

Stop Stealing the Spotlight: The perils of extraverted leadership

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Extraverted leaders are not always effective? In contrast to popular wisdom, our work suggests that extraversion can be a liability for leaders.

John was a born leader. His colleagues described him as bold, charismatic, assertive, magnetic, outgoing, and drawn to the spotlight. He quickly rose through the ranks at a Fortune 100 company, becoming the youngest division president in company history at age 40. He turned around failing divisions, championed innovative new products, and was well on his way to running the entire company. John decided to launch his own company, and the British government gave him 100 million pounds to finance a factory. His newest product seemed destined to take the world by storm.

Although the DeLorean car was celebrated as a time machine in the *Back to the Future* movie series, it failed miserably as an automobile. John DeLorean's company fell apart, and his leadership was to blame. How could the world have been so wrong,

and why is John's story all too familiar in the lore of leadership debacles? Why do so many natural leaders drive their companies into bankruptcy?

For several decades, organizational psychologists have studied the traits that predict who emerges into leadership roles and succeeds in these roles. In a comprehensive analysis cumulating the results of 73 different studies, a research team led by Notre Dame's Tim Judge found that of all personality traits, extraversion is the most consistent predictor of leadership emergence. Extraverted individuals tend to naturally engage in behaviors that place them at the center of attention, such as being outgoing, talkative, energetic, and assertive. Evidence shows that extraverted individuals are more likely to seek out and rise into leadership positions than their introverted counterparts. For example, a study by psychologists Stephan Dilchert and Deniz Ones demonstrated that although 50% of the U.S. population is extraverted, approximately 96% of U.S. leaders are extraverted. Some neuroscientists have even gone so far as to

classify enjoying leadership roles as a defining feature of extraversion. The reasons seem all too clear: extraverts naturally possess the energy, enthusiasm, vision, assertiveness, and social skills that leadership roles demand. Highly successful extraverted leaders such as Richard Branson (Virgin), Herb Kelleher (Southwest), and Meg Whitman (eBay) fulfill and reinforce these stereotypes. This is not limited to business; the relationship between extraversion and leadership seems to permeate other contexts too. In the sphere of politics, for instance, research has demonstrated that people perceive U.S. presidents as more effective when they score high rather than low in extraversion. All of this evidence is consistent with the commonsense theories people hold about what it takes to be an effective leader: we tend to view being extraverted as a key ingredient for successful leadership. Demonstrating this point is an online survey of over 1,500 senior leaders earning at least six-figure salaries that was conducted recently by USA Today. The survey results indicated that 65% of the respondents viewed introversion as a barrier to leadership, while only 6% believed introverted leaders to be more effective than extraverted ones.

Yet by all accounts, John DeLorean was highly extraverted. Is it possible, then, that extraverted leaders are not always effective? Our research suggests that this may in fact be the case. In contrast to popular wisdom, our work suggests that extraversion can be a liability for leaders. Although extraversion is an important catalyst for rising through the ranks, under particular circumstances, it can place leaders at risk for failure. To understand these risks, let us consider what it means to be an extravert. Recently, a team of psychologists led by Brock University's Michael Aston sought to resolve a debate that had been raging for more than 70 years: what is the core feature of extraversion? In a systematic study, they found that the "real core" of extraversion is the tendency to enjoy and attract social attention. The punch line: extraverted leaders

seek out and command the spotlight. Indeed, numerous studies have shown that extraverted leaders are more likely to be dominant, assertive, and status-seeking. Although these tendencies help extraverts ascend into leadership positions, what do they mean for success in leadership roles?

It turns out that the answer depends on the types of employees being led. Extraverted leaders can be highly effective when employees are dutiful followers looking for guidance from above. Extraverts bring the vision, assertiveness, energy, and networks necessary to give employees direction. But what happens when employees are proactive, taking initiative to introduce changes, champion new visions, and promote better strategies?

