

EXHIBIT 4.8

Attributional Biases

Bias	Description
Fundamental attribution error	The tendency to overattribute behavior to internal rather than to external causes
Actor–observer effect	The tendency to attribute the behavior of others to internal causes and to attribute one's own behavior to external causes
Self-serving attribution	The tendency to take credit for successes and avoid blame for failures

Attributional Biases

The attributions people make to their own behaviors and those of others can have a profound impact on their subsequent actions. Like perceptions, however, attributions may sometimes be inaccurate because of certain biases. Here we consider three of these biases: the fundamental attribution error, actor-observer effect, and self-serving attributions (see Exhibit 4.8).

FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

The tendency to overattribute behavior to internal rather than to external causes.

THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR Behavior is often caused by a combination of internal and external factors, but situational factors are the sole determinants of behavior in certain circumstances. Regardless of how capable and motivated an employee might be, for example, if the employee does not have the proper resources to accomplish a task, she or he will not be able to perform at a high level. No matter how hard a waiter tries to have customers enjoy their meals, they are bound to be dissatisfied if the restaurant serves poorly prepared food. Despite the fact that external factors often determine behavior, people have a very strong tendency to attribute other people's behavior to internal factors. Because this tendency to overattribute other people's behavior to internal rather than to external causes is so basic to human nature, it has been called the **fundamental attribution error**.⁸⁰

Why does the fundamental attribution error occur? Researchers have offered two explanations. According to the first, which concentrates on perception of the target's behavior, when we observe a person behaving, we focus on the person, and the situation is simply the background for the behavior. Because the person is the focus of our thinking and the situation receives little attention, we tend to think that something about the person prompted the behavior. According to the second reason for the occurrence of the fundamental attribution error, we often are simply unaware of all the situational factors that may be responsible for the behavior we observe.

Because of the tendency to overattribute other people's behavior to internal causes, managers are likely to think that a subordinate's behavior is due to some characteristic of the subordinate rather than to the situation. Similarly, subordinates are likely to think that their supervisor's behavior is determined by internal rather than external causes. Suppose a manager must lay off 30 percent of his or her staff because of a major decline in the organization's performance. Those who are laid off (and those who remain) may be likely to attribute this action to the manager's hardheartedness and lack of concern for the well-being of others rather than to economic necessity.

People who manage diverse employees need to be especially aware of the fundamental attribution error and try to avoid it. Just as perceptions can be inaccurate as a result of stereotypes, so, too, can attributions. Inaccurate stereotypes about women, older workers, or African Americans, for example, may cause members of an organization to inappropriately attribute behavior to internal causes such as gender, age, or race when the behavior is actually caused by an external factor. If an older worker has difficulty getting new computer software to run, the worker's supervisor may fall victim to the stereotype that older workers have difficulty learning new things and inaccurately attribute this behavior to the worker's age, even though the real cause of the problem is that the computer has insufficient memory to handle the new software (an external cause).

ACTOR–OBSERVER EFFECT

The tendency to attribute the behavior of others to internal causes and to attribute one's own behavior to external causes.

THE ACTOR–OBSERVER EFFECT We make attributions not only for the behavior of other people but also for our own behavior. Researchers comparing these two types of attributions uncovered an interesting phenomenon: the **actor–observer effect**. The actor–observer effect is the tendency to attribute the behavior of others to internal causes (the fundamental attribution error) and to attribute one's own behavior to external causes.⁸¹ We tend to think that other