

# INTROVERTS, INTERRUPTED: TIPS FOR PROTECTING THEIR TIME

*By Edward G. Brown*



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Introverts make up 25 percent to 40 percent of the population, so it's likely you have some in your company. Your environment needs to be one in which introverts can thrive, not just extroverts. That way, when it's time for teams to work together, the introverts will be well prepared and energized to contribute and participate.

In today's Interruption Culture, people's time is rarely their own. They are interrupted constantly by so-called "smart" devices and also by "Time Bandits" – co-workers, the boss, customers, and others who inadvertently steal their time by throwing them off task.

People – extroverts as well as introverts – tolerate interruptions because they think they must. They don't realize interruptions typically steal three to five hours a day from them. Extroverts are robbed, too, but it's worse for introverts, because they are acutely sensitive to external stimuli – sights, noises, smells, even moods, like tension in the air – that extroverts can shrug off or, often, not even notice. So introverts get interrupted more often, and by more things – even by the anticipation of an interruption.

Some who may have sensory issues that contribute to being introverts have trouble separating competing strands of sound – their own voice vs. background voices, or a speaker at the mic vs. a whispering pair nearby. On a phone call in the presence of conversing office mates, they hear all voices but struggle to concentrate on any of them. For those type or persons, there's no such thing as "background" music; it's all upfront. Trying to converse in its presence, they will hear a bit of lyric, then a snatch of what is being said to them, then a lyric, which can be profoundly irritating.

Because introverts draw energy from their interior life, external interruptions are more distressing and depleting for them. They are pulled away from their energy source. Interruptions are not benign for extroverts, of course – the stolen time can never be replaced – but because extroverts draw energy from other people, they weather their Time Bandits better from an emotional standpoint.

And finally, many introverts are notorious avoiders of conflict and anxious not to appear rude, so they are more likely to suffer than speak up and deter the interruption.

What steps can you take to make it easier for introverts to protect their time

**Know who's who.** As Yogi Berra said, "You can see a lot just by observing." Where do people choose to sit in meetings and restaurants? In general, extroverts choose a prominent seat, introverts a neutral seat or one where they can be observers, out of direct lines of communication. Who's the first to speak, as opposed to choosing their timing and words more deliberately? Who seems to love social events vs. those who come late and leave early? Who closes their office door more, or dons headphones more? Who readily accepts lunch invitations vs. who declines often and lunches alone?

**Cut both ends some slack.** Provide areas where extroverts can interact without distracting the introverts. If you find your extroverts calling a few more meetings than you might, fine, let them – that's how they work. If your introverts choose to work in channels with a lower "people quotient," that's fine, too. You'll get more email from your introverts, more visits and phone calls from your extroverts. As long as they are performing, let them do it their way.

**Assess the environment.** If you have an open office, is there constant music – if so, how loud and does it have lyrics? Some introverts are more distracted by lyrics than by instrumental. Are there frequent loudspeaker announcements? What about digital or TV screens – are they situated where they are almost impossible to ignore? Do elevators open directly into the open work space, so that comings and goings are "announced"?

What is the office etiquette regarding groups of people standing around talking within earshot of others who are concentrating on their own work? Are there protocols for interrupting people and/or announcing that someone wishes not to be disturbed?

**Teach them the skills for deterring Time Bandits.** This applies to extroverts, too, since people in general don't know how to accomplish this without being rude or looking like they can't handle their workload. But introverts, less inclined to push back, might need extra coaching and encouragement. Teach them how to "buy" their Time Lock by promising the Time Bandit their undivided attention later. Teach them arts and skills for broaching this touchy topic, like tone, etiquette, listening, body language and role playing.

**Give extra berth to Time Locking introverts.** People need a way to announce their Time Lock to any would-be interrupters. One team of outbound sales employees chose to do this with lights on their desks. Others use actual "Time Locking" signs. For your serious introverts, you might need to provide extra isolation and extra quiet. Their improved performance will make it worthwhile. [|dMBA|](#)



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