5 Myths about Introverts and Extraverts at Work

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"Raise your hand if you're an introvert."

During two different years, I made this request to more than 200 MBA students at Wharton. In 2011, only a few students raised their hands. In 2013, more than a third of the hands shot up.

Had we accepted a more introverted cohort of students? No. When they filled out confidential surveys, the two classes were identical: on a 1-5 scale, where 1 is extremely introverted and 5 is extremely extraverted, the average was 3.34 in 2011 and 3.39 in 2013.

We had the same number of introverts; students were just more willing to admit it publicly now. When I asked what made them comfortable stepping out of the shadows, the most common answer was Susan Cain's life-altering book ***Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking***. Before reading it, they saw introversion as a liability. As actress Emma Watson (aka Hermione Granger) **laments**, "If you're anything other than an extravert you're made to think there's something wrong with you."

Thanks to Susan Cain's sensational writing, the stigma of introversion is evaporating. People recognize that it comes with strengths, not only vulnerabilities. This awareness is not unique to students; I've seen the same trend with senior executives. Leaders are coming out of the introvert closet in droves.

However, I've noticed that despite growing social and professional acceptance, introverts are still wildly misunderstood. People may be more open about being introverts, but they cling to assumptions that don't stand up to the test of rigorous evidence. It's time to debunk five myths:

Myth 1: "Extraverts get energy from social interaction, whereas introverts get energy from privately reflecting on their thoughts and feelings."

Although many people believe that the above quote from the MBTI's publisher is true, extensive research suggests that it's false:

- Introverts spend about the same amount of time with other people as extraverts, and enjoy it just as much.
- When people are randomly assigned to act extraverted or introverted, extraverts and introverts alike experience greater energy when they talk more.
- Extraverts report the most energy when they're being talkative and assertive—but so do introverts. This is true when people rate their energy during 45 different hours over two weeks or weekly for ten weeks: the energizing hours and weeks for *all of us* are those that involve more active social interaction, regardless of whether we're working, reading, eating, or partying.

This shouldn't be a surprise: social interaction is the spice of life, in part because it satisfies the fundamental human need to belong. So if it's not in where you get your energy, what's the difference between introverts and extraverts?

It's your sensitivity to stimulation. If you're an introvert, you're more prone to being overstimulated by intense or prolonged social interaction—and at that point, reflecting on your thoughts and feelings can help you recharge. But introversion-extraversion is about more than just social interaction. Extraverts crave stimulating activities like skydiving and stimulating beverages sold at Starbucks. Introverts are more likely to retreat to a quiet place, but they're very happy to bring someone else with them.

Except for a raging extravert, because let's be honest, that will be a drain.

Myth 2: Introverts are plagued by public speaking anxiety

In ***Quiet***, Susan Cain described the terror that she faced as an introvert preparing for a speech: "It's 2:00am, I can't sleep, and I want to die. I'm not normally the suicidal type, but this is the night before a big speech, and my mind races with horrifying what-if propositions. What if my mouth dries up and I can't get any words out? What if I bore the audience? What if I throw up on stage?"

We assume that the gift of gab belongs to extraverts, and introverts are doomed to be nervous on stage, but we're wrong. In one study, people rated how anxious they would feel in various public speaking situations. Introverts did anticipate more anxiety than extraverts, but 84% of public speaking anxiety was completely unrelated to introversion-extraversion. Bigger factors were whether they tended to be anxious people in general, thought the audience was kind versus hostile, and feared they would bomb the particular speech.

This mirrors Susan Cain's experience. She tells me that after her year of speaking dangerously, which included a top-viewed TED talk, she underwent a transformation: "Thanks to the miracle of desensitization (exposing yourself in small doses to the thing you fear) and to the great joy of speaking on a subject I'm passionate about, ironically I now have a career as... a public speaker." She now travels the world giving talks to businesses and schools about "how they can harness the talents of the introverted half of their populations. Three years ago this seemed about as likely as taking up a new career as an astronaut."

"Speaking is not an act of extraversion," observes Malcolm Gladwell, another introverted writer who spends plenty of time on stage. "It has nothing to do with extraversion. It's a performance, and many performers are hugely introverted."

Myth 3: Extraverts are better leaders than introverts

Studies show that 96% of leaders and managers report being extraverted. And in a poll, 65% of senior executives said it was a liability for leaders to be introverted, and only 6% saw introversion as an advantage. Extraverts must be better leaders!

Not so fast. Extraverts are more likely to be attracted to and selected for leadership roles, but they're not better leaders than introverts. When I tracked leadership effectiveness with Francesca Gino and Dave Hofmann, we found that extraverts and introverts were equally successful overall—and excelled with different types of employees. When employees were passive, looking for direction from above, units led by extraverts had 16% higher profits. But when employees were proactive, voicing suggestions and improving work processes, units led by extraverts had 14% lower profits. Extraverts had the enthusiasm and assertiveness to get the best out of passive followers, but they hogged the spotlight in ways that stifled the initiative of proactive followers, leaving them discouraged and missing out on their ideas.

