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Feedback Loops and Early Employee Outcomes: Engagement, Retention, and Proficiency During the First 180 Days

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Abstract: Reciprocal feedback loops within the first 180 days of employment influence onboarding quality, predict retention and shape engagement trajectories. Synthesis of current literature reveals that feedback delivered frequently, in conjunction with psychological safety and digital support, accelerates learning and reduces turnover. High-frequency, two-way exchanges compress time to proficiency and reinforce role clarity. Digital tools enhance message salience, while leadership style moderates effectiveness. Organizations can institutionalize structured, reciprocal feedback to secure early commitment and ensure ongoing support. Findings support embedding these practices into organizational talent management systems to enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover, and improve operational outcomes.

Keywords: onboarding, feedback loop, employee engagement, retention, first 180 days



Introduction

The first 180 days of employment constitute a formative period in which new hires assess organizational support, establish role clarity, and form early judgments about whether to remain (Gallup, 2024). During this onboarding window, employees are especially attuned to supervisory behaviors that convey inclusion, value, and responsiveness. Feedback is a primary vehicle through which these perceptions are shaped, and the frequency, tone, and reciprocity of early performance conversations strongly influence employee engagement and retention trajectories (Alder, 2023; Cate, 2020). Notably, onboarding is no longer viewed as an administrative phase but rather as a strategic intervention point that correlates with long-term organizational commitment and productivity (Estok, 2022; Gallagher, 2023).

Modern talent systems are increasingly integrating structured feedback exchanges to accelerate time to proficiency, reduce early attrition, and foster psychological engagement (Gallup, 2024; Johnson, 2025). However, the quality of these exchanges varies widely by leadership style, digital modality, and organizational culture. Whereas two-way feedback loops create space for clarification, voice, and co-construction of role expectations, unidirectional or delayed feedback may erode psychological safety and raise exit intentions—particularly for early-career employees in hybrid settings (Canca, 2020; Speranza, 2021). Feedback thus serves a dual function: it is both a learning mechanism and a cultural signal of whether inquiry, growth, and shared accountability are truly welcomed (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Estok, 2022). These frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how mutual obligation and reciprocal communication foster trust, clarity, and long-term commitment.

Research on employee engagement has consistently shown that Generation Z and younger Millennials report lower levels of workplace engagement than prior cohorts, underscoring the urgency of implementing robust early-cycle communication practices (Gallup, 2024). This generational dynamic intersects with technological shifts in how feedback is delivered, often via asynchronous platforms that risk losing tone and context (Canca, 2020). Organizations that overlook the interpersonal dimensions of feedback during onboarding may inadvertently extend time to proficiency, suppress voice behavior, and fail to activate early engagement drivers (Alder, 2023; Cate, 2020).

This study contributes to ongoing conversations about the relationship between early-cycle feedback and workforce outcomes by synthesizing current empirical and theoretical literature. The inquiry is guided by three research questions, which are presented in the next section.

Research Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to clarify how feedback loops shape onboarding effectiveness, retention probabilities, and engagement levels during the first 180 days of employment. The study aims to consolidate and interpret recent empirical and theoretical insights that connect feedback loops with onboarding, retention, and engagement during a new hire's first six months of employment. Specifically, the review examines:

1. How do structured feedback loops shape onboarding quality?



2. In what ways do early-cycle feedback patterns predict six-month retention?
3. How are engagement trajectories moderated by the frequency and reciprocity of feedback exchanges?

Research Results

Conceptualizing Feedback Loops within Onboarding

Rooted in Social Exchange Theory and Psychological Contract Theory, feedback loops refer to scheduled, two-way exchanges in which supervisors and new employees exchange performance information and adjust expectations in real-time, thereby producing iterative learning cycles that refine task execution (Cate, 2020). These exchanges are not merely transactional but form the basis for trust, mutual obligation, and the co-creation of role clarity. Social Exchange Theory emphasizes the reciprocal nature of relationships and how mutual reinforcement fosters commitment, while Psychological Contract Theory explains how perceived fairness and responsiveness shape expectations of long-term support. Together, these frameworks explain how feedback loops evolve from technical interventions into trust-building mechanisms that influence early employee engagement and retention.

Influence of Feedback Loops on Onboarding Quality

Empirical evidence from manufacturing, technology, and service sectors indicates that new employees exposed to structured loops reach proficiency benchmarks an average of twenty-three days sooner than those receiving ad hoc feedback, highlighting the operational value of timely guidance (Alder, 2023; Estok, 2022; Gallup, 2024). In particular, task clarity and process confidence tend to emerge more quickly when feedback is scaffolded through conversational norms that allow for immediate clarification (Cate, 2020). Linguistic analysis of feedback transcripts further reveals that respectful turn-taking, hedging to soften critique, and explicit invitations for questions are correlated with heightened role clarity and stronger self-efficacy scores by day 60 (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Estok, 2022; Gallagher, 2023). Feedback loops that follow a consistent structure, inviting reflection, offering behavior-based observations, and establishing shared goals contribute to early performance stabilization and reinforce psychological safety (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021). In hybrid and remote environments, video-enabled platforms replicate non-verbal cues that would otherwise be lost, mitigating the risk of isolation while reinforcing message salience and emotional tone (Canca, 2020; Estok, 2022). These tools, when used to sustain synchronous exchanges, have been shown to outperform asynchronous dashboards in terms of engagement, comprehension, and retention of feedback.

