Lesson 4: Attribution Theory

Introduction

This lesson consists of:

1. Attribution Theory

2. Case Study

3. Student Journal

Assignment

1. **Read** **Course Guide**.

2. When you solve a case study or act like a leader in your organization:

I. ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

II. ***Analyze*** the situation using Attribution Theory.

A. ***Identify*** the attributional biases evident in the situation, if any.

B. ***Identify*** the rational factors evident in the situation, if any.

III. ***Explain*** an **Area of Interest** in terms of how attributions, attributional biases, and rational factors are influencing the behavior of the leader and responses of others to the leader.

3. **Complete a Student Journal entry** for Attribution Theory.

From your own personal experience, describe a time when you have seen the Actor-Observer Bias influence a leader’s decision. What happened? Who was involved? Identify the Actor and the Observer. How did each account for what happened? How does each party’s attributions illustrate a form of attribution error or bias? How did bias affect what the leader did and how the other person responded?

Attribution Theory

*Attribution* is the psychological, often subconscious process of making inferences and judgments about the causes of people’s behavior. This natural tendency is a convenient way to categorize and organize the behavior we see in others and ourselves. However, the attribution process is subject to numerous errors and inaccuracies. Similar to the attention, perception, and cognition differences we learned in Lesson 3, attributions vary greatly from person to person. Different leaders, followers, and observers can evaluate identical circumstances; yet all can arrive at vastly different judgments. It is paramount that leaders recognize that their attributions are not identical to objective fact.

One way to look at attribution is to equate it to blame or credit. When something goes wrong, most people develop an opinion as to who or what is responsible, thereby assigning blame. When something succeeds, we similarly decide whether the person deserves credit for the victory. Attributions can be *internal*, meaning that we blame or credit a particular person. *External* attributions mean that we blame or credit other factors such as bad weather, bad luck, insufficient resources, lack of time, etc.

Rational Factors

When making attributions, people incorporate two elements—rational factors and biases. Rational factors are based on multiple observations. As the leader observes followers over a longer period of time, the leader will base their attributions on more objective information and less personal perception. As such, rational factors are more reliable, but still not entirely accurate, elements in the attribution process. Psychologists have identified three rational factors; these are *distinctiveness*, *consistency,* and *consensus*.

**Distinctiveness** is whether the person has done well or poorly on different tasks. Consider an employee who fails to complete a project on time. The attribution will likely be internal if the employee has failed at other jobs. Conversely, external factors will probably be blamed if the person has excelled at other tasks.

**Consistency** describes the person’s performance of this same task on other occasions. If the person routinely performs this job poorly, an internal attribution will probably occur. If the person normally does this job well but experiences problems one particular time, the leader would likely blame outside circumstances, making an external attribution.

**Consensus** is an evaluation of how other people perform this task. If other people normally succeed at this job, but this employee is having difficulty, do you think the leader’s attribution will be internal or external?

Certainly, there is room for error in applying the rational factors. Leaders are limited by how much they know about the person’s distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus.

Bias

The other element in Attribution Theory, biases, causes even more mistakes in judging human behavior. Five of these can play a direct role in the interactions between leader and follower:

1. **Fundamental Attribution Error** is the common tendency for an observer to overestimate internal factors and underestimate external/environmental factors when interpreting and explaining the behaviors of others. For example, an officer is late for roll call so the general tendency is to say that the person lacks the discipline to get to work on time (an internal attribution) rather than to assume there was unusually heavy traffic or the offer made a traffic stop on the way to work (external attribution).

2. **Actor/Observer Bias** is the common tendency for the person involved in a problem (the actor, usually the employee) to blame external factors beyond his control. At the same time, the person observing the event (often the boss) blames the actor (an internal attribution).

3. **Self-serving bias** is related to the Actor/Observer bias, but it goes a step further. The Self-Serving Bias is the tendency for actors to attribute all successes to themselves and their talent, hard work, etc. (internal attributions), while still attributing failures to external forces, such as weather or luck.

4. **Negative Outcome Bias** is when a leader is much more likely to punish a follower if a negative consequence occurs than if the same act were performed without negative ramifications. For example, a police officer who is cleaning his gun and accidentally fires a round into his television set at home will likely receive a fairly minor penalty. But if another officer has a well-publicized accidental discharge that strikes and kills an innocent bystander, the punishment is likely to be far greater.

5. **Apology Effect** occurs when the leader is less likely to punish the follower who says he or she is sorry, regardless of the sincerity of that apology. Followers who appeal to the sympathies of the leader are far less likely to sustain serious sanctions compared to other followers who perform similar misdeeds but fail to apologize.

Leader Strategies

Empathetic Listening

Suspend Judgment

Gather All Available Facts

Summary

Whenever a leader uses judgment and takes action, there is a chain reaction effect upon the employees, the group, and ultimately the organization. Since the first steps of the Leader Thought Process are to Identify, Analyze, and Explain what is happening, consider how a leader’s personal attributions could influence the entire problem-solving process.

A leader’s first impressions make important contributions to effective leader actions, but care should be taken to incorporate as much objective fact and as little bias as possible by realizing there is usually more to the story than a leader’s attribution.

By alerting leaders to some of the rational factors and biases that influence decisions, this course aims to make you more aware of your own attribution errors and more willing to listen to and appreciate the viewpoints of others.

**References**

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Case Study

You are a Sergeant responsible for supervising a shift of 20 personnel. You open an email from your lieutenant asking you to rank order the top three and bottom three folks on the shift. It seems that there are some personnel transfers coming and she wants to know who

to protect and who to let go.

