
Attribution Theory and Motivation

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, the student should be able to understand:

- The basic premises of attribution theory.
 - The differences between optimistic, pessimistic, and hostile attribution styles.
 - The role of attributions, emotions, and expectations in motivating employees.
 - Techniques managers can use to promote accurate and motivational attributions.
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OVERVIEW

In this chapter we expand on the discussion of attribution theory introduced in Chapter 3, as well as the motivational topics described in Chapters 5 and 6. In this chapter's discussion, attribution theory is used to provide managers with a better understanding of the highly cognitive and psychological mechanisms that influence motivation levels. The chapter begins with an overview of attribution theory. We then discuss the different attribution styles that can bias the accuracy of causal perceptions, potentially undermining the effectiveness of motivational strategies. We then describe the impact of attribution-driven emotions and expectations on motivation. This is followed by an overview of techniques healthcare managers can use to promote motivational attributions among employees.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Before describing the basic tenets of attribution theory, it is useful to understand exactly what is meant by the term *attribution*. An attribution is a causal explanation for an event or behavior. To illustrate, if a nurse observes a colleague performing a procedure incorrectly on a patient, he is likely to try to form an attributional explanation for this behavior. The nurse might conclude that his colleague is poorly trained, meaning that the observer is attributing the behavior to insufficient skills. People also form attributions for their own behaviors and outcomes. For example, a physician might attribute her success in diagnosing a patient's rare disease to her intelligence and training, or to good luck.

As these examples might suggest, the attribution process is something that people are likely to engage in many times each day. For many of us, the process is so automatic and familiar that we do not notice it. However, a wide body of research indicates that the formation of causal attributions is vital for adapting to changing environments and overcoming the challenges we are confronted with in our daily lives. When we experience desirable outcomes,

attributions help us understand what caused those events so we can experience them again. When we experience unpleasant outcomes, attributions help us identify and avoid the behaviors and other factors that caused them to occur.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Fritz Heider (1958) argued that all people are “naïve psychologists” who have an innate desire to understand the causes of behaviors and outcomes. Attribution theory holds that attributions for these behaviors and outcomes ultimately help to shape emotional and behavioral responses (Weiner, 1985). A simplified depiction of this attribution–emotion–behavior process is shown in Figure 7–1. In order to understand these relationships, however, it is important to be familiar with the various dimensions along which attributions can be classified.

First, attributions can be classified along the dimension of *locus of causality*, which describes the internality or externality of an attribution. If a physician misdiagnoses a patient and attributes this medical error to his own carelessness (i.e., ignored the patient’s symptoms), he is making an internal attribution. If the same outcome is attributed to faulty laboratory results even though the patient’s symptoms contradicted the lab results, the physician is making an external attribution. The locus of causality dimension is particularly relevant to emotional reactions. Internal attributions for undesirable events or behaviors are frequently associated with self-focused negative emotions, such as guilt and shame. External attributions for the same behaviors and outcomes are generally associated with externally focused negative emotions, such as anger and resentment (Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2002; Weiner, 1985).

Causal attributions can also be categorized along the *stability* dimension. Stable causes are those that tend to influence outcomes and behaviors consistently over time and across situations. Causes such as intelligence and physical or governmental laws are generally considered relatively stable in nature because they are difficult, if not impossible, to change. Unstable causal factors, such as the amount of effort exerted toward a task, are comparatively easy to change. Unlike the locus of causality dimension, which primarily influences emotional reactions to events and behaviors, the stability dimension affects individuals’ future expectations (Kovenklioglu & Greenhaus, 1978). When an outcome such as poor performance is attributed to a stable cause, such as low intelligence, it is logical to expect that the employee’s performance is not going to change in the future. If the same poor performance is attributed to a less stable factor, such as insufficient effort, we can expect that the employee could improve his or her performance by working harder in the future.

