

Look inward and lead

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How to be a successful leader if you're an introvert.

AT FIRST, Faith's excited to be selected as director of critical care, but after spending time with her fellow directors she has second thoughts. She's not as outgoing as most other nursing leaders. For example, rather than join colleagues for lunch in the cafeteria, she often retreats to her office to reflect and reenergize. She feels she isn't enough of a people person and doubts her ability to succeed in a leadership role.

Many introspective people share Faith's concerns about taking on leadership responsibilities. Leaders are usually thought of as charismatic and outgoing, so much so that extroverted personality characteristics have become linked to effective leadership. Introverts, who are more inward looking, may find seeing themselves as leaders and assuming leadership roles difficult. In a society that favors extroverts, introverts may be vulnerable to feeling excluded, overlooked, and misunderstood.

But many highly respected leaders, past and present, are introverts. In his work on introversion, Aditya Sawdeka notes examples of well-known people who acknowledge being introverted despite their public roles, including Barack Obama, Lady Gaga, Beyonce, and Warren Buffett.

The key is knowing who you are, not trying to be what you are not, and playing to your strengths.

Understanding introversion and extroversion

Introversion is often mistakenly equated with shyness

and withdrawal. But introverted is not the same as shy; it is more accurately described as inward looking. Shyness is often driven by fear and social anxiety; introversion is a preferred approach for interacting with the world.

Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and pioneer of psychology, first described introversion and extroversion. Extroverts draw energy from being with others. They are prone to boredom when by themselves. In contrast, introverts draw energy from quiet reflection. They lose energy when interacting with large groups. These dimensions of the human personality exist on a continuum, with highly extroverted at one end and extremely introverted at the other end. (See *Are you an introvert?*)

Being outgoing is considered "normal" and, therefore, thought desirable in our society. People generally see extroverts as happier, more vibrant, warmer, and more empathic. Many people have a hard time understanding why anyone would need to spend time alone. Like Faith, many introverts grow up believing that there is something wrong with them because they enjoy solitude and may decline opportunities to socialize.

Knowing your strengths

Adam Grant, author and professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, has challenged the assumption that the most effective leaders are extroverts. In his research, he found that introverted leaders are less concerned about power and status, enabling them to work more effectively with proactive employees. Introverted leaders are also more open to new ideas and suggestions, which enables them to maximize their staff's contributions. Other strengths of introverted leaders can include:

- ability to deal with adversity in a calm manner.
- the self-control to avoid impulsiveness.



Are you an introvert?

The following 10 questions can help you determine if you are an introvert.

- 1 Do you need to recharge your batteries after spending time interacting with groups of people?
- 2 Do you believe in thinking first and talking later?
- 3 Do you process ideas in your head before discussing them with others?
- 4 Are you reserved in social situations?
- 5 Are you less emotionally demonstrative compared to other people you know?
- 6 Are you apt to share fewer details of your personal life compared to other people you know?
- 7 Do you prefer writing to talking?
- 8 Do you prefer to focus on depth versus breadth?
- 9 Do you enjoy spending time alone?
- 10 Are you more comfortable in one-to-one relationships than in large groups?

If you answered yes to most of these questions, you are likely an introvert.

- better listening skills.
- understanding of the power of silence.
- higher level of creativity because of their love for the world of ideas.
- ability to maintain focus in a sea of information—in a world of constant online chatter, this can be a vital advantage.
- ability to deal more effectively with complexity and ambiguity.
- a natural inclination to be a self-starter and assume individual responsibility for work.

Introverts may deal more effectively with loneliness that often comes with leadership roles. They are comfortable with themselves and can create their own happiness. Many entrepreneurs acknowledge being introverts. Bill Gates observed that introversion has served him well, enabling him to be comfortable going off for a few days alone to think about challenging problems and dig deep for solutions.

Barriers to success

While introverts like Faith possess qualities that can make them outstanding contributors and potentially great leaders, they also face some hurdles. Being aware of pitfalls can help you overcome them.

If you are introverted, your need for solitude can lead coworkers to think you are aloof, arrogant, and unapproachable. You may become so deeply con-

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sumed in your own thinking that you fail to attend to social niceties. A disinclination to attend social events and seek networking opportunities can limit you socially and professionally.

