



RESEARCH & IDEAS

# Introverts: The Best Leaders for Proactive Employees

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*Think effective leadership requires gregariousness and charisma? Think again. Introverts actually can be better leaders than extraverts, especially when their employees are naturally proactive, according to Harvard Business School professor **Francesca Gino**. Key concepts include:*

- *Extraverted leaders can be a liability if the followers are extroverts, tending not to be receptive to employees who make suggestions and take initiative.*
- *Introverted leaders are more likely to listen to, process, and implement the ideas of an eager team.*
- *Leaders need to adapt their style depending on the type of group they are leading. With proactive employees, leaders need to be receptive to the team's ideas; with a more passive team leaders need to act more demonstratively and set a clear direction.*

We often expect corporate executives to conform to certain extroverted CEO stereotypes: C for charismatic, E for effusive, and O for outgoing. To wit: Virgin Group chairman Richard Branson, who very publicly flew around the world in a hot air balloon; former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, a guest player on the sitcom *30 Rock*; and Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, the swashbuckling yachtsman.

But then there are the introverted CEOs—calm, eremitic, and observant—who prefer flying below the radar. You've never heard of them because they don't like the spotlight. Take Peter Rouse, who last week was named interim White House chief of staff, replacing the extraverted Rahm Emanuel. Barely known outside of Washington circles, Rouse is a quiet politician who seems to eschew the public eye, preferring instead to hunker down and deal with problems. Within the walls of the West Wing, he is reportedly known as a "fixer."

Both types of leaders, the extraverts and the introverts, can be equally successful or ineffectual, but with different groups of employees.

***"Often the leaders end up doing a lot of the talking and not listening to any of the ideas that the followers are trying to provide."***

A new study finds that extraverted leaders actually can be a liability for a company's performance, especially if the followers are extraverts, too. In short, new ideas can't blossom into profitable projects if everyone in the room is contributing ideas, and the leader is too busy being outgoing to listen to or act upon them.

An introverted leader, on the other hand, is more likely to listen to and process the ideas of an eager team. But if an introverted leader is managing a bunch of passive followers, then a staff meeting may start to resemble a Quaker meeting: lots of contemplation, but hardly any talk. To that end, a team of passive followers benefits from an extraverted leader.

"Often the leaders end up doing a lot of the talking, and not listening to any of the ideas that the followers are trying to provide," says HBS associate professor Francesca Gino, who conducted the study with professors Adam M. Grant of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and David A. Hofmann of UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School. Their article, "Reversing the Extraverted Leadership Advantage: The Role of Employee Proactivity," will appear in the *Academy of Management Journal* next year.

The three professors commenced their research with field data from a national pizza delivery chain, mailing out questionnaires and successfully surveying fifty-seven pizza store managers and 374 employees about their personality traits and their coworkers' behaviors. Using a five-point scale, the respondents rated themselves on adjectives such as "reserved," "introverted," "talkative," and "bold." The employees rated their teams' general work behaviors on items such as "Try to correct a faulty procedure or practice" and "Communicate opinions about work issues to others even if their opinions differ or others

disagree."

The researchers then compared the survey results against each pizzeria's overall profitability over a seven-week period. Sure enough, they observed high profits in stores where the employees were relatively passive but the managers were extraverted. On the other hand, when employees were proactive, the stores led by introverted managers earned high profits. Meanwhile, profits were lower in stores where extraverted managers led proactive employees and introverted managers led passive employees.

***"There are ways to influence the likelihood that leaders will act introverted or extraverted."***

The research conducted by Grant, Gino and Hofmann shows that there's a definite need for introverted leaders. Here's the problem: research shows that introverts, not prone to self-promotion, typically have more trouble than their extraverted colleagues rising through the corporate ranks in order to take a leadership role. This is especially true if they are surrounded by extraverted coworkers, who are likelier to receive promotions because they actively draw attention to themselves—fitting the stereotypes of great leaders.

"Many people associate extraversion with action, assertiveness and dominance—characteristics that people believe to be necessary to be effective leaders," Gino says. "The features that define extraversion are commonly the features people associate with leadership."

## Changing a leopard's spots

Unfortunately, companies that promote only extraverts are natural breeding grounds for the aforementioned ineffectual situations in which extraverts report to extraverts. Fortunately, the research also shows that it's possible not only to change prevailing attitudes about leadership, but to influence leadership behavior as well—that is, to encourage introverted and extraverted behavior in any given situation.

"We showed that there are ways to influence the likelihood that leaders will act introverted or extraverted," Gino says.

For the second study in their paper, the researchers devised a scenario in which 163 college students participated in a T-shirt folding contest. The students were divided into fifty-six groups, all tasked with folding as many T-shirts as possible in ten minutes. (They were encouraged to try their hardest—the most productive groups would win iPods.) Each group consisted of one assigned leader and three followers, plus two research assistants—"confederates"—who pretended to be followers. Some of the confederates were told to approach their team leader, after a minute and a half into the folding session, and say, "I have a friend from Japan who has a faster way. It might take a minute or two to teach it, but do we want to try it?" (The Japanese method is featured on YouTube.) The goal was to see how introverted and extraverted leaders would react to the proactive suggestion.

In an effort to control whether the student leaders would manage their teams in an introverted or extraverted manner, the researchers asked them to read a brief statement before the T-shirt folding commenced. Half of the leaders received this statement, along with a list of supporting academic studies:

***"By creating a work environment where people feel free to speak up and be proactive, then the organization is creating the right place for introverted leaders to be successful."***

*"Scientific research now shows that behaving in an extraverted manner is the key to success as a leader. Like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jack Welch, great leaders are extraverted: their behavior is bold, talkative, energetic, active, assertive, and adventurous. This enables them to communicate a strong, dominant vision that inspires followers to deliver results."*

The other half received this antithetical statement, also followed by a list of academic studies that supported it:

*"Scientific research now shows that behaving in an introverted manner is the key to success as a leader. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, and Socrates, great leaders are introverted: their behavior is quiet, shy, reserved, and unadventurous. This enables them to empower their people to deliver results."*

"We had them think about their role as a leader and consider how the certain style would

help them go about the task," Gino says.

Sure enough, the students' leadership style during the T-shirt folding exercise corresponded with the statement they had been asked to consider. Those who had read about the virtues of introverts were far more likely to signal that they were receptive to the novel Japanese folding method. And as with the pizzeria study, when the followers were proactive, the groups with introverted leaders were more productive than those with extraverted leaders.

"It worked," Gino says. (The research team believes that the results may have been more dramatic had the groups been given more time to fold; the sessions were only ten minutes long, and the whiz-bang Japanese folding method took some practice.)

Gino says her future research plans may involve the topic of authenticity, the degree to which introverts can genuinely adopt extraverted behavior before landing a leadership role. Ideally, though, she hopes to see more corporations adopt policies that reward good listeners as much as they reward good talkers.

"By fostering a work environment where people feel free to speak up and be proactive, the organization is creating for a climate in which introverted leaders can be successful."

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## About the author

**Carmen Nobel** is the senior editor of *HBS Working Knowledge*.