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Cognitive Dissonance Theory of Leon Festinger

A First Look at Communication Theory

9th edition

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Dissonance: Discord Between Behavior and Belief

- **Cognitive dissonance**—distressing mental state caused by inconsistency between a person's two beliefs, or a belief and an action
 - The need to avoid dissonance is as basic as the need for safety or to satisfy hunger
 - Aversive drive that goads us to be consistent

Cognitive Dissonance

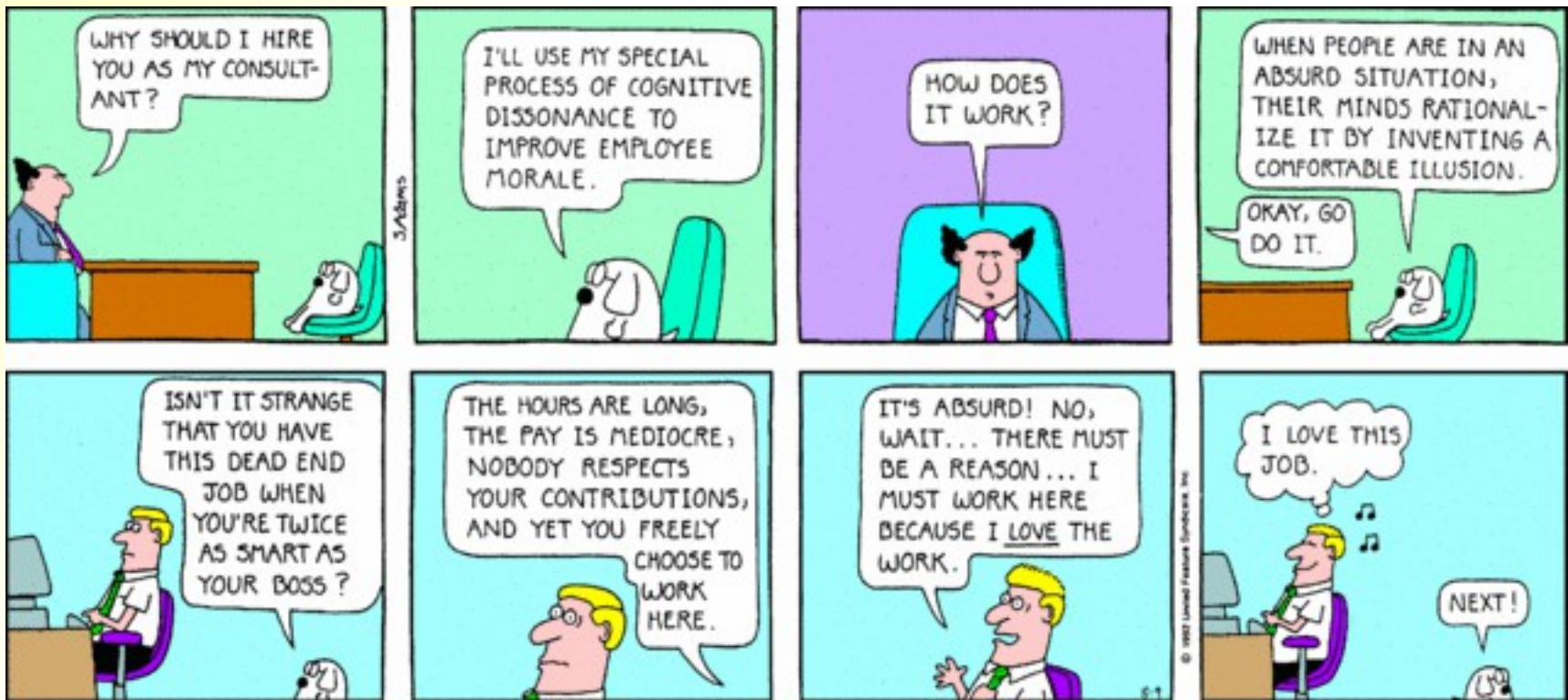
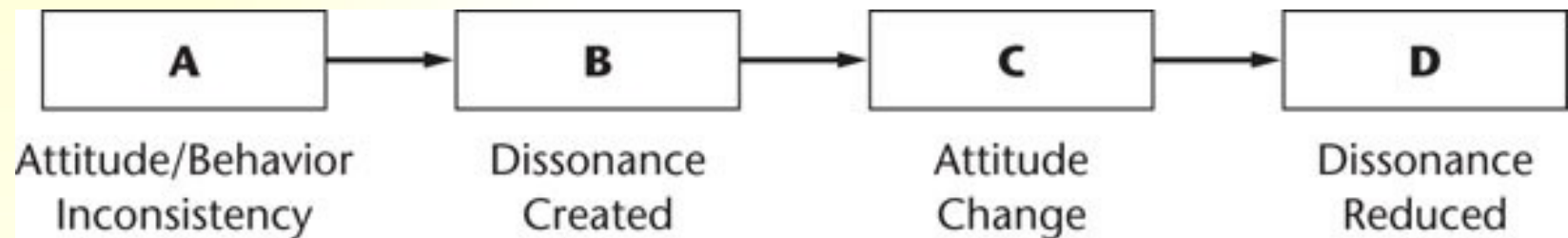