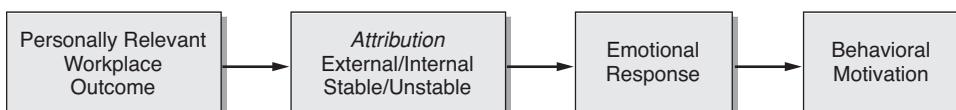


Figure 7-1 Attribution–Emotion–Behavior Process

Researchers have also classified attributions in terms of the intentionality and controllability of the cause (Weiner, 1995). However, for the purposes of understanding the basic impact of attributions on motivation, we will limit our discussion to the aforementioned dimensions of locus of causality and stability. Thus, we can consider attributions that are internal and stable (e.g., intelligence), external and stable (e.g., laws), internal and unstable (e.g., effort), or external and unstable (e.g., temporary organizational policies). Before examining the influence of these attributions on motivational states, however, it is useful to understand how attribution styles can bias the attributions individuals form.

ATTRIBUTION STYLE

It is important to recognize that, as with all perceptions, attributions are not always an accurate reflection of reality! We can probably all think of an instance where someone failed at a task because of his or her own actions, but erroneously blamed the failure on other people or circumstances. In fact, if we are totally honest with ourselves, we can each probably recall one or two instances where we made these false attributions ourselves.

Astute observers may also notice that some people make these attributional errors more frequently than others. These individuals are said to have a biased *attribution style*. An attribution style is defined as a tendency to consistently contribute positive and negative outcomes to a specific type of cause (e.g., internal or external, stable or unstable). The aforementioned tendency to attribute negative outcomes to external factors is often coupled with a tendency to attribute positive outcomes to internal factors. This self-serving attribution style is referred to as an *optimistic attribution style* (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Douglas & Martinko, 2001). This term reflects the fact that people with an optimistic attribution style often feel good about themselves and their capacity for success. An obvious downside, however, is the fact that this personal optimism may be unfounded and can set the individual up for disappointments in the future.

A second attribution style, known as a *pessimistic attribution style*, denotes the opposite tendency. Individuals who demonstrate this attributional tendency frequently attribute undesirable events to internal and frequently stable factors such as lack of intelligence, while attributing desirable outcomes to external and frequently unstable factors, such as bad luck. As the name suggests, people who exhibit this tendency often lack confidence in themselves and are pessimistic concerning their chances for success (Abramson et al., 1978). This tendency can also promote depression and a tendency toward learned helplessness (this is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter and Chapter 12).

A third attributional tendency, known as a *hostile attribution style*, also warrants discussion. This style is similar to the optimistic style just described in that it denotes a tendency toward external attributions for negative outcomes. The two styles differ in that the external attributions for undesirable events associated with a hostile style are also stable in nature. A study by Douglas and Martinko (2001) suggested that the stability of these attributions

could promote anger toward the external “entity” (e.g., one’s manager) and increase the likelihood of an aggressive response. It appears, for example, that a number of highly publicized incidents of workplace violence that have occurred in the United States were committed by individuals with a history of consistently external and stable causal explanations for the negative events in their lives. As such, we can conclude that hostile attribution styles in the workplace are not only unproductive but can also be dangerous as well.

Before discussing the implications of these attribution styles (see Table 17.1), and attributions in general, on employee motivation, one point should be clarified. In many situations the causes of an event are perfectly clear. For example, if a person is rear-ended at a traffic light well after coming to a complete stop, she is going to blame the other driver regardless of her attribution style. Thus, because attribution styles are only tendencies to make certain types of attributions, they are unlikely to have an effect in situations where the causes of an outcome are obvious. However, when the causes are ambiguous, attribution styles are more likely to have an effect. A manager’s goal, therefore, should be to make (as well as to encourage) accurate and unbiased attributions so that employees’ successes can be repeated and the causes of problems can be rectified. (See Exhibit 7–1 at end of chapter.)

ATTRIBUTIONS AND MOTIVATIONAL STATES

The discussion of attributions and motivational states is divided into four sections, each of which describes a desirable or undesirable motivational state and the capacity of specific attributions and attribution styles to bring about these states. Two undesirable states, learned helplessness and aggression, are discussed first. Two desirable motivational states, empowerment and resilience, are then discussed.

