

Mentoring an Introverted Leader

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Let me guess what you're thinking. "Are you kidding me? An introverted leader? Who ever heard of a leader being an introvert?"

At a recent conference, I met Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, PhD, executive coach, speaker, and author of *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength*. I admit that I was surprised to see a book on this topic. However, after a brief conversation and a glance through her book, I was assured that Dr. Kahnweiler knows her material.

She claims that about half our population and about 40% of leaders are introverts. The first statistic didn't surprise me, but the second one did. Is your stereotype that a leader is an outgoing, take-charge kind of individual? Well, how about Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, and Mother Theresa? Were they not effective leaders? None, however, were fiery, high profile, expressive individuals.

As I considered my work experience, I've known quite a few introverted leaders. Perhaps there is a leader with a quiet, reflective manner in your organization who routinely feels excluded, overlooked, and misunderstood. Kahnweiler's description suggests that this person's low-key approach may be mistaken by you or others in your organization as reluctance, lack of intelligence, or even arrogance.

If you happen to be extroverted, you may have difficulty providing effective counsel to that introverted leader. In designing her research, Kahnweiler heard, "Don't listen to some loudmouth who doesn't know what it's like to be me. Motivational speaking is a billion dollar industry built on confident and extroverted people molding introverts into thinking we are wrong for being what we are. Get advice from people who have actually dealt with being introverted in an extroverted world!"

So, she interviewed professionals from across a wide variety of industries. Her book "will help you learn to understand introverts, coach them, and maximize their contributions." She developed a process to help introverted leaders effectively contribute their unique perspectives to their organizations.

Frankly, I found Dr. Kahnweiler's guidance to be insightful for all of us. Surely you've experienced occasional "situational introversion," such as when dealing with awkward people situations.

Dr. Kahnweiler believes introverted leaders characteristically face four primary challenges.

Stress. When word of their good performance gets around, some individuals have problems saying "no" to the many invitations to participate in projects. Holding feelings of frustration inside can manifest physical symptoms. Introverted leaders can become very tired after being with other people continually; they need time alone to recharge their batteries.

Perception Gaps. Often there are disconnects between an introverted leader's intended message and what comes across. Their silence and quiet manner can create the impression that they are withdrawn, gruff, too serious, or even rude. Pausing to carefully consider a response can be perceived as being slow-witted, indecisive, or even as weak.

Career Derailers. Introverted leaders tend not to "sell themselves," preferring that their results speak for them. Unfortunately, not letting people know you exist rarely works when an important team is being assembled. Also, building relationships with bosses and peers is much harder if informal chatting is not an enjoyable behavior for the introverted leader. Office politics and networking situations are typically avoided, but are often necessary parts of anyone's success.

Invisibility. Extroverts in meetings often are "front and center," garnering the attention and often the resources that are so necessary for success. It's very hard to be "top of mind" when the introvert prefers to remain "out of sight." The ideas they do share often don't "stick" as easily as the ideas of more extroverted contributors.

Kahnweiler offers four practical steps, the 4 P's, for helping introverted leaders to both capitalize on their strengths and make their presence known.

Preparation. Introverts can rarely successfully “wing it” for presentations, with challenging people, and even in simple conversations. Imagining and simulating proper behaviors, making extensive notes, and conducting role-plays with a cooperative ally are ways to prepare introverts for opportunities.

Presence. Focus on the current moment and the person you are with so that he or she knows that you are definitely present. Attentive listening and eye contact, along with an awareness of body language and facial expression will help introverted leaders substantially.

Push. Taking conscious steps to overcome the fear of stepping out of a comfort zone into a higher-profile situation provides a more realistic perspective of an introvert's strengths and potential.

Practice. For others to recognize the introvert's unique attributes, practice will be required perpetually, despite the natural desire to retreat back into a lower profile.

In the second half of the book, Kahnweiler applies these four steps to many specific activities the introverted leader faces, such as public speaking, heading up projects, building relationships, and others. She closes the book by offering studies of individuals who have used the planning process to ensure an approach that would help the introvert be successful.

If you have responsibility for supporting the skill development of an introverted leader, let me suggest that you acquire two copies of Kahnweiler's book, one for you and one for the individual you'll mentor. One will help you figure out what you can do to help. The other will guide your mentee into some healthier behaviors without sacrificing who he or she is.

For more information on this topic, go to aboutyouinc.com or theintrovertedleaderblog.com.

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