Transcript of the Deeper Dive on Language

Hi there! In this installment of "Deeper Dive," we will explore how we assign blame in a little more detail.

Have you ever made a mistake at work? Were you blamed for it? Did you feel judged? If you were, don't worry, that is kind of normal.

In many ways, we make sense of the world around us through our use of language. And language gives us some options in how we describe events.

If we again take the example statement, "Sam made an error," this is phrased in the active voice. In a sentence using the active voice, we clearly identify who did it. It was Sam! In fact, Lannon and Gurak would refer to this as a "blunt use of active voice" (Lannon and Gurak 2022, p. 231).

Another way to phrase this is to say, "an error was made." This is known as the passive voice. When we use the passive voice, we hide the doer of the action.

When writing, it's often preferable to use the active voice. Using the passive voice usually uses more words. It also sounds vague and evasive, like how a politician might describe something. Perhaps the foremost example of a politician embracing the passive voice was when New Jersey Governor Chris Christie explained his role in the politically motivated closure of the George Washington Bridge:

"Mistakes were clearly made" (pbbump 2014, 00:01:13).

They were? What mistakes? By who?!

We don't want our documents to sound vague and abstract when writing, so we tend to discourage the passive voice.

By its nature, the active voice adds agency. As we have already learned, An agent of an action is the "doer" of that action. Agency makes our

documents stronger and more purposeful. According to Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, as well as injecting purpose, the "active voice apparently conveys a sense of control and causation that is lacking in the passive voice" (Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor 2008, p.732). But, this causation can also have the effect of administering judgement—knowingly or unknowingly.

Lee Ross used the term "fundamental attribution error" (Ross 1977, p.187) to describe how that judgement is introduced. It refers to how much a given action reflects something about the agent's personality, as opposed to the various situational factors influencing the agent (Ross 2018).

In his research on biases and shortcomings in human inference, Professor Ross asserted that when people interact, we make fundamental judgements on why we do what we do. Very often, our judgements are based on the person- perhaps something about their characteristics, education, or ability. As opposed to something about the situation that the person is in-what influences their behaviour, and what constraints they are under.

When we make the error of attributing too much cause to a person rather than a situation, we are making a fundamental attribution error. We are introducing a bias that overlooks the importance of the situation.

If we again examine our example of "Sam made an error."

An instinctive reaction to this statement is to think, "Uh oh, Sam messed up." Or "Sam must not be very good at their job." These are very normal reactions to have to this kind of language. But, focussing on Sam as a person disregards the fact that Sam's behaviour, the actions, the outcomes, the successes, the failures, the things that make Sam look good, or look bad, may all be caused by something about the situation that Sam is in.

As incident reviewers, particularly those of us tasked with documenting a record of the incident, we must be conscious of this type of bias. Our goal is to learn as much as possible about an incident, which means that we specifically want to know about Sam's situation.

So, remember this in your next PIR: Even without explicitly blaming a person, the structure of how an event is described can influence how people remember and interpret those events. Prefer the passive voice when you want to be indirect or inoffensive, and steer people's attention towards the situation rather than the person.

Thanks for listening!

References

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