

The Introverted Leader

Thriving in the extroverted business world

By Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, Ph.D.

In today's extroverted business world, introverts can feel ignored, overlooked, and misunderstood. In fact, according to my research—a two-and-a-half year national study of introverted professionals—four out of five introverts say extroverts are more likely to get ahead in their workplace. What's more, over 40 percent say they would like to change their introverted tendencies, but don't know where or how to begin.

The *good* news? Introversion can be managed. There is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but with time and practice, introverted pros can learn to build on their quiet strength and succeed.

What is introversion, anyway?

Introverts may be less noisy at work, but by all accounts they outnumber extroverts. Even many high-powered executives—a full 40 percent—describe themselves as introverts, including Microsoft's Bill Gates and uber-investor Warren Buffett. Odds are, President Obama is an introvert as well. *But what is introversion, anyway?*

Unlike shyness, a product of anxiety or fear in social settings, introversion is a key part of personality—a hardwired orientation—and may be best defined by several characteristic behaviors. Introverts process information internally, keep personal matters private, and avoid showing emotion. Other defining behaviors:

▶ **Seek solitude**

Introverts need and want to spend time alone. They often suffer from people exhaustion and must retreat to recharge their batteries. At work, they prefer quiet, private spaces and like to handle projects on their own or with a small group.

▶ **Think first, talk later**

Introverts think before they speak. Even in casual watercooler chats, they consider others' comments carefully and pause and reflect before responding. They dislike interruptions, especially when they are thinking things through.

▶ **Focus on depth**

Introverts seek depth over breadth. They like to dig deep—delving into issues and ideas before moving on to new ones. They are drawn to meaningful conversations—not superficial chit-chat—and know how to tune in and listen to others.

▶ **Let their fingers do the talking**

Introverts prefer writing to talking. On the job, they opt for e-mail over the telephone and stop by only when necessary. Averse to excessive conversation, many gravitate toward social networking Web sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter.

▶ **Exhibit calmness**

Introverts are usually quiet, reserved, and low-key. Unlike extroverts, they have no desire to be the center of attention, preferring to fly below the radar instead. Even in heated conversations or circumstances, they tend to stay calm—at least on the outside—and speak softly and slowly.

The hard realities

“It’s not easy being green,” laments Muppet Kermit the Frog. Same goes for being introverted in an extroverted business culture. With their appetite for talk and attention, extroverts dominate the workplace. Meanwhile, introverts—with their quiet smarts and unsung successes—sit on the professional sidelines. Some hard realities faced by introverted pros:

▶ **People exhaustion**

Introverts can experience an assortment of ailments at work—headaches, backaches, stomachaches, and more—yet feel fine off the job. This mind-body response to stress can result from a wide range of factors. The chief culprit: people exhaustion.

▶ **Project overload**

Introverts tend to have difficulty saying no and find it equally hard to ask for help or direction. As a result, they frequently feel overloaded with projects and deadlines—hurting their on-the-job performance and work-life balance.

▶ **Underselling**

Introverts typically stay mum about their accomplishments—seeming to abide by the old Southern adage, “Don’t brag on yourself.” Yet today careers are made or broken by what others know about a person’s skills and potential. Introverts, therefore, can miss out on promotions or plum assignments simply because they don’t sell themselves.

▶ **Unheard ideas**

Introverts often have great ideas that go unheard. In group settings, they may show up with smart solutions, yet can’t seem to find an opening in which to share them. Even in one-on-one conversations—especially with talkers—they have trouble interjecting their ideas and being heard.

▶ **Failure to “play the game”**

Introverts routinely retreat from office politics. Sure, politics can be nasty, but much of the game is natural and necessary, particularly for building relationships up and down an organization. Introverts, with their desire to be low-key, often fail to sniff out important politicking opportunities and wind up watching their extroverted colleagues get ahead.

Onward—and upward

There is no magic bullet for managing your introversion. But in today’s noisy business world and workplace, you can learn how to thrive. The goal is not changing your personality or natural work style, but embracing and expanding *who you are*. As an ongoing framework, follow the “4 P’s”: preparation (devising game plans);

presence (focusing on the moment); push (stretching and growing); and practice (rehearsing and refining new skills). Seven practical tips for getting started:

▶ **Have a game plan.**

Rather than wing it on the people part of your job, have a game plan. Prepare for high-stakes meetings and conversations—anticipating questions and rehearsing your responses. Fact is, just as you strategize for key projects and tasks, you need to plan ahead for connecting with people—and taking regular timeouts to refuel your energy.

▶ **Communicate early and often.**

It's easy for introverts to be out of sight—and out of mind. So, take the initiative in sharing information—communicating early and often with higher-ups, team members, and project stakeholders. Don't wait to be asked for updates or news about your accomplishments. Find out what people need to feel confident in you and provide it to them—ahead of time.

▶ **Match the medium to the message.**

Resist the temptation to hide behind e-mail. It may appear to be the easiest or safest channel, but it's not always the right one. For every exchange, match the medium to the message—determining if texting, e-mail, phone, or face-to-face is best. Texting and e-mail may be great for quick exchanges, but they miss the mark in critical high-touch areas, including developing relationships and delivering difficult news.

▶ **Use social networking to set the stage.**

Technology is a great tool for preparing to meet people. Use social networking Web sites such as Facebook and Twitter to set the stage for connecting with others in person at meetings and events. You can introduce yourself, send “news you can use” items, and warm up cold leads—all in a low-key yet friendly way.

▶ **Get your voice in the room.**

Without delay, speak up in meetings and conference calls. Try to make your first comment no more than five minutes into the session. Even a quick question, remark, or paraphrase will do. You need to be seen as a contributor, but the longer you wait, the harder it becomes.

▶ **Stand up to “talkers.”**

Don't be afraid to take on the talkers in group or one-on-one settings. There are several ways to stand up and get a word in edgewise. One simple, sure-fire strategy: hold up your hand, give the stop or timeout signal, and calmly announce, “I'd like to say something.”

▶ **Value humor.**

“A smile is the shortest distance between two people,” mused entertainer Victor Borge. As a reserved, inner-focused contributor, you can overcome perceptions of being standoffish or too serious by smiling, laughing, and having fun now and then. You need not “yuk it up”—just be good-humored.

Finally, *practice, practice, practice*. Learning new skills and behaviors may be uncomfortable at first, but with conscious repetition and refinement, you can manage your introversion—and thrive in the extroverted business world.

Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, Ph.D., is a workplace and careers expert and author of The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength (Berrett-Koehler, \$19.95). Founder and president of AboutYOU, Inc., an Atlanta-based leadership consultancy, she is an executive coach and corporate speaker. Contact her on the Web at aboutyouinc.com and theintrovertedleaderblog.com.

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