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Why and how introverts can excel in leadership positions

Current times see a polarized distinction between the “winners”- those who are able to reach business and financial success, often without any regard for the way they reach it – and the “losers”- the outsiders who are left behind. Values such as kindness, empathy and thoughtfulness are less and less regarded: our leaders are admired for their determined actions and loud voices. It does not look like a good time to be an introvert. In fact, it may not be just so.

Who’s the introvert again?

Introversion is a basic psychological trait, originally identified by Jung, characterized by a larger attention towards the inner self rather than the outside environment and other people. While no one is introvert or extrovert only, as these psychological traits are distributed in a continuous spectrum, we can identify in everyone a predominance of introversion or extroversion. Introverts are typically shy, reserved people who often have difficulties adapting to social situations; they indulge in deep introspection and daydreaming, carefully balancing every option before taking any decision. On the other hand, extroversion is characterized by a stronger interest for one’s environment and social contacts. Extroverts are usually outgoing, talkative, active people who can act aggressively and can take decisions in a matter of seconds.

When we think of the characteristics that make *a good leader* we are instantly led to consider personality traits such as strong charisma, dominance and persuasiveness, which all belong to the extrovert type. A study by Kirkpatrick and Locke demonstrates we associate leadership with traits such as self-confidence, motivation, drive, motivation and cognitive ability, most of which are generally related to extrovert personalities. This view does not belong to common sense only but is shared by the scientific community alike.

Recently, this position has been challenged. Appreciation for introverts as leaders is growing because of their tendency to *deep-thinking* and increased ability to listen, aspects of leadership that are not so evident but just as important as the more obvious ones. In fact, some of the top leaders describe themselves as introverts: the ex-president of the USA,

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Barack Obama, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, Facebook funder Mack Zuckerberg and many more.

Nevertheless, research shows that introverts, who tend to be quiet and passive, are *less likely to emerge* as leaders, both through the traditional selection and promotion channels and through informal unstructured groups. As the 2009 study from Ones and Dilchert reports, while only about 50% of the population is extrovert, almost 96% of managers and executives show extrovert personality traits. What this study actually suggests is that leaders will at some point have to act as extroverts, which does not mean that introverts cannot be leaders. By and large, it is more likely that an introvert leader will recognize the need to act as extrovert rather than the contrary, probably making introverts better leaders.

Introverts do it better

Introverts have characteristics that allow them to outperform extroverts in various leadership situations, such as leading proactive teams or acting as "servant leaders", or *relations-oriented leaders*, who promote the wellbeing and growth of their teams rather than focusing on the immediate completion of the tasks.

- Introverts are usually **better listeners**: they may not express themselves as much as extroverts, but they consider other's comments carefully and reflect before they answer. This is especially important in highly creative environments, where *promotive control*, the leadership style that facilitates dialogue, feedback and support, has been shown to be positively related to performance as it allows opportunities for *job crafting*, that is to say increased autonomy and proactivity in the definition of one's job.
- Introvert leaders are prone to explore new ideas or current issues **in depth**, seeking for meaningful, unexpected solutions. Generally, introverts are usually more creative as they spend more alone time documenting themselves, reflecting upon the matter at hand and carefully balancing every pro and cons of possible solutions. While extroverts then to be reactive, immediately responding to the environment stimuli, introverts tend to be responsive, retreating to come up with an appropriate, well-thought response. On the other hand, the fact that they feel uncomfortable in social situations such as meetings leads them to carefully prepare, plan and rehearse their interventions.
- Finally, introverts often prefer to express themselves through **writing** rather than conversation, which again leads to more articulated and meaningful positions.

What exactly is holding back introverts from taking leadership position?

A recent study by Sparka, Stansmore and O'Connor suggests that introverts believe they

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will not enjoy leadership, avoiding top positions because of *fear* of feeling uncomfortable and *low consideration* of their potential and capabilities. In general, when the study participants anticipated negative emotions such as worry or distress, these became strong barriers to leadership; when it came to introvert participants, this perception became even stronger. In addition, introverts also anticipated less positive emotions, as interest and excitement, in a leadership position, but the mediation of negative emotions was stronger in explaining leadership behaviour.

The good news is that introverts are capable of engaging and enjoying extroverted behaviour: when inspired by their passions or goals, introverts can be outgoing. The issue, as highlighted by research on "*enacted extraversion*", is that they simply overestimate the negative emotions resulting from it.

How to make your workplace introvert-friendly

According to these results, all introverts need to emerge and excel in leadership positions is an environment where they can feel confident and optimistic about their abilities. The worldwide current organizational model is mostly extrovert-oriented, as most of the decisions are taken in **meetings**, which can be an extremely stressful situation for introverts: without previously defined agendas, participants are often asked to discuss, share opinions, take decisions, evaluate and comment on other's positions with little or no preparation. Extroverts excel in this situation, but they do not always have the best answers. This difficulty can be easily overcome with three measures:

1. giving **accurate and detailed information** on what will be discussed and which decisions will be made;
2. structuring **debates** so that small teams can argue the pros and cons of every solution or issue in the agenda, creating a comfortable environment for introverts to speak up;
3. adopting measures to solicit everyone's opinion, such as employing **polling** in decision-making or using anonymous feedback mechanisms as suggestion boxes, or even allocating pre-determined speaking time to those who request it in advance, allowing thus introverts to confidently express their positions, both publicly and privately.

Outside of the meeting setting, an *introvert-friendly workplace* may be obtained through the adoption of a few organizational shifts in addition to the previously mentioned ones. For instance, **job descriptions** should be comprehensive of information on how "social" the job is, so that the potential introvert candidate has realistic expectations and can select beforehand the job that best fits her personality. Furthermore, the organization's **performance appraisal system** should be carefully examined in order to identify evaluation bias that favour extroverts over introverts.

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These little measures can go a long way in creating an inclusive workplace, where not only introverts can express their opinions and emerge as leaders, but more broadly where the *power of the diverse* can truly unfold.

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