

Quietly

POWERFUL

Be heard, get ahead and make a difference without
feeling fake as an quieter professional woman





“

In a gentle way, you can
shake the world

- Mahatma Gandhi

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THE DOUBLE DISADVANTAGE OF BEING A QUIETER PROFESSIONAL WOMAN



Gender diversity has become a hot topic in organisations. Progress is slow, but the noise is getting louder. So many initiatives are under way within and outside organisations, such as conferences focused on gender diversity, women's networking and support groups, leadership development for women and support through male champions of change and hiring, promotion and flexible working policy and process changes.

While they are all great for promoting gender diversity more broadly, they don't always help us quiet, professional women.

"Faking it till you make it" is a piece of advice that's given to many women trying to advance in their careers. While useful from time to time, it doesn't work in the long run.

"Be more confident" is not so easy when the assumptions around how to look confident involves mostly extroverted behaviours, such as speaking up to get attention.

As quiet professional women, we are faced with a **double disadvantage**.

First, as a woman, it's challenging enough to get heard and get ahead. It's clear in the statistics.

- While an improvement, women still only make up 23.6% of ASX200 company directors.¹
- In male-dominated problem solving groups such as boards, committees and legislatures, men speak 75% more than women.²

It is an unfortunate reality where words such as "manel", male only panels³, "mansplaining" men explaining in a patronising way, "manterrupting", men interrupting women have been invented out of frustration.

Many people have researched, written on and continue to work on the issue of gender diversity in the workplace. It is a complex issue with many challenges in making progress. Some organisations still do not take the issue seriously and unconscious biases are still rife in organisations.

1. Abc.com.au news 16/06/2016, <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-16/number-of-women-on-asx-200-company-boards-increasing/7517156>

2. Soraya Chemaly, Huffington Post, 30/08/2014, <http://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/5544203>

3. Australian Financial Review 10/05/2016, <http://www.afr.com/leadership/how-to-avoid-a-manel-panel-pledge-signee-darren-hill-offers-3-ways-to-do-it-20160510-gorw0e>

Second, as a quieter person or an introvert, it sometimes feels impossible or exhausting to be heard. Fortunately, people like Susan Cain (author of *Quiet*¹ and TED speaker²) have made introversion more visible and acceptable. Unfortunately, there are still stigmas and stereotypes about introversion that hold us back. Have you ever noticed how biased workplaces are in favour of extroverts? Think about:

- Move to open plan offices – worse, flexi-desking
- Brainstorming as a way of generating ideas
- Offsites and workshops
- Back to back meetings with little time to think
- Team building events that require large groups of people to socialise
- Networking events and the importance placed on them
- Action orientation – we don't hear about reflection orientation
- Valuing thinking on your feet
- Valuing looking confident, sometimes more than the substance behind the look

Have you ever heard “Oh, she's so introverted and quiet!” as a compliment? I haven't.

Being a quiet woman has additional challenges. Broad stereotypes of women don't always fit us, such as being more emotional, more talkative and social than men. So when organisations address gender diversity, our unique challenges are not always addressed.

1. *Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking*, Susan Cain, 2012

2. Susan Cain's TED talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0KYU2j0TM4>





Do you feel:

- It's impossible to get your views heard, either because you can't get into the 'noisy' conversation, people just speak over you or they just don't listen?
- Like simply giving up, resort to staying in the background and remain invisible?
- Like you do a lot of work in the background that no one notices?
- You get put into a 'box' or subtly put down as an introvert (eg. "She's quite introverted so she won't like to present in front of groups")?
- You put yourself in a 'box' (eg. "It's just not me, I will never be good at ...")?
- You wish you had more extroverted traits like your friends and colleagues?
- You know you should do the 'networking thing' but find it too exhausting?
- You're supposed to be 'social' as a woman (another stereotype) but sometimes (or often) you just feel like being on your own?
- Guilty, odd or not good enough for not wanting to socialise?
- Like it's not worth contributing your ideas if people won't listen?
- Like you get overlooked for opportunities because of your style, even though you have the substance and capabilities?
- You have to show up with a fake 'power' or extrovert persona – dressed up, make up, jewelry, high heels, speaking louder, faster, expressively or entertaining others?
- You're exhausted or somewhat hollow, having had to fake it?
- People will be or have been surprised or shocked when you tell them you are an introvert?
- People don't really get to know and appreciate you, the real you?
- You enjoy being social to an extent but crave being alone?

