

THE TRUTH ABOUT CONFIDENCE

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“Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are.”

Theodore Roosevelt

The beginning of a new year: how many of us have made resolutions at one point to be different in some way? These commitments often arise from our internal sense of not doing - or not being - quite 'enough' of something. When this relates to how we are at work, it may be prompted by the prevailing culture, both inside and outside the office walls.

One characteristic that is typically valued in both social and workplace cultures is that of confidence. Until recently, the assumption in many work sectors was that leaders exhibit an assertive, decisive self-confidence. Similarly on social media, an apparently extroverted ideal prevails. For many people though, behaving self-assuredly in this way does not come naturally, takes significant emotional effort to maintain and, long-term, creates a sense of inauthenticity. Recent studies have found that a third to a half of the working population tends more towards the introverted end of the personality spectrum, while some people are 'ambiverts', with aspects of both characteristics (see definitions below). Gender can play a factor: women commonly report feeling less dominant, less outspoken and less confident at work, while successful men may be particularly vulnerable to imposter phenomenon when under pressure.

However, many people experience times when acting out of character is necessary. We are all faced with the need to 'perform' in some way in daily life, often in the work context. What is our capacity to override our natural traits? Psychological studies have shown that we are able successfully to go against our biological make-up and act in different ways from our natural selves, when we are pursuing certain projects or goals which are important to us. This is particularly so for more introverted individuals who are required to act as 'pseudo-extroverts', for example at networking events or when giving presentations. Knowing that the necessary behaviour is time-limited, and that there will be an opportunity afterwards in which to restore their natural equilibrium, allows those individuals to 'perform' without detriment to their wellbeing. Interestingly, it appears that it is more challenging for extroverts to tone down their exuberant confidence, and that they find the process less rewarding and more stressful than an introvert does having to step out of character.

While the prevailing myth has been that extroversion is correlated with success, so has the value of introverts in society and the workplace been under-recognised. The work environment plays a vital role in supporting or, in some cases, constraining individuals' sense of themselves in work contexts. Introverts and extroverts tend to engage with work in different ways, particularly where this involves team-oriented problem-solving. Their ability to do this freely impacts on both individual and team performance. Managers and team members who are able to understand and accommodate variation in personality type engender better work and stronger working relationships. The powerful driving force which enables core personality to be overridden when pursuing important projects and goals should also be borne in mind.

What about the myth of the extroverted leader? Increasingly, it is being accepted that effective leadership is less about 'command and control', and more about engaging the team. If there is an unshakeable confidence to be shown, it should be rather in the individual qualities and abilities of the people who make up the organisation. In the context of our volatile, uncertain and complex world, leaders should aim to foster a work environment where individuals are enabled to feel less anxious, less fearful and less self-conscious. This requires leaders who are neither self-interested nor over-confident, but who remind others around them what they are capable of. What is required from truly confident leadership is the desire and impetus to create a work culture in which people engage authentically, feel valued and remain resilient.

Key term definitions

- **Extroversion** – deriving energy from other people, noise and outgoing activity; consistently seeking social interaction.
- **Introversion** – while sometimes or often enjoying the company of other people, having a need to recharge in a quieter, less sociable environment, often on one's own and/or where there is more space to reflect.
- **Ambiversion** – having aspects of both of these characteristics, perhaps at different times or in different situations.
- **Imposter Phenomenon** – despite being successful or reaching a position of seniority, having a fear of being 'found out' and a sense that achievements have been attained through trickery or fluke. This is surprisingly common, but can be successfully worked through.

Tips for Consideration

- Consider the physical workplace set-up. Open-plan offices may be difficult for introverts to work and think in. There needs to be a place for introverts to close themselves off and find quiet space to work.
- Team meetings often work better for confident extroverts than for introverts; the latter may feel silenced, to both their and the team's detriment. There are techniques which

allow and encourage everyone in a team meeting to speak. These can fundamentally change team dynamics and facilitate non-judgmental contribution.

- For the introvert required to act out of character: think through what is needed in advance, how much time it is likely to take, and how and where it is possible to recharge in a quiet space afterwards. Repeatedly practising this technique will gradually build confidence and the capacity to remain so in more situations.

Further reading

Quiet: the Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking

B Little - *Me, Myself and Us: the Science of Personality and the Art of Well-Being*

K Kay & C Shipman - *The Confidence Code*

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