

consistency and distinctiveness, and they can be linked together in different compositions. Let's look at what these terms mean:

- 1 *Consensus* refers to whether the person's behaviour is similar to that of other people in similar situations.
- 2 *Consistency* refers to how often the person behaved in a particular way in the past.
- 3 *Distinctiveness* refers to how often the individual behaves in the same way across different situations.

These variables can be organised in a number of different ways and this can lead people to attribute behaviours to internal or external factors. It is particularly useful in a work context to be able to understand how individuals attribute certain explanations to other people's behaviours.

Let's look at how attribution theory can help to assist us in explaining people's behaviour at work. We will explore two different scenarios using the same example of an employee who has received a poor result in a performance evaluation from his supervisor.

In scenario one, the employee's supervisor has noted that the employee usually performs poorly in the performance evaluation (high consistency), other workers doing the same job and working in the same area have not performed poorly (low consensus), and the employee's performance is poor despite having been placed into different work situations across the factory (low distinctiveness). The manager may then attribute the poor result to a lack of effort and a poor attitude to work (internal factors).

In scenario two, the employee's supervisor has noted that the employee usually performs well in the performance evaluation (high consistency), other workers doing the same job and working in the same area have also performed poorly (high consensus), and the employee's poor performance is very unusual as the individual usually works well in any work environment (low distinctiveness). The manager may then attribute the poor result to a lack of training or persistent problems with the machines that the individual is operating (external factors).

As you can see, depending on the pattern of the variables, behaviour in a given situation can be mainly attributed to internal or to external factors.

## FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR

This is something which sounds serious yet has quite a simple explanation. The **fundamental attribution error** is another example of a perceptual error and is where individuals tend to

Scenario One: Low Consensus, High Consistency, Low Distinctiveness = Internal Factors
Scenario Two: High Consensus, High Consistency, Low Distinctiveness = External Factors

**Figure 3.5** Patterns of attribution elements

**fundamental attribution error** where individuals attribute external causes to their own behaviour, and internal causes to the behaviour of others