

# Newsday

## **Introverts Struggle to Fit Into An Extroverted Workplace**

By Patricia Kitchen, Change@Work

About four years ago, Kerry Sturgill was facing a career crossroads: stay in an industry populated by extroverts, or to jump to a more reflective ship where introverts like her were in the majority. Career counselors had told her to get out of the highly extroverted public relations field "so you can be happy and do what you are." Among the less frenetic areas they pointed to: art, scientific research, data analysis.

Such a move is definitely the right road for many introverts struggling to fit into an extroverted workplace. But not for Sturgill, who lives in Seattle and says she's drawn to those who are more outgoing and wanted "more of what they had ... I wanted to buck my own system." Indeed, with a concerted effort she's been able to "tame my introverted ways and gain quiet power and respect. Sure it was painful, but here's what I learned: that I may be an introvert, but I could be an extrovert when I needed to."

So, just what is an introvert anyway? It's someone who is energized by thought and reflection, while extroverts are energized by socializing. Introverts naturally need to think before they speak. Extroverts use the speaking process to figure out what it is they want to say. And, needless to say, there are pluses and minuses to both personality types.

Still, in a country where as many as two-thirds of the population may be extroverted, those who are the opposite can be misunderstood. They can be seen as antisocial, secretive, even territorial, as introverts can sometimes be protective of their space and quiet, says Shoya Zichy, an extroverted Manhattan coach and specialist in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, an assessment that helps identify personality types.

But many introverts are humorous and charismatic - just in a quieter way, she says. And of course, you can't beat 'em for their listening skills. One famous introvert she's interviewed for a book: Diane Sawyer. Workplaces can actually benefit from having both types, says Deborah Barrett, program director of the Rice University MBA Communications program, where students are assigned to teams based on their Myers Briggs types, the idea being to create a better balance. An introvert herself, she says she has the best of both worlds - working in an environment of professors, who tend toward introversion, yet getting to teach, which calls on her more "out there" skills.

Of course, for some, the stresses of working against type are just too strong. Says one woman at a Dallas public relations agency, "Over the long term, being in such an environment has caused me to be deeply depressed. Much of this has to do with extroverts' feelings toward quiet types and their tendency to ostracize." She says introverts can become self-conscious about not being so outgoing and that "makes you skeptical of yourself." What's more, being around highly extroverted types "tends to bring

out your introversion even more." This woman, who prefers not to be named, wants to move back to the corporate side of public relations, which she says she found to be more balanced.

As for Sturgill, her determination may have started with a seventh grade teacher who recognized her quieter style and told her, "Don't ever think you don't have something to say just because others are louder." She's been able to design a work life that keeps her in the creative environment she loves and allows her to be herself. With the help of a career counselor, she was able to learn about her own style - what stresses and what energizes her, so, "I was able to re-approach my career with much more success."

She opted to work for Parker LePla, a small brand development and PR firm in Seattle, which is heavy on research, writing and strategy - and light on event management and publicity stunts. Here's her advice for those looking to take her path: Make good use of e-mail. If you don't get to make a point at a loud meeting, send a follow-up e-mail sharing your thoughts, but don't fall into the trap of using it as a crutch.

If you don't have an office and are easily distracted by ongoing chitchat, consider listening to music through headphones. But take care not to make your more gregarious neighbors feel rejected. Seek out interaction as opposed to letting the extroverted environment define interaction for you - be an extrovert twice a day.

Sure, she says, if she had moved to a less stimulating environment, that might have "short-circuited a lot of my pain, but I also believe it would have short-circuited learning that's made me a much more well-rounded person." Her main lesson? "I don't have to be an extrovert. I just have to play one for an hour."