

CHAPTER 4 – Individual Perception, Judgment, and Attribution

OBJECTIVES

One objective is to introduce the model and descriptions of the perceptual process including the perceiver and characteristics of the object and situation. This section builds on earlier chapters that discussed personality, learning and attitudes.

A second objective is to discuss judgment biases and errors including attributional errors. Students should understand that these biases can influence managerial performance on tasks such as performance appraisals, selection of new employees, responding to customer relationship issues and other forms of managerial decision making.

KEY POINTS

There are two key points in this chapter: (1) the nature of perception and perceptual tendencies or errors, and (2) judgment tendencies and errors including attribution theory.

This chapter introduces the discussion on perception and judgment processes that have important relationships to the remaining chapters in the book. Subsequent chapters build on the processes in discussing motivation (most notably the process theories), stress, conflict, and decision making to name a few.

TOPICAL OUTLINE

Perception

Figure 4.1: A Model of the Perceptual Process

The Perceiver

Characteristics of the Event or Object

Situational Effects

Judgment Biases and Errors

First Impressions

Halo: One Characteristic Tells All

Projection

Implicit Personality Theory

Stereotyping

Attribution Theory: Finding Causes of Behavior

Judging Other People's Behavior

Judging Our Own Behavior

Some Organizational Implications of Perceptual and Attributional Biases

Problem Solving and Decision Making

Performance Appraisal

Managing Workplace Diversity

Summary

KEY CONCEPTS

Attribution
Attribution theory
Automatic information processing
Closure, principle of
Consistency, principle of
Contrast effect
Controlled information processing
First impressions
Fundamental attribution error
Halo effect
Implicit personality theory
Intensity effect
Perception
Perceptual bias
Perceptual organization
Projection
Schemas
Selective perception
Self-serving bias
Size effect
Stereotyping

EXERCISES**Inference Exercise**

This exercise is an example of how people's values, needs, experience, and perceptual tendencies operate. Despite the fact that this is an uncomplicated, four-sentence story and the questions are not complex, even bright and well-educated people make mistakes in answering questions.

The procedure is to read the story slowly to students, repeating it several times. Then ask the students to write down their answers to each question below as you read the questions. Again, repeat the questions or the story as often as students may request it.

The story and questions you read are as follows:

A businessman had just turned off the lights in the store when a man appeared and demanded money. The owner opened the cash register. The contents of the cash register were scooped up, and the man ran away. A member of the police force was notified promptly.

Now answer the following six questions by indicating T (true), F (false), or ? (can't tell or don't know):

- _____ 1. A man appeared after the owner had turned off his store lights.
- _____ 2. The robber was a man.
- _____ 3. The man did not demand money.
- _____ 4. The owner opened the cash register.
- _____ 5. After the man who demanded the money scooped up the contents of the cash register, he ran away.
- _____ 6. While the cash register contained money, the story does not state how much.

After all questions are answered, poll the class for their answers to each question, one question at a time. Discuss reasons for particular answers and disagreements over them. The correct answers are as follows:

1. ?
2. ?
3. F
4. T
5. ?

6. ?

The (?) or "can't tell" answer are cases where people's perceptions, judgments, and inferences come into play in mentally interpreting and organizing the story. Question 4 is particularly interesting because it is taken verbatim from the story itself, yet people get it wrong (attentiveness? selective perception?). Duplications for such behavior at work can be discussed; e.g., how quick judgments and assumptions might affect a superior-subordinate relationship such as during a performance appraisal or discussion over a work-related incident.

Chapter 4 Study Questions

1. What characteristics of an event or object are likely to affect how it is perceived?

Characteristics of an event or object that affect how it is perceived include (1) its intensity; (2) how much it contrasts with its surroundings; (3) its motion, (4) its novelty; (5) its relative size; (6) its ambiguity or incompleteness; and (7) its status or importance, such as in viewing other people.

