

The Introvert's Leadership Toolkit

The Introvert's Survival Guide

One of the most popular and successful non-fiction books of the past few years has been Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, which aims to help introverts claim their power. The success of the book is probably revealed by the premise of the book: one third to one half of the US population is probably introverted and they can feel trapped in a busy, loud, noisy, multi-tasking, and extroverted world.

For those who may need a quick reminder, we derive our notions of introversion and extraversion from Carl Jung's work on personalities in *Psychological Types*. The extrovert is open to the external, objective world and seeks the stimulation of engaging people in that world, drawing energy and inspiration from conversations, actions, and deeds that are done in that world. The introvert is drawn to the inner world of thought, reflection, and feelings, with a tendency to protect herself from what is seen to be excessive stimulation. Correspondingly, the introvert finds that focused work that is done in a deliberate manner is more desirable than the rich array of activities that can engage an extrovert.

No one is exclusively one way or the other and the goal of a leader should not be to be an introvert or an extrovert, but rather to understand what preferences you have as an individual and to bring this knowledge to each leadership challenge. You should also strive to determine what trait is warranted for a given situation. Few people that do work in this area believe that people can or should change their preference, but most believe that smart leaders know when the situation demands action that is outside of preference and that just about everyone is capable of such a response.

One definition of leadership is to do "work with and through other people." Not surprisingly, when we think of many leadership traits such as public communication, engaging direct reports, and creating new partnerships, we strongly associate them with extroverted preferences. Leaders who happen to be introverts need a way to access many of these seemingly extroverted activities as well as deploy their more reflective and quiet skills to their leadership agenda. To do this they need to approach the challenge in four different ways:

1. Accept and celebrate the introverted world.
2. Learn and use the leadership power of introverted ways.
3. Engage as an extrovert when needed.
4. Negotiate standing with an extroverted world.

These are a few tools in my introvert leadership kit that help me access these four dimensions of leadership and survive and even thrive in an extroverted world.

Invite Yourself Into the Conversation

Most introverts in leadership roles know that they are just fine in situations where they have a defined role. Keynote addresses, staff meetings, day-long seminars where they are the presenters are all assignments that introverted leaders are given and master artfully. Where they are less effective is on the fly. An impromptu hallway question with a colleague with whom they are not very close. A large staff meeting where there are many voluble personalities, limited time, and a less than structured agenda. A request for formal comments that comes unexpectedly from a chair. All of these present worst case scenarios for many introverted leaders.

A good friend and colleague has an introverted score as high as mine — over 20. She also serves as a national vice president of a large health plan. She spends most of her week in meetings and, if she is not running the sessions, she is there to make comments. Here is her reality. She is actively engaged with the discussion. She knows she needs to say something. She has an opinion or perspective to offer, but others seem to have addressed the topic adequately already. Her introverted tendency is to sit back and let others carry the conversation, but she cannot afford to do that. In part this is because, as a leader, she needs to let others know that she is informed, engaged, and has thought about these issues. So she invites herself into the conversation, just the way she is invited to give a talk or run a seminar. As a rule, she will not let her voice be later than the third or fourth one heard as the discussion begins. Her contributions might be, “Matt, that is a valuable perspective, thank you for sharing that with us.” This is, of course, a very non-introverted thing to say – because, well, we just don’t say

things like that even if we believe them. But it gets her into the conversation and once her voice has been heard by herself, it is much easier for her to continue to join in as needed.

I do a form of this practice in teaching all the time. If I'm leading a group of 20 or so people and ask a question — an easy question that everyone in the room undoubtedly has an opinion on — I might get a stray extrovert contribution, but mostly I'll get blank stares from smart people. Even extroverts will be quiet in some situations. But if I ask them to share their experience on the same topic in small groups at their table, then I'm met with a cacophonous rush as everyone is sharing everything in their small groups. Back as an assembled group, even the introverts will share publically with everyone. They've invited themselves to the smaller scale conversation, after which it is easier for them to scale.

