

Quiet Cultivation: Identifying Introverted Leaders

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Bold. Charismatic. Outspoken. Action-Oriented.

For most people, these are often the first words that come up when asked to define a leader. As someone whose work involves identifying and cultivating leaders, you know that it's much more complex than that.

The Shifting Face of Leadership

It's been almost 10 years since Jim Collins published his almost instant classic, "**Good to Great.**" Every chapter has value for businesses of all shapes and sizes, yet one of the findings stands out as particularly important: Level 5 Leadership.

Why is that one so important? Because it provides concrete evidence that **introverts can be extraordinary leaders.**

The typical introvert does not outwardly match the descriptors I mentioned above. Compared to their extroverted counterparts, they tend to be "seen and not heard" and have a quieter presence in the workplace. Because of this, it's easy to overlook a large part of your employee base when identifying potential leaders.

A Level 5 Leader is characterized by Collins and his team as embodying "a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will. They are ambitious, to be sure, but ambitious first and foremost for the company, not themselves."

They also "display compelling modesty, are self-effacing and understated." Other words that describe Level 5 Leaders include quiet, dogged, humble, shy, reserved, modest, gracious, calm, shares or deflects the credit...

Do those words sound familiar?

They should, because **they are often the traits associated with introverts!**

Collins never uses the word "introvert" to describe them; that would be making assumptions about something that is rather complicated. Regardless, his studies show a compelling consistency of introverted traits showing up in Level 5 Leaders.

In fact, he found that those who were more traditionally thought to be CEO material – charismatic, outspoken, ego-centric and self-important – actually did more harm than good to a company. I am NOT going out on a limb to say those folks were all extroverts; that would be a dangerous assumption. It is, however, safe to say that **having a larger-than-life personality does not automatically translate into great leadership.** According to Collins, it's the plow horse – rather than the show horse – that has a more successful track record.

More recent research from 2009 and 2010 has increased awareness about introverts and leadership. Francesca Gino, a Harvard Business School researcher, is advancing the idea that introverts make great leaders. She found that while just 50% of the population demonstrates an extroverted personality, **executive and manager level positions are held disproportionately by extroverts, to the tune of**

96%! She led a team that performed surveys and experiments that highlighted some differences between introvert and extrovert leaders, and how they responded to proactive and passive employees. They found, among other results, that introverts were excellent leaders of proactive employees.

What does this mean for you?

You can strengthen your organization's culture, teams and leadership pipeline by intentionally reaching out to the quieter crowd.

To identify introverts who may be outstanding leaders, watch for employees who exhibit these qualities:

- **Thoughtfulness:** Introverts process internally and generally make a decision and take action only after sufficient consideration. They think before they speak, rather than thinking by speaking.
- **Calm, Cool, Collected:** Because of their thoughtful nature, introverts tend to have a calming energy. This contributes to an atmosphere of trust and safety for others.
- **Ambition for the company (mission/vision/team), not self:** Being front and center, in the spotlight, is not the typical goal of the introvert. Introverts can and do lead the charge, but the focus is always on the company, rather than self-promotion.
- **Takes responsibility as needed, gives credit when it's due:** Their focus on the job at hand means that introverts don't feel a strong need to claim the credit or displace the blame.
- **Active listening skills:** Introverts are keen observers and like to gather information, process it, then come to a conclusion. Most prefer to listen more than talk.
- **Quiet charisma:** Introverted leaders quietly command the respect of those around them and draw people in. Their magnetism is less polarizing and more team-oriented.

Are these traits the exclusive domain of introverts? Absolutely not; innies and outties can both exhibit these qualities. The point is that **these qualities can be easily overlooked in introverts** who exert their influence behind the scenes and through their more vocal colleagues.

If your programs for leadership development are slanted towards the more obviously outgoing, social and quick-on-their-feet group, consider this: when it's critical that everyone consider themselves a leader, and everyone contributes to the bottom line, don't you want to be sure that introverts have the same opportunities?

I've heard from many introverts who say that in order to be considered for leadership roles, they pushed themselves to project more extroverted qualities. This certainly expanded their comfort zone, but it also led to less job satisfaction and higher burn-out, since they had to act like someone they weren't in order to be accepted.

As we recognize and acknowledge that strong leadership emerges when an individual can be authentic, we'll experience a wider range of leadership styles that will open everyone up to new possibilities.

Beth Buelow is on a mission to create a world where introverts can be wildly successful while still being authentic. She is a professional speaker, coach and trainer. You can reach her at 253.617.0779, Beth@TheIntrovertEntrepreneur.com or www.TheIntrovertEntrepreneur.com

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