

# 5 Myths About Introverts and Extroverts at Work

By Adam Grant

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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-to-5 scale, in which 1 is extremely introverted and 5 is extremely extroverted, 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 extrovert you're made to think there's something wrong with you."

Thanks to 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: "Extroverts 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 extroverts, and enjoy it just as much. When people are randomly assigned to act extroverted or introverted, extroverts and introverts alike experience greater energy when they talk more.

Extroverts 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 10 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 extroverts?

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-extroversion is about more than just social interaction. extroverts 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 extrovert, because let's be honest, that would be a drain.

### **Myth 2: Introverts are plagued by public speaking anxiety.**

In *Quiet*, Cain describes the terror that she faced as an introvert preparing for a speech: "It's 2 a.m., 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 extroverts, 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 extroverts, but 84 percent of public speaking anxiety was completely unrelated to introversion-extroversion. Bigger factors were whether they tended to be anxious people in general, they thought the audience was kind versus hostile and feared they would bomb the particular speech.

This mirrors 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 says. Cain 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," she says.

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

### **Myth 3: Extroverts are better leaders than introverts.**

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

Not so fast. extroverts 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 researchers Francesca Gino and Dave Hofmann, we found that extroverts 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 extroverts had 16 percent higher profits. But when employees were proactive, voicing suggestions and improving work processes, units led by extroverts had 14 percent lower profits. extroverts 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, 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 extrovert doing that. General Charles Krulak, former commandant of the Marine Corps, introduced himself to me as an introvert too. When Krulak took over as 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: Extroverts are better networkers than introverts.**

Think of the best networker you know, and chances are that you'll conjure up an extrovert. 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 extroverts 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 extroverts 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 the number of people you contact or the number of times you reach out to them. If you stereotype extroverts as charismatic and introverts as aloof, think again. extroverts do feel more positive emotions than introverts, but they don't always cause *other people to feel those same positive emotions*. Studies of work groups show that extroverts 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 extroverts 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 extroverts. 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 extroverts: 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: Extroverts are better salespeople than introverts.**

After debunking the first four myths, I like to pose a challenge. If extroverts 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 extroversion 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 extroverted: 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 extroverts.** Whereas extroverts 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 extrovert, 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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