

Outreach, Networking, Communicating—Oh My But I Am An Introvert ¹

Rebecca Winston

The other day I was reading an article in one of my other professional journals, American Bar Association Journal, 1 Jul 2019, and came across an article by Heidi Brown, “Navigating ‘Introvert Hell’: You Don’t Have to be Hard-Charging to be an Impactful Legal Networker”. It got me to thinking about the numerous social events I have attended as a project manager, as well as the other outreach events or other communication activities in which I have had to engage. Just thinking about them caused some stress and by the time an hour passed, I needed to think about something and have a session of mindfulness to relax and send my stress into the ether. I am an introvert and I need to recharge my batteries following any event or communication activity. I thought I would share what I have learned over several years of such events and activities, as well as practicing law and doing public speaking events. I will also share that I learned some of these items through the school of hard knocks and road rash and others by reading and learning in the classic sense.

Most dictionaries define an introvert as a reserved or shy person. The American Psychological Association defines an introvert, as one that as an orientation towards the internal private world of one’s self and one’s thoughts and feelings; prefer to work independently. Whichever definition one accepts, the overall impression is one in which one is not adept at outreach, networking and communicating. So how does one become adept or at least give the impression of being adept.

Well, growing up I can remember my Mother telling such gems as “Smile more, it will make it easier.” “Shoulders back and just do it, once you begin it will be fine.” “Making friends will be easy, just start.” None of those words of wisdom helped and each time I heard them they caused me to panic.

I ended up spending time in the public library in my town reading up on my weakness as it was referred to in my home. I read about numerous coping skills, but one of them registered with me and I began thinking that I was doing it to some extent just to cope with life in general.

The book, the title of which I can no longer remember, recommended that one take a drama class and assume a bit of an alter ego. For years I assumed the alter egos of pioneer girls or Nancy Drew from books I was reading, I would try that route. I took three years of drama in high school and a year in college. I have used this technique to great advantage. I have been the lawyer or the project management. These roles have been well defined by me with specifications and other requirements that provide several personality traits, allowing me to interact in a complete way with others and to communicate in those roles.

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Do I still have to re-charge the batteries after any event? Absolutely, acting is tough. It is not the natural state for this person. I have to continually remind myself of the performance requirements and boundaries. But I have also put up boundaries for the interactions that protect the introvert.

Ms. Brown reiterated one of the other guides I learned from my research in those early days in her article. The lesson is to do research prior to engaging in any interaction. I learn as much as possible about who will be present, what they hope to gain from the interaction or what their objectives are, who is funding them to attend, what the purpose of the event is stated to be and who is funding the event, as it may mean there are other objectives than the stated objective or objectives, length of the event and what the normal time one may be expected to attend or stated in another way—when can I leave the event, and who is asking me to attend and what is their objective for my attendance. If there are any conflicts in the answers, I may try to find out the drivers for the conflicts and how I can avoid any potential situations that may cause them to come to the surface. While conflict management is something I am trained to handle, I am usually playing a different role at such events and changing the role I am playing is difficult for this introvert, although it can be done.

Another technique is to find a friend to go attend the event and with which one can network. Make sure the friend is more extrovert than introvert. Two introverts will find a corner to stand and have a conversation together to the exclusion of others. The friend should be someone that you feel comfortable interacting with and socializing with others. Decide if the friend is the technique you use for introducing them to others or they introduce you, so you do not stumble over one another, as you do not want awkward for you to become embarrassing.

Do not try to make contact with everyone in the room or to do all the communicating for the team. You are just one person. Sometimes introverts try to overcompensate for what they see as a deficit in their personality. It is not a deficit. We just have a different personality. We excel at different aspects of the jobs and some of the introvert personality traits make us better communicators, as we tend to be more focused, are noted to do better at follow-up once we meet individuals, and we recognize contacts in follow-up interactions more often.

Each of us is unique and is made up of various personality traits; we just have to learn to manage them, as we manage other items in our lives, both private and professional.

So, if you are an introvert, you have some follow-up activities to handle right now: phone calls, emails, texts, notes, app messaging, and other outreach. For the rest of you, yes I am often jealous, but I will close my eyes and meditate a bit to de-stress and recharge and be back to being me.

About the Author



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Rebecca (Becky) Winston, Esq., JD, PMI Fellow, is a former Chair of the board of the Project Management Institute (PMI®). An experienced expert on the subject of project management (PM) in the fields of research & development (R&D), energy, environmental restoration and national security, she is well known throughout the United States and globally as a leader in the PM professional world. Becky has over 30 years of experience in program and project management, primarily on programs funded by the US government. She is a graduate of the University of Nebraska's College of Law, Juris Doctorate (1980), in Lincoln, Nebraska and has a Bachelor's of Science (BS) degree in Education from Nebraska Wesleyan University. She is a licensed attorney in the states of Iowa and Nebraska, USA.

Active in PMI since 1993, Rebecca Winston helped pioneer PMI's Specific Interest Groups (SIGs) in the nineties, including the Project Earth and Government SIGs, and was a founder and first co-chair of the Women in Project Management SIG. She served two terms on the PMI board of directors as director at large, Secretary Treasurer, Vice Chair (for two years), and Chair (2002). She was elected a PMI Fellow in 2005. She has served as a reviewer of the Barrie Student paper for the PMI Educational Foundation for several years and now serves on the PMI Educational Foundation Board for a three-year period of service beginning in 2018. She is also a member of the American Bar Association and the Association of Female Executives in the United States.

Ms. Winston periodically serves as an advisor to organizations such as the National Nuclear Security Administration (USA), U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on topics ranging from Program and Project Management to project reviews, risk management and vulnerability assessments. She served on the Air Force Studies Board for six years and currently serves on the Intelligence Science Technology Engineering Group for the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, as well as actively serving on many studies for the National Research Council.

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