

Can an Introvert Succeed at BD? (Yes, Here's How)

By Rich Friedman



Vanke Mall, Shenzhen, China. CallisonRTKL. ©CallisonRTKL / Chris Eden, edenphotography.us.

If you've heard me speak or have read my previous articles, you know that I'm a strong proponent of building a firmwide culture of business development (BD) by having everyone contribute in ways that are consistent with their career juncture, functional role, and BD acumen. It's been my experience over my 27 years in the A/E/C and environmental consulting industries that growing your BD skills means growing your career—and your firm.

Yet one of the most common questions that comes up is "That sounds good, but what if you're an introvert?"

The reality is that many A/E/C professionals, especially engineers and environmental scientists, are introverts by nature. At a recent class I taught for the Massachusetts chapter of the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC), 66 percent of the room identified themselves as such. While this group was there to learn BD skills, many introverted professionals feel reluctant or uncomfortable about taking on this role.

Firm leaders can be just as reluctant to put introverts into this role, focusing their efforts on more extroverted staff. In a *USA Today* poll, 65 percent of executives across all industries viewed introversion as a barrier to moving up the ladder. That's a view that can limit their firm's growth, limit the professional growth of their employees, and quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Introverts (and those who manage them), take heart. You really can learn to be more comfortable with—and even enjoy—BD activities. And you can become proficient without the pressure to be someone you're not. Here's how.

Isn't This a Case of "Square Peg, Round Hole"?

Actually, no it is not. I have met many introverts over the years who are successful at BD and, for this article, have spoken to several who are still learning. It's true that we often think of it in terms of activities like networking, speaking, and social media, which may not come as easily to introverts as to extroverts. However, BD is about strategy first, then tactics.

Also, introversion and extroversion are often misunderstood. One is not better than the other. Introverts need solitude and quiet to energize themselves, whereas extroverts gain energy and stimulation from being around people. It's also a continuum. The majority of us sit somewhere along the spectrum, not on the extreme edges.

I promise you that if you exercise your BD muscles regularly, they will develop.

Research shows that those who are more introverted can also be:

- More reserved about sharing their ideas and opinions, especially in groups
- Observers and listeners rather than talkers
- Focused and deliberate in their thinking and language
- Subject-matter experts who like to “go deep”
- More internally than externally motivated
- Curious people who enjoy learning
- More comfortable when they feel prepared
- Reluctant to draw attention to themselves

It may seem counterintuitive, but these traits can become BD strengths. For example, listening, curiosity, and solid preparation are key skills for identifying and understanding your clients’ and prospective clients’ needs. They’re also strong leadership skills.

If networking like an extrovert doesn’t work for you, there are other ways to build visibility, confidence, and relationships, such as focusing on one-to-one conversations and small groups. Here are more practices that work.

Business Development Tips for Introverts

- When attending events, obtain the attendance list in advance. This gives you time to see who you want to connect with and set up meetings in advance.
- Do your homework to identify conversation starters or connections. One simple way to do this is to check out your subject’s LinkedIn profile and

their organization’s website ahead of time. Or find things you have in common such as sports, hobbies, or parenting.

- Arrive early to networking venues. This gives you time to scan the nametags and/or attendee list (if you could not get it ahead of time). It’s also easier to join small groups as they form, instead of walking in when everyone is engaged in conversation.
- Develop your interpersonal comfort level by shifting your focus from what you’re going to say to what you’re curious about and what you are going to ask.
- Be genuine, especially when entering or exiting conversations at networking events. Using a line such as, “I’m going to get more food” can feel disingenuous. Instead, be direct and sincere, “I enjoyed talking with you. I’m going to meet more people.” (After all, it is a networking event!)
- Practice good self-care (nutrition, exercise, and sleep) and schedule alone time when attending an event. It’s perfectly fine to make time and space to recharge.
- Hone your skills where you are already comfortable, such as peer organizations, community groups, or clubs that you’re involved in. Here you can practice asking questions and talking about what you do and what your firm does in low-risk circumstances.
- Build your confidence and visibility by challenging yourself to ask more questions or share more of your ideas in meetings.
- Shift the spotlight from *you personally* to *your expertise* by focusing your social media use on sharing industry information; presenting an internal “lunch and learn;” or educating clients

through a presentation, workshop, or webinar.

- Check in with current clients and follow up with past clients. This is a great opportunity to practice networking and asking probing questions with people who already know and trust you (assuming they were pleased with your firm’s work).
- Join groups such as Toastmasters to develop your speaking skills. Standing in a room of strangers may sound terrifying, but as one environmental scientist I spoke with discovered, it’s a friendly and supportive environment where everyone is learning.
- Business development is a marathon, not a sprint. It’s not unheard of to land a new project in one conversation, but that is not the norm. Establish rapport, build credibility, and develop the chemistry and trust needed for a good working relationship.
- Be yourself. Identify outreach activities that work for you and build your confidence by seizing the opportunities to practice them.

Are you an introvert? If so, put these tips to work at your next opportunity. It might feel awkward at first, but start where you are as the occasions present themselves. I promise you that if you exercise your BD muscles regularly, they will develop.

Are you a leader who wants to help your introverts become stronger business developers? Share this article with them, offer them training, and start a firm-wide dialogue about what it truly takes to develop business using your natural strengths. ■