant intervention group managers would have been aware that their managers also underwent the training, making blinding impossible and introducing the risk of detection bias (Higgins, Savović, Page, Elbers, & Sterne, 2021). To counter this, our analysis controlled for whether respondents were themselves managers.

To investigate the four hypotheses, our analysis first combines the randomized and non-randomized elements of our study to maximize the power of the analysis, before isolating only the randomized element of the study. We estimate impacts using logit regression models with binary dependent variables.³ Regression allows us to accommodate concerns that differences in ~~the~~ observed characteristics of ~~the non-randomized part of the study~~ADMIN2 employees, compared to ~~ADMIN1 and SERV1 employees in the control group~~, may drive findings.

¹ Survey questions: 'My meetings with my line manager help me learn and develop as a professional'; 'My meetings with my line manager help to improve my performance' [5-point scale: strongly agree to strongly disagree].
² Example item: 'In general, how often do you typically discuss the following with your line manager? My progress towards explicit performance objectives' [8-point scale 'Never' to 'Several times a week'].
³ Binary variables split between: 'strongly agree' or 'agree'; and 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'

3. 6. Implementation and process evaluation

Drawing on the principles of realist evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) the quantitative evaluation was supplemented by a qualitative implementation and process evaluation (IPE). Within the experimental groups in ADMIN1 and SERV1, post-intervention focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand experiences and opinions of managerial and non-managerial employees. The focus groups were conducted online, separately for line managers and non-managers to avoid power dynamic bias. The qualitative enquiry centered on respondents' views of performance conversations and PM in general and of the strengths-based approach, including which aspects worked well or poorly. Participants were also asked to contextualize their views on the nature of jobs and performance in their teams and the PM climate within their organizations. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. Data were thematically analyzed using Excel in two main stages, first using the pre-intervention interview data, and later building on this using the post-intervention IPE data. The coding scheme was developed based on literature and scoping conversations with participating organizations. Codes were then validated, expanded, collapsed or amended through an iterative process, based on interview transcripts.

4. Results

4. 1. Response and demographics

Across two waves of the survey, we obtained 2,903 usable responses (16% response rate). Table 1 presents data from the Civil Service People Survey (CabinetOffice, 2016) confirming that the demographics of subjects are broadly representative of the UK civil service as a whole, with the exception that employees with disabilities are overrepresented; and shows areas where the post-intervention response rate is significantly different to that at baseline. Post-intervention, we conducted 16 focus groups and interviews with a total of 63 respondents in ADMIN1 and SERV1 experimental groups (see Table 2 for respondent detail).

[Table 1 about here]

[Table 2 about here]

4. 2. **Impact on the usefulness of performance conversations**

To inform the debate on the administrative and developmental functions of PM, we begin by estimating two logit regression models with binary dependent variables: employees’ responses on whether meetings with their line managers helped them (a) to learn and develop and (b) to improve their performance. Table 3 first presents results of a basic model that combines all ADMIN2 employee responses (the non-randomized component) with those of the treatment groups in ADMIN1 and SERV1 and compares to employee responses in ADMIN1 and SERV1 control groups.⁴ It then presents findings only from the randomized element of our quantitative study and finally, shows results for a model controlling for whether or not a respondent is a manager. As discussed previously, this counters a variety of concerns, especially detection bias relating to the fact that intervention group managers received FFT training themselves and would know that their managers also received the training.

[Table 3 about here]

Estimates from the ‘basic model’ for all organizations indicate that treatment group respondents reported significantly higher levels of agreement with both statements than control group respondents, providing initial support for H1: they were (a) 9.7 percentage points (ppts) more likely to report a positive response regarding learning and development (equivalent to Cohen’s $d=.22$); and (b) 7.4 ppts more likely regarding improving performance ($d=.18$). The ‘Manager model’ for all organizations appears to push the data to its limits, with neither of the coefficient estimates

⁴ Marginal effects for the coefficients of interest from these estimates translate into percentage point differences.

