

# Why'd She Do That? Explaining Workplace Behavior and Why It Matters

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The boss walks by your office with a scowl on her face. Your employee rolls his eyes halfway through your comments in a meeting. Your project fails miserably.

Next come the mental gymnastics, where you try to figure out why these things happened and what it means for you and your organization.

This process of interpretation is called attribution. It happens everyday with profound effects on workplace dynamics. Attributions underlie employee performance evaluations, workplace climate, and both rocky and smooth interpersonal relationships.

The problem with attributions are their tendency to be inaccurate, sometimes wildly so. Without mind-reading skills or crystal balls, we often interpret behavior through the lens of our own worst-case scenarios. And when this happens, it can cause miscommunication, conflict, and problems.

Social scientists who study attribution identify patterns in how we explain behavior, whether it is due to the person or the situation; whether the behavior might change or not; and whether we are explaining success or failure.

Our tendency, according to this research, is to explain other people's behavior as internal, i.e., it's something about them. But our *own* behavior we tend to explain as a result of the situation. So our eye-rolling underling is disrespectful by nature (something about him). If we roll our eyes during a meeting, it's because there's a speck in our eye (the situation).

Along with person vs. situation attributions, viewing employee behavior as changeable or unchangeable makes a huge difference in how you manage. An employee's lack of skill or knowledge is subject to change, potentially fixed by training or education. Not so much if the employee has personality or ability issues, which tend to be viewed as stable and unlikely to change.

Researchers have also identified styles of attribution. Optimists tend to attribute successes to people and failures to situations; all things can change in the optimist's eyes, so the future looks rosy. These employees tend to be high performers, but they can also be overconfident. Think

Leslie Knope from Parks and Rec.

Pessimists attribute successes to situations (pure luck or stars aligning), failures to people (I can never get anything right), and tend to believe that things won't change. Pessimists tend to be helpless and low performers. Think Eeyore the donkey on Winnie the Pooh.

Gender also plays a role in attribution. Men and women alike tend to attribute women's achievements to circumstances (external) and men's achievements to the man (internal). These patterns of attribution have been used to explain the relatively low percentage of women at the tops of public and private organizations.

Attribution skill is particularly important to supervisors delivering employee performance evaluations. Which is where another bias surfaces: supervisors tend to attribute workplace successes to the situation (over which they have more influence), but workplace failures to individual employees (which pinpoints the blame). Employees do the opposite, attributing workplace successes to their own efforts (internal) and workplaces failures to circumstances (external and on the supervisor's watch). Gaps in attribution between supervisors and employees are not a good thing, potentially leading to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions.

To improve the accuracy of your own attributions, you can:

- Understand your attribution style. Online tests can give you a clue, but simply being aware of how you explain behavior and events will help as well;
- Write down attributions for behavior or events, as well as the difference they will make to your responses;
- Recognize the potential for biased attributions, whether related to the person vs. the situation, success vs. failure, or gender;
- In delivering employee performance evaluations, write down your attributions for workplace successes and failures, have your employee do the same, then compare the two. Research has shown that this approach tends to close attribution gaps between supervisors and employees.

These tips won't make you a mind reader, but they can help you better interpret behavior, whether of bosses, employees or peers.