

The Silence of The Introverts:

Using Coaching To Capitalize On Introvert Strengths In The Workplace

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Introduction

Most people have heard the terms “introvert” and “extrovert” but often misunderstand their meanings. Contrary to popular opinion introverts are not necessarily shy, retiring wallflowers, nor are they lacking in social skills. Shyness involves a lack of self-confidence coupled with anxiety. It is something to overcome, while introversion and extroversion are simply personality types. To state it simply introverts find their energy source by going within themselves and extroverts seek theirs among people and the outer world.

About a quarter of the population are introverts. They are often misjudged by the majority, especially within the dynamics of the workplace. In order to flourish introverts have their own particular needs, but they also contribute a unique set of skills and talents that add to the success of any work team.

Introversion and extroversion are concerned with where we get our energy; inside or outside of ourselves. This then influences how and when we communicate, as well as what we communicate about (Karten, 2008).

This paper seeks to examine the role of coaching in the workplace for introverts and the effect it can have on making them better understood and valued. It also seeks to aid the introvert in making him/herself a more productive team player.

How introverts and extroverts differ

It is not difficult to spot an introvert. Apart from the obvious (conducting an assessment or by simply asking), it’s easy to figure out by observation. Introverts tend to think before they talk. They often come across as reserved or private, needing a certain amounts of quiet and solitude to remain at their best. Introversion doesn’t mean being timid or socially inept.

Introverts can do all of the things extroverts do. They may do them for shorter periods of time, however, as constant people contact drains them. Being alone then gives the introvert a chance to recharge his/her batteries. Solitude provides a soothing quiet time to regroup before emerging into an active outer world once again.

Introverts are contemplative and tend towards reflection before action. They need time to internalize and process ideas before coming to an answer or solution. When reaching a final decision, it's generally well thought out and often creative. Additionally, introverts are perceived as quiet, especially as they dislike small talk. Although they tend to stay in the background in large groups, introverts do enjoy being around smaller circles and they excel in one-on-one rapport. They do become quite animated when discussing things that stimulate their interests and passions, in other words topics of substance.

Other strong points include the ability to focus and concentrate on tasks. Introverts are good listeners, are creative, have vivid imaginations, and observe a lot of things that most people miss. Inner strength is their key to success and few introverts worry about what people think of them. Introverts have been leaders throughout history in blazing a trail for human advancement. Some of the most famous introverts include Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin (Kim, 2007).

Introversion may be attributed to a combination of culture, genetics, and upbringing (Jones, 2006). Biologically introverts and extroverts differ in that their neuroimpulses travel along different routes (longer for the introvert) and require different neurotransmitters (Karten, 2008). Extroverts utilize dopamine (which stimulates) and introverts use acetylcholine (more calming). Introverts also have increased brain activity in their frontal lobes. When these areas are stimulated by a solitary activity like problem solving, introspection and complex thinking the individual becomes highly energized. (Kim, 2007).

Unfortunately or not, the world is a sea of extroverts. These are the people who think out loud, need frequent conversation, and have to be surrounded by people and activity to stay energized. Because they are in the majority there is a lot of pressure in the world to be extroverted. Most workplaces are the epitome of extroversion. Consider cubicles, frequent staff meetings, constant interruptions, the necessity for self-promotion, team spirit, networking, and requirements to attend work functions after hours.

The problem lies in the perception. Because they see the exterior and not the inner workings of introvert brains, extroverts often view them negatively. What comes across is aloofness, withholding of information, disinterest in their surroundings and an unwillingness to be part of the gang. For them introverts are too serious, hard to read, detached and even snobbish or unfriendly.

Challenges of introverts in the workplace

Introverts and extroverts are both capable of doing the same important, complex work. The difference lies in the way they approach their tasks. (Karten, 2008). Almost all business advice is written by extroverts for extroverts. We exist in an “in your face” culture, where networking, being “on” and being “out there” are prized. The business world emphasizes extrovert skills (e.g. constant vocal interaction, willingness to self promote, ability to endure the company of a number of people for hours on end) rather than the introspective talents of introverts (Kalvar, 2007).

Introverts have trouble getting recognition because they say less. Quiet is often seen as “not interested” rather than as being in thinking mode. The outgoing people are the ones who out in the crowd regardless of the value of what they say. Being mistakenly seen as non-contributing can make introverts even lose out on career advancement. Their ideas get hijacked by someone who speaks up faster. A more vocal colleague gets the credit for something simply because he has more “presence.” A lot of introverts joke that going to work would be fine if they didn’t have to put up with the people.

As mentioned, introverts are not necessarily shy or anti-social, they are just perceived this way because they live inwardly. As perception is reality, this can make it hard to get recognition at work. Because introverts live in their own heads rather than in the outer sphere of overstimulation (to them), it’s only natural that the greater majority of people think there’s something wrong with being an introvert (Kim, 2007).

