With so much being written about introverts over the past few years, you’d think that there’s not much left to talk about. But my sense is that we’re just getting started. It’s not that we’re going to be talking forever about what it means to be an introvert, or have endless party and networking survival tips. We’ll be moving the conversation to deeper levels. We’ve been challenging the stereotypes, and we’re getting closer to a time when we can move past them to discover what’s on the other side.

Over a series of articles, we’re going to dig into those stereotypes and why they exist, which helps us to overcome them. Then we’ll look at ways that introverted leaders and professionals can become more energy efficient; handle the vulnerability that comes with visibility; and create a more integrated presence that makes room for your introverted nature in otherwise extroverted situations.

STARTING WITH THE STEREOTYPES...

The term “introvert” is often conflated with the words “shy” and “anti-social,” which feeds a misconception that being an introvert has something to do with social skills. Because introverts by nature tend to be less verbal and more reserved than their extroverted colleagues, they’re also perceived as arrogant or aloof. We tend to regard with suspicion someone who doesn’t talk a lot, is difficult to “read,” or isn’t always in the mood to be social. We leap to the conclusion that they are depressed, mad, or simply unfriendly.

This carries over into the workplace. There are certain assumptions others will make about introverts: that we’re not good on teams, that we need an extrovert to make things happen, that we don’t like or aren’t good at public speaking, and that we wouldn’t be strong leaders.

Introversion and extroversion are two traits among many that inform how we show up in the world. I prefer to think of them as energetic traits, rather than personality traits. They certainly influence our personality, but at their core, they are about where we gain and drain energy. Introverts gain energy from solitude and low-stimulation environments, and drain energy during social interaction or high-stimulation environments. Extroverts gain energy from social interaction and drain energy when left for too long on their own without people. To be clear, introverts need people, and extroverts need solitude; it’s a matter of which do you prefer and gain the most energy from when you need it. Time in solitude is what gives an introvert energy to be social. Extroverts build up their energy reserves around people, and that sustains them during quieter periods.
NATURE OR NURTURE?

We all have introvert and extrovert traits within us. No one is 100% one or the other; we’re all on a spectrum. There’s evidence of differences in brain activity and response to external stimuli (an introvert becomes over-stimulated more quickly than an extrovert), so nature certainly has a hand in it. Where nature can be masked is by nurture: growing up in a household with incompatible energy, an introvert might feel forced to be a fake extrovert, and vice versa. There’s a point in our development when we become aware that our natural tendency – to be quiet and introspective, or to be social and talkative – is either acceptable or unacceptable.

If we learn our natural energy isn’t acceptable at home or at work, we’ll compensate by developing traits that make us “good” in other people’s eyes. For instance, in order to fit into the norm, the introvert will push herself to be social and gregarious, and the extrovert will suppress his outward expressiveness. This adaptation can be healthy if it’s done intentionally and viewed as a skill to be developed while honoring one’s natural energy. It can be unhealthy if it’s not the person’s choice and only done to survive or please others.

HOW CAN WE USE THIS INFORMATION?

If we’re going to get past the stereotypes in professional settings, we need to start seeing introversion as a strength, rather than as a liability. Where to begin? With ourselves. We want to be authentic, and recognizing that we work within often complex systems, there are ways to be true to our nature while meeting expectations.

Visibility and Accessibility: Understand that you’ll do your best work if you have a healthy combination of solo visioning/planning and public interaction. Train the people around to respect your boundaries between personal and professional time: don’t respond to emails or voice messages during non-business hours, take your vacation days, and put your phone on “do not disturb” for an hour or two each day.

Communication: We introverts have such rich inner dialogue, we can forget that others can’t read our minds! It’s important to over-communicate in those situations. This is especially critical when the project or process takes place over a long period of time or involves a large number of people. Transparency builds trust, whereas a perceived withholding of information erodes trust. Develop communication patterns that involve regular sharing in a way that feels good to all involved.

Expressiveness: There are simple things you can do to soften a perception that you’re not approachable or expressive. Make a commitment to smile more. Look people in the eye when you pass them in the hall, and say “Hi, Sally.” You don’t have to ask how the person’s doing unless you want. A quick “nice to see you” is sufficient. Be aware that your internal excitement might not always translate when you talk to others, so dropping your shoulders, relaxing your face, smiling and making eye contact can go a long way towards communicating your feelings without feeling fake. And when you’re bursting with excitement, show it! You’ll be surprised at how energizing it can be for everyone when you let those emotions flow.

I’ve heard from many introverts who say that in order to be considered for leadership roles, they pushed themselves to project more extroverted qualities. This certainly expanded their comfort zone, but it also led to
less job satisfaction and higher burn-out, since they had to act like someone they weren’t in order to be accepted.

The goal is to integrate, to find that sweet spot where you can tap into your natural extroverted energy when necessary, while still coming from your introvert core. That’s what we’ll explore in our next piece on becoming an energy efficient introvert. In that article we will explore how to manage your most precious asset so that you set yourself up for sustainable success.

BETH BUELOW, PCC

Beth Buelow, PCC, is the author of “The Introvert Entrepreneur: Amplify Your Strengths and Create Success on Your Own Terms”. She is the founder of The Introvert Entrepreneur, a space where introverts gain insight, support, and empowerment. Beth helps introverts (and those who live, work, and play with them) understand and appreciate what it means to be an “innie” in an “outtie” world. Not sure if you’re an introvert? Find out by taking our Innie or Outtie Quiz!