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THE

# QUIET EFFECT

Best-selling author and 2014 NAESP Conference speaker Susan Cain shares how educators can support introverts.

**T**housands of people write to Susan Cain about her best-selling book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, and her renowned TED talk. Many of them have a similar story to tell.

"I hear from 12-year-olds who are having difficulties at school because they feel that their teachers don't understand them," she says. "Then I hear from 70-year-olds who still carry around with them pain from experiences they had in school where they felt like their talents weren't fully appreciated and their way of being wasn't fully understood."

School can be challenging for introverts, who Cain says are often undervalued and can feel unsupported in the classroom. This is because contemporary American culture values what she calls an "extrovert ideal," or the notion that extroverted personality traits—assertiveness, charisma, social dominance—reflect a superior type of person. But one-third to one-half of the population are introverts, characterized by their focus, introspection, and observation—and too often, their leadership potential is overlooked.

But Cain, one of *Fast Company's*

Most Creative People in Business, is leading a "Quiet Revolution" to rethink the way we see introverts. For educators, embracing this revolution may entail revamping staff meetings, jettisoning classroom group work, and more. Here, Cain and NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly explore where principals can start.

**GAIL CONNELLY:** What kind of school culture supports introverted as well as extroverted students?

**SUSAN CAIN:** One of the things I have found in touring schools across the United States is that there is such a premium placed on classical leadership qualities [such as assertiveness and gregariousness]. These qualities are wonderful and important. But equally so are many other qualities that don't get celebrated as much—qualities like deep thought, kindness, artistic ability,

and even scientific ability.

I would say in a typical school, most students feel they are much more praised for being leaders than they are for being great thinkers or great artists or scientists. It's not about one being better than the other. It's about making room for many different styles and having them coexist. The ironic thing is, quiet kids often grow up into leaders, because in the service of something they are passionate about, they end up taking on leadership positions. We should be making sure to communicate that leadership is one of many equally important attributes or skills.

**GC:** What should teachers remember when working with introverts?

**SC:** The biggest thing I would say is to remember the phrase "long runway." Children who are shy or introverted often have a longer runway that they

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have to taxi down before they can take off and fly. They fly like everyone else, but their runway is longer. They need to know that you think it's okay that they have a longer runway. They need to know that you value them for who they are.

**GC:** How can teachers create a balanced classroom environment to allow introverts and extroverts to thrive?



**SC:** The best performing classrooms are the ones that really cater to those different styles of learning. We need to take a deeper, more thoughtful approach to really structuring the school day in such a way that it honors quiet time. It honors children reading quietly by themselves. It honors pairing up one-on-one to

discuss topics in depth. It honors the thoughtful, reflective [individuals] as much as it does the bold and the natural leaders. We need to honor all types.

We've gone overboard with breaking children into groups. The fact is, introverted kids, for the most part, do not like to work in groups. I know there's research that [group work promotes] active learning and student engagement, but in a group of seven students, [introverts] are not learning; [instead] they are going to feel anxious and overstimulated. We need to break up solo and group exercises. When we do have group exercises, they need to be very properly managed. Small groups should contain no more than two or three students, and each student should know what his or her role is.

**GC:** Say a principal is an introvert. What should she or he do to manage their many, many daily interactions?

**SC:** I'll tell you a quick, personal story. [Since writing my book], I give tons of speeches and interviews. And people often say to me, "Oh, look at you, you're out there now. You've become an extrovert." And I always say, "No, of course not. I am exactly the same as I always was. But I have grown comfortable with a skill that I need to use in the service of something thing I am very passionate about."

The same thing is true of principals who might be introverts. They have probably already developed the skills they need to give a talk to parents or the student body. But they equally need to really understand who they are and what their true strengths are, and to structure their days in a way that plays to these strengths. For example,

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“Quiet kids often grow up into leaders, because in the service of something they are passionate about, they end up taking on leadership positions.”



if you're going to have a morning full of meetings and presentations, you don't book a lunch date. [Instead], you book a lunch date with yourself and you sit alone in your office or you go out of the school if you need to get away. You do what you need to do to recharge. Don't feel guilty for doing that: You know when you return, you will be much fresher than you would have been without that recharge time.

Also, have an open, honest discussion with the people in your organization about how they like to function. That serves two major purposes: First, it lets people know who you are and allows you to work together to create something that works for you both. And second, the choice to be open and honest encourages other people to do the same. It encourages others to be authentic about who they are, and that automatically creates a better environment.

**GC: How can an extroverted principal work productively with introverted staff members?**

**SC:** First, understand that the people who seem to go off on their own sometimes for breaks are not doing it because they don't like you. They might adore you; they just need that time to recharge.

One of the big differences between introverts and extroverts is that introverts want to process things before they articulate them, whereas extroverts like to think out loud. So, extroverts need to understand that introverts need that processing time. When you want to get the most of your introverted colleagues' brains, give them a chance to prepare for the discussion. Don't

spring it on them. Instead, schedule a time to discuss the topic and let them prepare.

**GC: Any tips to reorganize staff meetings?**

**SC:** Introverts often love to work for the sake of the team. They are often very cooperative. But they don't want to do hard thinking in a group. They want to think for themselves and present the ideas later.

If you want to get the best of everyone's brain, you have to create alternative channels [for feedback], such as asking people to provide written answers and scheduling one-on-one appointments with people from whom you really want to hear. Then, when you are in a meeting, be very careful to make sure that you are not hearing over and over from the dominant people in the room. Use techniques such as going around the room and asking everybody in turn to share what they think. Or, encourage dissent by making it safe for people to do so. Try saying, "We just heard this view. Now I am going to challenge you all to take the opposing side. I want to hear someone who can articulate that kind of opposition." Those kinds of techniques give people the freedom that they need to really speak their minds.

**GC: What might you tell those who argue that success in life still depends on being social and collaborating?**

**SC:** You are much more likely to develop children who are social and collaborative if you honor who they are and if they feel valued for who

they are than if you always tell them to be someone else. Introverts are just as loving and as interested in connections as anyone else. They are just as social; they are just differently social. Many of the best networkers I know are introverts. They are not the best at chatting at a party but they are often the people who really form bonds, share information, and connect to other people. They're just doing it in a quieter way.

The reality is, once kids get out into the "real world" of work, both of those kinds of [social] styles are needed. You have to demonstrate the classically extroverted style of being able to speak up when needed. [But] you also have to have the introverted style of really strategizing, thinking things through, and digging in creatively. **P**

Join Susan Cain's "Quiet Revolution" at NAESP's 2014 National Conference and Expo, July 10-12 in Nashville. Don't miss her plenary presentation on Friday, July 11.

