

The "Error" of Our Ways

There's an interesting socio-psychological phenomena that occurs in our everyday behavior when we judge others negative behavior and when we compare others negative behavior against our own in similar situations.

This dynamic is called the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). In essence, the FAE says:

We have a tendency to over-emphasize others personality (i.e., their disposition, character, attitude, motives or desires) when we judge or explain their behavior, while discounting their life situation or context as a reason or explanation for their behavior.

That is, we have an unjustified tendency to judge their actions based on some notion we think we have about the kind of person they are, rather than on the social and environmental forces that are influencing them.

BUT,BIG BUT, when we behave inappropriately, or negatively, we most often excuse our own behavior as a reaction to our social or environmental circumstances, NEVER as a function of our own personality or character. That is, we point to something outside ourselves, or someone else for our negative actions, never ourselves.

This tendency for us to judge others on the basis of the Fundamental Attribution Error is true for people we know as well as for strangers we've never met.

Examples:

1. I'm walking down the hall toward a colleagues office and pass a co-worker who doesn't make eye contact, say anything or in any way acknowledge my presence. I react by assuming (rightly, in my own mind) that this person is a jerk, has a huge ego, doesn't like or respect me, is absent-minded, or unfriendly judgments I have created judgments and assumptions that point directly to this persons personality, character or true and real nature.
2. My team leader walks by at 5:15 and throws a report she's been working on, on my desk, nary a word, a thought, a good-night, or a glance. I make a judgment to my team-mate about her behavior, her personality and her attitude, a judgment that is demeaning, unkind, cruel and disrespectful.

What I Don't Know:

In the first example, the individual recently found out that his wife was leaving him and in the second, the team leader just learned that her son was killed in an auto accident.

It seldom ever dawns on us to perhaps consider that folks like these two may be deep in thought or that they are mulling over some bad news they just received.

The point here is to be self-aware, conscious of how much our ego-mind, our judgmental-comparative, reactive mind, our human side, drives our habitual and patterned behaviors and thoughts during the day, especially when it comes to judging others.

What I Need to Know:

One way to understand this phenomena is to ask ourselves: When were at work, do we take a task-orientation or a people-orientation towards our co-workers? In other words, do we view others as objects, as roles, as functions, or as people? Do we connect with others from an objective, mental, what you do place or from a subjective, heart-felt, who you are place? That is, how do we frame another person as we perceive them and interact with them?

When we come from a heart-felt, subjective, person-vs.-function perspective, a very real and spiritual perspective, we can be more conscious of our reactivity and be more open to seeing others as people as opposed to functions, and be more willing to give the other the benefit of the doubt.

From this more spiritual frame, we make no assumptions about others character, motives or attitudes. We don't assume we know chapter and verse about others' lives and are therefore justified in judging them.

In fact, when we approach co-workers and colleagues from this Inner, spiritual place, we make an effort to understand, and not judge, others behaviors. We make an effort to understand that another's life circumstances, another's life context can and does affect their behavior. From this Inner, heart-felt place, we are more understanding, empathic, compassionate and allowing. We make no assumptions, draw no inferences.

Why The Fundamental Attribution Error is So Common:

One major reason for this type of reactivity is that so few of us actually know thyself and, as such, are more focused outward, on others. Most folks have a natural tendency to focus on others motives and attitudes because they are not cognizant of the situations in which others live their lives. Because most folks have little to no knowledge of what is actually affecting another person in their life, and how others are reacting to their life situations, its easier to focus on the person, rather than their context. So, we judge the person as the person is all we have to go on. So we judge, assume, compare, and criticize based on what we think know, or make up, about another.

An American Indian saying points to the Fundamental Attribution Error very succinctly, Don't judge a man until you have walked two moons in his moccasins.

Her are two additional perspectives:

Everyone is in Chapter Three of their life. No one knows what transpired in Chapters One and Two. So, don't assume you know.

No one gets up in the morning and says, Im going to be a jerk today. So, don't assume you know the motives for their actions.

When we allow our True and Real Self to show up at work, when we show up as our authentic self, acting in integrity, from a heart-felt place, not an ego-based place, we are less inclined to fall into the Fundamental Attribution Error trap and prejudge the negative actions and behaviors of others. When we live our life at work and relate to

others from a "people-perspective" rather than a "task perspective" we can be more forgiving, understanding, and supportive of others who act negatively, and perhaps be more aware of "*the error of our way*" when it comes to judging others.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- How often do I make inferences about what I think is motivating another to act negatively?
- How often do I justify my negative behavior by pointing to events and circumstances outside me and *certainly not to me*?
- Do I take personal responsibility for, and ownership of, my negative actions?
- Do I ever ask myself how I would behave if I were in another's moccasins?
- Am I in the habit of consciously observing, watching and witnessing my negative actions?
- Am I willing to look for unseen causes for another's negative behavior?
- Am I compassionate toward others who behave negatively?
- Am I generally judgmental about others? What do I get from being judgmental?
- Is there one person on my team about whom I can be less judgmental, and more open to understanding?
- Is blame an "art form" I have mastered? Do I often feel like a victim?
- How do I feel when I'm judged, especially when others have no idea of my life situation or context at work?

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