

Introverts think they won't like being leaders but they are capable

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Compared to extraverts, introverts tend to be relatively passive, quiet and reserved. Credit: www.shutterstock.com

Introverts often don't think they will enjoy leadership roles and so are less likely to go for the top job, [new research finds](#). In fact, introverts in our study thought they would be worried and distressed in leadership situations.

Whether or not someone is an introvert is usually measured by how much they exhibit the personality trait called "extraversion" - being outgoing and social. Compared to extraverts, [introverts](#) tend to be relatively passive, quiet and reserved.

Not surprisingly, someone's level of introversion or extraversion is related to a range of important personal and professional outcomes. For example, [research has found](#) that extraverts are more likely than introverts to perform well in sales jobs. Introverts, on the other hand, are more likely to be [honest or humble](#) and are less likely to risk their own [health and safety](#).

Our research examined these behavioural traits in

184 business students, but it's [well established](#) that introverts occupy fewer leadership positions than extraverts. Introverts are less likely to formally emerge as leaders in organisations through the usual promotion and selection channels.

They are also less likely to [informally emerge](#) as leaders in unstructured groups. Additionally, even when introverts manage to emerge as leaders, they are typically rated as being less "leader-like" by their peers.

Why don't introverts emerge as leaders?

As part of our study, we measured each business student's extraversion using a personality questionnaire and observed their leadership behaviour in a small group activity. Prior to the group activity, we also asked each participant to predict or "forecast" what emotions they would experience during the activity. We presented participants with a list of positive and [negative emotions](#) (i.e. "I will feel excited" or "I will feel upset") and participants indicated their likelihood of experiencing each emotion during the activity.

We found that what introverts think they will feel in a leadership position plays a powerful role in explaining why introverts struggle to emerge as leaders. When participants thought they would experience negative emotions (i.e. fear, worry or distress) these became strong psychological barriers to acting like a leader. Introverts were more likely to think they'd feel these negative emotions than extraverts.

The introverts in our study also felt like they would feel less positive emotions in a leadership position (i.e. excitement, interest). However, these thoughts about positive emotions were not as important as negative emotions in accounting for leadership behaviour in participants.

Helping introverts become leaders

Just because introverts don't expect themselves to manage leadership positions, doesn't mean they cannot be successful leaders.

Until recently, the popular scientific view was that extraverts generally perform better as leaders than introverts. Extraverts have a set of characteristics that make them appear leader-like, and these characteristics also foster certain [effective styles](#) of leadership (for example being charismatic and inspirational). This also makes sense intuitively, as extraverts are dominant, confident, persuasive and expressive and therefore *should* make better leaders.

However, recently this idea has been challenged and there is a growing appreciation of introverts both in and outside the workplace. In her bestselling book [Quiet](#), author Susan Cain focuses on the multiple strengths of introverts, many of which should assist individuals in leadership positions, like listening and deep thinking.

A number of studies have also identified several leadership situations where introverts tend to outperform extraverts. [One study](#), for example, reported that introverts are more effective leaders of proactive teams than extroverts. [Another study](#) found that introverted characteristics are prevalent in effective leaders known as "servant leaders". These leaders are individuals who foster good performance in others by focusing on the growth and well-being of their teams.

It could be possible to change the mindset among introverts about their ability to be leaders. Our study found that introverts and extraverts who forecast similar low levels of negative emotions in leadership situations were equally likely to emerge as leaders. [Other research](#) also indicates that introverts are very capable of both engaging in "extraverted" behaviour and enjoying such behaviour when compelled to do so.

Importantly, research on what is termed "[enacted extraversion](#)" indicates that introverts tend to overestimate the negative emotions they will experience when acting extraverted. If introverts can be taught to be more confident or optimistic with respect to leadership situations, it seems very

likely they can emerge as leaders as often as extraverts.

There are many situations whereby introverts will make good leaders and it seems that introverts have the potential to emerge as [leaders](#) in those situations. So the challenge is not making introverts more like extraverts, but rather assisting introverts to be more confident about their own [leadership](#) capability.

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