Figure 16-1: Process Model of Cognitive Dissonance



Reducing Dissonance between Attitudes and Actions

Festinger hypothesized 3 mental mechanisms people use to ensure their actions and attitudes are in harmony

- Selective exposure prevents dissonance
- Postdecision dissonance creates a need for reassurance
- Minimal justification for action induces a shift in attitude

Reducing Dissonance between Attitudes and Actions

Hypothesis 1. Selective Exposure Prevents Dissonance

- **Selective exposure** – tendency to avoid information that would create cognitive dissonance because it is incompatible with current beliefs
 - Research supports this hypothesis but strength of tendency was relatively small

Selective Exposure



Reducing Dissonance between Attitudes and Actions

Hypothesis 2: Postdecision Dissonance Creates a Need for Reassurance

- **Postdecision dissonance** – strong doubts experienced after making an important, close-call decision that is difficult to reverse
 - DeSantis: friendship and collective rationalization of those who smoked cigars together held postdecision dissonance at bay

Postdecision Dissonance



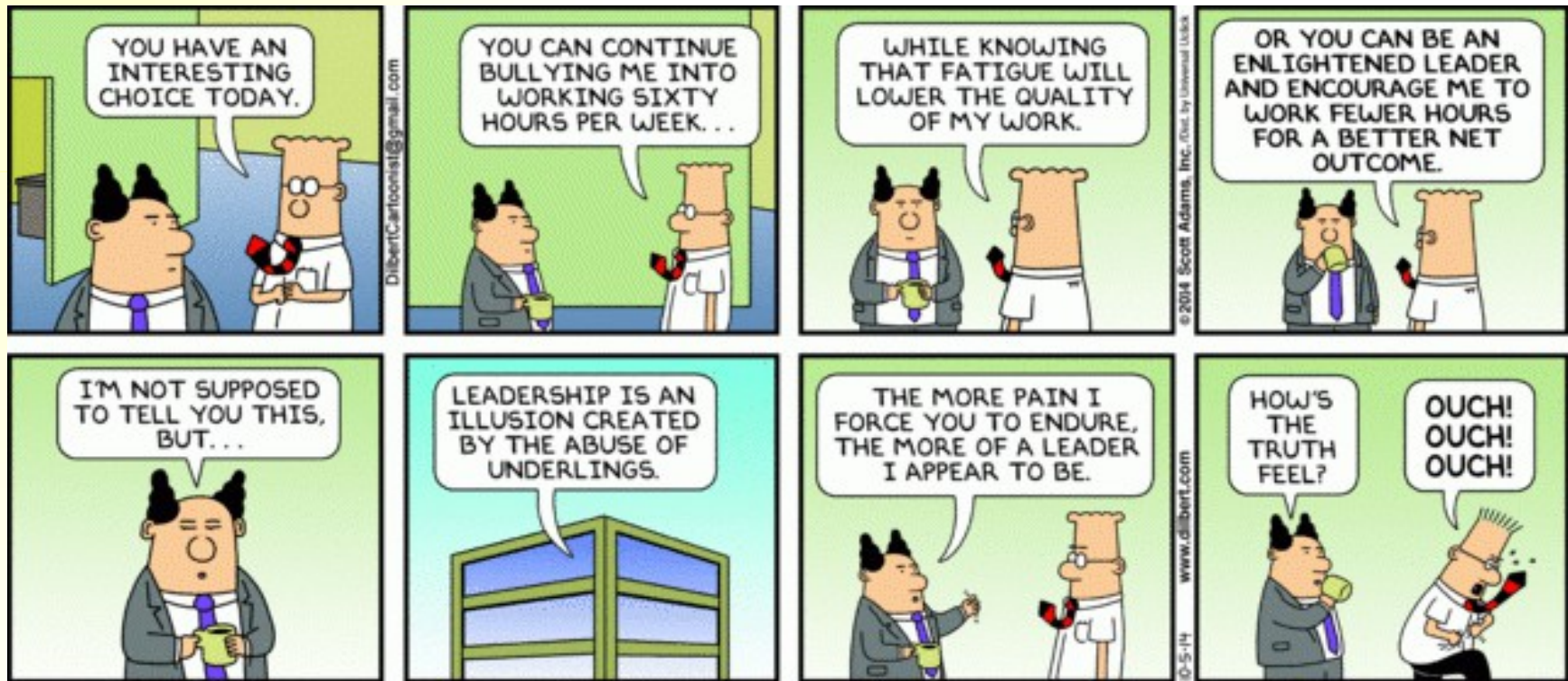
Reducing Dissonance between Attitudes and Actions

