



Introverted Leadership

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I don't believe anything really revolutionary has ever been invented by committee... I'm going to give you some advice that might be hard to take. That advice is: Work alone... Not on a committee. Not on a team. - Steve Wozniak

Wherever smart people work, doors are unlocked. - also Steve Wozniak

What do we mean by introversion and extroversion?

In 1921, Carl Jung's book [Psychological Types](#) was published. It was from this work that our modern understanding of these categories arose. According to Jung, a very basic definition of extroversion and introversion is this:

Jung's Extroverts	Jung's Introverts
Drawn to the external life of people and activities	Drawn to the inner world of thought and feeling
Plunge into the events happening around them	Focus on the meaning of events around them
Recharge their energy by being around others	Recharge their energy by being alone

Fast forward to 2012, and we have Susan Cain's book [Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking](#) and her TED Talk [The Power of Introverts](#). She's not the only person to explore this topic, but her work is one of the most nuanced and impactful in recent years. Importantly, Cain explains that **the most common – and damaging – misunderstanding about personality type is that introverts are antisocial and extroverts are pro-social... Neither formulation is correct; introverts and extroverts are differently social.**

With this in mind, Cain adds more modern thoughts to Jung's types:

Cain's Extroverts	Cain's Introverts
Add life to your dinner party and laugh generously at your jokes	May have very strong social skills and enjoy parties and meetings, but after a while wish they were home in their pyjamas
Tend to be assertive, dominant, and in great need of company	Prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues, and family
Think loud and on their feet	Listen more than they talk, think before they speak, and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation
Prefer talking to listening, rarely finding themselves at a loss for words (and may occasionally blurt out something they didn't mean to say)	Tend to dislike conflict
Comfortable with conflict, but not with solitude	

A word of caution: let's not get too hung up on definitions. Like with any behavioural model, it's just one tool – we do not want it to limit us.

And if you're not quite sure where on the introvert / extrovert spectrum you fall, fear not – [Cain's Quiet Quiz](#) is eye-opening. You might be an **ambivert** – someone who falls roughly in the middle and has an easier time shifting between more introverted and extroverted behaviours.

Further, let's also consider what introverts, and extroverts, are NOT. Introverts are not anti-social. Introverts are not always shy. Some extroverts are incredibly shy; shyness is about fear of social judgment.

At its core, introversion and extroversion is about stimulation, and what energises (or depletes) us.

The sweet spot

Thus, the most useful – and affirming – way of thinking of introversion and extroversion is this: *preferences for certain levels of stimulation* (Cain 2012).

Ideally, we would be able to spend most of our time in environments that offer us the perfect amount of stimulation. However, our western world – classrooms, shopping centres, businesses – is set up to favour extroverts. And, most of us have very little control over the modern environments in which we live and work.

But that doesn't mean we have NO control. There is a great deal we can do to find our energetic sweet spots. What we are looking to do is *set up your work, your hobbies, and your social life so that you spend as much time inside your sweet spot as possible*. (Cain 2012).

But our modern world is built for extroverts...

It's true, and a lot of it has to do with how Western society has evolved in the last 200 years, and the shift from a more rural to a more urban, industrial, and business-focused society. We've become, in many ways, a culture more focused on personality than character and substance.

Western society favours "action" over "contemplation." This ideal is sold to us all the time. We see this in our schools, our universities, and our offices. The expectation that we are charismatic, friendly, open, quick on our feet is relentless. We have *the pressure to entertain, to sell ourselves, and never be visibly anxious*. (Cain 2012).



This is what is known as **The Extrovert Ideal** (Cain 2012). And it's what most of us are taught to pursue so that we can be successful in life – whether that's in friendships, school, relationships, or especially work. Compare this to the one time in modern history in which introverts could largely avoid forces interaction and work remotely: the pandemic.

