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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Attributional Style as a Factor  
in  
Academic Department Chair Communication

by

Frank C. Daniels

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Interdepartmental Area of  
Major: Administration, Curriculum & Instruction

Under the Supervision of Professor Daniel W. Wheeler

Lincoln, Nebraska

April 1999

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DISSERTATION TITLE

Attributional Style as a Factor in Academic Department

Chair Communication

BY

Frank C. Daniels

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# ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE AS A FACTOR IN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT CHAIR COMMUNICATION

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University of Nebraska, 1999

Adviser: Daniel W. Wheeler

The purpose of this study was to identify attributional styles (AS) of academic department chairs. Attributional style is the repeatable pattern of personal explanation for other's behavior and was examined through the underlying dimensions of locus of control, stability, controllability, globality, and intentionality. Measurement of these dimensions was accomplished through the administration of the Chair Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ). AS results were examined for significant correlations with departmental effectiveness, future departmental effectiveness, attitude toward change, and the effects of positive versus negative scenarios.

Significant correlations were found in individual departmental scenarios, most notably for locus of control, stability, and controllability, but did not adequately hold together in a factor analysis to warrant generalized conclusions. Results were sufficiently encouraging in this initial application of attributional style to academic department chairs to suggest the value of further study. Future research will require additional efforts to develop psychometrically sound instrumentation.



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Finally, I would like to offer a special tribute to my wife, Ceri, without whose unconditional love and encouragement this would not have been possible.

This dissertation is dedicated to you.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context

Academic department chair effectiveness is directly linked to the ability to communicate with those whose support or resistance can significantly affect the success of the department. As individuals, chairs can be vain or self-effacing, impulsive or cautious, gregarious or reclusive. Leaders come in many different forms and personality styles. The entity they share is the ability to motivate others through effective communication (Hesselbein, et al., 1996).

Communication is influenced by the psychological proclivity of individuals to make assumptions consistent with personal values, what social psychologists call *self-schemas* (Markus, 1977). Self-schemas guide the interpretation of events in an ego-centric way with the sometimes inevitable distortion of the facts from another's perspective. The chair who believes a member's pointed questions are evidence of lack of support may miss the inquisitor's need to more thoroughly understand the topic under consideration. While individual differences in attributional style will continue to confound issues, it was the purpose of this research to look for generalities that, nonetheless, have recurring value.

While the core of effective leadership may be the ability to communicate (Wilhelm, 1996), communication can be elusive. Leaders do not have the time or resources to know how accurately a message has been perceived. There is not the opportunity to explore the nuances behind complex directives or verify understanding. What a leader can measure is the behavior that another exhibits and make judgments as

to the causes of that behavior. While behaviors do not reveal all extenuating circumstances surrounding a follower's compliance or a peer's comprehension, they are measurable indicators.

The current study measured attributional styles of department chairs with the understanding that generalities mitigate, but do not eliminate, the potential value of such research. Lack of time, inclination, and resources will continue to limit communication while at the same time generate continued interest in developing methodologies to achieve that end. For the purposes of this study, attributional style was defined as the generalizations made by chairs about the underlying causes of their own or another's behavior.

Chair inclination to explain other's behavior was the focal point of this exploratory, descriptive look into the psychology of leadership in academe. The study further projects attribution styles of chair leadership that could hypothetically enhance or retard department performance. According to Anderson, et al., (1988), attributional style is related to motivation, performance, and affective reactions and is an important construct in the study of department chairs and academic leadership.

With leadership often described as influencing others to accomplish a particular task (Bass, 1990), the causal meaning a leader attaches to another's behavior could significantly affect the interaction and the subsequent relationship. Attribution involves making inferences about the nature of another person based on that person's behavior, and, as such, assessments of character, intentions, and capabilities are made. They may occur spontaneously, as one cognizes the environment, or occur through a more

deliberate, deductive process (Kelley, 1967). While its purpose is to provide information useful to the perceiver, attribution can also involve inaccuracies and bias's due to factual limitations (Ross, 1977). Ultimately, attribution may be part of an adaptive mechanism that allows people to function in rapidly changing environments, distortions notwithstanding.

To compensate for discomfort associated with unpredictability, psychologists have noted the propensity for individuals to assume personal control over circumstances. That propensity to assume control seems to pervade thinking, even in the face of contradictory evidence, and serves as another underlying motivation of this research. So prevalent seems to be the need to understand and predict events, people regularly assign causal explanations consistent with personal beliefs (Heider, 1958). To maintain equilibrium in a social environment requires the individual to make judgments about other's behavior consistent with the perceiver's view, thereby minimizing cognitive dissonance and dysfunction.

