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The Introverted Leader: Examining the Role of Personality and Environment

*Candace Atamanik*¹

Reserved, introspective and quiet. These are not the characteristics that typically come to mind when we think of great leaders. In today's diverse society, although we know that leaders can come in all shapes and sizes, often we still imagine them with strikingly similar personality types. There is an unspoken assumption that a charming, gregarious leader will be the most effective in any environment, whereas an unassuming, self-effacing leader would ultimately fall short.

Susan Cain (2012) illustrates this point in her best-selling book on introverts. She found that at the Harvard Business School, the epicenter of leader development, being an extrovert is mandatory. Students are required to study in "Learning Teams" and half of their grades are based on participation in class discussions where there is a higher premium placed on being confident in your response rather than being correct.

With this extroverted mindset embedded in the institutions which train the world's top leaders, how can we move beyond traditional perspectives on leadership and embrace opportunities for the other 50% of the population. One possibility is to examine the context in which introverts can be more engaged and successful leaders. This study attempts to shed some light on the influence of work environment on introverted leaders effectiveness and well-being.

Personality and Leadership

Researchers over the years have examined the relationship between personality and leadership with a strong focus on the Big Five dimensions of conscientiousness, openness to experience, agreeableness, neuroticism, and introversion. Introversion and its counterpart extroversion are considered to be dichotomous variables, with individuals falling more to one side of the spectrum than the other, although new research suggests that the majority of the population are ambiverts, falling around the mean and displaying both introverted and extroverted qualities depending on the situation (Grant, 2013). Contrary to popular misconception, introverts are not shy or antisocial but are characterized by enjoying time alone to reenergize themselves. Introverts have a tendency to process their thoughts internally and prefer to form solid ideas before sharing with others (Kahnweiler, 2009). On the other hand, extroverts draw energy from interacting with others and are seen as more social and outgoing (Depue & Collins, 1999). Classic research studies by Eysenck have demonstrated that this difference is likely due to a sensitivity to stimuli, with introverts being highly sensitive to outside stimulation and extroverts being less sensitive and less reactionary to sensory input (Eysenck, 1967).

As previously stated, extroverted personality traits are typically viewed as being more desirable for leadership positions. Several studies have found that extroversion is a strong predictor of perceived

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leadership characteristics. Bono and Judge (2004) conducted a meta-analysis and found that extroversion was the best predictor of perceived transformational leadership. Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) found that extroversion is the most consistent correlate of perceived leadership across study settings and leadership criteria. Their results indicated that extroverted employees were more likely to emerge as leaders in selection and promotion decisions and be perceived as effective by both supervisors and subordinates. These studies have primarily focused on perceptions of leadership and have not made the connection to actual organizational performance.

Studies examining performance outcomes have found that extroverted or charismatic CEOs don't always ensure high profitability. Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld and Srinivasan (2006) found that ratings of CEO charisma were positively related to CEO pay but were not positively related to firm performance. Tosi, Misangyi, Fanelli, Waldman, and Yammarino (2004) examined the relationships among CEOs' perceived charisma, CEO compensation packages, and firm performance over a 10-year period. CEO charisma ratings were directly related to total CEO pay but not to any firm performance measures. This indicates that charismatic leaders may be able to convince others of their importance to the organization, but that may not always translate into tangible firm performance.

Although past research has largely favored the extrovert in determining qualities of successful leaders, more recent studies are beginning to draw a distinction between leadership styles in different contexts. One such contextual factor is the behavior of the leaders' followers. In a study by Grant, Gino, and Hofmann (2011), they examined the mediating effects of employee proactivity on the relationship between leaders' extroversion and group performance. Results indicated that introverted leaders produced greater group performance when leading proactive employees whereas extroverted leaders produced greater group performance when leading passive employees. The researchers attributed these findings to the introverted leader's willingness to listen and take suggestions from proactive employees and not feel threatened or the need to assert their dominance.

