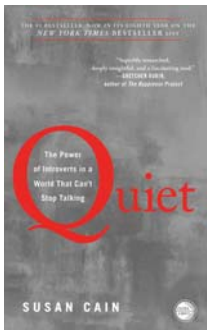




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Q&A

with **Susan Cain**



Quiet has sold more than two million copies worldwide. Her bestselling second book, *Quiet Power*, focuses on empowering introverted kids and teens.

Susan Cain, founder of the Quiet Revolution and author of bestselling books *Quiet Power: The Secret Strengths of Introverts* and *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in A World That Can't Stop Talking*, was scheduled to be a keynote speaker at GFOA's annual conference in New Orleans. With this version of the conference canceled, GFOA Deputy Executive Director **Mike Mucha** connected with Susan for her thoughts on introverted public finance officers, adjusting to a work-from-home environment, and building strong relationships with colleagues despite the challenges we face.



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It's unfortunate that GFOA members didn't get the opportunity to hear you speak in New Orleans this year. Your message and the work you have done with the Quiet Revolution is very relevant to our members. What led you to start the Quiet Revolution and focus your career on working to support introverts?

Even though I've wanted to be a writer since I was four years old, I took a massive detour and became a corporate lawyer. I practiced Wall Street law for almost 10 years and during that time, I got involved in committees focused on mentorship, professional development, and the more social-emotional side of life. I also started to think about what the drivers were that made people interact differently, behave differently, and react so differently in negotiations, conversations with colleagues, or other settings at my firm. It felt like the only language that we had to talk about this was the language of gender, which I really believed was hugely important but also not the full answer to the question. And it seemed to me that introversion and extroversion played a gigantic role in the way we show up, make decisions, interact at work, create personal relationships, and just about everything else. There was no vocabulary for talking about it back then. So later on, when I stopped practicing law and started writing, I knew that this was something I needed

to write about. When I first started, I thought I was working on a very idiosyncratic, sort of oddball project. However, when I shopped my book proposal to publishing houses, I really started to understand the exact scope of it, because I saw it everywhere. People were having the reaction I had: This is my colleague. This is my boss. This is my spouse. This is me. It was like the floodgates opening.

I can definitely relate and had the same experience in reading the book. You said that between one-third and one-half of all workers are introverts, and that made me think about GFOA members. In the last GFOA member survey, we asked if our members better self-identified as an introvert or extrovert. Two-thirds of GFOA members said they were introverts. Does this surprise you?

No, not at all. I think there is something about the quantitative side of life that attracts introverts. That is also interesting, because I'm really not that type of person myself; I'm much more on the humanities side. Also, the public service component of working for governments would be another draw. Whether you look in technology, finance, or other science-based companies like pharmaceuticals, these are all sectors that tend to attract a lot of introverts.

You mentioned that you saw introversion and extroversion as an alternative to talking about gender roles. Have you uncovered any relationships to gender in your research?

Well, in terms of statistics, it's about half: half of women are introverts and half of men are introverts. What is different is the way it plays out, depending on your gender. Male introverts tend to have the advantage that men in general have: authority is automatically granted to them. Whether or not they're actually saying anything, they can be assumed to behave in that cultural ideal of the man, you know, the super-dominant alpha person. If you're more somebody who wants to pause and reflect, this can feel like a departure from your assigned role. And for women, in some ways, it's easier to be introverted because there is a little bit more of an alignment between traditional gender roles. However, that gets complicated really quickly when you look at the modern workplace. For leaders that are quieter, are you failing to live up to expectations that all leaders take the format of an assertive person? At the same time, when I speak about this topic at conferences, extroverted women come up to me after and say, "You know, it's really hard for me, too, because I'm too assertive and people don't like that."

How do you respond and coach others to become better leaders? I know this is the million-dollar question and may be difficult for you to answer in our short interview, but how can GFOA members—who all represent leaders on their teams, for their organizations, and in their communities—use your research to become better leaders?

