

Salespeople's Work-Orientation Preference: An Exploratory Attributional Analysis of Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation

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Salespeople have different work attitude toward teamwork. Some of them value communication and coordination between team members, whereas others enjoy working on their own. It is believed that the discrepancies in work attitude derives from the different attribution styles, that is, whether people attribute failure outcomes to the external environment (e.g., lack of organizational support, unstable task situation, etc.) or to internal factors (e.g., self-ability, personal skills, consciousness, etc.). In addition, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation also comes into play during the formation of work-orientation preference. Using an attributional perspective, this article examines how different attribution styles influence the development of varying work attitude (team-orientation vs. self-orientation). Self-determination theory is also employed to explain the moderation role of intrinsic/extrinsic motivations.

Keywords: salespeople, work-orientation preference, Attribution Theory of Motivation, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation

INTRODUCTION

When salespeople fail tasks and events, some of them tend to blame themselves on not working hard enough or using the wrong strategies, whereas others would attribute the cause of failure to external environment, such as inadequate support from the organization, poor training, poor communication and coordination between team members, or even bad economy, etc. (Johnston, Hair, and Boles, 1989). The rationale behind the phenomenon is that people attribute failures to different factors. Some people tend to attribute the cause of failure to internal reasons, whereas others try to seek for external explanations to account for poor task performance. Those who believe that external factors play pivotal role in job performance tend to value teamwork because they regard the organization as a whole, whereas those who attribute success and failures to internal factors prefer to work individually, because they believe the internal self is the key determinant of the job performance, e.g., his/her own conscientiousness, emotional intelligence, etc. (Ingram and Hutson, 1992).

In addition, there is also evidence showing that both intrinsic motivation (e.g., nature of the task) and extrinsic motivation (e.g., company reward system) have influences on attribution styles during the process of salespeople's strategy selection, attitude formation and behavioral change (deCharms, 1968). When faced with the same motivation stimulus, either intrinsic or extrinsic, people with different attribution styles will react in different ways.

The motivation of this article is to examine how salespeople holding different attribution beliefs tend to work with different orientations (i.e., team-orientation vs. self-orientation) under the moderation role of

motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation vs. extrinsic motivation). The article contributes to the existing literature by merging attribution theory and self-determination theory as a theoretical foundation for the explanatory mechanism and provides managerial implications to practitioners in terms of employee selection and company reward/punishment system design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attribution Theory of Motivation

For about three decades, attribution theory prospers and continues its dominant conception in educational psychology, social psychology, and motivation, not only because attribution theory has received strong empirical support, but also due to its ability to change to meet objectives, problems, and empirical challenges (Weiner, 2000). Attribution theory indicates that people are not only motivated to maximize their awards, but also inspired to “attain a cognitive mastery of the causal structure of their environment” (Kelley 1967). Attribution theory helps people make sense of their successes and failures and better understand the causes and implications of future events. The explanations of failures group into two categories according to attribution theory: one type of explanation tends to attribute the causes of the action to environmental situations (e.g., “something else caused this”), whereas the other type trends to find causes from personal factors, such as “I caused this to happen” (Heider, 1958).

From the attribution theory’s perspective, many reasons have emerged as explanations to why salespeople succeeded or failed a task, including effort, ability, strategy and difficulty of the task, etc (Anderson, Horowitz, and French 1983; Frieze.1976). These causal dimensions of attributions have been classified along three key dimensions. (1) Locus: whether the cause is internal (e.g., ability) or external (e.g., luck) to the individual; (2) Stability: whether the cause is stable and relatively invariant (e.g., ability) or changing and tending to vary over time (e.g. task situation); (3) The degree of controllability: whether or not the cause is under the individual’s volitional control (e.g., strategy versus task situation) (Sujan, 1986).

Motivation Theory

Several theories distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. When salespeople are intrinsically motivated, they will engage in activities that they are interested in and enjoy, whereas when salespeople are extrinsically motivated, they will engage in activities for instrumental or other reasons, such as receiving a reward (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002).

