Credit and blame at work

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Definition

The process of assigning causal responsibility to oneself and others, for either positive or negative outcomes in the workplace, is a very important cause and effect of many other variables at the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis.
Credit and blame at work

- Introduction
  - Individual factors
  - Group factors
  - Organizational factors
  - Conclusion
In the workplace, credit and blame is an integral part of:

- Job satisfaction
- Turnover
- Lawsuits
- Organizational commitment and morale
- Work relationships and conflicts
- Learning and development
- Performance appraisals
- Safety and violence
- Promotions and raises
- Stock price and financing
- Legislation
- Government intervention
The six stages of a project...

1. Enthusiasm
2. Disillusionment
3. Panic
4. Search for the guilty
5. Punishment of the innocent
6. Rewards for the uninvolved
Credit and blame at work

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• Group factors
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• Conclusion
Individual factors

Benefits of inaccurate attribution

• Minimize embarrassment, guilt, remorse, and anxiety
• Boost confidence, self-esteem, and sense of control
• Maintain one’s status, rank, and reputation in the organization
• Avoid punishment for failures, shortcomings, and mistakes
• Create a simpler, more acceptable explanation for why things are the way they are
Individual factors (continued)

Risks of accurate attribution

- Diminished confidence in one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Risks of diminished pride, status, rank, and reputation
- Threatening vested interests and the power structure within the organization
- Empowering rival individuals or groups within the organization
- Having to grapple with complexity, ambiguity, and responsibility
Individual factors (continued)

Risks of inaccurate attribution

- Diminished sense of one’s own integrity and true capabilities
- Inability to build on strengths and remedy weaknesses
- Reputation as being unfair, political, or agenda-driven
- Attrition, performance, commitment, and morale issues for peers and subordinates
- Unjustified focus on people rather than problems
- Counterproductive organizational behavior and/or retributive justice in reaction to unfair credit or blame
Benefits of accurate attribution

• Better assessment of one’s own true talents and capabilities

• Individual performance can be improved over time

• Individual learning and development can be accelerated and new challenges can be met more effectively

• One can gain the trust, respect, and loyalty of others
Individual factors (continued)

Individual variables that affect credit and blame processes

Self-serving bias: most individuals tend to take credit for their successes and blame external causes for failure

Actor-Observer effect: most individuals attribute others’ behavior to personal or dispositional factors and their own behavior to situational factors
Individual variables that affect credit and blame processes

- People who are narcissistic are more susceptible to self-serving biases, taking credit for good outcomes and blaming others for bad outcomes.
- People who are open to experience and agreeable are less prone to inaccurate or self-serving biases in terms of credit and blame.
- People who are depressed are more likely to attribute failures to internal, stable, and global factors.
Individual factors (continued)

Levers for change

• Recognize that trying to change the dynamics of credit and blame in an organization is complex and can be very risky

• Consider your own role in the credit and blame dynamics and ways that you might be inadvertently helping to maintain the status quo

• Explore strategies for soliciting and responding to more feedback in a non-defensive manner

• Explore strategies for holding yourself more clearly accountable to criteria that are as objective and transparent as possible

• “Look in the mirror and out the window”
Levers for change

• Recognizing that there will be risk involved, explore strategies for giving more honest and candid feedback to others

  • Try to assign blame and credit more accurately while balancing the need to be sensitive

  • Carefully consider the timing and the venue when communicating credit or blame

  • Attempt to frame things positively when possible and change the focus from the past to the future

• Work to institute more objective and transparent systems for the analysis of individual, team, and organizational performance
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Group factors

Benefits of inaccurate attribution

• Preservation of group stability, power structure, and cohesiveness
• Minimize anxiety about questioning assumptions or people
• Maintenance of internal group pride and commitment
• Maintenance of group status and reputation in the organization
• The group avoids punishment for failures, shortcomings, and mistakes
Risks of accurate attribution

• Diminished confidence in the group’s capabilities
• Risks of hurting the self-esteem of members of the group
• Risks of challenging the established power structure of the group
• Diminished support or rewards from the rest of the organization
• Transparency to other groups can lead to vulnerabilities
Risks of inaccurate attribution

