

A Winning Personality:

Why Ambiverts Make Great Entrepreneurs

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Steve Ballmer is a maniac. Just days into the new year, the rookie owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers took the internet by storm when he leaped from his courtside seat at Staples Center and began wildly gyrating to the music of halftime performer Fergie—a dance described by media outlets as “whacked out,” “hilariously insane” and “enraged and ecstatic all at the same time.”

The spectacle was nothing new to anyone who recalls Ballmer's 14-year tenure as Microsoft CEO: Bill Gates' handpicked successor was a notoriously towering presence at software developer conferences and industry events, stalking keynote stages like a caged animal—a shouting, sweaty Chris Farley character come to life.

Ballmer, we can surmise, is an extrovert. Or is he? You don't take command of one of the world's most influential companies or rack up a personal net worth of \$22.5 billion without deep concentration and focus, keen observational skills and at least some capacity for self-reflection—attributes commonly associated with introverted personalities.

“There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or a pure introvert,” argued Carl Jung, the pioneering psychologist credited with popularizing the concepts of extroversion and introversion almost a century ago. “Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum.”

Public perception notwithstanding, Ballmer is probably an ambivert. The majority of other successful entrepreneurs and corporate leaders are most likely ambiverts as well—and chances are you are, too. Neither fish nor fowl, ambiverts occupy the expansive space between the polar extremes of extroversion and introversion, embodying and adopting key attributes of both psychological archetypes. For example, ambiverts are uniquely equipped to move comfortably between raucous social settings and intense solitude, and while they know how to assert their opinions, they refrain from being aggressive or boorish.

“If you look at something like [personality test] Myers-Briggs or even the popular parlance of ‘introvert’ and ‘extrovert,’ the wisdom is you’re either one or the other. That cuts against a lot of people’s experiences,” says Daniel Pink, whose 2012 book, *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*, addresses ambiversion as it explores the complexities of salesmanship. “What I like about ‘ambivert’ is it reflects that introversion and extroversion are really a spectrum. People are located at different spots along that spectrum. It’s a more accurate way of describing who people really are.”

The ambivert advantage

One’s location on the spectrum can play a dramatic role in professional prowess. “Rethinking the Extraverted Sales Ideal: The Ambivert Advantage,” a 2013 research paper by Adam Grant, a professor at The University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, tracked sales representatives at an unnamed software company over the span of three months. Using a personality assessment test, it measured introversion and extroversion on a scale from 1 to 7. Ambiverts—sales reps who scored between 3.75 and 5.50—had average hourly revenue of \$154.77,

far surpassing their extroverted (\$125.19 per hour) and introverted (\$120.10) colleagues. Most telling, however: The employees who scored at the exact midpoint of 4.0 averaged \$208.34 per hour, considerably more than any other subset.

The same middle-of-the-road psychological profile that helps make ambiverts outstanding salespeople extends to other facets of professional life, including entrepreneurial leadership, experts say.

“We have data suggesting that if you go all out on the extroversion side, you’re going to be worse at leading and worse at selling, and leading and selling are at the heart of what an entrepreneur has to do,” Grant says. “[In ambiverts] you see a good balance between talking and listening. Extroverts make the mistake of dominating the conversation and not hearing enough ideas from the people around them. Introverts make the opposite error of staying quiet too often and not bringing their ideas forward. A mix of that can be pretty helpful when it comes to generating ideas for what visions and strategies your startup should be pursuing—or when it comes to pitching investors.”

Leadership roles

The term “ambivert” first appeared in sociologist Kimball Young’s *Source Book for Social Psychology*, published in 1927—six years after Jung’s groundbreaking *Psychological Types*, which outlined his theories on extroverts and introverts. “There is, finally, a third group, and here it is hard to say whether the motivation comes chiefly from within or without,” Jung wrote. “This group is the most numerous and includes the less differentiated normal man.”

Subsequent contributions to the ambivert literature are scarce across the decades that follow, with psychologists like Hans Eysenck instead focusing attention on extroversion and introversion. Eysenck's influential 1947 book, *Dimensions of Personality*, proposed that extroverts operate at a lower basic rate of cortical arousal than introverts, requiring extroverts to work harder to energize their minds and bodies, and in turn leading them to crave adventure, social activity and other thrill-seeking stimuli.

That insight into the extrovert dynamic may explain why magnetic, larger-than-life personalities like Sir Richard Branson, Donald Trump and Mark Cuban were so long identified as exemplars of the entrepreneurial ideal. Conventional wisdom held that extroverts translated as more effective leaders simply because their outgoing personalities made them better suited to networking, public speaking and collaboration. But the pendulum shifted following the 2012 publication of Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. Virtually overnight, pundits began arguing that introverts are in fact better engineered to run businesses because they are more focused, more risk-averse and more willing to listen to constructive criticism.