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4 statistically significant. For the perceived usefulness of conversations for learning and
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6 development, this null result seems to be driven by a fall in degrees of freedom for our findings, as
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8 we observe little change in parameter estimates and confidence intervals; but with regards the
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10 usefulness of conversations for performance, the change in estimates questions our support for
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12 this element of H1. Thus, these findings provide support that the 'discrete' FFI training intervention
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14 (SERV1 and ADMIN1) changed manager behaviors in a way that enhanced the usefulness of
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16 performance conversations for H1(a) employees' learning and development; but that this is not
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18 necessarily true for H1(b) employee performance.
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23 The findings provide initial evidence, in partial support of H2, that to achieve the desired impacts, a
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25 more holistic intervention is preferable to a discrete training intervention. We infer that ADMIN2
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27 employees, who were subject to the holistic intervention, were more likely to see positive outcomes
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29 relating to performance (H1b), as this sub-sample drives findings in the 'basic model' for all
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31 organizations. However, more research is needed on H2, as the statistical results are not
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33 conclusive, and we cannot confidently rely on the unrandomized part of our study.
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36 37 38 **4.3. Changes in the content of PM conversations**

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40 Table 4 presents findings from eight separate logit regression models, each with binary dependent
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42 variables that compare responses from employees on the content of meetings with their line
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44 managers, allowing us to test whether the FFI training had a significant impact on these outcome
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46 measures for employees of trained managers ('treatment group'), relative to employees whose
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48 managers did not receive the training ('control group'). The first four rows present the findings from
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50 the four regressions that provide insight into key aspects of Hypothesis 4.
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54 We see no significant difference between treatment and control groups in the change of frequency
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56 of discussion of 'progress towards explicit performance objectives' and thus reject H3(a). This
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58 suggests the FFI training did not change manager behaviors wholly as envisaged. However, our
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findings show clear intervention group impacts on the discussion of employee skill development needs and career ambitions, and how managers can support staff in their job role, in support of H3(b) and H3(c). Relative to the control group employees, treatment groups saw significant increases in discussion of career or development ambitions (17.4 pts), their skills development needs (12.6 pts) and how managers can support their job roles (8.9 pts).

[Table 4 about here]

Regarding areas of reciprocal relations that are not covered by FFI and appreciative inquiry, we find no significant results the frequency of discussion of non-performance related work issues, such as updates, and work-related challenges, leading us to reject H4(a) and H4(c). However, we find that treatment groups were significantly (9.5 pts) more likely than control groups to report increased discussion of ‘Any challenges I am facing in my personal life’, although there was no significant difference in the incidence of non-job-related chat. This leads us to partially accept H4(b).

4. 4. **Implementation and process evaluation**

Within the qualitative component, the thematic analysis generated 17 themes grouped into five dimensions (see Table 5). While much of the coding followed the structure envisaged at the outset, some themes emerged during the diagnostic research (notably, *Guided distribution policy* and *Isolated intervention*) and some emerged through the **implementation and process evaluation (IPE)** analysis (*Time to talk*, *Challenging conversations* and *Tone or approach of conversations*). Below we present the IPE data, providing insights into employees’ views and experiences of the intervention and related contextual issues.

[Table 5 about here]

Our findings on H3(b) and H3(c) are reflected in the qualitative data, which evidenced changes in meetings in line with LMX, including increased support for development and employee involvement, fostering a “zone of reciprocity”. For instance, an ADMIN1 manager commented on changes to performance meetings thus:

‘It’s been really, really positive. I mentioned about my manager, she’s very much focused on... what I’ve done really, really well. There might be a couple of things in there that aren’t on track, but you do come out of it thinking, “I’m playing my part and I’m making a contribution to the business.” ... I have to say, it’s the culture that we’ve moved into. ... don’t like to say it’s inclusive, but it is. They’re very open, the communication’s there. There’s a lot of discussion ... I feel awful when I’m decrying the previous line of business, but it wasn’t there ... you were expected to do a lot, but you didn’t see it happening at the top. Whereas now, the culture [is] ... “Yes, we’re in it together.” That’s been driven by my manager, but that’s also been driven by my manager’s manager.’ (Manager, ADMIN1)

Similarly, focus group participants evidenced a more developmental focus following the intervention and a greater ability of managers to build a detailed picture of individual employees where they better understood employee needs, as suggested by LMX. One manager recounted:

