

How to access the wisdom of introverts – listen to them!

Robyn Pearce

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Over the last few months several people have recommended ‘*Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that won’t stop talking*’ by Susan Cain. So I ordered it from the local library. To my surprise 147 people were ahead of me – clearly the word was out! And now I’ve finished it I’ve joined the fan club. It’s a must-read for everyone.

If you’re a quiet thinker you’ll learn strategies to cope with the noisy crowd: if you’re an extrovert you’ll see why it’s so important to sometimes shut up and give space to your introverted friends, colleagues and loved ones. And as a teacher you’ll be handling children in both categories.

Here are just a few of the well-researched and clearly presented topics Susan Cain, an ex-

lawyer and herself an introvert, discusses:

- the relatively short time that extroversion has been fashionable
- the value (or otherwise) of brainstorming
- different angles on the 2007 Global Financial Crisis and how it could have been averted
- multi-tasking – good, bad or ugly
- how to work with your introversion/extroversion preferences in situations that don’t naturally support you
- how to raise an introverted child in a world that encourages extroversion
- how to successfully teach introverted children
- how to manage a relationship when the partners have opposite socialising needs.

In summary, introverts need quiet and space to do their work. They can only cope with loud noise

and lots of people in short doses. If they can’t work and live in conditions that support their preference they will be stressed, get sick and be far less productive. And, if the extroverts of the world don’t take time to listen or give them the opportunity to contribute, they miss out on many well-considered pearls of wisdom that in some cases would have saved serious consequences.

Following are just a few of the stand-out points that hooked me.

A cultural change

Cain charts the progression in American society over the last 100 years from the Culture of Character to the Culture of Personality and the rise of the Extrovert Ideal. Being able to speak up and out confidently has become an expectation, even in educational institutions of

all levels. For example many US universities, including Harvard, encourage and edify quick and assertive answers over quiet slow decision-making. "We see talkers as leaders". And so the heads of many organisations have extrovert tendencies.

You'll read many case studies of introverts who have been marginalised, side-lined and ignored while loud confident leaders have taken their companies to ruin. Examples include Enron and a number of the institutions caught in the 2007 Global Financial Crisis.

Brainstorming – is it really as useful as we think?

You'll find a very thorough overview of the origins and value of brainstorming. Cain's conclusion? Group brainstorming makes people feel attached – but doesn't increase creativity. Online collaboration, however, is a form of solitude – it works really well for introverts.

She gives three reasons why physical group brainstorming isn't as effective:

- social loafing – some sit back and let others do the work
- production blocking – only one can talk at a time
- evaluation apprehension – people in a group are afraid to look stupid in front of peers. (As backup, she refers to Solomon Asch's research on the 'Pain of independence' – the dangers of group influence and how it can change an individual's perceptions).

Her suggestion is not to stop collaborating face-to-face but to refine the way we do it. Most healthy teams are those with a mix of introverts and extroverts. Create settings so people can circulate when they want and disappear into private workspaces when they want to focus or simply be alone.

As teachers of any age, how can we support the different needs of our students whilst keeping everyone engaged and without losing control?

How do you rebuild your energy?

Everyone needs 'restorative niches'. For introverts it will be places they can retreat and restore their energy levels. It might be for only for a short time, but if they have to interact non-stop they'll become more and more uncomfortable. Instead, give them space to have time out (for pleasure, not pain) and they'll be content.

I saw this happen in Melbourne last November. I was with a group of Kiwis and new Aussie friends, being entertained in a beautiful mansion after a fun day at a sailing regatta. For a few minutes I stepped away from the gregarious and chatty crowd in the kitchen and dining room and wandered through the big reception rooms, admiring the awesome architecture and amazing art. To my surprise I spotted my good friend Penelope all alone in one of the lounges, reading a book.

"Are you OK?" I asked in some surprise.

"Absolutely." She looked up with a happy smile, book still open on her lap. "I've talked enough for now. I just need some quiet time to recharge." Clearly she hoped I'd move on. So I did. Half-an-hour later she was again engaged in animated conversation.

Extroverts also need 'restorative niches' – but they'll work in the opposite way. Are they getting enough stimulation from others, either at work or outside of work? Does the job involve talking, travelling and meeting new people? Is the work space stimulating enough? If the job isn't a perfect fit, are the hours flexible enough that they can blow off steam after work?

We can work in jobs and environments that

aren't perfect for our type, as long as we can buffer the activities with enough contrast to support our required energy and interaction levels. However, if we act out of character for too long, without the chance to recharge in the right way for ourselves, we will burn out, get sick, compromise our immune functioning.

How to cultivate quiet kids in a world that can't hear them

In Chapter 11 Cain tells us that one of the best things you can do for an introverted child is to work with him/her on their reaction to novelty. They react not only to new people, but also to new places and events. An introvert will recoil from novelty or overstimulation, not from human contact. They just need smaller doses of others' company and gaps in between. Expose quiet children gradually to new situations and people – taking care to respect their limits, even when they seem extreme.

And there's much more – I've only scratched the surface. From many angles, including getting better results faster by understanding how to communicate with each other (which is where my time management comes in), this book is a standout.

Read it! **ET**



Robyn Pearce helps exhausted overloaded teachers find more time, control their paperwork and get home earlier. www.gettingagrip.com.

She is a Certified Speaking Professional (top speaking accreditation in the profession of speaking) held by only about 800 people around the world.

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