In her book [Quietly Confident: An introvert's guide to knowing and expressing your worth](#), Kate James says that when the introverts she coaches *express a desire to build their confidence, the available advice is often based on the premise that they will need to alter their behaviour (and personality) to meet 'the extrovert ideal.'*

...even though we need introverts

Tank asks: *which would you prefer: a leader who's the life of the party, or one who generally cares about you?*

And that's NOT to say that extroverts are not deeply loving and caring folks – it's just that leaders who lead from more introverted strengths, like empathy and thoughtfulness, are being overlooked in favour of those who display more extroverted characteristics.



Yet, according to Adam Grant's 2024 research, *introverted leaders drove 28% higher productivity from proactive, engaged teams compared to their extroverted counterparts.* In fact, most of us would agree that *"thoughtful competence can outshine performative leadership any day of the week"* (Pong 2024.)

And leadership is NOT a fixed trait, but is a skill that we continually develop. Becoming skilled at anything – music, chess, baking, leadership – requires something called Deliberate Practice.

James Clear defines [Deliberate Practice](#) as *a special type of practice that is purposeful and systematic. While regular practice might include mindless repetitions, deliberate practice requires focused attention and is conducted with the specific goal of improving performance.* How could this work be done best with others around you all the time? Now, imagine the times you've tried to engage in Deliberative Practice in your open office plan. A ton of collaboration, but less mastery and focus happening in those spaces.

With *intense concentration, other people can be distracting. It requires deep motivation, often self-generated. But most important, it involves working on the task that's most challenging to you* (Cain 2012). What does this tell us? It tells us that you cannot become an expert pianist, a top-notch baker, or a trusted Subject Matter Expert via committee – sometimes, you have to just sit down and study. Alone. Solitude is a crucial ingredient for practice, focus, and creativity – which is why many great minds like scientists and artists have introverted streaks.

How does this impact leaders?

Introverts are not only lacking in the time, space, and quiet many need to succeed in our modern, Western business culture, but extroverts are *paid more, promoted faster, and rated more positively by their colleagues and managers* (Kuijpers, Hofmans and Wille 2022). Cain says introverts are repeatedly passed over for leadership roles. And according to Wilding, it's possible your quiet demeanour has been mistaken for a lack of passion and drive.

Part of the problem is that *it's human nature to be drawn to a charismatic leader. Studies show that we tend to view them as more likeable and effective* (Tank 2024). And Cain reminds us that *verbal fluency and sociability are the two most important predictors of success* in a modern business context. She continues with the staggering research confirming that:

- We perceive talkers as smarter than quiet types
- We rate quick talkers as more capable and appealing than slow talkers, and
- We see talkers as leaders

It makes sense, then, that so many lovely introverts are white-knuckling through their days pretending to be extroverts – especially when they are leaders or looking to become leaders.



The cost of pretending... and the benefits of stepping out of your comfort zone

Many introverts tend to mask in the workplace for the reasons we've listed above – extroversion is an unspoken expectation for success in many of our contexts.

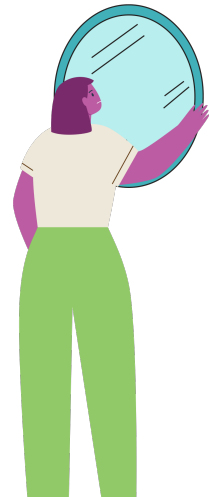
Kate James references the work of [Gabor Maté](#) when she mentions that *being nice and people-pleasing at the expense of expressing true feelings does very real damage to our health* (James 2024). And, we know that *acting in a manner that's out of character can be depleting in the longer term* (Kuijpers, Hofmans and Wille 2022).

Not to mention the hit we take to our sense of self-worth and confidence. James says that *when you pretend to be something you are not, again and again, you send your soul a message: You're not good enough as you are, and whatever real confidence you have is at risk of being eroded.*

Imagine the impact of leading your team inauthentically – *consider what others learn about how to be in the world by watching you smile while doing something you hate.* (James 2024).

That said, leaders are often called upon to step into behavioural styles that are not their default. There's nothing wrong with this, so long as you're choosing it, you are in control of it, and it's for a tenable length of time. We can do this with extroverted characteristics, too.

