

Attribution Theory and Management Education

Effective management education programs focus on the best way to prevent conflict, by avoiding bias in employee evaluation.

By STUART C. FREEDMAN

This article examines the organizational problem of attribution and its implications for problem diagnosis, performance evaluation and management education. Attribution is the process of making inferences about the motives underlying another's behavior.^{1,2} Attribution theorists specify the ways persons interpret their social environment.

Why is making faulty attributions often a major problem in organizations? Consider two case examples. The first involves a former employee at a parcel delivery company, and the second a group of production supervisors in a manufacturing firm.

In the first incident a woman was denied both a promotion and job transfer even though she was considered highly competent. After months of inquiries she discovered why her requests were being refused. A company manager informed her that her superiors believed she was a women's liberation advocate because of the way she dressed and therefore they considered her untrustworthy.

In addition, her immediate supervisor indicated on her performance appraisal that she was antisocial because she did not have lunch regularly with other women in the department. As a result, other department heads were reluctant to hire her. The fact that she needed her lunch periods to complete assignments for an evening course approved by the company did not affect her boss's personality trait attribution. Though she eventually got her promotion, she soon found employment elsewhere.

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The second case describes a management education (MED) program in a firm manufacturing industrial equipment. The program was requested by the vice president for manufacturing and focused on supervisors of production-related departments. According to the V.P., most supervisors had little formal management training and were performing poorly. He pointed out that supervisors were frequently away from their work areas, leaving subordinates unsupervised.

The course was planned jointly by a consultant and the V.P. It dealt with time management, motivation, delegation, communication and planning, and included lectures, discussions and problem solving. The V.P. also requested that the consultant identify supervisors' most salient problems.

During the course, supervisors claimed the ideas could not be applied to their work because their problems were mainly in other departments. They identified four specific problems:

- Supervisors often had to wait weeks for materials needed to complete a job.
- Supervisors attributed the engineering department's errors to poor quality control due to work overloads.
- Supervisors attributed major backlogs in the paint and sheet metal departments to the large number of jobs in progress.
- Supervisors experienced severe pressure and production departments were unable to meet completion deadlines when sales personnel, responding to departmental requirements, made untenable delivery commitments.

When the consultant presented a memorandum to the V.P. outlining these concerns, the manager claimed he had "known this for years." To the consul-

tant's knowledge, no more was ever said of the memo.

Attribution theory and management education

The simplified personality appraisals in case one, and the production problems in case two, highlight the role that attributions play in organizational diagnosis and performance evaluation. Several important attribution concepts useful in MED programs are useful when diagnosing and evaluating the behavior of organizational members.

■ **Diagnosing organizational problems** is a subjective process often carried out by managers who have poor relations with subordinates, have a stake in the outcome and who reach conclusions based on their limited observations and frame of reference.

Errors in diagnosis can occur on individual, departmental and organizational levels. In the case of the women denied a promotion, the supervisor neither tested the assumption that the woman's behavior was anti-social nor indicated any other interpretation in her performance appraisal. The woman suggested that her supervisor's own self-interest may have contributed partly to this bias. Since employees rarely transferred into this department, those who left were very difficult to replace. The supervisor, therefore, may have tried to prevent turnover by causing the employee to appear unsuitable to other department heads.

At the organizational level, similar problems exist. In conducting a diagnosis, it is important to identify the conditions under which attribution errors occur. First, one must recognize that individual

members are limited in their experience and knowledge of daily events in the organization. Diagnostic data based on a narrow sample of respondents therefore may lead to biased attributions reflecting the interests of only a small group in the organization.

This problem is compounded by the fact that diagnosis often takes place in organizations burdened by conflict, dissatisfaction and mistrust. Members of conflicting groups often attenuate areas of agreement, exaggerate areas of disagreement, attribute hostile intentions to "outgroups" and polarize points of view.^{3,4} Furthermore, conformity norms that discourage deviation from majority opinion consolidate these biases and become even more difficult to change.⁵ Good diagnostic work therefore requires that one be aware of respondents' special interests and personal biases.

These problems are particularly troublesome when the diagnostician is also an organizational member, and a partial cause of organizational problems. In the manufacturing case, the V.P. himself

may have been responsible for the supervisors' ineffectiveness by failing to coordinate interdepartmental activities, an upper management rather than supervisory responsibility. His resulting defensiveness and bias easily could have influenced his choice of respondents and his interpretation of data. This also may have influenced diagnostic results and managerial action. A systems approach is necessary to help avoid those pitfalls of more limited and subjective attribution.