It is proposed that academic department chairs make similar causal attributions. While innumerable specific explanations exist for any individual behavior, this study measured more generalizeable causal dimensions of attribution through the administration of the Chair Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ). For the purposes of this study, the following causal dimensions were examined: locus of control (internal/external); stability (stable/unstable); globality (global/situational); intentionality (intended/unintended); and controllability (under individual's control/not under individual's control). See Appendix A.

Academic department chairs play a pivotal role in higher education, a role especially significant in periods of rapid change (Seagren, et al., 1993). Leaders in education are being asked to become more responsive in an increasingly competitive environment. With that responsiveness comes the need to utilize the creative energies of other department members in an environment of trust. While some scholars have found that good leadership is situation specific depending on the task to be performed, it has also been noted that leadership is influenced by the nature of the interpersonal relationships within the unit (Schein, 1992). These relationships are related to leader attributions as to why a department member was successful or unsuccessful. Leader assessment of member failure, for example, will elicit a much different response if the failure is attributed to personal (internal) reasons rather than external (environmental) ones.

For the purpose of this study, attribution was viewed as a subset of the broader field of organizational behavior, described as the understanding, prediction, and management of individuals in organizations (Luthans, 1998). As a source of systematic study, organizational behavior dates back to the 1970's, coinciding with the rise of attribution theory. Organizational behavior draws from the behavioral sciences and is based on the theoretical framework of behaviorism, cognition, and social learning. Behaviorism's influence came with an emphasis on observable behaviors and consequences. Cognition involves thinking, perception, problem solving, and information processing, while social learning includes both behavioral and cognitive

components with an emphasis on learning about the environment to know how best to access behavioral reinforcers.

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to identify attributional styles (AS) of academic department chairs. Attributional style is the repeatable pattern of personal explanation for other's behavior and was examined through the underlying dimensions of locus of control, stability, controllability, globality, and intentionality (See Appendix B). Measure of these dimensions was accomplished through the administration of the Chair Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ). AS results were examined for significant correlations with departmental effectiveness, future departmental effectiveness, attitude toward change, and the effects of positive versus negative scenarios.

### Research Questions

1. Is attributional style a valid construct with regard to academic department chairs?
2. To what extent are the variables locus of control, stability, controllability, globality, and intentionality statistically significant indicators of chair attributional style?
3. Does attributional style relate significantly to expectations of departmental effectiveness when controlling for length of service, years as chair, department size, institutional affiliation, age, gender, and academic discipline?
4. Does attributional style relate significantly to expectations of future departmental effectiveness when controlling for length of service, years as chair, department size, institutional affiliation, age, gender, and academic discipline?

5. Does attributional style relate significantly to chair perceptions of change when controlling for length of service, years as chair, department size, institutional affiliation, age, gender, and academic discipline?
6. Does attributional style show a consistent pattern across domains of positive and negative events?

### Theoretical Perspective

The underlying theoretical framework for this study of academic department chairs was the social psychological construct of attribution. The primary usage of attribution in the literature refers to it as the inferences made about the causes of another's behavior for the purpose of learning about the target person's traits and other dispositions (Smith, 1994). As department chairs manage multi-faceted elements within the department, inferences as to the intent of other's behavior will inevitably surface. Once intent is inferred, whether a positive or a negative judgment, the chair makes an internal assessment that will affect attitudes toward that individual and, ultimately, influence the relationship.

### Definition of Terms

*Attribution:* An assumption about the underlying cause of an individual's behavior.

*Attribution Style:* The extent to which individuals show repeatable attributional tendencies as measured by the Chair Attributional Style Questionnaire (CASQ).

*Baccalaureate Colleges I & II:* Primarily undergraduate colleges as defined by Carnegie Classification (1994).



*Causal Dimensions:* A generalized pattern of underlying structure for innumerable, specific attributions that might be used to explain behavior. The dimensions of this study will be locus of control, stability, controllability, globality, and intentionality as measured by the CASQ.

*Controllability:* The extent to which a cause is under the control of the individual or other people (Weiner, 1979).

*Demographics (Individual):* Length of service, years as chair, previous institutions, age, gender, and academic discipline, as measured by the CASQ.

*Demographics (Institutional):* Department size as measured by the CASQ.