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

- **Minimal justification hypothesis** – best way to stimulate an attitude change in others is to offer just enough **incentive** to elicit counterattitudinal behavior

Behavior → **Attitude**

Minimal Justification



Reducing Dissonance between Attitudes and Actions

□ Hypothesis 3 (continued)

■ **Compliance** – public conformity to another's expectation without necessarily having a private conviction that matches the behavior

- Example: Marlboro Man given gift in return for silence but remains antagonistic to former employers

A Classic Experiment: “Would I Lie for a Dollar?”

Festinger and Carlsmith experiment: people changed their attitudes toward task to being in line with their behavior



A Classic Experiment: “Would I Lie for a Dollar?”

- Some students were asked to lie for \$1, while others were asked to lie for \$20
 - Students who lied for \$20 admitted the task was dull and experienced little or no tension between action and attitude
 - Students who lied for \$1 claimed task was more enjoyable and had to create another justification

Instead of “Would You Lie for a Dollar?”

Let's play

*WHAT WOULD YOU DO FOR A
MILLION DOLLARS?*

Three State-of-the-Art Revisions: The Cause and Effect of Dissonance

□ Self-Consistency: The Rationalizing Animal

- Aronson concluded the issue was inconsistency between cognition and self-concept

Three State-of-the-Art Revisions: The Cause and Effect of Dissonance



- Personal Responsibility for Bad Outcomes (The New Look)
 - Cooper argues we experience dissonance when we believe our actions have unnecessarily hurt another person

Three State-of-the-Art Revisions: The Cause and Effect of Dissonance

□ Self-Affirmation to Dissipate Dissonance

- Steele: some people can call up a host of positive thoughts about themselves that blot out a concern for restoring consistency
- Most people are greatly motivated to maintain an overall image of moral and adaptive adequacy

Theory Into Practice: Persuasion Through Dissonance

Focus on attitude change as the end product of dissonance

- Don't promise lavish benefits
- Offer just enough encouragement (minimal justification) for a listener to try new behavior
- Try to get the subject to count the cost of doing what he or she wants, and to grasp the potential downside of that behavior for others

Critique: Dissonance over Dissonance

- Cognitive dissonance has achieved name recognition within popular culture
 - There is no way to prove the theory wrong (that is, *it lacks falsifiability*)
 - Festinger never specified a reliable way to detect degrees of dissonance

Critique: Dissonance over Dissonance

- ❑ Devine developed **dissonance thermometer** – hypothetical, reliable gauge of the dissonance a person feels as a result of inconsistency
- ❑ Bem developed **self-perception theory** – the claim that we determine our attitudes the same way that outside observers do