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Before we answer this question, let's pause and think about the nature of proactive employee behaviors. Proactive behaviors are forward-looking actions that employees take in an attempt to create change in their organizations from the bottom-up. These behaviors are particularly important in generating improvements in an ever-changing business world. Today, companies are becoming more dynamic, uncertain, and unpredictable. Given this uncertainty and unpredictability, it is increasingly difficult for leaders to succeed by merely developing and presenting their visions top-down to employees. In such environments, employee proactivity can be critical to success. But how do extraverted leaders react to it?

Our research suggests that extraverted leaders are more likely to be threatened by proactive employees. When employees proactively champion new visions, strategies, and work processes, they often steal the spotlight, challenging leaders' dominance, authority, and status. As a result, extraverted leaders tend to be less receptive to proactive ideas: they shoot down suggestions and discourage employees from contributing. After studying DeLorean's career, leadership expert Jay Conger noted that "he would often claim responsibility for projects without acknowledging the contributions of others." DeLorean's biographer Hillel Levin interviewed an executive who was dismissed after challenging DeLorean's ideas. The executive lamented: "When I told him he couldn't bear having anyone disagree with him so he had to stack the board his way, John... just nodded and said, 'That's right. It's my company and I'm going to do what I want to do — when you get your own company, you can do the same.'" By comparison, an introverted leader might have been comfortable listening quietly and carefully considering suggestions from below. This is consistent with a wealth of research on what is known as dominance complementarity: groups tend to be more cohesive and effective when there is a balance of dominant and submissive members.

The intuition here is that extraverted leadership may drive higher performance when employees are passive but lower performance

when employees are proactive. To test this idea, we started by studying a national chain of U.S. delivery stores. Since the stores operated in the same line of business, this was a natural opportunity to compare highly similar stores and track whether their success varied as a function of extraverted leadership and employee proactivity. We compared the profitability of 57 different stores, with the goal of isolating the influence of extraverted leadership. The leaders at each store completed a validated survey instrument assessing their levels of extraversion, indicating how assertive, talkative, bold, and energetic they were. An average of 6-7 employees per store completed surveys about how proactive they were as a group: to what extent did they voice suggestions for improvement, attempt to influence the store's strategy, and create better work processes? Then, for the following seven weeks, we tracked each store's profits. We statistically adjusted for factors beyond the leader's control, such as the average price of pizza orders and the total number of employee labor hours.

We found the results fascinating: extraverted leadership was linked to significantly higher store profits when employees were passive but significantly *lower* store profits when employees were proactive. In stores with passive employees, those led by extraverts achieved 16% higher profits than those led by introverts. However, in stores with proactive employees, those led by extraverts achieved 14% lower profits. As expected, extraverted leadership was an advantage with passive groups but a disadvantage with proactive groups.

Although these findings were exciting, they left three key questions unanswered. First, did the match between extraverted leadership and employee proactivity actually cause the performance differences? Second, would the results hold up with a different type of task? Third, can leaders actually produce these results by changing their styles?

To explore these questions, we turned to the laboratory, which gave us the precision necessary to isolate cause and effect, design a task with measurable results, and carefully control extraverted leadership and employee proactivity. We designed a production task: folding as many t-shirts as possible in 10 minutes. We invited 130 business undergraduate students into the lab, who worked in 56 different groups. Following the scientific method, we randomly assigned each team to extraverted or introverted leadership, and either passive or proactive team members, and then tracked their output.

In each group, we had the participants draw out of a hat to identify the leader. To ensure that they would care about the results, we offered a reward: the top 10% of teams would win an iPod. To create differences in leadership style, we provided each team leader with a description of how great leaders had operated as either extraverts or introverts:

- Extraverted leadership: "Scientific research now shows that behaving in an extraverted manner is the key to success as a leader. Like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jack Welch, great leaders are extraverted: their behavior is bold, talkative, and assertive. This enables them to communicate a strong, dominant vision that inspires followers to deliver results."

