Keeping it up!
When Desire to Change is not enough

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Introduction

An axiom of coaching practice is that what motivates a client to change is their desire for a "valuable" goal and the "discontent" they feel with their present circumstances. However, when it comes to actually doing the work of change many (perhaps most) clients default. To counter this, coaches have developed various strategies for "refreshing" the client's goals and keeping them "discontent" with the present. The assumption is that a "state of mind" is a necessary and sufficient motivator. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that this is not enough. What is required to keep the client motivated over the duration of the coaching relationship is the arousal of <u>both</u> a psychological discomfort and a drive state. This paper proposes the use of a "Motivation Balance Sheet" (MBS) to maximize the cognitive dissonance effect and help clients in "keeping it up!"

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Managing Dissonance

Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory proposes that pairs of (simultaneous) cognitions (elements of knowledge) can be relevant or irrelevant to one another. Two cognitions are *consonant* if one follows from the other, and they are *dissonant* if the opposite of one cognition flows from the other. The client may have cognitions about behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings, in relation to oneself, another person or group, or about things in the environment. However, the existence of dissonance is considered to be psychologically uncomfortable and the client is motivated to try to reduce the dissonance through a number of strategies (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). In other words, people will alter the way they think in the face of situations that could create cognitive conflicts.

The motivational nature of cognitive dissonance theory relies on demonstrating that: (a) dissonance is experienced as a negative intrapersonal state, and (b) this negative intrapersonal state is alleviated through the implementation of a dissonance-reduction strategy (Elliott & Devine, 1994).

That the nature of dissonance is unpleasant has been demonstrated by Harmon-Jones (2000) who showed that emotion could be aroused by the sheer discrepancy between cognitions.

Dissonance *arousal* has been found to occur under the following circumstances:

Issue Involvement
Behavioural commitment is an important although not necessary condition of dissonance arousal. The higher the personal importance of the attitudinal issues under consideration, the stronger the dissonance between the pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal positions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979).

Effort Justification
When clients engage in effortful or costly activity to attain a goal, that goal becomes more attractive leading to a positive change in behaviour (Cooper, 1980).

Induced Compliance
Committing a counter-attitudinal act (e.g., saying "not-A" when one thinks "A") or a counter-motivational act (e.g., not playing with an attractive toy or eating an un-appetizing dish) will arouse dissonance if the justification for acting in this manner is just barely sufficient to induce the behaviour. Combining both aspects, such as performing a counter-attitudinal act, and then having to describe it favourably, will increase measurable dissonance (Girandola, 1997).

Free-choice

Dissonance occurs when the participant has freely chosen (high choice) to act counter-attitudinally and feels responsible for the inconsistency. A difficult choice between less desirable alternatives produces a larger increase in participants' evaluations of the chosen alternative, and in the case of a difficult choice between more desirable alternatives produces a large decrease in evaluations of the rejected alternative (Shultz, Leveille & Lepper, 1999).

Aversive Consequences

An aversive event is one that blocks the participants' self-interest or an event that the participant would rather not have occur. Aversive consequences need not actually occur for dissonance to be aroused. It is the participants' *perceptions* that the consequences will result from their actions that are important. As Cooper & Fazio (1984) point out, dissonance arousal is facilitated by *attributions* about consequences and *responsibility* for actions.

Self-Concept

The self-concept is a particularly central and important 'cognition'. According to Steele et al (1993), dissonance may be aroused due to a sense of threatened self-integrity. Participants can respond to these threats by affirming some valued aspect of the self-concept not necessarily related to the threat (Aronson, Blanton & Cooper, 1995).

Dissonance can be reduced by:

Attitude Change

Changing the element(s) that is dissonant (Pyszczynski, et al, 1993).

Changing the Balance

Increasing the proportion of consonant element(s) (*adding a consonant cognition or subtracting an inconsistent one*) (Gibbons, et al, 1997)

Trivialization

Reducing the importance of the dissonant element(s) (Simon, et al, 1995).

Balance Sheet

The *balance sheet* is a useful coaching strategy tool along the lines of Draycott & Dabba's (1998b) suggestions.

Clients fill out a balance sheet at their first coaching session, listing the reasons FOR making their desired change, and the reasons for NOT making the change. They also weight each reason (cognition) in terms of importance to them.

The balance sheet is then used by the coach (coach's copy) as a basis for discussion, and referred to throughout the session to allow dissonance to be maintained. At the end of the session, clients are invited to re-rate their reasons for and against change, and to take this balance sheet with them in order to maintain dissonance between sessions.

The coach can revisit the balance sheet at each subsequent session, helping clients work through the cognitions that are consistent with NOT making the desired change, in order to reduce their importance or remove them from the balance sheet. At the same time, the coach attempts to increase the importance of cognitions that are consistent with the reasons FOR making the desired change, or adds new ones.

Maximizing Dissonance

The coach should look for opportunities to emphasize the clients' own responsibility for their present behaviour (consistent with the reasons for NOT making the change), the aversive nature of the consequences of maintaining the behaviour (NOT making the change) and any conflict between this and the clients' self-image, in order to "personalize" the inconsistencies found.

Maintaining Dissonance

When dissonance is recognized, the coach can use reflective statements to reinforce and imply the response of behavioural change (favouring the desired change) as soon as possible within the normal flow of conversation.

Statements of resistance by the client should be confronted immediately. Resistance statements might include one of the three common responses to dissonance:
  (1) Altering an inconsistent cognition ("diluting" reasons FOR making the desired change),
  (2) Adding a consistent cognition (finding another reason for NOT making the desired change), or
  (3) Altering the weights of cognitions (increasing the rating of reasons NOT to change, or decreasing the rating of reasons FOR making the change).

The only response to dissonance of interest to the coach is commitment to behavioural change. Since the dissonant state lasts only a few minutes such statements should be acted on immediately to re-introduce the dissonance that elicited the clients' response.

In conclusion, cognitive dissonance combines elements of social interaction, motivation and cognition and appears to be a valuable strategy in coaching practice.

Cognitive Dissonance:

Implications for Coaching Practice

The motivating effects of cognitive dissonance are maximized when:

1. Goals and behaviours are freely chosen.

2. A behavioural commitment is made.

3. Goal attainment is presented as effortful or costly.

4. The individual recognizes responsibility for their behaviour.

5. The current behaviours (reasons for NOT making the desired change) result in consequences that are experienced as aversive.

6. Inconsistency involves an important cognition, such as the self-image.

7. Behaviours *consistent* with the desired goals or preferred self-image (reasons FOR making the desired change) are maximized, and behaviours *inconsistent* with the current unhelpful self-image (reasons for NOT making the desired change) are maximized.

8. There is no overt reward in doing the desired behaviours.

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MOTIVATION BALANCE SHEET

Reasons FOR making the desired change	Rate	Reasons for NOT making the desired change	Rate