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## HIDDEN MECHANISMS OF ATTRIBUTION ERROR IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The attribution error, which consists of incorrectly attributing the causes of other people's behavior, plays an important role in the conflict management process. The article analyzes the hidden mechanisms of this error, which can affect the behavior of employees. The result of these mechanisms is often an escalation of tensions and difficult conflict resolution, which negatively affects the effectiveness of the organization. The article identifies the main forms of attribution error in conflict management and analyzes their impact on decision-making processes and interpersonal relationships in teams. Based on the literature review, recommendations for managers and leaders for recognizing and minimizing the impact of these mechanisms in practice are also presented. The ultimate goal of the study is to understand how conscious management of attribution errors can contribute to more effective conflict resolution and building better collaboration in organizations.

**Keywords:** conflict management, attribution error, human resource management, communication and argumentation, behavioral economics.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict management is a key aspect of building good relationships within teams, as well as strengthening the effectiveness of the entire organization. One of the challenges that accompany the process of conflict resolution is the incorrect attribution of the causes of behavior and situations they so-called attribution error. This mechanism leads to inadequate assessments of other people's intentions and actions, which can escalate tensions and make dispute resolution more difficult. The error of attribution, especially in the context of conflict management, manifests itself in two main forms: excessive attribution of internal personality traits to others (internal attribution) and ignoring external factors that can have a key impact on employee behavior (external attribution).

These hidden perceptual mechanisms often lead to an unconscious exacerbation of conflict situations, which poses a challenge for both leaders and HR teams. Psychologists' research shows that people overly attribute the behavior of others to their character traits. If someone saw a man who, for example, gave someone homeless man money, they would

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immediately attribute him the quality of a sincere and empathetic person. On the other hand, people who are responsible for their own behavior focus on the analysis of a specific situation rather than their character trait (Kennedy, 2010) This is extremely important from the perspective of management and the argumentation itself in the business environment, so an additional goal of the article is to show that the executives, who, that differently analyze their own behavior, are subjected to errors of attribution in communication and argumentation with their team. The aim of this article is to analyze the hidden mechanisms of attribution error in conflict management, their impact on the effectiveness of the dispute resolution process and to provide practical recommendations for managers in terms of minimizing these errors. The article will also discuss the long-term consequences of ignoring these mechanisms, as well as tools supporting more effective conflict management in organizations.

## **2. THEORETICAL BASIS OF ATTRIBUTION ERROR AND ITS IMPACT ON CONFLICT PERCEPTION**

The attribution error was first identified in social psychology as the tendency of people to explain the behavior of others in an overly simplistic way, which often leads to erroneous conclusions. The most common type of attribution error is the so-called fundamental attribution error, which consists in the tendency to attribute the causes of self-successes to internal actions (personal traits), while failures are attributed to external factors (Lee, 1977). These differences are particularly important in conflict situations, when, under the influence of high emotions, employees, instead of thinking about the situation, rashly assess the behavior of others as deliberately directed against them. Another type of attribution error is the situational attribution error, which involves the downplay of the other party's personality traits in favor of situational traits (Kelley, 1973). Both types of attribution errors can affect the way people perceive conflicts in an organization.

Conflict in organizations is a multidimensional phenomenon and can result from a variety of reasons - from differences in values and goals to contradictions in the interests of individuals or groups (Rahim, 2003). In the context of the error of attribution, interpreting the causes of conflicts becomes more subjective and emotionally. People involved in the conflict tend to assign negative motives to the other party, regardless of the actual intentions. Such communication generates a lot of misunderstandings between employees and reinforces negative emotions, which effectively hinders the implementation of daily tasks. The tendency to overgeneralize and focus on internal factors in the other person, while omitting situational circumstances, is the most common reason for attribution errors. An example of a hypothetical situation is shown in the figure below.

The figure above shows a situation in which employee A has a conflict with employee B. There is a high probability that employee A will attribute behavior to employee B as a result of his negative personality traits (malice, stubbornness, cold unpleasant handling of people) instead of taking into account external factors, such as time pressure or private troubles (maybe financial problems with which he is bothering himself). Sometimes someone's unpleasant behavior can result from really small reasons, such as rain on the way to work. In this way, the error of attribution can lead to an escalation of the conflict by deepening misunderstandings and strengthening negative emotions.

In the context of conflict management, the error of attribution is identified as one of the key factors that can hinder effective dispute resolution. Interpreting the actions of others as knowingly harmful can lead to the polarization of positions and hinder dialogue (Yoqubov,

Muminowa, 2002). In this view, it is important that managers and organizational leaders are aware of this trend and apply strategies that reduce the impact of attribution error on conflict management. An effective approach may be to promote an approach based on facts and data, rather than subjective personal assessments. In addition, the ability to actively listen and consider alternative interpretations of events helps reduce the negative effects of attribution and increases the chances of a constructive solution to the conflict.

