

## The Power of Introverts

### Part 1

A third to a half of the population are introverts—a third to a half. So that's one out of every two or three people you know. So even if you're an extrovert yourself, I'm talking about your co-workers and your spouses and your children and the person sitting right next to you right now—all of them **subject to this bias**<sup>1</sup> that is pretty deep and real in our society. We all **internalize**<sup>2</sup> it from a very early age without even having a language for what we're doing. . . .

But now, here's where the bias comes in. Our most important institutions, our schools and our workplaces, they are designed mostly for extroverts and for extroverts' need for lots of stimulation. And also, we're living through this belief system, we have a belief system right now that I call the new groupthink, which holds that all creativity and all productivity comes from a very oddly gregarious place.

So if you picture the typical classroom nowadays: When I was going to school, we sat in rows. We sat in rows of desks like this, and we did most of our work pretty autonomously. But nowadays, your typical classroom has **pods of desks**<sup>3</sup>—four or five or six or seven kids all facing each other. And kids are working in countless group assignments. Even in subjects like math and creative writing, which you would think would depend on solo flights of thought, kids are now expected to act as **committee members**.<sup>4</sup> And for the kids who prefer to go off by themselves or just to work alone, those kids are seen as **outliers**<sup>5</sup> often or, worse, as problem cases. And the vast majority of teachers reports believing that the ideal

student is an extrovert as opposed to an introvert, even though introverts actually get better grades and are more knowledgeable, according to research.

OK, same thing is true in our workplaces. We now, most of us, work in **open-plan offices**,<sup>6</sup> without walls, where we are subject to the constant noise and gaze of our co-workers. And when it comes to leadership, introverts are routinely passed over for leadership positions, even though introverts tend to be very careful, much less likely to take **outsized risks**<sup>7</sup>—which is something we might all favor nowadays. And interesting research by **Adam Grant**<sup>8</sup> 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**<sup>9</sup> things, and other people's ideas might not as easily then bubble up to the surface. . . .

### Part 2

Now if all this is true, then why are we **getting it so wrong**?<sup>10</sup> Why are we setting up our schools this way and our workplaces? And why are we making these introverts feel so guilty about wanting to just go off by themselves some of the time? One answer lies deep in our cultural history. Western societies, and in particular the U.S., have always favored the man of action over the man of contemplation and “man” of contemplation. But in **America's early days**,<sup>11</sup> we lived

<sup>1</sup> When someone is “subject to bias,” they are treated unfairly due to others’ discriminatory beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> When we “internalize” a belief, we begin to unconsciously think it’s the truth, usually because we have heard it often (not because we agree with it).

<sup>3</sup> A classroom with “pods of desks” is usually set up so that three or four desks are turned into each other, which means students face each other as they work. This classroom layout is supposed to encourage group work.

<sup>4</sup> Instead of saying “teamwork,” Cain describes it as “committee members.” We can infer from her language choice that she sees this option as not ideal. This is especially clear in noting that she describes working individually with positive language: “solo flights of thought.”

<sup>5</sup> An “outlier” is an individual alienated from the group. It is not a positive term.

<sup>6</sup> An “open-plan office” is organized so that all desks are visible to everyone. There are usually no walls or doors. Note that students saw a picture of an open-plan office in Lesson A.

<sup>7</sup> A synonym for “outsized” is “large” or “oversized.”

<sup>8</sup> Adam Grant is a business professor and social science writer. He is the author of *Give and Take*.

<sup>9</sup> When you “put your own stamp on something,” you make it or claim it as yours by adding your ideas to it somehow.

<sup>10</sup> Note that “bubble up,” meaning “to emerge,” was also used by TED speaker Nic Marks in Unit 4.

<sup>11</sup> “America’s early days” refers to when the nation was founded in the 1700s.

in what historians call a culture of character, where we still, at that point, valued people for their inner selves and their moral rectitude. And if you look at the **self-help books**<sup>12</sup> from this era, they all had titles with things like “Character, the Grandest Thing in the World.” And they featured role models like **Abraham Lincoln**<sup>13</sup> who was praised for being modest and unassuming. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**<sup>14</sup> called him “A man who does not offend by superiority.”

But then we hit the 20th century and we entered a new culture that historians call the culture of personality. What happened is we had evolved from an agricultural economy to a world of big business. And so suddenly people are moving from small towns to the cities. And instead of working alongside people they’ve known all their lives, now they are having to prove themselves in a crowd of strangers. So, quite understandably, qualities like magnetism and charisma suddenly come to seem really important. And sure enough, the self-help books change to meet these new needs and they start to have names like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. And they feature as their role models really great salesmen. So that’s the world we’re living in today. That’s our cultural inheritance.

Now none of this is to say that social skills are unimportant, and I’m also not calling for the abolishing of teamwork at all. The same religions who send their sages off to lonely mountaintops also teach us love and trust. And the problems

that we are facing today in fields like science and in economics are so vast and so complex that we are going to need **armies of**<sup>15</sup> people coming together to solve them working together. But I am saying that the more freedom that we give introverts to be themselves, the more likely that they are to come up with their own unique solutions to these problems. . . .

So I just published a book about introversion, and it took me about seven years to write. And for me, that seven years was like total bliss, because I was reading, I was writing, I was thinking, I was researching. It was my version of my grandfather’s hours a day alone in his library. But now all of a sudden my job is very different, and my job is to be out here talking about it, talking about introversion. And that’s a lot harder for me, because as honored as I am to be here with all of you right now, this is not my natural milieu.

So I prepared for moments like these as best I could. I spent the last year practicing public speaking every chance I could get. And I call this my “**year of speaking dangerously**.”<sup>16</sup> And that actually helped a lot. But I’ll tell you, what helps even more is my sense, my belief, my hope that when it comes to our attitudes to introversion and to quiet and to solitude, we truly are poised on the brink of dramatic change. . . . So I wish you the best of all possible journeys and the courage to speak softly.

Thank you very much.

<sup>12</sup> A “self-help book” refers to a book written on a topic that encourages people to improve themselves.

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Lincoln became the 16th President of the United States in 1861. He was president during the Civil War that led to the abolishment of slavery.

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson was a writer and speaker in the U.S. in the 1800s. He is best known for being a leader of the Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalists believed that individuals have to be free to develop independently in order to be good members of society.

<sup>15</sup> The term “armies of” is used when a large number of people or things are needed to get something done.

<sup>16</sup> When Cain says that it is her “year of speaking dangerously,” she is making a humorous comment by referencing a popular novel and movie titled *The Year of Living Dangerously*.