Extrovert, Introvert or... Ambivert?

Throughout our lives we have heard quite a bit about what it means to be an introvert or an extrovert. We have been told that someone is extroverted because they are outgoing and like being around people. On the other hand we have been told that someone is introverted because they are shy and tend to avoid being around crowds. And, personality profiles have traditionally lumped us into an either-or outcome; we are extroverted or introverted. Researchers have suggested that 75% of the population is comprised of extroverts and 25% introverts.

When the Swedish psychiatrist, Carl Jung, studied introversion and extroversion in the early 1900's he developed theories that over the years have been taken out of their original context and have been used differently than his research and conclusions suggested. For example, Jung believed that while we all have a preferred orientation that leans toward extroversion or introversion, these terms were to represent extremes rather than to be used to define us. He believed that each person has both traits and that most people fall along a continuum rather than on the extreme ends of the spectrum. Jung focused on how we process information as a way to determine where we fall on the introvert-extrovert continuum.

- Extroverts prefer the external world of objects, people, and activities. They find meaning outside of themselves. Because of this way of processing information and finding meaning, someone on the extroversion end of the continuum will tend to gain energy by being around people. They will find less enjoyment and experience an energy drain being alone for long periods of time.

- Introverts are introspective and prefer to find meaning within their own internal world of thoughts and feelings. Because of this way of processing information and finding meaning, someone on the introversion end of the spectrum is more likely to enjoy solitude and to be thinking about their internal thoughts and dreams. They gain their energy from this alone time and become drained being around a crowd of people for an extended period.

Note that these two ways of viewing extroversion and introversion are different from how many of us have learned to view these two personality types, and in many cases how we have been taught to view ourselves. For example, for most of our lives we have probably heard that introverts are shy. Being shy infers being uncomfortable with and around other people. Over time this has been translated to introverts not being good, or even being awkward, socially. That is typically not the case and introverts are simply choosing environments that favor the way that they prefer to process information and find meaning in their lives.

Similarly, extroverts do not always choose to be around people and may instead gain energy through the external world of activities and objects. They may not be the “life of the party” or prefer to speak in public to large groups of people. On the contrary, introverts can be very comfortable addressing large audiences. Many pastors who deliver powerful weekly sermons to hundreds or thousands of people would not be considered extroverts due to being in front of a lot of people, but more accurately introverts based on the way that they process information. When their sermons are over they retreat to a quiet place to recharge.

More recently the term “ambivert” (the prefix ambi meaning both) was coined to capture the people falling on the continuum’s midrange. So, unlike the traditional statistic that approximately 75% of the population is made up of extroverts and 25% introverts, recent studies show that slightly more than 50% are actually ambiverts. This places many more people in the much larger midrange and explains why people in this group never felt like the extroversion or introversion labels accurately fit them.
We now have a better idea of how to think about extroversion and introversion. How about those who are ambiverts? As the prefix ambi (meaning “both” or “combination”) implies, ambiverts exhibit a combination of both introverted and extroverted tendencies. This combination, which can be thought of as being able to move with varying degrees of flexibility between the two styles, means that ambiverts have a wider possibility of responses to their environments.

Extroverts and introverts have more predictable responses to similar environments. An extrovert, for example, will typically enjoy most social settings. An ambivert can have mixed responses to the same situations and environments. One time a happy hour get-together may seem appealing and provides energy and the next time it feels negative and energy draining. Ambiverts have a more fluid range of responses that at times this may be confusing based on the prior extrovert and introvert labels (“I've been told all my life that I am an extrovert so why do I feel like an introvert so often?”).

Ambiverts can flexibly move between introversion and extroversion and are significantly influenced by their environments and specific situations. In a party environment an ambivert may be lively, highly engaged, and mingle from person to person as would typically be associated with highly extroverted behavior. At the other end of the spectrum, when they find themselves alone they are completely comfortable and find it energizing to have some quite time. Both situations can equally provide an ambivert with energy.

Having awareness about what it means to be an ambivert provides more than half of the population with better options to consciously choose situations and environments that increase rather than decrease outcomes and energy. While most helpful for ambiverts whose flexibility offers more options, these tips will also help extroverts and introverts to better understand ambiverts.

- Recognize that it is natural for ambiverts to enjoy a situation or environment one time and not another. For example, getting together with friends or co-workers for a happy hour gathering is energy gaining one time and energy draining another. Extroverts and introverts will usually have a more consistent experience in similar situations and environments.
- Notice in which situations you are more naturally adaptive and how this can be a benefit. For example, ambiverts can be very good at sales and statistically close more sales than extroverts. They have the best of both worlds; they can be naturally enthusiastic and assertive and can then fluidly move to listening well and being empathetic.
- Since ambiverts are more influenced by their environments and specific situations they need to be more aware of what provides or drains them of energy. Whereas an extrovert will generally prefer almost any social environment, an ambivert may thrive in one type of social setting and feel drained in another social setting. For example, a work social gathering may be draining but a classroom setting with the same number of people may be energizing.

Gaining new awareness about where we fall on the Extrovert-Ambivert-Introvert continuum allows us to make better choices about business and personal environments and situations. We can then choose people, situations, and environments that help us to succeed and thrive while avoiding the ones that do not play to our strengths and drain of us of energy. The outcome will be greater success and enjoyment in business and life.