

# FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

## Separating the blame from People and Systems

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Recently, I worked with an organization that was trying to find “just the right person” to head up a key account in Dallas, Texas. They really wanted to get this right since they were having a rough time in the past. Each of the four different managers hired recently for this position had only survived a handful of months on the job. And of these four managers, three had left the company in disgrace.

Why was it so important? This managerial position was going to oversee one account that generated approximately 20% of the profitability of the company.

When I started working with this client we had just promoted a young man, (let’s call him Dan) from within the company who had an excellent educational record, with MBA, and a personable outgoing style. He was even from Texas! We thought we had the whole “package” in Dan with experience, education and culture match – Dan was going to be our hero.

But within a year the key account contacted my client to let us know that Dan wasn’t working out. After this announcement I met with Dan and he had dark circles under his eyes, had put on twenty pounds and seemed uncomfortable in his own skin. In one year he had gone from looking like a man with confidence to a man wearing disappointment and sorrow like a suit coat. It was hard to believe that in one year he went from hero to goat.

What had Dan done wrong? But once I started digging into the specifics with Dan, a different picture became clear. Dan was falling prey to a concept known as the Fundamental Attribution Error.

The Fundamental Attribution Error is “blaming people for a system failure.” Dan was being blamed by the organization for losing at something that might be impossible to “win.” So the issue was less about Dan and more about my client’s company. So how to begin?

We took it all apart. We wanted to stop blaming our employees for these repeated failures and start looking at the system as a whole. We tried to use a systems fundamental attribution approach. Some of the questions we asked ourselves were:

- Was the strong relationship between our principal and the client company’s principal putting whomever we put in this job into a “water carrier” status?
- Was the client acting entitled? Did they have too high of expectations?
- Was the culture of our organization compatible to the Texas company’s culture? (In other words, if someone was successful with us – could they be successful with them – was success at the client’s company and success at the customer mutually exclusive?)
- Were we giving adequate focus (or too much focus) to our staff that supported this client?
- Who in our company would consider taking this on now that Dan had failed?
- If we hired someone outside of our company would they have enough loyalty to us to not sell out to the client?

When we use systems thinking we can look for the system failure and not as often set up worker after worker to fail in a broken system.

We decided to bring Dan into the conversations and asked him to resist making excuses but help us to look at our relationship with this important customer as a system. We explained the fundamental attribution error and asked him to help us look at root causes for the client's repeated failures to put the right person in the Dallas account. Before we sent in another employee we wanted to view the landscape of our relationship with this important customer. I watched the color return to his face.

I'd love to make this a fairy tale and tell you that everything worked out beautifully. The truth is – that this account is still both profitable and troublesome. However, this client is not creating a "hero or goat" scenario of those they send to this account and it isn't considered a career ender to only serve in Dallas for a year.

In the end – we could not fix the system – but we could stop treating talent with unreachable expectations.