- The group is not able to accurately assess its internal capabilities and limitations
- Team performance and learning can both be adversely impacted
- Power and rewards can be unfairly allocated, leading to more dissatisfaction and higher turnover
- The group can suffer from internal and external suspicion and mistrust
- There can be unnecessary symbolic and substantive conflicts with other groups
Group factors (continued)

Benefits of accurate attribution

• Better assessments of what the group can and cannot accomplish
• More efficient and effective team learning
• Increased trust, communication, and cohesion within the group
• The alignment of power and rewards with actual expertise and contributions
• Better communication with other groups
• Enhanced reputation in the rest of the organization
Group factors (continued)

Group variables

• Level of motivation to constantly align and realign internal structures and processes to meet external challenges

• Norms for candid communication, risk taking, asking for help, admitting mistakes, and learning

• Norms of transparency and a commitment to maintaining trust

• Not necessarily a comfortable environment, but a “safe” one

• The style and approach of the leader or leaders of the group

• The style and approach of the members of the group
Levers for change

• Teams should take both an adaptive and a technical approach to challenges

• Select team leaders and members based on their ability to thrive in and foster a learning environment

• Teams should assess and improve their ability to be constructively self-critical

• Stop for comprehensive process checks at key intervals
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Organizational factors

Benefits of inaccurate attribution

• Can help the organization maintain its prestige and standing in the community

• Can help maintain the power structure in organizations

• Convince investors to support the organization and management

• Prevent the government or regulators from intervening

• Protects the pride and self-esteem of members of the organization
Organizational factors (continued)

Risks of accurate attribution

• Having to confront hard facts about the quality of products or services

• Diminished support and/or rewards from external stakeholders, i.e.: Wall Street and investors

• Can challenge the power structure in the organization

• Lawsuits and/or government/regulatory intervention

• The self-esteem and status of organizational members can be negatively impacted
Organizational factors (continued)

Risks of inaccurate attribution

• Organizational learning is prevented or slowed down

• Leadership roles filled with those who are most politically connected rather than those who are most capable

• The organization loses focus on ensuring that internal capabilities will be configured to meet changing external demands

• Widespread anxiety as people fear that they might be unfairly rewarded and/or punished

• Less organizational citizenship behavior and discretionary effort

• Violence, revenge, and sabotage in response to injustices
Organizational factors (continued)

Benefits of accurate attribution

• Organizational performance and learning increase

• Power and rewards accrue due to merit rather than politics

• The organization unleashes more of its employees’ discretionary efforts

• Social bonds and trust within the organization are stronger

• The organization can develop better relationships with external entities when it holds itself responsible
Benefits of accurate attribution

- Increased levels of organizational commitment, performance, job satisfaction, focus, and good citizenship behavior
- Increased levels of justice and fairness
- Resources spent understanding business drivers and developing strategies rather than building alliances and playing politics
- Relevant and realistic appraisals of individual and team performance for development, rewards, and role assignments
Organizational factors (continued)

Organizational variables

• Organizational history and the degree and kinds of organizational politics

• The culture of the organization—i.e.: the level of participation and openness, tolerance for innovation and risk taking, etc.

• The style and approach of leaders of the organization

• The style and approach of members of the organization

• The balance of power both within the organization and between the organization and external entities/stakeholders
Levers for change

• Consider the ways that inaccurate assignment of credit and blame is both a cause and an effect of other issues

• Select organizational leaders for their ability to foster an open, fair environment

• Select organizational members based on their likelihood of being able to solicit, receive, appreciate, and give candid feedback

• Develop cultural norms regarding credit and blame

• Establish the right criteria for what does and does not merit credit/blame and periodically reevaluate these criteria
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✓ Conclusion
• The processes by which credit and blame are assigned are at the very center of organizational behavior

• Individuals, groups, and organizations that attempt to change the ways in which credit and blame are assigned must take risks in the short term in order to do so

• Individuals, groups, and organizations that monitor and improve the processes by which credit and blame are assigned on an ongoing basis are likely to be more successful over time
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