

1. Why people do what they do

1.1. Summary

As a psychologist (registered in NSW), I am often asked 'why do people do what they do?' This is generally asked in context of people at work and why staff aren't doing what management would like them to do, or in terms of how to drive customer behaviour in the direction the organisation would like it to be (e.g. customer re-use of a service, using self service instead of calling the call centre).

In this paper, I introduce some core concepts from social psychology about how we interpret and make attributions about why people do what they do. These focus on more than just individual motivation, the common aspect we attribute to why people do or don't do things. The other causes are their ability, the effect of the team and culture, organisational rewards and organisational systems.

1.2. Why people do what they do

People do things, ultimately, for reasons that 'make sense to them at the time'. Based on their own goals, the context and other intervening factors, their behaviour can be explained, even though it may not make sense to us, or we would have done things differently, or we may not agree with what they've done.

In most cases, people tend to act fairly rationally and weigh up different courses of action before committing to one. At other times, people are influenced by the environmental context. That's why people who are capable may perform badly in one organisation, but excel in another. And at yet other times, people act from an emotional basis, acting in an apparently irrational way, reacting with feelings, emotions, listening to their gut feeling, or otherwise behaving in ways that we do not necessarily understand or empathise with.

These are all valid ways for people to interact with the world. Even though they may not be as effective as a rational approach, or the way we would do it, it made sense at the time for the person to act or think in that way.

1.3. The fundamental attribution error

Our ability to explain people's behaviour is critical to making recommendations for improvement. If we make poor explanations, we make poor recommendations. In an organisational setting, this can lead to a continuation of poor performance. In contrast, if we make strong and accurate observations, we can make strong recommendations that have a demonstrable impact on people and the business.

The fundamental attribution error is an error we commonly make when we judge the causes of our own and other's behaviour. When we judge our own behaviour, we blame the situation. For example, if a player fumbles the football, s/he may say, 'The wet grass made the football slippery and I couldn't hold on'. When we judge the behaviour of others, we blame their failures on their character. A person in the stands might say of the same football player, 'S/He is a hopeless player who needs to practice more'.

The following table shows how we attribute or own and others' success and failure:

	Me / my	Others'
Success	My ability / effort <i>Internal attribution</i>	The situation / <u>good</u> luck <i>External attribution</i>
Failure	The situation / <u>bad</u> luck <i>External attribution</i>	Lack of effort / motivation <i>Internal attribution</i>

That is, we tend to attribute:

- ◀ Our own successes to ability and effort (INTERNAL ATTRIBUTION).
- ◀ Our own failures to the situation and (bad) luck (EXTERNAL ATTRIBUTION).

And we tend to attribute:

- ◀ Others' successes to the situation or (good) luck (EXTERNAL ATTRIBUTION).
- ◀ Others' failures to [lack of] effort (and often neglecting lack of ability as a possible cause) (INTERNAL ATTRIBUTION).

This situation is often observed when managers attempt to explain the performance (good or bad) of their staff. If a staff member is performing poorly, we find that the first reaction by the manager is generally 'they don't want to work hard'. If we attribute poor performance to motivation, then the solution is to try and motivate them to perform better. Unfortunately, this usually take the form of the manager saying to the staff member 'perform better or you'll lose your job'.

You might think this is extreme, but think back to the last time someone apparently cut you off in traffic. What's the first thing you think? We all know what it is, and I'm sure it's not fit for publication!! We think they did it deliberately to cut us off. While this is sometimes true, it is certainly not true all the time.

So if we make the wrong causal attribution for why something is the way that it is, then we will almost certainly apply the wrong solution. The wrong solution just causes frustration and we get more of the same – because we haven't tackled the root cause.

1.3.1. Why do we make the fundamental attribution error?

Our attributions are guided by what is in the focus of our attention, what is 'salient', or highly visible in a situation. When we look at other people, the person is salient. When we look out from ourselves, the situation is most salient because we are engrossed in the situation we have to deal with.

We aren't disciplined enough to look for other causes, and are therefore trapped in using the symptoms of the problem as the cause. In medicine, we know that if we treat the symptoms the patient won't get better.