*Globality:* Refers to whether the attribution can be applied globally or is situation specific. For example, an attribution of diminished intellect would likely result in an expectation of modest success across domains, and not just in specific situations (Abrahamson et al., 1978).

*Intentionality:* Involves the difference between effort and strategy. Example: an individual does not intentionally pick a wrong strategy, but could intentionally not exert enough effort (CASQ). From Rosenbaum's study as cited in Kent & Martinko, (1995).

*Leader:* The academic department chair in Baccalaureate Colleges I & II.

*Locus of Causality (Internal/External)* Factors thought to be either "inside" the person or "outside" the person in the environment. Locus has the greatest degree of acceptance as a dimension along which attributions are thought to vary (Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1979; Weiner, 1985).

*Locus of Control: (Internal/External)* Used interchangeably with locus of causality and locus.

*Stability: (Stable/Unstable).* The degree to which a cause is constant over time or varies over time. The inclusion of stability in a number of studies and evidence of its validity has lent widespread credibility to this dimension (Weiner, 1979; Weiner, 1985).

#### Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study confined itself to department chairs in American Baccalaureate I & II institutions to narrow the focus of the research commensurate with the interests of the researcher. From the six hundred and twenty-four Baccalaureate I & II institutions, one hundred and seventy colleges and universities were randomly selected as representative of the population. Over three hundred chairs were identified and contacted directly by e-mail with the intention of obtaining responses from one hundred department chairs. It was determined through consultation that one hundred individuals would be sufficient to reasonably conduct a factor analysis.

Of the three hundred and four chairs contacted, one hundred and seventy four agreed to participate in the survey with one hundred and thirteen eventually completing and returning the questionnaire in a usable form. A convenience sample of individual chairs was determined by website identification of department chairs and an accompanying e-mail address.

A significant limitation of the study was the unknown nature of the validity and reliability of the untested instrument. As no instrument was available to investigate the proposed area of research, it was necessary to develop a survey following extensive

preliminary precautions. Among these precautions was a careful examination of similar measures, creation of an expert review panel, reviews by a research consultant, and extensive reworking of the instrument before completion.

Other limitations included the difficulty in generalizing psychological constructs, quantifying behavior, and quantifying the impact of situational data. As the researcher recognized the possibility of seemingly endless causal attributions that could be applied to explain member behavior, this study focused on the broader area of underlying causal dimensions.

Finally, attributional processes pose obvious problems with respect to measurement with no way to verify accuracy (Harvey & Weary, 1985). It is recognized that the use of a survey will elicit responses as to how department chairs recall their attributions. The study does not allow for how chairs actually responded attributionally at the time of interaction. It is limited to the chair's recollection of a past event that may have been modified by later reflection or mitigating circumstances.

#### Significance of the Study

Much has been written about the significance of attribution at the personal level. Despite the documented importance of attribution in achievement motivation (Weiner, 1986), relatively little has been done in an organizational context (Furnham, et al., 1992; Kent & Martinko, 1995; Riollo-Saltzman, 1998). The literature on department chairs is devoid of references to attributional style in spite of the sophistication and volume of attributional writings with potential application. Therefore, attributional style was examined in an exploratory fashion for the purposes of this inquiry.

As institutions of higher learning face increasingly competitive pressures with other institutions and technology-based accommodations such as Phoenix and Western Governor's Universities, it is likely that the demand for leadership will grow. Just as businesses have had to learn to be more responsive, higher education is also being affected by these trends and will be required to adapt. The traditional independence of the individual faculty member is likely to give way to the need to engage in more cooperative efforts. As collaborative interactions become more substantial, the ability to recognize and work with varying personalities is likely to take on greater importance. Businesses today are increasingly using psychological measures for such purposes as screening potential employees and assisting in the resolution of interpersonal conflict (Luthans, 1998).

Internally, chair awareness of attributional style could increase personal objectivity in interactive settings. Department member awareness of leader attributional style (AS) could offer insight as to how the chair is likely to view members' behavior, thereby allowing members to position themselves for maximum positive exchanges. Finally, a degree of leader predictability could minimize departmental conflict by reducing misunderstanding and mistrust as members anticipated and made advanced preparation for leader response.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review serves to connect a proposed study to the larger body of literature on the topic, to acquaint the reader with the results of other related studies, and to provide a framework for establishing the importance of the study (Creswell, 1994). To understand the fundamental issues of the current research, it is necessary to briefly examine the literature on academic department chairs and leadership. Theoretical and empirical considerations of attribution will be examined in more detail as attribution represents the foundation of this study.

