

Communication Advice for Introverted Leaders in Law Firms

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Yvonne:

According to some studies, about half or slightly more than half of the people around the world land on the introverted side of the spectrum. Yet, according to one survey, 9 out of 10 people feel pressured to act extroverted.^[1]

Close your eyes. Picture a great leader. How would you describe that person's personality and leadership style? A common perception is that bolder and more outgoing types of people tend to have more followers and sway. However, it is interesting to note that some of the most influential leaders of our time, like Barack Obama and Bill Gates, are introverts.^[2]

As we gravitate towards remote work and distributed teams in the legal industry, it is more important than ever to find ways to effectively communicate with team members. If you are an introverted leader or work with one at your law firm, here are some ideas for how you can improve your communications.

Larry:

If you lift the hood and look at the underlying biology behind introversion and extroversion, you find that they are essentially two different strategies to manage and meter cerebral stimulation. This single fact explains a whole lot about this personality trait. People often mistakenly assume that introverts are shy or that they avoid people. The truth is, all human beings need people. An introverted personality trait simply tells us that the individual is already generating copious amounts of cerebral stimulation internally, and thus they try to manage and minimize the amount of additional stimuli that impact them from the outside. Introverts still seek out relationships—it's just that they may do so in a way that keeps the stimuli to a minimum. For example, most introverts prefer one-on-one interactions while many extroverts prefer getting together with bunches of other people—it's more stimulating for them. Introverts charge their battery by seeking out downtime, which may be solitude, or other low-stimulation activities, while extroverts charge their battery by seeking out external sources of stimuli.

Even though we need to manage our energy to be effective in the world, we also need to adapt to the preferences of our teams and the world to effectuate change. Good leaders understand how to adapt in two significant ways—first, you have to know yourself. You're no good to others if you deplete your own cognitive resources, so rule number one is to "Put your own oxygen mask on first." For example, introverted leaders need to take the initiative to manage "incoming"—perhaps after interacting with your colleagues all day, you might prefer room service over a noisy dinner with those colleagues, even though you like them and otherwise enjoy being with them. Rule #2 is to adapt to your constituents. You need to understand your own level of extroversion or introversion and also, to the extent possible, the mix of extroversion and introversion among your constituents. If you're not sure, it usually makes sense to employ communication strategies that have something for everyone—e.g., provide written materials for introverts who wish to absorb information quietly on their own, and deliver the same information from a platform to an assembled group so that the extroverts get their needs met

as well.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a personality assessment that's been around since the 1940's. It's a tool that can help a leader understand the preferences of their constituents for extroversion or introversion.

Something I've noticed from my own work is that extroverted tendencies in the legal profession have barely changed over time. As part of my doctoral research, between 1989 and 1991, I gathered data from over 3,000 attorneys across the U.S.: in every U.S. state, in every major practice area, from private practice to corporate legal departments, law professors, military, non-profits, and government – a really good cross-section of the legal profession – and wrote my dissertation about what I found. Since then, I have performed several smaller studies and every one of those studies pretty much looks like a microcosm of the original research. Basically, the data show almost no change in the distribution of Myers Briggs personality types among lawyers between 1989 and today. Even though the nature of the legal profession, society, skills, and technology have changed since 1989, personality hasn't changed much, with one exception: the Thinker-Feeler scale of the Myers Briggs. Slightly more people today have a Feeler preference than they did 30 years ago. Nevertheless, lawyers with a Thinker preference still outnumber those with a Feeler preference. (Note that it's about 50/50 in the general public.) This dramatic skewing towards Thinker in the legal profession makes sense because the legal profession is a knowledge-based profession. We can ask a normative question: should it be that way? Perhaps not, because what is needed today is great leadership through periods of change. We have a lot of change going on today. If we take time to understand leaders' and followers' Myers-Briggs preferences, we can help them communicate more effectively through periods of change. Any great leader needs to be aware of the personality types of their team members in order to effectuate change.

It's interesting: one's tendency for extroversion or introversion is the most genetically predisposed personality trait of any personality trait as far as I know. There are several longitudinal studies that show that the quiet or noisy attribute of babies accurately predicts whether they'll grow up to become introverted or extroverted adults.^[3]

Just because you're born with a predisposition towards extroversion or introversion doesn't mean that you can't adapt once you're in a leadership role. Leaders who "enter the world" of their constituents, and thus gain rapport, are much more likely to build trust and gain buy-in from those constituents, even if it means the leader may have to briefly tolerate some moments of mild discomfort in doing so. William Washington is a self-proclaimed introverted leader. He is going to provide us with some examples of how he has learned to reach both introverts and extroverts on his team.

William:

With over 120 finance professionals and over 2,500 attorneys that I interact with, communication is very important. Even before this pandemic, I was looking for ways to communicate effectively and efficiently. As an introvert, I don't mind meetings and communication but I'm careful to allot time in my day to recharge and handle other responsibilities. I have a system of blocking my calendar which allows me to balance work time and decompress time. My assistant notices when I ambitiously take on too much and she proactively works to clear my calendar as needed. Still, I am often caught off guard during those scheduled breaks by an unexpected urgent matter that requires me to engage. Every day is not ideal, but it would be a lot worse if I did not have this clear system.

My team is important to me and I stress that communication is the cornerstone of any relationship. It's as Larry said: if I'm going to show them they are important, I have to be open to communicating with them in a way that works for *them*. In one of my favorite books on leadership, John Maxwell's [The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership](#), he says "It's one thing to communicate to people because you believe you have something of value to say. It's another to communicate with

people because you believe they have value.”

