

Internal Pressure is the Secret

Most of us feel more harmony in our lives when everything is consistent: our jobs, our homes, our habits, even our soft drinks. Consistency is the glue that holds everything in our lives together, thereby allowing us to cope with the world. Think of all the people you admire. I'll bet, by and large, most of them are consistent, congruent people. What they believe, what they say, and what they do (even when no one is watching) flow together seamlessly. Typically, a high degree of such consistency in one's life is indicative of personal and intellectual strength. People are naturally more inclined – even subconsciously – to gravitate toward and follow individuals who are consistent in their behavior. The converse is also true: Inconsistency in one's personal and professional life is generally considered undesirable. The person whose beliefs, words, and deeds don't consistently match up is seen as hypocritical, two-faced, confused, or even mentally ill.

The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger formulated the Cognitive Dissonance Theory in 1957 at Stanford University. He asserted, "When attitudes conflict with actions, attitudes or beliefs, we are uncomfortable and motivated to try to change." Dr. Festinger's theory sets the foundation for the Law of Dissonance, one of the twelve laws of *Magnetic Persuasion*.

The Law of Dissonance states that people will naturally act in a manner that is consistent with their cognitions (beliefs, attitudes, and values). Therefore, when people behave in a manner that is inconsistent with these cognitions, they find themselves in a state of discomfort. In such an uncomfortable state, they will naturally be inclined to adjust their behaviors or attitudes to regain mental and emotional consistency. When our beliefs, attitudes, and actions mesh, we live harmoniously. When they don't, we feel dissonance at some level – that is, we feel awkward, uncomfortable, unsettled, disturbed, upset, nervous, or confused. In order to eliminate or reduce such tension, we will do everything possible to change our attitudes and behavior, even if it means doing something we don't want to do.

Imagine a big rubber band inside of you. When dissonance is present, the rubber band begins to stretch. As long as the dissonance exists, the band stretches tighter and tighter. You've got to take action before it reaches a breaking point and snaps. The motivation to reduce the tension is what causes us to change; we will do everything in our power to get back in balance. We seek psycho-emotional stasis at all times, much like we experience the ever-present, driving need for food and water to satisfy our physical being.

Methods of Protecting Mental Consistency

When we feel cognitive dissonance, we have to find a way to deal with the psychological tension. We have an arsenal of tools at our disposal to help us return to cognitive consistency. The following list outlines different ways people seek to reduce dissonance. A powerful persuader will also use these tools to create dissonance in the audience then move them back to comfortable state of consistency.

Denial – To shut out the dissonance, you deny there is a problem. You do this either by ignoring or demeaning the source of the information. You might also deliberately misperceive the confronting position.

Modify – You change your existing cognitions to achieve consistency. Most of the time this involves admitting you were wrong and making changes to remedy your errors.

Reframe – You change your understanding or interpretation of the meaning. This leads you to either modify your own thinking or to devalue the importance of the whole matter, considering it unimportant altogether.

Search – You are determined to find a flaw in the other side’s position, to discredit the source, and to seek social or evidentiary support for your own viewpoint. You might attempt to convince the source (if available) of his or her error. You might also try to convince others you did the right thing.

Separation – You separate the attitudes that are in conflict. This compartmentalizes your cognitions, making it easier for you to ignore or even forget the discrepancy. In your mind, what happens in one area of your life (or someone else’s) should not affect the other areas of your life.

Rationalization – You find excuses for why the inconsistency is acceptable. You change your expectations or try to alter what really happened. You also find reasons to justify your behavior or your opinions.

Consider how each of the above strategies could apply if the following experience actually happened in your own life: Your favorite politician, the local mayor, whom you campaigned and voted for, is in trouble. You spent your own time and money convincing family, friends, and neighbors to vote for this candidate. You thought he was a family man, a man of values, somebody who could be trusted. Now, after two years in office, he’s been caught red-handed having an affair with an office staff member, who is barely older than his daughter. The news creates dissonance inside you. To alleviate the dissonance, you might react in any one or combination of the following ways:

Denial – “This is just the media going after him. He is doing a great job, so the opposing party is trying to spear his good. This will all blow over when the facts come out. It’s all just a big misunderstanding.”

Modify – “I can’t believe I voted for this guy. I feel swindled and taken advantage of. I really mistook him for a man of character. I need to apologize to my family and friends. I cannot support a man who does not honor his wedding vows.”

Reframe – “The media said ‘*affair.*’ Well, I’m sure he didn’t actually sleep with her. Maybe they’re just good friends. I’m sure his wife knew all about the whole thing. Even if they did have an affair, who doesn’t? Is it that big of deal?”

Search – “I’ve heard about the reporter breaking this story. He’s blown things out of proportion before. All the friends I’ve talked to don’t think the story is true. In fact, this reporter has been ‘anti-this-candidate’ from the beginning. I’m going to call that reporter right now.”

Separation – “I voted for him and he is doing a great job. Inflation is low, unemployment is not a problem, and crime has been reduced. He is doing everything he said he would. It does not matter what he does in his private life. What matters is how he is doing his job. There is no bearing between an affair and his job performance.”

Rationalization – “Well, his wife is cold to him and she’s never around when he needs her. She’s never really supported him since he took office. After all, she still has her own business. Maybe this is just a marriage of convenience and this relationship is part of their agreement.”

Everyday Examples of Dissonance at Work

Listed below are some examples that might create dissonance.

Situations that create dissonance:

- You are a strict vegetarian but you see a stylish leather jacket on sale and want to buy it.
- You are pro-life and your daughter has an abortion.
- You made a New Year’s resolution to exercise everyday, and already halfway through February, you have not yet been to the gym once.
- You are on a strict diet when you see Ben and Jerry’s ice cream on sale at the grocery store.

“Buyer’s Remorse” is also a form of dissonance. When we purchase a product or service, we tend to look for ways to convince ourselves that we made the right decision. If the people around us or outside influences make us question our decision, we experience buyer’s remorse. On feeling this inconsistency, we’ll look for anything – facts, peer validation, expert opinion – to reduce the dissonance in our minds concerning the purchase. Some of us even use selective exposure to minimize the risk of seeing or hearing something that could cause dissonance. Often people won’t even tell family or friends about their purchase or decision because they know it will create dissonance.