

Bridging the Innie-Outtie Communication Gap

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The Situation

“Why can’t they just figure it out on their own?” “What is taking him so long?!” “Why does she keep talking about stuff she doesn’t know about?” “Why can’t we ever have a productive team meeting?”

In the typical workplace, there are a wide range of personality types, all trying to accomplish the same thing but having very different ways of doing it. We often label others as “control freaks” or “fly by the seat of her pants” types, sometimes using even less flattering terminology. Underneath those behaviors is a core personality trait – being introverted or extroverted – that informs whether we prefer to have lots of space or be rapid fire.

In short, an introvert is someone who gains energy from solitude and drains energy from too much social activity. An extrovert is energized by people and activity and depleted if she has too much time alone. Another key difference between innies and outties: their problem-solving and communication methods. The extrovert will want to gather others and reflect collectively, asking “What do *you* think?” The introvert will move towards solitude or maybe one other person, to ask “What do *I* think?” The introvert prefers to reflect on that information by going deeper into the self, whereas extroverts assemble the troops.

Why is this important? Because by understanding each type’s modus operandi, we all can improve our communication and be more productive.

Top 10 Communication Tips

For Extroverts working with Introverts:

1. Understand that introverts need space and quiet to gather and process their thoughts. Brainstorming sessions can be stressful (unless you ask the introvert to facilitate or scribe). Share the brainstorming topic or question in advance, so they can get a head-start on thinking of ideas to contribute. Allow people to submit ideas in writing, either during or after the meeting.
2. Leave room in the process for introverts to communicate one-on-one or in a small group, or in writing.
3. Provide gentle nudging if your introvert colleague is moving too slowly for you or the situation. Give him permission to share something that’s imperfect or unfinished.
4. Don’t assume that because an introvert doesn’t speak up that s/he has nothing to say. You may have to ask for feedback directly. Refrain from prefacing your request by saying “You’ve been quiet over there,” which puts them on the spot.
5. Keep meetings on-topic and respect the meeting timeframe. Long meetings with free-form agendas leave most people exhausted, especially introverts.

For Introverts working with Extroverts:

6. Use your listening skills to support them in problem solving. Extroverts think out loud by talking through things with others.
7. Speak up if you feel you’re not being heard. Extroverts expect you to speak up. Decide if you can wait until after the meeting, or practice interjecting at appropriate moments.
8. Know that extroverts prefer face-to-face, verbal communication. Respect their preference while honoring your needs by scheduling short, focused meetings as needed to clarify key information.
9. Set clear expectations and measures of success. Acknowledge the accomplishments of the extroverts on your team with specific feedback and recognition.

10. Take advantage of the average extrovert's open-door policy. Share what's on your mind, early and often.

The Bottom Line

Communicate with others according to their preferences, not yours, while still honoring your needs. Introverts generally dislike the phone, but they can learn to deal with it because it's sometimes the fastest way to accomplish something. Extroverts often don't like to think too much before doing something, but they can choose to slow down because it helps avoid later problems.

It's a matter of stretching yourself while being aware of what you prefer, what your colleagues prefer, and how you work best. The ultimate outcome is less frustration and easier communication.

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