

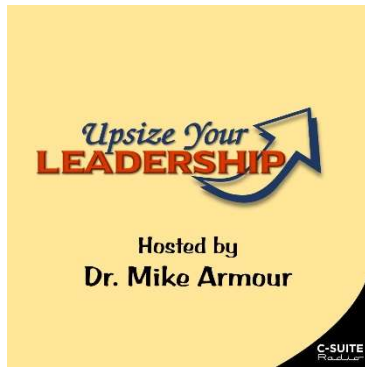
Extraverts and Introverts

Not Always Who You Think They Are

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Today I want to talk about common misconceptions regarding the words “introvert” and “extravert.” As I coach managers and leaders, I find that many of them misunderstand these terms. As a result, they are not always making the wisest decisions in how best to motivate or task their people.

It’s easy to recognize how they came to misunderstand these terms. You see, the way in which we speak of introversion and extraversion in day-to-day speech is a distortion of what these terms actually mean in psychology. As a result, it’s common for people to misidentify a person as an extravert when, according to the psychological definition, the person is in fact an introvert.

Since everyone who looks to you as a manager or leader is either an extravert or an introvert, it’s helpful to be conversant with the true meaning of these words and to develop a deeper understanding of how best to interact, task, and motivate people based on their introverted or extraverted nature. That’s the journey which we undertake with today’s episode as we seek to Upsize Your Leadership.

Extraversion and introversion are two sides of a personality continuum. Some people have a personality which places them near the extreme end of the spectrum, either on the extravert side or the introvert side. We can rightly describe these people as highly extraverted or highly introverted.

Most people are not this fully pronounced in their extraverted or introverted tendencies. They fall somewhere between the extreme ends of the continuum and the midpoint. They blend a mixture extraverted and introverted qualities. To the casual observer, therefore, it’s not always a simple matter to identify someone as either an extravert or an introvert. Many people evidence elements of both. Making this determination is compounded further by the way the words “extravert” and “introvert” are bandied about in casual conversation.

When I’m conducting leadership or management trainings, I will often ask the group to give me a set of words which describe an extravert. In almost every instance the responses will build around things like “energetic,” “out-going,” “self-confident,” “assertive,” “dynamic communicators,” and “enthusiastic.”

Next, I follow up by asking for words which are descriptive of introverts. Here I will get answers such as “quiet,” “reserved,” “shy,” “low-key,” “timid,” “non-assertive,” and “reflective.” These two sets of words pretty much sum up how people use the words “extravert” and “introvert” in day-to-day contexts.

Once the list-building is complete, I will often ask the group to classify some famous male actors known for their “he-man” roles, people like Clint Eastwood, Harrison Ford, George C. Scott, Marlon Brando, Charles Bronson, and Steve McQueen. “Would you classify these actors as extraverts or as introverts?” I ask. The general response is usually, “Extraverts.” After all, these actors made their name in bigger-than-life roles, depicting characters who take bold, dramatic action, often highly physical in nature. They fit the popular mold of what constitutes an extravert.

I then catch everyone a bit by surprise by saying, “In the truest sense of the word – psychologically speaking – all of these men would be classified as introverts.” This then gives me an opportunity to begin drawing the contrast between the psychological meaning of “extravert” and “introvert” and the popular understanding of these terms.

These words were coined for us by Karl Jung, the Swiss psychiatrist who was one of the earliest pioneers of psychotherapy. The people he labeled as extraverts were far more interested in what was going on in the external world than in the internal world of their thoughts, ideas, and contemplation. Their counterparts – the introverts – were by contrast more internally-oriented, although still attuned to what was happening around them.

From a purely psychological standpoint, the difference between extraversion and introversion is determined by the degree to which extensive interaction with people results in a net energy gain for the person or whether it constitutes a net energy drain. Extraverts are actually energized when they are in settings where they interact with lots of people. Demanding, physical exertion has much the same effect on them. They may come away from it tired, but rejuvenated.

For introverts, heavy interpersonal interaction is a net energy drain. It wears them down, especially if it must be maintained for extended periods of time. And they are far less prone to engage in pastime activities which call for intense exertion. Protracted, demanding exertion not only wears them out physically, it tires them emotionally and psychologically.

This means that extraverts find crowds and action-oriented settings invigorating, rejuvenating. For them, getting friends together to take in a fast-paced ball game, is a great way to re-energize. The introvert is more likely to find rejuvenation in quieter settings which allow unhurried time to read, reflect, pursue creative interests, make plans, or think through issues. Introverts thus tend to spend considerable amounts of time alone or working in isolation, which leads to the popular notion that they are shy, timid, or non-assertive.

