

DIAGNOSING POOR PERFORMANCE WITH THE HELP OF THE ATTRIBUTION PROCESS

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, it is intended to describe how a manager makes casual explanations about a subordinate's poor performance; and how he, with the help of attribution process, may answer the questions beginning with "why". The attribution theory is developed within social psychology as a means of dealing with questions of social perception. For example, if a person is aggressively competitive in his behavior, is he that kind of person, or is he actually reacting to situational pressures? If a person fails on a test, does he have low ability, or is the test itself difficult? If a subordinate performs poorly, is it because he isn't motivated enough or is it due to the fact that he doesn't have the ability to behave accordingly.

One of the most difficult and unpleasant aspects of the manager's job might be to deal with the performance problems and appropriate corrective actions-which can under circumstances be very hard to pinpoint. In a step-by-step way to describe a performance problem, the very first step lies in its recognition.

Managers have expectations from their subordinates in relation with their behavior. These expectations might be expressed in terms of the performance goals or as the norms of behavior. Therefore it is necessary to define the problem both subjectively and from the manager's point of view. It may quite be conceivable that a pattern of behavior which is perceived as a poor performance problem by the manager is not seen as such by the subordinates. So, we can assert that a manager may frequently make some attribution errors.

Before explaining the attribution errors, it is useful to say that the attribution theory focuses primarily on people's naive assumptions about the causes of their own behavior and the behavior of others (1). The process of attributing the causes of the behavior depends upon our behavior as well as the behavior of others through which the people can better understand and anticipate their

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(1) See, Heider, F. (1958), *passim*.

own and others' actions. It is not possible to be aware of what the other people are thinking, but the observation of their behavior may give us a reliable cue. In this connection, the inference process leading to assess and evaluate the people according to their own behavior is nothing but what we call the attribution process.

THE USE OF ATTRIBUTION PROCESS IN DIAGNOSING POOR PERFORMANCE

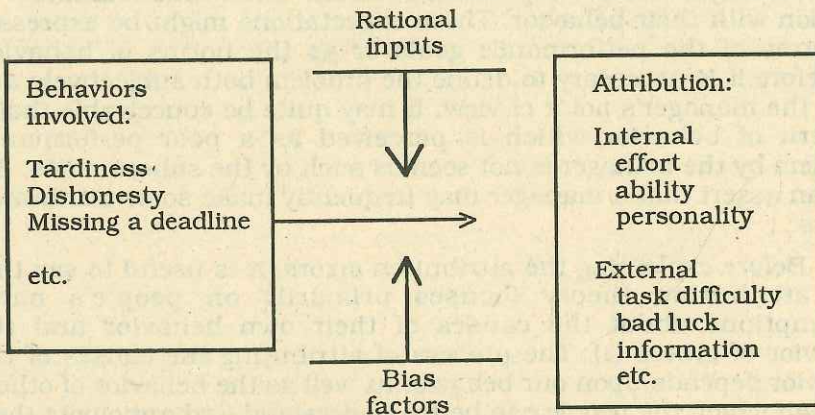
There are three basic contributions of the attribution theory to our knowledge about the problems of performance evaluation. First, research on the attribution process has shown that people make fairly systematic errors in their diagnoses of behavior (2). Secondly, it is well known that there are a number of both rational and less rational cognitive activities. Third, the causes of behavior can be classified into the internal and the external causes. The internal causes are associated with the individual's abilities, effort, personality and mood. External causes on the other hand, are associated with the setting, which involves task difficulty, available information and interpersonal pressures.

As it can be conceived from the Figure 1 below, the process of making an attribution concerns with the components named "behaviors involved" and "attribution" together with the intersecting effects of rational inputs and bias factors.

In deciding whether a poor performance is internally or externally caused, a manager makes use of the covariance principle. The covariance principle simply points out the fact that we attribute an action to the one of its possible causes with which it covaries most strongly throughout the time (3).

Figure: 1

The relationships between poor organizational behavior and attribution process.



(2) See, e.g., Ross, M. and Fletcher, G.J.O. (1985), pp. 73-122.

(3) For further information, see, Kelley, Harold H. (1973), pp. 107-128.

The mentioned covariance is secured through the interplay of three kinds of rational factors of information, namely the distinctiveness, consistency and consensus through which the manager can make attributions. Distinctiveness refers to the extent of a subordinate's poor performance on other task assignments. By the degree that the poor performance is less distinctive, the likelihood, that it is accepted as an internal attribution, increases. Consistency on the other hand, refers to the fact, whatever and to which extent the subordinate's poor performance is consistent with his past performance on the same task. The more consistent the present poor performance is with that of the past, the greater is the likelihood of an internal attribution. Finally, consensus refers to the extent of the similarity of subordinate's poor performance in comparison with the performance of other subordinates who have done the same task. When there is a so called low consensus, i.e. when the poorly performed subordinates become fewer, there is a greater likelihood of an internal attribution.

