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THE SILENT ARE GOLDEN

Those who shout the loudest do not always have the best ideas, writes **Farah Dib**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOE WALDRON

A third of us belong to a group of largely marginalised and ignored minds. At school, quiet children are told they need to brush up on their teamwork. In business, those of few words are often sidelined in important meetings. And, because of our cultural preference for extroverts, introverts are actively questioned. But the costs of our unwillingness to accommodate different personalities in business are high. In fact, research shows that some of the most creative team members go unnoticed amid the loudness of the majority.

Dr Narendra Laljani, dean of graduate studies at Ashridge Business School, explains where this bias comes from. “Business organisations have always had a bias for action, rather than thinking,” he says. “We talk about being results-oriented, having drive, leading people and getting things done, and we confuse this with being charismatic, outgoing, sociable and assertive – which are all traits of extroverts.”

“Perhaps this is a hangover of an old-fashioned sales and manufacturing orientation. Perhaps

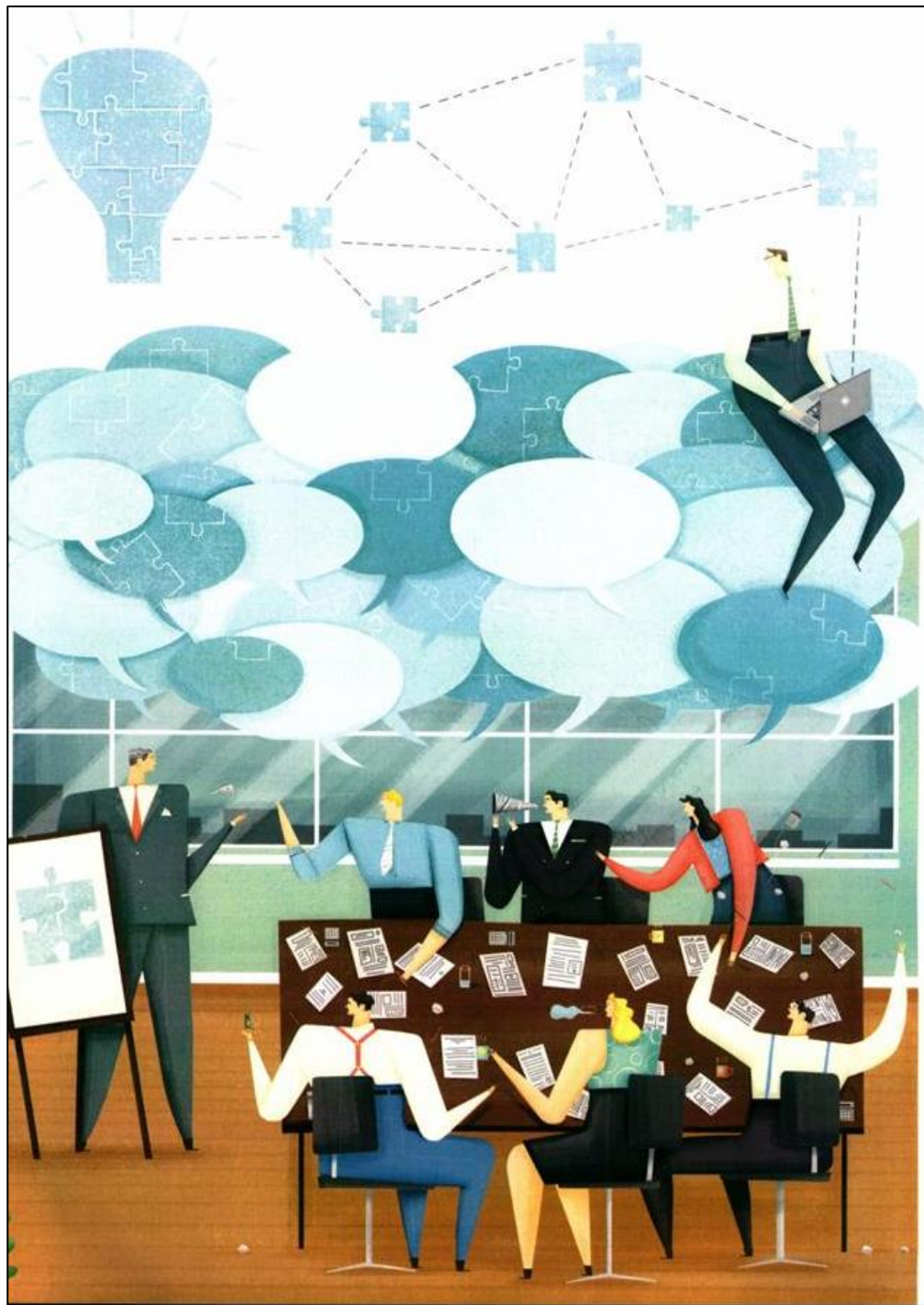
there is a wider problem, whether in public life or in organisations, of preferring style to substance.”

