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Success Strategies for Introverts and Extraverts

By Sherrie Haynie

Those who understand their own personality preferences can more deftly manage their roles.

There's been a lot of talk recently regarding the differences between introverts and extraverts. Much of this interest has been sparked by Susan Cain's book, "Quiet," which explores the unsung benefits of "introversion," and asserts that society is largely missing out on the contributions, talents, and advantages of this particular disposition. As a consultant for CPP, the publisher of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument, which has been studying differences along the introversion/extraversion dichotomy since the '70s, I concur that in the U.S. we do fail to value the gifts of those with a preference for Introversion—a failure that appears to be getting worse.

It may be helpful to start by defining these terms. Contrary to what many believe, introversion is not synonymous with shyness. Rather, while interacting with people energizes extraverts, introverts are energized by thoughts and reflection. All of this affects how we work, interact, and deal with stress. Consider, for example, something that has been widely touted as of late to be the key to our economic progress: innovation. People with both preferences can be innovative but prefer to go about it in different ways. Introverts tend to innovate in solitude, while extraverts favor collaboration.

As environment also shapes behavior, many introverts learn early to adapt to a culture that favors extraverts. Often introverts describe their interaction with the outside world as a "performance." Similar to professional actors, introverts may appear enthusiastic, lively, and entertaining, yet feel like they're "on stage"—a feeling that requires a great deal of energy, and may leave them feeling mentally and emotionally drained. Contrast this to an extravert, for whom being "on stage," so to speak—be it at a board meeting or cocktail party—is an energizing experience.

While CPP's research division hasn't found any correlation between introversion/extraversion and effectiveness in any given profession, those who understand their own preferences can more deftly manage their roles. They understand their natural assets and potential blind spots, and can adopt strategies to operate more effectively.

Introverts Operating in an Extraverted Environment

If you're an introvert in an extravert environment, don't assume people know how to communicate with you. Often, introverts need time to process before responding to a question. If the inquirer expects an immediate answer, this can be a source of friction. You can address this by explaining that you need to think it over before offering a response. Additionally, you

might deal with the feeling of being put “on the spot” by identifying when you’ll likely be pressed for information, and preparing ahead of time to provide a thorough answer.

If you understand that it’s a normal part of your personality to feel drained by heavily interacting with others, you can prepare for such occasions and be ready to tap your own energy reserve. So if you know you’re going to have limited time to work alone or will be required to attend a brainstorming meeting or operate in a noisy environment, you can plan steps to maintain your balance.

This leads to the topic of restoring the energy level. For those who prefer introversion, this often means finding time alone to reflect and direct focus on thoughts, ideas, and internal feelings. If you’re anticipating a particularly draining schedule, you may want to schedule regular, solitary breaks during workdays or plan some “me time” in the evening.

Dealing with Stress as an Introvert

Depleting too much energy eventually will lead to a stressful reaction. For both introverts and extraverts, early warning signs of stress tend to manifest themselves in exaggerated forms of natural tendencies—introverts, for example, may withdraw socially. If a stressful situation continues unresolved, unconscious functions may take over, and you may find yourself acting out of character by exhibiting extreme or immature extraverted characteristics. This reaction may show up as an outburst or other outward expression—opposite to your normal calm and reserved demeanor.

Extraverts Operating in Introvert-Dominated Environments

If, on the other hand, you prefer extraversion, you most likely step outside of your comfort zone when your role requires introverted behaviors, and you can be drained by not having enough time to interact with others. Likewise, your patience might be strained in an environment where opinions are not forthcoming and questions take too long to be answered.

Often, the extravert is thinking more about what he or she is planning to say next rather than listening. In a room full of extraverts, this may be necessary to get a word in edgewise. However, if you’re in a more introverted culture, it may cause friction and stress. You can sidestep much of this by practicing listening and giving feedback—pay attention to how intently you listen to others, and paraphrase their thoughts, asking for feedback regarding your accuracy.

Another strategy involves slowing your train of thought. If your natural inclination is to move from one big-picture item to the next, try to fully visualize and develop an idea with specific details before moving onto the next topic.

Extraverts can be drained by long periods of solitude and must recharge their batteries by interacting with people. So if you know you’re going to be involved in energy-draining activities such as solitary work during the day, you can compensate by planning lunch with friends, or social interaction in the evening.

Dealing with Stress as an Extravert

For the extravert, the early warning sign of stress is also an exaggeration of normal behaviors. As such, under stress some extraverts initially may become critical and harsh. Prolonged or

extreme stress, on the other hand, results in the opposite function erupting, and you may find yourself exhibiting immature or extreme introverted behaviors, such as withdrawing socially. This makes it particularly important to recognize early warning signs because, in this state, others can't see your internalized stress reaction—the people around you may be oblivious to the severity of your situation. To return to your normal state, start by telling someone you're in trouble and ask for help.

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