2. Define five major judgment tendencies or errors that people commonly commit.

Five major judgment tendencies or errors include (1) first impressions, which are often lasting; (2) halo, or overemphasizing a single characteristic; (3) projection, or casting our own attributes onto others; (4) implicit personality theory such as linking, honesty, and diligence; and (5) stereotyping, as in attributing characteristics of a group to a particular individual.

3. Describe three work situations that show how a particular judgment error might damage the relationship between a superior and a subordinate.

The following are some examples that show how judgment errors might damage this relationship. (1) A supervisor halos on one worker and inflates the performance appraisal. This would damage the supervisor's relationship with other subordinates who do not halo on that worker. (2) Stereotyping has capacity to damage a relationship, because very few people like to be characterized in terms of some group such as Polish, southerner, black, or female. (3) Projection also can damage a relationship when the person engaging in projection makes the other person feel mischaracterized or misunderstood.

4. According to attribution theory what are two basic judgment errors people commit? Cite several organizational implications of attribution errors.

One basic attribution error is the fundamental attribution error. This is the tendency to explain behavior as caused by personality or "what they are" as opposed to attributing behavior to environmental or outside causes or pressures. The other error is the self-serving bias, which is a tendency to see ourselves favorably. The self-serving bias leads people to take personal credit (e.g., intelligence) when they do something favorable, but to blame the environment when they behave in an unfavorable way or are accused of so doing. Organizationally, there are many serious problems of attribution errors. They can affect how interacting groups get along or cooperate. Relationships would deteriorate if the other group were blamed for causing errors that were beyond their control, for example. These tendencies are also apt to play a critical role in special situations where people evaluate each other, such as when a superior conducts an annual performance appraisal or selection interview.

5. List the ways in which an applicant for a job can behave in order to affect or control judgment tendencies of the interviewer.

Applicants can generally try to present themselves in a positive manner and try to control first impressions. They might do so by appropriate dress, good posture, and a smiling or otherwise pleasant demeanor. To fight negative halo, applicants would control their resumes and their personal behavior so as to highlight specific accomplishments. Showing interest in the interviewer or his or her job or company would also help. Another technique is proving contrary evidence if and when the interviewer engages in stereotyping or in the fundamental attribution error. For example, a female or minority person could present cues or experiences that are contrary to commonly held stereotypes.

DIVERSITY, ETHICAL AND GLOBAL ISSUES

**Diversity Issues:
Perceptions About Women and International Assignments**

The role of perception in day-to-day business transactions is an extremely important one. As managers create that internal portrait of the world around them, their past experience and expected information comes into play. The flawed perceptions that can occur based on a personal bias can be extremely damaging to an organization. Since perception forms the basis for our judgements, perceptual errors can lead to errors in judgements that can be extremely costly for the organization.

One such judgment error that can occur could be the result of a manager's flawed perceptions about whom to assign to a particular task. Despite multiple opportunities now available, gender-based errors in perception are still encountered. For example, in determining who to send on various global assignments, it has been documented that some managers may tend to lean more towards men as a general rule. Their reasoning can be attributed to familiar but inaccurate errors in their perceptions of the ability of women. Women, they reason, may have difficulty with the stress associated with travel, may be faced with a lack of respect by other cultures, and may lack the aggressive nature needed to close a deal. These perceptual errors based on stereotypes may lead in them to choose a less capable employee for the assignment.

In examining such gender-based misperception, studies show that reality is far different than the perception. It has been shown that women are capable of a resiliency equal to and often times greater than their male counterparts; the idea that they could somehow be more vulnerable to travel stress seems entirely baseless. Further, the notion that other cultures prefer male representatives is also suspect. Studies have shown that female consultants' very nature makes for a more open, personal, and comfortable exchange of ideas. The skill needed to negotiate and close a potentially profitable alliance lies in this same natural ability.

The basis for these misguided perceptions is easily understood; assumptions and dated norms can lead to inaccurate opinions. The lesson here is in the care with which perceptions should be formed. A manager's lack of concrete data and inherent personal bias offer more than just room to make a poor assignment. In the case documented above, a poor perception can yield lost opportunities. And that is not good business.

