OPINION

Leadership beyond words: Four strengths introverts have that are key to success

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In a business world that frequently associates outspokenness with leadership, introverts are often misjudged, or even worse, undervalued for their leadership skills.

It's a pity. Introverts are just as influential and effective leaders as extroverts; they just bring different skills and strengths to bear.

The key for introverts lies in highlighting and embracing their strengths, rather than hiding or trying to change them. It is not a matter of extroversion versus introversion that produces exceptional leaders; it is how each person uses their innate talents to motivate and get things done through others.

Introverts have four strengths that are also critical success factors in leadership roles.

Introverts usually think before they speak

Even in casual conversations, introverts consider others' comments carefully. They stop and reflect before responding. They use silence to not only gather data relevant to their decision-making, but to also allow even more ideas and thoughts to come to the surface.

Introverts tend to be good listeners

Unlike extroverts who learn by talking out loud, introverts learn by listening. And

the ability to listen well comes with great advantages. Listening gathers data, information that adds to the leader's knowledge and expertise bank, helping to improve their decision-making ability.

Introverts generally exude calm

No matter what's happening behind the scenes, introverts tend to project a reassuring, calm confidence. They speak with composure regardless of the heat of the conversation or crisis-level of the circumstances. This calm, quiet demeanour not only permeates others, but also has another advantage – when they do speak, their voices tend to be heard above all the organizational noise and chatter.

Introverts typically go deep

Introverts usually delve deep into issues and ideas before tackling new ones. They are drawn to meaningful conversations (rather than superficial chit-chat), and they know how to ask careful questions and really listen to the answers. This in-depth questioning – something that introverted leaders do exceptionally well – allows them to learn what is happening in the far reaches of their organizations. As a bonus, it individually engages their best people.

If you are an introvert, you don't need to develop more extrovert-type skills in order to be successful. Instead, stick to what makes you comfortable and play to your strengths. Here are five ways you can capitalize on your natural skills to make your voice heard.

Choose your battles

Be selective about what you take on. Be clear to yourself as to your goals and what you want to achieve, and you will also have clarity on your values. Use your values as a barometer to determine if you need to speak up. For example, suppose there's talk afoot that staff will be required to work the next long weekend. If work-life balance is one of your core values, then you know that this is one of the occasions on which your input is necessary.

Phrase your input as a question

Asking questions often causes others to pause, which will give you an opportunity to turn your colleague's monologue into a dialogue. Directing the question to a specific person by name can be even more effective. "Amy, are you suggesting that …?", or "Karl, what do you think about … ?" is more likely to let you get that word in edgewise, and allow you to make your point of view known.

Make your point early in the discussion

An introvert's natural tendency is to hang back and listen. But the danger in waiting is that, as more people get invested and involved, your opportunity to add to the conversation may lessen. So instead of leaving your contribution to chance, have a plan. Put your ideas on the table in the first few minutes so you establish yourself as an active participant.

Get yourself on the meeting agenda

If you're on the agenda as someone who will present on a specific issue, you'll get the stage solo, and ensure that your voice will be heard.

Be the synthesizer of ideas

In the rush to be heard, extroverts may talk over each other, contradict or even be in total agreement without realizing it. If you can be the synthesizer who finds common threads, summarizes and advances the conversation, then you can play an important role. A question such as, "What I hear Fred and Patrick both say is that our product is out of date. What are we going to do about it?" not only achieves results but also enhances your reputation.

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