■ **Managers and consultants should be aware of the tendency to externalize the cause of failure and internalize the cause of success.**

Attribution theory and everyday experience suggest that people often resist perceiving their own behavior as inadequate and rarely see themselves as a primary cause of failure. Complementing this is the tendency for evaluators (organizational superiors) to attribute the cause of failure to actors (subordinates), but for actors to attribute causes to external situations.⁶ In case one, the supervisor claimed the employee's lunch hour

activities were motivated by a personality trait, i.e., antisocial feelings. The true cause was situational; the employee had to do homework. In case two, the V.P. attributed the cause of failure to supervisors' lack of knowledge rather than constraints in their work environment.

Both of these attributions had negative consequences. The supervisor's appraisal caused the loss of a highly productive employee. The V.P.'s negative evaluation of supervisors' knowledge and motivation lead to resentment and dissatisfaction. According to the supervisors, the V.P. was attributing the cause of failure to personality factors and assuming supervisors were incompetent. Similarly defensive, the supervisors attributed the causes to other departments.

As a result of these differences in perception, hostility increased between lower and upper levels of management, exacerbating the conflict. To reduce this source of conflict, managers should consider that multiple factors—personal and situational—may be responsible for organizational problems, and that mis-

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attributions only intensify these problems.

■ Managers and consultants should base their assessments of the causes of employees' behavior on a systematic analysis, and classify these causes for action choices.

One way this might be achieved is by evaluating attributions in terms of sources of error. Consider the model proposed by Kelley.⁷ Kelley's main concern is how an observer assesses the validity of his or her attributions. To determine this, he suggests that people partition the variables likely to influence their judgment, and observe the consequences of variation. According to Kelley, there are three sources of variation that enter into this subjective analysis: *Distinctiveness*—Are supervisors performing less adequately than other comparable groups of employees? *Consistency*—Over time are supervisors performing poorly under varying circumstances? *Consensus*—Do other members of management similarly perceive supervisor performance? These questions discount misjudgment as an attribution source and confirm the impression of performance.

Kelley's descriptive rather than normative model does not address attribution accuracy. It does, however, suggest potential sources of error in the inference process. These errors may be classified in terms of the outcomes of subordinates' behavior, subordinates' motivation and the criterion for evaluating subordinates' performance.

Avoiding errors

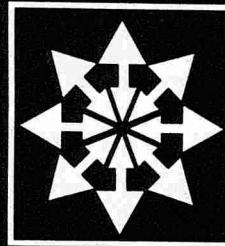
To accurately determine the distinctiveness of employees' performance, one must assess the full range of outcomes resulting from their behavior. Careless or incomplete observation of these outcomes is an inadequate basis for evaluation. This error might have occurred if the V.P. observed supervisors only when negative feedback was obtained. It might also have occurred if preconceived beliefs about his subordinates biased his search for information about them. For example, if he assumed supervisors were motivated to avoid work, the V.P. would seek supporting data and evaluate the supervisors' actions accordingly. Likewise, if he believed their supervisory skills were weak, he would resist attributing poor performance to another cause such as lack of supplies.

To avoid distinctiveness errors one would need to know about employees' goals and intentions. This is perhaps the

most difficult aspect of the attribution process because it requires that the manager make assumptions about subordinates' "internal states." It is, nevertheless, central to diagnosing the cause of their success or failure, since it gives an evaluator important information about what subordinates were trying to accomplish. For example, being away from one's work station might be motivated by the intention to coordinate one's activities

with another department, or by the desire to take an extended coffee break with a co-worker stationed at the other end of the plant. The behavior, then, may be associated with two distinctly different goals. The major question is which of these goals motivated the employee? The answer will figure prominently in the manager's evaluation of the employee's work.

A third type of attribution problem in-



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volves the distinctiveness criterion itself. In the manufacturing case, the V.P.'s definition of "adequate performance" was his standard for evaluating supervisory effectiveness. This standard is critical because it influences perception of the distinctiveness of others' behavior. If, for example, the V.P. used criterion not based on past performance or the performance of others, the resulting standard would be unrealistic in relation to existing constraints. His judgment would be overly severe, less valid and unfair.

Similarly, in the parcel delivery firm the criteria used to disqualify the employee for either transfer or promotion were also inappropriate. Not only were the clothing and lunch hour issues unrelated to job performance, their meaning was misinterpreted. This caused the employee to be evaluated negatively in comparison to her co-workers.

To determine without attribution error whether or not employee performance is adequate over time and circumstances requires monitoring subordinates. This involves only periodic, unobtrusive observation and regular meetings with subordinates to identify problems they cannot solve at their own organizational level. At these meetings superiors can inform subordinates that they, too, operate under constraints.

For these meetings to be successful, candid two-way communication is necessary, in which subordinates as well as superiors are rewarded for being honest. This type of open communication is more beneficial if there is only one observer of subordinates or if evaluators rely mainly on their own observations (low consensus). If all participants were able to address problems in this way, they would be less inclined to attribute the cause of others' failures to personal inadequacies, and more able to recognize the situational factors that determine behavior.