Collins (2001) conducted a landmark study examining the progress of organizations from good to great and determined that one of the key drivers of that success was a Level Five Leader. The researchers found that this leader was not charismatic or outgoing but in fact the most transformative executives possessed a paradoxical mixture of personal humility and professional will. According to Collins "they are timid and ferocious, shy and fearless. They are rare and unstoppable" (Collins, 2011, p. 67). These leaders defy the stereotype of the larger-than-life celebrity CEO, instead demonstrating genuine modesty and shunning public attention. On the other hand, they are able to catapult their organizations into great success by using their unwavering resolve to produce the best results, no matter the obstacles. Collins indicated that a Level Five Leader was not the only requirement for a company to transform from good to great but that they were an essential component of the company's success. This surprising finding demonstrates that quiet, introverted CEOs can sometimes have a major impact on their organizations.

The preceding research studies suggest that both introverts and extroverts can make valuable leaders, but in many organizations the stereotype of the extrovert as the great leader still persists. In a survey conducted by USA Today, 65 percent of executives said they perceive introversion as a barrier to leadership, and only 6 percent believe that introverts are better leaders (Jones, 2006.) With estimates that 50 percent of the population and 40 percent of executives are introverted, those outdated misconceptions don't reflect the reality of the workforce (Hammer & Martin, 2003). This study will attempt to illuminate the relationship between introversion and leadership by examining whether the context matters in determining when introverted leaders thrive.

Work Environment and Leadership

In addition to studying the personality of a leader, it is important to better understand the context in which leadership occurs. Leadership does not happen in a vacuum and different leaders may be better suited to different organizational environments or cultures. The key to success in one environment may be a hindrance in another but this factor is sometimes overlooked when evaluating leader performance. Little attention has been given in the leadership literature to the principle of trait activation, which holds that personality traits require trait-relevant situations for their expression. In other words, an individual will behave in trait-like ways only in situations which are relevant for that given trait (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Ployhart et al (2001) examined the relationship between The Big Five personality traits and ratings of transformational leadership in both typical and maximum performance conditions. Using a military sample they assessed leadership in very demanding and uncertain situations as well as low-stress, non-competitive situations. The researchers found that extroversion was more predictive of transformational leadership behavior in the high-uncertainty situations compared with the low-stress situations. This suggests that extroverted leaders may be better suited to high stress situations where charisma is necessary to motivate followers.

De Hoogh, Den Hartog & Koopman (2005) also set out to examine trait activation theory by testing the effects of a dynamic work environment on the link between personality and charismatic leadership. De Hoogh and colleagues found that both agreeableness and conscientiousness were related to charismatic leadership but only in stable environments and that openness to experience and neuroticism were only related to charismatic leadership in dynamic work environments. Surprisingly, the researchers found no relationship between extroversion and charismatic leadership in either environment but attribute this to a possible self-presentation effect as participants were being evaluated for managerial potential and may have considered extroversion as a highly desirable trait for such a position. The results of these studies indicate that the nature of the work environment can have a strong influence on the relationship between leader personality and performance.

Another line of research has suggested that there is also a relationship between work environment and managerial well-being. If there is a poor fit between a manager's personality and their work environment they may feel less satisfied, less engaged and less productive. A study conducted by Haakonsson et al. (2008) found that misalignments between climate and leadership style are problematic for organizational performance. The authors argued that an organization's psychological climate captures affective events, which then influence employees' emotions and subsequent information-processing behaviors. They conclude that climate and leadership style should be aligned in order for the leader to provide sufficient support to employees to ensure that the organization performs well.

In order for managers to be aligned with their organizational climate, they must feel supported by the organization and their supervisors. A supportive work environment can have a significantly positive effect on a managers' job satisfaction and work engagement. Lok & Crawford (2003) found that innovative and supportive cultures (empowerment) had a strong positive link with job satisfaction and commitment in a sample of Australian and Hong Kong managers. In addition, the Australian sample reported higher ratings of supportive culture than the Hong Kong managers. The researchers suggest that this may be due to the hierarchical, high power distance culture of Chinese organizations which are highly competitive and offer little autonomy to managers.

Perceived organizational support has been shown to be positively related to employee's attachment, involvement and innovation at work. Eisenberger et al. (1990) conducted two studies which reported positive relationships between employees' perceptions of being valued and cared for by their organization with conscientiousness in carrying out job duties, affective and calculative involvement in the organization, and innovation on behalf of the organization.

In Study 1, involving six different occupations varying from high school teachers to police officers, researchers found a positive relationship between perceived organizational support, job attendance and performance. In Study 2, using manufacturing employees and managers, perceived organizational support was positively related to affective attachment, performance outcome expectations, and the constructiveness of anonymous suggestions for helping the organization. These studies demonstrate the value of perceived organizational support for employee well-being and productivity.