Feedback Loops and Six-Month Retention

Survival analysis modeling on a sample of 4,200 hires reveals that each one-point increase in perceived feedback usefulness reduces the voluntary exit hazard by 12 percent during months four through six (Gallup, 2024). Toxic leadership behaviors, characterized by unilateral monologues and public reprimand, nearly double early attrition risk when feedback loops are absent or superficial, underscoring the centrality of respectful reciprocity (Gallagher, 2023; Johnson, 2025; Speranza,



2021). Organizations that implement formalized fifteen-minute, two-way check-ins as part of onboarding protocols report substantial gains in retention, especially among Generation Z employees who tend to interpret conversational symmetry as a proxy for inclusion and respect (Morris & Edmonds, 2021). Importantly, retention effects are moderated by leadership tone and psychological safety, meaning the same frequency of feedback can yield very different outcomes depending on how the message is framed and received. Employees who experience early feedback as collaborative rather than corrective are significantly more likely to remain through their first six-month and report more substantial affective commitment (Johnson, 2025; Speranza, 2021).

Feedback Loops as Drivers of Engagement

Engagement surveys administered at the 90-day mark demonstrate that perceived voice mediates 42 percent of the relationship between feedback frequency and engagement, indicating that loops promote ownership rather than mere compliance (Gallagher, 2023). Gamified recognition, such as micro badges for rapid course correction, increases behavioral engagement indicators, additional idea submissions, voluntary cross-training, and discretionary client support without inflating managerial labor hours (Alder, 2023; Canca, 2020; Estok, 2022). Conversely, feedback delivered exclusively through numeric dashboards without dialogic follow-up fails to produce comparable gains, reaffirming the social dimension of feedback effectiveness (Alder, 2023; Cate, 2020; Estok, 2022). Digital communication platforms that support two-way exchanges facilitate engagement gains when designed to reinforce reflection, voice, and a growth-oriented approach rather than solely monitoring outputs.

Moderating Effects of Digital Platforms and Leadership Style

Digital modalities extend the reach of feedback yet require intentional design to preserve warmth and reduce cognitive load. Synchronous video outperforms asynchronous text in measures of trust formation in hybrid teams (Canca, 2020; Estok, 2022; Gallagher, 2023). Ethical leadership, marked by transparency and humility, amplifies the positive impact of feedback loops, whereas authoritarian styles neutralize gains by discouraging upward communication (Gallagher, 2023; Johnson, 2025; Speranza, 2021). Training that teaches leaders to solicit employee reflections before offering critique yields measurable improvements in engagement within one quarter, supporting a causal chain from feedback practice to motivational climate (Cate, 2020; Gallagher, 2023; Johnson, 2025). In essence, the structure of the loop and the character of the leader co-determine the feedback's impact, with open, dialogic, and psychologically safe formats producing the most favorable engagement and retention outcomes.

Conclusions

This study aimed to clarify how reciprocal, high-frequency feedback loops influence onboarding quality, engagement, and retention among new hires, thereby addressing a persistent gap in the literature on early-cycle employee experience (Alder, 2023). The findings demonstrate that daily microsessions in the first two weeks and weekly dialogues through day 180 create timely learning cycles that compress time to proficiency and reinforce role clarity, extending prior empirical work on



structured cadence (Cate, 2020; Estok, 2022). By confirming that respectful conversational protocols reflection, behavior-based commentary, and joint goal setting strengthen psychological safety and employee voice, the study amplifies linguistic insights on politeness reciprocity and trust formation in workplace discourse (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021; Gallagher, 2023).

Positioning feedback loops within modern talent systems highlights their strategic value: early, two-way exchanges not only facilitate skill acquisition but also serve as cultural signals that the organization values inquiry and shared accountability, deepening social-exchange interpretations of onboarding processes (Canca, 2020; Johnson, 2025). The convergence of accelerated proficiency, elevated engagement, and reduced attrition confirms that feedback is a foundational mechanism through which onboarding initiatives translate into sustained organizational commitment, corroborating large-scale engagement reports that identify the first six-month as decisive for retention outcomes (Gallup, 2024).

Practically, human resource leaders should systematize feedback schedules that begin with daily sessions and taper to weekly check-ins, ensuring that each interaction follows a dialogic structure proven to foster psychological safety and learning agility (Estok, 2022). Supervisors should utilize digital platforms that support both synchronous video communication and asynchronous documentation, ensuring that feedback remains personal and traceable, a combination shown to strengthen trust and accountability in hybrid contexts (Canca, 2020). Executives can further institutionalize these gains by incorporating early-cycle feedback indicators, such as time to proficiency, ninety-day engagement scores, and six-month retention rates, into organizational talent dashboards. This integration ensures that feedback practices contribute meaningfully to broader performance governance and workforce strategy (Gallagher, 2023).

By situating these actionable insights within the existing body of scholarship, the study not only affirms the essential role of feedback loops in onboarding but also contributes to academic discourse by illustrating how the structure and quality of communication shape early employee experience and influence long-term organizational outcomes. This contribution helps bridge the gap between theory and practice by translating empirical insights into actionable strategies for organizations seeking to improve retention, engagement, and time to proficiency. Moreover, the study reinforces the relevance of communication-centered frameworks in organizational research, especially in the context of hybrid and digitally mediated work environments. These findings advance ongoing conversations in organizational behavior and human resource development by underscoring the long-term strategic value of structured, reciprocal feedback.

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