




The Strong, Silent Type

by Theona Layne

Outspoken, boisterous, larger than life: These are the perceived personality traits of great leaders. However, some of the more successful leaders are the strong, silent type. Tech titans Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, for instance, both identify as introverts. Surprising, but true!

Introverts differ from extroverts because they draw creativity and physical energy from solitude and introspection rather than collaboration and outward expression. So, it may be difficult for some to understand how introverts can be such good leaders. They don't exhibit the personality traits commonly associated with leadership and instead are often seen as shy, quiet, and anti-social. Their behavior, however, can be misinterpreted.



While most introverts need periods of solitude to recharge, many aren't afraid of social interaction or the limelight. Plus, some introverts can have just as much charisma, ambition, and fortitude as any extroverted leader. In fact, "a really smart introverted leader can be more successful than anybody else," says Linda Henman, author of *Challenge the Ordinary* and *Landing in the Executive Chair*. What exactly makes introverts such great leaders?

Sheer personality

Perceived personality traits can be deceiving when determining qualities of a good leader. "People judge you on your level of engagement," says Lisa Boren Sivy, senior manager at Jabian Consulting and co-author of the paper, "The Power of Introversion." "If someone is more reserved, people may wrongly assume that person isn't comfortable, isn't interested." But this isn't the case with introverts who are naturally great listeners and are adept at reading people and sensing their unspoken needs. They harness this knowledge to delegate and play to the strengths of individual team members.

In addition, shyness can be misinterpreted as well. Solitude allows for much needed reflection, which enhances an introvert's natural problem-solving abilities. Introverts possess a knack for thinking outside the box and considering all variables of a problem to discover more workable solutions. Furthermore, they are a calm presence in an often-hecky environment as their reassuring nature allows them to stay cool during a crisis. This results in greater trust and reliance on the introverted leader to behave appropriately.

Finally, truly effective leadership is built on relationships and "introverts are masters at that," says Merrick Rosenberg, author of *The Chameleon* and CEO of Take Flight Learning. Introverted leaders truly care about the people they lead and

excel at forging strong one-on-one relationships. "When you have a strong relationship with staff," adds Rosenberg, "they'll do anything for you."

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Take time for yourself

Part of being a successful leader is being aware of one's strengths and limitations and making adjustments accordingly. For the introvert, one needs to understand that his or her physical and creative energies do not come from being around other people, but rather come from quiet reflection on ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Henman explains, "An extrovert gets revved up from a lively discussion, but that sort of interaction can drain an introvert." Similarly, a day filled with back-to-back meetings would leave an introvert emotionally and physically tapped while the opposite occurs in the extrovert. Thus, the introvert leader needs to schedule downtime for reflection.

It might not be easy to find the time. Just remember, not taking the time to recharge is an inevitable step toward irritability and burn out. The result is productivity and creativity will take a nose-dive. Often times you will find taking the time out now will save you time in the future.

Complicating this issue is that many introverts aren't big talkers. As a result, extroverted coworkers and subordinates may mistake silence and solitude for rejection or withdrawal. This is easily avoided by communicating your need for downtime, simply and elegantly, without stepping on anyone's toes. In her paper, "The Power of Introversion," Sivy recommends these simple yet effective scripts for letting others know what is going on:

"I need some time to reflect on your comments or ideas."

"There's nothing wrong; I am processing my thoughts about this. Can we talk later?"

It's also crucial for effective leaders to make time to meet with team members, either one-on-one or in small groups, for collaboration and for relaying relevant information. Although it might seem counter-intuitive, keep in mind what others need as well as what you need.

Loving and accepting your power

In this extroverted world, introverts might feel pressured to change their personalities in an attempt to appear more extroverted and gain approval. However, Rosenberg warns, "When we work in our style it feeds us; when we work outside of our style, it drains us." Pretending to be something you're not can lead to problems down the road. Experts agree that accepting and loving your own introvert power can be more beneficial than conforming to society's notion of what a leader acts like.

It may very well be an extrovert's world, but introverts are quietly and powerfully forging their own way to propel their businesses to heights only few could imagine. Perhaps you will be the next introverted leader to redefine the role and reach beyond your potential.

About the author:

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