‘[There was] one particular conversation where I thought to myself, “I wouldn’t have had that had it not been for the workshop.” It was probably my only real strength-based conversation where I said to a member of my team, “I noticed you were really, really enthusiastic. When you do this kind of work you’re really enthusiastic, and I wonder if there’s some kind of way we could get that enthusiasm over into this bit of work here. How could we do that?” We did have a very interesting conversation that turned out, in the end, with them saying to me

they've got a bit of a problem with personal time management. That they respond really well to deadlines, and the bit of work over here was all about really sharp deadlines and the bit of work over here, well, there weren't any, and that's why they couldn't get excited about it. So, I think the strength-based conversations uncovered something quite interesting about their personality and a, sort of, development need that I wouldn't have got to otherwise.' (Manager, ADMIN1)

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest performance conversations had improved in the ways suggested by LMX, although not always as suggested by strengths-based theory: in particular, by making PM less bureaucratic, which is not an explicit intention of FFI. For example, one ADMIN1 manager argued that the intervention had improved the end-of-year appraisal process, previously experienced as an 'energy-sapping fraught process', in which employees provided 'reams and reams' of evidence and 'horse trading' took place in validation meetings. This manager regarded the strengths-based approach to performance conversations contributing to a much easier process. This is important when considering the likely transmission mechanisms from FFI training to PM conversations, and ultimately to performance outcomes. In general, we observe improvements in managerial attitudes towards the PM process and it is possible that this may change conversations in a way that is not fully captured in the quantitative findings. For instance,

'I remember coming away from it feeling good. Sort of, feeling refreshed. So, although a lot of the concepts were not new to our service, it was a good refresher, and invigorating.' (Manager, SERV1)

'Definitely, much nicer meetings. Don't get me wrong; you still have to address many issues ... [but] my team do look forward to it and they ask me when the next meeting is going to be.' (Manager, ADMIN1)

Finally, a small number of employees held negative views of the strengths-based approach as practiced. For example, one employee suggested review meetings were 'pointless' unless employees were not meeting targets; another regarded their manager's use of a strengths-based approach as 'patronizing' and little more than 'buzzwords'. No intervention will be universally successful or applied with universal consistency. Nonetheless, this may help explain our null findings on H1(b) on employee performance.

5. Discussion

Synthesis of findings

This study provides new evidence that a strengths-based training intervention for managers can increase the usefulness of PM for the organization (Linna et al., 2012). The study strengthens the empirical basis of strengths-based PM, within which experimental evidence has previously been sparse (Budworth, Latham, & Manroop, 2015; McDowall, Freeman, & Marshall, 2014). It also sheds new light on outcomes from strengths-based interventions and the managerial behaviors that drive change, triangulated through quantitative and qualitative data. It does so in the context of the UK civil service, a sector lacking in evidence on this topic.

Specifically, the findings suggest that, as hypothesized, FFI-based training changed manager behaviors in a way that supported employees' learning and development. There was no generalized improvement in the perceived utility of PM meetings for employee performance, and not in the context of a discreet training intervention, but it seems likely such an improvement occurred in the context of a more holistic organizational change program in which training was complemented by changed HR policy, communications and other training. This finding relies on the non-randomized part of our study and thus should be considered with caution.

We find evidence managers changed their behaviors in ways that were, and some that were not, promoted by FFI training or envisaged by appreciative inquiry theory. The apparent impact on

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learning and development can be explained by meetings increasingly focused on managerial support, as well as employee skills development needs and career ambitions. However, a curious non-impact is that we did not observe a decrease in discussion of progress towards explicit performance objectives, as hypothesized; that is, a shift away from traditional PM foci, along with increased focus on development and strengths. Another interesting finding is that changes to performance conversations were not all in the ways suggested by the FFI training, also including less specific improvements in line-management relationships. Overall, relationships improved due to changes in managerial behavior through mechanisms aligned with LMX theory, notably building a detailed picture of each individual employee, allowing managers to better understand needs, provide support and allocate resources.

