

Credit attribution bias and its impact on employee morale and retention

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Is someone stealing your thunder?

Mr X woke up early morning, excited about the informal felicitation ceremony at the office that was supposed to recognize the team's success with an international project. After 6 h, Mr X stood silent, applauding as the team leader was credited with all the success, while the team members had to be content with mere references.

Do not be surprised if Mr X seems to be your reflection from your initial years in corporate life or even your current situation. The way recognition is done in corporate circles can get skewed toward a single person. It is not rare to find one person who "steals the thunder," while the rest of the team just wonders why their hard work was in vain. First impressions – reinforced by subsequent interactions with the supervisor – that an employee forms in the minds of the superiors leads to a credit attribution bias, which leads to repeated and continued acknowledgment and disproportionate allocation of benefits to one or two individuals in a team. A lot of psychological factors are at play in such a scenario.

The situation

First impressions matter a lot, and it is quite hard to change the perceptions borne out of first impressions. In a

corporate setting, it may so happen that out of a project team, one person shines out. Let us call him "Y." The reasons can be one or more of the following.

Organizational factors

- During the job, a person becomes the spokesperson for the team. He/she is preferred over others for communication with supervisors, either due to his/her greater knowledge or better communication skills. Over time, this person is always pushed to interact with supervisors and steadily, he/she becomes the face of the team. Therefore, the person has higher visibility when it comes to communication between the team and the superiors.
- The zero-sum kind of appraisal system leads Y to try to stand out by increasing visibility in team meetings, regular client calls and occasional meetings with supervisors. The perceived expectation of success that Y gets out of such behavior and the supportive response that he/she gets reinforces the practice.

Individual factors

- If an employee takes the initiative to be the spokesperson of the team when it comes to stand-up calls or meetings, then he/she

eventually gains visibility over other team members. The spirit of initiative that a person shows depends on the proactiveness of the person and his/her willingness to take on additional responsibilities.

- The employee who regularly features in the mail threads and formal channels of communication also tends to become known to others on the supervising team, and slowly the project starts to get associated with the person's name or image in the superiors' minds.

Group-level factors

- If the team members depend upon a particular person during any interrogation or give way to his/her words without hesitation when interrupted by him/her, this demonstrates the authority or domination that the person holds over the others. This again can give an impression of the person being an authority that others on the team follow, which makes him/her look like a pseudo-team leader, even though the person may not be so in reality.

- The lack of protest, in a way, legitimizes the behavior of Y and nothing works effectively to sensitize Y of the ill-effect of his/her actions on the team dynamics. This contributes to the continuation of such behavior, which can be seen by other team members as traits of a "high Mach" personality.

This kind of visibility from supervisors, followership from peers and overt accountability and authority demonstrated by the person leads superiors to use their cognitive filters and biases to form a snap judgment about this person. And such judgments endure for a long time. Over the course of time, whenever the team achieves something or delivers on its responsibilities successfully, the spotlight eventually falls on Y. The superior, owing to the bias that he bears in mind, associates the image of the team with Y. This leads to a glorified image of Y in the minds of the superior, which eventually gets communicated to the peers of the superior, resulting in increased glorification of Y (Figure 1).

The next time, even if Y does not work enough, but maintains a good visibility and rapport, the success of the team is attributed to him, regardless of whose efforts actually led to the project's success. This leads to a credit attribution bias (Figure 2).

Figure 1

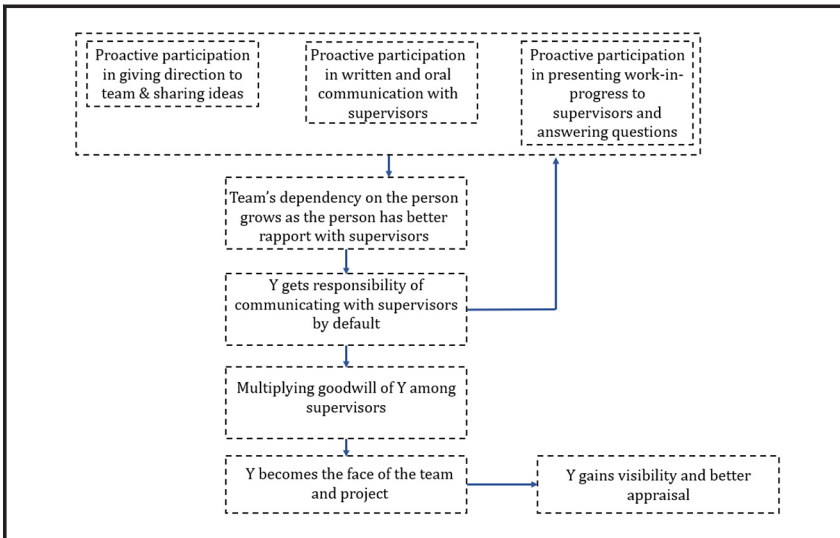
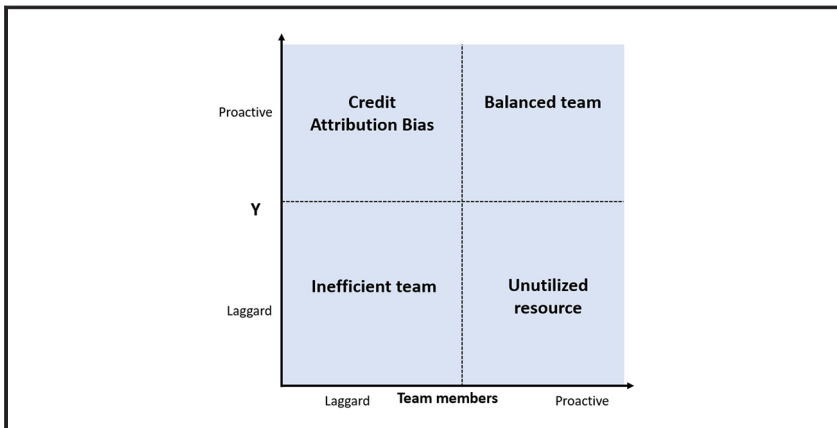


Figure 2 Team members vs individual performance placement matrix



Reasons

Let us look at this issue through the lens of the actor-based model.

