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CAN INTROVERTS BE GREAT SPEAKERS?

By Paula Lyons

I had a friend I met just after college, who was a classic introvert. She loved her solitude and was someone who never wanted a ton of friends. She relied on just a few but trusted them completely.

Meeting new people, attending large parties, visiting trendy, crowded restaurants all gave her the heebie-jeebies.

Even the thought of a traditional wedding, where she would have been the center of attention, surrounded by friends and family was too much for her.

She opted to marry quietly, in city hall, with just immediate families in attendance.

My friend had a lot to offer. She was brilliant, thoughtful, took the time to listen and almost always came up with well thought out solutions to problems. She was a great friend and as we both began to build our careers, I knew she'd be a valuable asset to any company or organization too.

But I admit I wondered if she would pay a price for being an introvert. What would happen as she moved into leadership positions? Would she be able to speak up and be heard? Could she become a great speaker as so many leadership jobs demand?

Now that I've become an executive coach, specializing in communications, I am often asked to help introverts master communications skills.

Can introverts become great speakers? The answer is yes! We **all** can. But the truth is we **all** have to work at it.

As Suzanne Bates, author of **Speak Like a CEO, Secrets to Commanding Attention and Getting Results** says, "There is no such thing as a natural born speaker!"

“Speaking well is your decision,” she adds. “It doesn’t matter if you were an introverted child or the quiet type in high school. It doesn’t matter if you didn’t have opportunities to speak early in your career. It doesn’t matter if you have a busy schedule or a company that doesn’t particularly support your professional development. You are the one who has to decide to be great.”

And whether you are an extrovert or introvert, we all have challenges.

Extroverts may enjoy being around people. They seldom mind, in fact they often enjoy getting up and speaking in front of a group. However, they hate the research, writing and preparation. That part of the process is torture to them.

Their challenge is to learn to pour themselves into that part of the process so that when they speak, they have substance.

Introverts would prefer not to get up in front of groups. Sometimes they avoid it entirely. However, they don’t mind and often enjoy doing the research, writing and preparation.

Their challenge is to take all that rich material they have produced, get up on their feet and practice out loud until they know it well, and can deliver it with confidence.

Both personality types have a lot to offer when they concentrate on building the skills they lack.

As for my friend, we lost touch after a while, but I hear she now leads a medium sized company and speaks frequently at conferences and industry meetings. So somewhere along the way she decided that speaking well mattered.

How did she become good at it? Probably by doing what we all must do, whether we are speaking to just a few in a meeting or to hundreds from a podium.

Some advice that you can put to work right away:

- Decide to become a good speaker. Write it down! Make it your personal goal.
- Get to know enough about each audience so that you give them what they want and need, no more, no less.
- Write your speech with your audience in mind. Put your messages in terms of benefits to them.
- Make it clear, concise and interesting.
- Practice out loud, several times, so that your delivery sounds smooth and confident. Consider using a tape recorder so that you really hear yourself as others do.
- Terrified? Look for low-risk speaking opportunities first. Speak at colleges, volunteer organizations and professional groups outside of work where there is less at stake. Or, in the office, start by preparing and rehearsing meeting contributions. Small steps lead to big ones.
- Bring your notes. No one expects you to become note-free overnight.
- Smile. Frowns or sober expressions can be interpreted negatively. Smile and your audience will see you as friendly, confident and in control.