



EP#178: LEADING QUIETLY: THE POWER OF INTROVERTS AT WORK

WITH RICHARD ETIENNE

TRANSCRIPT

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Announcer:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome back to GovComms, a podcast about the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin our conversation today. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land from where we are broadcasting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging and recognise the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region. And indeed, may I pay my respects to all First Nations people of the lands from where anyone listening to this podcast is joining us from.

So think about this for a moment. What if the best ideas in your team are the ones that you never hear? In successful workplaces, we value and talk a lot about collaboration, ideas and teamwork, but so often it's the squeaky wheel that gets the oil. It's perhaps the loudest and the most confident who speak most often and crowd out the space for those of our colleagues who might be a little more contemplative or a little more reflective. But if that's the case, just imagine the value that's being left in the thoughts and the words unspoken. So how do we create environments where all types of personalities are valued and heard? How do we create workplace behaviours where everyone can contribute equally? And how do we foster that psychological safety so that not just the most outspoken feel confident to share their ideas?

Well to consider this and discuss it today, I'm joined by an expert in this particular field of work, and his name is Richard Etienne, who is an internal communications expert and the founder of the Introvert Space, and he's a former official videographer for UK Prime Minister Theresa May. He's an advocate for introverts in the workplace, helping organisations build cultures that prioritise inclusivity and psychological safety. Richard is the author of the Introvert's Survival Guide, a must read for Anyone Navigating Leadership and Communication as an introvert or leading a diverse Team that will inevitably include much quieter people. And he regularly delivers workshops on communication, leadership and workplace culture, helping leaders to create those types of environments where everybody can thrive. He joins me from his home in London. Richard, welcome to GovComms.

Richard Etienne:

Thank you, David. And that's probably the best intro I have ever received on a podcast. I don't mind if other people hear this. I don't care.

David Pembroke:

So listen, before we jump into the meat and potatoes, what's your story? Where are you from and how did this all come to pass?

Richard Etienne:

Yeah, so as you said, I'm from London. I grew up as a very quiet, reflective child who often felt out of place in louder environments like school or social family gatherings. I have a brother who's three years younger than me, and he was the one that would climb trees and I'd read books. It was just that dynamic was very different, and I realised that what this thing was with my personality was introversion. And I found that out after reading what some call the introvert's Bible, Susan Cain's *Quiet*, which was definitely a turning point in understanding myself.

So yeah, I then began tutoring interactive masterclasses with the Guardian newspaper to help introverts or other professionals in my shoes, essentially, who were desperate to navigate the extrovert-favouring workplace to just do it, but within their comfort zone. So that's the introvert side of things, but you mentioned about communications and videography. So yeah, parallel to that, I was progressing within my career in communications and videography where I just discovered I had a passion for storytelling. David, I love the fact that everyone has a story to tell and I'm able to help to amplify quieter voices.

David Pembroke:

So as a younger person, did you think there was something wrong with you given that you could see the noise and the carry-on and that you felt apart from it? Or did you feel quite comfortable in that world of quiet?

Richard Etienne:

So it was twofold. I would feel uncomfortable when in public spaces, and a lot of people always ask me, are you okay? Because I was quiet. So then if enough different people ask you that question, then you start to think, actually, is there something wrong with me and not them? But then when I was alone recharging, whether it was doing my puzzles, reading the book, whatever it was, oh gosh, yeah, I felt so comfortable. I didn't feel out of place at all.

David Pembroke:

Did you gravitate to people who were also quiet and so you were comfortable together being quiet, and so perhaps were your friends more of that quieter variety?

Richard Etienne:

So again, it's twofold in the sense that I would always notice another quieter person. So again, that social gathering, I'd say a wedding, let's say a reception part, it's getting towards the end. For me, my sand timer is a lot quicker than most people. I would also notice a quieter individual somewhere sat at a table and I would go and talk to them. They were the ones who became invisible because of the noise that was happening externally to them.

However, on the other side, my friendship circle is very mixed, and if anything, I probably have a few more extroverts because it was nice for them to kind of lead the discussions and kind of kickstart certain events and host things, and I would turn up and do my thing. But I believe it's important to have a mix of characters in one's social circle because we all act as different mirrors to each other because I may view myself a particular way, but I know for sure that my friends of differing personalities would also have another lens, and it wouldn't be a deprecating lens. It would definitely be an uplifting one. But it's funny how we all see each other and ourselves in different lights.

