

Careful what you say and agree to: You may end up believing it.

Consider the following situation. You are a young colleague, perhaps an assistant professor, having lunch with several other faculty members. They have known each other for years, and you are glad to be there because they represent the “establishment” in the department. All of you are having a discussion about another younger colleague who is not present. There is a rumor that he, the absent younger colleague, has harassed a female student, but no one seems to know the real facts of the case, and neither the student nor the colleague have been interviewed or spoken to by anyone present.

One of the more senior members of the group says:

“We’ve talked about this before and this behavior can’t be tolerated. We need to deal with this harassment issue quickly, and I prefer, harshly.”

Another member of the group agrees.

“I’ve been suspicious of him for some time for other reasons. We need to come down hard on him.”

Others nod their heads in agreement. But, they notice that you have not agreed, and they look at you inquisitively. You really don’t agree with them because you feel that the facts are not yet in. But, do you nod in agreement – realizing that there is some pressure to do so? Or, do you point out that the real facts are not yet clear to you? Do you point out that because he is younger, newer, and not as well-known as some other faculty, caution is needed for sake of fairness? Do you say that we shouldn’t speak of him as guilty, but that the situation is under examination? This is a predicament. Do you take the easy way out and lie by nodding, or find some courage and state your real opinions, which might annoy the group? Of course, CE would recommend fairness.

Comment: Agreeing to something you really don’t believe creates an internal dissonance, and the outcome of these situations has been studied. It has been found that after you agree to something you really don’t privately believe, your private opinion changes to bring it more in line with what you have said (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959; Gawronski and Strack, 2004). Just because you *state* agreement, not because you see more evidence or logic, you move your real personal position towards agreement! You can at least partly convince yourself just by *saying* something, even if it is under mild pressure and not really what you believe. We can “brainwash” ourselves to some degree, although that is probably too strong a statement.

If we truly want to be fair, then we need to withhold stating false opinions or else speak the truth of our opinions. Courage is a major factor in what we might do.

Festinger L and Carlsmith JM (1959) Cognitive consequences of forced compliance. J Abn and Soc Psychol 58:203-210.

Gawronski, B and Strack F. 2004. On the propositional nature of cognitive consistency: Dissonance changes explicit, but not implicit attitudes. *J Exp Soc Psychol* 40:535-542.