Implications for theory

This study extends evidence that a strengths-based approach (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Kluger & Nir, 2010) is practically viable (Wijekuruppu, Coetzer, & Susomrith, 2021), can foster performance-focused employee behaviors (Mansour et al., 2025) and can enhance PM (Budworth, Latham, & Manroop, 2015; McDowall, Freeman, & Marshall, 2014). More broadly, the study builds on existing evidence that leadership styles in PM affect employee behavior (Bauwens, Audenaert, & Decramer, 2024; Lepistö & Lepistö, 2024) and supports arguments for focusing PM on rich performance conversations enabled by quality leadership and a coaching style which emphasizes employee support and development, rather than prioritizing structure in performance appraisals as per ‘traditional’ approaches (Coens & Jenkins, 2002; Murphy, 2020; Pulakos & O’Leary, 2011). This is further corroborated by evidence provided on the causal mechanism of FFI: namely that the increased usefulness of PM is partly explained by increased focus within meetings on skill development and career ambitions.

In addition, the study evidences an additional element in the causal mechanism of strengths-based PM, namely an increased focus on managerial support and employees’ personal challenges. It is

noteworthy that the increased discussion of non-workplace issues was specific to challenges and did not extend to 'non-job-related chat (e.g. personal activities, interests or relationships)', suggesting no general move towards informality. These findings are somewhat blurred but may reflect that personal lives were increasingly seen as valid topics of conversation within a supportive line management relationship. These findings point to reciprocity being a factor driving observed improvements in PM, in line with LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Kilroy, Dundon, & Townsend, 2023) yet not in a way that is anticipated by FFI and appreciative inquiry theory.

Taken together, our evidence suggests that PM should be understood and researched not only in its component parts, but as an integrated set of practices that are applied within the social context of line management relationships, which vary from case to case in being generally positive or negative, strong or weak, supportive, directive and focused on accountability or development.

Our finding that a strengths-based approach did not detract from a focus on performance objectives is in line with van Woerkom and de Bruijn's (2016) argument that strengths-based PM is compatible with redressing underperformance. Our findings do not indicate whether line managers balance the dual foci of development and performance *within* individual meetings or *across* them (with some meetings being administrative and others developmental) but they do appear able to work towards both purposes (Cleveland, Murphy, & Williams, 1989; Jawahar & Williams, 1997).

Implications for practice

This study has clear implications for practitioners looking to overcome challenges in PM. It suggests that the strengths-based intervention's potential lies in supporting employee learning and development, on which it had a small ($d=.22$) but significant effect. The effect holds despite qualitative findings illustrating that some employees felt frustrated by what they viewed as an irrelevant intervention. The effect is explained both by the adoption of an appreciative approach and by managers developing their understanding of individual employees and strengthening LMX.

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Our evidence that the approach directly improves employee performance per se is weak, but in supporting employee development and LMX, an indirect, weaker contribution to performance is possible.

Related, the study provides useful insights for managing the organizational politics of PM.

Practitioners are likely to perceive risk in moving towards strengths-based approaches from more formal and prescribed PM processes. Our qualitative findings found some employees lamented reduced discussion of targets or objectives, but the quantitative evaluation found that a strengths-based intervention did not lead to a general move towards informality or a lesser focus on performance and was not detrimental to the usefulness of PM conversations for performance. Thus, managers appear to be able to balance a developmental strengths-based approach with a maintained focus on performance, which goes some way to allay fears that it may lead managers to lose influence on setting targets. This narrative underlines the potential for complementarity between developmental and administrative PM, as both require managers to have an accurate understanding of individual employees.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

We identify several study limitations. First, the interventions were fundamentally grounded in existing management theory but were also adapted to perceived organizational needs. We thus made a trade-off between theoretical rigor and precise interventions on the one hand and contextual relevance through co-creation with participants on the other. Second, due to organizational constraints, the research design in ADMIN2 was non-experimental, limiting the rigor of our findings into a holistic multifaceted intervention. Third, practical data limitations meant that learning- and performance-related outcomes were measured through perceptual self-reported data rather than more objective measures. Fourth, the response rate suggests that non-response bias is likely to create unknown error in the results; however, the use of before-and-after measures and regression-based approaches mitigates these concerns. We recommend that future research

consider designs that can differentiate impacts of holistic integrated change programs compared to discrete (e.g. training-based) interventions. This is especially relevant given that a strengths-based approach to PM can have impacts beyond the specific intended design, including broader aspects of line management relationships.

