

What Is an Introverted Leader?

Do you ever feel like extroverts get everything they ask for while your needs are passed over . . . or ignored?

Are you drained by business socializing?

Do you feel like you are not heard at meetings?

Have you ever turned down a speech or interview request?

If so, you may be introverted, and you are not alone. Many respected executives, such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Andrea Jung, are naturally introverted.¹ Other famous leaders, such as Mother Theresa, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr., were thought to be introverted. The late Katharine Graham was introverted, and it is likely that President Barack Obama is an introvert. The list goes on.

A well-kept secret is that, like these well-known and successful introverts, there are millions of people who can experience deep discomfort and inhibition in interpersonal situations. This is not because there is something wrong with them. Introverts have a temperament that is more inner-focused, and they must adapt to an extroverted world, one that is primarily driven by interpersonal interactions. With estimates that almost 50 percent of the population² and 40 percent of executives are introverted, you are certainly not alone. Yet, to be an effective leader, you have a responsibility to connect with employees, customers, and colleagues and, like other successful introverted leaders, you need to find ways to succeed.

An Overview of Introversion and Extroversion

There is no one definition of introversion or extroversion that can be tied up neatly. However, it is an area of personality that can be

Figure 1. Typical Characteristics

Extroverts	Introverts
Energized by and seek out people; batteries “charged up” by other people	Energized by time alone; need time to “recharge” their batteries after interactions with other people
Talk first, think later	Think first, talk later
Talk out their thoughts	Process their thoughts in their head
Enthusiastic	Reserved
Are transparent, easy to read—like a fur coat with the fur on the outside	Less demonstrative emotion in facial expressions—like a fur coat with the fur on the inside
Freely share personal data with friends and strangers	Share personal data with a select few
Prefer talking to writing	Prefer writing to talking
Focus on breadth	Focus on depth

best explained by a description of general tendencies. If you haven’t taken the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (the MBTI) to determine your preference, doing a search online will reveal many resources to help you with this.

However, I find that most people seem to recognize their introversion when presented with some typical characteristics. Let’s review the list above in Figure 1 and see which side resonates with you more.

If you are torn between both sides of the chart, it is not a problem. You might ask yourself the question, “If I had to be one for the rest of my life, which one would I choose?” Some people have situational introversion. There are certain scenarios in which they reveal introverted tendencies. It is said that even Oprah Winfrey was tongue-tied when she met Nelson Mandela for the first time!

There is a difference between introversion and shyness. Shyness is driven by fear and social anxiety. Although the symptoms may

overlap (e.g., avoidance of public speaking), introversion is a preference and should not be considered a problem.

Can Introverts Be Leaders?

Absolutely, introverts can be successful leaders. I define leaders very broadly. If you are someone who recognizes that you need to work through people to achieve results, then you are a leader. If you are not satisfied with the status quo and want to improve processes and make a difference, then you are a leader. If you want to help people, then you are a leader. I leave it up to you to define the term for yourself. Leaders have to make sure the job gets done, and they also need to plan for change, coach others, and work with other people to get results.

There is a strong case to be made for the success of introverted leaders. *Good to Great* by Jim Collins has become a classic business book. In studying the characteristics of successful companies, Jim Collins found that every successful company he studied had a leader who exhibited what he called “Level 5” characteristics during times of transition. They demonstrated a focus on results, but equally important, and perhaps paradoxically, they each possessed personal humility. They displayed “compelling modesty, were self-effacing and understated”³; these qualities and this emotional intelligence seem very aligned with the introverted leader.

In a study published in *CIO Magazine*,⁴ senior executives said that a lack of empathy was a key cause of failure in leaders today. These results match research that was done by the guru of emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman. He found that the best bosses have something called high social intelligence. This form of intelligence correlates more with attention and focus on relationships. Those with high social intelligence are able to connect with others and greatly influence the performance of their people.⁵

How Leaders Manage Their Introversion

Turn a Weakness into a Strength

In my consulting with successful business executives over the years, I have found many who have been candidly honest about being

introverted. In fact, they tend to talk about the topic at length, as though they have never been asked about this “secret.” They approach introversion as they would any other challenging business problem and seek to understand which behaviors are working and which aren’t. Then they develop a strategy and execute a plan.

The successful introverted leader actually turns what might be considered a weakness into a strength. One well-respected manager was given feedback in his career that he was too “low key.” In his future role as a senior leader he turned this laid-back persona into presence. He had a strong ability to project a calm confidence—a sense of ease, poise, and self-assurance that transferred to all the people around him.

Another leader turned her disdain for large-group socializing into a chance to get her vision across to her team in different ways. She made a point of building on her preference for one-on-one conversations. As a result, she got to know each of her people, and she built clear communication channels and trust.

These leaders have found creative ways to adapt. In and out of diverse workplaces, one-on-one and in groups, the ongoing give and take with customers and colleagues is what gets results and ultimately makes the difference in whether or not you are a credible and respected leader, colleague, and employee.

Though she is far from a role model, Miranda Priestly, the ghastly boss (and “closet introvert” perhaps?) in the film *The Devil Wears Prada* uses a technique that serves her well. Her two assistants memorize the names, photo headshots, and trivia about all of her party guests, which they then unobtrusively whisper in her ear before each encounter.

One CEO I interviewed said that he managed his anxiety in meetings with subordinates by taking careful notes, not realizing how incredibly helpful this would be when he needed this information months later.

The power of silence is another characteristic that can serve as a strength. Many people are not comfortable with silence and try to fill the gaps with comments that are off the cuff, whereas the comments made by the introvert can be more thoughtful. Sid Milstein,

VP Global BPO for EDS, an HP company, told me that you can convey a sense of reflective wisdom to your peers and your bosses because you “hopefully, are considering facts and issues before speaking.”

Introverts can access greater wisdom from within when their mind is quiet. They can choose their words carefully and correctly. An executive coach I know who has worked with many senior executives said that when these reflective leaders speak, what shows up is very powerful. Judy Gray, president and CEO of the Florida Society of Association of Executives said, “The whole phenomenon of quiet yet effective leadership deserves to be recognized and appreciated. The passionately exuberant or charismatic leader initially has a leg up on capturing people’s hearts and minds, but those characteristics alone are not what create sustainable progress or meaningful change.” A really powerful, astute Ivy-League type years ago told her, “The person in the room with the most power is the quietest.”

Pausing and reflecting also helps keep introverted leaders from putting their feet in their mouths. One person I spoke with who works in politics expressed gratitude at being able to hold his tongue. Where he worked, one wrong word could have cost him his job.

When you are introverted, you also have more time to observe and read people. Mary Toland, a senior project manager, has been able to groom talent on her project team by coaching those who have receded into the background. She has developed empathy for introverted, emerging leaders, and shares a realistic view of what it takes to rise in the ranks and succeed in her organization. Mary is now passing this knowledge on.

This book will show you the many ways you can adapt your leadership style now and in the future. Just as you may complete Sudoku puzzles or learn a new language to stretch your brain, you can gain practical and proven tools to build on your quiet strength. The next chapter will clarify the tangible challenges you will likely experience as you move down the road toward being a successful introverted leader.