

# Leading as an **Introvert**

Hi everybody! Being here is an honor and a dream come true. For many years I wanted to attend this conference and not necessarily as a speaker but I'm glad I am here with all of you either way.

My name is Nelida and  
I am an *Introvert*...

but also I'm a bit *shy*

And as you can probably imagine my brain is full of thoughts about how to get away from here as quickly as I can! So lets get it done so I can go away and hide to my hotel room! Nah, I'm just kidding, I'm hiding at home, I live here in Berlin



Photo by Maria Victoria Portelles on Unsplash

Anyway, first, I want you to reflect on what were your thoughts when I said I was introvert AND shy? Did you think those were the same thing?

A photograph of a turtle on a gravelly ground, viewed from above. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text "Introversion misconceptions" is centered over the turtle's shell.

# **Introversion misconceptions**

Photo by Josh Eckstein on Unsplash

I used to think they were, actually, most of my life I have struggled with many negative feelings and wrongly attributing those to be being an introvert.

- Lack of confidence
- Shyness
- Impostor Syndrome
- Social awkwardness

Some of those feelings ranged from lack of confidence, shyness, impostor syndrome, social awkwardness among others

But a few years ago, there was a book that help to challenge some of those misconceptions and I have the feeling that at least some of my fellow introverts here might know which book I'm talking about.

