



# Cognitive Dissonance

**For Mains:** Cognitive Dissonance concept, Ethics and Human Interface

## What is Cognitive Dissonance?

### ▪ About:

- Cognitive dissonance's definition is a **feeling of unease when there is tension between one's beliefs, attitudes, values, and one's actions.**
- The notion of cognitive dissonance was **developed by the American cognitive psychologist Leon Festinger** in the 1950s.
- Festinger thought that **people were driven to promote the harmony and coherence** of their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Thus, when people develop a sense that there has been a breakdown in their mental harmony, they will attempt to end their cognitive dissonance.

### ▪ Experiment:

- Festinger developed an **experiment in which people had to perform a mundane, repetitive task** (turning pegs).
- They were then paid to lie to someone and attempt to convince the person that the task was interesting.
- Festinger created two groups, one group's members were paid a small amount of money, and another group was paid a larger amount of money. Festinger found that those who were given more money experienced less cognitive dissonance.

### ▪ Cognitive Dissonance Theory:

- **It attempts to explain not only feelings of discomfort that arise from a tension between one's beliefs and actions but also analyze how people resolve this tension.**

## What are the Causes of Cognitive Dissonance?

### ▪ Forced Compliance Behavior:

- Forced compliance is a situation in which **a person is forced to perform an action that is inconsistent with their beliefs**
- Since the action already occurred and the behavior cannot be changed, the way to alleviate dissonance is for a person to re-evaluate what they have done.

### ▪ Decision Making:

- Decisions **can often create dissonance because decisions involve choosing one alternative over another**, which may mean accepting the disadvantages of one choice

#### • Example:

- A person gets a job offer in a great city, but rejecting the job offer means getting to stay near friends and family
- Both choices have positives and negatives: if the person takes the job, they will miss their loved ones, but if they turn down the job offer, they may miss the opportunities available in the city.

### ▪ Effort:

- Most people tend to place higher value on value goals or items that require a lot of effort to

achieve.

- But **cognitive dissonance could occur if a person spends a lot of effort to achieve or acquire something** and it turns out to be negative or undesirable.

## How can Cognitive Dissonance be Resolved?

### ▪ About:

- There were **different ways in which individuals or groups resolved cognitive dissonance** to best suit their situations.
- One could change one's thoughts, change one's behaviour to match one's thoughts, add a thought to justify the behaviour or trivialise the inconsistency between thoughts and behaviour.

### ▪ Example:

- X is a 25-year-old graduate (unemployed) who has newly started supporting a political party.
- He follows the political party as he believes in their promises of providing better job opportunities and development for youngsters in the country if they came to power.
- His party wins the elections. Despite five years of governance by his party, no significant changes occur in the employment sector and X is still unemployed. As the next elections approach, the political party members request his support. In such a situation, what would X do?
  - **X can Change his thought about the Situation:**
    - He looks at his neighbours B and C, who are also graduates. They have started a chai shop and samosa shop respectively, in their street.
    - X concludes that **though not in a conventional sense, jobs were created** after his party came into power, changing his opinion about the situation, and **reducing the inconsistency in his belief**. He will still vote for the same political party with a change in his perspective.
  - **X can Change his Behaviour towards the Situation:**
    - He understands and accepts that the promises made by the political party he supported were false and decides not to trust them anymore.
  - **X can add a Thought:**
    - He analyses the activities of his government and **concludes that though the government failed to provide jobs**, in the past five years under his party's leadership, there are **infrastructural development** such as the construction of the Supreme Court, bridges, roads etc.
    - He resolves the cognitive inconsistency between his thoughts and behaviour by adding a **thought that rationalises his support of the political party**. He will still vote for the same party with the hope that the party will fulfil its promise and provide employment for its citizens in the next term.
  - **X can Trivialise the Inconsistency:**
    - He **compares the state of his country after his party came into power** with economically poorer neighbouring countries.
    - He observes that **while only 40% of the educated youth in his country are employed**, the share is less than 30% in his neighbouring countries.
    - In trivialising the faults in his political party's governance, **the tension created due to the inconsistency between his thoughts and behaviour is negated**.
    - He will thus continue voting for the same political party as he has now justified the reason behind supporting the party.

## What are the 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.

## Way Forward

- 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.

[Source: TH](#)

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