How many of these resonate with you? I have felt most of them myself. It can be highly frustrating and sometimes downright depressing. What's worse, we often internalise these feelings, become self-critical and damage our sense of self-worth.

THE PROBLEM WITH HOW WE DEAL WITH THE DISADVANTAGES

Most workplaces favour men, masculine approaches and extroversion, the more senior the position. Because men, masculine approaches and extroversion are more valued, the opposite – women, feminine approaches and introversion – are not considered valuable. If you have heard some comments such as the ones below, you know what I mean:

- “They’re introverted so I have to help them to talk to each other.”
- “She’s overly sensitive, she won’t be able to handle ...”
- “It’s hard to get to know her, she’s quite introverted.”
- “Oh really? Surely you’re not an introvert.” (Meaning, there’s something wrong if you are an introvert)
- “I’m lucky I’m an extrovert.” (Meaning, we’re unlucky we’re an introvert)
- “She’s quite shy – she’s an introvert.” (Introverts are not necessarily shy)
- “She may be good at the soft skills but will she be tough enough?”

Sometimes they are disguised as light hearted jokes. We laugh, but there is a part of us that feels put down. Many of these comments/jokes are stereotypes, too. Not true for everyone and not true all the time.

Introversion is not a disorder and femininity does not equal weak.

Unfortunately, the extroverted, masculine dominant environments repeats messages as if introversion is a disorder to be corrected and femininity is weak and needs fixing or protecting.

The big problem is that with all the reinforcing messages out there, we internalise them – often without realising – and somehow feel inferior. As quieter professional women, this internalisation is dangerous and damaging. We end up either hiding these qualities that are deemed as inferior to get ahead or hide behind roles that keep us invisible, believing that we are not good enough.

This does not mean that we should stay as we are and not develop ourselves and evolve. The problem is when we work on ourselves so much that we marginalise the precious qualities that make us uniquely who we are. Some of these qualities are also exactly what we need more of in the world right now.

BECOMING QUIETLY POWERFUL

Whether you want to get recognised and advance your career or you want to make a positive difference in the world, as quieter professional women, we want to do so without diminishing our quieter powers. Quieter professional women can be powerful leaders in their chosen field because of their quieter nature, not in spite of it. Emerging research shows that feminine and introvert qualities can be highly effective in leadership, contrary to mainstream views and stereotypes¹.

We have talents and powers that others don't have and we owe it to ourselves and the people we care about to come out of the shadows and make a difference in our own unique way. Where are you on the path to becoming quietly powerful?

LEVELS OF IMPACT AS A QUIETER PROFESSIONAL WOMAN

	YOU FEEL	OTHER SEE YOU AS	IMPACT
VALUED	Powerful	Leader	Significant
	Recognised	Influencer	Increasing
UNDERVALUED	Heard	Contributor	Some
	Misunderstood	Confusing	Mixed
NOT VALUED	Invisible	Nobody	None

1. "An Overview Perception of Introverted Leaders" Kuofie, Stephens-Craig, Dool, International Journal of Global Business, June 2015

"Why women are more effective leaders than men" Bob Sherwin, Zenger Folkman, Business Insider 2014

INVISIBLE

Quieter women can easily remain invisible. If you've ever been told you're a "great support", "quiet achiever" or "low maintenance", there's a risk that you are becoming invisible and you limit your potential to have impact, contribute your talents and gifts or be appreciated for them.

MISUNDERSTOOD

Quieter women can be misunderstood for a range of things. We may be seen as aloof and antisocial as we may not smile and talk enough. People may see us as disengaged, indifferent, not passionate enough, lack confidence, too shy, or worse, not have anything to contribute. As women already have unconscious biases to counter, these misunderstandings can be major blockers.

