



Stanford eCorner

How to Rewrite Reality

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Author and leadership coach Olivia Fox Cabane shares the challenges an individual faces when trying to create warmth and empathy as behaviors for building charisma. She also shares a valuable technique for restoring mental balance and focus through the power of cognitive reframing.



Transcript

Now what are the obstacles to warmth? Interestingly, they can be the same as the obstacles to presence or power. For example, it's hard to be emitting warmth when you're in the grip of self-criticism. Have you ever been in conversation when you say something and you immediately think, ooh, that was a stupid thing to say? What happens to your face? It grimaces. What emotions show on your face? All of them. All of them, okay. Let's get specific. When you're thinking, ooh, that was a stupid thing to say, what emotions show on your face? Stress. Stress, shame, embarrassment, all of that. Coldness, criticism, et cetera, yes. Now this is self-criticism, self-directed tension, coldness or judgment, yes? But they don't know that.

All they know is that while you were looking at them, listening to them, and presumably thinking about them, they did see tension, coldness or criticism on your face. So naturally, what are they going to assume? That it's about them. Think about that. The next time that you're speaking with someone on their face, you see tension, criticism or coldness, it might not have anything to do with you. In fact, in most cases I would say it's self-directed. Never assume your immediate assumption is the valid one. So once you know that your immediate assumption is not necessarily valid, the next step is to choose a more charisma-enhancing one. This is called rewriting reality and here's how it works. Imagine this: it's 8:00 AM on a Monday morning. You're driving on the freeway on your way to a really important meeting.

You will be giving a 30 minute presentation, which could change the course of your career. You're focused, you're calm, you're ready. When all of a sudden a huge black car swerves in front of you, cuts you off, so with your heart racing and your hands gripping the steering wheel, you stomp on the brake. The car keeps swerving in and out of your lane and finally abruptly exits the freeway. What an idiot, reckless driver. Now what happened to your body during this episode? A fight or flight response made your heartbeat accelerate, your muscles tighten, and stress hormones flood your system. You know you need to get back into a charismatic mental and physical state for your presentation, but you only have a few minutes and you can't get that incident out of your mind. You could try to suppress the anger, but as Stanford researchers found, when people are asked to suppress negative emotions their internal experience often remains unchanged. And they sustain activated - elevated activation in their amygdala and their cardiovascular system. What if instead, through a fluke coincidence, you were to learn that that apparently idiotic, reckless driver was actually a distraught mother whose baby was choking in the back seat and it's all she could do to even keep the car on the highway while trying to save the baby's life.

Would that immediately alleviate your anger? For most people, it would. Deciding to change your belief about what happened, which is technically called cognitive reframing, effectively decreases the stress in the brain. In most situations in life, you'll never find out if it was an idiot driver or a distraught mother. So, you might as well choose whichever version of reality puts you in the most useful mental state.