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The perks of being an introverted lawyer

In the fall, I attended an event at my firm featuring Susan Cain, author of “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.” She spoke about her book, which is the distillation of many years of research and what she discovered about introverts, and herself, in the process.

As a closet introvert, meeting Cain and reading her book were watershed moments for me.

It was the first time I had encountered a mainstream discussion about something which had been personal and hidden for me, and the conversation was being framed in an open, frank and enlightening way. Her book gives introverts a meaningful voice, provides her audience with an insight into what makes introverts who they are and sensitizes readers about the importance and contributions of introverts, particularly as leaders.

There has been much written about introverts and what makes them tick. They tend to be private, quiet and reserved and often prefer to be alone, particularly when they need to recharge their batteries. They think carefully about an issue and will often wait to contribute to the group until they fully understand the topic and feel they can speak thoughtfully.

Introverts are more sensitive than most to stimulation of all types, which manifests itself in myriad ways. For example, while introverts often enjoy having meaningful conversations with others they know well, either one-on-one or in a small group, it is often challenging to engage in superficial chitchat among large groups of people whom they do not know.

They are generally discerning of others, prefer to work independently and often enter professions where they can work

alone most of the time. Given their personalities and tendencies, introverts are often misunderstood as aloof or arrogant. However, more often than not, nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this is why many introverts feel the need to hide their introverted tendencies.

Interestingly, Carl Jung and many other psychologists claim that all individuals display both introverted and extroverted tendencies and that no person can be just one to the exclusion of the other. Moreover, people’s tendencies often change over time. Indeed, I have spoken to a number of rather extroverted individuals who have told me that they have become more introverted as they have gotten older.

There are many introverts among us. Cain writes that at least one-third of the people we know are introverts. This statistic is significantly higher among lawyers. I recently read that more than 50 percent of lawyers are characterized as introverts on personality tests such as Myers-Briggs. Thus, given that so many of us are introverts, we need to be self-aware enough to acknowledge this about ourselves and to think about how this impacts our day-to-day lives and interactions with others.

It is also of paramount importance for us to consider these qualities and predilections in the context of our careers and how we must perform, so that we can excel in a profession that has been and continues to undergo profound change — and which seems much better suited to the extroverts among us.

We all need to embrace who we are and to understand our natural tendencies. Whether an introvert or an extrovert, there is no right or wrong — we are

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wired a certain way and we need to acknowledge and accept this about ourselves.

The introverts among us should understand that our natural tendencies can sometimes lead to self-limiting behavior and that sometimes we need to turn it off. This is particularly true with respect to the more extroverted activities associated with networking, business development and building your practice.

Getting to know potential business leads is an uphill battle if you do not put yourself out there. If people do not know who you are and what you have to offer, then it becomes challenging to develop the relationships, credibility and trust that are crucial to developing a practice.

These types of situations can be quite difficult for introverts. Nevertheless, when we find ourselves in situations calling for us to be more extroverted, we

need to get out of our heads and into the moment.

We all need to develop a comfort zone for being outside of our comfort zones. If we are passionate about what we do, we will naturally project it and want to share it with others, regardless of whether we are introverts or extroverts.

Collaboration is an important part of the problem-solving and client-service process. This can often be more difficult for introverts who, as noted above, generally prefer to work by themselves and to minimize interactions with others.

As lawyers, we need to understand that this can often lead to a less-than-optimal result, both in the work product we deliver to clients as well as in the perceptions of our co-workers, who may not fully understand the introvert’s behaviors and tendencies in these types of situations.

We must all make a concerted effort to balance the benefits of different types of working styles and contributions and work together to reach optimal results for our clients.

Introverts can and often do rise to leadership positions. A number of authors, including Cain and Jim Collins in his landmark management book “Good to Great” have studied effective leadership qualities, many of which are attributable to introverts. These skills include strong listening and intuition, introspection, deep thinking, humility and compassion. If we each look at the leaders in our organizations, communities and globally, we are sure to find at least a few introverts among them.

Whether an introvert or an extrovert, each of us is an interesting amalgam of contradictions and I invite you to explore both the yin and the yang within yourself.