David Pembroke:

So there wasn't any resentment towards your noisier, louder, perhaps more confident friends who were sort of taking the stage, taking the microphone?

Richard Etienne:

Okay, maybe not the word resentment, but when it moved into the workplace, for example, I remember my first full-time job was I was on an IT help desk for what was then Lloyd's TSB, when they were together, open plan office, phones ringing. I mean, Gen Z wouldn't know what a ringtone is right now, but it was just loud. And to get over that noise, the louder individuals would speak very boldly about, "Yes, thank you for agreeing to close your deal with me" and all of this kind of me, me, me conversation.

And so when it came to bonuses and promotions, regardless of whether I hit objectives or exceeded them, guess who got them? It was the louder ones, the ones that paraded up and down the office floor being loud about their achievements. And yeah, on those occasions. And then also when again, such louder ones would steal the limelight or take the credit for something that I would have done, I just didn't really want the confrontation or felt bold enough to speak up and defend myself. And definitely not verbally, but I would do it in writing afterwards via email for example.

But you know how it is, David, there are moments where unless you say it there and then it's a lost moment. So there are tips in the Introvert Survival Guide and other books that I've written that help introverts to circumnavigate this or at least challenge these moments head on from a way that is comfortable for them. And I'm really pleased that I'm able to do that.

David Pembroke:

Because it's interesting in a lot of government public sector work, it tends to attract a lot of people who are a little bit more reflective, a little bit more contemplative, a little bit more considered in the way they go about their work. So there are many introverts who work in public sector work. So let's jump into that. So how do you advise introverts? Where's the starting point for, okay, you're about to go into a workplace, well, you're going to have a career. Where do you place people on the journey into understanding their context, understanding their environment, and helping them on a pathway to effectiveness?

Richard Etienne:

So the first thing I do is ask them what type of personal brand they want to have. And I let individuals know that you have a personal brand whether you like it or not. And I explain it as one's personal brand is what people say about them when they're not in the room. So in my workshops, there might be a task where I ask those who attend to write down three words that they believe people would use to describe them, and then three words that they would want to be described, how they would like to be described.

Because this is it. Introverts don't like to be the centre of attention without asking for it. They don't like promoting themselves or standing out in the crowd generally. And so this is something I explain that we as introverts need to unlearn because it's no longer the type of work environment where you can be quiet in the meeting and then expect that not to reflect badly on your personal brand, or if you don't let your line manager or seniors know that you are doing X, Y, and Z in an exceptional way, if you don't tell them you just won't get that promotion, you won't get that pay rise, you won't get the celebration or acknowledgement that you deserve.

So I definitely always start by asking, "How do you want to be seen? How do you want your personal brand to be shaped?" And then provide the steps to help them to get there.

David Pembroke:

So what then are some of those steps that give them the confidence? Because I can imagine sitting there and talking to an introverted person and talking about personal brand, there would almost be, "Geez, I don't want to have a personal brand. That's not who I am."

Richard Etienne:

Yeah, so a great example is some of the words to stop using. So there's another part of my workshops where I have the seven deadly words, the seven deadly sins, the seven words and phrases to remove from your professional vocabulary. And while I won't go through all of them, just for example, using terms like "I'm no expert, but." Why would you lead with that self-deprecation? Or on emails, we start them with the word "Just." "Just checking in to see if you had that thing for me," or "Just wanted to know if I could just take five to 10 minutes of your time."

A lot of the words and terms and phrases that introverts tend to use a lot feel like apologies, and it's like apologising for your presence, apologising for asking or requesting something of others. And that is definitely one area that I focus on helping introverts with dealing with in the workplace. And that links to my communication side of things because as you've mentioned earlier, I've worked with Theresa May who is an introverted leader, and I mean we'll probably go into that in a bit later. But there were definitely some techniques that she used to help her to, again, operate in a way that was comfortable for her so that she could be or display the leadership qualities that she felt she needed to be prime minister.

David Pembroke:

So in your experience of working with introverts, what would you say are the top one or two things, which are the hardest issues to overcome to effectiveness?

Richard Etienne:

So networking is a big one. The idea of going into an environment for the sole purpose of showcasing one's personal brand, to unlock some potential open doors so that you know so they can advance along the career path that they want to. That is definitely one area that is of particular challenge. And let's face it, dread for some individuals. However, I always start with encouraging people to reframe the word networking and view it as a conversation, that is literally what this is.