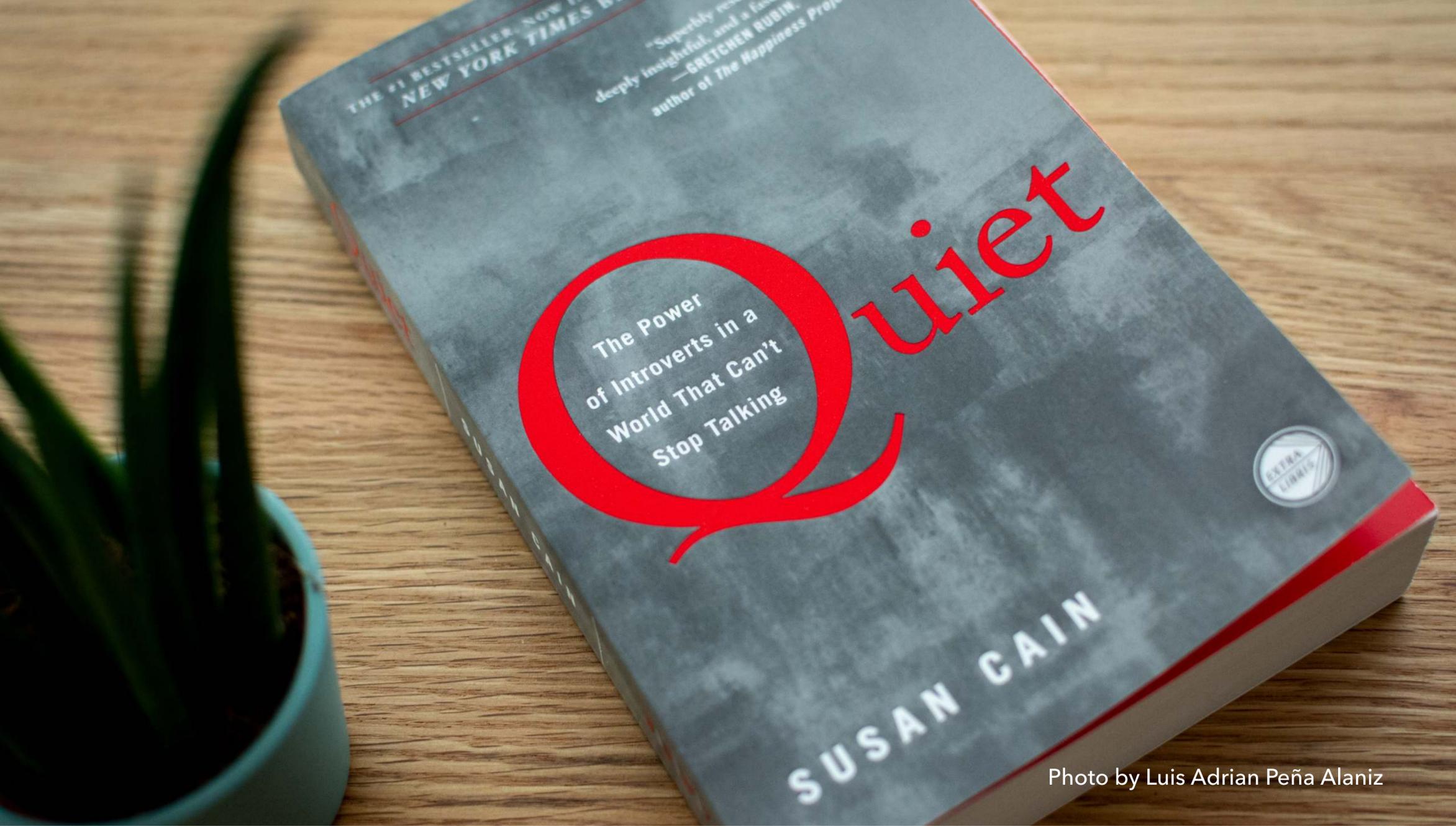


Photo by Luis Adrian Peña Alaniz

## Quiet: The Power of Introverts

Can you raise your hand if you have read or at least heard about this book?

"Remark about the number of people that know it"

Well, this book is great, very recommended for introverts and extroverts alike. I really like the approach of the author because I don't think she is only talking to introverts in this book; she believes that by understanding introversion, we can all benefit. Even if you are not an introvert, you are surrounded by them all the time, in your family, in your teams, so this book might help you to understand them better.

# Understanding Introversion

Photo by Jessica Favaro on Unsplash

But of course I don't pretend to give a summary of the book or make the talk all about it, instead I want to talk about my personal journey on understanding myself as introvert, rest enough saying that this book was of a great help and just for the purposes of being in the same page, I want to use the definition of introversion from it.

*Introverts have a preference for a quiet, more minimally stimulating environment*

**Stimulation comes in all forms – social stimulation, but also lights, noise, and so on**

*Shyness is the tendency to feel awkward, worried, or tense during social encounters*

Now let's compare this with shyness, the American Psychology association defines shyness as the tendency to feel awkward, worried, or tense during social encounters, especially with unfamiliar people

The big difference with the two is that the first is part of your identity whereas the second one is not, you can change being shy but not your introversion.

For example as time has passed I've been able to deal with my shyness a bit better and now I don't feel as worried or anxious in social situations (except if is talking in front of a hundreds of people).

But no, in fact I do I love conferences such as this, I enjoy getting to know fellow peers in the industry and learning about them and their work, however, no matter how much I enjoy it, after a few hours, I need some down time because I get physically tired and mentally drained, so as much as I might enjoy people's company sometimes I just prefer to be alone for some time to recover and gather my own thoughts.

So as we can see, even-though these two concepts really have different meanings I still think shyness and all the other negative feelings that I listed earlier are related and actually caused by the miss-understanding of introversion. Let's see a few examples

# Culture and introversion



I'm from Mexico, we have big families and I remember that in celebrations, aunts, uncles and cousins, the whole family will gather and my family would make jokes about me always being in a corner with my computer and my books even-though everyone else was chatting, laughing and having a good time (I always laugh of the assumption here that I was not having a good time)

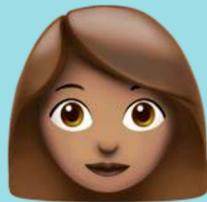
Also, when I migrated to the United States I faced the stereotype of the sassy, fierce Latina, as a young woman I was so confused and disappointed with myself for being unable to live up to that stereotype,

How many times I really I wished I was sassy and fierce just to stop feeling out place for being a quiet Latina

These are just a couple examples of how culture can influence on how we feel about ourselves as introverts, these stereotypes might generate these insecurities that are result of the world telling us ALL THE TIME that there's something off!

As introverts we have this tendency of not speaking much (and we don't do just because we are listening not because we don't have anything to say), sadly, sometimes, people around might fill those gaps and then make us feel like there's something wrong with us, we might feel like our style doesn't have a place in the work place, in leadership positions, within our own families.

# Gender and introversion



There's also this other aspect that I think about a lot, gender and introversion. It is general knowledge that that third to a half of the population identifies as Introvert, according to these studies women are not necessarily more introverted than men on average but because of all this stereotypes and bias we know for example, that women get to talk less in meetings.

All women struggle with this problem, but as introverted women we have to deal with multiple intersections, we have to overcome other people's prejudices about introversion, but also about gender and race.

From early age many women are told to be quiet, at least in my family and in my culture; things are changing but we have still a long way to go.

