



The Charisma Myth

How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism
by **Olivia Fox Cabane**

The data-driven tools and techniques used by our coaches in assisting coachees in rewiring their brains to embrace more productive, constructive, and healthy habits are fundamental to the personal and professional development system here at CIMBA. Within our **6-Columns Development Tool**, the initial five columns or process steps involve setting a goal and then understanding and testing why your brain is making it so difficult to achieve it. With that understanding and the data that supports it in hand, coaches then take coachees into the final phase of the development process, column 6. The intent of column 6 is to practice, practice, and practice so that the new habit becomes the brain's default wiring in response to the social stimulus that initially motivated the behavior development goal.

The coaches will build the essential Column 6 foundation for this development by first guiding coachees in becoming more self-aware of the situations and/or people that activate their Social Brain threat detection circuitry and bring about the unproductive, unconstructive, or in unhealthy habitual reaction of concern. Not infrequently, this habit was generated by the coachee's Social Brain as a productive reaction to a particular social stimulus in prior social groups, but it is now proving to be unproductive and dysfunctional in the present one. In making this knowledge actionable, the coaches will correspondingly encourage coachees to strengthen their Social Brain's self-regulatory capacity through mindfulness and other tools. Their intent is to enhance a coachee's ability to slow down his or her brain in those difficult situations, understand the deceptive emotional sensations it is generating, and then direct the brain toward more productive, constructive, and healthy action choices.

It has always been our sense that the functionality and usefulness of our Social Brain's self-awareness circuitry reaches far beyond merely perceiving the onset of emotional situations. Heightening the conscious interaction of the Social Brain's self and social awareness circuitries has always presented itself as a potentially productive area for personal development focus and attention. It is in this sense that I found the book [The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism](#) by Olivia Fox Cabane to be quite interesting.

Cabane's basic premise is that our internal physical and emotional workings (Self-Awareness circuits) manifest themselves externally without more in our facial expressions and body language (Social Awareness circuits). Of course, our Social Brain evolved to be particularly sensitive to those signals, and particularly if the brain's interpretation of those signals is negative. Signals we transmit to others work to our benefit when the intended signal we send is the signal they receive. For example, if our facial expressions and body language signal our disagreement with the content of a discussion and the other party receives that signal, the receiver's Social Brain will have the appropriate information upon which to base a reaction. But what if the transmitted signal has nothing to do with the current social interaction but is actually reflective of a prior communication with another person completely unrelated to the current interaction? Without additional information, the receiver's Social Brain is very likely going to interpret those signals as reflective of the sender's reaction to the present social interaction. Similarly, what if the message being sent is reflective of a completely unrelated physical or mental discomfort? Obviously, the simplest message in all of this is that we need to be self-aware of our internal stimuli with particular regard to how they manifest themselves externally in social signals to others.

But Cabane takes this basic notion one important step further. It is relatively easy for each of us to think of internal physical or mental discomforts we have manifested externally to others. However, as most of us who enjoy a good fright at the movies understand, our Social Brains have a very difficult time telling reality from imagination. That is, our Social Brains have difficulty differentiating between actual physical or mental discomfort, or any other emotional state for that matter, and those that we create artificially in our minds. In other words, if we want to convey ***presence, power, and warmth*** to others, creating an artificial internal mental state consistent with that conveyance will significantly enhance our Social Brain's ability to reflect that mental state in our facial expressions and body language. Cabane refers to these elements of *presence, power, and warmth* as charisma, and instructs us on how to assist our Social Brain in signaling or messaging them to others to be appropriately received and interpreted. She provides a variety of useful examples and illustrations to assist in signaling the appropriate message in a number of social environments. In various "Putting it into Practice" call-outs she shares her techniques for internally generating such emotions as gratitude and compassion to convey warmth, along with others to signal power and presence. She provides a variety of suggestions for developing our listening, speaking, and other skills in these same context. Cabane also explores specific situations that demand internal and external state consistency for effectiveness, such as interacting with difficult people, providing challenging feedback, giving an apology, delivering a presentation, or functioning effectively in a crisis.

Within the dictum of our Social Brain Theory of Leadership, Cabane's more sophisticated notion has merit. From a human evolution perspective, spoken language is a relatively recent invention.

Anthropologists and linguists argue that it may have become into *formal* existence -- emphasis on formal -- as recently as 11,000 years ago. Clearly before then our social interactions were conveyed through nonverbal modes of communication in one form or another. Anthropologists argue persuasively that the development of our Social Brain began some 2 million years ago as we came to recognize the survival advantages of communal living. Obviously, this would have necessitated some form of effective communication. Taking together his need and the recent development of spoken language, it is relatively easy to assert that nonverbal communication is deeply hardwired into our brains, arguably much deeper than are our more recent language-processing abilities.