Table 7–1 Summary of Attribution Styles

<i>Attributional Style</i>	<i>Impact on Attributions</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Optimistic	Biased toward internal (often stable) attributions for positive outcomes, external (often unstable) for negative	Attribute successful diagnoses to personal ability, and misdiagnoses to inadequate information from patients.
Pessimistic	Biased toward internal (often stable) attributions for negative outcomes, external (often unstable) for positive	Attribute successful outcomes to good luck; poor outcomes are due to lack of personal ability.
Hostile	Biased toward external, stable attributions for negative outcomes	Attribute most workplace problems to a biased and vengeful manager

Learned Helplessness

After repeated punishments and failures, people often become passive and unmotivated and stay that way even after the environment changes so that personal or professional success is possible (Abramson et al., 1978; Martinko & Gardner, 1982). This phenomenon has been labeled “learned helplessness” because it describes a situation in which individuals come to believe that effort is futile because failure is inevitable. They have, in effect, learned to be helpless.

Learned helplessness is a consequence of the reinforcement process described in Chapter 6. When people see that behaviors lead to desired rewards and outcomes, they are motivated to repeat those behaviors. When specific behaviors do not achieve desired outcomes, the motivation to perform those behaviors is lost. Learned helplessness was first observed by Overmier and Seligman (1967) in dogs placed in a shuttle box with two sides. One side had an electric grid, the other side was safe. Initially, the dogs were tethered to the electrified half of the chamber. Before administering an unpleasant, but nonlethal, shock, a light flashed. The dogs quickly learned to associate the flash of light with the impending electrical shock, because of classic conditioning. After the conditioning was complete, the experimenters removed the tethers that had previously made escaping to the nonelectrified side of the chamber impossible. Instead of leaping to safety when the light flashed, however, most of the dogs froze, whimpered, and braced themselves for the shock. It was concluded that the dogs had “learned” helplessness, believing that the shock was inevitable regardless of their efforts.

More recent research suggests that this tendency toward learned helplessness is also common in people and that organizational rules and norms can cause learned helplessness among employees in the same way the experiments induced it in dogs (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). Specifically, organizational policies/norms and leaders’ behaviors that cause employees to feel that success and/or recognition is unobtainable are likely to inhibit motivation. For instance, a manager who routinely takes credit for her subordinates’ successes while blaming them for their failures may find herself with employees who see little reason to work any harder than is necessary to keep their jobs. Similarly, an organization that forces employees to follow outdated and ineffective procedures may find itself with employees who show little urgency or interest in their work, given that they expect the effort to fail. If you expect to fail, why bother trying?

The significance of organizationally induced learned helplessness is that, like the aforementioned dogs, it often remains even when the barriers to success are removed. To continue the previous examples, if the unfair manager is replaced or restrictive policies are removed, we might expect that employee motivation and performance would immediately improve. The reality, however, is that employees who work under such conditions for an extended period of time often retain their learned helplessness and remain unmotivated even after the situation and conditions change.

This tendency can be explained by the attribution process. External barriers to success in the workplace can, ironically, promote internal and frequently

stable attributions for failures while promoting external attributions for successes. Over time, these attributions can manifest themselves in the form of a pessimistic attribution style, causing employees to accept blame for failures they did not contribute to, while attributing successes to their manager or to other external factors. To illustrate, a manager that consistently takes credit for departmental successes while blaming employees for failures can, over time, cause employees to believe and feel that they are incompetent at their jobs. This perception can remain even after the manager is removed if proper steps to restore employees' confidence are not taken. This example also illustrates one of the downsides of the aforementioned optimistic-attribution style. When organizational leaders demonstrate this tendency, they may feel good about themselves (at least in the short term), but their tendency to take credit for successes and attribute blame for failures to others may cause their employees to lose confidence and experience learned helplessness.

Aggression

Another undesirable motivational state discussed here differs from learned helplessness in several ways. Perhaps the most significant is that, unlike the diminished motivation associated with learned helplessness, aggression refers to a state of heightened motivation. The problem is that this motivation is focused on an undesirable behavior or goal.

Instrumental aggression describes behaviors targeted at obtaining a goal that the employing organization is not providing. For instance, an employee who feels he is underpaid and steals from his employer is performing instrumental aggression. Hostile aggression refers to behaviors aimed primarily at harming another person or entity. An employee who physically attacks a manager, for example, probably does so not to get anything from the manager, except the satisfaction of inflicting physical pain. Beyond the obvious surface-level differences in these forms of aggression, there are different underlying motivations (Martinko, Douglas, Harvey, & Joseph, 2005). Whereas instrumental aggression is primarily motivated by a desire to obtain something, hostile aggression is motivated by a desire to retaliate and harm others.