These contrasting preferences for re-energizing themselves say nothing about whether extraverts or introverts make better leaders. As we shall see, introverts are well represented in top leadership posts whether in corporate life, government, or the non-profit-sector.

For the most part, one simple question will ascertain whether someone is more extraverted or more introverted. The question is this. When your batteries are drained, how do you recharge them? Do you look for opportunities to be around a lot of people in a setting filled with activity? Or do you prefer to do something quieter and slower-paced, choosing activities which you do alone or with only a handful of people?

Extraverts will typically choose the first option, because for them, interacting with a variety of people in very active settings is a net energy gain. Introverts, on the other hand, gain energy from withdrawing from the crowd and recharging their batteries in quieter, more reflective settings. Being alone with their thoughts re-energizes them, as do lengthy, unhurried conversations with intimate friends.

Now, keep in mind, extraversion and introversion are two sides of a continuum. Most of us move back and forth along this continuum. In some situations we are more extraverted or introverted, in other situations less so. If our most natural position on the continuum is near the crossover point between extraversion and introversion, we may be decidedly extraverted in certain circumstances, notably introverted in others.

Saying that someone is an extravert or an introvert is therefore a gross generalization, but a helpful one. In most cases, people spend the bulk of their time on either the extraverted or introverted side of the continuum. Even at that, they may occasionally move to the other side of the continuum and do so effectively.

When we recognize that people can cross back and forth between extraversion and introversion, we can then understand why actors and actresses who may seem extremely extraverted on stage, in movies, or in interviews may in fact be pronounced introverts. At show time, they become quite extraverted. Once their energy is drained, however, they need to retreat to their introverted space to recharge.

In the social circles of Hollywood, these are the renowned on-screen personalities who rarely show up at big gala events. Or they may have a favorite home somewhere in the Tetons or tucked away along a remote coastline, a place where they can regularly retreat to get away from the crowds, the hustle, and the bustle of the entertainment world.

The vast majority of the world's greatest comedians are also introverts. On stage they may be dynamic, take-charge personalities who seem ready to talk about anything and everything in their lives. Off-stage they may be quite private or even something of a loner, a recluse.

If you think about it, the worlds of acting and comedy are a natural fit for introverts who can don an extraverted demeanor at the proper moment. Consider all of the hours that actors must spend alone, learning their lines and mastering the nuances of how these lines will be delivered. Or think of the hours and hours which comedians must spend privately perfecting the timing and inflection of their punch lines. All of this time alone could easily become frustrating and even dispiriting to someone who is by nature highly extraverted.

Jerry Steinfeld, one of the greatest comedians of our day, once made a comment which you could never expect from an extravert. During an interview, he was asked what he enjoyed doing when he was not performing. "A really great day for me," he answered, "is working over a punchline so that I can squeeze it down from nine words to seven words." He realizes that by delivering the punchline more quickly, he is likely to generate a bigger laugh. So for him, this is time well spent. But can you imagine how quickly an extravert would go stir-crazy if told that he or she had to spend the entire day on a task like that?

Other performance professions are also an attractive domain for introverts. Professional speaking is one of these worlds. Even though we think of motivational speakers and keynote personalities as quite extraverted, that's because we usually see them in their performance mode, surrounded by lots of people and building excitement and enthusiasm in the room.

But off-stage, professional speakers live in a world far more attractive to introverts. Ahead of their presentation they may fly alone to a city where they are to speak. They may stay alone in a hotel room. Once their presentation is over, they are again alone in a cab to the airport, where they take another flight alone to their next stop. All of this on top of the amount of time which they must spend alone revising or refining their speech.

I've used these extended examples from acting, comedy, and professional speaking to emphasize how wrong-headed it is to think of introverts as not a natural fit for roles and positions which call for them to be dynamic and energetic before a group. In fact, introverts can be highly successful leaders. When Jim Collins wrote the book *Good to Great*, he studied in detail the work of the CEOs who had taken a good company and turned it into a great company. The vast majority of these people were introverts, with only a handful of exceptions.

A few years ago, I was training about three-dozen managers in an international conglomerate. The CFO to whom they all reported was also part of the training. When we conducted standardized assessments of the managers' individual personalities, the CFO turned out to score very high as an introvert. When this aspect of his personality was revealed, several people around the room insisted that my assessment was surely wrong. In the workplace, the CFO was known for the energy and engagement which he brought to every situation, hour after hour. Him an introvert? No way, his managers thought.

Fortunately for me, the CFO quickly rose to my defense. He looked around the room and asked, "How long have I worked with most of you?" On average it was about five to seven years. "And in all of those years," he continued, "how many of you have ever been invited to my house on a weekend? For that matter, how many social activities with the group have you seen me attend on weekends?" It was quickly apparent that no could readily recall any weekend interaction with him other than an occasional phone call, text, or email.