Many introverts struggle in large organizations. They work hard yet rarely get their due. Introverts often experience a dynamic similar to women and minorities. They constantly have to work harder to over deliver, as success in the workplace is based not only on what you know and do, but around relationships with people. In other words, their personalities can keep them down (Balzano, 1999). It’s easy to be taken for arrogant or even stupid when preferring the world of thought to that of constant schmoozing. Many face the dilemma of whether to be true to themselves as introverts and risk social alienation, or to pretend to be extroverts and feel like they are defective human beings.

Few resources address professional success from an introvert’s perspective. In order to survive and thrive, introverts need skills and strategies to make sure they are understood, recognized, and appreciated. They also need to be validated as introversion is not something that needs to be fixed. It shouldn’t have to limit anyone. Like an orchestra or a good recipe, a variety of components make the final product (Gelberg, 2008).

Coaching for a productivity

If the introvert/extrovert dynamic poses challenges on the job, the best suggestion is to get together to discuss and work out any differences (Karten, 2006). The first step is to educate people as to the meaning of the two personality types and how they complement each other. Many will be unaware of the true definitions and won't know where they themselves lie on the continuum. The next phase would be to identify the introvert/extrovert personalities in the group in a fun, non-threatening way and then help them to change their perspectives to more positive ones.

Karten (2008) has devised a grid which can be used as a practical team building activity to discover who falls where. The premise is strictly positive. Participants can compare their similarities and differences, and then proceed to discussion questions and activities. These activities would include seeing where the most variability lies, what traits are prevalent in a particular group, the benefits and pitfalls of the dominant results, and whether the discoveries are strengths or challenges to the team.

Karten (2008) also suggests sharing both positive and negative perceptions, then asking participants to think of ways to accommodate each other; asking for what is needed to perform at peak levels. The main point is to use the results as an action tool to foster cooperation and productivity amongst workmates. Teams have made striking improvements in the way they work together through discussions of this kind (Karten, 2006). An accompaniment to the aforementioned exercise would be a coaching sequence for the introverts which incorporates the following steps of: 1) changing perception, 2) perspective turnaround, 3) bringing strengths to the forefront, 4) asking for what's needed, and 5) adding new skills to existing strengths

1.Changing perception: A huge problem for introverts is being perceived negatively. When they're busy thinking instead of interacting they often come across as aloof, unfriendly or as non-contributors. The introverted individual must make an effort to be viewed positively and has to take steps to initiate this change (Karten, 2010). Most of these misperceptions come from the way introverts integrate or don't integrate into their work groups. If they want to transform negative perceptions into positive ones, they need to be willing to make small adjustments in their communication styles. (Karten, 2010).

A typical introvert speaks only after he has carefully thought out his position. Studies confirm that those who speak up in meetings are seen as more competent and gain more influence even if they're not actually adding anything (Hutson, 2009). The best advice to the introvert is to

establish a presence in the room. Sitting by the discussion leader is also helpful. An initial comment should be made soon after the meeting commences (Kahnweiler, 2009). The first 15 minutes is then the time to pay attention and observe. Here's where the advantage lies for quiet people. They listen and find out more, seldom missing out on important nuances and details (Schultz, 2008).

On the work floor in general an introvert can strive to be seen as more of a contributor by sharing information and ideas freely. Nodding, smiling, even frowning along with other facial expressions shows acknowledgement and a willingness to engage (Karten, 2010). Transitioning from small talk, which introverts dislike, to substance talk is also easier when seeking some common interest with extrovert colleagues.

2. *Perspective Turnaround:* Introversion should be seen as a strength. The unique talents introverts offer are needed in any successful organization and the balance they lend is invaluable. The introvert who sees himself as a victim does a disservice to him/herself and to the entire team. When introversion is celebrated a foundation for success is established (Melymuka, 2004).

Surprisingly many individuals in the higher echelons of business are introverts. There seems to be no specific evidence that says extroverts make better leaders than introverts (Kahnweiler, 2009). Studies on introverts and leadership go back to WWII and the Myers- Briggs Type Indicator. Creativity has always been one of the most common traits found. Introverts and closet introverts are found on the highest rungs of the corporate ladder. Four in ten high level executives prove to be introverts and topping the list are Bill Gates and Warren Buffett (Jones, 2006).

3. *Bringing strengths to the forefront:* Introversion provides leverage to reach higher places. Quiet strength, calmness, unwavering concentration and the ability to think deeply while weighing all possible outcomes, are characteristics that superiors look for. The list further includes excellent listening skills, strong one-on-one rapport, and creative problem solving. Most important is that the possessor carries him/herself with confidence and openly shares the assets of introversion.

