Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Why people aren’t always listening

Former Stanford University social psychologist Leon Festinger (1950s) developed what he called, the theory of cognitive dissonance.
- This is the feeling of uncomfortable tension which comes from holding two conflicting thoughts in the mind at the same time.
- It is the distressing mental state in which people feel 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.”

Dissonance increases with:
- The importance of the subject to us
- How strongly the dissonant thoughts conflict
- Our inability to rationalize and explain away the conflict

Cognitive dissonance is a very powerful motivator which will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action.
- Change our behavior
- Justify our behavior by changing the conflicting cognition
- Justify our behavior by adding new cognitions

Dissonance increases with the importance and impact of a decision, along with the difficulty of reversing it.
- Discomfort about making the wrong choice of car is bigger than when choosing a lamp.

Cognitive dissonance is a very powerful motivator that will often lead us to change one or other of the conflicting belief or action.
- The discomfort often feels like a tension between the two opposing thoughts.

Any inconsistency in the way we think and/ or act produces dissonance, which is uncomfortable and creates a drive to reduce the tension.
- We will change what’s easiest—usually our attitude—unless we can find some external justification for the inconsistent cognition.

According to Festinger, people manage dissonance in five ways.

Take the example of smokers who knows that smoking is bad for them:
1. They avoid situations they believe will produce dissonance
   The smoker avoids reading about the ill-effects of smoking or avoids people who criticize them for smoking.
2. They seek out consonant information
   The smoker will seek out information that supports the belief that smoking relaxes them.
3. They redefine dissonant cognitions as less important
   The smoker reassures him/herself that good health is not that important - after all they are not a professional sports person.
4. They change their dissonant cognitions
   The smoker reassures him/herself that the research is flawed and that smoking is not in fact bad for health.
5. They change their behavior to fit their cognitions
   They stop smoking.

Some researchers suggest that the mind operates four rings of defenses against unwanted information.

- Selective exposure
  - We seek out info that agrees with our attitudes or beliefs.
- Selective attention
  - We tune out communication that goes against our attitudes or beliefs or pay attention only to parts that reinforce our positions, forgetting the dissonant parts.
- Selective perception
  - We tend to interpret information so that it agrees with our attitudes and beliefs.
- Selective retention
  - We tend to let psychological factors influence our recall of information. We forget the unpleasant or block out the unwanted.

Changing behavior is often the last resort;

Using cognitive dissonance to change people’s beliefs

If a person is induced to do or say something that is contrary to their private opinion, there will be a tendency for them to change their opinion to bring it in line with what’s been said or done.

- The key is to use only a small amount of pressure to get someone to do something. Using more pressure than is needed will actually make it less likely that they will change their mind about it.

Conditions needed for changing beliefs:

- Behavior appears chosen
- Behavior blatantly violates belief
- Behavior cannot be undone
- An extraneous justification is blocked

People change their cognitions because they feel they don't have enough reason/justification for acting the way they did.

Cognitive dissonance is central to many forms of persuasion to change beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors.

- The tension can be injected suddenly or allowed to build up over time.
- People can be moved in many small jumps or one large one.

How to change people’s beliefs

- Get people to agree with you, perhaps on a small point, about something which you want to persuade them.
• Reward them for their compliance, but ensure there is no significant external justification.
• After a while, their beliefs will change.