

Book Review: The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism by Olivia Fox Cabane (2012)

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I need to begin with a disclaimer. This is not the type of book I typically read. The title, *The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism*, has the familiar ring of a pop psychology book, and that's not far from the truth. But for librarians, what sets this book apart from the standard self-help books is its application to teaching and presenting. Librarians with teaching responsibilities will find valuable insights into creating the proper mindset before instruction sessions, speaking and listening with charisma, and projecting a powerful and warm presence to your audiences. As the author states at the book's outset, "You'll learn how to become more influential, more persuasive, and more inspiring" (p. 7).

The author, Olivia Fox Cabane, a university lecturer and an executive leadership coach, unmaskes charisma and breaks it down into digestible bites, effectively debunking the myth that charisma is something you're either born with or you're not. The main idea of her book is that charisma is not mysterious; it's simply a set of personal skills that can be learned, mastered and integrated into your work and personal life. Cabane attests that charisma is not based on something you *are* – qualities that are part of your fundamental personality – but on something you *do*. In other words, charisma can be acquired with simple tweaks to your behavior using simple methods and techniques. These tweaks can be practiced, and then mastered, by interacting with people in everyday situations.

I noted the similarities in Cabane's book to the concept of transformational leadership, which names charisma as a key characteristic of the leadership style (Pounder, p. 536). The author draws from several of the concept's advocates – Bernard M. Bass and others – in her introductory chapter, and the Notes section at the close of the book provides suggestions for further reading about transformational leadership (pp. 247-248). If an administration or management course was not part of your library school curriculum, you should be aware that transformational leadership theory is included in the American Library Association's "Core Competences of Librarianship," a document adopted in 2009 that defines basic knowledge for all graduates of an ALA-accredited master's program in library and information studies (ALA, 2009).

So how does an instruction librarian interested in becoming more effective in the classroom gain something from reading Cabane's book? There are thirteen chapters and at the end of each is a list of "key takeaways." Additionally, there are more than twenty exercises scattered throughout the book to guide the reader through the process of developing charisma and put that guidance into practice. Even if you have no intention of doing them, the exercises and takeaways will help you remember the key points.

The Charisma Myth investigates how to exhibit the hallmark traits of charisma – presence, power and warmth – through charismatic listening, speaking, and body language. The basis for exhibiting charisma, the author asserts, is creating the right mental state; and the biggest obstacle to creating the right mental state is internal discomfort. The author devotes chapters three, four, and five – nearly one-fourth of the book – to this topic. Embedded in these chapters are visualizations for overcoming anxiety and self-doubt; creating a charismatic mindset; and practicing gratitude, compassion, and goodwill.

Chapter six, which explores different charismatic styles, is interesting to read because the author relates each type to a highly recognizable public figure. She explains how to develop each style – focus, visionary, authority, and kindness – and access different parts of your personality to achieve your goals for a particular situation. There is even an exercise for working with introversion, if that's your natural disposition, such as giving yourself time to "hang back and observe" in large social gatherings (yes, there is such thing as a charismatic introvert) (p. 108).

Other chapters discuss how to use charismatic behaviors in a crisis or when dealing with difficult people. At first glance these chapters may not appear relevant for instruction librarians. But they offer valuable insights into how to unleash newly-learned charisma behaviors during challenging classroom situations, such as when a disruptive student threatens to spoil your efforts. For example, you should be empathetic toward the student, while also being specific about what you need him to do and ensuring you critique the behavior, not the person. Employing these practices can diffuse the situation and help you regain control of the class.

The chapters that resounded the loudest with me were eight, nine and eleven, the ones covering speaking and presenting with charisma. In my previous career, my work had been mostly behind the scenes. Public speaking was never my forte, and confidence issues often got in the way. Now that I find myself teaching college students, these issues have surfaced as obstacles to success in the classroom. I found the exercises for overcoming confidence issues quite helpful, including techniques for using body position to create a better mindset (pp. 90-91), and improving vocal power and body language (pp. 40-41).

The author also explains the importance of exhibiting charisma when speaking to a group, by projecting power and warmth to your audience. I've heard these tips before: craft a clear and relatable message; make every sentence count; dress comfortably; focus on your audience (students); show confidence by pausing; and remember to breathe – but this succinct summary and the corresponding exercises really bring it all home. What can you do if you're midway through an important presentation and your mind goes blank? The author tells how to check negative thoughts and return to charismatic presenting. What are some things can you do to get ensure a smooth presentation day? The author offers tools for this (pp. 198-200), too.

Instruction librarians, who rely on communication skills to be effective in their work, will find the tips and essential techniques in *The Charisma Myth* useful – not only in delivering effective and engaging classroom

presentations, but in several other areas as well. Cabane's techniques can be applied to commanding respect in the classroom, presenting at conferences, interacting with academic peers, interviewing for new positions and more. Although much of the advice is just common sense, reading and thinking through these concepts can be valuable nevertheless.

Take a stroll through this fun-to-read book. *The Charisma Myth* doesn't take much time to absorb – especially if you use the chapter takeaways and summaries to get to the meat of the book – but internalizing the principles of charisma will require practice. “Commit, and do your homework,” Cabane reminds the reader (p. 12). Self-help books may not attract you either, but if you can get past that, this one is worth picking up and applying to your personal instructional style.

References

- American Library Association (2009). ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf>
- Pounder, J. S. (2006) Transformational classroom leadership: The fourth wave of teacher leadership? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 34(4), 533-545.