

The Power of Introversion

by Lisa Boren Sivy and Pearl Alexander

Leveraging the depth and quiet force of the so-called “highly sensitive introvert” could open new opportunities in management.

Discovering you’re an introvert may not be as troubling as it once was, given all the books, articles, and fanfare over the subject recently. In our society, experts estimate that extroverts outnumber introverts three to one; some believe it is closer to 50/50. What does this mean for introverts? They must recognize themselves for what they are and learn to navigate in an extroverted world.

Moreover, even if an introvert does not identify as a “highly sensitive person” (HSP), there’s a good chance he or she bears that trait. Just the thought of being labeled “sensitive” stirs up gremlins and negative self-talk that may send anyone into a serious identity crisis of sorts. Sensitivity, after all, is not on anyone’s Top 10

list of desired traits for high-potential professionals, let alone C- or E-suite leaders.

Couple together the traits of introversion and “highly sensitive person” and you might seem to be describing an overly emotional, awkward individual, unfit for the senior ranks in an organization.

Not so. You may be fortunate to have a secret weapon sitting right next to you and not know it! Meet the highly sensitive introvert—a talented, quiet force—who can provide any team with a competitive edge. By understanding and thoughtfully leveraging the strengths of your highly sensitive introverts, you have a significant opportunity.

Through the Looking Glass: Spotting an Introverted HSP

Introversion and extroversion speak to a person's temperament, something he or she cannot change at will. A common mistake is using "shy" and "introvert" interchangeably, and thus viewing introversion as a weakness in the workplace. As Meredith Whitten explained in her article on Psych Central about the work of Bernardo J. Carducci, "All About Shyness," introverts prefer solitary to social activities, but do not necessarily fear social encounters like shy people do.

In fact, being introverted means a person's natural energy, perceptions, and decisions flow inward toward their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas. The introvert enjoys mulling things over because it's stimulating and energizing to them. They will gladly share their ideas and thoughts, but too many external activities deplete them.

By comparison, an extrovert's energy flows outward when he or she is around people, doing external activities.¹ Extroversion tends to be manifested in outgoing, talkative, and energetic behavior, whereas introversion is manifested in more reserved and solitary behavior. Carl Jung and the developers of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator both suggest that everyone has both an extroverted side and an introverted side, with one more dominant than the other.

The highly sensitive person, according to Elaine Aron, is one who has a "finely tuned nervous system." This makes the HSP aware of subtleties in the environment, such as the emotions and moods of others, personalities, noise levels, lighting, colors, and air. Their sensitivity doesn't make them more emotional. Rather, it makes them more discerning, great at being in close relationships, and able to easily sense the unspoken needs of others. HSPs have wonderful aesthetic tastes, and tend to be "right-brained" creatives. Hence, they enjoy the arts and tend to engage in deep,

spirited, and provocative conversations about the complexities of work and life.²

According to Aron's research, most introverts are HSPs, too. People with those combined attributes provide a rare advantage within a group. Whatever their job or career endeavors, they are much more likely to pursue them with a sensibility like that of "priests or royal counselors," according to Aron. Their presence is typically grounded, calm, and reassuring.

The Silver Bullet: How to Leverage Introverts

Introverts bring innate assets and gifts into the workplace in the form of reflective practices. A reflective practitioner models deliberate, thoughtful ways of being and evolving. An introverted, highly sensitive person is likely to be the "go-to" person when things need to downshift (reduce speed or intensity). Introverts are thorough and accurate when situational analysis is required. They are also often skilled at resolving conflict, able to manage the situation when colleagues need to vent their emotions. Furthermore, when space is desired for an innovative idea to emerge, the introvert can shine.

The gifts of the highly sensitive introvert include:

- Slowing it down: Because introverts do not respond impulsively or by overacting, they're adept at pausing, asking questions, considering options, investigating issues, and negotiating solutions.
- In conflict, not reciprocating with heat: Their natural tendency to be calm, and remain calm, to give measured responses, and to manage emotional ventilation is priceless.
- Creating the space for possibilities to emerge: Introverts are often active listeners and synthesize information well. Brilliant collaborators, they offer complementary viewpoints.