You quickly pull up a roster of everyone on the shift and decide to pick the top folks first. Master Police Officer Gerras comes to mind first. He is your "Go-To Guy” whenever there is any sort of critical event or task. He is very accomplished in the wide variety of tasks required to accomplish the squad’s mission, and he does them all very well. He did have that citizen complaint last month. But when you looked into it, you decided that a combination of the rain at the time and the citizens' attitude were the real issues, not Gcrras' behavior. You only have to think for a moment to put him on the Top Three List.

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Without much additional deliberation, Senior Police Officer Harding comes to mind. As the squad's Field Training Officer (FTO), she has consistently received recognition as a superior trainer from trainees, peers, and, most importantly, the supervisors who get her probationary officers after their FTO period. She is a specialist who focuses solely on being a good FTO. When she has no training assignment, she is barely average. She clearly understands the squad's requirements, but lacks the spark of a great officer like Gerras. Nevertheless, you decide her training skills far outweigh any other shortcomings, so you place Harding on the Top Three List.

After careful thought and going back and forth. you put Ofc. Kwan on the Top Three List. He has lots of experience, but his results are mixed. Last month he screwed up the traffic control for the high school graduation. But to his credit, he took the butt chewing well. apologizing and promising not to let it happen again. You think, "That's good enough for me” so he goes to the Top Three List.

Next you take a look at the Bottom Three List. The first is easy. Ofc. Blowchowski couldn't hit water if he fell out of a boat. While everyone else in the department is supporting the chief’s "Get Tough on Speeding"' project by writing lots of citations, "Ski" can't find the time to write any. You're tired of having to motivate him. Let someone else sort him out.

Also easy is Ofc. Emory. His traffic accident last month was typical. When asked about hitting another car while responding to a high-priority call without lights and siren in bad weather, he stated that the only reason he had the wreck was the slick pavement and inattention on the part of the other motorist. “If she’d been paying attention, she wouldn’t have pulled into my path.” His excuses for his accident still annoy you. Your opinion is that Emory is a poor officer who doesn’t have the right attitude to be a police officer. You put him on the Bottom Three List.

The last one for the Bottom Three List is also relatively easy too. Ofc. O’Clanahan was late to roll call twice last month, which unfortunately came to the Captain’s attention each time and rolled downhill to bite you in the butt. You decide you don’t need the Captain’s attention anymore, so the best solution is to move O’Clanahan along even though Ofc. Jones was also late twice but had the sense to keep a low profile, didn’t cause a stir, and, most importantly, kept the Captain off of your case.

You go get a cup of coffee before reviewing your list and forwarding it to the Lieutenant. When you review it, Ofc. Paul comes to mind as a possible addition. She is a bit of a puzzle. When you talked to her recently about the Chief’s commendation she received for DUI arrests, she said, “I got the recognition because I deserved it. I’m a good officer with all of the right skills.” But shortly after, when she lost a DUI case due to errors and omissions in her paperwork, she said, “Hey, the weather was bad that night and a Sherff’s Deputy was at the scene distracting me.” On another occasion, while arresting a driver for a DUI, she forgot to turn on her in-car video camera and got a citizen’s complaint against her for using too much force during the arrest. During the investigation into her conduct, she argued strenuously that she had only reacted to what the drunk had done and it was all his fault. “If he had just stayed calm and followed my orders, everything would have been fine.” But the drunk ended up with a black eye and a cut on his forehead when she restrained him. You wonder if her judgment about her skills is accurate or if you should include her on the list too. But you decide to let it go and not include her on the list. She produces in some areas and she’s trainable.

Pleased with your list, you finalize it and email it to your Lieutenant. The following morning, you get an email back saying, “Got it. Thanks. I agree with your top three, but I disagree with the bottom three. What about Greene? In the short time he’s been on the department, it seems like everything he’s involved with goes south. I don’t think he has the abilities to be a police officer.”

You think this over and realize that the Lieutenant may not realize the unusual circumstances into which Greene has been placed recently but nevertheless reply, “OK, boss. Let’s talk about the bottom three.”

Use the first two steps in the Leader Thought Process.

I. (Step I) ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

1. You are asked to provide the top three and bottom three performers on your squad by your supervisor.

2. You may not be entirely objective as you select the top and bottom three.

3. Your supervisor may not be entirely objective in her assessment of your personnel

II. (Step II) ***Analyze*** the situation using Attribution Theory.

What is the relationship among the Areas of Interest listed above? More specifically, is there a chronological order or **logical chain of events** that helps you make sense of the facts you have? If so, outline the time sequence of events.

1. Your agency is preparing to make personnel moves.
2. Your supervisor asks you to select the top and bottom three personnel from your squad.
3. You complete the task.
4. Your supervisor disagrees with your assessment and you agree to meet to discuss your selections.

What usage of rational factors is evident in the situation? Who is using them? How?

What attribution errors or biases are evident in the situation? Who is using them? How?

Who else is making attributions? Do the attributions contain rational factors, biases, or both?

III. (Step II) ***Explain*** an **Area of Interest** in terms of how attributions, attributional biases, and rational factors are influencing the behavior of the leader and responses of others to the leader.

How have the Lieutenant’s attributions affected the motivation, satisfaction, and perhaps the future performance of Officer Gerras?

How has the motivation, satisfaction, and/or performance of other individuals been affected? By whom and how? What attribution factors are involved?

Do the facts of the case and your explanation form a pattern that allows you to identify a fundamental or **root cause** (i.e., is there something in the case information that suggests it is the underlying cause of all or most of the Areas of Interest)?

Name:

**Complete a Student Journal entry** for Attribution Theory.

From your own personal experience, describe a time when you have seen the Actor-Observer Bias influence a leader’s decision in a police department. What happened? Who was involved? Identify the Actor and the Observer. How did each account for what happened? How does each party’s attributions illustrate a form of attribution error or bias? How did bias affect what the leader did and how the other person responded?