SECTION – A

Answer the following question in about 1000 words each.

1. Elaborate attribution theory and its applications.

**Ans:** Attribution theory is intended to help a person understand the causes of human behavior, be it their own or someone else's. The basis of attribution theory is that people want to know the reasons for the actions that they and others take; they want to attribute causes to behaviors they see rather than assuming that these behaviors are random. This allows people to assume some feeling of control over their own behaviors and over situations. Psychologist Fritz Heider (1896–1988) first developed attribution theory in his 1958 book The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations. Heider proposed that what people perceived and believed about what they saw dictated how they would act, even if their beliefs about what they perceived were invalid.

Heider's proposed theory of attribution was further developed by psychologist Bernard Weiner and colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s, and this new theoretical framework has been used primarily in current attribution research. A final development to attribution theory was provided by psychologist Harold Kelley, who examined how consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus could be used by individuals to establish the validity of their perceptions.

Attributions are critical to management because perceived causes of behavior may influence managers' and employees' judgments and actions. For instance, managers must often observe employee performance and make related judgments. If a manager attributes an employee's poor performance to a lack of effort, then the outcome is likely to be negative for that employee; he or she may receive a poor performance appraisal rating or even be terminated from the job. Conversely, if a manager perceives that an employee's poor performance is due to a lack of skill, the manager may assign the employee to further training or provide more instruction or coaching.

Making an inaccurate judgment about the causes of poor performance can have negative repercussions for the organization. Attributions also may influence employee motivation. Employees who perceive the cause of their success to be outside of their control may be reluctant to attempt new tasks and may lose motivation to perform well in the workplace. Conversely, employees who attribute their success to themselves are more likely to have high motivation for work. Thus, understanding attributions that people make can have a strong effect on both employee performance and managerial effectiveness.

Attribution is considered to be a three-stage process. First, the behavior of an individual must be observed. Second, the perceiver must determine that the behavior they have observed is deliberate. That is, the person being observed is believed to have behaved intentionally. Finally, the observer attributes the observed behavior to either internal or external causes. Internal causes are attributed to the person being observed, while external causes are attributed to outside factors. The two internal attributions one can make are that a person's ability or a person's effort determined the outcome. Task difficulty and luck are the external causes of behavior.

When perceiving behavior, an observer will make a judgment as to which of these factors is the cause of behavior. However, when making a determination between internal and external causes of behavior, the perceiver must examine the elements of consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus.

Consistency describes whether the person being observed behaves the same way when faced with the same set of circumstances. If the person being observed acts the same way in the same type of situation, consistency is high; if they act differently each time, then consistency is low. Distinctiveness is whether the observed person acts the same way in different types of situations. If the person being observed exhibits the same behavior in a variety of contexts, then distinctiveness is low. If they have different behavior depending on the context, then distinctiveness is high. Finally, consensus is the degree to which other people, if in the same situation, would behave similarly to the person being observed. If the observer sees others acting the same way that the person being perceived acts, then consensus is high. However, if others behave differently in the type of situation, then consensus is low. Consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus are evaluated when observing behavior, and then a judgment about an internal versus external cause of behavior is made. When consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus are all high, the perceiver concludes that there is an external cause of behavior. When consistency is high, distinctiveness is low, and consensus is low, the perceiver will attribute the cause of behavior to internal factors.

To better understand consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus, consider a workplace example. Nancy, a manager, has assigned a team of employees to develop a custom sales training program for a client. As the project progresses, Nancy continues to see problems in the work produced by Jim, one of the team members. In order to determine why Jim's performance is not satisfactory, Nancy first considers consistency, or whether Jim has performed poorly on other similar team projects. A review of his past performance appraisals indicates that he has not had prior performance problems when creating custom sales training programs. This would lead Nancy to conclude that there was an external cause of the poor performance. Second, Nancy considers distinctiveness; she wants to know if Jim has performed poorly on different types of tasks. Again, in checking Jim's performance reviews, she finds that when he is on a team to accomplish a different type of task, such as developing a selection interview, he has excelled. This further points to an external cause of Jim's poor performance. Finally, Nancy assesses consensus, or the behavior of others in this similar task. In asking the team members about their experiences with the current project, she finds that many of them have had difficulty in developing this custom sales training program. Thus, all indicators point to Jim's poor performance being caused by an external factor, such as a difficult task or a demanding client. Based on this attribution, Nancy may explore ways in which to minimize the negative effects of the external factors on Jim's performance rather than attempting to influence his level of effort or ability.

The prior example illustrated how consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus might point toward an external cause. However, these three factors also may lead an observer to attribute behavior to an internal cause, such as the observed person's effort or ability. Nancy, the observer from the previous example, also has experienced difficulties with a secretary named Kelly. Another manager has complained to Nancy that Kelly has not completed work on time and turns in work full of errors. Nancy observes Kelly for several