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Introverts can be nurse leaders, too

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

NATALIE SANCHEZ recently was promoted to a nurse manager position. So far, she thinks, things are going well. She is starting to feel comfortable with her new role and establishing relationships with her staff. So she's surprised when her director asks to meet with her and tells her she's not being social enough. She advises her to plan to go to the cafeteria each day and have lunch with the rest of the management team.

Natalie's heart sinks because she enjoys eating lunch alone; she uses her lunch break to recharge her batteries. Before accepting the manager position, she'd worried whether she had the right personality for the job. She sees herself as quiet and reflective—not extroverted and talkative like most nurse leaders she knows.



Many nurse leaders are introverted and share Natalie's concern over this personality trait. In the United States, we tend to value extroversion and view it as a key leadership quality. In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, author Susan Cain observes that "introverts living under the extroversion ideal are like women in a man's world, discounted because of a trait that goes to the core of who they are. Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we've turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform." Cain believes introversion isn't a negative trait, contending many introverted leaders are more creative and careful than extroverts in their approach to managing problems and risks.

Introverted leaders provide important balance in organizations, which need both introverts and extroverts. Many widely respected world leaders have been introverts, including Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, Warren Buffet, Bill Gates, and Al Gore.

Besides providing balance to organizations, introverted leaders may excel at mentoring, empowering, and developing people.

Introversion vs. extroversion

The terms *introversion* and *extroversion* have a different meaning in psychology than they do in everyday conversation. Psychiatrist Carl Jung introduced them to describe different personality dimensions that reflect how and from where an individual obtains energy. (See *Extroversion-introversion continuum*.)

Extroverts draw their energy from the outer world of people and things. They enjoy talking through problems with others and prefer active involvement in many activities. You're probably an extrovert if these statements, adapted from the Myers-Briggs Type fundamentals, apply to you:

- Others see me as an outgoing person and describe me as a "people" person.
- I feel comfortable in groups and like working in them.
- I have a wide range of friends and know lots of people.
- I sometimes jump too quickly into an activity and don't allow enough time to think it over.
- Before I start a project, I sometimes forget to get clear on what I want to do and why.

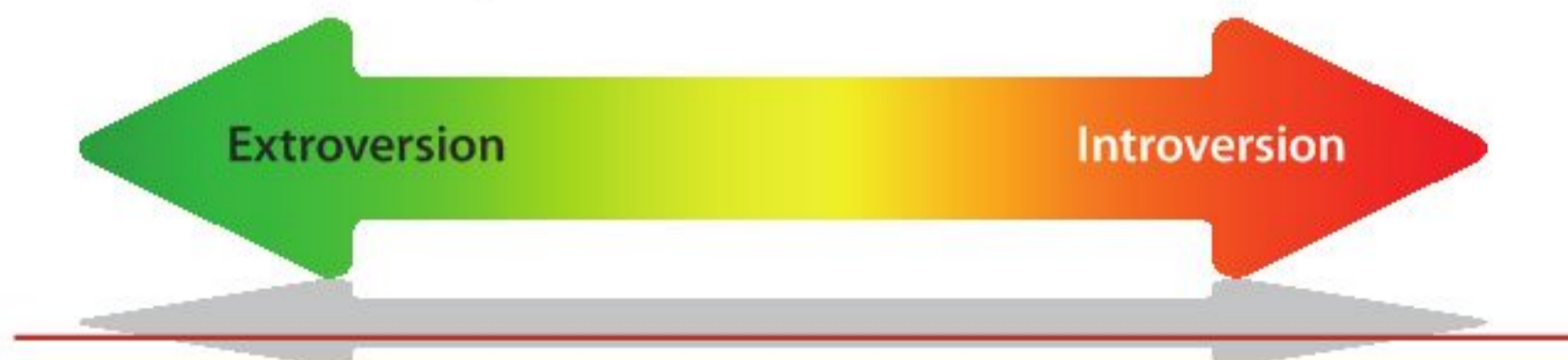
By contrast, introverts draw energy from quiet reflection and lose energy when interacting with large groups of people. If you're an introvert, you're more likely to suffer from "people exhaustion" when you don't have time to reenergize (like Natalie in our scenario). You're probably an introvert if these statements, adapted from the Myers-Briggs Type fundamentals, apply to you:

- Others see me as reflective or reserved.
- I feel comfortable being alone and like things I can do on my own.
- I prefer just to know a few people well.
- I sometimes spend too much time reflecting and don't move into action quickly enough.
- I sometimes forget to check with the outside world to see if my ideas really fit the experience.

Extroversion-introversion continuum

Extroversion and introversion are thought to exist on a continuum, with some people being extremely extroverted, some in the middle, and some extremely introverted. In the United States, research shows that slightly more than half the population are extroverts, but the percentage among those in leadership positions is much higher.

Some introverts can adjust their behavior successfully according to social context, but given a choice, they treasure their time alone. Extroverts may have a hard time understanding introverts and their need for “alone time.”



Strengths of introverted leaders

Historically, extroversion has been viewed as important in leadership. But some argue that today's workplace and workforce are better served by more introverted leaders with high degrees of emotional intelligence. In his book, *Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work*, David Rock cites neuroscience research that suggests effective leaders should focus on mentoring, empowering, and developing people—behaviors more typical of introverts than extroverts.

Introversion doesn't mean a leader is shy, fearful, or unable to take action. Rather, it's a way of processing the world and information. Introverts have many strengths. They think first and talk later, and they tend to be better listeners than extroverts. They focus on depth, not superficiality. They exude calm and have less need to be the center of attention. They're comfortable with the written word. And they're more inclined to empower employees.

A less-discussed strength of introverts is their ability to negotiate successfully with the isolation that leaders often feel. It can be lonely at the top for a leader advancing up the career ladder. Introverts are less bothered by the sometimes solitary nature of leadership work.

Know your possible weaknesses

If you're introverted, be aware that your need for solitude can lead staff to think you're aloof, arrogant, or even unfriendly. Although it may be difficult for you, make an effort to get out of your office and interact with staff, peers, patients, and their families. If you avoid social events because you find them draining (as do many introverts), you'll need to push yourself to go, even if just for brief periods. Introverts relish their privacy, so introverted leaders need to work harder to help people know who they are.

Maximize your potential as an introverted leader

Susan Cain offers excellent ideas introverts can use to maximize their potential as leaders. Here are some suggestions drawn from her work and that of other leadership experts:

- Recognize there's nothing wrong with you. You just operate differently and have capacities others might not see immediately.
- Be selective about the leadership opportunities you accept. You're more likely to succeed in situations that let you engage deeply in your work and require less socialization.
- Know you can become deeply engaged in a project and lose track of time. Although this may help you solve complex problems, it may lead you to

ignore other important parts of your role.

- Carve out restorative niches in your workday to replenish your energy.
- Schedule time during the day when you're able to work alone.
- Avoid multitasking. Introverts are more likely to feel less productive when multitasking.
- When socializing, focus more on one-to-one interactions with a few people rather than trying to “work the room,” which can be exhausting.
- Recognize that to accomplish your work more effectively, at times you'll need to push yourself out there to engage staff or socialize. (For instance, in our scenario, Natalie doesn't need to eat lunch with the team every day, but should make an effort to do so once or twice a week.)
- Delegate some of the activities you find exhausting to more extroverted members of the leadership team.

Introverted nurses can—and do—make great nurse leaders. One of the best nurse leaders I know is introverted. She readily admits this tendency to staff and even jokes about her occasional need for solitude as she leaves social events. She offers excellent guidance for introverted nurse leaders: Know who you are. Be honest with others, but push yourself outside your comfort zone when it's important to do so. ★

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