HEARD

Some of us make a big effort to speak up, find ways to contribute and be understood. People start to notice the depth of insights we offer and listen when we speak. This is progress from being misunderstood. Unfortunately, it may only happen from time to time, or it may be at a cost to us as we change ourselves to fit in. This is where many successful quieter women find themselves and are exhausted or feel somewhat hollow as their true selves are not allowed to shine.

RECOGNISED

Some quieter women break through the barriers with skillful use of their natural qualities and learned behaviours. When we are recognised, people begin to appreciate us for our natural qualities and invite us to bring more of it. For example, people may deliberately allow some time to reflect with pre-reading before workshops or ask us to go away and think about problems before making any decisions. People may create space for you to speak and ensure that others listen. We may verbally hear people comment on the value you bring because of your unique style and qualities.

POWERFUL

Do you know of quieter women who are super powerful? Think of the powerful yet non-aggressive leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. How about J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series? Or Audrey Hepburn? They don't have to say much, they have a presence and they get attention.

There is something powerful about quieter women who are comfortable in their quietness and can simply "be". A few spiritual teachers I have come across are like that as well. They got people's attention as soon as they entered a room and had profound effects on people, simply with their presence and energy. It's about the presence, not the volume.

FROM INVISIBLE TO POWERFUL

The development and transition from being invisible to powerful is like the ugly duckling who doesn't quite belong to the duck family but has unique beauty and talents that are yet to shine. With appreciation of the unique talents along with growth and maturity, quiet professional women have so much to give and achieve.



THE KEY TO DEVELOPING OUR QUIET POWER IS TO APPRECIATE AND ADAPT



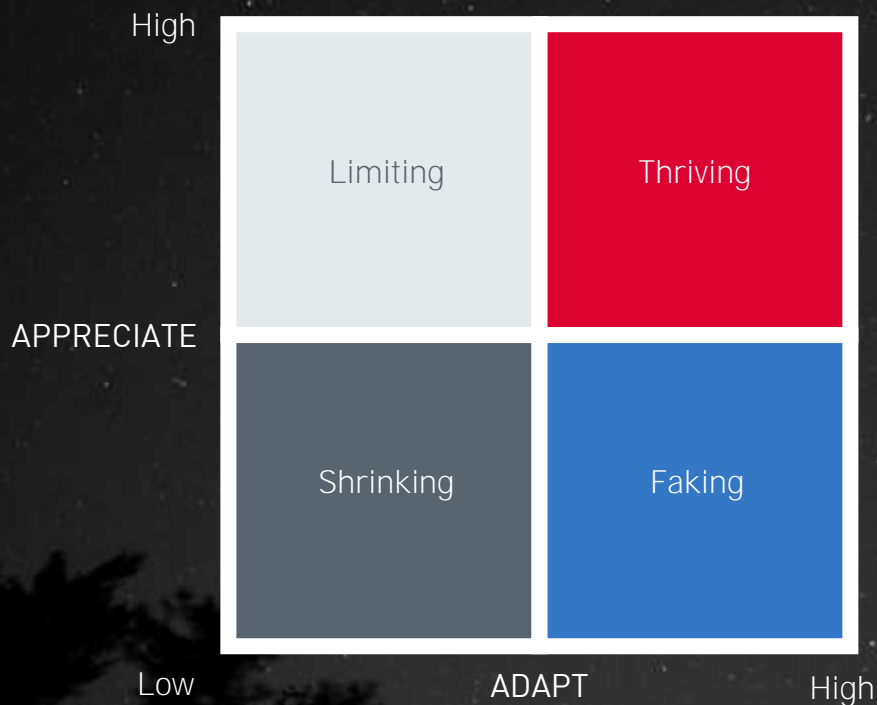
All too often women get sent to leadership development programs where the focus is on looking confident, networking and speaking up. Often in an extrovert friendly setting. For quieter women, it can result in feeling inferior to the extroverted women who enjoy the networking and naturally have higher energy. There is a better approach to growing into the quietly powerful leader – that is, to work first on appreciating our natural qualities and expand our skillsets and behavioural flexibility, by adapting, not replacing.