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Tables

Table 1: Respondent Demographics at T1 and T2 (all organizations) compared to the UK Civil Service as a whole.

Gender	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
Male	47%	53%	46%	-4.2046	0.0000***
Female	53%	47%	54%		
N	242301	1640	1965		
Ethnicity	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
White British	90%	92%	93%	-1.044	0.2966
BAME	10%	8%	7%		
N	245525	985	1893		
Age	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
Mean age ^x	37.51	38.34	41.46	-7.7126	0.0000***
N	235238	1625	1895		
Sexual orientation	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)

Heterosexual	96%	94%	95%	0.5483	0.5835
LGBT+	4%	6%	5%		
N	237214	960	1858		
Disability	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
Yes	13%	23%	23%	0.0151	0.5835
No	87%	77%	77%		
N	251494	970	1818		
Childcare responsibilities	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
Yes	34%	31%	32%	-0.6862	0.4927
No	66%	69%	68%		
N	255966	1054	1979		
Carer of someone with disability	CSPS	Baseline	Wave 2	T	p (two-tailed)
Yes	24%	28%	29%	-0.9128	0.3614
No	76%	72%	71%		
N	255844	1039	1959		

Notes. t-tests shown for differences between baseline and wave two. ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.10. Civil Service People Survey (CSPS) data shown for reference (CabinetOffice, 2016). *Mean age mean calculated from minimum of age ranges in categorical variable; comparison between trial data and CSPS data are indicative due to differing categories.

Table 2: Interview and focus group respondent characteristics for the diagnostic stage and implementation and process evaluation (IPE)

Research phase	Organization and interview type	Job type	Female	Male	Total
Diagnostic	Civil service interview	HR leader		1	1
	Civil service focus groups	HR policy consultants	1	1	2
		Trade unions		2	2
	ADMIN1 interviews	Senior and HR leaders	2	1	3
	ADMIN1 focus groups	HR leaders	2	0	2
		Managers#1	3	1	4
		Managers#2	2	2	4
		Non-managers#1	4	1	5
		Non-managers#2	1	2	3
	ADMIN2 interviews	Senior and HR leaders	3	3	6
	ADMIN2 focus group	Non-managers	4	0	4
	SERV1 interviews	Senior and HR leaders	2	2	4
	SERV1 focus groups	Managers	1	2	3
		Non-managers	4	3	7
	Total leaders/managers		16	15	31
	Total non-managers		13	6	19
	Total respondents		29	21	50
IPE	ADMIN1 focus groups	Managers#1	5	1	6
		Managers#2	2	3	5
		Managers#3	0	2	2
		Managers#4	4	4	8
		Non-managers#1	1	4	5
		Non-managers#2	4	2	6
		Non-managers#3	1	2	3

		Non-managers#4	5	3	8
	SERV1 interviews	Managers	2	2	4
	SERV1 focus groups	Managers#1	3	2	5
		Managers#2	2	0	2
		Managers#3	1	3	4
		Non-managers	3	2	5
	Total managers		19	17	36
	Total non-managers		14	13	27
	Total respondents		33	30	63

Table 3: Coefficient estimates for ‘My meetings with my line manager (i) help me learn and develop as a professional’ and (ii) ‘...help to improve my performance’

<i>Learn and develop:</i>	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P> z	95% CI		dx/dy	N (treat)	N (control)	N (total)
Basic model: all organizations	0.404	0.171	2.37	0.018	0.069	0.740	0.097**	1,828	1,075	2,903
Basic model: ADMIN1 & SERV1 ^{xx}	0.290	0.178	1.62	0.104	-0.060	0.640	0.070	1,426	1,075	2,501
Manager model: all organizations ^x	0.282	0.174	1.62	0.105	-0.059	0.623	0.068	1,828	1,075	2,903
<i>Improve performance:</i>										
Basic model: all organizations	0.319	0.173	1.85	0.065	-0.019	0.659	0.074*	1,825	1,073	2,898
Basic model: ADMIN1 & SERV1 ^{xx}	0.287	0.181	1.59	0.113	-0.067	0.643	0.067	1,422	1,073	2,495
Manager model: all organizations ^x	0.195	0.176	1.11	0.267	-0.149	0.540	0.045	1,828	1,075	2,903

Note: Marginal effects show interaction effects between survey wave (baseline versus post-intervention) and experimental group (control versus treatment). Models control for organization with ^x added control for whether respondent is a line manager. ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.10.