Both types of motivation may be sparked by the causal perceptions associated with hostile attribution styles. Case Study 7–1, at the end of the chapter, describes a study that indicated that individuals can more easily justify instrumental acts of deviance, such as forging paperwork or lying about their performance, in response to negative workplace events that were attributable to stable organizational factors (e.g., inadequate resources). Research has also shown that the attribution of undesirable workplace outcomes to external and stable causes can increase the likelihood of a hostile aggressive response. Similarly, research suggests that individuals with a hostile attribution style are more likely to engage in acts of hostile aggression than others (Douglas & Martinko, 2001). In addition to empirical research evidence, anecdotal reports suggest that a number of workplace shootings in the United States, such as those at several U.S. Post Office facilities, were perpetrated by individuals with external attributional tendencies.

From this evidence we can conclude that employees who attribute negative events at work to external and stable causes are more likely than others to become motivated to engage in aggressive behaviors. A key element in determining which form of aggression will occur, or if any aggression will occur at all, appears to be the perceived intent of the responsible party. In cases where an undesirable workplace event is deemed to be caused by factors beyond the control of any specific party (e.g., an economic downturn), aggression becomes less likely (Harvey, Martinko, & Borkowski, 2007). There is some evidence, however, that some individuals will remain motivated to engage in acts of instrumental aggression in these situations (see Martinko et al., 2005). When it is perceived that an external and stable factor caused a negative outcome and could have been prevented, hostile aggression toward the “guilty” party becomes more likely. This is probably due to the feelings of anger associated with such perceptions (Weiner, 1995). That is, when causality and intent can be attributed to a specific person or entity, people often feel anger, which, in turn, frequently motivates acts of hostility.

Empowerment

Turning our attention to desirable motivational states, we first discuss the notion of empowerment. Empowerment refers to a heightened state of motivation caused by optimistic effort-reward expectations (Conger & Kanungo, 1994). Put differently, empowered individuals expect their efforts toward their goals to succeed and are therefore motivated to exert high levels of effort. Empowerment is also associated with high levels of innovation and managerial effectiveness (Spreitzer, 1995).

Because empowerment among employees is generally good for overall organizational effectiveness, it is helpful to understand the cognitive processes that help foster this state of heightened motivation. Research has shown that the causal attribution process can tell us a lot about how employees become empowered. Unlike learned helplessness, empowerment appears to result from the attribution of negative workplace events to factors that are either internally controllable or that are external, unstable, and uncontrollable. Thus, a physician who misdiagnoses a patient’s disease, but believes the error was under her control (e.g., “I didn’t think to check for this disease, but I will know to do so in the future”), is less likely to experience strongly negative emotions and learned helplessness than a physician who attributes the error to his incompetence. Similarly, a physician who attributes a similar error to an external, unstable, and uncontrollable factor (e.g., the patient gave incomplete information and there was not enough time to run a full battery of diagnostic tests) is likely to feel optimistic about her future chances for successful diagnoses.

Naturally, we can also expect individuals who attribute positive events to internal factors, such as their intelligence, skill, and effort, to experience empowerment (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). It follows that individuals with an optimistic attribution style are more likely to demonstrate empowerment than those with pessimistic or hostile attribution styles. Recall, however, that attribution styles can cause individuals to form inaccurate perceptions of causality. A caveat, therefore, is that those with an optimistic attribution style may

become disillusioned with themselves and feel empowered even when their skills and abilities are lacking. Thus, as we discuss later in the chapter, it is more important to promote attributions that are accurate than to encourage attributions that are optimistic.

Resilience

Resilience is defined as a “staunch acceptance of reality . . . strongly held values, and an uncanny ability to improvise and adapt to significant change” (Coutu, 2002, p. 47). Research suggests that resilient people are relatively good at developing accurate attributions (Huey & Weisz, 1997). More specifically, it appears that people with low levels of resilience have a tendency to be overly external or internal in their attributions for negative outcomes. Thus, people who are nonresilient are likely to err in the attributions and are prone to blame others or themselves for their failures. As we have discussed, either of these attributional errors can promote negative motivational outcomes. High levels of resilience have the opposite effect, helping people keep their attributions in line with reality (recall that resilience denotes a “staunch acceptance of reality”).