"Let me tell you why that's the case," he went on. "When I leave this building on Friday afternoon, I am worn out. I'm going to spend the next two days reading a book out by the pool, watching sports on the TV in my den, or taking a long hike or bike ride. I've got to spend the entire weekend recharging my batteries for Monday morning."

The bottom line is, if you are an introvert, don't let that discourage you from stepping into leadership roles. And if you are a manager, don't overlook the potential leadership of your introverted team members.

Having said that, let's examine some things which you should always keep in mind when leading a team of both extraverts and introverts. Extraverts, by their very nature, are likely to be naturals at networking. The unfamiliar does not tend to intimidate them. And they do not hesitate to initiate conversations with people whom they have never met before.

Introverts, too, can network effectively. But they usually have to be more intentional about it. They are rarely naturals at networking. When I'm coaching introverts, I frequently help them master a list of a half-dozen questions which they can readily ask as conversation starters in networking scenarios. I also help them develop techniques for maintaining small talk in social settings. With practice and time, introverts can in fact be quite effective at networking. But whereas the extravert is likely to leave the networking event energized, the introvert is equally likely to leave it feeling somewhat drained.

One noteworthy difference between extraverts and introverts is how they develop clarity on a topic under consideration. For the most part, extraverts gain clarity by talking. It's almost as though they cannot critique the strength and validity of their argument until they hear themselves say it. I've seen this dramatically demonstrated in meetings which I've chaired when I have tossed out a difficult question for consideration.

Almost invariably, an extravert will be the first to speak up. But as extraverts air their views, I've seen something amazing happen. I've actually had extraverts start out by taking a particular position on the question at hand, only to change positions in midstream. On occasion I've had an extravert make a three-minute comment, at the end of which he had assumed an altogether different stance than the one with which he began his comment. As he heard himself articulating his original position, only then did he begin to see the weakness in his argument.

Meanwhile, as the extraverts join in the give-and-take, the introverts are saying to themselves, "If these people would just be quiet for a while, I believe I could have something substantive to offer." Introverts, you see, get clear by reflecting. Talk in the midst of decision-making is a distraction to them.

Because of the introvert's less talkative nature, managers and peers may wrongly conclude that the introverts in the room are disengaged from what's going on. That's not usually the case. They are merely processing their views reflectively rather than talking about them.

Knowing this, I long ago developed a decision-making practice when working with a mixed group of extraverts and introverts. If at all possible, I forego making a final decision while I am in a meeting with the entire group. Instead, I say something to the effect of, "I'm going to make a final decision on this early tomorrow afternoon. By 11 in the morning I want an email from each of you giving me any additional thoughts which you've had on this subject after this meeting."

I can pretty well anticipate that the next morning my message from the extraverts will basically be, "I've not thought of anything further since the meeting." That's because as soon as the meeting was over, they went off and started doing other extraverted things.

The introverts, on the other hand, went back to their office or cubicle and began mulling over the discussion in the meeting. Then they thought about it more in traffic on the way home and again as they were dropping off to sleep. The next morning, they gave it additional thought during their commute to work. And around mid-morning you will receive an email from the introverts offering some insightful thoughts on the topic. They will rarely be able to articulate such depth of thought in the meeting itself, because they are still thinking it through.

Unlike certain other cultures, American culture celebrates action and energy. The American motto, in effect, is "Don't sit there. Do something!" With that cultural bias, we have a natural propensity to celebrate extraverts, people of action and bold undertakings. As a result, calling someone an introvert is rarely seen as a raving compliment.

Yet, introverts are just as crucial to our national, corporate, and organizational success as extraverts. As a leader, capture the unique contributions which each is equipped to make. When you need sustained interpersonal energy for an endeavor, put an extravert in charge. When you need wise, reflective insight, your better choice is probably an introvert.

And be especially aware of your own tendencies. As leaders, extraverts are so eager to get things done and to get everyone involved that they may initiate undertakings without giving them

enough detailed advanced thought. Accordingly, extraverted leaders may find themselves dealing with frequent unintended consequences which a bit more forethought might have foreseen and avoided.

Introverts, on the other hand, must discipline themselves to get out of their thinking and reflection mode and move into a decision-making mode. Otherwise, they are likely to spend excessive amounts of time thinking things through, often to the point that they delay decisions unduly and, in the process, dispirit and discourage their people who are eager for a decision.

Wherever you are on the extraversion to introversion continuum, you have something unique to contribute as a manager or leader. So, too, does every extravert and every introvert on your team.

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