- Introverted leadership: "Scientific research now shows that behaving in an introverted manner is the key to success as a leader. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, and Socrates, great leaders are

introverted: their behavior is quiet, shy, and reserved. This enables them to empower their people to deliver results.”

To bring the leadership styles to life, we asked the leaders to write about a time when they led a group effectively by “acting bold, talkative, outgoing, and assertive” or “by acting quiet, shy, and reserved.” At that point, the leaders were prepared to lead in an extraverted or introverted manner. We invited the leaders to explain the task to their four team members and get started.

The leaders believed that they were in charge of four team members, but in fact, only two of the members of each team were naïve participants. Unbeknownst to the leaders, the other two members of each team were “confederates” who we hired and trained to be either passive or proactive. When the confederates were assigned to be passive, they simply followed the leader’s instructions. When they were assigned to be proactive, after 90 seconds, one of them took the initiative to challenge the leader’s chosen method: “I wonder if there’s a more efficient way to do this.” The other confederate then said to the leader, “Actually, I have a friend from Japan who has a faster way. It might take a minute or two to teach it, but do we want to try it?” If the leader agreed, the confederate taught the faster folding method to the team. If the leader said no, the confederate continued folding using the traditional method.

This created four different combinations of leaders and team members: extraverted leadership of passive members, extraverted leadership of proactive members, introverted leadership of passive members, and introverted leadership of proactive members. To make sure that these differences emerged, we collected surveys after the task from the leaders and confederates. Both the leaders and team members rated the leaders who were assigned to the extraverted leadership style as more outgoing, talkative, bold, and assertive than those who were assigned to the introverted style. Similarly, both the leaders and team members rated the proactive followers as taking more initiative to create change than the passive followers.

We tracked the performance of the teams. As in our pizza study, the passive teams achieved higher performance under extraverted leadership, folding 18% more t-shirts. But the proactive teams achieved lower performance under extraverted leadership, folding 28% fewer t-shirts. The highest output occurred when extraverted leaders were matched with passive teams and introverted leaders were matched with proactive teams. Why? Team members perceived the introverted leaders as more receptive than extraverted leaders to their ideas and suggestions—and were more motivated to work hard as a result.

This evidence replicated the findings of our first study, and showed that the effects aren’t only due to whether leaders are by default extraverted or introverted: they can actually be driven by changes in leaders’ style. Both when leaders were naturally extraverted or introverted and when they were asked to adopt a set of behaviors that aligned with one end of the extraversion continuum or the other, the pattern of results was the same: when employees are proactive, extraverted leadership can actually undermine their performance. And although in this research we focused on relatively structured, simple tasks, we believe that our findings and their implications can be generalized to other contexts in which both leaders and employees deal with more complex tasks. The results of our research point to the need for

complementarity between leadership style and employee proactivity in organizations: in fact, the highest level of group performance in both of our studies resulted from a combination of either extraverted leaders and passive employees or introverted leaders and proactive employees.

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Our findings have three central implications for organizations. The first is for selection: when choosing leaders and composing teams, we recommend matching extraverted leaders with more passive employees and introverted leaders with more proactive employees. The second is for extraverted leaders: when proactivity is needed, it may be wise to step out of the spotlight and take care to support, encourage, and implement employees’ suggestions. This may be especially critical in highly dynamic, uncertain industries and companies, where it is particularly difficult for leaders to anticipate problems and opportunities without input from below. The third is for employees: when there is a risk that extraverted leaders will be threatened by proactive ideas and suggestions, it may be valuable to seek out introverted leaders as a receptive audience.

In conclusion, our research may shed light on why the John DeLoreans of the world often struggle despite their apparent fit in leadership roles, and why a surprising number of introverted leaders have led their organizations effectively. Journalists and scholars have identified Larry Page (Google), Brenda Barnes (Sara Lee), Andrea Jung (Avon), Bill Gates (Microsoft), and Roger Smith (GM) as introverted leaders. Is supporting and encouraging employee proactivity part of the secret to their success?

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