

How to Lead Introverts

Bruce E. Roselle

Over the past 30 years of my work as an executive coach, I've often run into situations where either I'm coaching an extreme introvert, or I have been asked by leaders how to best manage the introverts on their team. Being an introvert myself, I have some insights regarding what folks like me need when being managed by another.

What is an introvert? Using perspective from the folks at the Myers Briggs company, an introvert is someone who tends to need to get quiet and thoughtful and/or to be alone to recharge his or her mental batteries. The need to refresh typically comes from spending time in interaction with others and not having sufficient time to think privately.

In a work setting, introverts can be recognized as the ones in a group who tend to be quietly thoughtful while the extroverts are expressing their perspective. They often get a look on their faces that seems to others to be intense or bored, or perhaps angry, as they think deeply about the topic being discussed. The problem with 'the look' that appears on the face of introverts while they are thinking is that others tend to interpret the look—plus their silence—in negative ways.

For example, I once was invited to learn about a new 360-degree instrument that one of my clients wanted their executive coaches to begin using. As I entered the classroom where lunch was being served and the coaches were arriving, I suddenly felt a little shy and held back while I considered what my next step should be. In that moment, a new person from the client came up to me and introduced herself. In a meeting with her later that same year, she recalled that situation and described me as "cool, aloof, and not very confident." This is what she saw when I thought I was just being shy.

In a recent example, I was talking about managing introverts with a coaching client who is a clear extrovert, and he used the example of trying to generate a conversation with his teenaged daughter—an extreme introvert. In describing a five-hour car ride with her in which he asked a question and then waited for her response, he said, "I waited so long for an answer, I forgot what the question was!"

How can you lead introverts effectively? The suggestions that follow have been gathered over most of my career and are usually effective ways to lead an individual or team of introverts:

- In meetings, ask an open-ended question ("how is the X project going," or "what help do you need with Y?") and wait for 10 seconds for them to respond (count slowly in your head). Keep looking at them with an open look on your face (not annoyed) and wait patiently. When you get anything as a response, encourage them with a comment like, "that's very helpful. Let's talk more specifically about Z".
- Wait patiently for a response any time you ask an introvert a question, knowing that they are processing their thoughts silently and thinking about what you just said. Don't let the look on their face throw you off; it's usually just the look they get when they are thinking.
- Send out an agenda in advance for every staff or other meeting to give introverts a chance to think about the topics in advance. After the meeting, in which the introverts will usually be relatively quiet, reach out to participants individually to give introverts another shot at sharing their thoughts.
- Draw introverts out during a meeting by asking them specifically an open-ended question and waiting for their response. Work with whatever response you get and ask follow-up questions

to make sure they have communicated their thinking fully. Encourage them to share their thinking “so far” even if their thoughts are not fully formed.

- At a happy hour or other social interaction at work, assign each person a task that helps them interact with their colleagues--something like, find three people who share your taste in music, tell at least three colleagues about your last vacation, etc.
- Assess the physical space in the office and ask each person if the layout hinders or helps their interaction with colleagues. For example, a large open space with lots of ambient noise might overwhelm introverts.
- In meetings of all types, start off with each person giving a summary of their challenges and successes in their area. This makes sure everyone speaks a little, not just the extroverts.
- At the beginning of each day, conduct a ‘stand up’ meeting where people gather in one spot to briefly share issues, problems, focus for the day and ask others for help thinking them through. This gets them talking to each other, helping to break the ice for introverts.
- Encourage introverts to attend a Toastmasters or other meeting that helps them get comfortable speaking on a topic without much preparation time.

What can you do if you are an introvert leader? This one is a question that I’ve thought about my whole career and have developed a few techniques to address:

- When you are with your team, peers, or senior leaders, think out loud as much as possible (that is, narrate your thinking), even if only to let them know you ARE thinking. Though your preference is to wait until you have thought things out thoroughly, say something like, “Well, I haven’t come to a conclusion yet, but this is my initial thinking.” Continue to give people an update on your thinking, still making it clear that this is not the final decision.
- Develop a facial expression that is open and relaxed. You can do this by looking in a mirror and continuing to look at yourself until you see a facial expression that is one you would find easy to talk to. Then, close your eyes and feel what your facial muscles are doing to create that relaxed, open facial expression. Practice this in private until you can quickly shift to this expression, and then begin to use it in meetings.
- In meetings with peers and senior leaders, develop a habit of asking open-ended questions early in the meeting. This will establish for you a pattern of participating more actively in meetings. Combine this with your open facial expression and the habit of narrating your thoughts.

The bottom line. You do not need to be an extrovert to lead others, you just need to use a few extroverted techniques throughout the day. And you don’t need to despair over a hopelessly quiet team of introverts, you just need to give them the space and encouragement they need to speak up.