But according to Grant's research, neither perspective is correct. "When you look at the personality scores of effective leaders in studies that my colleagues and I did, they're not extreme introverts. They actually scored more in the middle," he says. "We saw that the leaders who were less extroverted—or in this case, ambiverted—did a really good job of empowering their most proactive people. The extroverts always wanted to set the direction, and they were really good at inspiring dutiful

followers, but they made the mistake of shutting down the ideas of the people around them because they always wanted to be the center of attention. The ambiverts were much better at toggling back and forth between leading and following, and initiating ideas and reacting to them.”

That innate ability to adapt is what sets ambiverts apart from extroverts and introverts, who are unwilling or unable to make the same behavioral adjustments, says psychologist Brian Little, senior fellow at The Wharton School and author of the 2014 book *Me, Myself and Us: The Science of Personality and the Art of Well-Being*.

“If we accept the premise that management and entrepreneurial leadership require adaptive flexibility to engage in both introverted and extroverted tasks, which I believe they do, then we can see that those in the middle have more of that adaptive flexibility than those at the extremes,” Little says. “A person who can act out of character, who can adopt either the extroverted style or the introverted style, is the prototype of the great leader.”

But that flexibility comes at a substantial cost. “Protractedly acting out of character is going to cause emotional and physical decline—the summary word would be ‘burnout,’” Little explains. “I talk in my work about how an introvert who has to engage in extroverted activity as a leader can carry that out very effectively if they have some restorative niches to which they can repair in order to get their first nature nurtured for a while. It is plausible to argue that the more we act out of character, the easier it becomes, but there are limits to that, and we really need restoration when we engage in that behavior.”

Core strengths

Ambiverts aren't superior leaders by default, of course. Intangibles like confidence, conscientiousness and commitment are critical, regardless of personality type. But in cases where ambiverts, extroverts and introverts exhibit many of the same core strengths, ambiverts maintain a competitive advantage by virtue of the comparative absence of chinks in their armor.

"If you are an ambivert, it's much easier to be a successful entrepreneur alone. If you're more of an introvert or more of an extrovert to either extreme, the odds are higher that you're going to need a partner who complements you and who brings the strengths that you are less likely to have," Grant says. "I always think of the Google example: Larry Page in particular is far more on the introverted side of the spectrum, and Eric Schmidt coming in as CEO as the company is growing was a pretty healthy complement. Or take Facebook: Mark Zuckerberg is far more introverted than Sheryl Sandberg."

However, Grant theorizes that some colleagues may find ambiverts too flexible and unpredictable for their own good, preferring to work alongside leaders with a clear-cut set of behaviors and perspectives. Ambivert leadership could even ring false or misleading to some employees, author Pink contends.

"What gives ambiverts strength is the same thing that gives bilingual people strength—they can talk to and understand introverts in their organization, and they can talk to and understand extroverts in their organization," Pink explains. "But one possible weakness is the perception of inauthenticity. If you [extend] the metaphor of bilingualism,

it's like, 'Wait a minute—you speak Spanish with Fred, and you speak English with Mary? What's your real language?' This idea that they're adapting to each situation—that they're quasi-chameleons—could be perceived as a weakness by some, although I think it's a strength."

Grant also questions whether ambivert leadership is vital throughout the life cycle of an organization. "I would bet that at the early stages of a venture startup, ambiversion is more important than it is later," he says. "In the early phases, you have to play more roles. There are fewer opportunities to delegate and adjust what your responsibilities are. As you grow, it's much easier to carve out a role that allows you to operate effectively in your introverted niche or in your extroverted niche. Maybe ambiverts would have higher rates of early startup success, and those differences would vanish once companies hit some kind of stride."

Time will tell whether Grant's theory is correct; research into the ambivert profile is still in its infancy, and the concept remains on the fringes of the popular consciousness. But with a growing number of academics turning their attention to personality psychology and its impact on all facets of human life, major breakthroughs could be within reach, Little believes.

"What's exciting is that we're getting away from the 'Are extroverts better than introverts?' logic and starting to look at some of the more subtle aspects of why we do the things we do and how they involve managing the balance between our natures and what I call our 'socio-genetic motives'—our cultural expectations, our work and so on," he says. "We're all a bit more complex than simple types of being."

Sounds like me

Given that ambiverts account for a larger percentage of the population than either extroverts or introverts, it stands to reason that most successful entrepreneurs line up somewhere near the middle of the personality spectrum. Whether they self-identify as ambiverts is another story.

“My guess is that most entrepreneurs would say, ‘I’m introverted, but I do like going out and talking to people and hearing what they have to say’ or ‘I’m a natural extrovert, but I love being by myself and reading,’” says Daniel Pink, whose books include *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*. “Most people don’t have the word ‘ambivert’ in their vocabulary. If you ask, ‘Are you an introvert or an extrovert?’ and that’s the only vocabulary you know, you have to pick one. But if you add ambivert to the mix, a lot of people will say, ‘That’s a choice? That’s allowed? Then yeah, I’m an ambivert!’”