Tool Practice

At the next meeting that you are not running, make sure that you invite yourself in by hearing yourself make a comment that comes no later the fifth to speak. Observe whether or not you find that making comments is easier afterward. For a big check on this, tell a colleague you trust who is also at the meeting that you are trying to change your interaction style and would appreciate it if they would observe your efforts generally and tell you what they see.

Cultivate the Summarizer Role

Many group discussions feel like a rugby scrum. People are trying to establish a position, win the group over, test an idea, assess the quality of their information or ideas. Often times, discussions end up as just a gaggle of activity that seems to be going nowhere. This dogfight is the last place you want to be with your introverted sensibilities. And here is the great news: you don't need to be. One way I have survived as an introvert is to studiously take on the role of summarizer in chief, a completely self-appointed role. Sometimes I am the chair of the group, and at other times I'm just one of the regulars with no more standing than any member. Often the occasion is the first time a group has gathered and everything is up for definition, and role expectations are unformed and for the taking. Around the table there is all sorts of posturing and positioning, and there is little in which I wish to participate. So, like most introverts, I am happy to watch, listen, and observe. I keep notes for no small reason to signal that I am participating, but really I am drawing a picture or mapping the opinions, positions, understandings, and conclusions that are emerging in front of me. While others are focusing on what they will say next, I'm trying to make sense of what has just been said and relate it to the whole.

At some point, usually about three quarters into the time allotted for the meeting, I feel enfranchised to offer the overview that I've assembled. I start with what it seems to me we agree on, even if there has been no formal vote. I am careful to point out when there is not actual disagreement, just misunderstanding of terms or perspectives

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keeping us all from seeing the common ground. I also take the time to acknowledge issues and questions that have been raised, but are not really a part of this common ground or core discussion. These are important concerns, but need to be addressed in another conversation. Finally, I give the most attention to the genuine disagreements in how we see the problem, opportunity, or solution. I try to keep this as focused and brief as possible, by using only the time I need to get the framework out and then transition to a discussion by others along the lines I have established. The reason for not waiting until the very end is that once the overview is out, there will need to be more group discussion if the framework is really going to stick. Also, I'm not very fixed or possessive about my summary. My goal is to get general engagement with my understanding of the conversation and then ownership from most of group. Letting

others refine my context does just that. This is such a potentially powerful move that when I do this well I am often asked by the chair or the group to put the summary into writing: an introvert's dream assignment.

There are a few things to keep in mind. First, suppress your agenda. Don't forget it, just set it aside while you listen to others. Bringing your ideas up later in the summary when you have had time to fit them with those of others will make them far more likely to see the light of day. Second, while you want to be a little removed from the conversation scrum, you should ask questions to seek information, introduce a summary theme you see emerging, and to test and signal to others that you are actively engaged in the conversation. Third, make seemingly naïve observations when you think others are being naïve. "Oh, I haven't really thought of it, but you two are really saying the same thing, aren't you?" Fourth, view your notes as less of a linear record of what has been said and more of a synthesis of the whole that is unfolding.

With a little practice, those you work with will come to expect this role from you, so you better get really good at providing it.

Tool Practice

Next time you are in a meeting that you are not chairing, be conscious about how you are taking notes on what is being said. Don't record every comment, but listen for themes and positions and draw a map of the discussion. If you have used any sort of mind mapping tools before, this is a great place to apply them. If not, this is a great time to spend a few minutes on line exploring the concept, then applying to your leadership practice.

Called Out By Passion

Leaders bring energy to a group, team, or undertaking. They provide the extra input to drive a change, focus work, and align disparate personalities. This is the sort of work that most introverts would rather leave to others than actually perform themselves. Susan Cain's book addresses this dimension of introverted leadership quite well.

As an introvert, you have observed a group of extroverts enthusiastically engaged in an active discussion that you have concluded is relatively unimportant and probably wondered if it is a good use of time to wrangle over such minutia, settled law, or otherwise unimportant dimension of the work at hand. In fairness, the extroverts are just engaged with their natural way of coming to these conclusions that you may have already reached. The prospect of becoming engaged might feel like a hemorrhage of your precious energy.

