

A woman with dark hair and glasses is looking over the top edge of a spiral-bound notebook. The notebook is open, and the text is written on its pages. The background is a solid blue color.

MISCONCEPTIONS

About Introverts in the Workplace

"I believe that introversion is my greatest strength. I have such a strong inner life that I'm never bored and only occasionally lonely. No matter what mayhem is happening around me, I know I can always turn inward."

—Susan Cain
(American writer and lecturer)

Susan Cain recounts a story about her childhood
summer camp in the TED Talk, "The Power of Introverts":

"Camp was more like a keg party without any alcohol. And on the very first day our counselor gathered us all together and she taught us a cheer that she said we would be doing every day for the rest of the summer to instill camp spirit. And it went like this: 'R-O-W-D-I-E, that's the way we spell rowdie. Rowdie, rowdie, let's get rowdie.' So I couldn't figure out for the life of me why we were supposed to be so rowdy, or why we had to spell this word incorrectly. But... I recited the cheer along with everybody else.

"The first time that I took my book out of my suitcase, the coolest girl in the bunk came up to me and she asked me, 'Why are you being so mellow?'—mellow, of course, being the exact opposite of R-O-W-D-I-E. And then . . . the counselor came up to me with a concerned expression on her face and she repeated the point about camp spirit and said we should all work very hard to be outgoing."

It's not that introverts don't like people, and don't enjoy going out and having a good time—these are both huge misconceptions that introverts are labeled with, but they do enjoy being by themselves just as much. This is an extrovert-biased society, and thus introverts often find it difficult to excel in the workplace; not because they do poor work, but, as the saying goes, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease."

Cain said, "Our most important institutions, our schools, and our workplaces, they are designed mostly for extroverts and [their] need for lots of stimulation. And we have this belief

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system right now that I call the new groupthink, which holds that all creativity and all productivity comes from a very oddly gregarious place.”

There are places where co-workers complain about their day and spend time being buddies with the manager, talking about their feelings. There are “frat boys” that go golfing with the boss every other weekend. These types of people tend to get ahead at the workplace—and there’s nothing wrong with that, they’re very competent workers—but it can be frustrating for introverts who do work of similar quality.

You may be an introvert and thinking to yourself (because you certainly wouldn’t be saying it out loud) “What can I do to be noticed in the workplace?” First, there are misconceptions you’ll have to overcome; second, there are some practices and strategies you can implement. The biggest misconception about introverts is that they are shy. This is simply not true. Shyness is fear, apprehension, or awkwardness around people. Introverts aren’t afraid to interact with people, they simply prefer not to. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying one’s own company.

You’ve probably heard that the biggest fear in America is public speaking, affecting 15 percent of the population. It would seem apparent that it is not only the extroverts that don’t like standing up in front of a crowd and talking.

If a fear of speaking up is bringing you down, you can overcome it. Jump right in, or join a Toastmasters club, and practice to become a better public speaker. Another thing that would probably benefit everyone—not just introverts—is learning how to network better. Remember, it’s not what you know, but who, that matters. Read the book, “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” Another misconception is that introverts are boring. Just because you choose to stay home

and read a book, instead of going out on a Friday night, doesn’t mean you’re boring.

So play to your strengths. Introverts are often strong-minded people who are good at listening, problem-solving, and exuding calmness and confidence in moments of crisis. These attributes are great, especially for people in a leadership role, and arguably make introverts better—i.e. more successful and productive—workers.

Cain said, “The vast majority of teachers report believing that the ideal student is an extrovert as opposed to an introvert, even though [studies show] introverts actually get better grades and are more knowledgeable... And interesting research by Adam Grant at the Wharton School has found that introverted leaders often deliver better outcomes than extroverts do, because when they are managing proactive employees, they’re much more likely to let those employees run with their ideas, whereas an extrovert can, quite unwittingly, get so excited about things that they’re putting their own stamp on things, and other people’s ideas might not as easily then bubble up to the surface.”

All in all, introverts are more comfortable in their own skin. They don’t need the external stimulation that extroverts do, and take more time to recharge after a lot of interaction. Unfortunately, people these days favor the “man of action” to the “man of contemplation.” But where would Sherlock Holmes be without Dr. Watson (or more, where would Holmes be without Holmes)? The world needs introverts, but expects extroverts. So, if you’re an introvert and want to get ahead in your work and social life, the best advice is to fake it. Be more assertive and take more action. This, like everything else, is all about perception.