As you say, it's hard to boil it all down, but maybe you can start with saying that one size does not fit all and recognize that, in any team, you are going to have some people who require a lot of stimulation to feel at their best and work at their best. At the same time, you have some people who require exactly the opposite: They need a lot of quiet and mellow time to be most productive. So, the answer is to apply that insight to everything: the way you design your offices in making sure that you have social spaces but also plenty of privacy. The way you shape your meeting culture, so you have time during the day where people get to interact, but you also have time where a person can really put their head down and get into a state of flow and know that they won't be interrupted in their thinking. And there's the way you think about a telecommuting policy and how that would play out for the different personalities on your team. Some people may love working remotely, while others will feel lonely. So basically, one size does not fit all.

Many GFOA members also have a leadership role in both their organization and community. As the chief financial officer, finance director, treasurer, controller, budget manager, or even as a project manager, many of those introverted GFOA members play very visible roles. When we looked at the survey data, while two-thirds of all GFOA members reported identifying as introverts, more than half of those who hold

leadership positions are also introverted. What advice would you give those members who are facing a situation where others expect them to be louder and more assertive, or have more of an outgoing or expressive public presence?

First of all, it doesn't surprise me at all that you have so many introverts in those leadership positions. One of the biggest misconceptions that people have about introversion is that an introvert would not make a good leader. In fact, there is a lot of data and are plenty of examples suggesting that introverted leaders deliver outcomes that are as good as, and in some cases better than, extroverted leaders.

On the other hand, there's this huge challenge in that introverts tend not to get groomed for leadership positions in the first place. As a result, we end up with this loss of talent, where many talented introverts are never given the chance to succeed because they don't get appointed in the first place. For someone who is an introvert in the position of leadership, I would recommend a combination of two things—two opposing things.

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On the one hand, draw on your natural strengths to find the ways that you lead. This may not be the way a textbook leader does it, but the way you do it. Maybe you are really good at making one-on-one connections and you make time to do that, team member by team member. For example, there is the case of Douglas Conant, successful CEO of Campbell Soup. He is a very introverted guy. He was also responsible for getting Campbell Soup's employee engagement ratings up to the top of the Fortune 500. He would identify people in the company who had really been contributing and he would write them a letter of gratitude. In the ten years he was CEO of Campbell Soup, he wrote 30,000 of those letters. Then, if the first thing is drawing on your own strength, the second is being able to step out of your comfort zone when you need to. Step out strategically. Maybe you do so for a few hours, but then you make time to recharge after that. Be really mindful and strategic about it, but also make sure not to forget your strengths and that you don't need to change.

Let's change topics to the environment that many of our members are facing now: the significant disruption to their work environments. Either they are now working from home or members of their team are at home. Do you see it as more of a challenge or more of an opportunity for introverts to be physically distant from coworkers and deal with remote work—especially if that hasn't been the case traditionally?

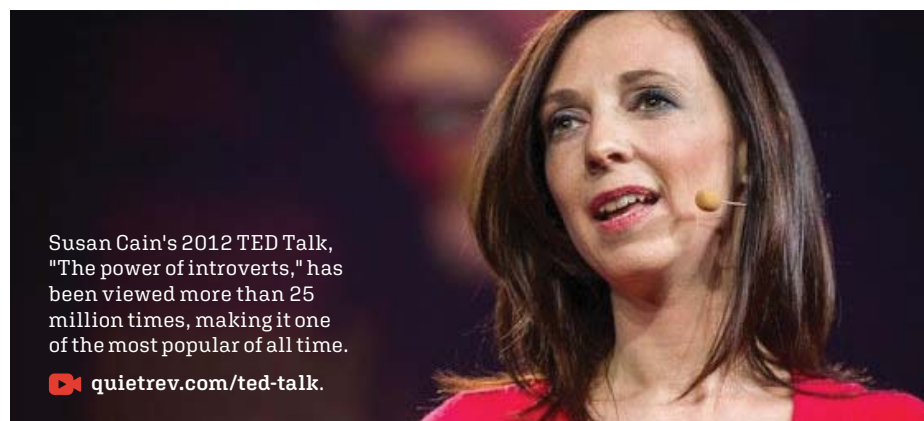
You know, it's funny. You would think on paper that it would be easier for introverts. And it probably is on average, but that's not true across the board. I started thinking about why this is and came up with a rubric for it. I think the question is, really, before this happened, before we had to be physically distancing, did you have social equilibrium? Did you have the right