Types of attributions

Making a confident and valid attribution is, from a managerial point of view, only half of the problem. The other is deciding on a course of action. To determine this systematically, it is useful to classify attributions in terms of causes and in a way that suggests a choice of action for the evaluator. For example, a performance caused by factors employees can control such as effort should lead to a different evaluation than a performance that employees cannot control due to lack of expertise. The evaluations must be dif-

ferent even though both causes are personal rather than situational.

Birnberg, Frieze and Shields suggest that the perceived cause of another's behavior may be classified in terms of the interaction of three variables: whether the observed behavior is perceived to be caused internally or externally (lack of ability or lack of supplies); whether the cause is seen as stable or unstable (laziness or fatigue); whether the observed behavior is seen as intentional or unintentional (poor motivation or poor training).⁸ The decisions a manager makes regarding these three variables will determine the nature of his or her attribution and his or her response to the person being evaluated.

In case two, the V.P. stated that he had long known of shortcomings in other departments. However, he did not indicate any need for action. He did not regard these problems as salient enough to affect supervisor performance severely, and did not consider them when making inferences about the causes of supervisory ineffectiveness. His bottom line was therefore internal causes (supervisors) rather than external ones (other departments). Supervisors perceived the actions of other departments as highly salient constraints. It would not be surprising to find that supervisors believed the V.P. was making internal attributions and, more tacitly, stable (lazy) and intentional (poor motivation) attributions as well.

To avoid this potential source of conflict, the V.P. could have determined whether supervisors' behavior was caused by internal or external factors, produced intentionally or unintentionally and whether the conditions leading to it were stable or unstable. These more specific attributions would have helped him identify and change the factors causing poor performance.

Management education

Consultants should address the attribution process in management education programs by examining the role that attribution variables play in improving the inference process. Consider the case of a manager attempting to improve the performance of subordinates. First, to improve attribution accuracy the manager must avoid potential errors. He or she gathers data on all relevant outcomes of subordinates' behavior, and monitors their activities over a wide range of circumstances. The manager also gathers data on their intentions and goals, and determines whether performance standards are realistic. Finally, the manager is aware of his or her biases by obtaining evaluations from others able to observe the same subordinates.

Next, the manager must determine why the performance was in fact poor. Was it due to the subordinate's traits, or to factors in their external environment? If available data indicates an external cause, the manager must search the subordinate's work environment and remove barriers to effectiveness.

If the attribution is internal, the manager must then determine if the causal factors involved are stable and intentional. This phase determines the nature of the manager's response to the employees. Four types of internal attributions are associated with corresponding corrective actions (see Figure 1). The response to *stable and intentional causes* (laziness) could be dissatisfaction, tacit or explicit threats or a search for new employees if performance does not improve (negative feedback intervention).

Stable and unintentional causes (lack of knowledge) require a training program. This response is suitable only for this type of internal cause, which indicates an

Figure 1—Attributions and actions

	Intentional	Unintentional
Stable	Communicate dissatisfaction and, if no change, search for new employee.	Initiate management education program.
Unstable	Reevaluate design of employee work context (e.g., reward system).	Provide counseling, more feedback and adjustment time.

underlying problem which is correctable through education.

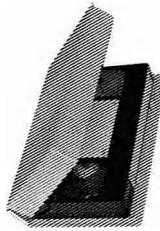
If the internal cause is *unstable and intentional* (low effort resulting from a poorly designed reward system), the source of the problem may reflect organizational rules that require modification (organization design intervention). This type of cause is distinguished from a purely external one in that here the employee chooses to perform poorly.

Finally, an *unstable and unintentional cause* (personal problems or lack of job experience) may be corrected by providing the employee with counseling, more performance feedback or additional adjustment time. No further job-related training may be necessary in this case (supportive feedback intervention or no response).

The consequences of attribution errors suggest that the process of attributing motives and characteristics to others should be a primary focus in management education. As managers learn to make more accurate inferences about the causes of their employees' job-related behavior, conflict and dissatisfaction should decrease.

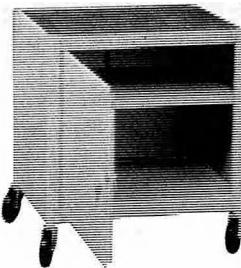
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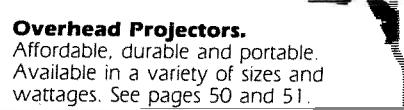
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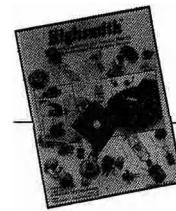
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