Ryan and Deci’s (1985) self-determination theory is a case in point, which regards intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as two distinctive yet correlated types of human motivations. According to self-determination theory, (1) Intrinsic motivation means that humans have basic need for competence, and personal causation or self-determination, which indicates that people do something simply because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable for them. (2) Extrinsic motivation means that humans are motivated to maintain an optimal level of simulation, which indicates that human beings do something because it will lead to a separable outcome (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Below I will discuss intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in more details.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is an important phenomenon for educators and practitioners, in which people are intrinsically motivated to act for the fun and inherent challenges of the task, rather than forced by external rewards or pressure (White, 1959). As these behaviors are normally spontaneous due to the positive experience associated with exercising and extending one’s capabilities, intrinsic motivation always generates high-quality work and creativity (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

On the one hand, intrinsic motivation exists within human beings, that is, people are curious, active, inquisitive, and playful creatures and they display a ubiquitous readiness to explore and learn, without the triggers from extraneous incentives to do so (Ryan, La Guardia, 1999). This natural and spontaneous motivational tendency is a pivotal component in physical, psychological, and social development, and it is

through proactive learning and performing inherent interesting activities that people develop and master skills and knowledge (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995).

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation plays a negligible role in the relation between individuals and activities, in the sense that people are intrinsically motivated for certain types of activities but not others, whereas not every single individual is interested in a particular activity. Some literature articles have defined intrinsic motivation at the basis of the inherent nature of the task (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995). They use “operant theory” to explain why people are motivated to perform certain activities by arguing that all behaviors are motivated by rewards, intrinsically motivated activities are believed to be the ones that get rewarded in performing the task itself (e.g., Skinner, 1953), whilst others define it in terms of the satisfaction the actors can gain from performing the activities (Leavitt, Pondy and Boje, 1989).

My method in this article will primarily focus on the psychological satisfaction people will gain from the task, that is, the natural need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Leavitt, Pondy and Boje, 1989). However, most of the time, it is also noteworthy that when people involve in some activities from which they will gain psychological needs, these activities are normally inherently interesting to them as well.

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is the driving force that makes people to perform certain activities to achieve the instrumental value of the task and attain a separately outcome (Chandler and Connell, 1987). Self-determination theory explains the way in which extrinsic motivation influences people to value and self-regulate certain activities in terms of internalization and integration. Internalization refers to the process of people taking in a value or regulation, whereas integration is the process during which people more fully transform the external value or regulations into the self and emanate from their own will (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

A sub-theory of self-determination theory, known as “Organismic Integration Theory (OIT)”, proposed by Deci & Ryan (1985), further details the different forms of extrinsic motivations and contextual factors that influence both the internalization and integration processes of these behaviors, either promoting or hindering. OIT illustrates the different types of motivation on a continuum ranging from one end of amotivation, which refers to the state that people lack intentionality and the sense of personal causation (Ryan, 1995), to the other end of intrinsic motivation.

In the middle range of the motivation continuum are various categories of extrinsic motivations. The first category that just right to amotivation is external regulation, which is the least autonomous form of extrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). A second type of extrinsic motivation is introjected regulation, and it illustrates a controlling form of internal regulation, in the sense that people perform actions because of the external pressure to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain self-enhancement or pride (Nicholls, 1984; Ryan, 1982).

A third and more autonomous type of the extrinsic motivation is identification. With this type of motivation, people have accepted the regulations as their own because they identified the personal importance of the actions (Ryan and Deci, 2000). A final type of extrinsic motivation is labeled integrated regulation, also the most autonomous one. Integrated regulation happens when people fully assimilated the regulations they have identified to themselves, and integrate the new regulations with the existing values and needs through self-determination (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002).

Self-Orientation Versus Team-Orientation Attitude

Self-Orientation

Employees with a self-orientation attitude are individuals who prefer to work on their own when making decisions and setting or accomplishing priorities and goals. When working with other team members, these people normally have limited patience for group process, and they see others as less effective than themselves (Dixon, et al, 2004). Self-oriented work attitude employees spend a lot of effort on the tasks on their own but devote little energy toward interpersonal communication and interactions (Deci and Ryan, 1987). As far as salespeople are concerned, they would like to operate autonomously, to

take responsibility for their actions, set their own goals, rather than rely on others for outcomes. In addition, they always try to avoid settings/mechanisms in which they must depend on others (Shaw, Duffy and Stark, 2000). They are eager to autonomy, interested in their freedom and retaining a solitary work existence, and are distant from and discontent with team-based systems (Wageman, 1995).

