

Fundamental Attribution Error

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2012, published in the *Savannah Business Journal* on Monday, Oct. 15, 2012

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 organization's 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 influence).

When asked, "Why did you do that?" regarding an action you took, your answer will usually be associated with something about the circumstances of the moment and their meaning to you.

When asked, "Why do you think that person did that [the same thing you just did]?" you often will surmise a cause that is associated with his or her character, education, upbringing, perspective, or some other aspect of what you know (or think you know) about how the person views the world.

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

When other people behave in ways we don't understand, however, we are probably not familiar with the uniqueness of the situation they faced or the meaning they gave to their 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, background, personality, or biases.

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

Let's explore this distinction further. Psychologists who study human behavior tell us that when other people (your spouse, your team members, your boss, your competitors, etc.) exhibit negative or frustrating behaviors, you tend to attribute their actions to something inside them (their attitudes, personalities, prejudices, motives, poor judgment, lack of competency, or any of many other things).

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, and they rarely test their suppositions by checking with 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 or her behavior.

Second, you influence much of what happens in your organization. Create ways people can more easily learn about you, their colleagues, and themselves. When they do, they will replace their unfair, incomplete 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 (self-focused) tendency to give yourself the benefit of the doubt while presuming some limitations in the character, motive, or competence of others.

Share this new insight with those you influence. Invite your colleagues to join 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 greater understanding and collaboration.

Do you want to learn about how you can reduce problems in your organization? Contact Dennis Hooper, an executive coach in Atlanta, serving leaders who build intentionally collaborative cultures. His website is www.buildingfutureleaders.com. Contact Dennis at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com.