amount of social interaction for you, too much, too little? Or was it just right? If it was just right, then even if you're an introvert, you're probably going to find the current situation difficult. For example, a friend of mine is the leader of a pretty big organization, and he has a prominent role managing a lot of people. He told me he's secretly thrilled that he gets to work from home and manage people from afar. He's really happy with it. Whereas for me, my previous life was perfect. I would travel around and give talks, and I would also spend a lot of time in a cafe writing my book. So for me, I find the current situation not as pleasing. It really depends. And for many extroverts, it's challenging for the obvious reasons. You know, they're not getting the stimulation that they really need to feel at their best, and it's hard.

When social distancing guidelines relax and people are able to return to normal office environments, do you have any predictions about how the shock of this period will have changed us and the way we view workplace relationships?

I've always been a big believer in the idea of the results-oriented work environment. As you know, understandably, many organizational leaders were afraid to really adopt that kind of orientation because it felt like such a radical change. Well, now they've been forced into it, and organizations have been able to adapt. So, I think people will be happy to keep what's working. I think we will be able to move to an environment where people can work more from home and have performance based on actual results and less on face time in the office.

How much remote work is possible for governments, which in a lot of respects are completely organized around in-person transactions, public



Susan Cain's 2012 TED Talk, "The power of introverts," has been viewed more than 25 million times, making it one of the most popular of all time.

 quietrev.com/ted-talk.

meetings, and a culture that is still very traditional when it comes to alternative work arrangements?

I definitely think there's going to be a shift with governments. But I also see many of those returning to the way they were. Despite what I just said, I actually believe that once this threat truly recedes, we will keep some of the telecommuting arrangements that seemed to work really well, but I think that for life in general, people will be thrilled to go back to normal.

After scheduling you for our conference, I also learned that you curate a book club and started the Next Big Idea Club with Daniel Pink, Adam Grant, and Malcolm Gladwell. Are there any specific books you think our members would enjoy?

Absolutely! For anybody working in government, I really do think the book club is excellent because we hand-select for you what we believe are going to be the next big nonfiction, big idea books. The books just show up in your mailbox and you get special access to the authors. It's really a way of being connected to what the big ideas are in your community and the leaders influencing discussions at a broader or national level, too. We also donate all our proceeds to children's literacy. There's one book now, for example, that we're just selecting, and it's called *Together* by Vivek Murthy.

He was the surgeon general under Barack Obama, and the book is about the problem of loneliness and what loneliness is, and what the difference is between positive solitude and negative loneliness. So, it's very apt for the current moment.

Last question for you: I'm pleased to announce to our members that even though we all missed the chance to see you at the conference this year because of COVID-19, we can all look forward to your future keynote address, now scheduled for the 2021 Annual Conference in Chicago. Is there anything you can preview or let us know what you are working on now that we might hear from you between now and next June?

I'm actually working on a book on a different topic right now. I'm not exactly sure if it will be done by next June, but it's a book about joy and sorrow and finding joy in a world that includes sorrow. I'm also working on a new podcast. I'm on social media, and your members can sign up for a newsletter that provides updates and is a good way of staying in touch. They can sign up for all that on my website, quietrev.com.

Thanks, Susan. We appreciate the time today and hope that our members are able to check out the resources you have on the website and connect with you on this very interesting topic. We look forward to seeing you next year in Chicago. 