Team-Orientation

Members of a team who take a team-orientation value their involvement with others and regard themselves as trusting members of a team rather than individual decision-makers who absorbed in their own self-interested motives. It is suggested that teams operating in a high-interdependent environment often require high levels of interaction and close coordination of members' actions in terms of timing and sequences (Janz, Colquitt, and Noe, 1997). Participating in group-decision-making processes increases commitment to, and understanding of, group goals, all of which are key ingredients to team orientation (Dixon, et al, 2004).

THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Attributional Styles and Attitude Orientation

Applying attribution theory to the sales work context, two of the three dimensions of attribution theory: stability and degree of controllability are relatively invariant for a certain task for salespeople (Weiner, Nierenberg, and Goldstein, 1976), and the most common attributional dimension indicated by previous research is locus of control (Zuckerman Miron, 1979), that is, whether the cause is internal (e.g., ability) or external (e.g., luck) to the individual. It is compatible with common sense and empirical study, that locus is the dominant dimension of the three facets of attribution theory when salespeople explain their successes/failures in the tasks. When they believe the internal factors influence the sales result (e.g., ability, conscientiousness, etc), they normally have a relatively stable and fixed degree of controllability of these internal variables. On the contrary, when salespeople attribute failures of tasks to external factors, they usually do not have any control over the external or/and organizational environment, such as unfavorable economic conditions, competitively inadequate, weak financial support (e.g., advertising), and fuzzy company objectives, etc, all of which are also relatively fixed during a certain period (Marvin, 1999).

Therefore, I propose that when salespeople hold the belief that external environment is the key determinant to the outcome of their tasks, whether they like it or not, they have to rely on the organization or their teams as a whole, because the outside factors weigh more than the internal selves, whereas for salespeople who attribute the outcomes of their tasks to the internal-self, including personal skills, ability, experience, and work strategies, etc, they tend to work on their own, as they believe the "self" is the key to succeed.

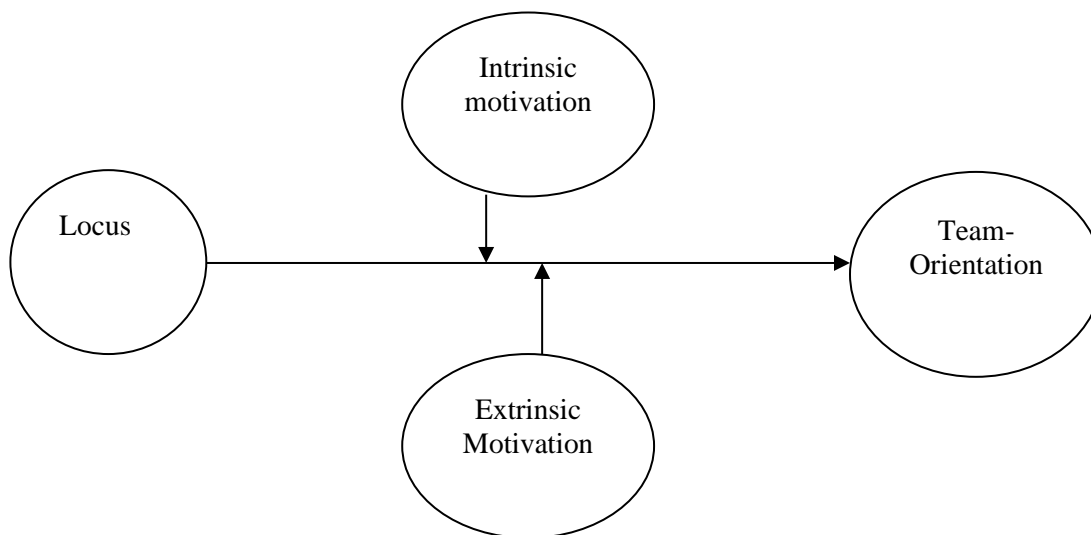
It is also consistent with the principals of social learning theory, which states that: "If a person perceives reinforcement as contingent upon his personal behavior, then the occurrence of either a positive or a negative reinforcement will strengthen or weaken potential for that behavior to recur in the same or similar situation (Rotter and Liverant, 1962)." If he sees the reinforcement as being outside his own control or not contingent, that is, depending upon fate, chance, powerful others, or unpredictable, then the preceding behavior is less likely to be strengthened or weakened (Weiner, 1976)". Therefore, in my conceptual model (shown in Figure 1), I will include only one of the three dimensions of attribution theory: locus.