Introverted leaders thrive by validating initiative and listening carefully to suggestions from below. Doug Conant, the former CEO of Campbell's Soup, is an introvert who has been celebrated for writing more than 30,000 personalized thank you notes to his employees. It's hard to imagine an extravert doing that. General Charles Krulak, the former commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, introduced himself to me as an introvert too. When Krulak took over as the CEO of a bank, he sat down with his vice presidents and said, "Everyone around this table has forgotten more about banking than I know. And because of that, I'm going to need and seek your advice. I may not always agree with you, and if I don't, I'll let you know why. If you get to a point where you don't feel you can come to me, I've failed as a leader."

Myth 4: Extraverts are better networkers than introverts

Think of the best networker you know, and chances are that you'll conjure up an extravert. It's easier to schmooze when you're outgoing and gregarious, and I've seen introverts cringe when Keith Ferrazzi challenges them to step out of their comfort zone and ***Never Eat Alone***.

Against this backdrop, when doing research for my first book, I was stunned to learn that *Fortune's* best networker was an introverted computer engineer. It's true that extraverts have larger networks—and more Facebook friends. It turns out, though, that great networking isn't about quantity. In the job search, research shows that extraverts engage in more intense networking, but this doesn't translate into more jobs.

Getting a job is about the quality and diversity of the relationships you build, not how the number of people you contact or the number of times you reach out to them. If you stereotype extraverts as charismatic and introverts as aloof, think again. Extraverts do feel more positive emotions than introverts, but they don't always cause *other people to feel those same positive emotions*. Studies of workgroups show that extraverts actually elicit more negative emotions in others, have slightly more difficult relationships with teammates, and start out with higher status but lose it over time. Colleagues report that extraverts are more likely to be overbearing than introverts (it's hard to annoy people if they don't even notice that you exist) and engage in

boisterous behaviors that create high initial expectations but fail to deliver with corresponding contributions.

Plus, it's not uncommon for introverts to be just as comfortable networking as extraverts. This is because shyness is a separate trait: as the psychologist Philip Zimbardo **writes**, it's the tendency to be hesitant and self-conscious when dealing with people who are "emotionally threatening." There are many shy extraverts: they're uncomfortable interacting with strangers, but love going to rock concerts. And plenty of introverts are sociable: they'll strike up a conversation with random people at parties, but get easily overwhelmed by bright lights and loud noises.

Myth 5: Extraverts are better salespeople than introverts

After debunking the first four myths, I like to pose a challenge. If extraverts aren't better at leading or networking, can you identify a domain where they do have a performance advantage? The most common answer was sales: salespeople need to be enthusiastic, gregarious, and assertive. Yet when I looked at **the evidence**, the average correlation between extraversion and sales performance was a whopping zero.

Why? Dan Pink gave me the answer: we forgot to consider the ambiverts in the middle of the spectrum. **Most people are ambiverted** rather than introverted or extraverted: they're quiet in some situations and loud in others, and alternate between seeking the spotlight and staying backstage. Sure enough, when I studied sales revenue, **ambiverts brought in more sales revenue than introverts or extraverts**. Whereas extraverts are prone to dominating the conversation and coming on too strong, and introverts are sometimes too reserved and reluctant to pitch, ambiverts have the flexibility to adapt to the demands of the situation. So if you're an introvert or an extravert, and you want to become better at persuading and influencing, follow the advice in Dan Pink's fascinating book ***To Sell Is Human***: "Get in touch with your inner ambivert."

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Adam Grant is a Wharton professor and the author of ***Give and Take***, a *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller about the hidden power of helping others. Depending on who you ask, he is either a sociable introvert or an ambivert.

*Photo: **emily mucha** / Flickr Creative Commons*

Spelling clarification: both "extrovert" and "extravert" are correct. Psychologists use the latter following the Jungian tradition (which is flawed in many other respects, as I wrote when I **broke up with the MBTI** and explained that **if the MBTI wants me back, she needs to change too**).

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excellent post! thank you for the clarity and the summarised concepts! (from another introvert, who feels identified with all of the above)

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Thank you, Adam. There are strong evidences mentioned in the article that confirmed many if us are ambiverted.

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I am too introverted to relate to any of this...

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Setiap orang mempunyai kelebihan dan kekurangan, dan menjadi seorang Introvert bukan berarti Anda berada di belakang sang Extrovert. Tempat dan Waktu yang mer ntu, mana sifat paling menonjol Anda.

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Introverts may hesitate to raise their hands. A better question may be to ask extroverts to raise their hands and subtract that number from the class size to estimate the number of introverts.

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