

Can introverts lead? Breaking down stereotypes: Breaking down stereotypes

by [Adam S. McHugh](#) in the [November 17, 2009](#) issue

As the senior pastor and I walked into the church office, we were greeted by two silver-haired women who were there to fold bulletins for the upcoming Sunday. At the sight of the senior pastor, their faces lit up and they quickly interposed themselves between him and the door to the pastors' offices. For 15 minutes they exchanged pleasantries, the women lavishing praise on him for the previous Sunday's sermon and spinning their well-rehearsed tales of hip replacements and winter arthritis. Reluctantly, the women returned to their duties, and the senior pastor paraded through the office hallway, sharing extended greetings and weekend reflections with each member of the administrative staff.

Meanwhile, I had ducked the women and made it through the door unnoticed. I gave a running hello to the receptionist and took shelter in the haven of my office, where I was eager to delve into John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* during the half hour before our staff meeting. Through my closed, frustratingly hollow door, I could hear each conversation about vacation cabins, new outfits, the abnormally cold weather and the new brand of church coffee. As I tried to concentrate on Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit and how I might use it in my Sunday evening sermon, a different indwelling voice began to pepper me with familiar questions: Is that what a pastor is supposed to be like? Does the staff think I am withdrawn or antisocial? Am I in the right business?

There may be no other feature of American life that contains as much bias toward extroversion as leadership. Since our leaders epitomize our cultural values, it is no surprise that Americans want their leaders to be extroverts. Psychologist and author Marti Olsen Laney cites a study that was repeated three times with the same findings: when asked if they would prefer their ideal leaders to be introverted or extroverted, both introverts and extroverts chose an extrovert as "their ideal self

and ideal leader.”

Clinical psychologist Leonard Holmes, in analyzing American presidents from the past two centuries, found that “great presidents were not only stubborn and disagreeable, but were also more extroverted, open to experience, assertive, achievement striving, excitement seeking, and more open to fantasy.” The tendency toward extroverted presidents has increased in recent decades, as the role of media and the importance of knowing how to utilize the media have become central to winning elections.

Richard Daft, author of the business textbook *The Leadership Experience*, cites numerous studies that have sifted out five attributes of successful leaders, called the “Big Five personality dimensions”: openness to experience, emotional stability, conscientiousness, agreeableness and extroversion. Although Daft insists that there is no one leadership model and that people of all personality types can lead effectively, he cites the findings of one study: “Researchers found considerable evidence that people who score high on the dimensions of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability are more successful leaders.” Though leadership paradigms have shifted in the past 20 years, leadership stereotypes endure. Our collective cultural subconscious holds to a particular mold of leadership, so many of us disqualify either ourselves or others based on the following four criteria.

Charisma. For many people charisma is the preeminent trait that distinguishes a great leader from ordinary people. It is an intangible quality—perhaps better described than defined—that attracts others to a leader like a magnet. Charismatic leaders have a theatrical quality to them, and they relish playing the lead role amid other actors on the stage. Public attention is an intoxicating force that brings out their best qualities. They are able to inspire and captivate others with their passion and presence.

People with charisma have the uncanny ability, as my friend describes them, “to speak to millions but make you feel like they’re speaking just to you. You don’t know them, and you’ll never meet them, but they feel like your friends.” A truly charismatic leader has a mystical ability to mix the appearance of an untouchable, larger-than-life persona and an accessible, sympathetic friend.

Dominance. People who are dominant are hard-charging, persuasive and directive. They can motivate people and accomplish their goals by sheer force of will. This trait is primarily *positional*, meaning dominant leaders rely on the authority of rank or title to compel others. Their understanding of leadership “assumes that humans are naturally still, at rest, and that they need some motivating force to get them going.”

When I think of a dominant leader I think of an extroverted pastor I once met who has built a large and successful youth ministry. He has positioned himself at the heart of the program, to the point that people cannot conceive of the ministry without him. He is constantly pushing things forward, starting new programs and rallying people around his ideas. He will not take no for an answer and will debate and persuade until the other person relents or ends the conversation.

