



# The Introverted Leader



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Oct 16 · 7 min read ★

Hi, my name is Alison and I am an introvert.

I've always considered my introversion to be an asset — a strength that I can leverage and play to. Yet, even with the many publications and books out there about the power of the introvert, this is still a loaded, and often misunderstood, term.

It surprises me the number of people I talk to that think introverts are shy, that we don't like talking to people, that we don't really like people at all. That we quake at the prospect of speaking in public, and that we lack the confidence (or interest) to lead.

In a workplace culture that is predominantly extroverted, introversion is often seen as a stumbling block that must be overcome — especially if we hope to advance to the top of the pyramid. In fact, in a 2006 study by the Harvard Business Review, 65% of senior corporate executives viewed introversion as a barrier to leadership.

However, as a Partner and VP of Strategic Design at BCG Digital Ventures who has been leading large teams for over 15 years, I'm here to tell you that not only can introverts be leaders, we can be pretty darn good ones at that! In fact, four in 10 top executives are introverts, including some of the most successful founders, inventors, investors, and entrepreneurs of our time, such as Marissa Mayer, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, Mark Zuckerberg, and Steven Spielberg.

When people think about those in positions of power, especially in an entrepreneurial setting, they often think of confidence, enthusiasm, and passion as key descriptors. While these are undoubtedly important traits, they are not held exclusively by extroverts — and they are certainly not the *only* traits that make a great leader.

Before I wax poetic about all the wonderful things introverted leaders have to offer, let's take a quick trip back to the early 20th Century when the term was first coined by Carl Jung, the father of analytical psychology.

## The Personality Continuum

According to Jung, there are two main personality types: extroversion and introversion.

An extrovert gets their energy from being around people — and this may all come down to how their brains are wired. Studies have shown that extroverts have more dopamine receptors in their brains than introverts, meaning they need more of it to feel good. So, the more time they spend with others, the more dopamine their brains produce, and the more “rewarded” they feel. As hard as it may be for an introvert like me to understand, extroverts can actually find themselves becoming drained by *too* much alone time. (Is there even such a thing?!)

An introvert, on the other hand, is someone who gets their energy from being alone. Because they don't need dopamine as much as extroverts, introverts don't require (or desire) as much social interaction. In fact, introverts actually rely on a different chemical, called acetylcholine, to feel good — and this is stimulated by turning inward.

When acetylcholine is released, it not only brings pleasant feelings like contentment and relaxation, it also enables the ability to reflect and think deeply for long stretches of time. This doesn't mean introverts are wallflowers who dislike being social; quite the contrary. They just need to recharge their batteries by returning to an inner world once the party is over.



Somewhere between 16–50% of people fall on the introverted side of the continuum, while 50–74% are more extroverted. Most of us have either self-identified as one of these personality types or been labeled by others at some point in our lives. However, many of people actually neither, or both...however you want to look at it. If you find yourself introverted in some situations and extroverted in others, you're most likely an ambivert. Ambiverts fall in the middle of the continuum and represent the vast majority of us.

So, now that we've got our working definitions squared away, let's talk about what makes introverts successful leaders.

### **Characteristics of Successful Introverted Leaders**

Have you ever had a boss who sat quietly in a meeting and took their time to speak up, but when they did, what they had to say was well thought out and insightful? This

person was most likely an introvert.

Extroverts are more prone to speak up in meetings, in part, because they tend to process their thoughts out loud. As we've already established, their brains respond more strongly to "rewards," so hearing others validate their thinking can release that powerful hit of dopamine they're looking for. Introverts, in contrast, learn by listening and take time to work out their thoughts internally before expressing them. Beyond the fact that their brains process rewards differently, introverts also experience more blood flow to the frontal lobes and thalamus, areas which deal with internal processing and problem solving.

For all of these reasons, introverts, even as leaders, are unlikely to dominate the conversation in meetings, and may take longer to contribute to the conversation. However, because introverts are so observant, they are naturally more attuned to emotional cues and sensory details around them and are thus able to synthesize the information they are taking in in actionable, impactful ways. So, when they do chime in, they often use more concrete, precise language, and their thoughts are well-developed and highly valuable.

Because introverts typically have a more reserved demeanor than their extroverted counterparts, they are well equipped to steer their teams in times of stress, grounding and focusing them to the task at hand. They also typically prefer small group settings and one-on-one discussions, which can make them highly effective mentors and coaches.

So, just because your boss may seem quiet at first, or take their time giving you a response, that does not mean they can't also be charismatic and sociable. I don't think many of my colleagues (or anyone who's ever met me for that matter!) would describe me as shy or without passion. But the traits that make introverts great leaders are often misconstrued as a lack of ambition, or ability to connect with and influence others. In an increasingly distracted and rapidly changing world, we need thoughtful, calm leaders who have the capacity for deep focus and observation, and introverts are excellent at doing just that.

## **Strategies for Being a Successful Introverted Leader**

If you're an introvert struggling to translate your skills in an extroverted world, take heart! Here is a list of strategies I've developed to leverage the strength and power of your introverted nature:

- **Listen, observe, and guide:** You may prefer to observe and listen in meetings, so make sure to take notes so you can summarize what you're hearing back to the team and guide the room to a solution. Your strong listening skills are an advantage — use them to help cut through the noise and move to a solution.
- **Respond with input, even if it's later:** You may find it challenging, at times, to break into the conversation, but don't let this hold you back! As you build up your skills, remind yourself to wait for a natural pause in the discussion to make your point. Or, if you need to, craft an email summarizing the actions and adding your voice to the solution.
- **Schedule one-on-one meetings and build relationships:** As an introvert, creating and building relationships in one-on-one settings can help you in situations like large meetings and conferences. You can also use your introvert skills to build empathy and understand the motivations and behaviors of your colleagues.
- **Remember, not all meetings are essential:** Modern work culture is driven around meetings and collaboration, but this is not *always* the most effective way to solve a problem. Sometimes, an email or Slack exchange is really all that's needed. You don't have to blindly accept every calendar invite. Ask yourself if the meeting is really necessary, or if your presence is truly required, and don't be afraid to suggest an alternative. This is not an excuse to blow off meetings, but simply a reminder to be more strategic about those you attend.
- **Take time to recharge:** Don't be afraid to completely switch off your email and take time to recharge. Carving out a little bit of downtime will make you more efficient and effective when you start up again, and sets a good example for your team. You may need a total mental break from work, or simply some alone time to focus on responding to actions. Whatever the case may be, aim for an hour each day that is just for you, and use your Slack or email out of office to mitigate people's expectations about your availability.

- **Communicate your preferred working style:** By having transparent conversations about your preferred working style up front with your peers, teammates, direct reports, and so on, you can head off any misperceptions or miscommunications. Also, having an extroverted ally in meetings who is familiar with your working style can help give you the space you need to make your point.
- **Don't be afraid to say "no" to extracurricular events:** Another fancy dress office party? If you're feeling maxed out and need a break from being around people, remind yourself that you don't have to attend *every* team event outside of work. Focus on JOMO (joy of missing out) rather than FOMO, and you will be much happier.

If you take anything away from this article, it should be this: Don't let being an introvert define you. It can be too easy to see your characteristics as limiting compared to your extroverted colleagues. Figure out what your personal introvert super powers are, and use them!

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