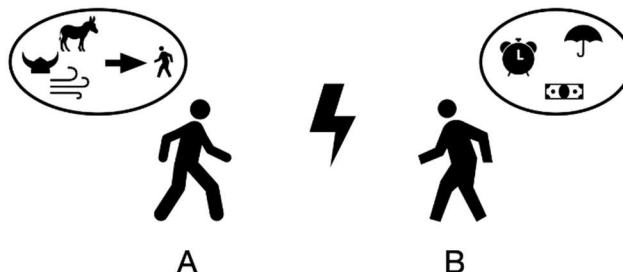


Figure 1. Hypothetical attribution errors situation

Source: own elaboration based on conducted research.

The attribution error is an important element in the process of perceiving conflicts in organizations. Its impact on the escalation of conflicts is clear, which means that managers must be aware of this mechanism and implement appropriate management strategies that will minimize its effects. Understanding the theoretical basis of an attribution error and its practical consequences can significantly contribute to more effective conflict resolution in organizations.

### 3. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL ASPECTS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management is a key issue in the field of management, especially in terms of modern, complex organizations, which we define as a series of activities aimed at minimizing the negative effects of conflicts to ensure the smooth functioning of the organization and strengthen its strengths (Ciekanowski et al., 2019). The psychological and behavioral aspects of conflict play a significant role in how managers and teams deal with interpersonal and systemic issues. One of the most important psychological mechanisms that affect conflict management is the phenomenon of attribution error, which can lead to an escalation of conflicts and wrong decisions. This will present how attribution errors affect the perception of conflict and its management, as well as how to avoid these errors in order to minimize their negative effects.

The psychological mechanisms of attribution error can cause managers to treat different points of view as a threat rather than an opportunity to resolve the conflict. As a result, conflict management becomes more defensive, and decisions are made based on emotions, not actual data or rational arguments. This psychological aspect manifests itself in a phenomenon known as the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy, which denotes a sequence of events beginning with the experience of a conflict situation whose experience defines the perception and approach to conflict at a later time (Trusz, 2018). According to the above definition, if the supervisor or manager has experienced unpleasantness related to a conflict

situation and, in addition, such a situation ended for him in an unpleasant and unfair way, such experience will determine his way of perceiving conflicts. With such an experience, his behavior in the face of a hypothetical conflict will be formed, as well as his reaction to a conflict that in reality does not have to run like the previous one. The very attitude towards conflict can, however, result in the fact that its effects will be as unpleasant as the previous one, which will only confirm this person in his approach to conflicts. This phenomenon often occurs in organizations where the overs foresee unfair actions of employees by starting to manage them in a more controlling way, which in turn reduces employee motivation and leads to confirmation of the original, erroneous attribution. The reproduction of the above scheme of self-fulfilling prophecy leads to an imbalance of the processes taking place in the organization, which consists of the behavioral aspect of conflict management.

Behavioral mechanisms of attribution error boil down to the perception of an organization as a single dynamic system that works with each other and the external environment. These mechanisms assume that it is not possible to maintain a state of equilibrium because conflict is a constant phenomenon that occurs in every organization and must simply be managed (Roszkowska, 2004). Another important behavioral mechanism is the tendency to self-reinforce. In this case, individuals tend to attribute successes to their skills and efforts, and failures to external factors. In an organizational context, this can lead to low self-esteem of employees who are unfairly blamed for failures, and to too high self-confidence among those who cannot properly assess their contribution to the team's success (Martinko, 2010). The behavioral mechanism can complement itself along with the psychological mechanism, reinforcing attribution errors and their harmful impact on the organization. In such a situation, the role of managing attribution errors in conflict increases significantly to prevent the negative effects of conflicts.

#### **4. CONFLICT ATTRIBUTION ERROR MANAGEMENT**

Managing attribution errors requires the introduction of strategies that minimize their impact on organizational conflicts. One of the most important tools is the development of attribution awareness among managers and teams. The ability to recognize misattributions, and awareness of their negative effects, can significantly improve the effectiveness of conflict management. Another strategy is to promote a culture of open communication, which allows intentions and motivations to be explained in a transparent way before the conflict escalates. Regular training on communication skills, mediation and diversity management can help teams understand each other better and avoid the pitfalls of attribution errors. An effective strategy for managing attribution errors is to promote "situational attribution". It consists in directing the attention of the participants in the conflict to external factors that may have influenced the behavior of the other party (Mazur, 2018). Instead of automatically assigning an opponent's actions to his character ("he is irresponsible"), people are trained to consider context ("maybe he had limited resources or time pressure"). With this process, people involved in the conflict become more open to alternative explanations, which reduces the tendency to attribute negative intentions to the other party. This strategy not only reduces tension, but also promotes a more rational approach to problems.

Another important strategy is to correct attribution biases through cognitive interventions. People involved in conflict can be educated about the prevalence of attribution errors, which increases their awareness of these phenomena and enables them

to more consciously manage their own reactions (Brycz, 1998). Training programs, which include techniques for recognizing and reducing cognitive errors, can significantly improve the quality of interaction between conflicting parties. Awareness of the tendency to attribute negative intentions or traits to other people too quickly leads to more balanced and less impulsive reactions. Mediation can also be an effective tool in managing attribution errors. Mediators, as third parties, are able to look at the conflict objectively and help the parties understand the extent to which their attributions can be wrong (Girnyk, 2018). Neutral intervention allows participants to look at the situation from a broader perspective, which promotes a reduction in prejudice and more constructive dialogue. The mediator can point out other possible causes of behavior and lead the discussion towards the search for common interests, instead of focusing on personal assessments.

