

Mining the Gold That Is Your Introvert Employee

by David F. Smith, Ph.D., CFP®

IT IS ESTIMATED that fully 50 percent of the working population in the U.S. is somewhat to highly introverted. This means that it is possible that half of the valuable employees at a financial planning firm prefer to not be on committees, prefer to not go to conferences, prefer to work alone, prefer to think about ideas for quite a while, and prefer to avoid conflict, especially in groups.

Introversion can be confused with shyness; it is not shyness. Introversion is a person's preferred style of working with ideas, people, and the world. Shyness is an anxiety challenge.

It's likely that in planning firms you will find greater than 50 percent introverts, as the financial planning community naturally attracts people with these preferences. This presents leadership challenges.

If leaders act incorrectly with these team members, they are likely: (1) missing out on a large pool of "the next great ideas;" (2) experiencing high voluntary turnover of valuable team members; (3) managing conflict about issues that appear trivial to an extravert (especially an extravert leader); and (4) missing goals due to employee non-engagement.

These problems are avoidable if leaders consciously apply leadership behaviors appropriate to all members, especially introverts. This means implementing personal behavior tactics thoughtfully and with flexibility, considering each member individually.

Value of the One-on-One Relationship

To improve group performance, leaders must focus on the one-on-one relationship with each team member. Studies show that this one-on-one relationship is the basis for individual performance. The individual performances sum to group performance. For any leader who relies on others to get done what needs getting done (financial planning is a perfect example), leading each member is foundational, but many leaders miss this concept.

Our society systematically rewards extraversion and either directly or indirectly punishes introversion.

This one-on-one relationship has a social science name: Leader-Member Exchange relationship (LMX). The team leader has an LMX relationship of some quality with each individual team member. The LMX quality correlates with outcomes: high quality with better outcomes; low quality with worse.

Voluntary turnover of valuable employees, for example, is lower with high-quality LMX, meaning building high-quality LMX relationships with key employees translates to them not quitting. And there are many related outcomes, including less absenteeism,

lower drug and alcohol use on the job, and increased voluntary participation in extra-role activities such as taking on an extra task, volunteering for committees, and mentoring others.

If high-quality LMX is a good thing, how does a leader develop this? How does introversion play a role if a leader wants to mine that gold that is within the introverted team member?

Optimizing LMX

There are five leader behaviors, researched by the evidence-based leadership development group Five Star Leadership®, that leaders can implement tactically that accomplish this. They are: (1) inclusion; (2) respect; (3) reward; (4) improvement; and (5) modeling.

Inclusion is ensuring a team member is involved to some degree in decisions affecting them.

Respect is remembering the team member is a person; so listen, empathize, and treat them as equals.

Reward is building a formal and informal reward structure (including saying "good job") that the team member values.

Improvement behavior means that as a leader, you help the member better themselves in skills—as a person and as a team member—by having them participate in deciding what improvements are needed and desired.

Modeling is demonstrating through action the way the leader wants a member to be, to act, and to present

themselves; and showing how to best get the job done, even if delegating that to a better-qualified person.

Here are two strategies that include these behaviors that can be easily implemented by leaders who want to get more from introverted team members.

Group Discussions

The first strategy is designed to solve the problem of introverted team members not contributing to group discussions. This can be like getting a fish to participate in a buffalo migration; it may never happen. But consider the goal of the group discussion: to generate ideas, to gain consensus, and to solve problems.

An introvert is quite capable of considering the goal and is fully participating in their mind. They want to participate, they just don't want to say in a group setting what they are thinking. Throughout their whole life, when they have spoken up an extravert has jumped on the contribution in some way that requires immediate response. Unless fully prepared, this challenge is too uncomfortable for the introvert in an extravert world. Empathize with this. The strategy, then, is to respect the member and avoid the discomfort.

Prepare and distribute in advance a memo to all team members regarding the subject and goal of the discussion (this is the leader-behavior of inclusion and also perhaps improvement).

Solicit voluntary written responses in advance. Let each team member know you value their input (respect).

Collect and summarize these responses so they can be used as part of the discussion, like "One listener called in with this idea ..." Names need not be mentioned, but be prepared to assist with any discussion on the idea (respect, modeling).

Thank each contributor one-on-one after the discussion for their input and ask if there is anything they would like to add either verbally or in writing

(inclusion, reward).

Using this strategy, the leader receives thoughtful input from the introverted team member. The member gives input and feels included and is thanked. LMX quality has increased, leading to even greater rewards organizationally.

Recognizing Preferences

The second strategy to get more from an introverted employee begins with recognizing they likely do not prefer group activities that are the norm in many organizations. This leads to career problems in some cases and certainly reduces improvement opportunities.

Career problems may be things such as not volunteering for the annual party committee (which looks great for the extravert who does volunteer); not hanging out at the after-event discussion, therefore not getting to know the senior management; avoiding conferences because so much of it is fast-paced, group-oriented, and crowded; and declining to lead a discussion at a conference or teach a course.

The problem is that there is a set of activities expected of team members if they are to be viewed as go-getters. For the extravert, these activities come naturally. Our society systematically rewards extraversion and either directly or indirectly punishes introversion.

The challenge as a leader is overcoming these impediments and ensuring that introverted members have access to the career-enhancing and improvement-oriented activities in a way that fits their preference for introversion. The strategy is to: (1) find alternative means toward the end; and (2) help the team member move toward extraversion, at least regarding these goals.

Here are some ideas on how to do this:

Reverse mentorships are a great way to pair an introverted, junior team member with a senior member. In a reverse mentorship, the junior member will get to know the senior manager better and

vice-versa, be able to share ideas in a one-on-one setting, and learn to trust themselves by driving the relationship.

Provide learning opportunities for the team member that focus on how to be a public speaker, despite the introversion. Techniques such as memorizing key outline points and phrases can be taught so the team member is prepared and confident. It won't make the introvert member as agile as an extravert might be, but they will accomplish the goal thoughtfully.

Create group activity opportunities that aren't a big party. If you want the team member to show leadership, find their interest and have them start an informal club around that. Help them learn how to manage and lead through this venue.

Show respect by allowing them to find the conference they want to attend. Perhaps they don't want to go to Las Vegas, but a similar conference in Vermont might achieve the goal. Or they say "yes" to the Las Vegas conference if you agree they can opt-out of the partying that might occur. Ask them what they would want.

The leader must keep in mind the goal and help find ways to meet these goals without straining the extravert-rewarding corporate culture too much.

If you want the most out of each employee, then act as a leader for each one. It is the individual attention a leader gives through the five leader behaviors discussed here that builds and sustains high-quality LMX relationships. High-quality LMX relationships lead to better outcomes, and better outcomes meet leaders' goals. ■

David F. Smith, Ph.D., CFP®, has been involved in financial planning since 1980. He is a member of the FPA of San Diego. He is also the non-paid director of research for Five Star Leadership®, a behavioral-based leadership development and coaching platform run by the non-profit Oahu Adventures Foundation Inc.