Gregariousness. Gregarious leaders relate comfortably with people of different personalities and backgrounds. They are able to initiate and prolong conversations and are at home among strangers. They have the capacity to disarm people and assuage conflict with their warmth and charm. Gregarious leaders in the Christian community are the face of a welcoming, friendly, inviting church. They set the tone for hospitality and openness among the congregation. They are skilled in the ministry of chat, filling awkward silences with engaging conversation, and people quickly feel at ease around them.

In a highly verbal culture, words carry power. The person who wields words with the greatest fluency, or even just uses the most words, is invested with authority. In group contexts people often give leadership to those who are most willing to present their opinions, even though their solutions may not be the right or best ones. Speaking is construed as confidence, whereas reserving one’s opinion, or speaking up only on topics one has previously considered, is interpreted as timidity or deference to others.

Superstardom. The superstar leader is one who excels at everything. Anyone with church leadership experience knows that the tasks of leading are manifold, even to the point of contradiction. Those in charge are called on to provide visionary, intellectual, administrative, financial, social, spiritual and emotional leadership. Superstar leaders are able to successfully address both the overarching needs of the organization and the particular, more personal needs of the individuals who comprise the organization. They have a rare combination of skills, which are often bolstered by intangibles like charisma and high energy, and are able to assert those

qualities in a variety of settings.

One pastor I interviewed said that her congregation expects her to be good at all things, to lead in every situation, no matter what the circumstances, and to always be available. Another friend, who is a solo pastor in the Northeast, agreed: “Most church cultures have expectations for pastors that no single person could ever fulfill. They want sermons that are biblical, deep, thoughtful and well prepared, but they also want the outgoing, extroverted, people person, as well as the CEO mover and shaker. These seldom come in one person. This may be one reason why so many drop out of pastoral ministry in five or ten years.”

In reviewing the qualifications we look for in leaders, I’m left to echo pollster George Barna’s question, “Who could possibly meet such a wide range of disparate expectations?” We set up our leaders for inevitable failure when we measure them by unreachable standards. So this is not simply a matter of whether extroverts or introverts make better leaders, but a question about the general soundness of our leadership models. When we explicitly or implicitly communicate that only a few people for whom the stars miraculously align can lead with power and effectiveness, we discourage those who do not fit our cultural ideals but have great potential to lead—thus doing harm to the body of Christ. Further, this model of leadership only validates the widespread, unbiblical expectation that pastors play the role of benefactor while everyone else in the congregation is a beneficiary.

The good news is that the stereotypical leadership mold is breaking. The long-term sustainability of an organization or a church cannot depend on the personality of the central leader, no matter how captivating or compelling that person is. In the corporate world, in classrooms and in the church, we are reconsidering the qualities that make a successful leader.

For example, Jim Collins’s book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . And Others Don’t*, has shattered paradigms of executive leadership. Collins discovered that glitzy, dynamic, high-profile CEOs are actually a hindrance to the long-term success of their corporations. Charismatic leaders naturally attract people, but these leaders may be less effective at drawing people to the mission and values of the organization itself.

No one embodied the larger-than-life executive more than Lee Iacocca, Chrysler’s leader and spokesperson in the 1980s. He almost single-handedly steered his car

company away from disaster and put it on the road to prosperity. He reveled in the spotlight, and his celebrity status rose at times to the level of a rock star—to the point where he considered pursuing a presidential nomination. Yet after Iacocca's retirement, Chrysler's profits faltered, and the company was sold to a German rival carmaker just five years later. Iacocca, more concerned with personal reputation than company sustainability, had done little to invest in his successors or to ensure the longevity of Chrysler.