APPRECIATE

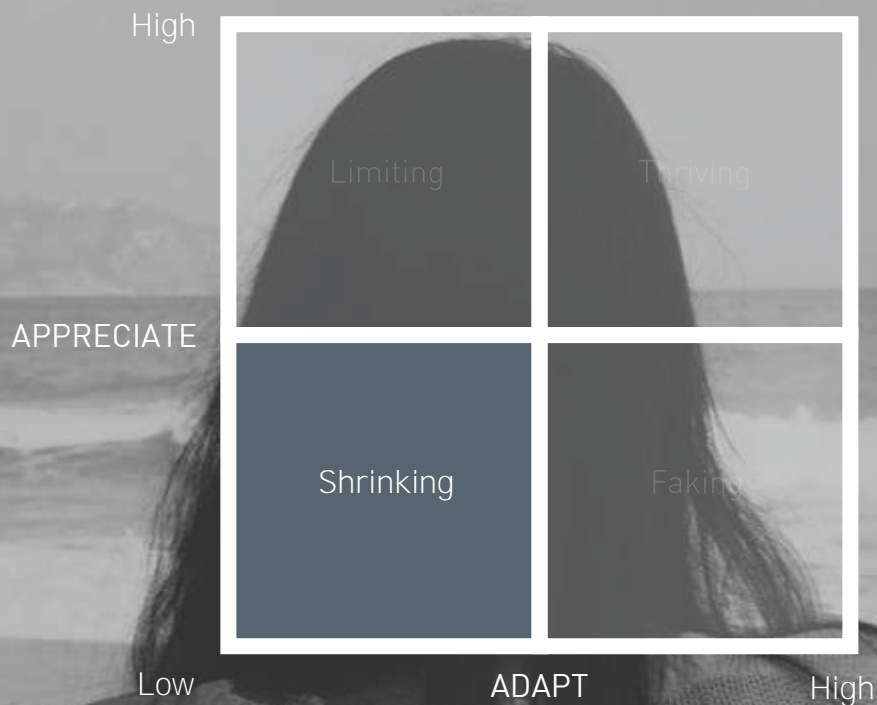
First, to accept, appreciate and harness the powers of being quiet. This is different to using our introversion as an excuse for being powerless. “It’s just how I am” is not a useful thought as it keeps us victim to our predispositions and the stereotypes that go with it. Harnessing our quiet power requires us to deeply understand, reframe and leverage the qualities with positive intent.

ADAPT

Second, to adapt and grow, so you have a larger repertoire of ways of being. The key is to not to replace or marginalise our precious qualities which others may deem as not so valuable. It is the combination of our predispositions and the additional qualities and skills we develop that enables us to be quietly powerful. We need to add behaviours and skills, adjust our work and environment or adapt to them.



WE SHRINK WHEN WE DON'T APPRECIATE OR ADAPT



The most disempowering place to be is to feel inferior about ourselves and be too afraid to make any changes. We hold ourselves back from opportunities or speaking up. We hide when we can. We become afraid of trying or learning anything new. We shrink.

Some hallmarks of being stuck in the shrinking box is when we hear ourselves say:

“I’ve never been good at ...”

“I wish I was more like ...”

“I’m happy to be in the background...”

