

# Fundamental Attribution Error

Joe can't believe he just got the job of his dreams. He aced his interview and blew the interviewers away. The company immediately got him on contract and assigned him to resume work the following week.

With great joy and euphoria, he took to the boutique to get some new suits and shoes. On his way back home, he had a haircut.

He was ready for the D-day, Monday.

On Sunday evening, turning and tossing on his bed, he wondered why Monday seems so far away. After a long thought, he fell asleep.

By 5 am Monday, Joe was up. This was well-expected since he had set a series of alarms last night.

Around 7 AM, He advanced to the train station.

Upon arriving at the station, he found out the trains would not be operating today due to technical issues.

'No problem', he says. 'I will catch a bus, anyway.'

As he advanced to the bus stop, a bike struck him from behind, spraining his ankle. He limped towards a nearby hospital with the aid of two sympathetic observers.

It was past 8 in the morning. Work resumes by 9 A.M.

By the time he could get his ankle fixed and catch a bus to the office, it was 10:30 A.M

He was 1 hour and 30 minutes late on his FIRST DAY AT WORK. First impression matters, doesn't it?

It sure does.

His manager stared at him in disgust. 'We just hired another incompetent individual,' he thought.

His colleagues' nasty faces said a lot about what they thought of him. 'He sure isn't responsible,' a blunt team member broke the ice.

Who would have believed Joe woke up earlier than anyone else in the room?

Who knew Joe just got his ankle fixed?

Who knew Joe might have been the first employee in the building if it weren't for the faulty train?

No one!

Why?

They are circumstantial or situational. No one other than Joe knows about them (except he opens up to someone about it).

What Joe's manager and teammates displayed is what Lee Ross described in a 1977 paper as Fundamental Attribution Error.

They lacked sufficient information about the situation. Despite that, they attributed the lateness to Joe's personality.

## What is Fundamental Attribution Error?

Fundamental Attribution Error occurs when an individual attributes an error or wrong behaviour made by someone to their personality while ignoring situational influences.

In this context, Joe's manager and new colleagues displayed Fundamental Attribution Error when they attributed his lateness to his personality, without considering the environmental influences that led to his latecoming.

Of course, they know nothing about the environmental influences. So why should they empathize?

## Types of Attribution

That brings us to the two types of attribution: situational and dispositional attribution.

**Dispositional attribution** occurs when someone attributes an individual's behaviours to their personality, character, or way of life. This form of attribution is far more common. The reason is that people tend to deliver judgement based on what they see.

For example, Joe's managers and teammates probably never knew about his sprained ankle or the faulty train. So, they came for his personality, which is quite obvious.

**Situational attribution** occurs when someone attributes an individual's actions to their environment or circumstances. While this may be far less common, it's possible. Often, the individual in question engages in this form of attribution.

For instance, a student may blame the teacher for his failure rather than his inability to study hard.

## The Effect of Fundamental Attribution Error on Relationships

Fundamental Attribution Error can tremendously influence an individual's relationship with people. Hence, we must pay attention to our behavioural patterns so we do not fall victim to this form of cognitive bias.

Fundamental Attribution Error can influence relationships in the following ways:

### 1. Lack of Empathy

This occurs when an individual cannot understand the situational factors leading to another person's action. We often tag such behaviour as being insensitive.

For example, a manager scolding an employee for being late when the employee was late because her child was ill.

### 2. Social Conflict/Misunderstanding

This is common in our society. This occurs when people unfairly blame others for their wrong behaviours caused by environmental influences.

For example, someone who criticizes her neighbour for being rude while failing to acknowledge that her parent just passed away.

### 3. Poor Judgement

This is common in the workplace. Managers or CEOs tend to decide without considering the holistic perspective.

For example, a manager wants to fire an employee for arriving late without considering her commute time.

## How Can Fundamental Attribution Error Be Avoided?

### **1. Admit your limitation**

We are all limited in thinking. Irrespective of who you are, you cannot see all the pieces. Acknowledging our limited view can be pivotal to mitigating the occurrences of Fundamental Attribution Error and overcoming this weakness in the long run.

After all, acknowledgement precedes transformation.

### **2. Be more holistic in your thinking**

While we cannot comprehend all the factors that could have led to a person's behaviour, we can still try to balance out our perspective.

Rather than viewing the action through the lens of one error or bad quality, consider other positive qualities the person also exhibits.

As Pat, a former member of the HBS Online Course Delivery Team, points out, 'Try to make a list of 5 positive qualities the person also exhibits.'

### **3. Be emotionally intelligent**

In this context, being emotionally intelligent entails showing empathy towards others and understanding the drive or rationale behind their actions. This way, you get to see right through them, understand their personality better, and strengthen your bonding. Also, being empathetic would be crucial to sustaining your relationship with the individual going forward.

It's way better than passing judgement based on inadequate information.

## Conclusion

When it's all said and done, no one is perfect. Everyone has a flaw or two. Hence, before you pass a judgement on others or attribute their mistakes, error or habits to their personality, second-guess your claims. Try to simulate multiple explanations. Do not pay attention to one side of the equation. Show empathy . Pay listening ears.

After all, little things like empathy can make all the difference in your relationships with people.