

What the Heck is an Ambivert?

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Every time I speak to a group of people, there are some in the crowd who've never heard the term "ambivert." I usually ask for a show of hands of the extroverts, then the introverts, then I ask if anyone else didn't vote or is a little confused.

If you're not sure which side of the continuum you belong on in this discussion, you may well be an ambivert. Ambiversion is a mixture of introverted and extroverted traits that makes identification as either one difficult. Introversion tends to be identified by higher sensitivity to outside stimulation, recharging in isolation or with one or a few close friends, and a general aversion to networking events. Extroversion thrives on outwardly stimulating environments; the more activity, the better. It gets energized in the presence of lots of people and things going on. Which side of this best describes you? Not sure, maybe ambiversion is your temperament.

Ambiverts at work are often marked by the following core traits:

- They tend to be even-keeled, neither overly positive nor overly negative, balancing healthy optimism and pessimism.
- They tend to move at an average pace and therefore work well with others on either extreme of fast or slow.
- They tend to have a balanced view of self, neither tending toward narcissism and pride nor self-criticism and self-loathing.

Ambiversion is an emerging subject of scientific study. We don't yet really understand the way in which the physiological and neurological differences we can see in brain scans of

introverts and extroverts operate in ambiverts. Do they alternate between these two neural paths and neurotransmitters? Is there a third path that uses different chemicals? A handful of studies are just beginning to suggest the possibility of this third way. These are the questions that remain for future research in the laboratory.

Though we may not understand the neuromechanics of ambiversion, we do know that people who identify with the middle of the introvert-extrovert continuum may well benefit from the ideal or optimal level of arousal, being not overly stimulated like introversion, not under stimulated like extroversion. Their pace would tend to be neither overly fast or overly slow, making it easier for them to connect with everyone else on the spectrum.

This may explain, in part, why Daniel Pink in *To Sell Is Human* recently suggested that ambiverts are best-suited for sales positions. It reminds me of the children's story, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Just like Goldi's experience in the bears' house, ambiverts may find themselves often in the "just right" place at the middle.

Because the pace and arousal levels of ambiversion represent the mid-point of those around them they bring some "just right" strengths to the team:

- They tend to have a great ability to relationally match others on the team, to alter their way of being toward them, improving communication and relationships.
- They may be well-equipped to work in startups which often by definition require a very wide-range of behavioral responses or wearing of hats.
- They are open to visionary thinking and grounded by realism, helping both extroverts and introverts to find the best solutions for the team.

As with any place on the continuum, there are also some fairly

common weaknesses that connect with ambiverts at work:

- They can sometimes be perceived as dispassionate, detached or ambivalent.
- They can seem too flexible or even unpredictable, seeming extroverted one minute and introverted the next.
- They can be perceived as inauthentic, leading from the middle and seeing both sides of many issues.

One of the reasons ambiversion is so difficult to characterize is that, in my estimation, there are eight distinct kinds of ambiverts. Each type blends one aspect of extroversion (either the task or people type) with one aspect of introversion (either the task or people type), creating a very diverse cast of ambiverted characters at work. This is one of the reasons I favor the use of the DISC assessment, a four-trait model, over many of the binary ways to measure introversion-extroversion. There is a great difference between a DC ambivert and an IS ambivert.

For example, Tim has a DC pattern on DISC. He's an ambivert who balances his tendency to get things done fast (extroversion) with his desire to see them done right (introversion). These two opposite forces operate inside him and moderate his pace. To observe him, he may seem more introverted due to the fact that task is what really drives him and brings out the energy.

Shellie is different. She has an IS pattern on DISC. She's an ambivert who balances her tendency to talk long and fast (extroversion) with her desire to go deeper, listening carefully to the details of others' stories. These two opposite forces inside her moderate her relational pace, making her more ambiverted. She can look like an introvert at times and an extrovert at others, but she is clearly more focused on relationships than tasks.

In reality, the right answer to the question isn't just what

the heck is an ambivert, but if I'm one, what kind of an ambivert am I?