

Introverts – redressing the balance

Listen to a talk about social psychology to practice and improve your listening skills.

Before you watch

Match the words with the definitions.

in the spotlight	a characteristic
to bond	used to describe a person who is charming and attractive
a trait	a person who enjoys spending time alone more than being with other people
charismatic	an outgoing, sociable person
an extrovert	the center of attention
contemplation	deep thought
to tone down	to form a relationship with other people
an introvert	to make quieter or less obvious

Transcript

If I asked you to describe a great leader, I'd be willing to bet certain traits come to mind ... someone charismatic, dynamic, inspiring, a confident public speaker. You're probably imagining a man too, but that's a bias we'll save for another talk! We tend to think of great leaders as people who naturally take to the stage, who draw other people to them by their sheer presence, who are extroverts. But history has also been transformed by people who don't fit these descriptions. People like Rosa Parks, Eleanor Roosevelt and Gandhi. These people would have described themselves as shy, quietly spoken ... as introverts.

Of course we're drawn to extroverts. They're usually charming and persuasive, fun to be around. They're not quietly in the corner somewhere reading a book where we might not notice them. Introverts are mostly happy to let the extroverts take the attention; they'd rather not be in the spotlight, they'd rather finish that book. If they become leaders, it's not because they want to be the center of attention, it's because they feel compelled to act. They lead not because they enjoy giving orders but because circumstances have put them in a position to make change. If they're the boss, they allow space for the ideas of others to grow because they're not trying to make their mark. An introvert sounds like a pretty good boss, right? You won't need to worry about them stealing your ideas or talking over you in a meeting.

Some of our great creators are introverts too. People like the writer JK Rowling, the great thinker Darwin and the designer of the first Apple computer, Steve Wozniak. It turns out coming up with good ideas is easier when you're engaged in quiet, solo contemplation than when you're leading the cheerleading squad. Not that I'm saying there's anything wrong with cheerleaders! Extroverts are great – some of my favorite people are extroverts. But why is the world so set up for extroverts and so hard for introverts? Why are we always encouraging our kids to speak up, join in, work as a team?

Nowadays, most schools and most workplaces are set up with the extrovert in mind. Children no longer sit in rows in desks, they sit in groups of four or six, doing group projects. Even subjects like math and creative writing are taught with an emphasis on group collaboration, even though most writers sit alone in front of their computer or typewriter, with nothing between them and the blank page. A kid who prefers to go off into a corner and work alone starts to look like a problem. What's wrong with Janie? Why isn't she joining in? Studies show teachers think extroverts make better students, even though introverts actually tend to get higher grades. We're telling our introverted kids something is wrong with them, that they need to be more sociable, more outgoing. We're giving them fewer opportunities for the quiet contemplation they need in order to produce the best work and be their best selves.

And then at work we do the same. Most offices today are open plan, everyone working and creating noise in one big room, attending team-building workshops or group brainstorming sessions; the introverts' worst nightmares. The introverts at school are judged negatively by their teachers and when they reach the workplace, they're passed over for promotion into leadership positions. But introverts typically take fewer risks and make more careful decisions, and don't we need those traits too?

I'm not saying let's get rid of extroverts and grab all those talkative, sociable performers at primary school and send them off to the library for four hours a day of solitude until they learn to tone it down. I'm not saying that at all. I'm saying we're doing something like the opposite of that to introverts and we need to stop. We need to allow them space to be themselves and then we'll end up getting the most out of our extroverts and our introverts. Let's teach all our kids how to work with others and how to work on their own. Let's create space in offices and at conferences for people to work on their own when they want to and give them the opportunity to come together to share ideas. Let's give staff 'away days', where they go off into the woods, walk up a mountain or wherever, to work on something alone, as well as the 'team-building day' where everyone learns to dance salsa together.

The future is complicated, with a lot of huge, complex problems to solve. Let's make sure we've got our best people working on those problems in the way that suits them best. And then we've got to make sure we listen to our extroverts and

our introverts and everyone who sits somewhere in between on the scale. We're going to need all of them.

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After you watch

Are you more of an extrovert or an introvert? Try to figure it out and then talk to a friend and see if they have the same idea about you. Also, try to use three new words that you have learned from the talk. As always, you can read the transcript at any time too.

