

## Attitude Change

Researchers have proposed three theories to account for attitude change: learning theory, dissonance theory, and the elaboration likelihood model.

### Learning Theory

Learning theory says that attitudes can be formed and changed through the use of learning principles such as classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning:

1. Classical conditioning: The emotional component of attitudes can be formed through classical conditioning. For example, in a billboard ad, a clothing company pairs a sweater with an attractive model who elicits a pleasant emotional response. This can make people form a positive attitude about the sweater and the clothing company.
2. Operant conditioning: If someone gets a positive response from others when she expresses an attitude, that attitude will be reinforced and will tend to get stronger. On the other hand, if she gets a negative response from others, that attitude tends to get weaker.
3. Observational learning: Seeing others display a particular attitude and watching people be reinforced for expressing a particular attitude can make someone adopt those attitudes.

### Dissonance Theory

Leon Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory proposes that people change their attitudes when they have attitudes that are inconsistent with each other. Festinger said that people experience cognitive dissonance when they have related cognitions that conflict with one another. Cognitive dissonance results in a state of unpleasant tension. People try to reduce the tension by changing their attitudes.

**Example:** Sydney is against capital punishment. She participates in a debate competition and is assigned to a team that has to argue for capital punishment. Subsequently, she is more amenable to the idea of capital punishment.

The phenomenon called justification of effort also results from cognitive dissonance. Justification of effort refers to the idea that if people work hard to reach a goal, they are likely to value the goal more. They justify working hard by believing that the goal is valuable.

### **The Elaboration Likelihood Model**

The elaboration likelihood model holds that attitude change is more permanent if the elaborate and thought-provoking persuasive messages are used to change the attitude. Basically, if someone can provide a thorough, thought-provoking persuasive message to change an attitude, he is more likely to succeed than if he provides a neutral or shallow persuasive message.

**Example:** Ten teenagers who smoke are sent to an all-day seminar on the negative consequences of smoking. Many of the students subsequently give up the habit.