

The Introverted Leader

BUILDING ON
YOUR QUIET STRENGTH

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An Excerpt From

***The Introverted Leader:
Building on Your Quiet Strength***

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Preface

You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts; And when you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips, and sound is a diversion and a past time.¹

Kahlil Gibran

Someone said that work would be great, if it weren't for the people. Who hasn't felt that way at one time or another? Yet, workplace success is based on more than how much you know. It is equally about relationships with people. If you are an extrovert you are probably stimulated by the interpersonal interactions that build these relationships. However, in our outgoing, Type-A business culture, if you are an introvert who is more quiet in temperament, you may feel excluded, overlooked, or misunderstood. Your reticence might be mistaken for reluctance, arrogance, or even lack of intelligence. And perhaps you have found that your inconsistent people skills have caused your career to plateau. You're losing out on the career benefits that workplace relationships can provide. Your organization is also losing out on tremendous talent and expertise.

Yet, there is good news. Introversion can be managed. You can capitalize on a quieter, reflective demeanor and still adapt to a culture that rewards being "out there" and on stage. This book will show you how millions of people have succeeded in doing just that.

Who This Book Is For

Are you a mid-level or aspiring manager who has to influence others to get results? Perhaps you lead projects. Maybe you desire more responsibility and challenge in your role as an individual contributor. If you are a professional in a technical, scientific, or financial field, there is a strong likelihood that you have a quieter temperament. It is also probable that you have not been exposed to focused training in people skills like your counterparts in sales or management. You may be a woman in a male-dominated field or someone in a company who faces particular challenges in being heard.

You may view yourself as occasionally introverted. There are degrees of introversion, and occasions when even the “talkers” among us may be at a loss as to how to handle uncomfortable people situations. As a manager, of people or projects, it is likely you have introverts on your team. This book will help you learn to understand them, coach them, and maximize their contributions.

My Background

I confess. I am a strong extrovert. I talk out my thoughts, and I am the person many of you reading this may find “crazy making” at times. So, you ask, what would this “babbling brook” know about the world of introverts? Let me share a little background.

I have been a corporate consultant, speaker, and coach for more than 25 years. I have trained and counseled thousands of leaders across many organizations, and I have found introverted clients particularly receptive to the tools I share in this book. Many have followed up with specific examples of how they used techniques to get tangible results for themselves and their organizations. I am all for results.

As workplace columnist for *AARP The Magazine*, *The Society of Human Resources*, and the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* blog I have done extensive research on leadership success, including introverted leaders. In addition, the comments and questions I have received from readers deepened my understanding of the challenges and successes of quieter leaders.

And, finally, through my 35-year marriage to an introverted leader, I have developed empathy and admiration. I have learned to gain an appreciation for my husband Bill's quiet demeanor and his view of life. Looking through that lens has taught me so much about the value of quiet reflection.

The Approach

Tom was referred to me by a colleague. He was a twenty-something marketing manager who was interested in my research. He made a suggestion that I took to heart: "Don't listen to some loud mouth who is going to tell you to be like him because they don't know what it is like to be like me, do they? Motivational speaking is a billion dollar industry built on confident and extroverted people molding people into thinking they are wrong for being the way they are. Get advice from people who have dealt with the same problem." I decided to take his advice, so I personally interviewed and collected data from more than 100 introverted professionals across a wide range of industries. Some of these interviews were structured with set questions. Others were hallway conversations in client companies or conversations with interested airplane seatmates.

Wearing my journalist's hat, I observed team meetings, seminar discussions, and coaching sessions, looking for specific examples of how quieter leaders took charge. I filled notebooks with observations that were then incorporated into this book.

I found that posing specific questions on social networking sites also yielded rich responses. Many people preferred to communicate with me in writing. Their advice was rich and varied. *The Introverted Leader* also draws upon the unique perspectives of leading academics and business thinkers.

Book Overview

This book organizes information from all of these sources into a practical structure. Chapter 1, Four Key Challenges, lays out the challenges you face when you let yourself be ruled by ineffective introvert

behaviors. You will learn how (1) stress, (2) perception gaps, (3) derailed careers, and (4) invisibility are significant hazards along the path to leadership.

Chapter 2, *Unlocking Success: The 4 P's Process*, describes a focused and practical method for breaking out of the status quo and effectively managing your introversion. The 4 P's Process (preparation, presence, push, and practice) serves as a road map to help you plan your strategy in a wide variety of leadership scenarios. You will also be able to use the 4 P's as a tool to continuously improve by analyzing what has been effective and not effective in your actions.

