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Leadership tips for introverts

Introverts' reflective, relationship-centered approach to leadership can be as effective as the more outgoing style favored by extroverts.

By Courtney L. Vien

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Mary Yeager, CPA, a self-described introvert, broke out of her comfort zone to use her skills to help Ohio fix an \$8 billion budget deficit. (Photo by AJ Mast/AP Images)

Mary Yeager, CPA, never dreamed she'd one day run for office. But in 2010, when the Ohio Society of CPAs asked members to advise legislators on how to turn around the state's \$8 billion deficit, Yeager volunteered. A self-described introvert, Yeager was hesitant to speak to state lawmakers at first, so she began by meeting with her city council. Members of the community saw that she was competent and dedicated, and asked her to run for a seat.

"I could have said, 'Because I'm an introvert, someone else would be better at this,' but I wanted to be part of the solution," Yeager said. "People told me, 'You're a CPA and we need your help.'"

Yeager, who works as a sole practitioner and part time for a small firm, also ran for city treasurer in 2013 and for the Ohio House in 2014. Though she didn't win, she's contemplating another run for state representative in her district this year. Her campaigns have also indirectly helped her accounting career, she said, by increasing her confidence, raising her profile in her community, and expanding her network.

"I'm still an introvert, but after running for office, I'm more outgoing than I used to be," she said.

In American business culture, leaders are often pictured as gregarious types who have no trouble addressing a crowd, schmoozing with potential clients at networking events, or voicing their opinions in meetings—in other words, extroverts. "Loud backslapping types are often seen as leaders," said business coach Nancy Ancowitz, author of the book *Self-Promotion for Introverts*. "It's a cultural bias, but it's not an accurate perception." In fact, many top business leaders, such as Warren Buffett, Charles Schwab, Marissa Mayer, and Bill Gates, are introverts.

Though introverts may have a more reserved leadership style than extroverts, they possess many qualities that make them good leaders. Their capacity for listening and reflection, for instance, helps them forge strong relationships with colleagues and clients. "Introverts have the ability to really take in what people are saying, process it, and come back to it in a meaningful way," Ancowitz said.

"People view leaders as 'life of the party' types," said Gary Boyd, CPA, a partner with top-100 firm Montgomery Coscia Greulich in Dallas. "But a lot of times leadership is being able to connect with someone and hear them out and then provide a thoughtful response or reaction."

Introverts also excel at making careful decisions that are grounded in research—a plus in an analytical field such as accounting. "Because they're introspective, introverts tend to be thoughtful and intentional," said Tamera Loerzel, a coach and a partner with ConvergenceCoaching. "They do a lot of internal processing before making a decision."

Yet, because introverts tend to be modest, they may struggle with some aspects of leadership, such as advocating for their ideas. This tendency sometimes causes them to be overlooked. As Boyd put it, if you're reluctant to take the spotlight, "people may wonder whether you know what you're doing or if you're adding value, because you don't stand up and tell them why you're there."

Introverts need to keep in mind that being a leader often entails becoming more social and visible, even if that's something that doesn't come naturally to them, said Maribel Torres-Pinero, CPA, the CEO of Lumix CPA and a member of the AICPA Digital CPA Advisory Committee. "As you grow as a leader, you'll be called on to do things like deliver presentations, give seminars and classes and webinars, and participate on boards," she said. "As an introvert you might think, 'That's not what I signed up for! I signed up for the analytical work.' But you need to move past that mindset."

However, if you're an introvert, there are techniques you can use to become more vocal, promote yourself, and contribute to business development—without going against your natural temperament. The key, introverted leaders say, is to tap into what motivates you.

THE RESERVED PERSON'S GUIDE TO SELF-PROMOTION

Yeager said that keeping her mind on the reason she got into politics helped quell her nerves when she felt anxious or intimidated. As she put it, "I'd keep focusing on the *why*. That helped me a lot—it took the focus off me."

The same principles can work on the job, too. To marshal your passions in service of your career, "lead a small group or create a presence in an area you're passionate about, like a certain niche or type of client," Loerzel suggested. To take the focus off yourself, think about how your actions will help your firm, team, or clients. When networking, for example, remember that "by building your network, you're not just serving yourself, you're serving others," Ancowitz said. "You're also helping your team members by finding out about projects that would benefit them."

