

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.

attributions are incorrect, problems are likely to result: the subordinate will be overwhelmed by challenging assignments or will not receive the challenges he or she thrives on. When subordinates perform poorly, supervisors are likely to provide additional on-the-job training if they attribute poor performance to a lack of knowledge rather than to laziness. If laziness is the real cause, however, training is not likely to improve performance.

Smooth day-to-day interactions among members of an organization often hinge on the extent to which people's attributions are accurate.⁷⁹ If a coworker snaps at you a couple of times one day, and you correctly attribute the coworker's behavior to the personal problems he is having at home, these small incidents are not going to damage your relationship. If you incorrectly attribute this behavior to the coworker's dislike for you, however, you may start avoiding him and treating him in a cold and distant manner, which will cause your relationship to deteriorate.

Internal and External Attributions

People generally attribute someone's behavior to internal and external causes (see Exhibit 4.7). An **internal attribution** assigns the cause of behavior to some characteristic of the target and assigns credit or blame to the individual actor. Martin Riley's supervisor at Rice Paper Products might attribute Riley's poor performance to personal limitations: (1) Riley lacks the ability to perform at a higher level; (2) Riley is not making an effort to work faster; (3) Riley has a low need for achievement. Attributions to ability, effort, and personality are the most common internal attributions that people make.

However much people like to feel they are in control of what happens in their lives, outside forces often play a decisive role in determining behavior. **External attributions** assign the cause of behavior to factors outside the individual. The most common external attributions relate to task difficulty and luck or chance. A salesperson who has just landed a major contract, for example, may have been successful because her company is the sole provider of a particular product in a certain geographic region or because the customer was in a particularly good mood at the time of negotiations. In the first case, the salesperson's success is attributed to the easiness of the task; in the second case, it is attributed to luck.

Whether attributions for a behavior are internal or external is an important determinant of how people respond to the behavior. If the supervisor of the salesperson mentioned previously correctly attributes the landing of the major contract to external causes such as an easy task or luck, getting this contract may have little impact on the supervisor's decisions about the salesperson's job assignments and suitability for promotion. But if the supervisor incorrectly attributes the behavior to an internal cause such as ability, the supervisor might promote this salesperson instead of another one who is more deserving but covers a more difficult territory.

The attributions people make for their own behavior also influence their own subsequent actions. An employee who fails on a task and attributes this failure to a lack of ability may be likely to avoid the task in the future or exert minimal effort on it because he or she feels that his or her lack of ability will almost certainly guarantee a negative outcome. Conversely, attributing failure to a lack of effort may lead the employee to try harder in the future on the same task. As another example, an employee who succeeds on a task and attributes the outcome to luck is unlikely to be affected by his or her success, whereas attributing the success to his or her ability or effort will increase his or her confidence.

INTERNAL ATTRIBUTION

An attribution that assigns the cause of behavior to some characteristic of the target.

EXTERNAL ATTRIBUTIONS

An attribution that assigns the cause of behavior to outside forces.

EXHIBIT 4.7

Types of Attributions

