

*On the Job*

# Myths about Introverts – Part I

*By Adam Grant*

**T**he stigma of introversion is evaporating. People recognize that it comes with strengths, not only vulnerabilities. This awareness is not unique to students I've had at Wharton; I've seen the same trend with senior executives. Leaders are coming out of the introvert closet in droves. However, I've noticed that despite growing social and professional acceptance, introverts are still wildly misunderstood. People may be more open about being introverts, but they cling to assumptions that don't stand up to rigorous evidence. It's time to debunk five of these myths. We'll explore two of them this month; the remainder will appear in part two of this two-part article.

**\* Myth:** *“Extraverts get energy from social interaction, whereas introverts get energy from privately reflecting on their thoughts and feelings.”*

Although many people believe this quote is true, extensive research suggests that it's false. Introverts spend about the same amount of time with other people as extraverts, and enjoy it just as much. When people are randomly assigned to act extraverted or introverted, extraverts *and* introverts experience greater energy when they talk more. This shouldn't be a surprise: social interaction is the spice of life, in part because it satisfies the fundamental human need to belong. So if it's not in where you get your energy, what's the difference between introverts and extraverts? *It's your sensitivity to stimulation.* If you're an introvert, you're more prone to being overstimulated by intense or prolonged social interaction — and at that point, reflecting on your thoughts and feelings can help you recharge. But introversion/extraversion is about more than just social interaction. Extraverts crave stimulating activities like skydiving and stimulating beverages sold at Starbucks. Introverts are more likely to retreat to a quiet place, but they're very happy to bring someone else with them!

**\* Myth:** *“Introverts are plagued by public speaking anxiety.”*

We assume that the gift of gab belongs to extraverts, and introverts are doomed to be nervous on stage, but we’re wrong! In one study, people rated how anxious they would feel in various public speaking situations. Introverts did anticipate more anxiety than extraverts, but 84% of public speaking anxiety was completely unrelated to introversion-extraversion. Bigger factors were whether they tended to be anxious people in general, thought the audience was kind versus hostile, and feared they would bomb the particular speech. “Speaking is not an act of extraversion,” observes Malcolm Gladwell, an introverted writer who spends plenty of time on stage. “It has nothing to do with extraversion. It’s a performance, and many performers are hugely introverted.” •

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