#### Department Chairs

This study focused on academic department chairs who daily strive to balance administrative demands of the institution with demands of faculty and students. Chairs must bridge the gap between diverse groups and work through often conflicting issues of governance, instruction, budgetary concerns, and accreditation. This is an especially challenging consideration given the range of age, education, and nature of individuals involved. Interactions with the college dean on visionary goals of the department demand different skills than those for recruiting prospective students or resolving faculty-student conflict.

While chairs serve a vital role in today's colleges and universities, departmentalization is a relatively new concept surfacing in the middle of the last century with the increase in scientific knowledge and rising enrollments. Until the second half of the 19th century, American colleges were mostly administered by

presidents who served as business managers, scholars, and teachers. With an increase in information, courses such as rhetoric and natural philosophy gave way to more specialized academic areas and some administrative responsibilities were passed on to newly formed departments (Tucker, 1993).

Today, departments are headed by chairs who routinely serve in a wide range of capacities. As unit leaders they are responsible for departmental governance including planning, goal setting, and morale building. They prepare and administer budgets, teach classes, recruit, encourage, and evaluate faculty. They serve as a liaison between administrators, faculty, and students, as well as promote and defend departmental priorities in interdepartmental committees. They mediate internal disputes and seek to generate an environment where faculty strengths are realized (Tucker, 1993).

In these interactive encounters, the chair will, of necessity, depend on conjecture as to what others are thinking. Based on causal projections to explain other's behavior, the personalized inclination to make certain assumptions about those causes will determine the nature of exchanges. Chair attributions of other's behavior are also significant, not only as they apply to the overt behavior of the leader in the present, but also as they enhance, or limit, the leader's outlook in the future. Attributions involve both expectancy for future interaction and bias that can alter the accuracy of future determination of causality (Martinko & Gardner, 1987).

### Leadership

Leadership is the ability to influence others toward accomplishing a common task. It has been described conceptually, described with typologies and taxonomies,

described with theories and models, but most commonly described with equivocation.

Leadership continues to defy both explanation and agreement. Although references pre-date recorded history, defining principles remain elusive. It remains widely accepted as necessary to the advancement of the human condition and continues to be studied with vigor and enthusiasm (Bass, 1990).

One leadership model of interest to the current study is predicated on the idea that there are a host of leadership styles and a wide range of differences in the nature of individual departments. Just as the “directive-supportive behavior model” (Tucker, 1993) generalizes leadership style for the purpose of increased understanding, so too this study generalizes to increase insight as to the influence of attributional style.

The directive-supportive model articulated by Tucker (1993) and based, in part, on Blanchard’s situational leadership proposes a quadrant system related to the directiveness/supportiveness of a chair. Emphasizing the relative nature of the identifiers, Tucker describes the first quadrant as high directive and low supportive. This quadrant identifies a chair who provides a high degree of chair direction, but offers limited psychological support. Quadrant two (high directive/high supportive) singles out a chair who does offer emotional support, but is also a manager who gets involved with detail. Low directive/high supportive quadrant three is characterized by limited chair direction, but much psychological support. Quadrant four is characterized by both limited chair direction and support. Each of these leadership styles will be influenced by a host of mitigating factors including personalities, institutional and unit culture, administrative demands, and departmental maturity.

Model generalization allows the observer to contemplate broader considerations that may otherwise go unheeded. Mature departments where individuals have the capacity to work effectively together not only do not need, but would be expected to be resistant to, high levels of directiveness. Similarly, mature departments where individuals are secure in the knowledge of their contributions may need less emotional support. Departments where individuals were not as well known to each other and who had not as yet developed mutually appreciative and supportive interactive styles might be expected to need additional chair support and direction. The model provides the opportunity to step back and look at what is best for the department given its current texture.

The current study uses the model concept to examine department chair leadership through the more narrowly focused lens of attribution. Instead of looking at a department-wide contextual framework, attribution theory examines the specific psychological phenomenon of assessing why people act in a particular manner. It is the assertion of this theory that all individuals assign a cause for other's behavior that provides a starting point for an appropriate response. If an observer considers the reason for another's behavior to be self-seeking, it will prompt a different response than a behavior judged to be in the interests of the group, for example. This model of attributing cause to behavior has long been researched in the area of individual psychology, but is of more recent interest in its application to group dynamics and its impact on leadership.