When you go up one floor in your office to ask someone from finance for a particular document or something, or whatever, request something that is networking, but you don't think that it's networking, is it? You are going to someone you don't know to request something that is a benefit to you, or mutual benefit. And that is essentially what networking is. Everyone is there for themselves, but then also to find ways of mutual benefit. And if we understand that networking is essentially a conversation, that's definitely one thing.

I think you mentioned too, David. The other one is meetings. We spend, I mean prior to Covid, I think we spent about a third of our working week in meetings. However, now I think because hybrid work and it is so easy to just look into people's calendars. I mean I used to block out lunch as a meeting, so I was not always dragged to one. But we spend so much time in meetings and that is another wonderful place to showcase our personal brand.

So I encourage introverts to speak early. The thing about not speaking early is thoughts develop. We tend to just hold them down because we want to almost have the perfect answer. There is something about introversion and overthinking and a type of perfectionist approach, which is not beneficial in meetings. So even if it is just to say hello and ask people how their weekend was, just get those initial words out so the butterflies are gone and you can actually just essentially announce your presence in a way that is comfortable. It is all about trying to expand one's comfort zone. Don't step out a bit. And this is the nucleus essentially of my tips.

David Pembroke:

How big a challenge is hybrid work for introverts?

Richard Etienne:

Oh gosh. So it's interesting, there's benefit and there's challenge. So I will just quickly start with the benefit. It has helped introverts to have more control over their environment and energy levels. I can, if I want to work within my home, just walk away and go for a walk or do something that helps me to just relax after something that's been quite tense or quite energy draining. But however, the challenges are greater it seems than the benefits. And there is a risk, for example, virtually to be overlooked in meetings in particular. There was a time when pressing the hand raise icon had some impact, but I feel like it doesn't have the same impact as it used to. And messaging in the chat, just these things just aren't working as well as they used to.

However, there are ways to be heard. I remember in The Guardian for, I think it was the end of 2020, I wrote a blog about seven things I learned from working remotely. And one was to within meetings if you want to be heard is to practise name calling. It's like, "Whoa, what's that about?" So we've all been in one of those situations where someone is just talking, they're just going on and on and on and on, and you want to interject, but you've done the hand raise thing, it's just not working. What is actually effective? Instead of saying, "Oh, sorry, sorry, sorry." Say their name. "Hi David, that's a great point. Let me just stop you there for a second because I have just come across blah blah, blah, blah, blah. This great point I think will help to enhance what you're saying or is relevant to what you're discussing right now."

Dale Carnegie said in his book How to Win Friends and Influence People that the sweetest sound to a person is the sound of their name. And there is something there, there's something in that, I don't know if it's psychological or something from childhood. But saying someone's name to interject really does work. And I encourage all of your listeners today to just give it a go. Just try it, see what happens, email me afterwards, let me know how you got on.

Yeah, that's a challenge. Meetings for sure. And then I mentioned networking, but missing out on informal networking. I remember the times I used to bump into the CEO or someone, permanent secretary with a department in the lift or in the coffee area or something. Those moments don't happen in one's home. So again, as an introvert, we're not known to reach out to individuals to book 15 minutes, half an hour for a quick virtual coffee catch up, to again, kind of showcase one's skills, talents, et cetera. Yeah, being at home one does definitely miss out on that informal form of networking for sure.

David Pembroke:

In your experience, do you see that it is something that people, if they actively address it, that they can work through it, that they can acquire some of these skills? Or is it just a continual work on that if you're an introvert that it's something that you have and you're going to be dealing with it from the beginning of your career to the end?

Richard Etienne:

This is perfect timing, David, because last week I hosted a webinar which was on the topic of nature versus nurture. Are we wired this way? And spoiler alert, the answer is it's a bit of both. And there were twin studies that showed when twins grew up in different environments, they were both introverted, however, they displayed their introversion, their traits, in different ways based on their environment. I was not someone who was confident public speaking, I was not confident in front of people who I thought were incredibly powerful, famous, et cetera.

However, it was through gentle steps, expanding my comfort zone. So like public speaking for example, I just immediately was able to stand in front of 2,000 people. However, I did start recording myself and then post it on social media. Then I would go on meetings on my laptop and just look a little dot at the top of the screen. Then I would go into a studio with a small production crew. Then I would go into a much larger studio with again, production crew and a few people. It was a civil service live event perhaps, which I knew was also being broadcasted online.