Table 4: Coefficient estimates for ‘topics respondents discussed with their line managers once a month or more’

	Coef.	Std. Err.	Z	P> z	95% CI		dx/dy	N (treat)	N (control)	N (total)
H3a) Progress towards explicit performance objectives	0.171	0.179	0.95	0.341	-0.181	0.524	0.041	1,822	1,074	2,896
H3b) Skills development needs	0.517	0.180	2.86	0.004	0.162	0.872	0.126***	1,812	1,070	2,882

H3b) Career or development ambitions	0.712	0.185	3.84	0.000	0.348	1.076	0.174***	1,817	1,065	2,882
H3c) Manager support for job role	0.422	0.184	2.29	0.022	0.061	0.783	0.089**	1,821	1,070	2,891
H4a) Updates on activity or plans for the dept/organization	-0.059	0.189	-0.31	0.753	-0.432	0.312	-0.011	1,821	1,066	2,887
H4b) Non-job-related chat	0.273	0.191	1.43	0.154	-0.102	0.648	0.050	1,817	1,070	2,887
H4b) Challenges in personal life	0.384	0.177	2.17	0.030	0.036	0.731	0.095**	1,816	1,069	2,885
H4c) Challenges in job role	0.197	0.198	1.00	0.319	-0.191	0.585	0.034	1,821	1,067	2,888

Note: Marginal effects show interaction effects between survey wave (baseline versus post-intervention) and experimental group (control versus treatment). Model controls for organization and whether respondent a line manager. ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.10.

Table 5: Dimensions and themes from qualitative analysis

Dimension	Themes	Example quotes
Performance and development demands	Performance issues & variation	<i>'I've found myself having to ... not just manage performance, but also manage people emotionally... Because ... [it's a workplace] that is quite stark, that's got a lot of challenges.'</i> (Manager, SERV1)
	Learning & development	<i>'The more experienced staff in the office are leaving... So, we're struggling to find mentors for new people who have started'. (Non-manager, ADMIN1)</i>
Usefulness of PM	Performance management practice	<i>'It's about instilling that confidence and having a bit of faith in their abilities to perform their roles effectively, as well, while encouraging the areas of development where I feel that there might be some weaknesses.'</i> (Manager, SERV1)
	Guided distribution policy	<i>'I think it has driven a culture of a bit of a fear, that people feel afraid to challenge and fear that they go in and collect loads and loads of evidence.'</i> (Senior manager, ADMIN2)
Attitudes to and content of performance discussions	Time to talk	<i>'I think people shy away from performance management because it's so time-consuming to do it [and] I think there's very little time.'</i> (Manager, SERV1)
	Challenging conversations	<i>"Does work feature in any of this?" "No." ... and you just think, "This meeting was supposed to be about your performance."' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Deficit orientation	<i>'If there's [targets] that I'm not meeting, [1-2-1s] can be helpful. ... If you're meeting all the targets I think it's pointless.'</i> (Non-manager, ADMIN1)
Intervention	Intervention relevance	<i>'It is making them think about what's happened in that last month, what help they need, support they need, anything that's gone really well. It's putting the onus on them as well, because ...</i>

