Griffin, E. M., (2006). *A first look at communication theory* (5th ed). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

CHAPTER 16

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

of Leon Festinger

Aesop tells a story about a fox that tried in vain to reach a cluster of grapes dangling from a vine above his head. The fox leapt high to grasp the grapes, but the delicious-looking fruit remained just out of reach of his snapping jaws. After a few attempts the fox gave up and said to himself, "These grapes are sour, and if I had some I would not eat them."[1]

DISSONANCE: DISCORD BETWEEN BEHAVIOR AND BELIEF

Aesop's fable is the source of the phrase *sour grapes*. The story illustrates what former Stanford University social psychologist Leon Festinger called *cognitive dissonance*. It is the distressing mental state that people feel when they "find themselves doing things that don't fit with what they know, or having opinions that do not fit with other opinions they hold."[2]

The fox's retreat from the grape arbor clashed with his knowledge that the grapes were tasty. By changing his attitude toward the grapes, he provided an acceptable explanation for abandoning his efforts to reach them.

Festinger considered the need to avoid dissonance to be just as basic as the need for safety or the need to satisfy hunger. It is an *aversive drive* that goads us to be consistent. The tension of dissonance motivates us to change either our behavior or our belief in an effort to avoid that distressing feeling. The more important the issue is to us and the greater the discrepancy is between our behavior and our belief, the higher is the magnitude of dissonance we will feel. In extreme cases cognitive dissonance is like our cringing response to fingernails being scraped on a blackboard—we'll do anything to get away from the awful sound.

Consider the plight of Cliff, a habitual smoker who is confronted by the Surgeon General's warning on his pack of Camels. He reads that smoking is hazardous to his health—an idea that strongly conflicts with his ongoing behavior. Festinger says that something has to give—either the use of cigarettes *or* the belief that they will hurt him: "Whether the behavior or the cognition changes will be determined by which has the weakest resistance to change."[3] For Cliff it's no contest. He lights up and dismisses the possibility of cancer. Granted that most behaviors are not as difficult to change as the habit of smoking, the majority of our actions still are more entrenched than the thoughts we have about them. Thus, the focus of Festinger's theory is on the attitude change that occurs after dissonance.

THREE HYPOTHESES: WAYS TO REDUCE DISSONANCE BETWEEN ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS

Festinger hypothesized three mental mechanisms that people use to ensure that their actions and attitudes are in harmony. Dissonance researchers refer to them as *selective exposure, postdecision dissonance,* and *minimal justification.* I'll illustrate these cognitive processes with students' responses to a two-week, off-campus class that they nicknamed the "Island Course."

For 20 years I taught a group dynamics seminar limited to eight students on a remote island in northern Lake Michigan. Travel to and from the island was by a single-engine airplane, and we lived together in a cabin—the only structure on the island.[4] Except when a few of us flew off the island to buy food, our sole communication was with each other. Course alumni look back and consider our isolation as similar to the original *Survivor* series, yet with a cooperative rather than a competitive agenda. No one was ever voted off the island.

Although the format of the seminar included four hours of class each day plus reading assignments, the Island Course was primarily a venture in experiential education. We learned about group dynamics by studying our own interaction. I asked students to adopt the role of participant observer. Whatever happened among us became a legitimate topic for group discussion.

My goals for the course went beyond academic knowledge. I sought to create a supportive communication climate based on the values that Carl Rogers advanced—congruence, empathic understanding, and unconditional positive regard (see Chapter 2). I encouraged students to enact these values through appropriate self-disclosure, sensitive listening, and positive feedback that would enhance others' self-esteem. I also tried to facilitate an honest discussion of the conflict that inevitably occurs when people are living in close quarters.

Did the Island Course achieve my ambitious agenda? In an effort to find out, I surveyed the 150 former students whose collective experience spanned two decades. The open-ended responses of the 114 alumni who replied not only provide evidence of lasting impact, they also attest to the power of cognitive dissonance.[5] I've changed the students' names, but I'll cite their words to show how the actual or anticipated discomfort of conflicting thoughts and actions can induce people to alter their beliefs and sometimes their behaviors.