In sharp contrast, Collins presents the story of Colman Mockler, the CEO of Gillette from 1975 to 1991. Mockler made personal sacrifices and took substantial risks for the long-term success of the company and the profits of the shareholders, and he was so effective that \$1 invested in Gillette in December 1976 was worth \$95.68 in December 1996. Laconic and reserved, Mockler labored in relative anonymity for a big-time executive; he was a man who prioritized the success of his company over ego gratification.

Mockler and executives like him are examples of what Collins calls "level 5 leaders." Collins summarizes the characteristics of this type of leader:

- Level 5 leaders display compelling modesty, are self-effacing and understated. In contrast, two-thirds of the comparison companies had leaders with gargantuan personal egos, which contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of the companies.
- Level 5 leaders display a workmanlike diligence—more plow horse than show horse.
- Level 5 leaders set up their successors for even greater success in the next generation, whereas egocentric level 4 leaders often set up their successors for failure.

While charisma has a magnetic force, its power can be fleeting. Unless it is buttressed by substance and consistency, its pull fades quickly. Leadership guru Peter Drucker said, "Indeed, charisma becomes the undoing of leaders. It makes them inflexible, convinced of their own infallibility, unable to change." For that reason contemporary leadership discussions are elevating character over charisma.

Character in a leader is the quality that has the ability not only to draw others but also to maintain their loyalty. Character is more than personal integrity and ethical

decision-making, though it certainly includes those elements. The central component of character is authenticity. Someone with character acts in unison with his or her God-given nature. Characterless leaders are tossed between the waves of personal success and popularity with others, and they often lose their true selves in the process. Leaders with character find their identity from within and are in harmony with whom God has uniquely created them to be.

We gain character by opening ourselves up to God's transforming power through prayer, through solidifying our most important relationships and by practicing the good habits that enable us to become the kind of people we want to be. True leaders don't lead by trying to be what others want them to be; introverts with character will lead as introverts. Those of us who are introverts should not try to be extroverts or contort ourselves in ways our personalities are not able to go. While we seek to grow as leaders and as people, we need to be committed to remaining true, because one of the greatest gifts we can offer others is leading as ourselves. People desperately want to know that it's possible to live, act and work as they are, and introverted leaders who model authenticity will give others freedom to be themselves.

Another movement that is changing the face of contemporary leadership is that of the "learning organization." Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, contends that in a rapid-fire, information-driven, technology-powered world, success is contingent on our individual and corporate abilities to adjust, adapt and learn. The organization, therefore, must incorporate processes of reflection and evaluation into its organizational systems. Leaders must commit to their own learning and to fostering an environment of learning in their organizations.

People who think before they act and listen before they talk can be very effective leaders. The reflective, thoughtful person may be able to learn, and encourage learning, in ways that people who can't stop talking are not able to.

Even more encouraging for introverted leaders is what Chris Argyris, emeritus professor at the Harvard Business School, calls "double-loop learning." Most people define learning too narrowly as mere "problem solving," so they focus on identifying and correcting errors in the external environment. Solving problems is important. But if learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behavior, identifying the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization's problems, and then change how they

act. In particular, they must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of problems in its own right.

In the learning organization, successful leadership is wedded to introspection. The source of dysfunction and inefficiency in an organization may go beyond misdirected actions and strained relationships to internal motivations, tendencies and assumptions. Leaders must learn to scrutinize every aspect of their leadership and personality. In this regard, people who are naturally self-reflective have a clear advantage as leaders of learning organizations.

Another category for understanding the nature of leadership that goes against the grain of traditional definitions is “sensemaking.” Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus, at the Center for Creative Leadership, explain that “most existing theories, models, and definitions of leadership proceed from the assumption that somehow leadership is about getting people to do something.”

Instead, Drath and Palus reimagine leadership as “the process for making sense of what people are doing together so that people will understand and be committed.” Leadership, in this view, is a matter of providing interpretation. Leaders give people a lens and a language for understanding their work and experiences in light of larger purposes. They help shape the mental frameworks of others so that those people see themselves as making contributions to the mission and direction of their organization, working in community for a common purpose.

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