

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Effective Meetings: Leaving No Voice Unheard

by Dr. Mike Armour

The meeting you called has gone on for 45 minutes, with lots of give and take. Now it's time to wrap up.

Of the seven people in the room, five have dominated the conversation. The other two have listened carefully, but with little input.

"It's important to hear from everyone," you think. So you close by going around the room, asking each person for his or her final comments.

Again the same five have an energetic summary. The other two offer a thoughtful, but rather generalized response.

You then adjourn, feeling that you have everyone's contribution. But do you? What were the two low-key participants not telling you?

The Quiet Voices in the Room

Whatever they left unsaid, they communicated one thing quite clearly. They put their introverted personality on full display. And here lies the most likely reason for their low-key involvement.

Introverts are not necessarily shy or bashful. (Extroverts can be shy, too.) But in meetings they may often seem reticent to speak. They easily come across more like observers than participants.

What governs their passive engagement is the difference that sets introverts and extroverts apart. The difference has nothing to do with whether a person communicates energetically or is a charismatic manager. In *Good to Great* Jim Collins has shown that highly effective corporate leaders are often psychological introverts.

Rather, extroversion and introversion are a measure of how you energize yourself. When your emotional batteries are drained or depleted, how do you recharge them? Extroverts recharge by hooking up with a crowd of people – even strangers – or plunging into some demanding group activity.

Introverts, on the other hand, recharge by finding something quiet to do – reading a book, going for a long walk, listening to music. When introverts include others in this activity, it's usually a small circle made up of close acquaintances, most likely introverts themselves.

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In effect, being with people is a *net energy gain* for extroverts, a *net energy drain* for introverts. And this leads to other distinctions in how they choose to behave, especially in meetings.

Two Paths to Clarity

Interaction is the extrovert's strong suit. Reflection is the strong suit for introverts. Extroverts are in their element when meetings turn to rapid give-and-take. Introverts would prefer to think about the topic in their office. The distraction of the meeting hampers their reflection, and thus their best thinking.

Extroverts tend to talk in order to clarify their own thought process. Their approach is, "Speak up and you will find your way to clarity."

Introverts, by contrast, come from the opposite direction. Their rule is, "First gain clarity, then you will have something worth saying." Thus their penchant for sitting quietly in meetings.

Indeed, if extroverts gain clarity by speaking, introverts may gain clarity by writing (notice the solitary activity). As an introvert myself, I typically depend on writing to crystallize my thoughts, even though I'm a speaker by profession and fairly dynamic in my stage presence.

What this boils down to is that introverts don't necessarily do their best thinking in meetings. It's afterwards, once they've had time to reflect on things, that their greatest creativity begins to gel.

So I coach clients to go one step beyond the traditional "once around the room" wrap-up. I urge them to close the meeting with, "I want to thank everyone for what you've contributed today. And I want you to continue to think about what we have discussed. I also have one final request. Sometime in the next 24 hours drop me an email with further suggestions that come to mind as you reflect on our discussion."

With this closing you've empowered the introverts to "go do their thing." They can retire to their office or cubicle and replay the entire meeting in their minds. Don't be surprised if the most helpful input from your team's introverts comes in this follow-up email, not in the meeting itself.

Still Waters, Quiet Voices

One final observation. When introverts feel strongly about a subject, they may jump into the give-and-take with the extroverts as though they were extroverted themselves. Yet, even when they are engaged and loquacious, introverts may not develop their best insights in the meeting.

So always make it okay for everyone – especially introverts – to offer belated input. Remember, still waters run deep. The very gem of wisdom you need may be tucked inside some quiet voice in the room. Always give that gem a chance to surface.

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