

Username: Sean Smith **Book:** Understanding and Managing Organizational Behavior, Sixth Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

A prediction that comes true because a perceiver expects it to come true.

scored highly on some predictor of academic performance such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), this knowledge may lead the professor to perceive the student more positively than he or she deserves. This bias could also work to the disadvantage of a person who scored poorly on the predictor.

Sometimes, knowledge-of-predictor bias results in a **self-fulfilling prophecy**—a prediction that comes true because a perceiver expects it to come true.⁷⁶ The classic demonstration of this phenomenon took place in a classroom setting in the 1960s. At the beginning of the school year, teachers were told that a few of their students were potential “late bloomers” who, given the proper encouragement, should excel. In fact, these students had been randomly selected from the class rosters and were no different from their peers. Later on in the school year, however, the “late bloomers” were indeed doing better and had even improved their scores on standardized IQ tests compared to their earlier performance and the performance of the other children in the class.⁷⁷ What was responsible for the change? The teachers in the study probably gave the “late bloomers” more attention, encouragement, and feedback and had higher expectations of them, all of which resulted in their improved performance. The teachers may have also looked more at these students and made encouraging body gestures toward them. In this way, knowledge of a predictor (in this case, a false predictor) resulted in behavior changes that caused the prediction to become true. Research has also shown that when an interviewer conveys negative expectations to a job applicant simply through nonverbal body language, the applicant performs poorly.⁷⁸ This situation hurts both the applicant and the organization; the applicant won’t get the job, and the organization may lose a potentially capable member.

Sometimes, self-fulfilling prophecies can occur in an entire work group. A group of construction workers, for example, may be very responsible and perform highly when their supervisor has high expectations and treats them with respect. The same workers, however, may act lazy and perform at a low level when they have a supervisor who has low expectations and a derogatory attitude toward them.

Attribution Theory

Through the process of perception, people try to make sense of their environment and the people in it. Sometimes, however, just making sense of a target does not produce good understanding. To return to an earlier example, if you see your friend drinking beer before a 9 A.M. class, you perceive that he has a drinking problem. This perception may lead you to wonder why he has the drinking problem. To answer the question of “why,” you attribute your friend’s behavior to a certain cause. Your explanation of his behavior is an **attribution**.

Attribution theory describes how people explain the causes of their own and other people’s behavior. Attribution theory is interested in why people behave the way they do and what can be done to change their behavior. Consider the case of Martin Riley, a newly hired production worker at Rice Paper Products. Riley worked at a much slower pace than his coworkers; he always seemed to be lagging behind the other members of his production team. The big question in his supervisor’s mind was why. Attribution theory focuses on how the supervisor and how Riley himself explain the cause of Riley’s lackluster performance.

In organizations, the decisions made and the actions taken are based on attributions for behavior. Only when these attributions are accurate (that is, only when the real cause of a behavior has been determined) are good decisions likely to be made and appropriate actions taken. In a job interview, for example, whether a qualified applicant who is quiet and fails to ask questions receives an offer often depends on the interviewer’s attributions for this behavior. Is the applicant a shy person who takes a while to warm up to new people? Was the applicant suffering from a bad case of nerves? Is the applicant not really interested in the job? If the interviewer makes the last attribution for the applicant’s behavior, an offer will probably not be forthcoming. If that attribution is inaccurate, however, and the applicant was simply nervous, then the organization may be missing an opportunity to hire one of the best applicants for the job.

Similarly, supervisors’ reactions to high or low performance by subordinates often depend on the attributions the supervisors make. A supervisor who attributes a subordinate’s high performance to exceptional ability may give the subordinate increasingly challenging assignments and eventually recommend a promotion. If the subordinate’s high performance is attributed to luck, however, no changes may be made in the subordinate’s assignments. In either case, if the

ATTRIBUTION

An explanation of the cause of behavior.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY

A group of theories that describes how people explain the causes of behavior.