It is also worth noting the role of organizational culture in conflict management. Open communication and an attitude towards cooperation support the clarification of misunderstandings that can cause a dispute and turn into conflict (Srokowski, 2011). Appropriate organizational culture sets the rules of behavior not only for managers but also for substantive employees, thanks to which the strength of individual employees in explaining inappropriate behavior in their feelings is greater. In addition, organizational culture can relate to standards in the use of technology in modern conflict management. The use of tools such as data analysis and artificial intelligence can help identify faulty attribution patterns and provide managers with objective information about the factors leading to conflict. Decision support systems that rely on analytical data can provide unbiased evidence, thus minimizing the impact of subjective cognitive errors.

In conclusion, managing attribution errors in a conflict requires the use of appropriate cognitive and interpersonal strategies. Promoting situational attribution, education on attribution bias, mediation and empathy are key tools that can help mitigate conflicts and improve communication between parties.

## **5. THE IMPACT OF HIDDEN ATTRIBUTION ERRORS ON DECISION- MAKING PROCESSES AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EMPLOYEE TEAMS**

Hidden attribution errors result from natural cognitive mechanisms that allow information to be processed quickly. In employee teams, this can lead to a false belief that the negative behavior of colleagues is the result of their laziness, lack of competence or bad intentions, instead of seeing the influence of external factors, such as overloading with duties or unclear expectations of superiors. For example, if an employee does not provide a report on time, co-workers may attribute this to their irresponsibility, ignoring the fact that the reason may have been on the side of too many tasks assigned by management. In the context of decision-making processes, attribution errors can lead to irrational decisions. When managers or team members perceive certain behaviors as a result of personal characteristics such as loud behavior and frequent gestures, they may suggest that someone is very confident and can be entrusted with more responsible tasks (Fiske, 1991). This leads to an incorrect assessment of the potential of employees and can lead to unjustified promotions or rewards. Such behavior has two negative faces: the first leads to overestimating the value of the employee on the basis of one positive behavior, and the second to excessive underestimation of his competence due to one negative situation.

In interpersonal relationships, hidden attribution errors can lead to deepening conflicts and violating trust in the team. When employees regularly attribute successes (internal attribution) to themselves and blame others for failures (external attribution), tensions and even open conflicts may arise (Eberly et al., 2011). An example is when an employee who performs well begins to treat his colleagues as incompetent, ignoring their contribution to the team or the difficulties they faced. In order to minimize the impact of hidden attribution errors on the functioning of teams, organizations should promote cognitive awareness and transparent communication. Employee education on the mechanisms of attribution errors, as well as regular feedback sessions, can help build a more objective picture of the situation and improve interpersonal relationships. The introduction of procedures to facilitate the open exchange of information and joint decision-making can further reduce the risk of attribution errors and thus contribute to better.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Managing attribution errors in conflict requires the use of appropriate cognitive and interpersonal strategies. Promoting situational attribution, education on attribution bias, mediation and empathy are key tools that can help mitigate conflicts and improve communication between parties. Very interesting research results conducted by Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Maracek show how much we are attached to giving other people specific characteristics based on observed behaviors (Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, 2001). It seems that solving the problem of attribution is much more difficult and one might be tempted to say that it may even be impossible. People can be guided by different needs in a given situation that someone from the outside can attribute to them as a character trait and then as intentional behavior. For example, someone may have a difficult financial situation at a given moment and therefore will not add flowers together with other employees for a colleague who has a birthday who may be perceived that he is a skner. Similarly, it is a matter of argumentation when someone cannot recall specific data in a discussion and may be suspected of a person who manipulates, or is not reliable. In fact, someone could have had a difficult day, so they did not have a chance to prepare reliably and is a great specialist.

In conclusion, one can ask why is it worth spending so much time studying the attribution error when everyone makes it and if it is so difficult to grasp? If you stopped thinking about it, would anything bad happen? Many studies show that people tend to make the error of attribution, but awareness of these errors takes the quality of research and communication to a higher level (Berry, Frederickson, 2015). However, what does the situation look like in the argument during the conflict? After all, participants pay attention to both body language and the very meaning of the arguments spoken. The answer comes behavioral economics, which shows that emotions are of great importance for human behavior and decision-making, so again, constant learning and awareness of the attribution error can affect the quality of argumentation and the way conflicts are resolved.

Supporting empathy is also a key element of conflict attribution error management strategy. When people in conflict are encouraged to put themselves in the other's position, they become more open to alternative explanations for their behavior. An empathetic approach allows for a better understanding of the other party's motivation, which reduces the likelihood of attribution errors. Attribution errors are a significant problem in managing conflicts in organizations. They can lead to escalation of conflict, weakening of interpersonal relationships and making wrong decisions. However, by developing

attribution awareness, promoting open communication, and using technology, organizations can significantly improve their ability to manage conflict and create harmonious work environments.

The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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