Hypothesis 1: Selective Exposure Prevents Dissonance

Festinger claimed that people avoid information that is likely to increase dissonance. Not only do we tend to listen to opinions and select reading materials that are consistent with our existing beliefs, we usually choose to be with people who are like us. By taking care to "stick with our own kind," we can maintain the relative comfort of the status quo. Like-minded people buffer us from ideas that could cause discomfort. In that sense, the process of making friends is a way to guarantee that we'll receive positive feedback.

Students selected themselves for the island seminar; no academic program required the course. Each applicant came for a 30-minute interview before signing up for the course. On one level the meetings gave me a chance to make sure I was putting together a diverse group. But the main function of the interview was to give students a chance to consider whether they would be comfortable sharing openly with others and, in turn, receiving feedback from the group. I'm not an advocate of forced intimacy, nor did I desire to create dissonance.

Selective exposure worked well in most cases. The majority of students signed up because they were committed to personal growth. As the following excerpt from Rodney illustrates, many saw the course as a catalyst for change.

> *Rodney:* The island trip came at a major turning point in my life. I was beginning to tire of being the class clown. It was difficult to bullshit Em and the other students. They saw through the mask to an intelligent, introspective guy. I welcomed the opportunity to be quiet.

Over half the respondents recorded a major relational stress occurring shortly before we came together—a new love, marriage, a broken engagement, divorce, date rape, the death of a friend. They, like Rodney, welcomed the open atmosphere they found on the island and experienced little or no dissonance.

The process of selective exposure failed to protect everyone from dissonance. Kari was one who felt disconnected and lonely, wary of an island-induced togetherness with people she barely knew.

> *Kari:* I don't put myself in situations where I don't know the people I'm with. Even a handpicked, carefully selected group is more than I would do without being friends with at least one beforehand.

Given her cautious approach to joining a group of strangers, why did Kari voluntarily put herself at risk? According to Festinger, selective exposure works only when we anticipate hearing ideas that run counter to our beliefs. Our mental guard is down when our purpose for being with others is enjoyment or pleasure.[6] As a mountain climber and fencer, Kari looked forward to flying and outdoor sports on the island. Because she anticipated fun in the sun, it's likely that she blotted out thoughts of the interpersonal responses that others might expect from her.

German psychologist Dieter Frey surveyed all the pertinent research on selective exposure and concluded that even when we know we're going to hear discrepant ideas, the avoidance mechanism doesn't kick in if we don't regard the dissonant information as a threat.[7] Warm personal relationships are probably the best guarantee that we'll consider ideas that would otherwise seem threatening.

Jake: At first I thought the people on the island were a bunch of dorks. They viewed me as never serious, insincere, and aloof. I saw myself as very caring and fun to be around. As the barriers broke down, I realized that they were the caring ones. They cared enough to be honest. I learned to be more real with my classmates and friends. The dork conspiracy showed me that there was no substitute for honesty in relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Postdecision Dissonance Creates a Need for Reassurance

According to Festinger, close-call decisions can generate huge amounts of internal tension after the decision has been made. Three conditions heighten postdecision dissonance: (1) the more important the issue, (2) the longer an individual delays in choosing between two equally attractive options, and (3) the greater the difficulty involved in reversing the decision once it's been made. To the extent that these conditions are present, the more the person will agonize over whether he or she made the right choice. Sometimes referred to as "morning-after-the-night-before" regrets, the misgivings or second thoughts that plague us after a tough choice motivate us to seek reassuring information and social support for our decision.

A classic example of postdecision dissonance is the mental turmoil a person experiences after signing a contract to buy a new car. The cost is high, there are many competing models from which to choose, and the down payment commits the customer to go through with the purchase. It's not unusual to find a customer in the library, poring over the pages of the *Consumer Reports* auto issue *after* placing an order. The buyer is seeking information that confirms the decision already made and quiets nagging doubts.

Daily living on the island required students to make lots of group decisions. What kind of food did they want to buy with limited funds? When would they turn off the generator at night? On what basis were they willing to be graded? By far the hardest decision for most students turned out to be whether to voice the disagreement or conflict they felt with another person.