So here's the catch: the more act of character you choose to act, the more you'll need to rebalance. Think of it this way: "the best way to act out of character is to stay as true to yourself as you possibly can – starting by creating as many 'restorative niches' as possible in your daily life (Cain 2012).



How can we create restorative spaces in our work?

Culturally, we need a better balance to bring the best out of introverted kaimahi AND leaders. We want the inspiration of extroverts paired with the considered introspection of introverts. We don't want to stop collaboration, Cain says, but refine the way we do it.

We want everyone to feel seen, affirmed, and that they have what they need to thrive at work.

Introversion expert Jenn Granneman has created a handy list of things that introverts to be happy. We've added a column for you to consider: what could this look like in your workspace?

What introverts need	Examples	Your workplace ideas
Plenty of time to wind down and process	Take a step back before speaking – and create space for others to do the same. Excuse yourself before meetings if you need to mull things over, or say something like "I deeply value getting this information correct for you – can I come back to you by the end of the day with a more thoughtful / considered response?"	

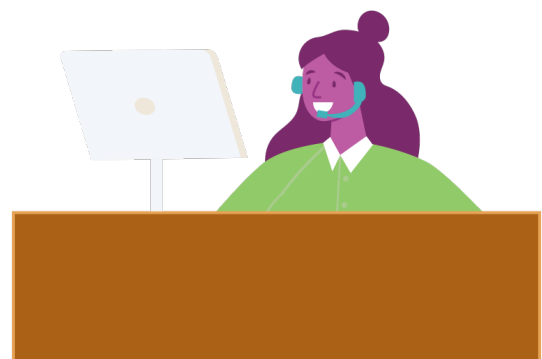
What introverts need	Examples	Your workplace ideas
<p>Meaningful conversation in many different ways</p>	<p>Designate roles in meetings, breakout rooms, and other spaces. i.e. this table speaks and this table captures what's being said.</p> <p>Also, use all channels of connection, including emails, Teams chats, and other tools that allow space before responding.</p>	
<p>Companionable silence</p>	<p>Introverts often love working NEXT to you – that doesn't always mean WITH you.</p>	
<p>Space to deep dive into interests</p>	<p>That project your introvert keeps asking about? Make sure they're involved!</p>	
<p>Quiet space to themselves</p>	<p>Create different spaces for different needs. You can designate "high-interaction" areas away from "high-introspection" ones.</p> <p>This can even include where you sit in meetings – get there first to grab a seat well at the back so you don't feel as "in the spotlight."</p>	
<p>Time to think</p>	<p>Introverts need TIME. Time alone, time to think, time to be creative.</p> <p>Give plenty of advance notice. Introverts like to plan so they can think ahead.</p>	
<p>People who understand when they need to opt out</p>	<p>This includes the "fun" things like the morning quiz. Some folks find all of the "fun" interaction and team building incredibly draining.</p>	



What introverts need	Examples	Your workplace ideas
A deeper purpose for our mahi	Make sure your kaimahi know how their work connects to the big picture, and why that big picture matters.	
Quiet	This can include noises you don't notice – like pen clicking or people thinking out loud.	
Independence	Allow as much flexibility as possible in their work – including flexible work arrangements, how they like to contribute (vocally or in writing), and where in the office they're able to work.*	
Simplicity so they can focus	Get to the point. Have agendas. No one likes their time wasted, but for introverts (who are already using A LOT of battery in your hui), it will be especially painful.	
To be valued	Remove the shame from shyness, quiet, taking their time, and other characteristics that are associated with introversion.	

*Let's also talk about whether our modern spaces need revisiting. Most of us now work in open office plans, and our tamariki attend schools that are highly collaborative. Yet, consider that **top performers overwhelmingly worked for companies that gave their workers the most privacy, personal space, control over their physical environments, and freedom from interruption.** The bottom line is this: **open-plan offices have been found to reduce productivity and impair memory** (Cain 2012).

It's hard to feel your most successful and confident when you can't even concentrate, let alone be appreciated for valuing concentration over collaboration.