But there might also be a cultural explanation for this. Alex Swarbrick, senior consultant at Roffey Park, has noticed a significant difference between desirable leadership traits in the US and western Europe, and Asia and northern Europe.

Defining traits

“The notion of desirable behaviours and attitudes and, equally, undesirable ones, can be seen as a social construction: it’s cultural,” he explains. “In modern Western business culture, certain values, behaviours and attitudes have become privileged – because organisations have assumed them to be associated with success. While ‘teamwork’ is good and open offices preferred for sharing ideas, working alone is assumed to inhibit creativity.”

Swarbrick points out that, contrary to popular belief, shyness is not necessarily a trait reserved for introverts. “It’s worth thinking about what we mean by introvert and extrovert. The classic Myers-Briggs personality test understands this



as about what recharges us; where we draw our energy, which world fuels us – the inner world or outer world. This is subtly but significantly different from popular understandings, in which 'introvert' can be synonymous with shy, quiet and socially anxious. They are not the same."

Professor Karl Moore from the Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University, Montreal, has been interviewing chief executives of large firms about how they manage introverts. He has noted similar differences in leadership culture when working in northern Europe and Thailand. In Finland, he says, introverts are not merely accepted but considered the norm. He tells a joke to illustrate his point. "How can you tell a Finnish introvert from a Finnish extrovert?" he asks. "A Finnish introvert looks at his shoes when talking to you. A Finnish extrovert looks at your shoes."

The differences

Professor Moore also notices a great difference in audience response to the usual "are there any questions?" request at the end of his lectures. In Finland, the audience take longer to respond, spending time thinking about what has been said. But, in New York, he can barely pause to take his breath before someone has tried to get a word in.

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In Thailand, his pupils tend to be more extroverted than the Japanese, but more introverted than the US. The UK, France and Germany fall in the same camp as the US, while Scandinavia holds a culture where introverted people are more common – and more valued.

Moore's research led him to speak to introverted executives about their career paths, in an attempt to discover how they rose to the top by harnessing their introverted strengths. He found that introverts bring a lot of valuable skills to the table; skills that businesses cannot afford to lose.

"One of the most important things is their ability to listen," says Moore. "Extroverts can be fantastic communicators and brilliant at getting people excited about a project, but introverts listen, which makes people feel respected." What's more, when extroverts make noise, others' abilities to share their creative ideas with the team are restricted. "The result is fewer ideas put forward," he adds.

Dr Laljani has also seen the benefits that introverts bring. "Creating the conditions in

THE INTROVERTS THAT ROSE TO THE TOP



THE MEEK MAGNATE: BILL GATES

In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, Susan Cain describes the Microsoft cofounder and chairman as an introvert. "We can stretch our personalities, but only up to a point," she writes. Bill Gates also challenges the misconception that introverts are also shy. In a blog post for *Psychology Today*, Cain notes: "He is quiet and bookish, but untaxed by others' opinions of him."



THE RELUCTANT EXTROVERT: MARISSA MAYER

She is the chief executive of Yahoo! and often portrayed as an extrovert, despite, by her own admission, being "shy and introverted". In an interview with *Vogue* in 2013, she revealed that keeping up a public persona is really hard work. "I will look at my watch and say, 'You can't leave until time X,'" she says. "And if you're still having a terrible time at time X, you can leave."



THE ASOCIAL NETWORKER: MARK ZUCKERBERG

One of the founders of the biggest social network in the world, Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg has been described by Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg as a classic introvert. "He is shy and introverted, and he often does not seem very warm to people who don't know him, but he is warm," she told the *New York Times*.