A reluctance to share your career aspirations with others or a lack of visibility in the organization may cause you to miss out on opportunities. Like many introverts, you may be a highly productive employee, but there is a risk you will take on too much work. A tendency to internalize issues and keep problems to yourself may make managing stress harder for you.

Leadership strategies

Authors such as Susan Cain and Jennifer Kahnweiler offer excellent ideas on how introverts can maximize their potential as leaders.

Declare yourself an introvert

Extroverts have difficulty understanding introversion. They assume that company, especially their own, is always welcome. They cannot imagine why someone would need to be alone. Douglas Conant, the former CEO of Campbell Soup, approached his introversion as he would any complex business challenge. He found that openly declaring himself an introvert to others was liberating. It helped his extroverted colleagues better understand his behavior.

Get your voice heard

Extroverted colleagues can easily dominate meetings where decisions are made. Make your voice heard. Be assertive, open, honest, and direct when expressing your viewpoint. If you are leading the meeting, ask everyone for his or her opinion.

Carve out downtime

Use your energy strategically. Back-to-back meetings during the day and an overscheduled calendar may leave you exhausted. Introverts need to schedule restorative time in their day to re-energize and work alone. The key is to not become so deeply engaged in a project that you lose track of time and ignore other parts of your work that require your presence.

Three principles of success for an introverted leader

1 Understand what it means to be an introvert

Introversion is not the same as shyness. It has to do with how you get energized. Do you feel energized after a quiet walk or reading a book? Or do you thrive on social activity? Do people sustain you or do they drain you? Introverts are separated from extroverts by their response to prolonged social interaction. Extroverts are energized by people; introverts need recovery time.

2 Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses

Introverts sometimes doubt their ability to be effective as leaders. Your actions may create the perception that you are not a team player. Maintaining visibility within an organization or being heard at meetings can be a challenge. However, you may be calm and effective in crisis situations, better focused, more willing to allow colleagues to share the limelight, more self-motivated, and more creative compared to your extroverted colleagues. The same qualities that make you an introvert can provide a pathway to leadership.

3 Play to your strengths but be willing to step out of your comfort zone

Consider a two-fold strategy for successful leadership. Understand your strengths and seek out leadership opportunities that play to them. At the same time, be willing to step out of your comfort zone when your role as a leader demands it. For example, if you need to become more involved in social activity to fulfill your role, read some articles or books on developing interpersonal skills and practice what you read. Introverts have a built-in advantage: They can always go back to their source of energy. It lives inside.

Go outside your comfort zone

To be effective in your work, you'll need to push yourself outside your comfort zone to socialize and engage with colleagues. While you may not highly value a sense of community at the workplace, extroverted colleagues see it as essential. Make the effort to leave your office each day to interact with staff members, patients, and families. Prepare the questions you want to ask beforehand and be prepared to listen. Concentrate on being present to convey authenticity. Consider asking an extroverted colleague to accompany you at social events or when rounding on units to help break the ice.

If someone points out, or you identify, a weakness in your interpersonal skills, work to improve it. Plentiful information is available online and in print to help you. Developing strong interpersonal skills will always be an important part of leadership. Once you take a leadership role, expectations change. Leaders are expected to be visible. You cannot lead from behind your desk.

Play to your strengths

Don't hesitate to seek out a leadership opportunity. As an introvert, you may thrive in:

- a complex, challenging situation; it may offer you the chance to think deeply about problems and serve as a catalyst for change within an organization
- a role that requires you to serve as a go-to expert within a workgroup; your innate thoughtfulness may give you a natural ability to develop expertise
- a role that requires strong writing skills
- a role that offers opportunities to build close one-

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to-one relationships.

You may find that you are less comfortable in leadership roles that require extensive socialization with larger groups.

Last thought

Introverts like Faith can be successful nurse leaders. The key to your success: know who you are and embrace your strengths as an introvert.

Don't try to be someone you're not, but be willing to push yourself outside your comfort zone when your responsibilities as a leader demand it. (See *Three principles of success for an introverted leader.*) ★

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