The preceding studies lead us to conclude that work context matters when assessing the link between personality and leadership. Different personality types may perform better in different environments, some thrive in supportive environments whereas others thrive in more competitive, high-stress situations. In order to examine the effects of work environment on introverted leaders' ratings of perceived organizational support, engagement and effectiveness we used two separate samples of leaders; school principals and corporate executives.

Principals are leaders of their schools, responsible for the day-to-day management of hundreds of teachers and thousands of students. Schools are unique environments which are intended as havens for learning and are designed to be more supportive and collaborative than the traditional corporate environment. Most corporate executives must function in a highly competitive environment that places a premium on extroverted behavior. Schools may be the ideal environment for introverted leaders to thrive in due to their focus on education and learning rather than financial success and climbing the corporate ladder. Ryckman et al. (2011) examined the relationship between personality and competition avoidance and found that introverts were more likely to engage in competitive avoidant behavior than extroverts. According to the researchers, those who are introverted, quiet, and reserved may fear negative reactions from others which in turn leads them to avoid competitive environments.

In order to determine if these two environments had sufficiently different rates of introversion, we conducted a pilot test. Using an independent samples t-test, we compared mean differences in personality scores for school principals and corporate executives. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in introversion scores between principals ($M = 31.36$, $SD = 5.29$) and executives ($M = 34.87$, $SD = 5.08$) such that principals were more introverted than corporate executives, $t(187) = 4.38$, $p < .001$. This provided support for our use of the two different environments as points of comparison.

The purpose of the current study is to examine whether the work environment has an effect on introverted leaders' well-being and success. We examine the effects of a competitive environment versus a collaborative environment on leader performance to determine if introverted leaders thrive in different environments than extroverted leaders. Specifically, we examine the relationship between leaders' self-reported ratings of introversion and measures of perceived organizational support, work engagement and effectiveness.

Method

Participants

Our sample consisted of 76 participants ranging in age from 32-67 years old ($M = 47$ years). Fifty-five percent of respondents were female ($N = 42$) and 45% were male ($N = 34$). Participants were leaders in their organizations either as CEOs ($N = 5$), Presidents ($N = 4$), Vice-Presidents ($N = 6$), Directors ($N = 10$) or Principals ($N=45$). Sixty-eight percent of participants had a Master's degree, 13% had a Bachelor's degree and 11% had a Doctoral degree. Participants work an average of 53 hours per week (range = 40-70) and have an average tenure of 7 years in their current position. Approximately 47% of Principals and 26% of Executives were self-reported introverts.

Procedure

Participants took part in a 5-day executive education program or a 7-day professional development workshop at a major university. The personality assessment was completed before the program began and additional measures were collected post-program in the form of a follow-up survey. Executives were asked to identify two direct reports who were sent a separate survey assessing Leader Effectiveness. Principals' leader effectiveness was obtained from publically available archival data collected by MDCPS as part of their annual School Climate Surveys.

Introversion was assessed using the NEO-FFI-3 Personality scale along with the other four personality variables comprising the Big Five. To ensure adequate sampling of introverts and extroverts, we used a cut-off score of 55 on the extroversion scale then we coded each participant as either an Introverted Executive, Extroverted Executive, Introverted Principal or Extroverted Principal. This allowed us to draw comparisons among the groups rather than relying on correlational statistics which didn't sufficiently isolate the introverted leaders.

We assessed Organizational Climate using the Perceived Organizational Support scale (Eisenberger et al, 1986) and Work Engagement was assessed using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al, 2006). Leader Effectiveness was measured using 8 items from the School Climate Survey for Principals and modified for a business setting (changed "principal" to "supervisor") for non-principals. This survey asks direct reports to rate the effectiveness of their supervisor on a 5 point scale (sample item: My supervisor deals with conflict constructively).