Karen: A guy in the course had a habit of hugging people—it bothered me. He crossed over my personal boundaries for someone I didn't know very well. I finally told him in the kindest way I knew, but he didn't take it well. I still remember how torn up I felt inside. Did I do the right thing?

That night Karen sought support from the other women in the group. Their reassurance put her qualms to rest. She now looks back on the experience as a positive first step toward asserting her rights and learning not to be afraid of talking straight with others.

Hypothesis 3: Minimal Justification for Action Induces a Shift in Attitude

Suppose I wanted to persuade students on the island to spend more time studying and less time waterskiing. Before cognitive dissonance theory, conventional wisdom would suggest that I work first to change their *attitude* toward the reading assignment. If I can convince them that the articles are filled with valuable insights that apply to their lives, they will then change their study *behavior.* It

seemed natural to think of attitude and behavior as the beginning and end of a cause-and-effect sequence.

Attitude → Behavior

But Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis reverses that sequence. That hypothesis suggests that the best way for me to stimulate long-term student interest in group dynamics literature is to first get them to read it.

Behavior → Attitude

Festinger attached one important condition, however. Instead of giving students massive rewards for studying the material—bestowing lavish praise, giving everyone an *A*, doubling the food budget—I should offer only the minimum incentive required to draw them away from the beach to the books.

> Thus if one wanted to obtain private change in addition to mere public compliance, the best way to do this would be to offer just enough reward or punishment to elicit overt compliance.[8]

Festinger's advice squares with what I observed on the island. In the early years of the course, quiz scores made up the bulk of the final grade. Students dutifully read the assigned material, yet once the test was over, they showed little interest in the ideas presented. In later years, quizzes counted for only 10 to 20 percent of the total grade, yet students still did the reading. Perhaps a feeling of group accountability or pressure for conformity spurred them on. Whatever the reason, it was these students who brought back to campus a newly found interest in the theoretical concepts of group dynamics. Students like Joan received minimal justification to study the course material yet did the work and then developed a favorable attitude toward its value.

> *Joan:* I have thought from time to time over the years that of all the course work I've done through the doctoral level, I've retained more from the Island Course than any other.

A CLASSIC EXPERIMENT: "WOULD I LIE FOR A DOLLAR?"

There is nothing particularly radical about Festinger's first two hypotheses. His selective exposure prediction nicely explains why political rallies attract the party faithful and why the audience for religious radio and television tends to be made up of committed believers. As for postdecision dissonance, all of us have tried to convince ourselves that we've made the right choice after facing a close-call decision. But Festinger's minimal justification hypothesis is counterintuitive. Will a small incentive to act really induce a corresponding attitude change when heaping on the benefits won't? Festinger's famous $1/$20 experiment supported his claim that it will.

Festinger and James Carlsmith recruited Stanford University men to participate in a psychological study supposedly investigating industrial relations.[9] As

each man arrived at the lab, he was assigned the boring and repetitive task of sorting a large batch of spools into sets of 12 and turning square pegs a quarter turn to the right. The procedure was designed to be both monotonous and tiring. At the end of an hour the experimenter approached the subject and made a request. He claimed that a student assistant had failed to show up and that he needed someone to fill in by telling a potential female subject in the waiting room how much fun the experiment was. Dissonance researchers call this "counterattitudinal advocacy." We'd call it lying.

Some of the men were promised $20 to express enthusiasm about the task; others were offered only $1. It is comforting to know that six of the men refused to take part in the deception, but most students tried to recruit the young woman. The typical conversation was similar for both payment conditions:

> SHE: "I heard it was boring."
> HE: "Oh no, it's really quite fun."

What differed were privately expressed attitudes after the study was over. Students who lied for $20 later confessed that they thought the task of sorting spools was dull. Those who lied for $1 maintained that it was much more enjoyable. (Festinger and Carlsmith practiced their own form of deception in the study—subjects never received the promised money.)

By now you should have a pretty good idea of how Festinger analyzed the results. He noted that $20 was a huge sum of money (worth more than $100 in today's economy). If a student felt qualms about telling a "white lie," the cash was a ready justification. Thus, the student felt little or no tension between his action and his attitude. But the men who lied for a dollar had lots of cognitive work to do. The logical inconsistency of saying a boring task was interesting had to be explained away through an internal dialogue:

> I'm a Stanford man. Am I the kind of guy who would lie for a dollar? No way. Actually, what I told the girl was true. The experiment was a lot of fun.