At this point, let us give an example to what we have been explaining. Suppose that a subordinate fails to turn in a budget report on time, the manager gathers the available information; and in terms of the factors stated above, if

1. This subordinate frequently misses deadlines on all sorts of tasks,

2. He is always late with financial reports, and

3. None of the other subordinates were late,

his decision will be influenced accordingly. Afterwards, the manager will be going to attribute the poor performance to a low ability or motivation, which is accepted as an internal cause. On the other hand, if the subordinate had never missed a deadline on any task before and returned the financial reports on time, and moreover everybody had trouble in returning their reports punctually, the cause may probably be due to an external attribution. Figure 2, summarizes what had been exposed above.

Figure 2: The patterns of information that either leads to an internal or an external attribution in returning a financial report.

Covariance information			
Distinctiveness	Consensus	Consistency	Most probable Attribution
He frequently misses deadlines on other sorts of tasks. (low distinctiveness)	All of the other subordinates were on time in returning financial reports. (low consensus)	He is always late with financial reports. (high consistency)	INTERNAL
He never misses a deadline on any task. (high distinctiveness)	All the others had trouble in returning their financial reports. (high consensus)	He doesn't miss deadlines on any other tasks. (low consistency)	EXTERNAL

In addition to the rational cues which are described above, there are also many other factors that can influence the attribution and they are called the bias factors. First and probably the most important among them is the actor-observer bias. The empirical studies indicate that people focus on external factors when explaining their own behavior, but tend to focus on internal factors when explaining the behavior of others (4). Therefore, the subordinate, being the actor, explaining his behavior is likely to see it as caused by external events, whereas the manager being the observer, is likely to see it as caused by the internal dispositional factors.

Another nonrational factor influencing the attribution process is the self-serving bias. In general, people tend to attribute successes to themselves and failures to forces beyond their control (5). For example, several studies have been shown that, when a group fails, the individual group members claim that they had relatively little impact on the group's product (6). Their claimed proportions of contributions always add up to less than 100 percent. On the contrary, when the group succeeds, every one says that he made the substantial contribution and the same totals add up to more than 100 percent.

It should be noted that, anything which increases the distance between the manager and the subordinate is likely to increase the magnitude of the actor-observer and self-serving biases. For example, if the manager likes the subordinate less, the experience he has with the subordinate's job is also smaller and the more power the manager has, it is in turn more likely that he is to make internal attribution for poor performance. Hence the opposite is true for high performance. To give an empirical example, the more prejudiced a male manager is against females, the more likely he is to attribute their successes at work to luck or to an easy job which is considered as one of the external factors (7).

In case of the poor performance, when the rational and less rational biases are considered together, it is likely that the managers will see the cause as being internal, and the subordinate will tend to see it as being external. This difference in attribution is likely to lead conflict, disagreement and hard feelings.

The principal benefit that the manager draws from his diagnosis about the type of the conflict as being either internal or external, seems to be that he may use appropriate solutions to correct the poor performance situation.

(4) See particularly, Jones, E.E., and Nisbett, R.E. (1972), *passim*.

(5) See, Miller, Dale T. (1976), p. 901.

(6) See, Ross, M. and Sicoly, F. (1979), p. 322.

(7) See, Garland, H., and Price, K.H. (1977), p. 29.

CONCLUSION

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the above given explanations:

1. People do attribute the success to the internal factors and failure to the external factors. This is the principal cause of attributional errors stated above.

2. Distinctiveness, consistency and consensus information are rational factors that effect the attributions in the manner predicted. They can, in turn, be employed as correctives to the attribution process.

Figure 3:

A checklist for diagnosing the causes of poor performance (*)

1. Is the cause internal or external?
 - (a) What is previous performance on this task?
 - (b) What is performance on other tasks?
 - (c) How do other people do on this task?
2. If internal:
 - (a) Is it an ability problem?
 - (1) Has performance been good in the past?
 - (2) Is the ability frequently used?
 - (3) Does the person have the potential to learn?
Arrange feedback, training, transfer, or dismissal.
 - (b) Is it an effort problem?
 - (1) Is desired performance negatively rewarding?
 - (2) Is poor performance positively rewarding?
 - (3) Is performance important?
 - (4) Are there personal or interpersonal obstacles?
Arrange feedback, rewards, punishments, or dismissal.
3. If external:
 - (a) Is the task too difficult?
 - (1) What are the demands of the job?
 - (2) Is there a simpler way?
 - (3) Does the person need help?
 - (4) Is the task intrinsically unpleasant?
Arrange for job redesign, enrichment, or restructuring.
 - (b) Are there extenuating circumstances?
 - (1) What distractions and disruptions occur?
 - (2) Is the person dependent on others?
 - (3) Were the proper materials and information available?
Counsel and provide support services.

(*) See, Mitchell, T.R.; Larson, J.R. (1987), p. 533.

In practice, it is not an easy task, to solve the poor performance problems of the subordinates by leading the manager to make practical use of the conceptual framework mentioned above. Aids, like the check-list example given in Figure 3 can be of little help. In Figure 3, a series of systematically stated questions are given in order that the manager can more easily and properly diagnose the causes of the poor performance problem he confronts. However, if we go through these questions, it is apparent that such memory instruments would be of small value unless the manager involved is not an expert of a technical profession but is trained in behavioral sciences. This being rarely the case, brings us to the conclusion that most managers require some kind of formal education, in which behavioral concepts and relationships as exemplified in Figure 3, to be trained both in theory and by means of workshops.

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