Anyway, as quietness was being regarded as kid and young women at some point I started wondering: is my quietness result of this conditioning or it is actually introversion?

Well, now I know it can be both.

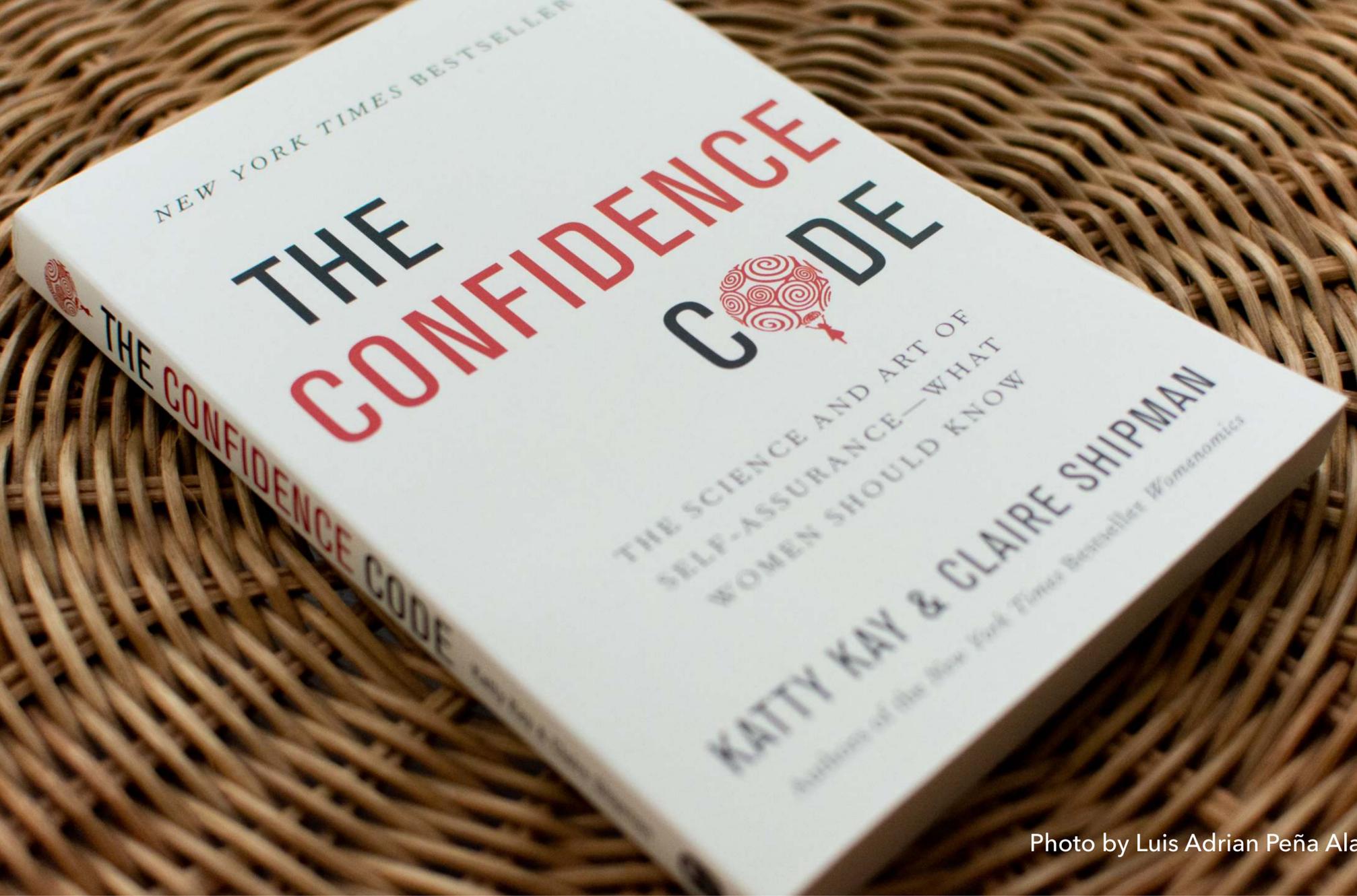


Photo by Luis Adrian Peña Alaniz

Can you raise your hand again if you have read or heard about this book? This book in combination with the "Quiet", helped me to understand myself better, and to understand that there might be some areas that one might want to work on but also there are some other things you have to embrace. You may want to address your shyness but not your Introversion.

