

# “Dare to be....Is the Fundamental Attribution Error getting in your way?”

The Fundamental Attribution Error is simply this: human beings tend to falsely attribute the negative behaviours of others to their character, while they attribute their own negative behaviours to their environment.

This happens because we like to believe that we do bad things because of the situations we are in, but somehow we easily come to the conclusion that others do bad things because they are predisposed to being bad.

*For example*, when our boss manages poorly, we believe that he does it because he's ignorant, lazy, playing politics, too “full of him/herself” and is inherently a bad leader. When we manage poorly, we're simply making a mistake because of the pressure we're under, a deadline has to be met, we didn't have enough sleep etc.

Similarly, we often attribute other people's success to their environment and our own success to our character. That's because we like to believe that we are inherently good and talented, while others are merely lucky, beneficiaries of good fortune “in the right place at the right time”, friends with the decision makers etc.

Recognising this effect and addressing our natural but dangerous biases is a significant element in becoming a better manager/leader.

## Attribution Theory

According to the Attribution Theory, we tend to explain our own behaviour and the behaviour of others by assigning attributes (or inferences) to these behaviour.

There are basically two sources for our behaviour; those influenced by external factors and those influenced by internal factors.

Imagine walking into your boss's office and he immediately tells you, in an angry tone, not to bother him. An external explanation of this behaviour might be, "He's really a nice guy but the stress is overwhelming. He needs a vacation." On the other hand, you might see the same behaviour and say, "what an ignorant jerk". The same behaviour is given two very opposite explanations.

Many factors play a role in how we assign attributes to behaviours. Obviously our view of the world, our previous experience with a particular person or situation, and our knowledge of the behaviour play an important role. Other factors can influence our interpretation as well, and there are two important errors or mistakes we tend to make when assigning these attributes.

**1. Fundamental Attribution Error.** This refers to the tendency to overestimate the internal and underestimate the external factors when explaining the behaviours of others.

This may be a result of our tendency to pay more attention to the situation rather than to the individual and is especially true when we know little about the other person.

For example, the last time you were driving and got cut off did you say to yourself "What an idiot" (or something similar), or did you say "they must be having a rough day." Chances are that this behaviour was assigned to mostly internal attributes and you didn't give a second thought to what external factors were playing a role in their driving behaviour.

**2. Self-Serving Bias.** We tend to equate successes to internal and failures to external attributes.

Imagine getting a promotion. Most of us will feel that this success is due to hard work, intelligence, dedication, and similar internal factors. But if you are fired, well obviously it's the state or the economy, a competitor destabilising the market, R&D not being innovative....

(Note - this bias is true for most people, but for those who are depressed, have low self-esteem, or view themselves negatively, the bias is typically opposite. For these people, a success may mean that a multitude of negatives have been overlooked or that luck was

the primary reason. For failures, the depressed individual will likely see their own negative qualities, such as stupidity, as being the primary factor.)

As a manager/business leader, being aware of the Fundamental Attribution Error is applicable in a number of ways – are some of my employees struggling or succeeding because of who they are and what they're willing to do, or am I missing something about the context, the structure of their lives, the support that shapes their days and lives?

Are managers expressing concerns that are strictly a reflection of their personality, or are there contextual factors shaping behaviour – environmental or organizational matters that I could address?

Are my managers approaching a difficult issue in a certain way because of their character, or because they have been shaped and influenced by their surroundings?

An awareness of fundamental attribution error will hopefully serve anyone responsible for leading change, or even in daily decisions and interactions with other managers, employees and colleagues.

On a broader level try to recognise the behavioural bias and not automatically attributing bad behaviour to bad people. Instead, initially look at mistakes and a resistance to good ideas to the context rather than to defects in character.

This doesn't mean you excuse serious mistakes. But the solution might be that they need an expanded context.

To avoid making the fundamental attribution error, one of the best things you can do is "put yourself in the other person's shoes," as the old saying goes. By thinking about what you might do in the same situation, you might come up with some situational factors for a behaviour which could shed more light on the subject.

Awareness of this common bias can help you look for hidden behavioural factors, making you a better observer and better able to read people and situations. Also when you are trying to explain your own behaviour, avoid indulging the actor-observer effect, and make sure to give your personality some credit for your actions.

## Don't always assume the person is the problem - another example

Sometimes what looks like a problem with a person is really a problem with the situation.

Let me tell you the story of manager named Constance. She travelled a lot, and when she got home, she had a pile of work waiting for her. But she wanted to stay accessible to her team, so she established an “open door” policy, inviting her direct reports to come see her any time.

So she was astonished when she got some performance reviews back and found that her team complained that she wasn't listening to them. What else did she need to do? She had an open-door policy! She investigated some more and discovered the root of the problem. When people came to see her, they sat across from her desk. And when they were talking, sometimes she'd catch a glimpse of an email coming in. And sometimes she'd take the opportunity to reply while the employee was talking. No big deal, right? Just multitasking! But, understandably, the employees felt like she was being rude and not listening. So, having discovered this, what did she do?

One afternoon, she rearranged her office. Now, when people came to see her, she had to turn completely around to face them. Her computer was totally out of sight. No more email temptation.

Six months later, she solicited more feedback from her direct reports, and her communication scores had soared. So what changed Constance's character so dramatically? Nothing. She was the same person. But her situation—her environment—was different, so she acted differently.

But what if HR had gotten wind of her performance reports? They might have drawn some conclusions about her. “This Constance isn't very empathetic. She doesn't listen well. Maybe she's just not cut out for management.”

Constance is a great manager with a situation problem—she needed to eliminate the distraction. What looks like a people problem is often a situation problem.

Be aware of the external factors before you leap to judgement.