1.4. Using the six cell model to identify other reasons for people's behaviour

The Six Cell Model (Grenny *et al*, 1996) is an excellent diagnostic tool we can use in all situations to better explain why people do what they do.

It is based on a long standing psychological approach where performance is a product of motivation and ability, and also incorporates elements of socio technical systems theory and organisational theory. The result is a set of six possible causes that can be systematically analysed to get at the root cause.

The following diagram shows six causes of people's performance, with a brief summary of each:

	Motivation	Ability
Individual	<p>1 Do I like doing the activity?</p>	<p>2 Can I do the activity?</p>
Social / team	<p>3 How will others respond?</p>	<p>4 Will others provide me with the resources I need?</p>
Organisational	<p>5 What formal rewards will I receive?</p>	<p>6 Do the systems and structures support my efforts?</p>

And here is a detailed description of each of the causes:

Section	Description
1	<p>Do I intrinsically enjoy the activity itself?</p> <p>This is about individual motivation. It is the primary location of the fundamental attribution error. That is, when trying to explain why people don't do as we expect them to, we are likely to assume 'they don't <i>want</i> to do it'.</p> <p>This is the extent to which an individual enjoys the enactment of a behaviour and the immediate, non-social outcomes resulting from the same. The focus is on the intrinsic satisfaction from either enacting a behaviour (the person enjoys the activity <i>per se</i>) or the immediate outcomes of their efforts (the piece of art, a job well done, etc.).</p>
2	<p>Can I do what is required?</p> <p>This is about a person's individual ability. It refers to the cognitive and motor skills, knowledge and abilities a person has to perform on a task. Poor performance on a task can be the result of insufficient technical skills, language barriers, poor communication skills, physical disabilities, memory or cognitive capabilities.</p> <p>Therefore, the person may <i>want</i> to do the task, but cannot, for lack of the skills and abilities.</p>
3	<p>How will others respond?</p> <p>This is about the social motivational influences other people have on us. Often appearing as 'peer pressure' we do things to conform with social norms. If a person is not performing as expected, it may be due to the influence of others. This is the primary location of organisational culture.</p> <p>Sources of influence can be peers, managers, customers and others.</p>
4	<p>Will others provide me with the resources I need?</p> <p>This is about social ability. Often seen as team support, where other provide us with skills, resources, etc., to perform a task. Tasks often require the support of others for successful completion.</p>
5	<p>What formal rewards will I receive?</p> <p>This is about organisational motivation. Organisations have the ability to provide motivation through the formal reward structure for specific behaviours, including salary, commission, bonuses etc. Organisations also have policies and procedures for doing certain things. These can have a motivating or demotivating effect on people's performance.</p>
6	<p>Do the systems and structures support my efforts?</p> <p>This is about organisational ability. This primarily reflects the infrastructure of an organisation, such as technology, tools, resources, the environment and communication systems.</p>

1.5. Conclusion

Understanding people's behaviour does not need to be a complex 'black box'. Being disciplined in using something like the Six Cell Model helps us explore all the possible reasons for why people do what they do, so if we want them to do something different, we apply the right support and motivation.

There's no point in 'motivating' people to work faster if the system is inherently slow. Just like there's no point telling people to do something different if their pay system rewards the old behaviours.

1.6. References

The Balancing Act: Mastering the Competing Demands of Leadership (1996). Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler, Kerry Patterson.
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0538861398/104-1852325-3299153?v=glance&n=283155>

2. About the Author

Craig is the founder and Managing Director of The Performance Technologies Group (PTG Global), with over 15 years in user experience, user interface design and change management.

Craig runs the R&D function at PTG, having produced a number of world firsts including XPDesign – the first systematic methodology for user interface design and Certified Usable – the first guarantee for usability and user experience.

Craig has been the primary architect behind many of Australia's most popular websites including CBA, Virgin Blue and ASIC and works on cutting edge technologies such as touch, medical and special-purpose applications.

Craig holds a Masters qualification in organisational psychology, is a member of the APS and the APS College of Organisational Psychologists and is a Registered Psychologist in NSW. He is also an Associate of the University of NSW and Macquarie University.



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