INTROVERTS IN THE WORKPLACE

How to Thrive in an Extroverted World

BY MEGAN MCCLURE

It’s hard for introverts to bring ideas to the table when they’d prefer to hide underneath it, Betsy Haugen, a legislative librarian from Minnesota, told a crowded session at the Summit in Nashville last summer. “Introverts can learn ways of presenting ideas, and managers can learn how to incorporate introverts into the office culture, without too much stress on all involved,” she said.

Haugen was joined in a panel discussion on introverts in the workplace by Matt Gehring, staff coordinator with the Minnesota House Research Department, and legislative librarians Eddie Weeks of Tennessee and Catherine Wusterhausen of Texas.

Too often introverts are thought simply to be shy or anxious people. But introversion is more complex and nuanced than that. It’s a personality trait an estimated 25% to 50% of people are born with. You’ll find a wide range of personalities and characteristics along the introvert-extrovert continuum.

In general, however, introverts prefer calm, quiet environments and space they can call their own. They often enjoy socializing, but find it tiring. While extroverts gain energy by being around groups of people, introverts expend energy in those situations; they gain it back by spending time alone with hobbies, books or long hikes.

Introverts tend to value a few close relationships, and may appear more aloof and harder to get to know than extroverts. Introverts often prefer to learn by observation rather than experience. They tend to process things internally and sometimes need time to think before responding to a question or expressing an opinion. They can also be very creative, with a talent for thinking outside the box.

Finally, introverts tend to do better in jobs that require working independently than in those that require collaboration and teamwork. But in many American workplaces, including legislatures, extroverts are more highly valued and rewarded since teamwork and collaboration are promoted and encouraged.

What’s an introvert to do?

“Let’s face it, most workplaces are built by and for extroverts,” Weeks said. “But we introverts can be valued members of that workplace as well. It just takes us a little longer to contribute, and our contributions might be a little bit quieter, and we might make it awkward for everyone around us.”

Tips for Introverts

• Find the right job for you. Many legislative staff jobs require researching, drafting, editing, indexing or archiving—all introvert-friendly tasks. If you are absolutely miserable in your job, do yourself and your co-workers a favor and look for something else.

• Don’t overcommit. Be mindful of the projects you take on. If you set realistic goals and expectations for yourself, and do your best to meet them, you’ll be more successful. And don’t be afraid to say “no.”

• Do what you do well. Introverts are diligent and focused. Research and prepare for meetings ahead of time, and bring notes on what you want to contribute.

• Plan it out. The main way of coping with the stress of presenting to a group, or just dealing with your day, is preparation.

• Practice, practice, practice. Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.
Delay your response. If you feel put on the spot to speak and you’re not ready to offer an opinion, it’s OK to say, “I need to think that over. Can I get back to you?” Think about your response, weigh the pros and cons or play devil’s advocate. Then write it up in a brilliant email.

Talk early, not often. In meetings, speak up early so you get it out of the way and take the pressure off yourself. Being sparing in your comments can add weight to them.

Tips for Managers
- Know your employees and the personality of your workplace. Understand that introverts often sit back, observe and listen. Identify their strengths and put them into situations that will let them shine. Consider offering written (rather than public) feedback and recognition.
- Arrange the occasional group outing or team-building activity that doesn’t require constant unstructured small talk. Instead of going out for happy hour, attend a trivia night, go bowling, tackle an escape room together—anything that provides natural, not constant, conversation.
- Avoid open floor plans. They are hell for introverts. “We need our own space that we can control,” Wusterhausen said.
- Be wary of meeting fatigue. Provide agendas before meetings; remember, introverts need time to process internally. And keep things moving, as introverts can be drained by drawn-out interactions.
- Keep it respectful. Resist the temptation to create an “us versus them” office culture.
- Know yourself. Are you an extrovert or an introvert? A good manager can be either personality type. Being aware of your own needs and skills will make you more comfortable, authentic and successful in your role.
- Look out for your staff. If you’re an introvert, you might not be inclined to speak up on your own behalf. But you may discover that, as a manager, you have no problem speaking up for your staff. With the focus on someone else, it’s so much easier, Gehring said.

A highly extroverted boss may pressure introverts to conform in ways that create stress and actually hurt employee performance. Likewise, extroverted employees may fail to thrive in a workplace designed around the preferences of a highly introverted boss.

Being aware of the variety of personalities in the workplace can make all the difference in office culture and staff morale, productivity and retention. Now that’s something even an introvert could party about (at least for a little while, and quietly).

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