According to attribution theory, people hold external attribution beliefs tend to blame the failures of their tasks to external factors (Weiner, 2000), therefore, I predict that this external attribution belief will lead them to an increased appreciation of the communication and coordination with other team members, because they think the external environment, as a whole, determines the outcome of their task, and they have to put themselves into a team to perform the activity. As a result, salespeople who believe the external and organizational environment play a key role in determining the result of their task result will expend more efforts in establishing relationship with team members, trying to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborations, and encouraging information sharing, etc. Specifically, they are more likely to hold a team-oriented work attitude.

I also further predict that when people attribute failure outcomes to internal factors, such as lack of ability, not enough persistence, and wrong strategy adopted, etc, they are recognizing the influence and determinant factors from the “self” (Heider, 1958). Because of this thought, they are likely to be motivated to change the direction in which they work in the future, believing that the changes they make will make success more likely. Consequently, they will spend more efforts to improve their personal skills, try to work harder and use the right strategies for the target tasks, etc.

Proposition 1. *The more salespeople attribute failures to external/organizational factors, the more likely they will hold a team-orientation work attitude.*

**FIGURE 1
PROPOSED MODEL**



Reward Type and Attitude Orientation

When applying attribution theory to explain how and why salespeople attribute their failures/successes to internal/external factors and consequently, develop different work attitude orientations in working with others, this theory is limited from a managerial perspective, due to a lack of knowledge of contextual factors that interact with attribution styles to develop team-oriented versus self-oriented work attitudes (Weiner, 1980). Among all the contextual factors that have been identified and examined extensively in salesperson research, two factors show interference and interactions with these two attributions (i.e., locus: internal vs. external): people’s intrinsic and extrinsic reward orientations (Sujan, 1986).

Salespeople are intrinsically motivated if they find their task inherently interesting and rewarding, whereas if they are motivated because of extrinsic rewards, they just work to achieve a separable result or/and win the reward. Therefore, if salespeople can gain pleasure and enjoyment from their work, by performing assignments, influencing their customers, achieving sales tasks, etc, they are intrinsically motivated (Chambers and Condry, 1978). On the contrary, if salespeople just work to make money to support life, or they are concerned with extrinsic rewards/punishment policies, they are extrinsically motivated to work because of the external pressure or stimulating rewards (Condry, 1977). It is also noteworthy that although intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are often conceived as two opposites (e.g., Boggiano, 1998; Harter, 1981; Meece, Blumenfeld & Hoyle, 1988), they are two different constructs that could co-exist (Corpus, McClintic-Gilbert & Hayenga, 2009; Lepper, Corpus & Iyengar, 2005).

Influence of Extrinsic Motivation on Attribution Styles

For salespeople who attribute successes and/or failures to the external environment, whether they like it or not, they have to rely on the organization or their teams as a whole, because they believe the outside factors weigh more than the internal selves (Amabile and Lepper, 1976), therefore, I propose that salespeople with external attribution belief will value extrinsic motivation, such as the reward and punishment policies of the company. Because salespeople in this category regard the result of their tasks as an outcome of external influences, they believe they can never make it happen on their own, rather, they shall devote themselves as members of their teams, and in the organization as a whole. I predict that extrinsic motivation will greatly influence extrinsic-attribution salespeople, and in turn, at the presence of extrinsic motivations, they are even more likely to hold a higher level of team-orientation attitude.

However, I predict that extrinsic motivation does not play a role as important for external-attribution people as it does to internal-attribution salespeople. They hold the belief that internal factors are the determinants for the final output of their tasks, and external environment will not change the orientation of the way the work (Dixon et al, 2005). Conversely, I believe that faced with the changing level of extrinsic motivation, salespeople in the internal attribution condition may tend to rely even more on themselves, as they would feel more assured that the external environment is unpredictable and unreliable.

