
Tapping quiet talent

In a talkative world, nobody gets to hear what introverts think. And companies are losing out as a result.

It's all too easy to underestimate introverts: they're good listeners but much less comfortable with speaking. Yet introverts are often extremely creative – exactly the kind of person a successful business needs. In 2001, management theorist Jim Collins discovered that many top companies were actually led by introverts. A decade later, American author Susan Cain has published a best-selling book about this shy and retiring species. THE FOCUS talked to Susan Cain about her findings, the potential that introverts have, and how businesses can best develop it.

More than a decade ago, management theorist Jim Collins researched what were then the eleven best-performing companies. His findings, presented in his book *Good to Great*, ran counter to everything they teach you at Harvard Business School: Collins found that every single one of those eleven companies was headed by a CEO described by colleagues as shy, quiet, unassuming, low-key and soft-spoken. Collins's findings are all the more remarkable because he hadn't set out to make a point about quiet leadership. But when he analyzed what the highest-performing companies had in common, the nature of their CEOs jumped out at him. What marked out these exceptional leaders was not their flair and charisma but their combination of extreme humility and intense professional determination. Those who worked with them tended to use terms like quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, and understated to describe them. The lesson, argued Collins, is clear: we don't need giant personalities to transform companies. We need leaders who build the institutions they run, not their own egos. In a word, we need introverts.

And research indicates that there are plenty of them around: at least one-third of the people we all know are introverts. They're the ones who prefer listening to speaking, reading to partying; who favor working on their own over brainstorming in teams; who innovate and create but shy away from self-promotion.

If those statistics surprise you, that's probably because so many introverts actually pretend to be extroverts. These closet introverts pass undetected in playgrounds, in high-school lockers, and in the corridors of corporate America. Some even manage to fool themselves until some life event – a layoff, an empty nest, an inheritance that frees them to spend their time as they like – jolts them into taking stock of their true nature.

It makes sense that so many introverts hide even from themselves, says Susan Cain, author of the best-selling but controversial book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Cain argues that our society is based on a value system that she

calls the "Extrovert Ideal" – the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha, and comfortable in the spotlight. Archetypal extroverts prefer action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt. They favor quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong, work well in teams, and like to socialize in groups. It's an ideal, Cain argues, that's promoted not only by our celebrity culture and Hollywood movies but also by large corporations and business schools. We like to think that we value individuality, but all too often, we admire one type of individual – the kind who is comfortable putting himself out there.

A risky equation

And there's the rub: the very nature of introversion makes it difficult to even detect, let alone tap into, this alternative potential. If we assume that quiet and loud people have roughly the same number of good (and bad) ideas, then we should worry if the louder and more forceful people always carry the day. That would mean that an awful lot of bad ideas prevail while a lot of good ones get ignored. Yet studies in group dynamics suggest that this is exactly what happens. We see talkers as leaders, as smarter than quiet types.

All of this would be fine if more talking were correlated with greater insight, but research suggests that there is no such link. If we favor extroverts, we neglect the input and potential of introverts by championing a personality style that is confident and appears to know more than is actually the case – "the kind of person who is very comfortable taking risks and who tends to pursue short-term gratification," as Susan Cain describes it. She believes the recent financial crisis, particularly at its height in 2008, was the direct result of "a corporate culture that disproportionately rewarded this type of person and had no respect at all for the kind of person who was quieter, more circumspect, more cautious – who wanted to evaluate risks before jumping in." The impact, Cain believes, is plain to see in the damage to the economy.

More recently, Jim Collins's findings on the correlation of introversion with success in business have been confirmed and fleshed out in research by management professor Adam Grant. He shows that introverted leaders tend to get more out of proactive employees, who are really excited about what they are doing. Susan Cain argues that it makes sense that introverts are uniquely good at leading initiative-takers: because they are inclined to listen to others and have no interest in dominating social situations, introverts are more likely to hear and cultivate ideas. Having benefited from the talents of their followers, they then motivate them to be even more proactive. Introverted leaders create a virtuous circle of proactivity.

And new, successful corporate models led by an entirely different type of person are beginning to emerge. Susan Cain points out that Google CEO Larry Page, for example, is a complete introvert and that the company has a lot of introverted engineers on its staff – people who are quietly changing the world. In recent years, in fact, the champions of new technologies have tended to be people comfortable with a counter-culture, Cain adds. People like Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak grew up in what she calls “a counter-cultural moment” in California, and their values and ideals are now shaping today's counter-culture. It's characterized by the notion that to have true creativity, you really need all kinds of different people and you need to allow people to be themselves. Indeed, Cain practices what she preaches: she has chosen an extrovert as her business partner for her new venture, a company that will deliver the tools to empower introverts to draw on their natural strengths in a world geared more to the “Extrovert Ideal”.

Finding a voice

And in a neat symmetry, the new technologies created by introverts are helping other introverts to find their voice. Susan Cain cites Douglas Conant, CEO of the Campbell Soup Company, who recently used a blog for Harvard Business Review to write about being shy and introverted: “Once he started opening up to employees about this, not only did they understand him better but they themselves started feeling more comfortable talking about who they really are. He created a culture of trust and openness. It has to come from the top,” argues Cain.

The burgeoning social media have also helped make new forms of leadership possible for scores of people who don't fit the Harvard Business School mold. Studies show that introverts

are more likely than extroverts to express intimate facts about themselves online that their family and friends would be surprised to read, to say that they can only express the “real me” online, and to spend more time in certain kinds of online discussion. They welcome the chance to communicate digitally. The same person who would never raise his hand in a lecture hall in front of two hundred people might blog to two thousand, or two million, without thinking twice.

These are promising beginnings, says Susan Cain. People are starting to understand that there is not only one way of being successful. However, the “Extrovert Ideal” is still dominant. Introverts trying to live up to it are like women in a man's world, she suggests – discounted because of a bias that goes to the core of who they are. And while companies and their staff are now comfortable discussing areas such as gender or sexual orientation at work, she argues, we don't yet have a shared language for talking about personality types; we're currently in a consciousness-raising period similar to the one we went through with women's issues 40 or 50 years ago.

Cain suggests that introverts also have other things going for them. Companies often rush into decisions, but it's actually not that difficult to take ten minutes to sit down and think about something. Having time to listen and think is a basic human need, she believes, and research shows that brief brainstorming really isn't as effective as people sitting by themselves and thinking. The introverts' cause may also be helped by the growing trend to humanize business. People want to see businesses operated on a more human scale. Part of that is accepting that there are different kinds of people, Susan Cain concludes: “It's an issue we really cannot afford to walk away from. If you're managing an organization, you're dependent on your introverts, you're dependent on your extroverts, and you're dependent on them working together effectively to create businesses that work.”



Photo: Aaron Fedor

Susan Cain

Susan Cain spent seven years as a corporate lawyer and negotiations consultant but never felt entirely comfortable in her chosen career. Cain, who has degrees from Princeton University and Harvard Law School, identified her introversion as the reason for her discomfort; her best-selling *Quiet. The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* was published by Crown in 2012. She now plans to set up her own company to deliver the tools that will empower introverts to draw on their own natural strengths. And Cain leads by example: she's chosen an extrovert as her business partner.