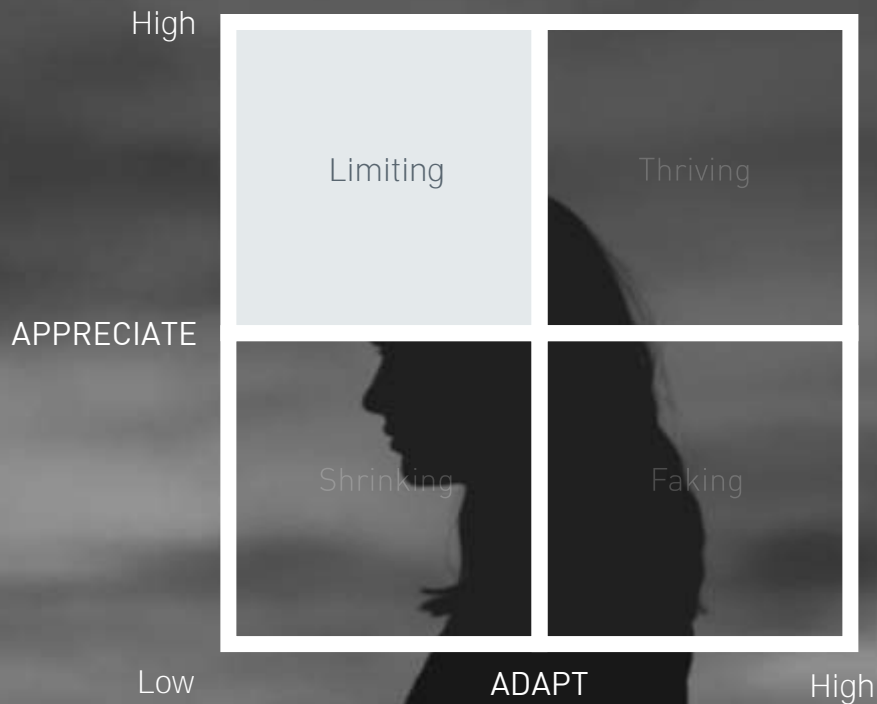
“It’s just how I am...”

Talented professionals stay small and in the background by putting themselves down and remaining in their comfort zones. So much talent is wasted and these women miss the opportunity to find and flourish in a profession they were born to be in.

Tips to get you started:

1. Notice the subtle devaluing of introversion that goes on – similarly to devaluing of women – through comments, set up of situations, how people treat you and in the media. Consciously tell yourself that these comments, set ups and treatments are about them, not you.
2. Find the quieter qualities within you that you appreciate and thank yourself for them regularly.
3. Work on small adjustments you can make to be more powerful. This could be asking for information before an event, preparing so you can speak up, smiling more, getting better at asking good questions etc.

WE LIMIT OURSELVES WHEN WE APPRECIATE AND NOT ADAPT



Some of us have decided to stick with the cards we're dealt with. We have come to peace with who we are and worry less about what others think of us. We become comfortable with saying no to social outings and telling people we need time to think and reflect. We may even tell our managers upfront about how to get to best out of us, based on a solid understanding of our natural tendencies.

This level of awareness and acceptance of our predispositions are healthy and empowering. Where it becomes limiting is when we use our predispositions as excuses. We might say:

"I'd rather focus on using my strengths."

"That's just not me. I'm sticking with what I am good at / what I know."

"I prefer to be in the background and support."

What we miss out on is the opportunity to grow and expand our repertoire. We limit ourselves to our comfort zones, what we are good at, what we know and where we feel in control.

While the strengths based movement has benefits of appreciating what we have, it is limiting if we stopped there and not build on what we have.

Tips to get you started:

1. Notice how much you are getting in the way of yourself. To keep yourself safe and comfortable, you may be stuck in a fixed mindset² – that you are not going to grow and evolve.
2. Reflect on times when you learned something new and the sense of achievement you felt.
3. Reflect on what contribution you wish to make in the workplace and beyond. Challenge yourself to make small adjustments that would allow you to have greater impact in the areas you want to make a difference.

2. See Dr Carol Dweck's *Mindsets* for more on fixed vs growth mindsets

WE FEEL FAKE WHEN WE ADAPT WITHOUT APPRECIATING



Some of us courageously challenge ourselves, regularly stepping outside of our comfort zones. We invest in personal and professional development. We read books and seek feedback and coaching from colleagues and coaches.

Unfortunately, well intentioned colleagues, teachers and coaches try to replace some of our 'weaknesses' with skills and behaviours that are demonstrated by people who are perceived to be successful. Especially in the business world, they are skewed towards masculine and extroverted behaviours. Being assertive, speaking up, looking confident, being decisive, networking effectively, speaking with conviction and passion etc.

While these skills and behaviours are indeed necessary skills and behaviours to succeed in masculine and extrovert preferred environments, we risk devaluing the precious qualities that are natural to us. When we constantly put on a brave face and behave this way, it can come across as fake or 'trying too hard' and people don't connect with our realness.