You will learn how (1) preparation means that you have a game plan and take the steps you need to prepare for people interactions; (2) presence means that you are able to fully be in the moment and “where your feet are”; (3) push means that you take deliberate risks and stretch yourself out of your comfort zone; and (4) practice means you continue to make these impact behaviors a part of your standing repertoire.

Chapter 3, *Strengths and Soft Spots*, includes a revealing quiz called *The Introverted Leadership Skills Quiz* that will help you recognize the behaviors you have already mastered in becoming an introverted leader. It will also assist you in zeroing in on the areas you may need to strengthen in order to fire on all cylinders. In addition, the quiz can serve as a baseline to assess your progress and a possible springboard for coaching discussions with your manager.

In chapters 4 through 9 you will learn how to apply the steps of the 4 P's Process to handle many typical work scenarios. A multitude of tools, specific examples, and practical tips will show you how to do this. Chapter 4, *Public Speaking*, will teach you how to gain mastery over presenting to groups and individuals. Chapter 5, *Managing and Leading*, shares many secrets from successful introverted leaders who have learned how to gain respect as leaders. Chapter 6, *Heading Up Projects*, focuses on the people side of project management. You will learn how introverted leaders can motivate the team to achieve strong results. Chapter 7, *Managing Up*, will prepare you with templates and tools to strengthen your partnership with your boss. Chapter 8, *The Meeting Game*, will take your

involvement in meetings to a whole new level as you learn a multitude of ways to get your voice heard in the room.

Chapter 9, *Building Relationships*, addresses networking both in and outside the organization. As in the previous chapters, you will learn to capitalize on your introverted temperament to be both highly focused and creative in this essential leadership endeavor.

Chapter 10, *Wins for You and Your Organization*, addresses the many benefits both you and your organization will achieve when you build on your strengths and step out from behind the shadows.

Chapter 11, *Going Forward*, focuses on your next steps. Learning to moderate behaviors is certainly not a one-time event but a process that, like a fine wine, mellows and ages over time. You will find a development plan to help you zero in on achievable actions for now and the future as you adopt expanding leadership roles.

In addition to using the book, I encourage you to visit the Web site www.theintrovertedleaderblog.com. There you can download resources and connect with members of the introverted leader community in a fruitful, ongoing dialogue.

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 Meyers-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.

Four Key Challenges

“It’s not easy being green,” sang Kermit the Frog on *The Muppet Show*. Substitute “introverted” for “green.” Although you may have buzzed along pretty smoothly in your role as individual contributor, once you decide to move your career forward, or after your organization taps you for more responsibility, life can become more complex if you are withdrawn.

Let’s look at key challenges that can result from being an introverted professional.

The Challenges

Understanding what challenges can occur in your life as an introvert at work helps you realize what behaviors to change. We tend to make adjustments when the pain of doing things the same old way is great enough. When we encounter roadblocks while driving, we are forced to find alternative routes. Similarly, these workplace barriers can be enlightening. A number of my introverted coaching clients have had light bulbs go off when we have discussed the following four common challenges. Giving a name to what they’ve experienced often gives them an impetus to change. Let’s look at the four major categories of challenges introverted leaders encounter at work. They are (1) stress, (2) perception gaps, (3) career derailers, and (4) invisibility.

I. Stress

Work overload, physical symptoms, and people exhaustion are all negative consequences that can hit introverts hard in the workplace. Here are some examples of each.

Work Overload

Recently out of school, a woman I know named Mady landed a plum job as a staff accountant at a large health care organization. She was looking forward to learning a lot and using her education. The honeymoon period of the first few weeks flew by, and her manager was pleased with her work. Unfortunately, a few weeks later, the picture had changed dramatically. Mady was getting into the office at 6:30 A.M. and leaving after 7:00 P.M. Her schedule was causing friction with her boyfriend and friends.

What happened in the interim? Mady had been pulled onto a few projects, and word got out that she was a sharp employee. When asked to join a project, she didn't say no. Afraid that people would think she was not capable or willing, Mady ended up drowning in a sea of projects and deadlines. In the end, she struggled to deliver on all her commitments. Her boss was not even aware of all her work, or he might have put the brakes on his overeager employee.

Have you ever found yourself unable to say no to a work request? For introverted people, lacking the self-assurance and confidence to assert themselves in social situations can affect not only their performance, but even more importantly, their health. It is not as much stress (which will always be there) but our reaction to it that causes problems. Mady's inability to set limits and ask for some direction from her boss created work/life balance issues that were destined to get worse.

