



Building Teams, Retaining Associates

Understanding Introverts: An Overview

By Lori A. Lofano

Since the 2012 publication of Susan Cain's bestseller *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, there has been a proliferation of articles, webinars, discussion boards, blogs, and online quizzes pertaining to various aspects of introversion, as well as a smaller, but no less impressive, collection of articles, blogs, and discussions that are specific to introverted attorneys. However, the discussion about extroverts and introverts frequently relies on two generalizations. First, too often "introverted" and "shy" are treated as synonymous when they are very different. Second, being an introvert or extrovert is often discussed as if they are essentially just two distinct categories when, in fact, there is a whole spectrum, from the highly extroverted individual at one end, to a "centrist" position where someone falls slightly to the extroverted or introverted side, to the extreme introvert at the other end of the spectrum.

When I tell someone that I am an introvert, the response often either is, "So am I—I feel anxious socializing," or "I used to be one too, but I got over it." Such responses reflect the tendency for people to conflate shyness with introversion. Shyness or social awkwardness is a psychological condition. It is defined as "the tendency to feel awkward, worried or tense during social encounters, especially with unfamiliar people." See *Shyness*, Am. Psychological Ass'n, <http://www.apa.org>. Whether a person is shy is irrelevant to how he or she reenergizes him- or herself, which is the basis for determining if someone is an extrovert or an introvert. Introverts recharge their batteries by drawing inward into their own thoughts and emotions. Marti Olsen Laney, *The Introvert Advantage: How to Thrive in an Extrovert World* 19 (2002). A shy person finds social interaction awkward or stressful, whereas an introvert becomes overwhelmed and stifled by social interactions and other outside stimuli. Moreover, unlike shy people, introverts do engage in and enjoy outside stimuli, provided that



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they have stored sufficient energy in advance of the activity, and preferably if the interaction is not shallow, but rather consists of a meaningful discussion or a "deep dive" into the minutiae of a specific topic.

Although this is an extremely simplified explanation, essentially someone is an introvert because he or she uses the neurotransmitter acetylcholine to recharge his or her batteries. *Id.* at 74. Acetylcholine travels through a neural pathway in the frontal lobe that is associated with long-term memory, and it is connected to reasoning, learning, and inner monologue. *Id.* Moreover, introverts all have some level of sensitivity to dopamine, a neurotransmitter that is connected to excitement levels and physical activity. *Id.* at 70. Contrarily, extroverts use dopamine—with a side of adrenaline—to recharge their batteries. *Id.* The neural pathway that dopamine travels in the human brain is connected to short-term memory. *Id.* at 74. Unlike social anxiety, which is a psychological condition, introversion and extroversion appear to be more properly characterized as physiological conditions. Consequently, someone may be a shy introvert, a shy extrovert, an outgoing introvert, or an outgoing extrovert. And while a shy person may overcome his or her anxiety over time or with proper psychiatric assistance, someone cannot "get over" a sensitivity to dopamine or a tendency for his or her body to rely on acetylcholine to recharge.

The level of acetylcholine or dopamine and adrenaline that a person needs to recharge depends on where he or she falls on the extrovert–introvert spectrum. An extremely introverted person may need an entire evening of quiet to recharge after a day that included a lot of outside stimuli, while an introvert who is more in the middle of the introvert–extrovert spectrum may require only a half-hour to him- or herself.

Knowing where you fall on the introvert–extrovert spectrum will help you in your legal career. Depending on how introverted or extroverted you are, you may choose to focus on a law practice that involves less or more outside stimulus. If you are an extrovert, you may choose a practice that involves more social interaction. If you are an introvert, you can learn how to recharge to ensure that you have sufficient reserves for client meetings, hearings, or business development events. If you know that you have social anxiety, however, you may focus on an area of law that involves less client contact and that does not require business development.

Likewise, it may help you manage associates if you take the time to consider whether they are more introverted or more extroverted. If you force yourself past any unconscious bias and focus on an introverted associate's work product, you will see more value in the introverted associ-

ate than you may otherwise have noticed. Similarly, if you are aware that an associate is more extroverted, you can give him or her assignments that play to the associate's strengths while helping him or her develop the concentration and depth of knowledge that does not necessarily come

naturally to extroverts. Understanding the differing strengths and needs of extroverts and introverts is thus not only important to personal and individual professional development, it is also a useful tool in building strong teams and retaining quality associates.

