COMMENTARY

Enjoy the silence: Providing space for introverted employees to thrive

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I catch the pattern
Of your silence
Before you speak

I do not need
To hear a word.

In your silence
Every tone I seek
Is heard.
~ **Langston Hughes**

As Asselineau et al. (2024) highlight the importance of nurturing silence in modern workplaces, I extend their lessons to discuss the relevance of silence to the large body of employees who are themselves innately quiet: introverted employees. In this commentary, I describe how introverted employees are often mischaracterized and subsequently undervalued and unfairly treated. I also extend on Asselineau et al.'s recommendations to emphasize ways organizations can support their quiet employees' success and, hence, their own. In sum, I argue that when an organization cultivates and appreciates silence, they also acknowledge the value of introversion and provide introverted employees with the opportunities needed to reach their full potential.

Misconceptions of introversion

Introversion is considered the low end of the continuum that represents the Big Five personality trait that is typically represented by the term "extraversion." Individuals who are more extraverted tended to be more gregarious, outgoing, assertive, and excitement seeking across most situations, whereas those who are more introverted (or less extraverted) are less so, most of the time (Goldberg, 1990). Indeed, the word "quiet" is easily associated with the term "introvert" (Cain, 2013). The characteristics that make up extraversion/introversion are behaviorally visible (Funder, 2012), and thus even strangers find it relatively easy to correctly identify someone as being more so extraverted or introverted (Connelly & Ones, 2010).

However, although some of the characteristics that people readily associate with extraversion/introversion can be accurate (e.g., talkative; Connelly & Ones, 2010), many are also often inaccurate, with a tendency to paint a negative portrait of introverted individuals. Indeed,

introverted employees tend to be stereotyped as cold, unfriendly (Hall et al., 2019), incompetent (McCord & Smith, 2018), socially awkward, and low in self-esteem (Blevins et al., 2022). In contrast, extraverted employees tend to be stereotyped in a positive light, often viewed as kind, warm, a leader (Hall et al., 2019), intelligent, and competent (McCord & Smith, 2004). Beyond negative perceptions by others, introverted employees tend to report more instances of bullying and ostracism than extraverted employees (Nielsen et al., 2017), and a substantial number of employees report being treated negatively and/or unfairly at work *because* of their introversion (McCord, 2021). These forms of workplace mistreatment pose a particularly troublesome conundrum for organizations because these experiences could lead the target (i.e., introverted employees) to withdraw and speak up even less, perpetuating a cycle of mistreatment (McCord & Joseph, 2020). As Asselineau et al. stated, "silences remain frequently—and wrongly—associated with emptiness and inaction and seem inconsistent with typical values of modern organizations, which expect and reward dynamic and action-oriented collaborators and processes, supposedly to lead to better performances" (p. 3).

The complex extraversion–performance relationship

Those misconceptions, wherein there is a bias against introversion and a bias for extraversion, may help to explain the extraverted advantage in job applications, job performance ratings, gaining leadership roles, and getting promoted (Wilmot et al., 2019). However, the relationship between extraversion and job performance is highly context dependent (Wilmot & Ones, 2021). Indeed, occupations that tend to have strong task demands for interpersonal interaction, such as management or sales, are those where the extraversion–performance relationship appears to be maximized. However, performance in skilled, semiskilled, and professional occupations does not seem to benefit from extraversion (Wilmot & Ones, 2021).

Additional research on the relationship between extraversion and performance in various contexts highlights the complexity of the relationship and how introverts can in fact thrive in stereotypically extraverted occupations and beyond. For instance, research on extraversion and sales performance suggests the relationship could in fact be curvilinear (Grant, 2013). In leadership, introverted leaders tend to be more effective at leading proactive followers compared to extraverted leaders (Grant et al., 2011). Beyond, introverted employees seem to thrive creatively in environments with higher job complexity (Zhang et al., 2017), are more likely to perform safely (Beus et al., 2015), and are less likely to engage in deviance or procrastinate (Wilmot et al., 2019). Overall, despite the stereotype that louder, more assertive employees (i.e., extraverts) will be higher performers at work, the evidence suggests a complex relationship that denies an intuitive desire to use extraversion as a heuristic for success.

Quiet workplace initiatives

Through the lens of extraversion/introversion in the workplace, I concur that "the proper interpretation of silence is highly perspective and context dependent" (Asselineau et al., p. 23). Introverted employees tend to face a dilemma at work where their quietness is often misinterpreted as meaning they are uninterested or incapable (McCord & Joseph, 2020), resulting in many quiet employees being overlooked, treated with dislike, unfairly scrutinized, or excluded (McCord, 2021). However, the focal article raises the status of quiet at work, pinpointing what can be gained by all when quiet opportunities become part of the organizational culture. To do so, the authors proposed numerous workplace initiatives to create more silence-friendly workplaces, which I posit would concurrently create more introvert-friendly workplaces. These initiatives would also align with introverted preferences, such as working in quiet settings in solitude or

working with smaller teams (Goldberg, 1990), giving introverted employees space to thrive and the opportunity to fairly contribute. For example, Asselineau et al. proposed a "golden rule" of silence for recruiters to allow candidates the opportunity to fully express themselves and ask questions. This practice could be extended to those in leadership positions, where active listening becomes the largest component of a leader's meetings with subordinates. This rule would provide introverted candidates and employees the space they need to gather their thoughts before responding. Quiet, relaxing spaces that employees could momentarily tuck into during times of high work demands would provide introverted colleagues in particular the opportunity for their brains and bodies to recharge and return to work reinvigorated. Meetings could also be re-envisioned with the suggested periods of silence to provide introverted employees the chance to think through and even write down their thoughts on presented agenda items.

Conclusion

In closing, I propose that it is past time to alleviate the negative associations with silence and quiet behavior in the workplace and instead treat silence as "an organizational resource" (Asselineau et al., p. 17) that allows for increased concentration, deliberation, and contributions from all employees, which in turn would lead to increased organizational productivity. Despite a societal ideal that favors the louder voices of extraverted employees (Cain, 2013), introverted employees have much to offer to their colleagues and organizations. It is time to give them the quiet space they need to support their success.

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