Resilience, then, can be thought of as a factor that helps individuals avoid the attributional errors that can hurt motivation levels. By promoting accurate causal perceptions, resilience helps to keep people grounded in reality and helps to prevent pessimistic and hostile attributional tendencies. It is also likely that resilience can help prevent overly optimistic attributions, and the disillusionment and unfounded optimism noted in the previous section.

If we assume that resilience is good for promoting motivation through accurate attributions, the next logical question is, where does resilience come from? We begin the next section by addressing this question, after which we discuss some additional techniques for promoting empowerment while discouraging learned helplessness and aggression.

Table 7-2 Summary of Attributions Associated with Motivational States

<i>Motivational State</i>	<i>Associated Attributional Tendency</i>
Learned Helplessness	Tend to favor internal and stable attributions for failures; external attributions for successes
Aggression	Tend to favor external and stable attributions for failures
Empowerment	Tend to favor internal and stable attributions for successes; external and unstable attributions for failures
Resilience	Tend to favor accurate attributions, not biased toward overly internal or external attributions for successes or failures

PROMOTING MOTIVATIONAL ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES

In this section, we summarize five techniques that can be used by managers to promote and maintain employee motivation. These techniques are grounded in the formation of accurate and empowering attributions.

Screening for Resilience

In the previous section, we discussed the benefits of resilience for forming attributions that are accurate and motivational. Unlike most of the suggestions in this section, however, our advice concerning resilience does not focus on increasing it among existing employees. This is because individuals' levels of resilience appear to form very early in life (Masten, 2001). With proper emotional support, children have shown remarkably high levels of resilience in dealing with undesirable circumstances, such as poverty and violence. Conversely, we are probably all familiar with both children and grown adults who break down in response to relatively minor problems. This suggests that resilience levels are formed early in life and are unlikely to change dramatically in the course of normal life events (note that drastic events such as war and serious disease appear to increase resilience levels in adults, but these do not fall under the umbrella of "normal life events").

Employers may determine that their organizations require a high level of resilience in their employees. Hospitals, for example, can provide a very stressful and emotionally draining working environment. If employees form overly hostile or pessimistic attributions in response to the negative events that are bound to happen in such settings, motivational problems are likely to arise. This type of organization, then, will probably benefit from a resilient workforce. A less stressful organization, on the other hand, might not require such resilience among employees.

Organizations such as hospitals that require high levels of resilience should, then, try to attract and hire individuals that demonstrate high levels of resilience. Although it is unlikely that managers can increase the resilience levels of employees, they can try to form a workforce that has high preexisting levels. This can be accomplished through the use of standardized measures of resilience (see Huey & Weisz, 1997, for an example) during the employee screening process, or through simple interview questions. Asking potential candidates to describe past hardships, and their responses to these hardships, is likely to shed light both on candidates' resilience levels and their attributional tendencies (Campbell & Martinko, 1998).

Attributional Training

Although resilience is a fairly stable and unchanging personal characteristic, accurate and optimistic attributional tendencies can be fostered in other ways. One technique for accomplishing this is attributional training (Martinko & Gardner, 1987). This can take several forms, one of which is measuring employees' attribution styles with an existing assessment device (see

Kent & Martinko, 1995; Lefcourt, 1991; Lefcourt, von Baeyer, Ware, & Cox, 1979; Peterson, Bettes, & Seligman, 1985; Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, & Seligman, 1982; and Russell, 1982, for examples of these instruments) and discussing their attributional biases with them. Often, by simply realizing that they favor overly optimistic, pessimistic, or hostile attributions, individuals can begin to deliberately adjust their “perceptual lenses” to correct for their biases. Over time, this correction can become subconscious, allowing employees to form accurate attributions without additional cognitive effort.

