Self-Determination Theory In Zootopia

Disney’s animated blockbuster, Zootopia, takes place in a world where animals behave like humans. The story is about a rabbit and a fox who work together to solve the mystery of the fourteen missing mammals in their city. One of the protagonists in the film is Judy Hopps, the first rabbit to become a police officer. Initially, Hopps finds herself working traffic duty because she is not taken seriously as an officer. Despite her dissatisfaction with the work, she strives for excellence in her occupation. On the other hand, Nick Wilde, the other protagonist in the film, seems satisfied being a crafty con artist who hustles popsicles for a living. Nick displays all the stereotypical characteristics of a fox: cunning, smart, deceptive, and creative. However, his deceptive behavior and smugness catch up with him when he brags about tax evasion as Judy secretly records him. Nick’s inadvertent admission enables Judy to blackmail him into helping her find Emmett Otterton, one of the missing mammals.

With only 48 hours, a parking patrol vehicle, and one paper in the case file, Nick and Judy embark on one of the toughest cases in Zootopia history. The stakes are high for Judy because her career is contingent on success, so Judy and Nick waste no time following clues until they discover Cliffside Asylum. Not only do they find Emmett Otterton, but also Mr. Manchas and other missing mammals. Nonetheless, their discovery only leads to more questions, primarily about the cause of the savagery that the missing mammals are exhibiting. Judy and Nick must find out why the mammals are behaving this way before Zootopia is irreversibly damaged by the fear and uncertainty dividing predators and prey. Throughout the movie, two important organizational behavior concepts explain Judy and Nick’s actions as the investigation progresses.

Judy’s initial setback in figuring out why the predators are going savage stems from a bias known as fundamental attribution error. “It is the tendency to underestimate the influence of external factors and overestimate the influence of internal factors when making judgments about others” (Jun, 2019, slide 14). For example, a student to come late to class and a school teacher assumes that the student’s laziness, an internal factor, rather than unfavourable road conditions, an external factor, is the reason. Fundamental attribution error exists because humans give meaning to their observations using heuristics, which are mental shortcuts that allow them to process the influx of information from their environment (Jun, 2019).

Self-Determination Theory explains the initial difference in Judy and Nick’s motivations for working on the case as well as the shift in Nick’s motivation. The theory distinguishes between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and outlines the three factors that influence intrinsic motivation (Jun, 2019). Extrinsic motivation “stems from the work environment external to the task” and “includes rewards, pay raise, benefits, bonuses, and promotions” (Jun, 2019, slide 13). Conversely, intrinsic motivation “stems from direct relationship between worker and the task and is usually self-applied” (Jun, 2019, slide 14). Three innate needs--competence, autonomy, and relatedness--lead to intrinsic motivation (Jun, 2019). Competence is the need to excel at what one does and hone new skills (Cherry, 2018). Autonomy is the need to freely determine one’s own career goals and decisions (Cherry, 2018). Relatedness is the need to have meaningful relationships with other members of the organization (Cherry, 2018).

Until Nick becomes intrinsically motivated by realizing his need for relatedness, the clash between Judy's intrinsic motivation and Nick's extrinsic motivation causes tension in the partnership and halts productivity. Judy's motivations are evident in a proclamation to the crowd of her goal of becoming a police officer. (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:02:37). Although Judy is assigned to parking duty, her need for competence prompts her to write 200 parking tickets before noon on her first day as she wants to stand out as a bunny police officer among those who would see her as inferior in her field. (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:16:08). Additionally, her need for autonomy empowers her to accept Mrs. Otterton's plea to find Emmett Otterton despite Chief Bogo's reservations because she seeks a challenging task that will allow her to define her own career path (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:31:55). Therefore, her motivation to take the case is driven both by a need for competence and autonomy. In contrast, Nick begins with purely extrinsic motivations and only agrees to help Judy when he was caught evading taxes solely to avoid punishment (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:35:06). As a result, Nick is not fully dedicated to the task and begrudgingly goes along with Judy. However, with each clue and trail, Nick's interest in the case increases, which becomes clear when he defends Judy against Chief Bogo's doubts about her ability to solve the case in 48 hours (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:56:50). Nick becomes intrinsically motivated to fulfill his need for relatedness, thereby assisting Judy due to their newfound connection. Only when Nick grows to have strong intrinsic motivation does his task performance enhance, and the tension between the duo relaxes. Nick's transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation culminates when Nick finally joins the police force as it is evident that he is finally striving to do good for the community to better himself rather than hustle popsicles simply for money (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 1:34:00).