This book in particular has a ton of information about science and research to understand various aspects of genetics, gender, behavior and cognition, I though that part was interesting.

However, personally I don't think it necessarily helped me to be more confident and actually I completely failed to find what I was looking for in this book because when I read it I had some fundamental misconceptions.

# Leadership misconceptions



Photo by Jehyun Sung on Unsplash

Miss-conceptions about who can be a leader and what leadership is I read the confidence code at a point in my career where I had some years in the industry and I started to wonder what I wanted to do next, do I want to be a manager? What skills I need to be a leader, and if I want to be a leader one day maybe I need to find out how to be more confident.

so, I read this book because Confidence is one of those traits that it usually get associated with Leaders right?

Well, bummer, like I said that book din't make me more confident or a leader, because of course being confident won't make you a leader at least not necessarily a good one.

It was many years after when I realized about all these miss-conceptions and how they were related to my internalized bias and stereotypes about my own introversion.

When I used to think about the concept of leadership I would get so anxious because the majority of the notions that would come to my head would be a complete miss-match with my personality and the way I approach problems.

- The Person who shows confidence
- The Person who speaks the most
- The most charismatic
- The person that has many relations (well known)
- Sociable
- An Extrovert

Some of those ideas were like this:

The Person who shows confidence, I just talked about how this made me read a whole book and the thing is, of course having confidence is a good thing but that alone won't make you a leader.

The Person who speaks the most, always wondered how people can think and speak so fast and so much at the same time!

The most charismatic, we all have heard phrases like oh they are a very charismatic leader!

The person that has lots of contacts, that is well known

Sociable, these last two are associated, not for anything we always hear in our careers that networking is important

Or just plainly I thought that leaders needed to be extroverts

And well if you think some of these ideas are nebulous and a bit random, well you have all the right, but that's what I used to think and in fact there's data to support that I'm not alone.

Studies show that extroverts occupy more leadership positions than those who identify as introverts.

So if all these characteristics don't necessarily make a leader or a good one anyway, what does?

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a striped t-shirt, is looking through a large telescope mounted on a ship's deck. The background shows the ship's railing and a blurred view of the sea and sky. The entire image has a light blue tint.

# Discovering Leadership

Photo by nine koeper on Unsplash

A few years ago I had an amazing coach and mentor Erika Carlson, who also spoke here at LeadDev a few years back, she is a person who I deeply respect and admire and who helped me a lot in my leadership discovery journey.

I hope one day she sees this talk because she helped me a lot, we used to speak a lot about this topic and me giving this talk in particular, in these conversations I remember asking Erika, what is leadership anyway? I don't even know, what does it mean being a good leader?

And as the great coach she is, she used to ask me so many great questions but there was one that I remember in particular, she asked this:

# Who do you admire?

See, in many talks about introverts you will hear people talking about this very famous introvert leaders but Erika was not asking about them, she was asking what colleagues past or present did I admire? Yes famous introvert leaders are there and we should not forget them but we don't have to go too far.

Erika was so on point with this question because it allowed me to stop for a moment and appreciate my day to day fellow team members, some of which have actually inspired me to give this talk.

Immediately after this exercise of reflection I started to notice that the people that I have always looked up are mostly introverts, for me all of them were leaders and interestingly very few of them had a big title that one might often associate to leadership such as manager, many of them influenced without authority

Many years it took me to understand that for me, leadership is all about shared values, and although I don't deny that a title helps a lot, especially if you are from an underrepresented group, you don't necessarily need one to advocate, and model for those values every day. That's exactly what I saw on these colleagues.



# Take a chance on your strengths

Photo by x) on Unsplash

So we talked about the miss-conceptions of both introversion and leadership but how can we align our understanding to see that there's room for different ways of leading, that introverts can be good leaders too? I would say we should take a chance on precisely those characteristics that identify us as introverts and see them as strengths.

So next I would like to talk about the values and qualities that I saw my colleagues demonstrating and that now I personally strive for?

# Good **Listeners**



Listening is a big one, some of the best leaders I've met, know how to really listen and it sounds easy but is absolutely not. As introverts we might have an advantage because we tend to speak less so we have more time to listen but this is a skill that takes practice and if done good can help you to build strong relationships.

Another flavor of listening that I have noticed is when leaders pay attention and listen other voices or explicitly seek those voices and incorporate them in the solutions and I mention this because seeking different voices and actually listening them is very different so good leaders know how to do both.