A second form of attributional training is less formal and involves discussing the causes of employees’ successes and failures on a case-by-case basis. This can help employees understand both the internal and external factors involved with workplace outcomes, by helping them to understand the “big picture” in terms of the multiple personal and situational factors likely to contribute to positive and negative events. This promotes a more thorough causal search process and can help employees avoid the cognitive shortcuts that enable overly optimistic, pessimistic, or hostile attributions.

Immunization

Another technique recommended by Martinko and Gardner (1987) is to immunize against demotivational attributions by enabling successes early in an employee’s career or tenure with an organization. If an employee fails miserably at the first few tasks she is assigned in a new position, she may quickly decide that she lacks the ability to succeed at the job (an internal and somewhat stable attribution). If she is allowed to tackle a number of more surmountable assignments before engaging in more difficult tasks, however, she is likely to see that she has the basic ability to succeed at the job. This will probably promote more optimistic attributions throughout the employee’s tenure by providing a basic level of confidence at the beginning.

Increasing Psychological Closeness

In addition to individual attributional biases, employees can also become the unwitting victims of their managers’ inaccurate attributional tendencies (Martinko, 1995). Managers provide an important, and often highly valued, source of feedback for employees. If this feedback consistently attributes blame for negative outcomes to employees’ internal characteristics, employees might accept the feedback as accurate even if it is not, and experience organizationally induced learned helplessness (Martinko & Gardner, 1987).

Research suggests that people in observational capacities (which is often the case for managers) frequently tend to be overly dispositional in their attributions for others’ performance (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). That is, they tend to focus on the influence of actors’ effort and ability levels while overlooking situational factors that contribute to performance. As a result, managers can be overly hard on employees when their performance is low. Managers might also

demonstrate an optimistic attribution style and take credit for the successes of their departments without giving credit to their subordinates, while also blaming employees when their department's performance suffers. Again, these tendencies can be demotivational, particularly if employees believe their managers' attributional explanations for their performance.

One technique for avoiding this tendency is to promote psychological closeness. Psychological closeness describes the extent to which two or more people form the same perceptions regarding their situation. Research has shown that managers who have direct experience with the work their employees perform are relatively less likely to form inaccurate attributions regarding employee performance. Managers who have little or no experience with their employees' tasks (or who have not performed them in a long time) appear to be less familiar with the situational challenges associated with the work and are more likely to blame employees' effort and ability levels when their performance is low (Fedor & Rowland, 1989).

To increase psychological closeness between managers and employees, organizations should work to ensure that managers have experience with the work their subordinates perform. This can be accomplished through internal promotions (i.e., selecting future managers from the pool of employees currently performing the job to be supervised) and by requiring existing managers to perform the jobs they are managing from time to time. These techniques will ensure that managers are familiar with both the internal and external factors associated with performance, allowing more accurate and motivational attributional feedback to be formed and communicated to employees.

Multiple Raters of Performance

A final recommendation for improving the accuracy and motivational capacity of employees' attributions is the use of multiple raters of performance, when possible (Martinko, 2002). As mentioned previously, managers can demonstrate attribution styles that bias them toward demotivational explanations for employee performance. This tendency can be offset by the use of multiple performance raters.

An illustrative example of this style of judging performance is the use of multiple judges to evaluate figure skaters in the Olympics. This system is used to help ensure that potential biases among one or more raters can be offset by the accuracy, or counteracting biases, of other judges. Similarly, organizations can use more than one individual to rate the performance of employees. An increasingly common example of this is the use of 360-degree evaluations, in which peers, managers, subordinates, customers, and the employees themselves rate performance. Although each of these parties may demonstrate some attributional inaccuracy, the hope is that through the use of multiple sources, an accurate picture of the causes of each employee's successes and failures will emerge. With this information, the proper steps can be taken to correct poor performance and encourage future successes, ultimately promoting empowerment among employees. (See Case Study 7-1 at end of chapter.)