Before Judy figures out that "night howlers" are responsible for predator savagery, she displays fundamental attribution error when she overestimates the influence of predator biology, thereby polarizing the predators and prey of Zootopia. When Judy and Nick discover that Mayor Lionheart and Dr. Madge Honey Badger are surreptitiously keeping the predators at Cliffside Asylum, Judy is influenced by the doctor's suggestion to Mayor Lionheart that "it may be time to consider their biology" (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 1:07:00) Zootopia eventually learns of Mayor Lionheart's secret, and reporters ask Judy for details about the case. Judy explains that "[...] predators survived through their aggressive hunting instincts. For whatever reason, they seem to be reverting back to their primitive savage ways." (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 1:11:13) She overestimates the influence of predatory biological instincts when she attributes the savage behavior to "a biological component [...] something in their DNA." (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 1:11:10) Even though Judy is not certain that biology is the reason for predator savagery, she emphasizes the idea in the press conference since she is a prey animal, making a judgment about predators. Because Judy is making a judgment about animals different from her, she more readily believes that biology, an internal factor, is to blame, exemplifying fundamental attribution error. However, she soon realizes the impact of her fallacious judgment when more predators go savage, and prey begin to fear them again (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016). The resulting upheaval causes Judy to dejectedly return to the carrot farm (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016). While on the farm, she realizes that bunnies can also become feral if they ingest the flowers Gideon Gray calls "night howlers" (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 1:19:20) Judy figures out that the flowers an external factor, were causing the feral behavior and rejects her earlier conclusion, demonstrating the error in her assumption about the predators' fundamental behavior. Armed with new information, Judy

and Nick successfully solve the case, rehabilitate the afflicted predators, and restore predator-prey relationships in Zootopia.

From their first meeting, the difference between Judy and Nick's motivation caused tension and lowered the productivity of the group; however, this could have been mitigated. Their problems are largely due to Nick's extrinsic motivation, which did not change until his need for relatedness developed because of his friendship with Judy. Starting groups through coercion harms the chances of creating meaningful relationships, which is proven as Nick and Judy are unsuccessful at first because Nick's motivation was extrinsic: to avoid jail (Clark Spencer, Byron Howard & Rich Moore, 2016, 0:35:06). Their problems could have been avoided by increasing intrinsic motivation factors: relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Organizations can learn from Judy's mistakes by fostering environments for relatedness without forcing individuals into the group structure. Employees' need for relatedness can be satisfied by organizing social events to increase camaraderie. From group activities to a fun night of bowling, creating social settings for employees fosters relatedness by allowing employees to communicate and understand each other. Additionally, redesigning office buildings to be more open and providing shared areas to eat or relax can increase the sense of relatedness within the organization. This allows relationships to develop without pressure. In order to foster autonomy, a manager can give significant tasks to employees so they feel empowered. Additionally, an organization could consider flatter structure so each employee has influence on the organization, increasing their sense of autonomy. To satisfy the need for competence, managers can offer personal coaching or pay for employees' tuition for night classes to increase their abilities.

The issues caused by fundamental attribution error could have also easily been avoided. The press conference placed a time constraint on Judy, so she relayed inaccurate information. If Judy were given time to find out the true cause of predator savagery, she might have considered external factors instead of simply attributing it to biology. To improve the accuracy of her judgment, Judy could have relayed only the information she could verify. Then, Chief Bogo could have said that the investigation is still open and that all questions will be answered in due course. Similarly, organizations can inform others of what they know only when it is verified and confirmed. They can support employees by giving them ample time to analyze all angles of a problem allows them to gather adequate information, effectively reducing the chance of reliance on heuristics and compelling employees to think beyond internal factors when making judgments about others or various situations. Furthermore, had Judy collaborated with Nick prior to talking at the press conference, she would have been presented with a predator animal's viewpoint and it might have changed her judgment. Therefore, facilitating collaboration between coworkers can reduce fundamental attribution error by allowing for multiple viewpoints, thereby filtering out biases.