# Good Observers



Very similar to listening is observing, good leaders that I have had in the past pay attention to their surroundings, one example of this is when people give good feedback, plenty has been said about how critical is to give feedback but in order to give it effectively we first need to pay attention.

I have had leaders in the past who when notice something that I did, no matter how small, if that had an impact, they take the time to let me know and feel appreciated.

Also, practicing observation allows you to identifying gaps and risks, some of the best engineers I've had the pleasure to work with, are good at identifying gaps and risks that overall help in a project to plan and be prepared.

# Ask **good questions**



Because good leaders listen and observe they know how to make great questions, and for me personally I prefer questions over answers, how many times you are seeking for an answer when what you need is actually a good question, remember the example of Erika

They **analyze**



Engineers that I admire are good at analyzing trade offs for solutions, they don't make rushed or unilateral decisions, they take some time to outweigh the options and make sure to incorporate other voices (remember the skill of listening, all these skills are interconnected)

# **Advocate** with conviction



When introvert leaders have an opinion, they advocate with conviction, and I do not take that lightly, why? Because all of the things I mentioned earlier, they did take time to listen, observe and analyze, introvert leaders might feel so compelled to advocate for the things they care that they go out of their comfort zone.

The psychologist Brian Little talks about the concept of acting out of character, we introverts do this a lot to be able to adapt into the world that benefits extroverts but that has a high cost for us, we tend to burn out easily so when an introvert speaks up is because they really care so take that seriously.

# They are **patient**



This is also an important one, for me good leaders are patient, they are kind, humble and are willing to work with you through problems and learn together.

In some companies or cultures quick action and results are admired, and of course in some situations this is a virtue, but leaders also need patience because that's what enables you to analyze the situation and to understand what is actually required. Quick action might give you quick results but we always have to ask ourselves how long those results will last?

Patient leaders reinforce the importance of focusing on the long-term outcomes. If you think about it, many tasks associated with leadership actually require a lot of patience: strategic planning, mentoring, coaching. The bigger or the more complex the problem the greater the patience required to remain committed.

I have seen patient leaders focusing on things they believe are important for the long term, for example some engineers that I most fondly remember are not the ones that worked on the most shiny features but those who had the patience to work on the little things that helped unblock others, to write documentation, to fix that complex, tricky problem, those who had the patience to advocate for the things that are not easy such as like good communication between teams.

# Show **vulnerability**



Finally, not sure if this one is necessarily an introvert quality but something that I've seen as a pattern, introvert leaders are willing to show themselves as they are, despite what the world often tell us about what a leader is. This creates a sense of safe space because you can say hey, we are all different, and leaders come in all sizes and flavors so I can be a leader too.

But also, I have been fortunate to work with people and companies that do appreciate introverts and that have made me feel that you can be an effective leader in different ways.

A photograph of two hands reaching towards each other, one from the left and one from the right, set against a light blue background. The hands are positioned as if about to clasp or support each other, symbolizing help or support.

# How extroverts can help?

Photo by Kelly Sikkema on Unsplash

so of I have talked a lot about introverts but of course we also know that we all need our extrovert fellow team members to help us go out of our comfort zones sometimes how else can you help help your introvert team mates?

- Learn about Introversion
- Listen to introverts
- But also don't force them to talk!
- Honor their choices

First learning about introversion and attending talks such as this Listen to introverts but also don't force them to talk! I know this sounds contradictory but let me explain.

Of course you should look for the introvert insight but it won't be often on the big meetings, so instead of telling that they should speak more in meetings, take some time to get to know them in 1:1 and look for their thoughts there, we introverts really enjoy deep conversations and you can't get that in a big meeting with lots of people, however when we do say something on these meetings, please listen because we don't share things lightly.

but most of all honor their choices and their style

please understand that when we are acting more extroverted we are paying a high cost so as much as we can we should be allowed to say exactly the amount of words that we have to give

*Introverts need to trust their gut and share their ideas as powerfully as they can.*

-- Susan Cain

Well this is pretty much all I have and for my fellow introverts remember to appreciate yourself so I want to share this quote from Susan Cain or a leave as reminder if you read the book. As Introvert you need to trust your gut and share your ideas as powerfully as you can Notice she says powerfully and not loudly, so I ask you now how are your sharing your ideas next?



# Thank you!

I am **Nelida** Velazquez  
Senior Software Engineer @ **Cobalt**

@tolkiana

# Thank you so much for listening!