Example of essay on attribution theory

Psychology, Success

Attribution is a causal justification of an event or an action. The process of attribution is usually automatic and often subconscious (Borkowski, 2007). Attribution theory was first proposed by Fritz Heider and describes the way people perceive reasons for their behaviour in response to a particular environmental condition (Martinko, 2004). Although the theory is related to the concept of motivation, it does not describe the objectives of behaviour but its underlying reasons. Weiner tried to connect attribution theory to the achievement theory, claiming that people seek accomplishments and try to avoid failures according to their perceived causes of a particular outcome (Hollyforde & Whiddett, 2002). The main assumption of the theory, therefore, is that individuals strive to support positive self-image (Vockell). In fact, attribution theory links the perceived abilities of the person to the complexity of the task, connecting performance to the external environmental conditions, such as opportunity and luck.

People usually tend to find causes of a particular outcome in terms of three dimensions. Firstly, they determine the reason of success or failure as internal or external. Internal factors usually arise within, while external factors can be attributed to the effect of the environment. Secondly, the cause of an outcome is defined as either stable or unstable. If the cause is stable, the result will be the same when the same actions are repeated. However, if the outcome is different every time the action is performed, the cause is believed to be unstable. Lastly, the reason for success or failure may be either controllable or uncontrollable. While controllable factors can be altered by the individuals, uncontrollable ones are believed to be unalterable. However, the evaluation according to these three factors is not

objective, since attribution of success largely depends on the perceived rather than the actual causes of the outcome (Vockell).

Attribution theory can be widely applied in the organizational setting. It provides the means for managers to explain the way individuals determine causes of particular events or actions and attribute meaning to their behaviour based on these causes. The process of attribution usually occurs in three phases, according to Wiener: behaviour observation, evaluation of the deliberate nature of the behaviour and attribution of it to the internal or external causes. According to the main assumption of the attribution theory, people try to maximise their positive self-image. Therefore, they tend to attribute their failures to external factors, which they have little control about. The success causes, on the other hand, are likely to be perceived as the result of internal factors, such as ability or extensive effort. Thus, lateness is very likely to be explained by the external factors, such as traffic or large distance to work, while task achievement is perceived to be the result of external factors, for example hard work or creativity. The situation is quite similar to the controllable and uncontrollable causes of behaviour.

If employees believe that they have little control over the outcome of a project or a task, they are unlikely to maximize their efforts for the achievement of the outcome. If there is a clear causation between a particular behaviour in the organization and the outcome, people tend to perceive the environment as stable. Stability can be a strong motivator for employees, since it guarantees that their efforts will be always appreciated, while their failures treated consistently. Thus, if a successful completion of

every project yields a bonus, individuals are likely to expect a reward every time a project is completed. If this is not the case, employees will not be motivated to perform at their best, since the outcome of their behaviour is not consistent over time. The stability dimension should be also considered, when hiring and firing employees. If low performance is attributed to the unstable factors, such as the lack of effort or motivation, the situation is possible to improve in the future. However, if the cause of underperformance is rooted in the insufficient abilities, it is not wise to expect any progress in the future (Borkowski, 2007).

Based on the attribution theory, it is possible to develop certain guidelines, which would promote more efficient attribution of the behavioural outcomes by the employees. Firstly, it is necessary to convince people that their failures are not attributed to their competence or abilities, but to the controllable factors, such as effort. However, developing a belief that success has been derived solely from the abilities may be detrimental, as employees will be reluctant to exert additional effort for completion of the next task. Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration that repeated failures may have a significant impact on the employee motivation. People start to perceive their failures as the result of chance or lack of competence, thus limiting their effort in the next projects. Therefore, the task of a manger is to maintain employee motivation by emphasizing the importance of internal controllable factors and to create a way to make people perceive themselves as successful at least in some tasks. Finally, the organization should have clear tasks and objectives assigned to particular roles. In this way employees

can evaluate whether their efforts were sufficient for a successful completion of a project, and can benchmark their results against the desired outcomes.

Attribution theory is very influential for explaining human behaviour in the diverse environments of organizations. The way people perceive the causes of their actions can be used as a powerful tool to influence motivation and efforts. Therefore, successful alignment of the differences in the organization is often based on aligning employee perceptions (Robinson, 2007). Managers, who understand that performance evaluation is not objective, but depends on the employees' attribution of the results to their causes, can manage to steer the efforts of the organization in the correct direction and to maximize employees' efficiency and performance.

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