Engaging Introverts: How to Pull Them in Without Pushing Them Out

Most membership groups have a variety of personalities within the group and on average, about 30 percent of those members are introverts. While many of these introverts have the professionalism to converse in large group settings, they are often uncomfortable beneath their professional exterior. They often appear to be much less engaged than their extroverted counterparts; however, it is likely that their interest and engagement are just subtle.

As Jill D. Borruss and Lisa Kaenzig wrote in an article titled Introversion: the Often Forgotten Factor Impacting the Gifted, “There is nothing wrong with being an introvert. It does not need to be cured. It simply needs to be understood and accepted.”

Determining What Members Value: Although introverts may not make up the majority of your group, they still make up a significant percentage of the organization and their preferences should not be ignored. If you don't already, survey your membership to determine what they value in your organization. Ask specific questions about their preferences in regard to your programs, opportunities for involvement, what they would like to see handled differently, and how they prefer to be involved, etc. Also be sure to ask about their preferred method of communication.

At the end of the survey, invite them to think about the people in their life who might enjoy your group’s next meeting. After all, introverts often have close colleagues and getting involved is much more comfortable when they have a friend they already know by their side.

Adjusting What You Offer: Review your survey results and see what modifications your organization needs to make to better meet the needs of all members. As you find ways to address their suggestions, be sure to communicate that you have heard their feedback and are making positive changes as a result.

If you have small groups or committees or task forces, consider how you define “small.” It's a group of ten to twelve people and for introverts, it can mean two to three people. Offer a variety of formats and opportunities for involvement.

One surefire way to pull in some of your less involved introverts is to reach out to them with a personal task. Use the technology that they have indicated they prefer for communicating and avoid putting them on the spot in person. Consider their area of expertise and then determine what will be a comfortable fit for them. While introverts might not be gung ho on joining a committee, they might be very willing to provide some more individualized guidance by serving as a consultant within their area of expertise.

When considering what to ask, take the approach of presenting introverts with an opportunity to share their insights in a low-pressure format. And if you do ask them, create small groups—truly small with two to three people—and give them specific topics to address or tasks to complete. By giving a small group a curriculum, they will be able to share their insights without being on the spot to “come up with a plan to present.” If those involved are interested in more in-depth group work, it will surface naturally.

As the small group works together on an initiative, they will likely begin to develop a comfort level that will help increase engagement across everyone.

It’s also important to consider the experiences of new members and how the engagement process works for them. When new members join your organization, consider having a mentorship program in place to ensure that all new members, introverts and extroverts alike, have someone to show them the ropes. While many will accompany the mentor for the first meeting or program, introverts will likely appreciate having that mentor by their side for the first several months.

Reaching Them Where it Counts: Besides communicating with members using the methods they have indicated in the survey, consider creating an online space for interaction. Whether it is message boards for small groups or a general message board for the entire membership, make the options available and communicate them. After all, if a moderator asks a tough question, Google is just a click away.

You don’t necessarily need different messages and events for every personality type within your organization, but it is critical that your members feel comfortable getting involved on their own terms. By embracing your introverts and providing them comfortable opportunities to contribute, you will certainly find the most impact.

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