

The Isolated Leader: Extraverted and Introverted Styles

By Manya Arond-Thomas

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When an executive moves up the hierarchical ladder in the organization, the promotion is often accompanied by an increasing sense of isolation and loneliness. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee coined the phrase “CEO disease” to describe the isolation of top executives in their book *Primal Leadership*. It refers to an information vacuum around leaders, created when people withhold important and sometimes unpleasant information.

Life is indeed lonely at the top. People may appear more reluctant to share information, staff members may be less forthcoming about emerging issues, and colleagues don't engage as openly in dialogue. As executives struggle to make sense of this loneliness, it is important to understand how the personality preferences for extraversion and introversion contribute to a leader's isolation.

The psychiatrist, Carl Jung, observed that people have a preference for introversion or extraversion. Extraverts prefer to direct their energy to and draw energy from the external world whereas introverts prefer to direct their energy to and draw energy from the internal world. Each preference has its own strengths and pitfalls, which play out in communication styles and habits.

Extraverted leaders are drawn to interact with the external world and to bounce ideas off people. They tend to make quick decisions and move into action, sometimes before enough time for reflection and analysis. They often think out loud, and share ideas without forethought. Thus, there is more transparency with extraverts - what you see is what you get.

They like to bring people together to explore issues. However, the extraverted executive may overwhelm and intimidate people, push ideas prematurely, and

unintentionally reveal confidences. When ideas are leaked or taken as decisions rather than mere brainstorming possibilities, the executive feels betrayed. The extravert may then stop sharing information and self-impose a cautious isolation.

Introverted leaders, on the other hand, may continue to reflect when it is time for action and their preference for internal processing may exclude others. Furthermore, their communication style is often more indirect so that others don't always understand what's most important to them, and they are often perceived as "hard to read".

While introverts seek out solitary time in order to process internally, whether gathering information or reflecting, this may cause others to perceive them as aloof, distant, unapproachable and even arrogant. The introverted executive typically develops strategies for creating solitude even in the midst of busy organizational life. Thus, appointments may be difficult to get, meetings may be highly structured and organized, and there may be little room for spontaneous sharing and brainstorming.

Both types of leaders can become isolated through externally created conditions or self-imposed ones. They either move toward isolation because their colleagues and staff pull away, or they remove themselves from the interactive field when problems arise.

With self-awareness, feedback, and coaching, both types can learn to balance out their natural styles. The introverted leader can learn to involve others and to share information more frequently. The extraverted leader can learn how to continue to work with others without the dangers inherent in sharing information prematurely or dominating the conversation and missing the input of the quieter introverts.

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