Proposition 2. *The effect of extrinsic motivation will moderate the effect of the locus on work attitude orientation. More specifically, extrinsic motivation will have a more positive influence on the relationship between attribution orientation and team-orientation for external attribution people than for internal attribution people.*

Influence of Intrinsic Motivation on Attribution Styles

Because interested in the content and the nature of the task, intrinsically motivated salespeople enjoy the inherent challenges and pleasantness of what they do (Eccles, Wigfield, A. (2002). Sujan's work (1986) explains how different attribution styles influence the types of strategies salespeople tend to adopt, that is, whether they prefer "work harder" or "work smarter", which inhere provides a preliminary foundation to my theoretical model. Based on his work and push it one step further, I propose that the different attribution styles (internal vs. external attribution) also influence the way how salespeople work with others, that is, whether they hold team-orientation or self-orientation work attitude, under the influence of intrinsic/extrinsic motivation.

For salespeople who attribute successes/failures to internal/self factors, when they are intrinsically motivated, that is, they are interested in the work they are doing, they will be more likely to work on their own, because they enjoy the task and they believe their skills, abilities, and efforts, are the key determinant factors to the result of the work (Sujan, 1986). However, when salespeople who are in the external attribution condition are also intrinsically motivated, it will be a different case. I predict that although they still hold the believe that external environment plays an important role in determining the outcome of the tasks, the inherent interest of the task itself may drive them to shift away from team-orientation. Because they are intrinsically motivated and they want to spend more time and effort on the task themselves, accordingly, they will tend to move toward to the self-orientation end of the "team-self orientation" continuum.

Proposition 3. *The effect of intrinsic motivation will moderate the effect of the locus on work attitude orientation. More specifically, intrinsic motivation will have a more positive influence on the relationship between attribution orientation and team-orientation for internal attribution people than for external attribution people.*

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This article tries to explain why salespeople have different preferences of work orientations, and attribution theory is employed as both the theoretical foundation and the explanation mechanism.

Furthermore, this article also examines the moderation effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, with the support of self-determination theory, that is, the influence of the nature of the task and the role organization plays during the development of work orientation attitudes.

A theoretical framework has been established by this article, as a predication and explanatory mechanism to link the relationship between attribution styles, contextual variables (intrinsic/extrinsic motivations), and work attitude (team-orientation vs. self-orientation).

The theoretical contribution of the article will be the attempt to merge attribution theory and self-determination theory, which forms the cornerstones of the conceptual model that explains the causes and development of the important phenomenon of why salespeople develop different work attitudes. The managerial implication the articles offers would be a mechanism that helps organizations to better understand their employees and achieve a better job design and implementation of reward/punishment system.

CONCLUSION

The development of employees' different work attitude preferences is believed to be determined by their varying attribution styles, in the process of work attitude formation under the influence of different attribution orientations, the motivations of salespeople also come into play. Fully understanding employee's attribution styles, specifically, who they tend to blame when a failure outcome of their tasks appears (Anderson, et al, 1983), will help organizations better assess their employees, correctly select qualified people, and assign the right person for a particular job. In addition, as self-determination theory indicates that intrinsic/extrinsic motivation has a very influential role during the process of attitude change and formation (Amabile and Lepper, 1976)., this article also takes into consideration the moderation role of motivations by examining the relationship and establishing the linkage of attribution styles, intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, and work orientation preference. Thus, organizations could take better advantage of their reward/punishment system and provide effective mechanism to stimulate the morale of their salespeople, with the help of this proposed model.

To conclude, attribution theory and self-determination theory provide strong theoretical backup for us to explain salespeople's different preferences to work with other team members, and it offers a platform that helps researchers and practitioners to better understand the causes and formation of different work orientation. The merger and integration of two separate yet equally important theories are a first attempt that tries to find a more rational explanation to a phenomenon.

After the establishing and testing of the proposed conceptual model, combined with empirical testing and evidence, it is believed that it all depends upon the "match" between the attribution styles and types of motivation that influence and determine the formation of different work attitude (Sujan, 1986). To maximize the potential and strengths of their salespeople, it is important and wise for the organizations to fully understand their employees and design the right stimulation system (Shaw, Duffy, and Stark, 2000) to achieve sales budget and provide a pleasant working environment for different types of salespeople.

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