Locus of Control

Locus of control describes how much people believe that they, rather than outside forces, control the events in their lives. The American psychologist Julian Rotter introduced the idea within his social learning theory, which he developed from the 1950s, and described it in a well-known 1966 monograph. It is not a fixed label but a spectrum, with an internal end and an external end. Where we sit on this spectrum often shapes how we act when things go wrong. We look at the two beliefs, how to hear them, what they do to motivation and results, and how to shift focus.

1. Two Beliefs

People with an internal locus of control believe that outcomes mostly follow from their own actions, effort and decisions. People with an external locus of control believe that outcomes mostly follow from luck, fate or other people. Most of us hold a mix, and the mix can change with the situation. Neither belief is simply right, because some events really are outside our control.

Example: Two students fail the same exam. One says the preparation was too short, the other says the questions were unfair. Asking whether their own actions shaped the outcome, we see that the first belief is internal and the second external.

At work: Dina leads a sales team that misses its target. Asking whether her own actions shaped the outcome, she admits that the market slowed, but also that she delayed two key follow-ups. She sees both sides of the situation.

2. Hearing the Difference

Our words often reveal our locus of control. External language sounds like nothing I do matters or it is just bad luck, while internal language sounds like what can I change or I will try another way. Listening to our own self-talk is the first step to noticing which belief is active. Noticing is not judging, because the aim is simply to see the pattern.

Example: A cyclist gets a puncture and says: this always happens to me. Asking how the situation is being described, the cyclist rephrases: I need to carry a spare tube.

At work: Dina notices her own sentence: nothing I do matters in this company. Asking how she is describing the situation, she rewrites it as: I cannot change the budget, but I can change how we plan.

3. Motivation and Results

Research has often linked a more internal locus of control with higher motivation, greater persistence and better job satisfaction. The reason is simple: if people believe that effort matters, they have a reason to try, to learn from mistakes and to keep going. A strongly external

This document is a property of Asaseeyat Academy - © Copy Right Protected.

belief can lower effort, because trying seems pointless if luck decides everything. These are tendencies, not rules, and many other factors also shape results.

Example: Two runners prepare for the same race. One believes training changes the result and keeps going after a bad week, while the other believes talent decides and may stop. Asking what the belief is doing to the effort, we see why the paths may differ.

At work: An employee in the team that Dina leads believes that promotions depend on luck, so he stops volunteering for projects. Dina asks what this belief is doing to his effort, and shows him how the promotions of last year followed concrete results. He volunteers for the next project.

4. Shifting Focus

We can practise a healthy shift by asking what part of the situation we can influence. We list what is in our control, what we can influence a little and what is outside our control, and we put effort into the first two. This is not about blaming ourselves, because internal control does not mean that everything is our fault. It means finding the next useful action.

Example: A job seeker receives a rejection. Asking what part of this can be influenced, the person lists: the economy is outside control, but improving the CV and asking for feedback are in control.

At work: The team that Dina leads faces a budget cut. Asking what part of this the team can influence, she separates the cut itself, which is outside control, from the priorities and schedule, which are in control. The team chooses three priorities and starts the same day.

Conclusion

In summary, locus of control is the degree to which we believe our actions shape what happens to us. Julian Rotter described it as a spectrum between internal and external beliefs. Hearing our own words helps us notice which belief is active. An internal belief often supports motivation and results, but it never means blaming ourselves for everything. Asking what part we can influence turns that belief into the next useful action.

Sources

- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. Psychological Monographs, 80(1), 1-28 – https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976
- Rotter, J. B. (1954). Social Learning and Clinical Psychology. Prentice-Hall.
- Spector, P. E. (1982). Behavior in organizations as a function of employee locus of control. Psychological Bulletin, 91(3), 482-497 – https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.91.3.482

This document is a property of Asaseeyat Academy - © Copy Right Protected.