In this sense, research suggests that nonverbal communication has a far greater impact on our Social Brain and its perception of the world around us than we might otherwise have expected. Put differently, our nonverbal communication in the form of facial expressions and our gestures, body posture, and other body language may matter far more than our words do as social signals. One endpoint to this line of thinking would imply that if the social signals you are broadcasting are incorrect, it likely will not matter how powerful your leadership message is or how skillfully you craft it. At the other endpoint, through the effective use of correct social signals we may be successful in conveying appropriate leadership character without even saying a word.

Research shows that our body language expresses our mental state, in many cases whether we like it or not. Below our level of consciousness our facial expressions, voice, posture, and all of the other components of body language reflect our mental and emotional condition virtually every second. Just as with our breath and heartbeat, those signals are an important part of the millions of bodily functions controlled by our brain's System 1 circuitry. Clearly, as with other such functions, there are far too many social signals broadcasted by our bodies for our brain to control through the use of its conscious, energy-intensive, System 2 circuitry. Because we do not control these physiological, emotional, and mental processes consciously, the thoughts and feelings in our head will inevitably show up in our body language. As a consequence, we cannot expect to consciously control all of our social signals in our efforts to convey effective leadership character. Our Social Brain would somehow be obligated to simultaneously control minute vocal fluctuations, the appropriate expressions around our eyes, and thousands of other associated bodily elements to assure the desired social signals were being transmitted to and interpreted by others. Simple experiments involving System 2 circuitry make it clear that this is not impossible with today's Social Brain circuitries.

As to the signals being sent, research has shown that we read faces in as little as 17 milliseconds. As with many other such functions, the survival advantages of being able to convey danger, or conversely, trust, quickly and automatically are obvious -- and thus would clearly have been

prized attributes from an evolutionary standpoint. As we have learned from Prof. Paul Ekman, even if we make a System 2 effort to control the main expression on our face or the positioning of our body, and if our internal mental state is different from what we are aiming to portray, sooner or later a micro-expression will flash across our face revealing that mental state (Ekman, 1999). As Ekman's insightful work shows and his online training tools actually demonstrate, while most of us will pick up those micro-expressions, it takes a degree of expertise to be able to integrate them with other information and interpret them with a measurable degree of accuracy in real time. However, most people do sense it on a subconscious level, bringing about some degree of System 1 threat detection reaction. We often say something to the effect "the way he presented himself raised my antennas." Supportive research abounds. Prof. James Gross (1995) has shown that even an individual's efforts at suppressing a mental state from others will generate a physiological response in those others (The other's heart rate, blood pressure, and skin conductance will all show signs of elevation).

As an illustration, ask yourself if you have ever had an experience where an individual undertook a manipulative effort to flash you a fake smile. The incongruence between the fake smile and a real smile activates our System 1 threat detection circuitry and leaves us with the sensation to be alert because something is not quite right. Your Social Brain is largely taking in a variety of sensory information including the fake smile and other visual data from your eyes and aural information from your ears, integrating them, but then finding that the interpretation leaves a sense of dissonance or incongruence. The dissonance activates your System 1 threat detection circuitry to arouse you to a potential threat. The fake smile simply does not reach the eyes in the same way a real smile does, and people sense the difference -- much like they would if you were smiling and screaming in anger.

The brain-based implications of this research and its corollaries are straightforward: learning and development efforts focusing on developing "soft skills" (or, by other names, social skills or social graces) are likely to fail in the absence of a foundation in self-awareness, and particularly self-awareness focused on developing the ability to manage your internal world. More specifically, it involves gaining an understanding of what exactly is happening inside you and how to manage it. For example, we are often told that leaders exude self-confidence. But the science clearly reveals that there is a big difference between an actor displaying self-confidence or a person practicing its external manifestation, and a person who actually possesses it. In the latter case, in the face of a simple event that shakes that false bravado, the mental focus is lost and the faux self-confidence along with it. Individuals with developed self-awareness skills are more likely to be aware of what exactly is happening inside them and know how to handle it. They will recognize when their self-confidence has taken or will take a hit, and have the tools to pull themselves back into a confident mental state so their body language reflects the appropriate leadership demeanor.

The basic notion here is, then, that leadership behavior must originate in your mind. From this perspective, if your internal mental state is inconsistent with effective leadership behavior, sooner or later your underlying thoughts and feelings are going to show through -- regardless of the amount of willpower and self-regulation you bring to bear. Conversely, if your internal mental state is consistent with effective leadership behavior, then the corresponding body language will flow forth effortlessly.