So, how do you change your mental framework of this situation? The best prospect for such motivation is to focus on your personal commitment to the larger goal or idea that is the objective of this exchange. True extroverts are motivated to be in the give and take because it is there in front of them. If they happen to be strong extroverts, their engagement can be so strong and unseeing that they may step on more than a few folks in their quest.

I find few things more debilitating than public meetings that create a forum for seemingly endless streams of relatively uninformed opinions usually expressed in a manner that is logically inconsistent with itself. For those appalled by this position, I will remind you that Mr. Jefferson was both our greatest democrat and an elitist. But a few years ago I found myself on a school advisory committee that did act as just such a place for every theory on education to be expressed. It was not my definition of a good time. But an idea did emerge that maybe we had set academic expectations too low and students — being savvy adaptable humans — had figured this out and were racing the adults to the bottom. There were lots of professional pedagogical theories in opposition to what I thought was right; parents by and large did not see the value; the union thought it sounded like more work; and the students had been out to the pasture of low expectations for almost a generation. But this idea captured for me many things that I thought were correct at the core. So before I knew it, I was speaking up at the meetings, reaching out to other like-minded souls, organizing students to demand more, and trying to move the union to hold its professional values

above immediate self interest. I was even going alone to the very community meetings that I found so annoying. And I enjoyed every minute. No one seeing my behavior would have suspected that I had an introverted bone in my body. I had been called out of my usual introversion by my own passion for the idea.

Being too critical of a passionate commitment is not really helpful for an introvert. It is important to detach a bit from the usual internal review process and just go with it. Without this, an introvert's analysis will drown out her passion.

Tool Practice

The next time you are dispirited about some dimension of work and are feeling the need to withdraw effort, take one minute to make a short list of the reasons why the work is important to you. For most introverts, our enthusiasm wanes when there is a lot of noise from others. Arm yourself with your passion for the work and get back in the game.

Let Awareness of Others Drive Connection

As a card-carrying introvert you are naturally drawn to observing all sorts of things, even those other primates that you work with. After an encounter with a group, you are likely to have a storyline that you have thought about for just about every character in the room. Almost always this story stays in your mind. It informs opinions, rightly and wrongly. It guides your actions, sometimes to good outcomes and sometimes to serious missteps. And while you may revise the story as new data emerges, it really is a dialogue with yourself. When it continues in this manner, it remains an unused and undeveloped leadership resource.

To use this resource will require a little focus and a little more courage. The focus part involves you paying attention to one individual and determining where their interests, passions, and concerns lie. The courage part comes when you take that insight to the individual and ask a simple and straightforward question: “You seem concerned about

this part of our work. Can you tell me more about how you see this?” Let’s be honest, introverts would never do this in their natural state. But, if you can bring yourself to proffer the question, you will activate one of the great potential energies of the universe: people like to talk about themselves. Even introverts.

The outcome of this will be an improved understanding of whatever it is that you asked about and a closer bond between you and the individual. Because you were interested in what they said and in them, they will quite naturally think better about you and what you have to offer. This taps into the enormous power of asking questions of others and truly listening to and understanding their answers.

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Tool Practice

To improve your skills in this area, start your practice at the next meeting by just being aware of how you are developing narratives of understanding regarding the conversations and the individuals in the room. Make up the questions that you could easily follow up on. These should be driven by what you are curious about, what seems vague, or what seems of interest to them. Write down two or three questions for each person in the room.

At the following meeting, select one individual and pay special attention to them and their engagement with the conversation. At a break or at the close of the meeting, approach them and try out your question or questions.

After this engagement take a few minutes to critique it. What was challenging to you about this approach? What did you learn from the exchange? What could you do to improve the exchange? Who will you approach next?

