

Effective Leadership for Introverts

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Leaders have something of a stereotype: energetic, personable, strong willed, and charismatic extroverts. Scientists have a completely different stereotype: careful,

systematic, work-focused introverts that are, well, “challenged” on the charisma scale. Stereotypes are really flawed generalizations; there are clearly many scientists who are charismatic and/or extroverted. But compared to the general population, it’s probably safe to say that there are a higher percentage of introverted analytical types among scientists. In reality, there simply aren’t a whole lot of scientists in public leadership roles, although that could be considered a sign of good judgment. Of course, any group of two or more individuals is at some point going to require leadership, and this is most certainly true of scientific societies like APS. And, like it or not, nearly everyone will have to assume some level of leadership in their life, including scientists (and introverts). Frequently, introverted people assume leadership out of necessity, not by choice.

OK, I’m stuck in this role, now what?

Good news—you’re not alone. Plenty of leaders have had to overcome their inner introvert, and some of them (**Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Bill Gates**, etc.) did a pretty good job. **Adam Grant** of the Wharton School found that introverted leaders actually deliver better outcomes, in part because introverts have qualities that make them good leaders.

- *Introverts are better listeners.* Listening is a critical leadership skill. Check out future columns for more on this. Extroverts have to work hard to avoid imposing their will on a group, thus squashing input and creativity.
- *Introverts tend to think first and then act.* Frequently, it’s easier to see the solution or spawn a great idea when you spend a little time in reflective thought.
- *A little humility makes you a better leader.* Introverts are unlikely to seek the limelight. They tend to want to shine the light on the group as a whole and will do their best to empower followers to achieve group goals.

“In a gentle way, you can shake the world.” —MAHATMA GANDHI

- *Introverts remain calm in the face of challenges.* Not every project goes smoothly, and every group faces a crisis from time to time. Introverts are more likely to maintain a peaceful even temper that can translate to a calming effect for the whole group.
- *Introverts tend to build more meaningful relationships with their contacts.* This isn’t intuitive, as introverts are people who keep to themselves. However, introverts, because of their listening skills and attention to detail, build stronger relationships with the contacts that they do make.

See, there are plenty of assets that introverts can utilize as a leader.

Sure, but that’s ignoring some basic problems...

I never said this was going to be easy.

Introverted leaders clearly face some challenges.

- *Introverts are not good at confrontation.* Introverts will strongly tend toward avoidance, giving ground whenever possible. Try addressing issues early to prevent conflicts from escalating.
- *Introverts can have trouble motivating others.* Let’s face it, we’re not the rah-rah types. Introverts may not tend to give stirring speeches or pep talks, but motivation comes in many forms (see the December 2014 issue of *Phytopathology News*) and can also be imparted in one-on-one settings.
- *Introverts may have trouble selling their team product or championing a cause.* Introverts aren’t comfortable with being in front or talking themselves up. In addition, because of their careful and calm nature, introverts tend to be perceived as lacking enthusiasm. Fortunately, communication can be improved with practice and effort. If necessary, it may be best to delegate the public communication tasks to a more extroverted member of the team.
- *Introverts have trouble moving on from failure.* Introverts are frequently detail people. When something goes wrong, they have a tendency to dwell on the issue until

it’s “fixed.” It’s good to identify someone in the group you can rely on to help you decide when it is time to give up and move on.

It’s not always easy for an introvert to willingly take on leadership roles, but introverts bring skills that are extremely valuable to a society like APS. All personality types have strengths and challenges in being a leader. The key is maximizing your assets and minimizing your weaknesses, skills that can be learned by attending Leadership Institute training offered at the APS Annual Meeting. Give yourself a challenge. You may be surprised and pleased with the results.

For more information, see *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength* by **Jennifer Kahnwieler** or **Susan Cain**’s book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*. ■