

ATTRIBUTION

Why do people do what they do?

Whenever we do something, there is an outcome. There are usually a number of possible outcomes, some of which may be preferred (success) and some of which may be unwanted (failure).

In the business environment, success may be defined as winning a big contract, making a good profit for the year, or getting a new patent – to name just a few. Failure may be considered to be anything from losing a customer, to defaulting on a loan, or even going bankrupt.

But what caused that success or failure?

The devil made me do it

Let's say you saw a colleague give a very poor sales presentation. In response, the customer is not impressed, and does not buy anything. Why was the sales presentation so bad?

You couldn't possibly know everything that affected the presentation; there were too many variables. There were "internal" variables, such as presentation skills, motivation to work with the customer and knowledge about the product to be sold. Then there were "external" variables, such as the equipment in the meeting room, the receptiveness of the customer, and even the weather (what if some presentation materials had gotten wet on the way). If you asked him, your colleague might not even know all of the variables himself.

Watching the situation, you make attributions about the behaviour of your colleague: your mind processes what you see and you determine probable reasons why his presentation was of such poor quality. Attribution theory gives us a framework for how your understanding of the situation comes about.

In attribution theory, there are three dimensions over which we assess behaviour: *consensus*, or how much other people behave the same way; *consistency*, how much the same person is the same way at other times; and *distinctiveness*, how much the same person is the same way in other situations.

In this case, there is low consensus, since you and your other colleagues usually give good presentations. There is also low consistency, because you have seen your colleague present very well at other times. However, you know that this customer is particularly difficult, which gives this situation a high distinctiveness. This probably leads you to the conclusion that your colleague may have been nervous about the customer (external attribution).

Fundamental attribution error

The customer will probably not reach the same conclusions as you regarding your colleague's behaviour. She might have had high consensus, since she is subjected to poor sales presentations by her other prospective suppliers. In addition, she does not have access to consistency and distinctiveness information, since this is the first time she has visited your business and she has not met your colleague before. Therefore, she will have to draw some conclusions about why the presentation was so bad. Your customer may believe it was because your colleague is not a very skilled salesperson, and doesn't really like the product he is selling (internal attribution).

Your colleague will also make attributions about his own behaviour, but they are not necessarily the same as those of you or your customer. He will probably also have low consensus, because the salespeople he works with give good presentations. Like you, he has low consistency, because he knows he can present well. But for him, the situation has low distinctiveness, because he has had some experience with them in the past. This client made an appointment on very short notice and he did not have enough time to prepare (external attribution, but different to yours).

People often believe that their own good performance is mostly due to their own skill, but poor performance is mostly due to some uncontrollable force. If profits are good, of course we would like to say it is our excellent business acumen: we tend to attribute our success to internal causes. But if we make a loss, it's probably because expenses are too high, customers are stupid, or the economy is in a slump: external causes. Yet when we look at other people, we tend to attribute their successes to external causes, such as luck, and failures to internal causes, such as laziness.

The mistakes that people make about identifying what caused behaviour in themselves and others are called the fundamental attribution error. In this case, the customer over-estimated the effects of your colleague's personality (dislike of product) and under-estimated those of the situation (arrival at short notice). Your colleague over-estimated the effects of the situation (not enough time) and under-estimate the effects of personality (perhaps he was overconfident about his ability to prepare quickly).

Implications

Understanding the way attribution works is particularly important in performance appraisal. Research shows that supervisors who don't properly know the tasks of their subordinates tend to believe poor performance is more due to internal than external factors. Studies also indicate that supervisors who don't really know their subordinates make the same mistake. If external factors are blamed for failure, we can change the task or improve resources or provide more training. But since we hire people on the basis of their skills, if internal factors are blamed too often for failure, it may result in removal from a project, demotion, or in the worst case scenario, dismissal.

It's only natural to feel confident when things are going well. But it's important for managers to remember that their professional skills and abilities are not the only

factors helping them and their team or organisation to be successful. And it is just as important to remember that external forces are not the only elements in failure; managers should be brave enough to look within themselves and examine their own responsibility. If they are making mistakes, it will then be easier to correct them before bigger problems result.

Managers also need to realise how internal and external attribution can influence employee motivation. As we said last month, you can't motivate anybody. However, it is possible to influence their thoughts so that they motivate themselves. If your employees believe they will get a pay raise for hard work (internal attribution), then they will continue to work hard. But if they believe they will only get a pay raise if the boss likes them, then they are likely to either work on their relationship with you (with less time spent on job tasks), or lower their effort if they feel nothing will make a difference; with the external attribution, you get two options where employees work less hard.

Summary

Attribution theory tells us why people think they (or others) do what they do. These reasons could be internal, from the self, or external, from the environment. You can't possibly know everything about somebody (including yourself), so you make conclusions about behaviour based on limited data. This can sometimes result in an attribution error. This error can be shown to follow predictable patterns.

People are more likely to work hard if they believe that they have the ability to do so, or an internal attribution. If somebody thinks they have no control, meaning that they make external attributions for success, they are not going to put in an effort to resolve problems, because they believe that whatever they do will have no effect. An organisational culture where people have strong internal attributions is more likely to encourage employee performance.

Management should get to know both their employees and the work they do, because they will then be able to offer better motivators to their employees, and make more accurate and useful performance reviews. A manager who blames poor performance on lack of training is going to act quite differently to one who blames it on bad attitude and laziness. It will also help them to manage themselves, as they better understand the factors involved in their successes and failures as managers and leaders.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Biography of Fritz Heider (he developed attribution theory)
http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_0004/ai_2699000495

In practice: some simple attribution examples
<http://www.as.wvu.edu/~sbb/comm221/chapters/attrib.htm>

Fundamental Attribution Error
http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/fundamental_attribution_error.htm

Next month, we will be discussing whether people believe they have the ability to do things or not: the concept of self-efficacy.

References:

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