

BUT I'M AN INTROVERT: EXTROVERTS AND INTROVERTS CAN BE EFFECTIVE LEADERS

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This essay examines the assumption that only extroverts can be effective leaders. It shows leadership is a process and not necessarily a trait you are born with.

INTRODUCTION

When encountering traditional conversations about leadership, most people tend to focus on the obvious attributes of a leader: outgoing, bubbly, friendly, and extroverted. Specifically, in the classroom setting these are the only attributes a leader is given. Students who do not identify as extroverted may leave the setting feeling disheartened about not having the qualities that a typical leader has. Likewise, introverted and extroverted are usually placed as opposing one another, leaving leadership as a trait only extroverts can possess. Roger Segelken, author of “Leadership Initiative Teaches Principles through Practice,” observes that “most leadership traits, perspectives, and skills require effort and experience to develop, that all kinds of leaders can contribute, that charisma alone is rarely sufficient” (Segelken, p. 3). In the political realm, Barbara Kellerman, author of “Introversion in the Oval Office” argues that even Nixon and Carter “destroy the common conception” that a high-ranking politician has to be an extrovert (Kellerman, 1983, p. 383). Since introverts hold positions of authority in society, it is a problem that institutionalized education promotes the idea that leadership is directly correlated with being an extrovert. I contend that introverts have qualities that are just as valuable to leadership positions as extroverts and have the potential to be successful leaders throughout their college experience.

DEFINITIONS

The terms introvert and extrovert originate from Carl Jung's work, *Psychological Types*, where he presents the idea that there are mainly two behaviors that people exhibit: extroversion and introversion (Jung, 1976). These meanings were originally used to describe a spectrum of attributes that a person could have. The terms weren't necessarily used to describe how they should act or interact with other people around them; the terms were used to help people self-reflect and help them understand more about themselves as individuals. The words were not connected to specific attributes preventing individuals from acquiring certain positions in society. Carl Jung's original intent was for the terms to be thought of as a continuum, every person having both an extrovert and an introvert side to them. Jung originally defined introversion as an individual's focus on the inner workings of themselves. Extroversion was originally defined as an individual's focus on the outside world around them.

Extroversion and introversion have evolved into "introvert" and "extrovert." When the word "introvert" is used, there are usually images of a person who is shy, not outspoken, who likes to spend time alone. On the other hand, the word "extrovert" seems to excite an idea of a person who is outgoing, outspoken, and extremely social. These words set up a binary that only allows people to fit into one of two categories, introvert or extrovert. This thinking is problematic because people have to identify with one group or the other. I propose going back to the original meanings of the words extrovert or introvert by thinking of the words as guideposts for how a person may create their energy, instead of as a label that is set in stone, denying a person from exploring different aspects of oneself.

PROBLEMS THAT ARISE FROM ONLY EXTROVERTS BEING LEADERS

If only extroverts are encouraged to have leadership positions, many people lose the opportunity to build leadership skills. When leadership is only "allowed" for certain people there becomes a disconnect between leaders and followers. If a leader cannot connect with a follower, such as a student or trainee, there will be no trust between the two which is essential for a strong relationship (Stein, 2014). Leaving people out of leadership opportunities because of an attribute that has little to do with a person's ability to lead can result in a loss of valuable leaders in a school

setting. Introverted leaders have the ability to connect and build meaningful relationships with people who are also introverts. Adam Grant, Francesco Gino, and David Hoffman in “The Hidden Advantages of Quiet Bosses” point out that “In a dynamic, unpredictable environment, introverts are often more effective leaders” (Grant, Gino, & Hoffman, 2010, p. 2). When presented with different settings that are not ideal, introverts are able to adapt and lead. While extroverts have the capability to lead, they may not always be the ideal candidates for a specific leadership situation.