		<i>they do have to take some responsibility, don't they?' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Intervention quality	<i>'The trainers were honest enough to say, "We only got the training on how to deliver this last week," ... it was all rushed in.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Isolated intervention	<i>'Given that it was all going to take place in the context of a performance management system that may well have been changing anyway, it's difficult to buy into that and understand what's the point.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
Impact on managers	Attitudes & understanding	<i>'Before, the line of business was very much focused on a stick to beat you with... It was a numbers game... Quality didn't come into it. So, when we did the workshop it was a bit of a, "Oh, this is different. We've gone back to appreciative inquiry," which we'd done years previously.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Behavior	<i>'It was being put forward as being something which was quite different in what we were doing. To me ... it seemed to be, at most, more a difference in emphasis.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i> <i>'Immediately afterwards I was more conscious about how I was addressing one person in my team and more positive about his strengths. I can very easily hone in on his weaknesses. Sometimes his weaknesses really annoy me.' (Manager, SERV1)</i>
Changes in meetings	Frequency of discussing issues	<i>'I suppose I've found myself exploring more things with them and getting them to open up and look at themselves, which I found has been quite positive.' (Manager, SERV1)</i>
	Tone or approach of conversations	<i>'Definitely, much nicer meetings. Don't get me wrong; you still have to address many issues ... [but] my team do look forward to it and they ask me when the next meeting is going to be.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Relationships in line management	<i>'... the culture where I am now is that, "Yes, we're in it together." That's been driven by my</i>

		<i>manager, but that's also been driven by my manager's manager.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
Impact on employees	Impact on development	<i>'We did have a very interesting conversation that turned out ... That they respond really well to deadlines ... and the bit of work over here, well, there weren't any, and that's why they couldn't get excited about it. So, I think the strengths-based conversations uncovered something quite interesting about their personality and a, sort of, development need that I wouldn't have got to otherwise.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>
	Impact on performance	<i>'I would say since we've been on this trial, that I found the conversations to be a lot more productive.' (Manager, ADMIN1)</i>

Strengths-based performance conversations: a randomized trial in the UK civil service

JOEPP-11-2024-0562_R3 reviewer comments & author response

February 2026

The authors would like to thank Reviewer 1 for these additional comments, all of which we find helpful and take on board. Our responses to specific points are below. Changes in the revised document are highlighted in red font.

Reviewer 1 comments	Author response
1. The introduction sounds much better now. Please note, however, that your third contribution is not a theoretical contribution, but rather managerial implications, which should be stated separately. You could also be more explicit about how your research “evidences the efficacy of strengths-based performance conversations”: through what specific mechanisms, and which causal processes do you provide evidence for?	We have made this clarification. New text: “... It also has managerial implications, drawing insights into the practical application of strengths-based PM.”
2. On page 11, you mention that “Our study includes two overlapping interventions grounded in the theory discussed above”. Please specify precisely which theory you are referring to here, as your framework draws on several theories (e.g. PM, strengths-based approach, LMX theory?	It is a combination of these theories; we have made this clear. New text: “Our study includes two overlapping interventions grounded in the theory discussed above: specifically, attempting to embed a future-focused, strengths-based approach to performance conversations that reinforces positive LMX, yet still exists within a PM paradigm.”
3. Please clarify what the IPE abbreviation stands for.	This is already explained on p.14 and in the Table 2 heading (p.15) as “implementation and process evaluation (IPE)”. We believe this is probably adequate clarification, but in the case of doubt later on, we have now added the same to p.17.

4. You write on p. 19 that “performance conversations had improved the ways suggested by LMX, although not always as suggested by strengths-based theory”. This statement is unclear: what exactly does LMX theory predict that your findings confirm, or what does strengths-based theory suggest that is not supported by your findings?	The following example in the text explains this through illustration. We now link the statement you highlight to this more clearly. New text: “...although not always as suggested by strengths-based theory: in particular, by making PM less bureaucratic, which is not an explicit intention of FFI. For example,...”
5. Regarding the dimensions and themes in Table 5, I would suggest using terminology that is consistent with the language in your findings. The first theme, Organizational context, is very broad and could be divided in a way that better aligns with the theoretical framework. In the Findings section, I noted the following themes: usefulness of PM, content of performance discussions, changes in meetings, managerial attitudes, and employee attitudes. Aligning the terminology across sections would make your story more coherent.	Thank you for this suggestion. We have separated out the broad dimension of “Organizational context” into three more specific dimensions: “Performance and development demands”; “Usefulness of PM”; and “Attitudes to and content of performance discussions” [attitudes and content were clearly intertwined in the qualitative interviews, so we have not tried to separate them here]. We have also changed the dimension label “Impact on performance conversations” to “Changes in meetings”. We already identify managerial attitudes under “Impact on managers: Attitudes & understanding; Behavior” so have kept this the same.