Creating confident (and quiet, thoughtful, considered, introverted) leadership

First, let's confirm what we mean by "confidence." We like James' definition: **trust in oneself: reliance on one's powers, resources, circumstances or self-assurance**. James then asks, **which approaches are most effective when helping introverts build true confidence?**

Leadership through the lens of introversion might be **characterised by mindfulness, empathy, and relatedness** (Chan 2024). These are consistently identified as examples of excellent leadership traits with all of the leadership groups we've worked with. In fact, we could go even further and acknowledge that **introverted leadership not only expands the definition of effective leadership but also paves the way for a more inclusive and innovative corporate culture** (Chan 2024). Being this kind of leader is one we should champion.

James' book itself is even called "Quiet Confidence." And, she believes that **anyone can train themselves to be confident** using the building blocks of authenticity, self-worth, and trust (James 2024).

We approach leadership through a strengths lens, and love the idea of doing this with introverted leadership as well. Introverts: let's champion ourselves as the strong thoughtful leaders we are.

How do we do that? First, let's look at what makes introverts so amazing. Granneman's article [7 Strengths Introverts Should Recognize in Themselves](#) lists reminders for leaning into your introverted strengths:

Your Introvert Strengths	
Introspective and self-aware	We're content to sit quietly and think. Our introspectiveness is an ability to turn inward and figure out what is (and isn't) working. As leaders, you can do this for your teams and organisations in a way that other leaders can't.
Expert active listener	In conversations, we like to sit back and let other people drive – we take things in and contribute when relevant. And if we're trying to be a supportive friend, we're not there to jump in. We're there to hear you, ask questions, and be a sounding board – and we're really good at it.
Sensitive and empathic	If a family member, good friend, or coworker is feeling down, a highly sensitive introvert can pick up on that and want to shoulder that emotion. Knowing we're capable of supporting on someone through their feelings is a huge introvert strength. On the flip side, if someone is excited or happy about something, we pick up on that, too – which is nice if our own moods need a boost.
Patient and prepared	And yes, technically, patience and preparedness are separate traits, but for introverts, these two strengths often go hand-in-hand. We take the time to think about decisions and don't like to be put on the spot. We like to be prepared, and careful planning and preparation takes patience.
Creative	Whether through music, art, or perfectly written policy papers, creativity is one of the ways introverts shine most strongly. It's one way we share our voice with the world without being the loudest in the room.



Thoughtful	Introverts may also notice something that isn't immediately obvious, paying attention and having your back. We might be the one who waits for you if you're running late, because we don't really care about catching up with the rest of the group. We'll leave a party early with you if we know your introvert battery may be drained (and ours may be, too!). And we'll know when we need to give you space.
Independent	Because we're so content with being alone, we don't need other people to make plans, enjoy ourselves, make decisions, or get things done. We're capable of finding solutions, tackling challenges, going on adventures, and forging new paths ourselves. (That's not to say we never ask for help – we just work really, really well alone!)

For introverts, also consider how your confidence is tied to whether or not you're seen and appreciated in your mahi. James reminds us that *matterings matter*. Wilding says that being visible is about *ensuring your contributions, skills, and achievements are recognised and appreciated*. This is easier for extroverts, but more challenging for you. For introverts, it might look like *strategically sharing updates, information, and successes in a way that's useful and relevant to others, always linking your progress with the larger goals of your leaders or company*.

What else can you do to be more seen? Try some of Wilding's ideas on how you might increase your visibility in a way that's true to your introverted nature:

Wilding's Quieter Approach to Visibility	
Speak up early in meetings	You can break your "too much thinking, not enough contributing" cycle by challenging yourself to be the second or third person to contribute in a meeting. This pushes you to overcome the initial barrier of participation, which is often the hardest part. Plus, it gets your voice and perspectives out there early when everyone's still paying attention.
Take the pressure off – you don't need ALL of the answers	Visibility does not require you to have all of the answers. It's more useful to think of yourself as an active participant and shaper of the conversation instead of an infallible expert. Being present and involved is often more important than delivering show-stopping insights.
Ditch self-deprecation	Have you ever hesitated in a one-on-one with your boss, confessing, "This probably isn't what you're looking for..." when handing over a deliverable? Or maybe, while brainstorming with a colleague, you've led with, "This may be a terrible idea, but..."? There's a time and a place to temper expectations and soften proposals, but introverts tend to habitually downplay their ideas and achievements. Habitually using disqualifiers like "I'm no expert on this" can lead others to underestimate your knowledge and capabilities, unintentionally signalling you're not a go-to resource or thought leader in your area, even when the opposite is true. Over time, this can diminish your authority and influence.