Physical Symptoms

At a recent seminar, I was talking with two withdrawn men who both acknowledged that they stuttered at meetings when called on to speak. In more relaxed surroundings, like the class, they were fine, but in this work situation they froze up. These participants illustrated that there is most likely a mind-body connection to stress. Symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, and back problems can also be correlated with stress reactions. Even the awkwardness that introverted people sometimes feel with people can take its toll. Holding feelings

inside when we are frustrated makes it highly likely that these types of physical symptoms will occur.

People Exhaustion

It is also common for introverted leaders to become very tired when they are forced to continually be with people. Fatigue and a sense of dread can set in before a social event, and these get-togethers are endured with clenched teeth. One of my introverted colleagues left a convention a day early because of her exhaustion from being around “so many happy, talkative people.” Another asked me if I had heard the joke about the introverted manager who said he would rather stay home with a bad book that he had already read than face one of those awful cocktail receptions.

One of the ways you can tell if you are introverted is that you need time to recharge your batteries and decompress after you spend time with others. The author of *Mars and Venus in the Workplace*, John Gray, PhD, portrays a “cave” as a metaphor for a man’s place of retreat, where he can take a needed break from the opposite sex.¹ Many introverts tell me that a similar type of escape is essential to recover from the utter exhaustion they feel from being surrounded by extroverts.

I have some empathy. I was on a relaxing beach vacation recently when one of the hotel guests caused me to experience a stress reaction. He seemed like a nice guy at the beginning of our conversation. After he did not shut up for the next 45 minutes, and after I tried several times to interject a comment or a question, I felt tired and not heard. This is what I believe introverts must feel daily.

Sometimes, being surprised can create stress. Paul Otte, an IT project manager at IBM with more than 15 years of experience, said that he experiences stress when he is called on to respond quickly and does not have an answer. He described it as feeling “naked.” He worries most about the people he calls “snipers,” the folks who use some esoteric piece of data to discredit his point.

Forcing yourself to play a visible management role can also take its toll. Being outgoing, conversational, and engaged is something that Sid Milstein does as a leader. He also finds that he can become

mentally exhausted from the role playing, not the discussion. Sid told me, “It can take the form of a headache, the need to be alone to reflect upon ‘what I’ve just done.’ It’s no different than what I might feel after a physical workout. . . . Of course in the continuing acting role, I have to disguise this from everyone else, which keeps my stress level up.” Adapting their behavior can become easier over time, but it will never be their natural style. Introverted professionals have to be self-aware on a continual basis, and this takes a great deal of energy.

2. Perception Gaps

There are often key differences between how we think people see us and how they actually do. You have heard the phrase, “perception is reality.” In his book *Cracking the Code*, Thom Hartman says, “The meaning of communication is the response you get.”² It can be helpful for introverted professionals to understand the nature and results of this disconnect between their intended message and what comes across. Negative impressions, and possibly being labeled as slow thinkers or as having no backbone are some of the negative perceptions that introverted leaders may face. Let’s take a closer look at each of these.

Negative Impressions

Introverted people do not intend to create a negative impression. Yet, they often do with others who are more outgoing. They want to be seen as competent and confident in their work environments, but along the way, this can get derailed. Their silence and sparse words can create the impression that they are withdrawn, gruff, insensitive, or even rude. This prompts others to ask, “What’s wrong?” when introverts don’t feel that anything is the matter. Jonathon Rauch wrote a terrific article for *The Atlantic Monthly* called “Caring for Your Introvert.”³ He said that introverts are often asked if they are okay, and also told they are too serious. He went on to discuss the disconnect between extroverts and introverts in this way: “Extroverts have little or no grasp of introversion. They assume that company, especially their own, is always welcome. They cannot imagine why

someone would need to be alone; indeed they often take umbrage at the suggestion. As often as I have tried to explain the matter to extroverts, I have never sensed that any of them really understood. They listen for a moment and then go back to barking and yipping. Impressions are formed early on in a relationship and though they don't intend to be seen as angry or curmudgeons, introverted people are often perceived this way. Unfortunately, these impressions tend to stick."

Self-expression can also lead to misunderstandings in others. *The Infinite Mind*, a radio show on public radio, covered the topic of shyness in a recent episode. Though shyness is associated with a lack of confidence and anxiety, and is different from introversion, the following comment is still relevant. One of the subjects interviewed spoke of having a distinctive voice that people commented on: "All of a sudden I knew that they noticed something about me. And I guess it's that feeling of being noticed. It's like people getting the wrong impression. People don't really understand who you are because your outside presents something very different. But inside, you could be really strong, very aware, and very bright, and . . . because you are a little bit introverted or intimidated you come across as this fumbling, kind of high-voiced silly girl."⁴

In the absence of words, sinister assumptions can be formed by others and projected onto the quiet person. One introvert found that others on his IT work team thought that he was plotting some scheme and manipulating the boss. Why? It was simply because he was quiet at meetings. The office politics became pretty ugly, and misunderstandings accumulated from this wrong perception.