A Practical Example

Consider this example of a boss, himself a super extrovert, wisely leveraging his introverted senior director to guarantee the best outcome. He would choose to stop by the office of his introverted senior director when he felt that he was going too fast and fixed on a certain outcome. He may have been uncertain about the true impact of his decision in the organization—especially when he genuinely believed in his solution.

Fortunately, he possessed the self-discipline to ask his introverted director to slow him down and help him consider whether his decision would yield the best outcome. As an experienced leader, he often had brilliant ideas, and he wanted to be certain he could get additional support for an idea and actually make it happen. His director would listen intently to his plans, and invariably ask questions. She would take different perspectives with her boss to be sure they thought through many angles and peeked around corners.

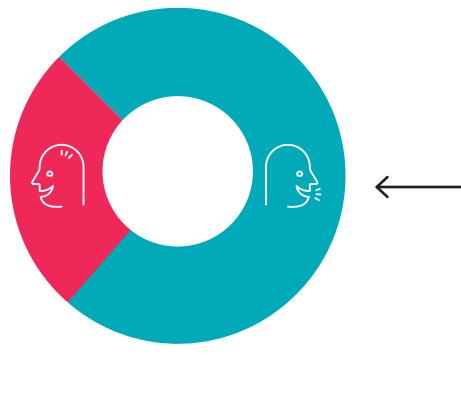
After their time together, the boss would typically revise his approach and his overall goal. He'd leave feeling heard, fortified, and armed with a great plan. For the introverted director, her recommendations were heard; she could make an impact in a way that was manageable for her.

On a daily basis, look to leverage your introverted HSP, who sits quietly in meetings, synthesizing critical details. He will think deeply, take copious notes, and use his capabilities to notice where more work is needed to smoothly navigate a situation and avoid errors.

Protecting Your Secret Weapon:

Restoring Their Energy

A caution with introverts and introverted leaders is the need to regularly restore their energy. A highly sensitive, introverted leader—when refreshed—is a naturally curious, grounded, harmonious, and symbiotic presence. Yet meditative space and



74%

**RESEARCHERS ESTIMATE THAT
EXTROVERTS MAY MAKE UP
74 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION.**

intermittent quiet time are essential to the sanity and authenticity of this temperament. At their best, introverted leaders can be charming.

Being placed in “bullpens” or “collaborative spaces” for lengthy periods of time is exhausting for the introvert; these circumstances may quickly lead to unpleasant overstimulation for an introverted HSP. Overstimulated is the point of no return for such a type. The result will be unfriendliness, survival tactics, or complete shutdown.

Introverts must guard against overstimulation to maintain a productive work environment. Conversely, they must also be mindful enough of their own needs to alert colleagues when this is happening, in order to prevent misunderstandings. Moments of extended silence may harm relationships with colleagues because they’re perceived as withdrawal. However, reflection provides critical processing time and replenishes essential energy for introverts—especially introverted HSPs. Once centered, they are able to be fully present; the power of their depth is unstoppable.

For introverts who must work in collaborative spaces, being keenly self-aware of their unique needs—and how to play nicely with extroverts—is important for success. Extroverts will often welcome company, enjoy contact time, and want to talk through ideas. It may be painful for them to feel as if they are being avoided, or an inconvenience. Introverts should communicate reassuring scripts that will help extroverts know when they need space and time to recharge. These scripts may be as simple as, “I need some time to reflect on your comments or ideas,” or “There’s nothing wrong; I am processing my thoughts about this. Can we talk later?” At the end of the day, the introvert must balance the need for restorative quiet time with the need for being available and engaged in relationships.

At Georgia Tech, the Introverts-Web of Brilliance—an employee resource group (ERG)—is developing specific tactics to support introverts. This is the nation’s first ERG of its kind, intentionally dedicated to enriching the work experience of introverts. With guidance from their leaders, this group spearheaded creating a “chill” space in one of the information technology offices. This designated place is a quiet zone, a harbor for introverts who need periodic refuge during the workday. It’s one of many ways this group is intentionally unleashing the talents of introverts.

Teams can achieve exponential success by leveraging the depth and quiet force of the introverted HSP. Their active minds make them exceptional visionaries, highly intuitive dilettantes, and prolific writers. With support, the conscientious introverted HSP is capable of taking a concept from vision to reality. They often do!

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References:

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- 2 Elaine N. Aron, Ph.D., *The Highly Sensitive Person*