To advance in your career, it's necessary to make sure key decision-makers know who you are and what you've accomplished. If you're an introvert, though, self-promotion may not come naturally. But you don't have to brag or become a social butterfly to make yourself more visible, introverted leaders say. Instead, you can capitalize on your knack for building one-on-one relationships.

Boyd recommended that introverts strategically choose people in their firm to get to know better. "Understand who the key decision-makers are in whatever environment you're in and get opportunities to speak with them in smaller settings," he said. "Then they can see that side of you that you may not be as comfortable showing in larger groups."

Another best practice, he said, is to "pick a good mentor—someone who can advocate for you if you're not always your best advocate."

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT YOUR STYLE WHEN LEADING A TEAM

Because they listen well and respond thoughtfully, introverts often make excellent one-on-one managers. They tend to take a more relaxed approach to leadership—coaching and advising others and then expecting them to follow through. Yeager, for example, said she prefers to teach others how to do things and then step back and let them perform on their own. "The only way people learn is by doing things themselves," she said.

Introverts' listening skills can be an asset when leading teams. Making sure everyone feels heard, Yeager said, is a good way to secure buy-in. "When you're trying to gain consensus, give everyone the opportunity to voice their opinion," she said. "People will be more likely to go along with your decision, even if it's not the option they preferred, if they feel like they were heard."

However, though introverts' unobtrusive leadership style helps team members feel trusted, it can have its drawbacks.

Leaders are expected to inspire people to buy into a shared vision. Extroverts, who are naturally more effusive, often find it easy to get others excited about their ideas. But introverts tend to be modest in their speech and body language, even when they're genuinely enthusiastic about a project, and their reserve can sometimes be mistaken for disinterest or a lack of resolve.

That's why, Loerzel said, introverted leaders need to explicitly state when they're passionate about something, even if it doesn't come naturally for them to do so. "Be intentional about acknowledging what you support and approve of," she said. "Don't sit back. People need to hear those things."

Employees who expect managers to be very proactive may not know how to respond to an introvert's style. It helps to be open with employees about your communication preferences, Ancowitz said. If you do your best thinking in advance, for example, "ask them to send you the information you need before you meet with them," she said. Or, if you dislike interruptions, tell them you prefer they schedule time with you. You can also ask them how they'd prefer to work with you.

If you have a mix of introverts and extroverts on your team, plan meetings and other events in a way that accounts for their differences in temperament, Ancowitz said. For instance, if you're planning a brainstorming session—a lively experience extroverts often enjoy—let participants know the topic in advance to give introverts time to think about it first. Then, allow time for quieter reflection on the ideas that were generated, perhaps by having participants write about them or break into smaller groups to work on them. (See the sidebar, "Get Noticed at Meetings.")

STRATEGY AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING ARE THE KEYS TO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

As you take on more leadership roles in your career, you'll likely be called on to make more contacts in your community and develop business. Though many introverts find the prospect of networking intimidating, they should keep in mind that networking is not just about shaking hands with hundreds of people at a conference. In fact, the approach to networking favored by introverts—pinpointing a few key prospects and taking the time to get to know them—can be equally effective.

Quality often outweighs quantity when it comes to business development, Boyd said. "Introverts probably won't be the life of the party, but often the life of the party doesn't have the yield in terms of production as someone who builds relationships with the two or three people they meet," he noted.

The main thing introverts need to remember, Loerzel and Ancowitz said, is that introversion is not about how social you are, but about how you gain and restore your energy. Introverts are energized by time alone and feel drained after long periods of socializing. Extroverts, on the other hand, derive energy from being with others and feel out of sorts if they're alone for too long.

"It's important for introverts to be strategic about how they use their time and energy," Ancowitz said. "Decide in advance who you want to meet and which events you want to attend. Set a goal such as having lunch with a certain number of people this quarter." As Boyd put it, "What I've learned is that I don't have to talk to everyone in the room. Having two to four good, meaningful conversations is enough."

If you're not sure whom to speak to at an event, "strike up a conversation with someone on the perimeter of the room who looks uncomfortable as well," Boyd said. "Then you're acting like an extrovert toward that person. Those conversations can lead to some really good opportunities."