Festinger said that $1 was just barely enough to induce compliance to the experimenter's request, and so the students had to create another justification. They changed their attitudes toward the task to bring it into line with their behavior.

THREE STATE-OF-THE-ART REVISIONS: THE CAUSE AND EFFECT OF DISSONANCE

The $1/$20 study has been replicated and modified many times in an effort to figure out why minimal incentives for inconsistent behavior cause a change in attitude when large rewards don't. Dissonance researchers also seek to close off loopholes that would admit other explanations for the attitude change that follows induced compliance. Based on hundreds of experimental studies, most persuasion researchers today subscribe to one of three revisions of Festinger's original theory. In order to understand each of the options described in the following sections, it will help if you picture the overall dissonance arousal and reduction process as Festinger imagined it. Figure 16–1 shows that four-step sequence.

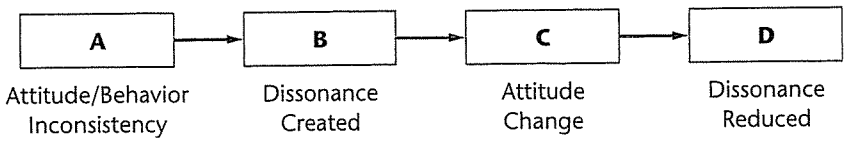


FIGURE 16–1 Festinger's Process Model of Cognitive Dissonance
(Based on Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance Theory.*)

1. Self-Consistency: The Rationalizing Animal

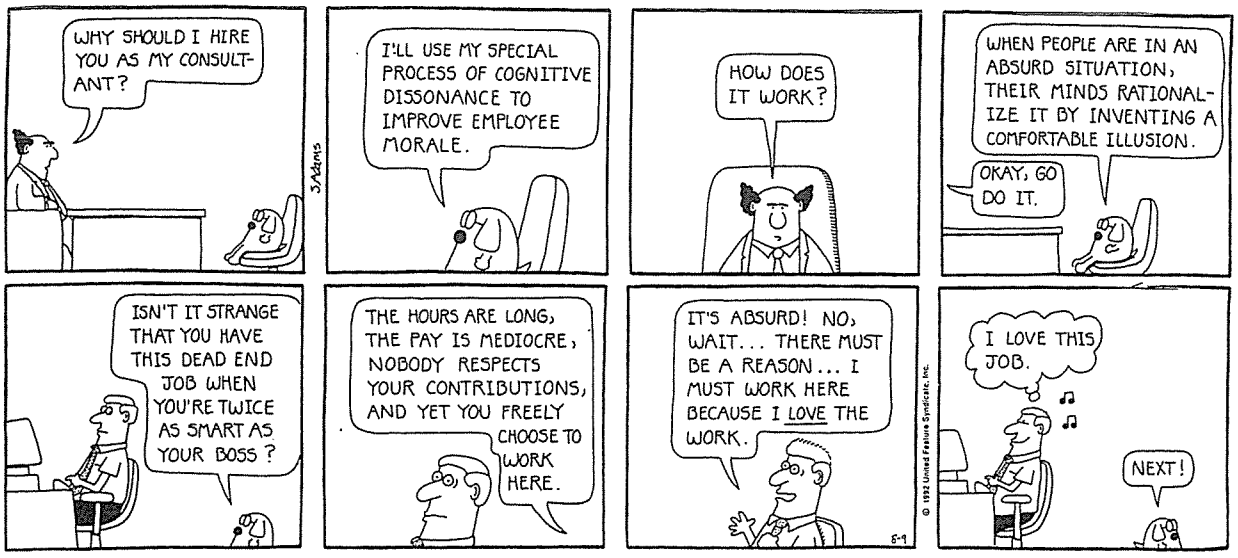
University of California social psychologist Elliot Aronson was attracted to cognitive dissonance theory because of Festinger's startling minimal justification prediction, but he quickly determined that the theory in its original form had some "conceptual fuzziness." Specifically, it failed to state the conditions under which a person would definitely experience dissonance, the A→B link in Figure 16–1. For example, when early disciples of Festinger were uncertain what the theory predicted, their advice to each other was "If you want to be sure, ask Leon."

