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# The leader within

Most IS professionals are introverts.  
Does that mean they can never be leaders?  
Not if they develop...

BY **ALAN S. HOROWITZ**

(October 28, 1996) If you hope to rise to a leadership position but are afraid your introverted personality will thwart your ambitions, take heart. The good news, experts say, is that introverts can be effective leaders, too. Chances are you have strengths that can be the foundation of a strong leadership style.

And there are many ways to improve on any weaknesses that hold you back. The experts' message: Don't give up.

### **The fact is, introverts have a lot going for them.**

"The introvert is the most effective leader. He's quieter, more observant, more of a listener, longer in thought. To me, these are assets to leadership," says L. Paul Ouellette, CEO of Ouellette & Associates Consulting, Inc., an information systems human resources consultancy in Bedford, N.H.

Darwin A. John, the soft-spoken managing director of information and communications systems at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, breaks down leadership into two qualities: the ability to create and set a vision, and the ability to communicate that vision and mobilize people to carry it out. According to John, creating the vision is best done by introverts, who are thoughtful and able to visualize the future.

The second quality, which emphasizes communication, mobilization and building a sense of excitement, is where the extrovert has the edge, he says. The challenge that IS professionals often face, John adds, is "being able to see it but not being able to get it implemented."

Bart Bolton, a consultant in Upton, Mass., who facilitates leadership training forums for the Society of Information Management, says he likes the introvert's technical know-how. "A leader must have followers," he says. "If somebody has a high level of expertise, others will follow that person because of that expertise, not because [that person] can get up on a podium and give a speech."

Introverts tend to think things through and consider situations carefully, which is a strength. Extroverts, says Shandon Gubler, director of electronic products at the Covey Leadership Center in Provo, Utah, are so confident of their ability to persuade people that they often don't properly prepare and fully consider their ideas. "I would take a person who is well-prepared, that has introverted tendencies, over one who is falling back on their personality ethic," he says.

Introverts "are smart, and they come with that powerful analytical capacity," says Dick Dooley, a consultant in Riverwoods, Ill., and a former chief information officer at major banks.

Thoughtful, good at listening, careful, analytical, technically knowledgeable, smart, well-prepared these traits of introverts can be valuable leadership assets to build upon.

### **What to do**

You don't have to become an extrovert to be an effective leader, but you will need some of the extrovert's skills. And although they may not come naturally, there is no shortage of ways to develop and improve those skills, even if you can't get away to take a leadership training program.

Leadership requires interacting with people, which doesn't come naturally to introverts. Harvey Shrednick, a self-described introvert and ex-CIO who is director of research at the Center for Information Technology at Arizona State University in Tempe, recommends that introverts master needed leadership skills by doing them over and over again, much as they might do morning exercises.

"You've got to get out of your office and pepper your schedule with stuff where you're engaging people and proactively seeking out people," he says. The Myers-Briggs personality test (see story, page 75) pegged Shrednick as having a significant tendency toward introversion. "In order to combat that, I had to consciously push myself to break out of my inner self," he says.

If you tend to be an observer rather than a leader, force yourself to take the initiative. "We [in IS] have typically had the kind of people who go away and write code by themselves. The introvert [has] discomfort in being the initiator and being proactive," says Jeff Clancy, a self-described introvert who until recently was vice president of information services at Citizens Gas & Coke in Indianapolis. He is now vice president of human resources.

Ouellette recommends another way to push yourself: When you leave town, turn over management responsibilities to your trusted assistant and tell him not to call you. Introverted leaders sometimes overmanage; this is a way to break that habit.

There are other habits to break. "You must be thinking not so much about the sophistication of your code as about yourself as a business manager," says Bob King, vice president of information services at United Healthcare Corp. in Hartford, Conn. "Talk about things like, 'When this program runs it has this kind of benefits.' Connect your effort to the business priorities or business benefits that your company has. That's not a habit most IS people follow."

Because introverts often have a hard time acknowledging their subordinates' efforts, Sherman Roberts, a program manager at the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies in Cambridge, Mass., recommends carrying 3- by 5-inch cards on which to record the names of people you compliment and whose performance improvement you reinforce and to note the frequency of such feedback.

Also, people who are uncomfortable with communications can sometimes generate inappropriate aggression. "The classic systems programmer is going to tell you how dumb you are first before he tells you the solution to the problem because he has to demonstrate how smart he is," Dooley says.

Gubler recommends that introverts not hide their discomfort with public speaking, personal interaction and the like. "I would advise them to go public with their weakness right off the bat," he says. "If a person goes public, they've set themselves up to be helped."

Perhaps the most important thing the introverted IS leader can do is acknowledge his shortcomings and make a commitment to improve those skills. As Normand L. Frigon Sr., co-author of *The Leader* (Amacom, 1996, \$17.95), says, "If you are an introverted person, very computer-centric, the first thing you have to decide is, 'Yes, I want to be a leader. Therefore, there are certain things I know I must work on.'"

Acknowledging that while building on your strengths as an introvert makes the journey toward becoming a successful leader much shorter and faster.