



Stanford eCorner

The Mental Side of Power

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October 10, 2012

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/3007/The-Mental-Side-of-Power>

Olivia Fox Cabane, author of *The Charisma Myth*, illustrates how self-confidence is easily undermined by the pervasive and pernicious "impostor syndrome." She also explains how the human mind's filtering processes prevent each of us from seeing a true representation of reality.



Transcript

So on the mental side, what hinders our power? The single biggest obstacle isn't lack of bank account funds, it's not lack of influence, and it's not lack of status symbols. The single biggest obstacle is lack of self-confidence. In one of the manifestations of low self-confidence called the imposter syndrome, people feel that they don't really know what they're doing. And it's just a matter of time before they're found out and exposed as a fraud. This syndrome is estimated to hit 70% to 80% of the population. And it hits the highest levels of business and education, every time I speak about this at Harvard, at Yale, at Stanford and at MIT, the room goes so silent you could hear a pin drop. And then the students breathe a sigh of relief at hearing that this has a name and they're not the only ones to have felt it. I've heard that every time the incoming class of Stanford Business School is asked how many of you in here feel that you are the one mistake the admissions committee made? Two-thirds of the students immediately raise their hands. Dismantling the imposter syndrome is a three-step process. The first step is destigmatizing, which means lifting the stigma of shame off the experience.

Destigmatizing is crucial because shame is a real performance killer. Of all the emotions the human being can feel, shame is one of the worst, which is why destigmatizing is so important and if you are leaders, you have a critical responsibility. Because as leaders, it's you that people turn to, to understand how they should feel about their experience. As leaders, you are by definition the alphas of your pack. People will turn to you to know how they should react to events and situations. So you can help them destigmatize by understanding this feeling as normal, natural, and entirely common. Now, if de-stigmatizing was step one, detaching is step two. The key to detaching is understanding that our thoughts are not necessarily accurate at all. Just because a thought is in our head does not mean it has any validity whatsoever. In one well-known study, Harvard researchers asked students to watch a video in which two teams played basketball, and count the number of passes made by one of the teams.

Afterwards, the researchers asked the students: did you notice anything unusual about the video? Some of you know where this is going. And the students said, no, but we can tell you the number of times they pass the ball. What over half the students had missed is that midway through the game, a woman dressed in a gorilla suit walked on to the court, waved her arms at the camera and walked off court again. Now, if you think you'd do better, let's try something out together right now. Look around the room and pick up really closely everything that is blue. Really closely, everything that's blue. You're going to get about 30 seconds, be really careful. Alright. Close your eyes. Keeping your eyes closed could you please tell me right now everything that's red? Thank you.

How did this happen? Because we have a limited capacity for conscious attention, which constrains how much we can be aware of at any given moment. Of the millions of visual inputs our eyes take in every moment, we only perceive very few. The conscious awareness of absolutely everything happening around us would be simply overwhelming. So to deal with this, our

brain filters for relevant information. Either what we specifically ask to pay attention to, red or blue, or what it considers important for our survival. In doing so, our mind does not provide us with a true representation of reality. Because it has to filter, it gives us an incomplete view presenting only some elements and withholding all others. Now, most of the time, the elements you're missing don't matter. And the picture you get is fairly useful. But sometimes, our mind gives us a highly distorted view of reality.

That's when you get distorted thinking. And just like an optical illusion tricks our eyes into seeing things that aren't real, distorted thinking tricks our mind into being certain that an inaccurate thought is true. So that's detaching. Some cognitive scientists recommend seeing these negative thoughts just as we would graffiti on a wall. When you're walking down a street and you see a graffiti, you might decide that it's an ugly sight, but you don't take that to mean that you are an ugly person. When you're meandering around the maze of your mind, if you encounter an ugly thought, try to see it as just graffiti on a wall.