And so that's me slowly expanding my comfort zone in order to allow me that comfort to be able to speak publicly. And this is what I really want for the individuals who come to my workshops or read my books, is to know and believe that they are capable of doing this as well. I often say that there are a few things sweeter than being reintroduced to oneself. I, after reading Quiet was like, "Oh my gosh, yeah, I am awesome. I have all of these wonderful characteristics and they are like quiet powers." And I'm part of a much larger network of individuals who I didn't know about before who also possess these strengths. And there are many who don't realise they do. So it's something that can be developed and it should be continually developed over time because there will be things that we will need to unlearn as time progresses.

10 years ago, as maybe time progresses if anybody was thinking about AI or gen AI at least 20 years ago, I don't know any Pilates teachers. Things will always move on. We have to learn new skills, new traits, new experiences. It's wonderful.

David Pembroke:

Inside your research around introversion, what does the formal research tell us about the percentage of people who associate with being introverts? How large a number is it?

Richard Etienne:

So according to Myers-Briggs, very purpose is to measure this. The latest figure, so just 2022 was 58% introverts. Yeah, 58% introverts. For people managers, this is something that I really am trying to encourage some interest because it's very likely that about half of your team will prefer introversion. And so it's important to understand how to make workplace culture and the way that you speak and handle team dynamics to be truly inclusive.

David Pembroke:

And with that, what is that advice to people who will be listening, who are leaders of teams who perhaps may not have thought about it before or not really addressed it in any particular way. And I'm thinking about myself right now.

Richard Etienne:

I think it's important. I appreciate you being frank about it, David, this is a very psychologically safe environment.

David Pembroke:

It's only the two of us, isn't it?

Richard Etienne:

The best place to start is actually understanding the difference between introversion and extroversion. I always say that it's how one gains or drains energy. It's not about being shy, it's not about being loud, it's not that at all. It's purely energy based. I think leaders should, in that case, for example, provide added time for reflection within meetings, for example, for expecting responses, especially within brainstorming sessions.

When I used to hear we had to attend a brainstorming session, I would slightly roll my eyes and be like, "Oh my God." Because that is all about pace, competition, who can get the best idea first? And that's totally the opposite of what introversion is about. So could you instead encourage people to write down their ideas on post-it notes, put them on the wall and then the chair or the team can address all of them equally. It's that, it's just providing added time for reflection.

And then another is offering multiple ways to contribute to a discussion or an idea. So yeah, you have written, could be one-to-one, it could be in smaller groups. And also recognising and celebrating introverted strengths. As I said before, we're not the best at self-promotion. We don't really do that in the best way possible. So I think it's important to acknowledge, find respectful ways to in meetings or in wider team conversation to ensure that accomplishments of your colleagues are being acknowledged, for sure.

David Pembroke:

Now, you mentioned before that you did work with Theresa May and that she was an introvert and she was also the prime minister of the United Kingdom. How did she, and what did you observe of her that enabled her to become more effective in such a high-profile role? And did you ever get the opportunity to talk to her about introversion?

Richard Etienne:

I was very fortunate to work with her. The reason why the opportunity became available is because the videographer for Number 10 Downing Street stepped down after something like 10 plus years or probably even more. He was there from Gordon Brown, David Cameron years. And so yeah, I felt very fortunate to be with Prime Minister at the time. And I learned very quickly the importance of precision, clarity and being fluid of thought. So very adaptable in one's thought, especially in high stakes communication. And I mean, what isn't high stake as a prime minister.

And I also gained insights into how visual storytelling was very impactful, amplifying messages and connecting with audiences at a deeper level. And that was my job, essentially as the videographer. But one thing I do remember as being with the PM, you're rubbing shoulders with a lot of other world leaders at events like the G20, I think that year was in Argentina, the UN General Assembly over in New York. So I got to see firsthand how world leaders had to balance their own communication style with the needs of a diverse audience. So it didn't matter if you were an introvert, you had to adapt your communication style to have this global perception of what a leader should look like or sound like in this type of extroverted way.

And I also recognise the value of creating space for quieter voices to contribute meaningfully. So for example, there was a roundtable at the UN General Assembly with Bill Gates present, but I remember there was this joke that there's only about 10 people around on this roundtable, handful of photographers, videographers. And this one photographer joked, "Oh," he said, "right now the average wealth of everyone in the room, including us, we're billionaires. This is pretty cool. Because that guy's here." I didn't feel like a billionaire, but that's another point.

