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Alone Together: Introverts, Extroverts and Team Dynamics

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In 2012, Susan Cain, a former Wall Street lawyer and consultant, wrote Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking. Since then, she has spoken to audiences all over the world on the topic of introverts, their relationships with extroverts, and workplace dynamics. Cain's book reached No. 4 on The New York Times best-seller list, and her TED Talk is listed among the 10 most popular ever given. Here are highlights of her research and ideas from the TED Talk she gave in 2013, as well as an interpretation about how best to apply these concepts to actuarial leadership.

Susan Cain's research has led her to conclude that from a third to half of all people are introverts.¹ Introverted individuals are those who often take pleasure in solitary activities, and are typically perceived as being more reserved or reflective. Extroverts, on the other hand, primarily obtain gratification from outside themselves.²

Introvert and extrovert dynamics matter in the actuarial profession, in the way that we understand the environment that best allows our colleagues to thrive.

There's an old joke that goes, "How do you tell the difference between an accountant and an actuary?" Answer: "An actuary will look at your shoes while they are talking to you instead of their own." (Sorry, accountants.) There is no data immediately available regarding what percentage of actuaries are introverts, but the stereotype is that we are a largely introverted profession. For the sake of argument, let's assume it is more than half of us.

Introvert and extrovert dynamics matter in the actuarial profession, in the way that we understand the environment that best allows our colleagues to thrive. Introverts tend to recharge their internal batteries much differently than extroverts do. For example, an introvert may prefer to be alone and reading a book for an hour, whereas an extrovert will gain energy in a social setting amongst many people. In their own way, they each will feel rejuvenated at the end of that hour. In fact, one of the ways that personality assessments determine where you fall on the introvert or extrovert spectrum is to ask what situations make you feel most or least energized.

By recognizing that more introverted and extroverted team members may have very different ways that they prefer to interact with one another, leaders can put team members in the environment that allows them to feel the most comfortable and to generate their best energy.

Today, according to Cain, we are regrettably moving toward a culture that values extroverts and their skill sets, and often makes it difficult for introverts to succeed. One perfect example of this is brainstorming. This group activity often results in mirroring, when we tend to get behind the figuratively loudest person in the room. There may not be any correlation, however, between what that person is saying and whether we think it is right.

So how do we give our introverted employees—and ourselves—the best chance to succeed? How do we, as a largely introverted profession, find a way to overcome limitations that we place on introverts and encourage them to be the strongest contributors they possibly can? Here are some things you can do as a leader:

- **Give your team an opportunity to prepare for brainstorming sessions ahead of time.** The extroverts may enjoy the opportunity to collectively think together, but this can deter introverts from participating and fully contributing. If you want to get everyone together to share or collect their thoughts, ask them ahead of time to consider what you want them to discuss. This will encourage the introverts to be well-prepared to contribute on topics they have had time to think about.
- **Ask for input from your most introverted team members first.** In a group setting, it is often the case that after the first person speaks, the group tends to follow his or her tone. When you start with the introverts, the extroverted members of your team will likely have no problem jumping in later; but the other way around, it may be more difficult to tease out the better ideas from the introverted members.
- **Give your team some alone time, especially the introverts.** When you need something from a team member,



even if it is relatively urgent, ask how long he or she needs to complete it and if the instructions are clear. Your more introverted team members may prefer some time on their own to process and complete the task, while your more extroverted team members may seek to complete it collaboratively or get back together soon to ask questions or discuss the assignment. Be flexible in how you manage each employee by either preparing to work more interactively or waiting to get back together to review results. Adjusting your management style to accommodate each employee's preferred working style will give your team members the best chance to succeed.

- **Make sure to give each team member a chance to participate.** If there is an introvert on your team who has an opinion that you value, don't end the meeting without allowing this person to speak and contribute. Introverts may have a difficult time finding the right place to jump into a group discussion, even if they have something valuable to contribute. It is up to you as the manager to make sure to ask for, and receive, their feedback.

Ultimately, as leaders in a profession heavily populated with introverts, we must be aware of our strengths while understanding how to provide our teams—and ourselves—with the best opportunity for success. If you begin to think about how to engage both your introverted and extroverted employees effectively, you will increase participation, enhance collaboration on projects, and improve the overall team dynamics, all of which can lead you and your team to be more successful in the future. ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.thisinsider.com/what-is-an-introvert-am-i-introverted-2017-3>
- 2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extraversion_and_introversion