Source: Adapted from Fisher (1999) by Pete Jones

**A Question of Ethics:
Some Careers Have Tougher Judgment Problems than Others**

Ethical problems related to judgments about different issues arise in any career. Executives often face judgments that force them to make tough choices about pricing, bribery, and other decisions that they must make. In some careers, particularly in medicine, the ethical questions often revolve around life itself. Nurses, for example, may have to confront situations in which their beliefs about the sanctity of life conflict with the desire of patients.

What does a nurse do when a patient wishes to forego life sustaining treatments such as CPR, forced nutrition, or hydration when the patient expresses the wish to not receive them?

What happens when a patient requests an abortion and the nurse's own belief is in the right to life?

How can the nurse, or the physician for that matter, make an ethical choice when the patient desires to be assisted in suicide?

None of these are easy issues.

CASE: A BAD DAY IN BOONETOWN

Tom, plant manager of the Boonetown facility, sat with his elbows on his desk, holding his head. "What a day! I've never seen it like this," he said aloud, though he was alone in his office. He was relieved that in a few minutes he could get into his car and head for the golf course. He couldn't remember when it all began, but knew that Carl had burst into his office before he'd finished his first cup of coffee.

"Those guys in Production wouldn't give you the right time of day!" said Carl, sales manager. "All I wanted was to get this big order scheduled, and you'd think I was asking for the moon. Those production people are all the same. They hate to touch a thing once a schedule is set." Tom tried to calm him down, but Carl went on. "I even tried to talk to Cranston. I figured maybe a new guy would help me out. But I should have known better. Last week at the welcoming party for him, I sensed he wasn't any different. I guess I was right. I shouldn't have wasted my time on him."

Tom told Carl he'd look into the matter, though he knew this wasn't anything new. He also knew he needed to get Production and Sales to cooperate more. After answering a few phone calls, Tom strolled out to the Production area to see what he could find out. He didn't even have to let on the Carl had come to see him. They were hot under the collar in Production, too. Peter Kenilworth, production manager, and Bonnie Baines, chief scheduler, were discussing Carl's visit and turned to Tom for counsel. Bonnie began: "I'm not sure how concerned those sales people are for production schedules and costs. They all think we can stop a run and set up for a new order in five minutes. I think they're conditioned to bark three times every time a customer calls. I'll bet half of them let their kids tell them what to do!" Peter had his own ideas as well. He stood up and paced the floor, yet in a controlled voice said, "Sales needs some appreciation for the total company. I can't figure out why they constantly tie us up in knots. They make impossible promises to customers. They should know better. Where did they get their training? Don't they value what our situation is? I'm pretty sure no one in this company is forcing them to make the delivery commitments they make!"

Tom did what he could to soothe bad feeling, and promised Peter and Bonnie he'd have a meeting in a day or two to discuss these issues. He was particularly upset with Bonnie's attitude. On more than one occasion she had gotten very critical toward other people. He wondered whether she had what it took to do the job. Much of her performance was good, he admitted. She certainly put in enough hours trying to improve and enforce the production schedule.

How many perceptual and judgmental tendencies are exhibited by Tom, Carl, Peter, and Bonnie?

Case Discussion: A Bad Day In Boonetown

A number of perceptual errors are exhibited by the cast of characters in this case. Tom, the plant manager, shows bias toward Bonnie by attributing her performance to her high effort but

probably not to her ability, which he questioned at the end of the case. Carl, the sales manager, stereotypes production people by saying they're "all the same" and shows the effects of first impressions in characterizing Cranston. Peter, the production manager, commits projection when he questions whether others have any appreciation for his situation. He also accuses sales of not considering the total company, and by doing so seems to be organizing facts in his own favor, and perhaps projecting once again. Bonnie, the chief scheduler, as well as others, is exhibiting selective perception by seeing only her side of the story and facts. A frequent error made by the parties involved is the self-serving bias, which frequently occurs with the fundamental attribution error. In addition, all parties at one time or another exhibit a level of emotion which is likely to worsen some perceptual errors such as selectivity, projection, and attribution errors.