

How to avoid making attribution errors in performance

Margaret Beaton 24 April 2014

All too often I see executives making mistakes with attribution errors in performance coaching. Coaching people to help them perform in their jobs and develop in their careers is an important part of every executive's responsibilities, yet attribution errors occur frequently and distressingly. Here's how to avoid making attribution errors in performance coaching.

First, you need to have an intense understanding of what's expected of the person in the role for which you are coaching them. Role expectations are the yardstick by which you and others assess the performance of the person. These expectations are of two, related types:

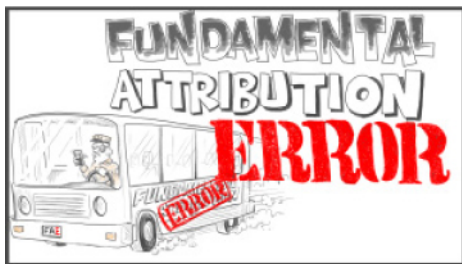
- + *What* outcomes are expected, i.e. KPIs such as financial results, business process changes, timelines to meet. Information on KPIs is readily available because KPIs are measured and reported, usually against plans and budgets.
- + *How* these outcomes are achieved, i.e. the behaviours used by the person to deliver results. Information on behaviours is gathered by on-the-job observation and in some instances by multi-source feedback. Behaviours are judged in terms of the organisation's core values.

Then, as a performance coach you need to use *what* and *how* information and your inter-personal skills to provide feedback that enables the recipient to choose to respond, change and progress.

The two most common attribution errors

Attribution errors occur when information used to explain either failure to achieve expected outcomes (the *what*) and/or behaviour that is contrary to organisational core values (the *how*) is misinterpreted.

In other words, relying on incomplete and/or invalid information causes attribution errors. These examples show that attribution errors arise from two sources of information: [1] sources internal to the person being judged (motives, abilities, style, etc.) and [2] sources external to the person (organisation, tasks, resources, etc.). Here are some examples for coaches and coachees.



Fundamental attribution errors. Typically the coach attributes problems in performance to the individual, i.e. the coachee. The coachee is adversely judged on their ability and/or their motivation, manner, or personality; which are internal factors. The coach all too often does not take into account the situation in which the individual is working, e.g. the complexity of the tasks, the adequacy of resources, the deadlines required; which are external factors. Thus the coach concludes, "Your skills are not up to it" and "You don't apply yourself fully".

Self-serving bias errors. In contrast, the coachee usually displays a self-serving bias such that if their performance is superior, look internally and take the credit, rather than acknowledging the support of their team, luck or other factors. On the other hand, if the coachee is deemed to be under-performing or behaving inappropriately, then they look outside themselves and seek to explain by pointing to lack of organisational support, unrealistic expectations of their supervisor and the like. Thus the coachee protests "I haven't been given the training to do this" and "You don't brief me properly".



Two ways to avoid attribution errors in performance coaching

First, be aware that attribution errors commonly creep into your judgement. Be alert to the tendency to be err, whether because of your fixed beliefs and assumptions or because of selection, confirmation, recency, or other biases.

Second, ensure all necessary information is accurate, available and systematically taken into account when assessing an individual. Avoid making attribution errors by being diligent in collecting and using current and accurate information.

Benefits of avoiding attribution errors

Performance coaching puts effort into achieving positive outcomes and behaviours.

Attribution errors diminish – and can even permanently damage – the returns on performance coaching efforts. When attribution errors mar coaching, returns to both the individual coachee and the organisation are compromised.

The individuals can be harshly judged and become the victim of unfair conclusions and actions. The organisation suffers reduced engagement of its people and diminished productivity.

Performance coaching should be a mutually rewarding investment by all parties. Executives need to recognise and avoid the pitfalls of making attribution errors. This starts with being aware of their ubiquity.

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