Aronson concluded that the issue isn't *logical* inconsistency—as Festinger maintained—but *psychological* inconsistency. We aren't rational animals; we are rationalizing animals who want to appear reasonable to ourselves. Aronson interprets the $1/$20 experiment as a study of self-esteem maintenance. "If dissonance exists, it is because the individual's behavior is inconsistent with his self-concept."[10] The Stanford men were in a bind because they regarded themselves as decent, truthful human beings. In fact, the higher their self-esteem, the more dissonance they would feel when they told the waiting woman that the study was fun. Conversely, if they had seen themselves as liars, cheats, or jerks, they would have felt no tension.

According to Aronson, the amount of dissonance a person can experience is directly proportional to the effort he or she has invested in the behavior. Since boot camp in the Marines is tougher than basic training in the Army, Aronson would expect a Marine recruit to feel greater tension if he or she violated the norms of the Corps. The harder it is to get into a group, the more one values membership. Conversely, it's rare for a football player to brag that his coach sets no training rules or schedules light workouts.

Even the reactions of Aesop's fox make sense in light of the animal's low investment of energy. Aronson points out that the fox wouldn't think the grapes were sour if he had spent the whole afternoon jumping to get them. Attitudes follow behavior when the investment of effort is high.

For many who enrolled in the island seminar, the feature of the course that took the most effort was a self-disclosure exercise labeled "This Is Me."[11] Each night after dinner one person would have an uninterrupted 30 minutes to tell the story of his or her life. The open-ended format allowed students to select a level of transparency within their comfort zone. For a few painfully shy students like Jason, however, the dissonance was acute at point B in Figure 16–1. As Aronson's



DILBERT © Scott Adams/Dist. by United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

version of cognitive dissonance theory predicts, so was the transformation he describes at point C.

> *Jason:* Before the autobiographical "This Is Me" time, I was extremely nervous. I couldn't imagine talking for that long. Then I burst. Words, times, details, events, places gushed out in what one of the groupies later called "this weird energy." He was right. It was my first major self-disclosure before a group. I don't remember what I said, as much as that it came easily, with urgency, and afterward so many questions. I felt loved, accepted, and, chiefly, an interesting person. It was the genesis of the social me.

2. Personal Responsibility for Bad Outcomes (the New Look)

Princeton psychologist Joel Cooper agrees with Aronson that logical inconsistency at point A in Figure 16–1 doesn't automatically create dissonance at point B. Yet he's not convinced that Aronson's concern for self-consistency captures the real cause of the acute mental discomfort. In his "new look" model of cognitive dissonance, Cooper argues that it's the knowledge that one's actions have unnecessarily hurt another person that generates dissonance. For example, in the minimal justification condition of the $1/$20 experiment, the Stanford man willingly "duped a fellow student to look forward to an exciting experience" while knowing "full well that the waiting participant was in for an immense letdown."[12]

Cooper concludes that dissonance is "a state of arousal caused by behaving in such a way as to feel personally responsible for bringing about an aversive event."[13] Note that the acceptance of personal *responsibility* requires that the person know ahead of time that his or her action will have negative consequences for

someone else and yet still choose to do the dirty deed. Two examples from the Island Course illustrate the link between dissonance and choice.

I asked Island Course alums to write about the single incident that held the most significance for them. One fellow wrote about the group's unanimous resistance to his demand to use limited funds to buy a supply of milk so that he could drink a gallon per day.

> *Larry:* I argued for buying plenty of milk to last the rest of our time together. When the group vetoed me I insisted on going on the next plane ride to shop for groceries. That way I got my milk, but still not as much as I wanted. I felt angry at being cast as the group deviant, and argued with some "jerk-know-it-all." I knew I'd clash with him, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Larry took no personal responsibility for the conflict that swirled around him. Because he felt he had no choice, Larry experienced no cognitive dissonance and his attitude toward other group members (and milk) never changed. Contrast Larry's response with the dissonance Natalie felt when she got what she wanted at others' expense.