Small-group networking can also be very effective. Boyd participates in networking groups of six to eight people that include professionals in other fields, such as lawyers and bankers. The groups meet regularly to share leads. "I'm comfortable with all the people in the group, and I know they're friendly to our firm," he said. "That takes a lot of the pressure off me."

When you're doing a lot of networking or socializing, be mindful of your energy levels, introverted leaders say. Take breaks by yourself, scheduling time for brief retreats if necessary. "Introverts really need that solitude to get their energy back so they can give again," Loerzel said. "That's something that is helpful for others to know about introverted leaders. They're reenergizing, not disengaging."

Torres-Pinero values solitude so much she made it part of her workplace. "When we expanded our office, we put in a small meditation room!" she said. "I like to take at least seven minutes a day to be in silence and recharge."

Finally, know that, while finding your voice can take time and practice, it will come with time. "I used to follow the saying, 'Better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than open it and remove all doubt,'" Boyd said. "But over the years I had many colleagues and subordinates tell me, 'We know you have good things to say. We want to hear more of what you're thinking.'" As I grew into leadership roles, I definitely became more comfortable with speaking my mind."

Get noticed at meetings

Sharing your ideas at meetings is an important way to increase your visibility in the workplace. As Tamera Loerzel, a coach and a partner with ConvergenceCoaching, pointed out, though, "introverts tend to think before speaking," which can sometimes put them at a disadvantage at fast-paced meetings.

"Introverts can get lost in thought," said business coach Nancy Ancowitz. "By the time they're ready to speak, people could have moved on to the next topic, and it's too late."

To make speaking up easier, Ancowitz recommended being the facilitator or making sure you have a designated time to speak on the agenda. Whether or not you're able to do this, come to the meeting prepared with specific items to contribute, such as metrics or an anecdote.

To project confidence, Mary Yeager, CPA, said, "Be careful about your word choices. When I spoke at town hall, I used too many qualifiers, like 'I sort of think this' or 'I might do that.' I didn't realize it at the time, but I was undermining their confidence in my abilities."

And don't worry if you're put on the spot by a question, Ancowitz said. When that happens, "buy yourself a little time with a response like, 'My initial thoughts are A, B, and C. I'd love to think about that a little more and get back to you,'" she advised. Then, be sure to follow up later.

In more boisterous meetings, introverts may struggle to get a word in. In that case, Ancowitz recommended using the name of the facilitator or person who's speaking. "Say something like, 'Hey, Joe, that's a good point. I'd like to add ...,'" she said. You can also lean forward or put your hand or index finger up to indicate that you want to speak.

Maribel Torres-Pinero, CPA, the CEO of Lumix CPA, shared some advice from her father, an attorney and college professor. "If you want people to listen, make sure you have something good to say, and say it with weight and confidence," she said. "Pause after you make a point, and most of the time people will stop and listen."

About the author

Courtney L. Vien is a *JofA* associate editor. To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact her at cvien@aicpa.org (<mailto:cvien@aicpa.org>) or 919-402-4125.

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- "[Finding the Extrovert Within](http://www.cgma.org/magazine/features/pages/communication-tips-for-finance-professionals.aspx) (<http://www.cgma.org/magazine/features/pages/communication-tips-for-finance-professionals.aspx>)," Issue 1, 2015

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- "[Networking Tips for Introverts](http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/privatecompaniespracticesection/newsandpublications/pcpsnewsandviews/pages/networking-tips.aspx) (<http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/privatecompaniespracticesection/newsandpublications/pcpsnewsandviews/pages/networking-tips.aspx>)," Dec. 16, 2015
- "[Networking and Sales Best Practices](http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/youngcpanetwork/resources/career/pages/networking-sales-best-practices.aspx) (<http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/youngcpanetwork/resources/career/pages/networking-sales-best-practices.aspx>)," Aug. 19, 2014

Online tools

- Leadership—An Essential Skill for Success, [aicpa.org](http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/youngcpanetwork/resources/leadership/pages/default.aspx) (<http://www.aicpa.org/interestareas/youngcpanetwork/resources/leadership/pages/default.aspx>)
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