

Fundamental Attribution Error

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The purpose of this article is to raise your awareness. As a leader, you seek to improve your ability to explain and predict behaviors, both yours and others. You also want to improve your effectiveness by learning about and applying concepts that work. Understanding cause-and-effect logic helps.

You want to improve hard-number results. That can only come from improving processes and the health of your organizational culture. Unfortunately, you commit a fundamental “attribution error” often, and you probably aren’t even aware of it! You may have never even heard this term.

Psychologists “attribute” human behavior to different causes, some driven by characteristics of the person (internal disposition) and some driven by the circumstances they face (situational).

When asked, “Why did you do that?” your answer will likely be associated with something about the circumstances and their meaning to you.

When asked, “Why do you think he did that?” you will likely surmise a cause that is associated with his character, education, opinions, or some other aspect of what you know or think about how he views the world.

We typically explain our own behaviors based on situational causes because we knew what specifics were involved and we knew the conscious choices we made about how to respond to them.

When other people take action, however, we are probably not familiar with the particular situation they faced or the meaning they gave to the unique circumstances. Without consciously considering this major absence in our awareness, we supply an explanation based on what we know or speculate about the person’s motives, abilities, or personality.

When we observe and comment on the behaviors of others, then, we characteristically make this “fundamental attribution error.” We don’t really know why they did what they did, but we think we do.

Allow me to explore this distinction further. Psychologists who study human behavior tell us that when other people (your spouse, your team members, your boss, etc.) exhibit negative or frustrating behaviors, you tend to attribute their actions to something inside them (their attitudes, their personalities, their motives, or their competencies).

In contrast, when you exhibit negative or frustrating behaviors, you tend to attribute them to factors in the environment (complexity of the task, stressful time demands, criticism coming from others, etc.).

Psychologists call this a “cognitive bias.” It’s the self-focused way our brains process information. Stated simply, you give yourself the benefit of the doubt yet assume the worst in others.

Ouch! That’s probably not a good thing for a leader to be doing. Yet you and I do that frequently!

Think about it. Don’t you assume honorable motives and competency in yourself? And don’t you sometimes wonder about the competencies, motives, or character traits of the other person?

This tendency leads to mistrust on both sides. (You aren’t aware of it, but other people make these same errant assumptions about you). What can you do differently? Two things--one is personal and one is organizational.

First, catch yourself when you do this. When a driver cuts in front of you and you think, "What a jerk!" pause and recognize that some stress in that person's life may be contributing to his behavior.

Second, you influence a lot of what happens in your organization. Create ways people can more easily learn about their colleagues (and themselves). When they do, they will replace their unfair judgments with heightened awareness and compassion. Individuals will be less critical and more accepting, open, and trusting. Trust--that's the key to productive, collaborative cultures!

You don't need to remember the psychological term "fundamental attribution error." Just remember to resist your natural human tendency to give yourself the benefit of the doubt while presuming some limitation in the character, motive, or competence of others.

Share this new insight with those you influence. Invite your colleagues to join with you in inventing ways that increase empathy, self-disclosure, and feedback in your organization. Seek ways to tear down any "we/they" walls of assumptions and replace them with understanding and collaboration.

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