To do this, I communicate with my team through multiple channels. For instance, I believe it is important to communicate the strategic priorities for my team to everyone on the team, regardless of where they are located. After sharing the priorities with my core leadership team, I circulate a monthly newsletter to every team member. In the newsletter, I make sure I frequently mention the strategic priorities for the month. Each month, I also announce the “Mckeeon” award to highlight members of the team who exhibit the qualities or accomplish goals that help us achieve our strategic priorities. The Mckeeon award itself was named after a former team member who embodied these qualities on a daily basis.

The pandemic has challenged me to think of additional ways to reach my team. I keep a printed directory in front of me throughout the day. It has the phone number of everyone on my team. Each day, instead of my normal routine of taking a break to decompress, I use that time to call 3-4 employees just to check-in to see how they are balancing life/work and the complexities of today’s realities. For me, it would have been nice when I was young in my career to have the CFO give me a call at home just to check and see how I was doing (FYI – that never happened, but I can recall the one time where I had an extended personal conversation with the CFO of Accenture when I was an analyst).

Additionally, I am holding weekly town hall-style meetings with my team during this pandemic. There is a lot of communication floating around and an endless number of reports in the media. I thought it would be helpful to offer a consistent voice and provide an opportunity for the team members’ voices to be heard as well.

Yvonne – I would be remiss if I didn’t mention how you introduced the idea of carving out time for fun breaks (which I used to call “forced fun” but have since come to understand that such breaks have real value and are truly fun when done right). You came in and facilitated great sessions with our team where, for half an hour at a time, they were able to forget about their jobs and connect with each other in a much more casual atmosphere. I have since adopted that model and initiated what I’ve called my “Monday Motivational Sessions” where I gather 8-10 team members for a Zoom call. Here, I encourage the team to get rid of virtual backgrounds and to mute their phones. We create a much more dynamic environment and then go through a series of fun PowerPoint slides meant to spark conversation. This is in stark contrast to my normal version of fun where I disappear to read a book but, as a leader, I gain more by giving of myself even when it’s uncomfortable and FUN!

Yvonne:

Wow. Thank you, Larry and William. Thus far, we’ve heard an expert in lawyer psychology talk about personality tendencies in the U.S. legal profession and a self-proclaimed introverted leader of an AmLaw 10 firm share some examples of how he communicates with his team. I would like to end this article by offering some suggestions for how team members can more effectively communicate with their introverted leaders:

Schedule and prepare for discussions

Interrupting an introvert’s thought flow can be particularly annoying to them. Extroverts are more comfortable juggling unexpected phone calls and knocks on the office door. With introverts, it is important to schedule time for discussions rather than have them on the fly. When possible, allow introverts to prepare for a discussion by providing them with an agenda. Likewise, allow them to process information – give them time to pause and respond during a conversation and do not expect them to make immediate decisions after a discussion. Instead ask them “when would be a good time for me to follow up with you about this?”

Allot time for decompression after presentations

If an introvert is going to give a presentation or preside over an event, whoever is in charge of managing that person's schedule should block time, as practical, immediately following the event for the introvert to have downtime.

Provide opportunities for silent individual work in collaborative work sessions

If you are having a group work session, you can appeal to both extroverted and introverted personalities by allowing some time for group problem-solving aloud as well as "silent brainstorming." Create a silent brainstorm by carving out time for everyone to work alone and quietly for part of the session. Afterwards, invite people to share what they came up with on their own. These ideas can be shared out loud or in a more anonymous fashion (the meeting facilitator should tailor the mode for sharing ideas based on the group's predominant personality style. Please feel free to contact me for some ways to encourage anonymous idea sharing).

Have conversations about communication style preferences

It is healthy to be transparent about our engagement and communication preferences. Tell your team members how they can best capture your attention. For example: if you do not like to be involved in a flurry of email activity, it generally takes you time to respond, or if you decline or cancel a meeting because you feel too overwhelmed with a day's activities, do not be afraid to explain why. It will help people improve how they work with you and not take personally what they may otherwise interpret as avoidance or being a low priority.

Of course, much of this advice falls under common courtesy for anyone, regardless of personality type. However, if you really want to win over and be heard by an introvert, you will improve your chances by taking these steps.

About the authors:

Dr. Larry Richard is recognized as the leading expert on the psychology of lawyer behavior. A former litigator, he holds a Ph.D. in Psychology and has studied the personality traits of lawyers for over 25 years. He provides management consulting services to the legal profession through his company, LawyerBrain LLC (www.lawyerbrain.com)

As CFO – Americas for Hogan Lovells, William M. Washington, III is responsible for all the U.S. LLP's financial functions including accounting, billing and collections, treasury, and strategic finance. Prior to joining Hogan Lovells, William worked in two other AmLaw 100 law firms and has served in leadership positions in diverse industries including consulting (Accenture) and financial services (Fannie Mae). William holds a B.S. in Finance, an M.B.A., and a master's degree in law firm management. He is a Certified Manager of Quality/Organizational Excellence and a Lean Six Sigma Master Black Belt. He, his wife Tracy, and their four children reside in Washington, D.C.

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[1] <https://www.themyersbriggs.com/en-US/Connect-with-us/Blog/2020/January/World-Introvert-Day-2020>

[2] <https://www.fastcompany.com/3032028/7-famous-leaders-who-prove-introverts-can-be-wildly-successful>

[3] Cain, S. (2012). *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group.
Also see, Kagan, J. & Snidman, N. (2004). *The Long Shadow of Temperament*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.