> *Natalie:* I made a life-changing discovery during an influence exercise. My partner and I "won" the exercise, but I felt terrible afterward about manipulating others. The experience has stuck with me ever since because I saw graphically how I can violate another person's dignity when I get power-hungry or competitive. This applies to my relationship with my husband and trying to "get my way." It was a watershed experience.

Consistent with Cooper's new look revision, Natalie's sense of hurting others was dissonant with our cultural norm against manipulating people for selfish gain, so she changed her competitive attitude—a major conversion experience. When dissonance is aroused, it can have a powerful effect.

3. Self-Affirmation to Dissipate Dissonance

While the revisions offered by Aronson (self-consistency) and Cooper (new look) address dissonance *creation* at the front end of Festinger's model, Stanford psychologist Claude Steele's self-affirmation approach speaks to the question of dissonance *reduction* at the back end. Unlike those first two revisions, Steele doesn't assume that dissonance always drives people to justify their actions by changing their attitudes. He thinks that some fortunate people can call up a host of positive thoughts about themselves that will blot out a concern for restoring consistency. If he's right, high self-esteem is a resource for dissonance reduction.

According to Steele, most people are greatly motivated to maintain an overall self-image of moral and adaptive adequacy. For a participant in the $1/$20 experiment, there's no question that lying to a fellow student makes it harder to preserve that favorable self-concept. But if the guy ignores the ethical slip and focuses instead on his good grades, athletic ability, social skills, and helpfulness to friends who are hurting, the dissonance will be only a blip on the radar screen of his mind and will quickly fade away. Thus, Steele believes that denial, forgetfulness, and

trivialization of the incident are alternatives to attitude change, but only for the person who already has high self-esteem. Josh was one such person on the island.

> *Josh:* I told the group that I was a good mechanic, so I was put in charge of servicing the Honda all-terrain cycle. Over a three-day period I forgot to check the oil, and the piston seized up. I felt awful. That night I repeatedly read a letter from my girlfriend and thought about my acceptance to grad school plus my success on the debate circuit. The next day my blunder didn't seem that big a deal. I think that the only time I thought about the incident again was when Em flew the ATC off the island to get it fixed.

Aronson, Cooper, and Steele each offer their respective revisions as more accurate accounts of what goes on in people's heads than Festinger's original theory. But we don't have to pick one and trash the others. Self-consistency, personal responsibility for bad outcomes, and self-affirmation aren't mutually exclusive explanations. As Cooper suggests, "They each describe a distinct and important piece of the overall dissonance process and, in doing so, make a unique contribution to our understanding of how cognitions about the self mediate cognitive dissonance and arousal and reduction."[14]

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: PERSUASION THROUGH DISSONANCE

I've located this chapter in the section on interpersonal influence because Festinger and his followers focus on attitude change as an end product of dissonance. Suppose you know someone named Sam who holds an opinion that you're convinced is harmful or wrong. What practical advice does the theory offer that might help you alter his conviction?

For openers, don't promise lavish benefits if Sam abandons that attitude or warn of dire consequences if he doesn't. A massive reward-punishment strategy may gain behavioral compliance, but the hard sell seldom wins the heart or mind of the person who is bribed or pressured. Instead, work to develop a friendly relationship with Sam. That way your own position will tend to bypass the *selective exposure* screen that Sam and the rest of us put up to avoid threatening ideas. And if Sam eventually adopts your viewpoint, an ongoing bond means that you'll be around to offer reassurance when *postdecision dissonance* kicks in.

To be an effective agent of change, you should offer just enough encouragement *(minimal justification)* for Sam to try out novel behavior that departs from old ways of thinking. Avoid making an offer that Sam can't refuse. As long as *counterattitudinal actions* are freely chosen and publicly taken, people are more likely to adopt beliefs that support what they've done. The greater the effort involved in acting this way, the greater the chance that their attitudes will change to match their actions.

Finally, as you seek to *induce compliance,* try to get Sam to count the cost of doing what you want and to grasp the potential downside of that behavior for others *(personal responsibility for negative outcomes).* That kind of understanding will increase the probability that Sam's attitude will shift to be consistent with his or her action. And if things turn out sour, your relationship won't.