Slow Thinkers

Another misperception is that introverted people lack quick thinking. If they don't share their ideas *immediately* they are not seen as contributors. Martin Schmidler, vice president, information technology at a food service distribution company, shared comments representative of many introverts. "I like to listen, hear all the facts, all the different points of view and I like to process them." He went on to say that often, pausing to offer a carefully considered response

can be perceived as either not being quick enough, being a procrastinator, or even being indecisive, a major faux pas for those on the leadership track. People who listen first are not seen as not being able to think on their feet, another major liability in many organizational cultures. Martin, by the way, did learn to close this perception gap by taking deliberate steps addressed later in this chapter.

No Backbone

Quieter people can also be seen as weak, with no backbone, especially when many leaders around them adopt more aggressive stances. Others are jockeying for position, and when the introvert does not push back, the more reserved personality can easily be manipulated. As a result, you may get assigned roles you didn't choose and, like Mady, who was described earlier, an overloaded plate. Unless you develop more assertive behaviors, this pattern continues and can make it very difficult for you as a quieter individual to be seen as a strong leader.

3. Career Derailers

It requires more than technical or subject matter expertise to get people motivated and achieve results. Interpersonal skills are key as you take on leadership roles. When you are achieving results for your company *and* developing relationships, career possibilities open up both in your organization and in your field. Introverted people inevitably hit a wall in their careers when they don't attend to the relationships side of the equation. These "soft skills," as they used to be called, are now taking center stage as necessary competencies. Hence, there has been tremendous investment in training and coaching for professionals, and leadership development programs have mushroomed in recent years. Some career derailers are the undersell, missed connections, avoiding politics, and working harder not smarter.

The Undersell

Careers are made or broken by what people know about you and your accomplishments. Southerners in the United States have an

expression, “Don’t brag on yourself.” In other words, be humble. Unfortunately, the world of work doesn’t go by these rules. You can’t expect people to be mind readers, so by not highlighting the results you have obtained, you can stay stagnant in your role. Other missed opportunities may include promotions, choice assignments, and opportunities to do something that is new and different. Sid Milstein said, “An extrovert might easily sell themselves in a favorable light, but I keep waiting for that phone call.”

If you don’t talk about what you do, people don’t know about either your skills or your potential. So, if you don’t “brag on yourself,” you can miss out on the challenging job and project opportunities that occur in fluid organizational structures.

When project leaders are looking for the right person to take charge, you are not on their radar screen. It can also have serious consequences for your career progression. Not selling themselves was an often-lamented regret of the people I interviewed for this book.

Missed Connections

“It is not what you know, but who you know,” goes the old expression. This still rings true today. Mary Toland said a missed opportunity to build relationships earlier in her career greatly impacted her career progression. She didn’t realize until later that it would make sense to stop in and chat with her bosses about their families, sports, etc. In her company’s culture, it was important to forge relationships to further your career.

People hire people they know and trust. I joined one organization that discouraged the exchanging of business cards at events. Members got to know each other through working together on projects in the community. From that type of real experience of interacting with each other, you learned whether you wanted to engage in business together. Today, I consider some of these folks (a number of introverts among them) key members of my own personal advisory board.

If you are hesitant to branch out of your comfort zone, and fail to expand your network in and out of work, you will never forge the kind of relationships that make you a visible and valuable asset to your organization and profession.

Avoiding Politics

Most people think of office politics as a negative, nasty game. Gossip, rumors, innuendo, and backstabbing are certainly part of the mix. For quieter people, laying low can keep them focused and more productive, especially during times of crisis. However, much of the political game is natural and not necessarily negative.

Politics (the good kind) is also about putting political capital in the bank, where it builds with compound interest over time. This means connecting with the right people, who are not necessarily the most senior members of the organization, but are often the people others respect and who are well-networked themselves. Making deposits of this political capital involves spending time with these people, finding out their critical priorities and needs, and determining where the organization is headed. Learning more about the culture from your network helps you to craft your goals.

Working Harder Not Smarter

I teach management seminars for mid-level and aspiring leaders. The seminars, which cover communication and business skills, are typically filled with professionals who deal with data or information. People come from areas such as accounting, finance, engineering, and IT. They are researching pharmaceuticals that may save members of my family. They are planning bridges and helping their companies stay in compliance with complex regulations. Most are high performers, or their companies would not be investing thousands of dollars a year in their development. They are not slackers. However, many lack critical people skills.