Introverts have the capability to be effective leaders in various school settings. Take a classroom situation for example; if a student is having a hard time participating in class, a leader who has had that same experience or problem will be more effective in helping that student than a leader who has never had an issue with participating in class. Diversity in leadership is crucial because not every student or trainee is going to have the same problem. Having both introverts and extroverts in leadership positions throughout a college program allows that program to positively impact more students than if the college program only had extroverts in leadership positions (Stein, 2014). More diversity in leadership can make specific programs more valuable because they will be effective in reaching a greater number of students or trainees.

The classroom setting is not the only place where diverse leadership is important. The whole college experience includes both introverts and extroverts. As colleges continue to discover the effects of leadership, many programs have become interested in what makes a good leader. Otis Caldwell and Beth Willman, authors of “Characteristics of School Leaders,” conducted a detailed survey that included different leadership positions across various age groups, genders, and clubs. Caldwell and Willman (1926) were interested in the same question that colleges ask today: What makes a good leader? Their results were enlightening and also interesting. They found that while extroversion was a factor in some leadership positions, it was not the overarching main characteristic found in student leaders. Caldwell and Willman found that, “Scholarship was high for all leaders; the athletic leaders among the boys were the lowest of the group of leaders in scholarship, but even they were at the average of their classes” (pp. 12-13). This study shows that being an extrovert was

not the main reason these students were in their respected leadership positions. The best correlation found from this survey was related to the student's scholarship, not if they identified with being an extrovert (Caldwell & Willman, 1926).

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In high school, student government nominations were usually considered a popularity contest. Teachers encouraged outgoing and extroverted students to run for student government because it was a great "leadership experience." If leadership equaled being loud and outgoing, there was no room for a person like me who enjoyed spending evenings at home in peace and quiet. This view seemed to be widely accepted in most public school classes; the outgoing and extroverted person was considered a "great leader." My university experience showed that people were usually divided into groups of introverts or extroverts. Both introverts and extroverts had different strengths and weaknesses, and leadership was usually lumped with the extroverts. Yet, as I learned in my first semester of college, several professors in my course schedule were introverts. This knowledge shocked me, and I soon learned that being an introvert doesn't automatically disqualify a person from being a successful and effective leader. If introverts held leadership positions, is it necessary for a person to be an extrovert to be a good leader?

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Schools and teachers could encourage introverts and extroverts to run for leadership positions in school. If students were taught from a young age that extroverts and introverts both have valuable skills that can lead to effective leadership, the myth that only extroverts being good leaders would be dispelled. Creating a black and white binary between extroverts and introverts gives students the idea that once you are labeled as one or the other, you can only have the attributes of that specific label. As the words "introvert" and "extrovert" continue to get used in the academic field, it is important to understand that a person may have attributes of both. Understanding that these words are guideposts instead of labels can help students understand that while their specific skill set is different from another student's, they are still valuable. Adam McHugh, author of "Can Introverts Lead?" contends

that “When we explicitly or implicitly communicate that only a few people for whom the stars miraculously align can lead with power and effectiveness, we discourage those who do not fit our cultural ideals but have great potential to lead thus doing harm” (McHugh, 2009, p. 23). A student should never feel disheartened with their ability to lead because of their personality. As shown from authors previously mentioned, personality is not the only factor that matters in leadership. Leadership is a process rather than a set of skills a person is born with. Students should be given opportunities to build their leadership skills and explore the possibility of creating themselves as leaders.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by returning to my first question. If introverts held leadership positions, is it necessary for a person to be an extrovert to be a good leader? The answer is a resounding "no". College students learn that their skill sets, whether they are introverted or extroverted, have the ability to change and grow over time. With practice and help from others, a person can develop the proper skills to be an effective leader. As introverts are included in the dialogue of leadership, different people will see a change for the better in their local school and work environments. Diversity in leadership creates an opportunity for a program to have a positive impact on more individuals. While teachers and leaders in the public-school system encourage all students to seek leadership, this will help students feel empowered with developing their skill set for leadership. Leadership can be approached and taught in a way that allows individuals to understand that it is a process and isn't something that is inherently connected to being an extrovert or introvert. As leadership starts to become a matter of how a person can become a leader, instead of whether or not this person was born an introvert or an extrovert, positive changes of empowerment will be found around campuses and society.

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