Some of us have mastered these skills and behaviours, to the extent that people think we are actually extroverted. If we deeply listen to ourselves, though, we know we are faking it and it feels somewhat hollow. Like we have neglected parts of ourselves.

Tips to get you started:

1. Notice how you feel when you keep adapting yourself. Does it ever feel you're leaving a part of you behind?
2. Find the quieter qualities within – your unique, natural strengths which have been hidden – that you appreciate and thank yourself for them regularly. Notice when you or others devalue them and consciously put them aside.
3. Find small opportunities to use and show your quieter qualities. It may feel awkward to being with, so start small and build on it.

WE THRIVE WHEN WE APPRECIATE AND ADAPT



When we have a good understanding and appreciation of the our natural qualities we have a better foundation to grow and evolve. Those learned skills and behaviours start to get integrated rather than replace or marginalise our natural qualities.

It is like we've taken good care at building the foundations of our house. With a solid foundation, we can build different types of houses and even add extensions. Without a solid foundation, we are limited in what we can build, or end up with an unstable house.

With an appreciation of our natural qualities, we can harness their power and build on it such that we thrive on both the natural and learned abilities. We can get comfortable with what we see as our weaknesses and harness the positive essence in them as well.

The learning process becomes more enjoyable, as it's an addition and integration exercise. We become braver at experimenting and learning new skills because we know we can fall back on what we have already if they don't work.

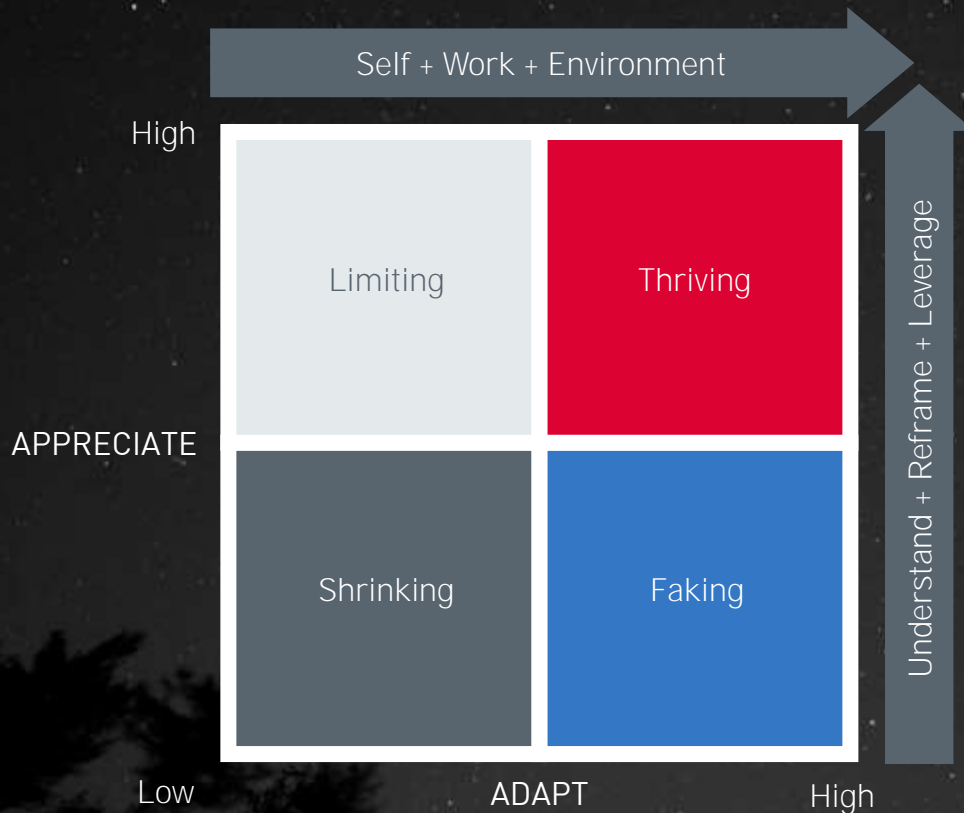
The process of appreciating and harnessing our natural qualities as well as growing and developing is ongoing. This dual process strengthens us and they start to feel like complimentary forces. The more we learn, the more we appreciate what we have. The more we appreciate what we have, the more we are able to stretch ourselves. We thrive and become more and more quietly powerful.