SUMMARY

Our overarching goal in this chapter was to illustrate the importance of attributional perceptions in predicting employee motivation. One of the key findings from research on this topic is that internal and stable attributions for successes in the workplace, as well as external and unstable attributions for negative workplace events, are associated with higher levels of empowerment. We have seen repeatedly, however, that such attributions are only desirable when they are accurate. If an employee fails at a task because the employee is simply not “cut out” for the type of work being performed, it is generally better for the employee to realize that the repeated failures are due to external factors. Similarly, if failures are caused by unstable internal factors such as insufficient effort, it is important for employees to make that attribution, even if it is not the most desirable short-term conclusion. These accurate attributions help steer employees down the path toward empowerment, and managers can assist in the process by providing honest and accurate assessments of the causes of employees’ performance.

END-OF-CHAPTER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is an attribution?
 2. Differentiate between optimistic, pessimistic, and hostile attribution styles.
 3. Why might an optimistic attribution style be undesirable?
 4. How can different types of attributions and attribution styles encourage high or low levels of learned helplessness, aggression, and empowerment?
 5. How does resilience promote motivational attributions?
 6. How can organizational leaders promote accurate and motivating attributions among their employees?
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END-OF-CHAPTER CASE STUDIES AND EXERCISE

Case Study 7-1 Managing Employees’ Attributions

David was just promoted to manage a small medical transcription department and has inherited a problem. His predecessor recently completed annual performance evaluations of the staff, and it is now time to distribute annual raises based, in large part, on these evaluations. Of the seven employees David now manages, all received fairly strong evaluations, mostly in the “above average” range, although no one received the highest rating of “excellent.” The budget for David’s department will not be growing much for the next few years, and there is very little room for salary increases. Had any of the employees achieved higher performance levels, he might have been able to apply for extra merit pay funding, but this does not appear to be an option.

Because all seven employees received relatively strong evaluations, and there was not much difference between the highest and lowest performers, he has decided to allocate the raises equally among them. These raises will probably be disappointingly small, however. David is trying to decide how to break the disappointing news to his staff in the least demotivational way possible. He is weighing the following options:

1. Explain to the staff that they deserve larger raises but, based on the long-term departmental budget, this was the best he could do for them.
2. Explain to the staff that he could have gotten them larger raises if their performance levels had been higher.
3. Explain to the staff that they deserve larger raises and that he, as their manager, failed them by not doing more for them.
4. Explain to the staff that these raises are fair, given their performance levels.

Questions

1. What attributions are being communicated in each of these explanations? Are they internal or external? Are they stable or unstable?
2. From a motivational standpoint, what potential pros and cons do you see for each of these explanations?
3. Which of these four options (or which combination of two or more) do you think would be least demotivational for the staff? Why?

Case Study 7-2 “Unhealthy” Motivation: How Physicians Justify Deviant Behavior

We probably all know the feeling, something bad happens at work and there are a few choices for dealing with it. You can go “by the book,” and potentially suffer some unpleasant consequences, or bend the rules just a bit to make the whole thing go away. For example, imagine a situation where you miss a deadline by a few hours and you can choose to tell your manager or, because your manager happens to be in a long meeting, finish the job late and slip it under some paperwork on her desk, claiming that it has been there all day. You know what you *should* do, but you also know that the sneakier alternative is probably the path of least resistance. What would you do?

Your answer to this question would probably depend, at least in part, on *why* you missed the deadline in the first place. If you missed the deadline because you procrastinated all week and then took an extended lunch break on the day the work was due, you might feel a degree of guilt over lying to your manager. Attribution theory suggests that this is because you are attributing the missed deadline to an internal and unstable/controllable factor, namely insufficient effort. This guilt might, depending on other factors, such as your values and the consequences of your manager learning of the missed deadline, reduce your willingness to lie about finishing the work on time.

Your response might change, however, if you feel that you missed the deadline because the amount of time your manager gave you to complete the work was unreasonably short. If you worked late and skipped lunch all week, but still needed a couple extra hours to get the work done, you are much less likely to blame yourself. Instead, you will probably attribute the missed deadline to an external and relatively stable factor—your manager. Such attributions are associated with anger, and anger is a strong motivator of deviant behavior. This attribution-driven anger might help you feel justified in sneaking the work onto your manager’s desk—why should you get in trouble if the request was unreasonable?

