

YOUR EXECUTIVE CAREER

Introverted Execs Find Ways to Shine



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Introverted executives are stepping into the limelight – even though many dislike being the center of attention.

Larry Page, a co-founder of Google Inc., is an introvert who keeps a low public profile. He reclaimed his role as chief executive of the Internet search giant on April 4, forcing himself into the public eye.



Google CEO, Larry Page ASSOCIATED PRESS

Meanwhile, in a Harvard Business Review blog posted earlier this month, Campbell Soup Co. CEO Douglas Conant wrote that he's an introvert who sometimes feels drained appearing "in front of large groups of people I don't know."

Messrs. Page and Conant represent the latest examples of how introverted leaders can flourish despite strong

cultural bias against them. About 65% of 1,542 senior managers see introversion as an impediment to reaching higher management levels, concluded a 2006 survey by TheLadders.com, a jobs website.

Introverts typically act reserved, think before they speak and are most energized spending time alone. A flurry of books, blogs, coaches and research is helping transform those supposed career deficits into assets.

But many introverts make good executives even though "extroverts get all the attention," Mr. Conant noted in an interview. Google declined to make Mr. Page available for comment.

Indeed, "introverts can be better bosses," especially in a dynamic and unpredictable environment, reports Adam M. Grant, an associate professor at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School who studies this topic. Amid the uncertainty created by the increased pace of innovation and globalization, he adds, it's probably better "to be an introverted leader now than at any previous time on record."

Ambitious introverts tend to excel at one-on-one interactions, empathy and deliberate decision making, experts suggest. They also tend to be good listeners.

Mr. Page, for instance, recently persuaded top executives to join him in sitting and working together each day in a public area of Google's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. The idea is that employees can approach them directly, people familiar with the matter have said.

Ian Cook, the chief of Colgate-Palmolive Co., characterizes himself as introverted. He believes his strong listening skills played a role in his steady advancement since he joined the consumer-goods manufacturer in 1976 as an assistant product manager. "I

listen intently," he says. "I am extremely attentive to language and body cues."

Still, when the British executive landed his first senior management spot more than a decade ago, he remembers being uncomfortable addressing large groups of staffers.

"He was humorous but a little stiff in the process," concurs Reuben Mark, then Colgate's CEO. "He wasn't engaging various parts of the audience with his eyes," Mr. Mark continues. "He tended to look down at the podium."

Mr. Cook says coaching from colleagues and advisers improved his presentation delivery. "Unshackling from the podium was a defining moment," he concedes. "I had to learn."

Campbell's Mr. Conant still feels anxious about giving speeches before strangers even though he has run the big packaged-food maker since 2001. He says he eases his jitters a bit by visiting the venue ahead of time, figuring out where he'll stand and bringing along a knowledgeable buddy who's familiar with the speaking venue.

That's what Mr. Conant did the day before he delivered a keynote address at a women's leadership conference on April 12. The tactic "makes me a little more effective," he explains.

Other introverted leaders navigate awkward situations by enlisting assistance from extroverted associates.

Consider Tim Miller, chief executive of Rally Software Development Corp. He unsuccessfully pitched an investor group about pouring \$10 million into the young software concern three years ago.

"All steak, no sizzle," Mr. Miller recalls the lead investor telling him following his flawed presentation. "I didn't create the excitement that they were used to seeing from an extroverted, more flamboyant CEO," he says.

At Mr. Miller's request, the investor group agreed to hear a revised pitch a week later. He brought along Rally's extroverted founder as well as the company's highest sales official. He wanted his audience "to see that the whole team wasn't introverts." After the second meeting, Rally got the \$10 million.

Rebecca Chopp, a self-described introvert, tried a similar approach when she became president of Colgate University in 2002. At first, she says she found it hard to make cold calls requesting donations. So, she promoted the head of fundraising to be her special assistant. "He was the most extroverted person I ever had met," she says.

The fundraiser coached the novice president, arranged introductions with potential donors and accompanied her on donor visits for several years. "He loved being the connector," Ms. Chopp adds. She left Colgate to command Swarthmore College in 2009.

Extensive preparation also enables introverted executives to conduct fruitful sessions with groups of coworkers. Introverts tend to do better when they "plan where to sit and stand," then make well-rehearsed comments in a meeting's first five minutes, says Atlanta leadership coach Jennifer B. Kahnweiler in her book, *The Introverted Leader*.

While president of Nabisco Holding Corp.'s food unit, his prior employer, Mr. Conant says he realized staffers considered him aloof because he was too shy to say much during meetings. "People were drawing [inaccurate] conclusions about my behavior," he recalls.

Things improved once Mr. Conant began to alert his colleagues that introverts like him often need time to process information. "The more transparent I became, the more engaged people became."

Some introverted executives thrive at work as long as they regularly recharge their drained emotional batteries through solitary pursuits, such as a long jog. For Rally's Mr. Miller, the remedy is golf. "I actually play alone more than I care to admit," he says.

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