

Soft Power and Quiet Persistence



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During a short trip to the University of Notre Dame this week I had an opportunity to visit the impressive campus bookstore and pick up a copy of Susan Cain's book, ["Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking."](#) I've been buried in the text ever since.

One of Cain's premises is that where we fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum "influences our choice of friends and mates, and how we make conversation, resolve differences, and show love." She explains that introversion is regarded by many in the business world as "a second-class personality trait, somewhere between a disappointment and a pathology," and notes that fast-talking extroverts are generally regarded as "more competent and likeable" than their slow-talking, reflective counterparts.

In her chapter titled "Soft Power" Cain writes about "quiet persistence" and "sustained attention"—qualities achieved by "restraining one's reactions to external stimuli." While reading Cain's book, I tried to recall nonprofit leaders who exemplify "soft power" and the callings cards of introversion. When I think about my experiences in the board room, one familiar scenario comes to mind—the board meeting with a handful of talkative, dominant and sometimes brilliant members. I enjoy being in the presence of charismatic leaders who are eager to share their views on the subject at hand. I truly look forward to the give and take of a lively board meeting.

But at a recent board meeting I noticed that a colleague across the table was unusually (or so it seemed!) quiet during our deliberations. At the very end of the meeting, she very gently proposed an approach to the issue we had been discussing that was nearly opposite to the options that had previously been suggested. It made wonderful sense to the room full of extroverts and it did not take us long to rally around her proposal. Now that I've learned a bit more about introverts I can see that "soft power" and "quiet persistence" can be invaluable in nonprofit governance. Although many board development committees focus on finding dynamic recruits whose outgoing personalities will shine in the boardroom, perhaps we should pay equal attention to the need for thoughtful, reflective, and yes, quiet, introverted leaders, whose instincts, reserve and persistence will help our missions shine.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your ideas about any risk management topic, feedback on this article and questions about the Center's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504. The Center provides risk management tools and resources

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