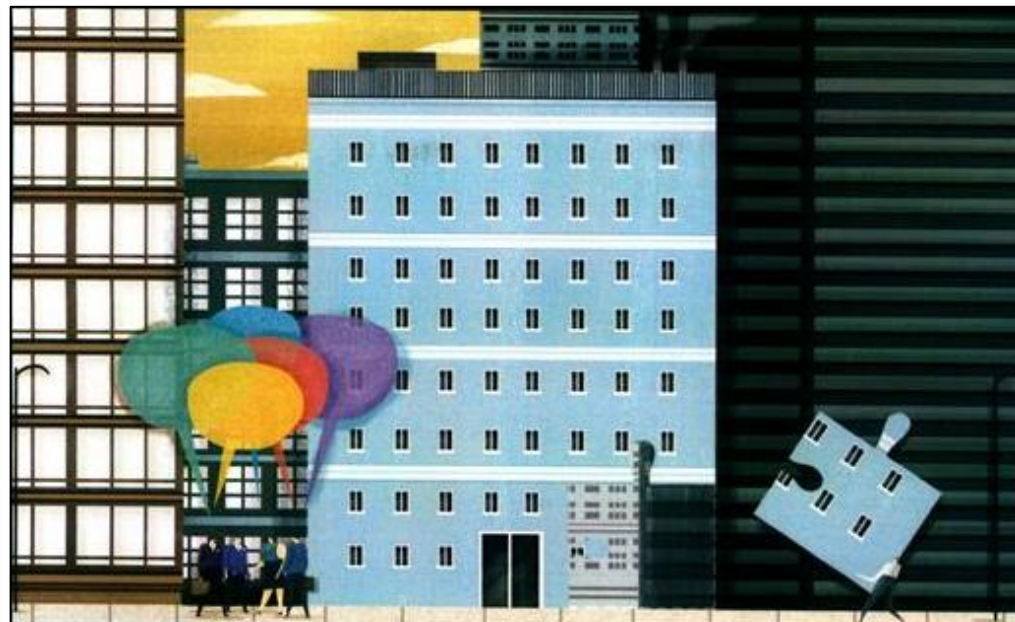
THE QUIET MAN IN THE MIDDLE: PAUL SCHOLES

Manchester United's Paul Scholes defied the gallivanting image of the Premier League footballer. A family man, he rarely went out to clubs, preferring nights in with his wife. Despite his talents, Scholes' England career remained unfulfilled. Unwilling to vocalise his displeasure at playing out of position, Scholes retired aged just 30, starving the national team of his skills.



THE COOL ORATOR: BARACK OBAMA

Being the President of the US and an introvert is not as much of a contradiction as it may seem. Barack Obama has been criticised for being aloof. As columnist David Brooks puts it: "Being led by Obama is like being trumpeted into battle by Miles Davis. He makes you want to sit down and discern." And journalist John Heilemann says: "He's a solitary figure who has extraordinary communicative capacities."



which introverts can give off their best means that we fully use the diversity of talents in the organisation. In particular, we can improve the quality of problem solving and decision-making, with a better assessment of the risks and greater sensitivity to issues of implementation."

Of course, being creative is not a character trait reserved for either introverts or extroverts. But, Laljani notes, the problem is that "introverts are often perceived as being aloof, unfriendly, unenthusiastic and not good team players. This lazy thinking can result in wasted talent".

"You get infectious enthusiasm, speed and action from extroverts," he continues. "You get thoughtful and insightful ideas from introverts. The challenge is that many of the problem-solving processes we set up in organisations, such as collaborative projects and brainstorming meetings, all appeal to extroverts. By contrast, introverts do not like being put on the spot in public, and need time and space to reflect."

Rising to the top

And Swarbrick agrees: "Because many organisations have come to value speed over reflection, and action over consideration, introverts can become seen as missing the key qualities a business has chosen as desirable. Extroverts typically think out loud and refine their thoughts as they go, whereas introverts think first and speak later. This extrovert quality can be assumed to indicate confidence – and reflection to indicate a lack of confidence."

But it seems the bias against introverts has not stopped a proportion of successful leaders who

describe themselves as belonging to this group from reaching the top. In his interviews with chief executives, Moore found that, out of the 23 leaders he spoke to, eight or nine were introverts, a surprisingly equitable ratio, you might say. But here's the rub: to reach the summit, every single one of the introverted leaders had to behave like extroverts. "They have to put on their game faces at times because that's what's required in the role," says Moore. "If you don't want to do that, that's fine, but you will remain at a more junior level of management."

Being yourself is not always good for your career. Nevertheless, the wise manager won't rely on individuals to break out of their box – they should instead create an environment in which all personality types can flourish.

So how can managers bring the most out of their introverted team members? "By simply recognising the strengths of introverts and make room for them," says Moore. "For example, don't rush them to give an opinion at the beginning of a meeting. Let them have a more thoughtful and analytical approach. And don't embarrass them with praise in public. Introverts tend to prefer to be told this one-to-one. Allow them to work in smaller groups rather than insist that everyone works in big groups."

Have a look around your office. Who in your team meets the classic profile of an introvert? Ask whether your working culture favours those people. It rarely does. We've fetishised extroversion. The quiet one-in-three have been forgotten; their great powers lost.



HOW TO WASTE AN INTROVERT

- Invite them to big brainstorming meetings
- Push them for an immediate opinion
- Ask them to teamwork in large groups
- Expect them to challenge if they are unhappy
- Praise them in public