The point is with Bill Gates present, and he's an introvert, due to his profile was given the space and time to consider his responses. I had never seen that before in spaces with world leaders. He was invited also to speak when he was quiet for some time. Those were some of the highlights or moments that I noticed when personality definitely played a role within Theresa May's tenure.

Did I get to speak to her about it? Not for as long as I would have liked, but we keep in touch and I'm very fortunate to say that. And yeah, you've inspired me to ask that question a bit more again actually next time we speak. So I'll do that for you, David, and let you know what she says.

David Pembroke:

Very good. So listen, where to from here for you, in terms of this work around introversion? It certainly feels like you've found an area that not only do you have a passion for, but an expertise. What's next?

Richard Etienne:

So with the Introvert Space, it is a company that I founded in 2021, but now I'm putting a lot more focus into, it was founded because of the challenges that I used to have as an introvert and the lack of resources for introverts in the workplace. So I wanted to create a psychologically safe place where introverts could share experiences, learn from one another, but then also to support educational institutions, employment professionals in learning how to best support introverts in their respective spaces.

So what's next? Let me just quickly talk about what I'm currently doing. So I think you touched on this before. I'm delivering workshops and master classes. I've been doing it for thousands of introverts and many leading organisations and government departments. I launched Black Introvert Week in 2021, which supports teachers and employers to better understand how to recognise and nurture the talents of black introverts. Because there's one thing to be a minority within the UK, but it's another thing to be a minority within a minority because data from ONS, Office of National Statistics, suggests that UK introverts make up to one third of the population. So it's the minority within the minority, and it's important to make sure those individuals are seen.

But yeah, going forward, launching a new series of workshops designed to help graduates transition into the workplace culture because many will have become accustomed to studying entirely from home during the pandemic. So that shift to hybrid work or even full-time office environments could feel particularly daunting, especially for introverts. I mean, yeah, probably for a lot of students, but especially for introverts. And finally, we've launched, within Introvert Space, we've launched the Toolkit for the Inclusive Management of Introverts or TIMI, because everyone loves an acronym and it's a practical guide for HR professionals and people managers to foster that inclusivity for all personality types.

David Pembroke:

So that is the best place for people to go and grab some free resources. The Introvert Space. And I imagine that the Introvert's Survival Guide, or large parts of it, are available for people if they want to go and explore a little bit further at the Introvert Space.

Richard Etienne:

Exactly. If you go to theintrovertspace.com, you'll have a full list of resources there available to download.

David Pembroke:

Very good. Well, listen, Richard, thank you so much for being so generous with your time and such a valuable conversation for a lot of people. I think that Myers-Briggs statistic of 58%, well, certainly that stuns me. I do reflect on my team and certainly we do have quite quieter people. But yeah, it's obviously something that people need to address. And I think in the planning of that engagement to try to grab the full value from your team consistently over time, you really do have to create the space and the opportunity and the practise that helps people to build their confidence because there is such value in everyone who's part of your team. So thanks so much for coming onto the programme.

Richard Etienne:

Thank you for having me, David. I really appreciate it. I hope all the listeners enjoyed as well.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, and good luck to you with the future work there because it sounds like Richard Etienne has a lot on his plate there and a big audience to serve. And thank you audience for coming back once again. What a great conversation with someone who is really a clever, intelligent, thoughtful person who's identified an area which really does need addressing. And then there's gone about assembling, I think what I like about it most is that it's actionable. There is so much of what Richard's just told us today that you can actually do. So if you are an

introvert, I'd be jumping onto the Introvert Space pretty well straight away to just pick up some of those tips and tricks.

And again, that Dale Carnegie tip around the sweetest sound is somebody's name. So when you do use people's names, and I discovered that when I was a kid as a paperboy, I used to go and sell newspapers to people in a hospital not far from my home. And I used to go and find out people's names and whenever I would go and say their name and visit them, you'd always get a sale. So there you go.

Listen, a rating or a review for the programme always is gratefully accepted by us because what it does is help us to be found. So wherever that you're listening to your podcast today, jump on and it doesn't take long. And just, if you could do that, I would be very grateful. Now you can find all of the latest information, updates, and insights from this podcast and other GovComms episodes on LinkedIn at the GovComms Institute. And certainly, I really did enjoy my conversation with Richard today, and we look forward to bringing you another great story from the world of government and public sector communications in the next fortnight. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke and it's bye for now.

Announcer:

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