Results

As a first step, we examined the relationship between personality and perceived organizational support by conducting a one-way ANOVA comparing introverted executives, extroverted executives, introverted principals and extroverted principals. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between groups ($F(3, 72) = 3.517, p = .019$). An LSD post-hoc test revealed that extroverted executives ($M = 4.45$) reported statistically significantly higher perceived organizational support scores than introverted executives ($M = 3.90$), extroverted principals ($M = 3.95$) and introverted principals ($M = 4.03$). This indicates that introverted leaders do not feel as supported as their extroverted counterparts in corporate environments. There was no difference found in perceived organizational support scores for introverted principals compared to extroverted principals indicating introverts feel equally supported as extroverts in an academic environment.

Perceived organizational support and work engagement were significantly correlated across samples ($r = .385, p = .001$). This indicates that participants who expressed high levels of perceived organizational

support also reported high levels of work engagement and vice versa. This relationship is further supported by our one-way ANOVA comparing work engagement among introverted and extroverted executives. Results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference between groups ($F(3, 66) = 2.67, p = .07$). An LSD post-hoc test revealed that introverted executives ($M = 5.19$) reported statistically significantly lower work engagement scores than extroverted executives ($M = 6.21$). This indicates that introverted executives are less engaged in their work than extroverted executives.

Finally, we examined the effect of work environment on the relationship between personality and leader effectiveness. Results demonstrated that there were no statistically significant differences between group means as determined by a one-way ANOVA ($F(3, 69) = 1.78, p = .16$). This indicates that there was no difference in direct report ratings of leader effectiveness for introverts or extroverts in either an academic or corporate environment.

Discussion

In the current study we examined the relationship between introversion, perceived organizational support, work engagement and leader effectiveness in order to determine if introverts would feel more supported, be more engaged or perform better as leaders in an academic environment or a corporate environment.

We found that introverted executives reported lower rates of perceived organizational support and work engagement than extroverted executives indicating that introverted executives do not feel as engaged in their work or as supported by their organizations as extroverts. This is consistent with the concept of the "*Extrovert Ideal*—the omnipresent belief that the ideal self is gregarious, alpha and comfortable in the spotlight" (Cain, 2012, p. 4). In this context, extroverts are held up as models of leadership and introverts are encouraged to "speak-up" and "stand-out" more which may be contrary to their natural inclinations and cause internal turmoil and feelings of disengagement.

There was no difference in perceived organizational support or work engagement for introverts in educational environments, indicating that introverted principals feel equally engaged and supported by their organization as extroverted principals. This may be due to the fact that there is less emphasis on aggressive, competitive behavior in an educational institution when compared to a corporate environment. Introverted principals may feel more accepted by their superiors and therefore more engaged in their work as well.

Results indicated that introverts and extroverts were equally effective as leaders in both academic and corporate environments indicating that introversion is not an obstacle to leadership performance in either competitive or nurturing environments. This is good news for introverts who should therefore not feel limited to working in only academic, stable environments, but can be successful in corporate environments as well although ultimately they may not feel as engaged or supported as extroverts.

Our results suggest that the well-being of introverted leaders may depend on the context in which they lead. Introverts may self-select into supportive organizations such as educational institutions which may be more conducive to nurturing introverted leaders due to their emphasis on learning and collaboration. Introverts may be more likely to thrive in these supportive environments and be promoted into higher leadership positions.

These findings should serve as a wakeup call for those organizations whose selection systems focus primarily on hiring extroverted candidates for management positions. Limiting your leadership pool to only extroverts could have devastating consequences for organizations. Companies will ultimately be

losing out on high performing leaders who bring a different perspective to the management table other than the traditionally overly-confident, self-important leader.

Previous research has also made the claim for the importance of humble, reserved leaders (Collins, 2011; Tsui et al., 2014). Tsui and colleagues found that CEO humility was positively associated with empowering leadership behaviors, which in turn correlated with top management team integration. Top management team integration was positively related to middle managers' perceptions of an empowering organizational climate, which was associated with higher ratings of work engagement, affective commitment, and job performance.

Leadership research has focused largely on the relationship between extroversion and leader characteristics, neglecting the quieter half of the population and deeming them inadequate to serve as leaders. Now is our opportunity to embrace our *Introverted Ideal* and strive to include introverts in our leadership vocabulary.

These findings shed light on a new perspective in management theory: the value of the introverted, humble, quiet, and reserved executive. Organizations are advised to nurture their introverted leaders in order to ensure they maintain a leadership team with both quiet and loud personality types. Otherwise they may be inhibiting their organization's ability to grow into an empowering and engaging workplace.

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