Wilding's Quieter Approach to Visibility

Leverage technology

Unlike real-time conversations that demand immediate responses, asynchronous communication allows for a more reflective and deliberate exchange, which is a perfect fit for introverts. This gives you the opportunity to organize your thoughts and articulate your insights without the pressure of responding on the spot.

Show gratitude (instead of feeling like you're showboating)

Introverts often find themselves caught in a tug-of-war between humility and the need for visibility. On one hand, they want to be modest, but on the other hand, they recognise the importance of claiming their successes. Expressing gratitude is a graceful solution to this dilemma. By framing your accomplishments within the context of humility and appreciation, you can stay true to yourself while also ensuring your achievements don't fly under the radar.

Statements like "It's a privilege to lead this initiative" demonstrate your readiness to take on responsibility. Mentioning "I'm thankful for the opportunity to contribute to this project, which allowed me to use my expertise," lets you acknowledge your role in the team's success. Sharing "I'm honoured to have our results recognized in front of our clients," allows you to offer a genuine, heartfelt sentiment while reinforcing your value.

How can we create a culture that welcomes and celebrates introversion?

When asked, it's interesting to note that the leadership of the highest performing organisations tend to have leaders described as:

Quiet	Modest	Shy
Humble	Reserved	Understated
Mild-mannered	Self-effacing	Gracious

(Cain 2012). Sounds an awful lot like introverted leadership. But how can we create a culture that appreciates and seeks out these qualities?

Try using Cain's [The Quiet Way](#) "manifesto" – a list of ten accessible ideas to support and celebrate introversion in yourself and others:

1. There is a word for "people who are in their heads too much"—thinkers.
2. Solitude is a catalyst for innovation.
3. The next generation of quiet kids can and must be raised to know their own strengths.
4. Sometimes it helps to be a pretend-extrovert. There is always time to be quiet later.
5. But in the long run, staying true to your temperament is the key to finding work you love and work that matters.
6. One genuine relationship is worth a fistful of business cards.
7. It's okay to cross the street to avoid making small talk.
8. "Quiet leadership" is not an oxymoron.
9. Love is essential; gregariousness is optional.
10. "In a gentle way, you can shake the world." – Mahatma Gandhi



Also, it's often not our introversion (or any other trait) that holds us back – it's fear. Breau says *the fears you carry, whether you've associated them with introversion or not, don't need to hold you back.*

No matter how we define our behaviours and style, imposter syndrome and self-doubt are the most damaging mindsets we can carry.

Cain explicitly states that the main takeaway from her book is *a newfound sense of entitlement to be yourself.* That's true for all of us.

Let's end where we started: with avowed introvert Steve Wozniak's quotes. While he advises working alone, he notably also tells us that in places in which smart people work, the doors tend to be unlocked. This is the perfect description of an affirming, respectful balance of the strengths extroverts AND introverts bring to the table. We want inspiration, collaboration, and fun – and then we want to be able to recharge, close our doors, and think before we take our next steps.

Resources and like minds

Jen Granneman's [Introvert Dear](#) online community has great resources and information to share.

You might also be interested in her work on highly sensitive people, which is essentially a cousin to introversion. Check out her [21 Signs You're a Highly Sensitive Person list](#).

Instagram content, like the team at [Subtle Careers](#), make for great bite-sized introversion appreciation. They also have their [Awfully Quiet](#) podcast.

[Grow with Colby](#) is a lovely instagram account with all kinds of leadership and growth content.

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March 21, 8:30 – 9:30am

In person at Ernst & Young,

Level 2, 40 Bowen St, Wellington

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