
THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Mind Over Matter

By **Olivia Fox Cabane**

“Imagination is more important than science,” said Albert Einstein. As usual, Al knew what he was talking about — the mind can do amazing feats when it truly believes something. Some schizophrenic patients so firmly believe they are two different people that they actually change eye color and make birthmarks appear and disappear on their skin as they switch personalities. Pure mind power can make many things come true. No, it won't make you win the lottery, but it can certainly be all-powerful on one person's behavior — you.

Olivia Fox Cabane is the Executive Director of Spitfire Communications (www.spitfireteam.com) located in New York City. A member of *MLF's* Board of Editors, Olivia can be reached at 212-561-9146 or via e-mail at Olivia@spitfireteam.com.

One interesting fact about the mind is that, per se, the brain has absolutely no actual connection to reality. It relies on chemical signals from other organs to decide what's happening out there. Picture this — if one interrupted the input of the other organs, the brain would be so thoroughly oblivious to everything, that one could be opening the skull and working on the brain itself, and it would have no way of knowing it, remaining blissfully unaware of the proceedings (this is exactly what general anesthesia does).

The fact that the brain is ignorant of reality is precisely what makes it so susceptible to suggestion. Have you ever felt your heart pounding and your blood curdling during a scary movie? Consciously, you know it's just a movie — the actors you're seeing on screen are probably delighted to look like they're having their heads chopped off in exchange for a couple million dollars. Yet your brain sees blood and guts on the

screen, and it sends you straight into fight-or-flight mode, adrenaline rushing through your system.

On a physical level, Harvard's Pr. Cohen showed that imagining performing an activity, and even just seeing someone perform it, fires the same neurotransmitters and the same pathways as actually performing the activity! Since it has no connection to reality, the brain cannot distinguish between reality and imagination. This is the reason techniques such as visualization (also called “guided imagery”), auto-persuasion and positive thinking (popularized by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale) work so well.

In **sports**, visualization has been considered an essential tool for decades. In a 1984 survey of the 235 Canadian Olympic athletes preparing for the Games, 99% of them were using imagery. “There's no one who doesn't use imagery,” says Rebecca Smith, a clinical research assistant in sports psychology at the U.S.

continued on page 9

Mind Over Matter

continued from page 8

Olympic Training center in Colorado. Professional athletes will spend hours visualizing their victory, telling their mind just what they want their body to achieve. Jack Nicklaus said that he never hit a shot, even during practice, without visualizing it first.

In **medicine**, visualization has proven through clinical studies to aid in a dazzling array of ailments, from arthritis to cancer to open heart surgery. Recently, the Director of the University of San Diego Neuroscience Institute used imagery to cure “phantom limb pain” in amputated patients. Insurance companies such as Blue Cross Blue Shield, not particularly known for their new-age tendencies or altruism, are starting to cover visualization therapy.

So, what does all this mean for you? Well, visualization can help speed the process of learning a new skill — **networking**, for instance. My coaching clients’ main priority is often increasing their level of confidence and comfort in networking. They want to feel absolutely confident when walking into a room full of strangers at a cocktail party, or when going onstage to face a sea of people at a conference. They want to feel perfectly at ease, and perform at their best, when meeting a new client, or current clients — especially

someone who they know to be difficult. Visualization is a perfect tool for this: through guided imagery, you can ensure that whatever you’re feeling is exactly those feelings you want; and that you’re performing at the top of your abilities. Visualized behaviors can be practiced more easily, quickly and frequently than actual behaviors, so they’re an ideal complement to actual, practice.

Let’s say you want to feel perfectly at ease, comfortable, relaxed and confident when meeting new people at a cocktail party—as if you were meeting old friends. This is exactly what you’re going to visualize: that the room is full of old friends. First, **relax**. You need your full powers of concentration.

Second, **make it real**: to make your imagery most effective, involve all five senses. Hear the laughter you shared together, taste the hot toddies you drank, smell the wood fire burning, feel the snowballs you threw at each other. Above all, feel all the warm emotions rising. Guided imagery must be precise, vivid and detailed to be effective, says Harvard-trained imagery specialist Stephen Krauss. Envisioning vague or broad goals like “being a people person” may temporarily boost your motivation, but won’t work as well. For instance, says Krauss, when visualization was used with the 1976 Olympic ski team, precision and

detail were crucial to the process: Skiers visualized themselves careening through the entire course, experiencing each bump and turn in their minds. That team went on to an unexpectedly strong performance, and precise visualization has since become a standard training tool for Olympic athletes.

Third, **do it often** — you’re literally creating new pathways, new connections in your brain. Krauss recommends that visualization exercises be distributed, rather than bunched together in fewer sessions, even if they’re longer.

When you do this visualization exercise, even for just a minute, a remarkable chain reaction, from the softening of your eyebrows to the dilatation of your pupils, will broadcast a message of trust and liking. These are long lost friends, and you are so happy to see them again! You’ll instinctively smile, and there’s a good chance it’ll be a “Duquesne” smile, a specific kind of smile we produce only when with friends, and which can melt even the worst curmudgeon. You’ll feel instantly at ease — after all, you’re going to meet old friends — relaxed, and confident. And you’ll go on to the stage, client meeting, or cocktail party with utter confidence.

Now, if it would only work for the lottery...