To test the strength of attributions such as these to motivate deviant behaviors, Harvey et al. (2005) examined the relationship between attributions, emotions, and the justification of workplace deviance using a sample of physicians. The researchers gave the physicians a hypothetical scenario similar to the one just described and asked them whether they would feel comfortable altering dates on paperwork to disguise the fact that a nonlethal, but procedural, mistake had been made in diagnosing a patient. Each physician was given the same hypothetical scenario with

one difference—the cause for the mistake (i.e., the attribution) was varied so that in some cases the mistake was due to internal and stable or unstable factors (i.e., the physician has poor attention to detail or was distracted), or to external and stable or unstable factors (i.e., the physician's department is chronically understaffed or an emergency meeting was called and the required test could not be ordered on time).

As you might expect, on the basis of the preceding discussion, physicians were more likely to say they would alter the paperwork when the cause of the mistake was beyond their control and was stable (i.e., likely to occur again) in nature. Before taking an overly dim view of these physicians, however, remember that the hypothetical mistake described in the scenarios was deliberately designed to be very minor and inconsequential. Still, this study provides some insight into the power of attributions to motivate behaviors we might not normally consider.

This justification process is an almost unavoidable part of life. There are always going to be times where it is tempting to break the rules because we feel that it is a justifiable response to a wrongdoing we have suffered. Indeed, many timeless stories are based on the notion of justifiable wrongdoing—Robin Hood returning the king's wealth to the peasants, for example.

There is a decidedly darker side to the justification process, however. Perpetrators of many serious crimes throughout history have, at least at the time of the crime, convinced themselves that they were justified in their behavior. In many cases, the justification can be traced to a desire for revenge resulting from the attribution of negative events to externally controllable, stable factors. Thus, we can see that there is more at stake than productivity when it comes to forming accurate attributions.

Exhibit 7-1 Attribution Style Self-Assessment: Measure Your Attribution Style for Negative Events

To complete this assessment, begin by reading each of the hypothetical scenarios below and imagine them happening to you. Then, try to imagine what the most likely cause of each event would be if it *did* happen to you.

1. You recently received a below-average performance evaluation from your supervisor.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

2. Today, you were informed that suggestions you made to your supervisor in a meeting would not be implemented.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

3. You recently learned that you will not receive a promotion that you have wanted for a long time.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

4. You recently discovered that you are being paid considerably less than another employee holding a position similar to yours.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

5. You recently received information that you failed to achieve all of your goals for the last performance reporting period.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

6. You have a great deal of difficulty getting along with your coworkers.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

7. You just discovered that a patient recently complained about the services you provided.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

(Continued)

Exhibit 7-1 (Continued)

8. A large layoff has been announced at your organization, and you are told that you will be one of those laid off.

What is the most likely cause of this outcome? _____

- a. To what extent was this outcome caused by something about you?

Nothing to do with me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Totally due to me

- b. Will this cause be present in similar future situations?

Never present 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Always present

Enter the sum of your **A** scores here: _____

Enter the sum of your **B** scores here: _____

Scoring Key:

Your **A** score represents the *locus of causality* dimension of your attribution style for negative outcomes. A score above 28 represents an internal attribution style, with scores closer to the maximum of 56 indicating a relatively more internal style (i.e., a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to internal causes). A score below 28 represents an external attribution style, with scores closer to zero indicating a relatively more external style (i.e., a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to external causes).

Your **B** score represents the *stability* dimension of your attribution style for negative outcomes. A score above 28 represents a stable attribution style, with scores closer to the maximum of 56 indicating a relatively more stable style (i.e., a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to stable causes). A score below 28 represents an unstable attribution style, with scores closer to zero indicating a relatively less stable style (i.e., a tendency to attribute negative outcomes to unstable causes).

Adapted from Kent, R. L., & Martinko, M. J. (1995). The measurement of attributions in organizational research. In M. J. Martinko (Ed.), *Attribution theory: An organizational perspective* (pp. 53–75). Delray Beach, FL: St. Lucie Press. Reprinted with permission.

Questions

1. According to this test, do you have an attribution style that favors internal or external attributions for negative outcomes?
2. According to this test, do you have an attribution style that favors stable or unstable attributions for negative outcomes?
3. Would you characterize your attribution style as optimistic? Pessimistic? Hostile?
4. If you were managing an employee with this attribution style, how would you help him or her stay motivated when negative events occur?

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