

# 4.6 Attributions

## Goal

*The students strengthen their awareness of the influence which cultural thinking patterns and interpretation patterns have on our communication. The starting point is an example of a failed communication, based on culturally shaped attributions.*

7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> grade

45 minutes



Materials:  
copies of the dialogs  
(see master copy on next page).

Hints:

- The example for the dialog can of course without any problems be substituted with another from one's own living environment. It would however have to be treated similar to our example.
- Source: according to Triandis (1972) in Thomas Alexander et al. (publisher) (2003): Handbook for intercultural communication and cooperation, vol. 1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Procedure:

- The instructor first explains the term imputation/attribution (Definition: everything that people attribute to themselves and project on others in terms of characteristics, e. g. ethnic or role stereotypes or other interpretations). Discussion of experiences that students may have had in this regard.
- The students are informed that a dialog must be analyzed on two levels: 1. Based on the level of what was really said, and 2. on the level of unspoken interpretations or attributions. The context of the exercise is a dialog between an American supervisor and a Greek employee of an international firm. The action takes place in Greece. The Greek is a long-time, successful employee. The American was recently promoted to manager of the Greek subsidiary.
- The students receive a copy of the dialog. The attribution side (right column) was previously folded back by the instructor and may not yet be viewed. The students assume different roles in reading the dialog out loud, and then discuss the reasons for the communicative breakdowns in smaller groups.
- They then unfold the paper and read the attributions in the right hand column. They discuss in pairs how these attributions came about.
- Reflection and discussion by the whole class:
  - What are the main reasons for the breakdown in communication?
  - What kinds of values, behavioral patterns and culture-specific attitudes could have been responsible for the behavior of the two men?
  - What could be the next step for dealing constructively with the situation? (It would be useful to compile strategies of intercultural communication.)
  - What kinds of experiences have the students themselves already had in this regard?

# The new American supervisor and his Greek employee

Worksheet "Dialog" for students

Behavior/what is said	Attribution: imputation/interpretation/thoughts
<p><b>American:</b> How long do you need to finish this report?</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>I'm inviting him to participate; I want to include him in the decision.</i></p>
<p><b>Greek:</b> I don't know. How long am I supposed to take?</p>	<p><b>Greek:</b> <i>What's the point of this? He is the boss: why doesn't he give me clear instructions?</i></p> <p><b>American:</b> <i>He refuses to accept responsibility.</i></p>
<p><b>American:</b> You can best determine yourself how long it will take.</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>He should accept responsibility for his actions.</i></p> <p><b>Greek:</b> <i>What nonsense! It's probably better to give him an answer.</i></p>
<p><b>Greek:</b> Ok, ten days.</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>He is unable to accurately gauge the time. This estimate is totally unrealistic.</i></p>
<p><b>American:</b> 15 would be better. Do you agree to finish the work in 15 days?</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>I offer him an agreement.</i></p> <p><b>Greek:</b> <i>Ok, he demands 15 days, he is the boss.</i></p>
<p>In reality, the report takes about 30 days to complete. Thus, the Greek worked day and night, but still needed an additional day at the end of the 15th day.</p>	
<p><b>American:</b> Where is the report?</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>I will make sure that he complies with the agreement.</i></p> <p><b>Greek:</b> <i>He wants the report.</i></p>
<p><b>Greek:</b> It will be finished tomorrow.</p>	<p><b>Both:</b> <i>The report is not yet ready.</i></p>
<p><b>American:</b> But we had decided that it would be ready by today!</p>	<p><b>American:</b> <i>I have to teach him to comply with agreements.</i></p> <p><b>Greek:</b> <i>This stupid, incompetent boss! Not only did he give me false instructions, but he does not even appreciate that I completed a 30-day job in 16 days.</i></p>
<p>The Greek submits his resignation. The American is surprised.</p>	
	<p><b>Greek:</b> <i>I cannot work for such a guy.</i></p>