First and foremost, quieter women need to accept and appreciate their quiet and feminine qualities. As Laurie Helgoe asks in her book, *Introvert Power*¹, "Introverts have an advantage of an inward perspective... how much respect do you give your introverted preferences?"

Without the appreciation, her investment in personal and professional development will either not stick or feel inauthentic.

1. Laurie Helgoe, *Introvert Power: Why your inner life is your hidden strength*, 2013

GROWING QUIETLY POWERFUL BY CONSCIOUSLY APPRECIATING AND ADAPTING



We can grow quietly powerful by consciously growing our appreciation for our natural qualities and adapting ourselves, our work and environment so we can be at our best.

UNDERSTAND, REFRAME AND LEVERAGE TO APPRECIATE

The path to truly appreciating our natural qualities require deepening our understanding of our qualities as well as how we marginalise them based on mainstream stereotypes about personality types. We need to stop internalising the put downs. We can then reframe how we perceive our qualities such that what may seem to be our weakness can in fact be our 'super powers'. Having uncovered our unique powers we can cultivate them as our advantages to be used in our work and beyond.

ADAPT OURSELVES, OUR WORK AND ENVIRONMENT

Expanding our skillsets and behavioural flexibility is much more powerful when it's an addition to our natural qualities. The adapting process is even more enjoyable and worthwhile when we are doing it for our work that is meaningful. It helps to find ways to adapt our work so our efforts to become quietly powerful is worth our while. Finally, when we appreciate our natural qualities, we can more easily request to adapt the environment – such as asking for information in advance, creating quiet spaces or time slots.

IMAGINE...

As you grow as a quietly powerful woman, what could you achieve? What difference would you make to others?

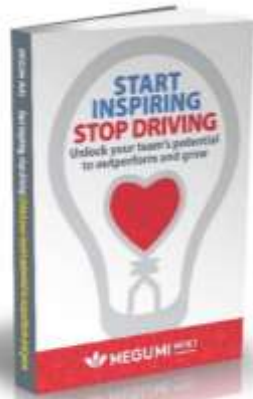
When the world has more quietly powerful women as leaders and a broader range of leadership styles are embraced, how would workplaces change? How might the world be a better place for the next generation?

Will you join us?

Getting comfortable with the various aspects of ourselves and evolving ourselves can take effort, time and care. It can also be exciting and rewarding as we start to notice the transformation within ourselves and the positive impact on others. Being quietly powerful give us greater ability to contribute our unique talents, make a difference to people and make our lives more meaningful and fulfilling. The world needs more quiet, feminine powers right now.

It is my sincere wish that together we can shake the world gently to make a difference.

About Megumi



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Megumi is an author, speaker and facilitator on leadership and culture. She has over 20 years as an internal and external consultant to large corporations including National Australia Bank, ANZ Bank and Accenture as well as smaller for-profit, government and non-profit organisations. Her experience ranges from organisational development focusing on leadership and culture to strategy and business performance analysis. Her book, *Start Inspiring, Stop Driving: Unlock your team's potential to outperform and grow* and the concepts within have helped numerous leaders find practical ways to tap into the talents within their teams and organisations.

Having faced challenges as a quieter, Japanese female consultant, Megumi has invested heavily in her personal and professional development over the last 15 years. She has undertaken and continues to work on her personal transformation with experts in the field to connect with the powers within. She is passionate about empowering people and groups of people on the 'outer' to build their powers to have a voice. Her passion is underpinned by her belief that these quieter and marginalised voices are critical for organisations to succeed in a changing, volatile world and for solving the big challenges in the world today.

To find out more about the journey to being quietly powerful, please contact me or connect with me on LinkedIn/Twitter to read articles and hear about future events.

Thank you

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