Many introverts are persistent, patient, highly analytical and listen more than they talk. Their calm demeanor can help steer a team through pressures and challenges. (Melymuka, 2004). An individual builds self-assurance by knowing both his assets and liabilities. This in turn reinforces confidence in his/her value to an employer.

By utilizing the introvert talent of creating good individual rapport, gaining support for creative ideas one person at a time, and managing communication with those higher up the introvert will

place himself in a position to be noticed. It also helps to request frequent informal meetings to solicit regular feedback, to ask for more to do or to learn new skills.

Amongst co-workers the introvert can show himself as thoughtful and reflective rather than as indecisive. As introverts take their time in finalizing decisions they can often be seen as hesitant. One way of dispelling this is to tell colleagues exactly when they can expect an answer on a pending issue which requires thought. For those who participate infrequently at gatherings; making sure to speak at an opportune time with a strong statement will make a positive impact.

4. Ask for what's needed: Introversion can be managed by both the introvert and his/her employer. Even an extroverted manager finds that in creating the right environment, there is no difference between introvert and extrovert. (Kahnweiler, 2009). Being open about his/her own needs helps an introvert become more productive. Talking with a trusted superior to get the right support and accommodation is a move that will position an introvert toward reaching goals. (Schultz, 2009) A manager's tools for best results are knowing the staff, their capabilities, what motivates them, and how to coach them.

Energy means accomplishment. A successful introvert has to manage his energy levels as his mind can tire from too much people contact. It's important to get adequate quiet time outside of work in order to be fully prepared for the day ahead (Karten, 2010). Pacing between people tasks and solitary tasks during work hours is imperative. Introverts will need downtime (meaning solitude) to re-energize. This can be done by spending brief periods in an unused meeting room, wearing sound reducing headphones, or listening to music to provide some distraction. This issue can also be brought before managements --not to complain but to make them aware of what is needed for a more productive environment (Karten, 2010).

Being a team player can mean different things to different people. Those who require solitude to reach the flow are justified in asserting their need for enough space to formulate ideas and therefore contribute most effectively to the team's common goals. It seems that our extroverted culture has a narrow definition of what working as a team means (Dembling, 2010).

Other things to suggest for an introvert-friendly office is for management to become better acquainted with the quieter employees and to recognize their contributions. Additionally they could keep an eye out for problems or grievances and understand that introverts need time to process and reflect on information, preferably quietly. The latter could be aided by passing around a sheet during meetings where people enter ideas or suggestions as they think of them. This could also be collected post meeting. Introverts would then have an opportunity to say what is on their minds without being interrupted or bulldozed by the more loquacious extroverts. .One

last recommendation would be to refrain from asking an introvert “What’s wrong?” when they are quiet or not particularly animated because nothing is.

5. Add new skills to existing strengths: Successful introverts seem to have mastered the ability to act like extroverts. In other words introverts must learn to play the game to get ahead. Savvy introverts have reframed this to see themselves as learning a new skill set rather than as faking it (Jones, 2006.) It helps for introverts to be aware of their colleagues’ personality types then adapt and adjust communication styles depending on what’s needed.

It also helps to partner with an office extrovert and learn something from him/her. Initiating a sense of camaraderie and mutual alliance can be beneficial to both. (Gelberg, 2008). It’s also crucial to be aware of the needs and ways of the office extroverts and give them their space. A large part of living successfully in an extrovert world lies in being open to them and making frequent, smooth transitions between the two spheres.

Conclusion

Today’s hard driving workplace requires all participants to contribute in an active, intense and enterprising style (Balzano, 1999). Introverts are a resource and companies need their unique gifts and talents. The best way to manage and engage introverts is first to understand them and their needs. They are multi-talented people and have much to contribute. A lot can be learned from them. Tapping into their hearts and minds is the key to bringing out their creativity and innovation (Kahnweiler, 2010). Coaching can maximize the contributions an introvert brings to the workplace. This would encompass a broad based program for all employees to better integrate diverse populations with distinct working styles.

Research indicates people learn better, retain more and are positively motivated when supported by regular and frequent coaching. (Agno, 2010). The end product means agreeing on a system where everyone is valued and gets a chance to speak up or share; where everyone is entitled to work in his own fashion rather than under the “one size fits all” regime of yesteryear, and where the only right way to approach tasks is in a style that is true to the individual. The key is learning to make the most of introversion where it provides an advantage and to downplay it when serving as a detriment (Gelberg, 2008).

For the introvert knowing where introvert behavior serves a purpose and where it doesn’t is the cornerstone. Understanding how to adapt and make improvements continues the process. Mastering extrovert skill sets and husbanding energy through the crucial parts of a workday complements the addition of new behaviors discovered through coaching. If introverts appreciate and value themselves and their uniqueness others will, too. Introversion can be used to stand out (Schultz, 2008).

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