Give Them Something Back

Becoming a better questioner involves focus on what is important and the courage to ask the question. It builds an improved relationship between you and the person you engage, because they feel as if we are interested in them — which we are — and we quite naturally have better feelings for people that recognize us in that way. This is the same for introverts and extroverts. We also have a better understanding of the person, how they see a problem or the world, and what they desire in this particular situation.

To build on this relationship, you need to make sure that it has a reciprocal quality. Reciprocity is an essential quality of human interaction. We may give generously and without expectation of anything in return, but when something is given in return the interpersonal tie is made stronger. When what is given is something that has real value to the recipient, the tie is stronger still.

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Because introverts are so focused on the subjective reality inside their head, they aren't as easily engaged by the life going on outside of their thoughts. This is unfortunate because these realities, such as recognition, acknowledgment, gratitude, opportunity, information, inclusion, affection, and understanding are essential currencies by which

humans develop relationships with each other. If the flow of these currencies is one way, the relationship will be weaker than it could become if there is a mutual exchange of qualities that are valued.

I believe that introverts have an advantage in this world of exchange and reciprocity through their mindful understanding of others and what they most desire or need. Their tragic disadvantage is that this understanding is too often passive and never becomes an active engagement, only a passing thought.

The key to taking advantage of exchange and reciprocity is to make it second nature, rather than something that requires a conscious effort. Of course, to make it second nature for introverts will require some intentional work.

Here is some good news. Most humans like the same things. Not everyone, not all the time, and not to the same degree, but generally we all like to be thanked, to be recognized, to understand the context, to have opportunity, to develop new skills, to feel a part of a team, to be made to feel special, to develop closer ties to others, and to be rewarded for good work. Each individual's calculus of what they like most varies. But it is a part of our nature as social beings to desire these things.

Tool Practice

Earlier practices have asked you to focus on individuals with a mind to understand and engage them more skillfully. This practice will ask you to become more mindful of one of the qualities listed above, to understand how you hold the quality, and then practice it throughout the week.

Let's take gratitude as an example. To do this practice, take five minutes before your work week begins (either Sunday evening or early Monday morning) to meditate on gratitude. What does it mean to you? How does it affect you? Are you a grateful person? Would others think so? How do you think others hold gratitude?

Now as the week unfolds, try recognizing your gratitude and sharing it with those who have called it out in you. Do not exaggerate your expressions, but make sure you share them. At the end of each day take another five minutes to think about the times during the day when you expressed gratitude to others as well as those opportunities that were missed.

Keep at this practice until you believe it has changed the way you relate to others. Then move on to another quality of exchange such as development or inclusion and go through the same process.

Influence the Introverted Way

Most of the suggestions above have something to do with how you improve your abilities to influence others as an introvert. This section points out the ways introverts can improve their influence in three directions critical to leadership: up, out, and down.

Influence up. Influencing your supervisor is critical to leadership success and this type of influence requires a conscious and active approach. Introverts are at times too passive in this relationship, always waiting for the boss to initiate the action. This style of leadership leaves introverts less effective. The key to influencing up is to ensure that your boss is aware that you are supportive and loyal of her leadership agenda. It is impossible to be influential in this direction unless this has been established. It is the introvert's responsibility to make sure that his supervisor is aware of this support. Quiet reflection or even general actions will not achieve the end that is needed. If you are not sure

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what your boss would see as supportive actions and deeds, then ask her. "How can I support you on this?" "What would be helpful from me in this situation?" "I could do these things to help this along, what do you think?" These are all good questions to ask the boss in a variety of settings in order for you to know how to be supportive. After a while you should be able to anticipate the actions and positions that will be taken as supportive, so you will not have to ask. But at the beginning, don't guess; ask.

You might be relieved if your boss is also an introvert. While it might be nice that neither of you like much superfluous conversation, it can be dangerous. Two quiet people can create just as much misunderstanding as two chatty people talking over each other. Introverts have a more challenging time engaging when they move outside of the expected behavior for whatever role they happen to be in at the moment. In the situation we are exploring, your job is to lead up. Yes, your boss has responsibilities as well, but as an introvert herself, she may not be as actively engaged as is needed in the situation, so she may not tell you what you should do to be supportive. It is your task to make this conversation happen.