Individual

It is not difficult for the individual (Y) to induce a halo effect. The halo effect is one of the biases that can creep into the performance appraisal of a subordinate. Y needs to simply do one of the following to impress his/her superiors:

- Show proactiveness in communicating with the supervisor through email or other means of correspondence.
- Present the project development to supervisors while the remainder of the team aside.
- Be the first one to answer the queries of the supervisors.
- Act as the liaison between the team and the superiors.

It should be noted that this behavior does not account as organizational citizenship behavior. It is rather about the visibility that an individual maintains about himself. The entire office may be working day and night on a project, but this one man emerges as representative of the team.

Such kinds of scenarios are also found outside of corporate circles. Take for example, a cricket team. The entire team perspires on the field along with the captain for victory. It may so happen that the captain himself underperforms throughout a number of matches. Yet, when it comes to receiving the trophy or to associating a person with the triumph, it is often the captain who gets the limelight.

Supervisors

In the case of supervisors, who may not see much but just rely on what is presented before them, the positive impression of Y's personality on a supervisor's mind influences the latter's expectations too. The supervisor sees one good quality of Y as a reflection of his overall caliber. This masks the supervisor's outlook, and he does not usually look into who is working and how one is working. Excessive interference into the functioning of smaller teams can be detrimental, which deters managers from looking too closely into the affairs of the team (Figure 3).

Why does the manager not delve deeper into finding out who actually worked well and how to reduce any kind of bias during appraisal system? The main reason is "paucity of time." High work load on supervisors and a high number of subordinates leads to managers using shortcuts in making impressions.

Here is where we see the outcome of a manager's paucity of time and the visibility of one individual. This is exactly where credit attribution bias gets fed. Having no knowledge of the intricacies of the team's work and having an eagle eye's view of the team functioning, the supervisor comes across only Y for official

communication. Over time, Y becomes an unofficial spokesperson, a representative, a pseudo-boss of the team, who carries instructions from the supervisor and makes the other team members work accordingly. Y's regular communication with the supervisor leads to information asymmetry, as Y carries more information than the rest of the team. Over time, Y is preferred more for communication as he is more knowledgeable about the discussion of the last meeting with the supervisor. This works as an amplifier of the matters and consequently, the halo effect increases.

Team members

The team members do not have a clean slate either. Passivity in presentations and discussions portray the team members as inert. The non-recognition of other team members leads to a Horn effect, due to which other resources do not get rewarded according to what they deserve. The resulting discontent can translate to attrition.

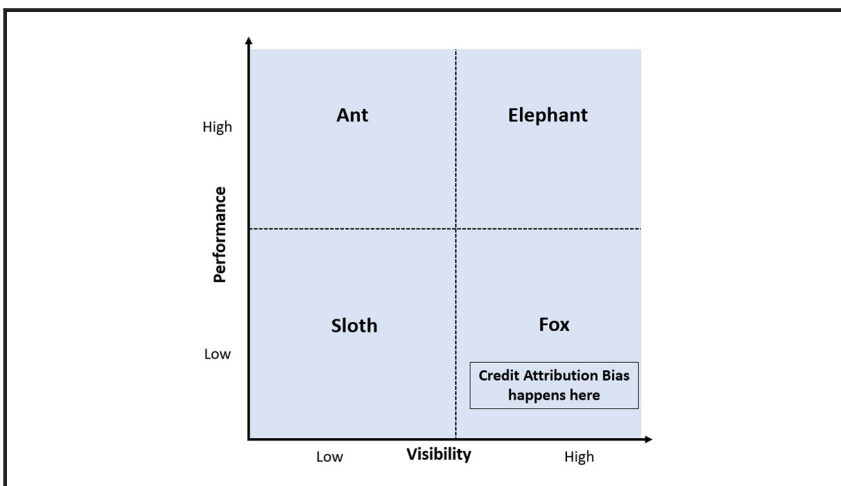
Recommendations

Credit attribution bias can be checked through various measures, best understood again through an Actor-based approach.

Individual

An individual working along with a team must have high self-monitors. He/she must continuously keep checking if one's actions are leading to credit attribution bias. Though it may seem useful and professionally rewarding in the short run, in the long run, it leads to the souring of relationships with colleagues and can result in poor team dynamics. It is possible that team members collectively speak against Y during any appraisal meeting, which can be the result of well-devised political behavior and planning. The other

Figure 3 Performance-visibility matrix



team members may not prefer working along with Y on other projects, which may lead to loss of credibility for the latter on a professional front.

Supervisor

The root cause of credit attribution bias is the overt visibility of Y. Skip-level meetings can help in the direct interaction between supervisors and other team members. Subordinates must be allowed to explain their performance in qualitative and

quantitative terms before appraisal. This can ensure that every team member's work gets visibility before their superiors.

Team members

Peer rating can be implemented as a part of the appraisal process. This can ensure that cases of covert social loafing by Y are brought to the knowledge of the supervisor. This can also ensure that Y works equally or better than the remainder of the team.

Credit attribution bias can lead to discontent among employees, employee resentment and attrition. If it is happening with you or in your corporate atmosphere, it is crucial to take remedial measures to address it. Let no X in your organization stay dissatisfied any longer.

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