



Mains Practice Question

Q. What do you understand by cognitive dissonance? Give some instances where a civil servant may experience cognitive dissonance. (250 words)

12 Mar, 2019 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Approach:

- Give in brief what you mean by cognitive dissonance.
- Why humans desire to reduce dissonance.
- Give some instances where a civil servant may experience cognitive dissonance.

Introduction:

- The theory of cognitive dissonance was first presented by **Festinger in 1957**. Cognitive dissonance is a sense of internal anxiety that is experienced when a person holds two inconsistent cognitions.
- In other words it is the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values at the same time, performs an action that is contradictory to one or more belief, ideas, or values, or is confronted by new information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values.
- An individual who experiences inconsistency (dissonance) tends to become psychologically uncomfortable, and is motivated to try to reduce this dissonance- as well as actively avoid situation and information likely to increase it.

Body

No individual can completely avoid dissonance. So people have to cope with dissonance.

According to Festinger, the desire to reduce dissonance would be determined by the importance of the elements creating the dissonance; the degree of influence the individual believes he or she has over the elements and the rewards that may be involved in dissonance.

1. **Importance of the Elements:** If the elements creating the dissonance are relatively unimportant, the pressure to correct this imbalance will be low.
2. **Degree of Influence:** The degree of influence that individuals believe they have over the elements will have an impact on how they will react to the dissonance. If they perceive the dissonance to be uncontrollable, they are less likely to be receptive to attitude change.
3. **Rewards:** Rewards also influence the degree to which individuals are motivated to reduce dissonance. High rewards accompanying high dissonance tend to reduce the tension inherent in the dissonance.

Some instances where a civil servant may experience cognitive dissonance -

- An IPS officer who believes in non violence or doing no harm to anyone when has to take decision of Lathi charge or using pellet guns to disperse crowd faces such cognitive dissonance.
- **Strict adherence to ethical conduct** may cause problems in carrying out certain aims both in public and private life causing disaffection arising out of inability to reach goals. Being upright also pits the person against powerful vested interest, endangering his and his family's life, which may create inconsistency (dissonance) in civil servants' mind.
- **Development v/s Environment:** A public servant faces dissonance when she has to take decision on displacement of tribal population for any development project.

Conclusion

- A civil servant should always follow the constitutional moral values, code of conduct of services and act within ethical framework of public service in any case of cognitive dissonance.
- Emotional intelligence can be a tool for the public servants to deal whenever such situation arises.

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