It is also important that the introvert fully understand the direction that the boss wants to pursue, the strategies that are the most important, and the values that are most important to her. If your instinct is to figure this out on your own, forget it. You need to push yourself out of your comfort zone and engage the conversations with your boss that will help you understand these dimensions of the work. No one expects you to know these things without input from up in the organization. Better to be a little pushy to get these questions on the table so an ongoing dialogue can take place, rather than to ignore them and find that your actions and understandings are out of sync with the boss.

To influence out as an introvert, use your mindful listening skills to actively hear what is being said. Look for all of those things that you share.

You also need to **influence out**. Here you can afford to lead with listening. But you will be listening for those understandings, desires, needs, and ambitions of the other

person or group that share common ground. The difficulty here is that the common ground may not sound that way at first. You approach things differently from others. You use different words to describe the same thing. Your priorities are similar, but probably are in a different order.

To influence out as an introvert, use your mindful listening skills to actively hear what is being said. Look for all of those things that you share. While the other person is “selling” their position — something you would never do — you are actively engaged with where you are in agreement.

The next step is the essence of your influence. Your response to the opening salvo from your extroverted potential partner is not to argue with her position or to advance yours, but to share what you have in common. This may be a challenge for you, but it is will be less of a challenge then defending your side or attacking theirs. If you need a mind trick here to give you permission, remember that you are speaking for the common ground, the higher ground. Keep at it with slow steady pressure and your influence will grow.

Remember to check and be critical of what you have concluded to be the common ground. If it seems a lot like your initial position and has not be leavened much by what your partner has been offering, then you have just relabeled your agenda as common ground and that probably will not fly.

The key to **influencing down** is making a commitment to help those people who report to you to be successful. Start with all of those things in the section above about influencing up that you thought your boss should be doing, but now you have to take responsibility for them. Do those things for your people.

But you have to move beyond that by actively engaging them in a development process that both of you commit time and resources to. The best part about committing to the development of others in a wholehearted way is that nothing you can do will more effectively motivate them.

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Moreover, if you actively work with them to carefully create a development plan that accommodates what their position needs, what the company requires, what they would like to develop, and what you see as their needs and your needs, you will have a blueprint for improved performance that is rich with input and far more likely to be effective than the traditional annual review.

As your influence increases with this person, in a curious way, so does their independence. In fact, as they develop you should become more and more certain that they have the technical skills, see the big picture, and have developed a two way bond of trust that ensures that when they are in trouble, they will come to and you will give them lots of freedom, except when more intervention by you is warranted.

This also leads to a situation where — as they become more skilled and independent — the next development step is for you to delegate more work to them. Your myopic to do list just got shorter, and the higher order stuff you never seem to have time for can become a priority.

One of the best things for introverts in having your direct reports have a shared development plan is that you do not need a reason to have the conversation; the plan always gives you a context and a role to play.

Tool Practice

Take one of the dimensions discussed here: up, out, or down. Sit down and do a little audit on what you do to influence others in that direction. Now evaluate how effective you are in that influence. Using the ideas discussed here or others, identify three or four other influencing techniques you could try for the direction you are considering. Now go to a person who is in the position of up, out, or down and ask them for 15 minutes, so you can present your self audit and get their input. It is probably easiest to do this a few times with peers before you try it up or down.

Once you have their input, make a decision about trying something new. Do it for a week or two and every time you are aware that you are doing it, be mindful of the impact. After your experiment, try to assess if you seemed more effective. Even better if there is someone you trust that will see you in many of these settings; tell them you are doing some things to tick up your influence, without telling them what you are doing. Ask if they noticed and, more importantly, what they noticed.

Know Your Limits and Needs

Finally, do not over do it. All of these suggestions are pathways to use your introversion in ways to improve your leadership. But even as introverted strategies, they still will have you more actively engaged and that will be a little bit of a burden. Try a few small experiments. If you get good results, then this will likely energize you to do more.

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