Are you occasionally getting out of your cube like the extroverts do in order to have these critical conversations? Many introverts avoid these relationship-building discussions altogether. It is natural to retreat to your office, or if you are telecommuting, to rarely check in. Avoiding people and working hard at your job can be effective for a while. In many fast-paced organizations, where lots of interpersonal interaction is required, it can take so much energy that little is left to devote to the job. Being an “actor,” as many introverts

have expressed, takes everything you have. As one person told me, “It is painful sometimes to put on a happy face.” We only have a certain amount of energy. If you don’t learn effective ways of getting comfortable being with people, then you come to work geared up for battle, tensed up, and just trying to survive the day. With this approach, it is highly likely that your performance will be affected. When the next promotion, or new and exciting assignment, comes around, it very well may not be yours.

4. Invisibility

Not being front and center is another trait that can create problems for introverts in the workplace. The key impacts of being invisible are lost opportunities, ideas not heard, and lost personal power.

Lost Opportunities

The “shiny” extroverted person will often get the resources he needs to do his job while his more introverted co-worker sits back in frustration. This may happen even if the extroverted person is all show. Laurie Nichols, CEO of a successful nonprofit organization, said, “These people are all fluff and no stuff.” Despite the fact that the introvert is plugging away, he may not be getting the credit for his work. When it comes time for budget allocations, pay raises, or plum assignments, guess who loses out? Management tends to overlook the strengths, capabilities, and accomplishments of the introverted person when these folks are not taking center stage.

One young introverted leader in public relations has noticed that meetings in his company are a place where perceptions are formed. He believes they make a huge difference in your future and thinks that the relationships that are cultivated in this group setting lead to impressions that are formed by higher management. Because he hasn’t been one to “throw it around,” he believes that he is not getting some choice assignments even though he is completing those types of tasks quickly and efficiently. “People know you are there but you are not holding the banner.”

Remaining in the background in these situations is similar to looking for work in a city where you don’t live. When you are out

of sight it is much harder to be “top of mind” of employers. In organizations people forget that you are there. The result can be a demotivating cycle in which you become frustrated from not getting rewards. You are not sure what you need to do, aside from turn your temperament upside down.

Ideas Not Heard

Because introverts tend to be more laid back, their insights, ideas, and solutions can fly under the radar. Introverted clients have often told me that they are unable to find a slot in which to insert their ideas, particularly in group discussions. In one-on-one dialogue with extroverts, they also have a hard time interjecting their comments and being heard. Many scratch their heads and sense that their slower, more deliberate style may be the culprit. They complain that even when they do have a chance to speak up, their ideas are either passed over or co-opted by the more aggressive types on their team.

Laurie Nichols described a frustrating experience that created stress for her and the other quieter individuals in a high-profile leadership program. “The extroverts really dominated the air space every time we got together. . . . It was a dog and pony show for them. Every time I would try to insert myself into the group discussion, I would be interrupted by an extrovert who would then redirect the conversation. . . . I was suffering from introversion.” Fading into the woodwork is an experience many other introverted leaders have highlighted.

Some also complain of their ideas not sticking. A seasoned IT leader at IBM told me that his natural style is to reflect on ideas quietly and then send out an e-mail with his carefully considered responses. He finds that he has not been particularly effective in getting his ideas heard. Even poorly designed proposals that get floated in a public forum seem to have more staying power than those sent out in e-mails later on. In his organization, you are judged more by your verbal than written input.

Lost Personal Power

In addition to reducing influence in corporate discussion and decision making, being invisible can cost personal power and influence.

I recently learned of a particularly frustrating situation that affected an introverted team leader. Apparently, he needed some reporting data from each person on the team by a certain date, and he let them know this via e-mail. When he didn't receive the information, he wrote a nasty e-mail to the team berating them for their lack of compliance, also telling them that they didn't care about the project. Had he checked with the group by phone or in person, he would have found that the system required to obtain the data had broken down and was causing the delay.

E-mail has been called a “multiplier of misunderstandings.” Though e-mail has been a boon for introverts, it can also create numerous disconnects, and sour just the relationships you need to build to succeed as a leader.

For example, as a result of this manager's e-mail follow-up, his team is pretty soured on him, and I suspect he will continue to have a challenging time keeping them on board with the work ahead. By making faulty assumptions about their attitude and lack of compliance, he relinquished any personal power he might have had.

Awareness Helps

The challenges discussed in this chapter can feel daunting at times, but the good news is that you can and will deal with these detours. If you know they lie ahead you can prepare for them and turn potential obstacles into opportunities to change, and then you will become an even stronger leader than you already are.

The next step is taking action. Let's talk about how to turn these challenges into opportunities by using a practical process called the 4 P's.

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