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Megumi Miki

# Quietly Powerful

How your quiet nature is your hidden leadership strength



## Praise for *Quietly Powerful*

‘This is a quietly powerful book ... the book itself walks Megumi’s quietly powerful talk. It is comfortable, present and purposeful – providing authentic and thoughtful observations and collaborating with the reader to empower and celebrate their quietly powerful selves.’

**Dr Steve Hodgkinson**, CIO, Business Technology and Information Management, Corporate Services at Department of Health and Human Services

‘Megumi Miki has written a must-read guide that flips our thinking about how powerful quietness can be in organisations. Packed with valuable advice drawn from personal experiences and interviews, this book is essential reading for those who tend to be quieter (and they are not only introverts) or those who want to leverage talent to get the most from quieter employees.’

**Siobhan McHale**, EGM People, Culture & Change at DuluxGroup and author of *The Insider’s Guide to Culture Change*

‘We live in a world that glorifies overconfidence and celebrates those who are unaware of their limitations. But there’s a better way, as this timely book shows: stop overlooking humble, quiet, altruistic people for leadership roles, and we will all win.’

**Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic**, psychologist, entrepreneur, TED speaker and author of 10 books including *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?* and *The Talent Delusion*

‘Megumi challenges our thinking to see how our quietness can be a leadership strength. She has put words to what I was subconsciously doing over many years in leadership positions. She shares important messages for organisations wishing to lift the quality of their leadership and embrace diversity in leadership styles by expanding their beliefs about good leadership. A quietly

powerful approach to leadership allows everyone to shine, not just the leader.’

**Ruth Picker**, Partner at Ernst & Young, Asia Pacific Risk Management Lead and Songwriter

‘Megumi brilliantly captures some very important and challenging ideas in organisational life with a central premise that people can be quiet while contributing powerfully and significantly. Through her indepth exploration, case studies and personal sharing, Megumi brings forward the contributions quietly powerfully people make and how, through our cultural bias, we do not give credit to those who are due this recognition. This book challenges how easily we overlook these important “leaders” and encourages us to re-examine who we value in organisations. This book is an important read for all leaders who’d like to optimise their hidden talent.’

**Stephen Schuitevoerder**, PhD, International consultant and facilitator in individual and systemic change, Board Chair of the Process Work Institute

‘I truly believe the future needs all of us – loud, quiet, young, old. It also requires the best of us. Megumi has added something special to the inclusiveness and diversity agenda with *Quietly Powerful*.’

**Matt Church**, professional speaker, voted Top 10 Conference Speakers Globally, Founder and Chairman of Thought Leader Business School

‘Having worked with a quietly powerful leader whom I admire greatly, I support Megumi’s view that we need more of this kind of leader. As an introverted leader, I love the practical strategies which Megumi offers for quiet professionals to tap into their leadership strengths without feeling like they have to pretend to be someone they’re not.’

**Michelle Cornish**, Senior Executive Coach, Learning Group Facilitator, Former Senior Executive Service Band 2 leader with a number of Commonwealth Government Departments

‘Megumi is the consummate quietly powerful leader. Her book beautifully encapsulates her thought leadership in the topic. Peppered with her own insights and case studies, this book reassures and reaffirms how quiet leaders can use their unique qualities to lead with compassion and strength. In a world full of chaos, noise and complexity, this is a timely book reminding us not to overlook the power and possibility of quiet.’

**Dr Jenny Brockis**, Lifestyle Physician, professional speaker and author specialising in nurturing thriving teams and leaders

‘As a quiet Asian leader, there is so much in Megumi’s writing and insights that speaks to me gently, reassuringly and powerfully. She’s been there before, herself, and lived a shared journey as a quietly powerful leader in a world that exalts extroversion and the extravagant. Megumi’s strategies and guidance have now given power to new voices that are in dialogue with my own inner critics!’

**Richard Foy**, Chief Archivist, Archives New Zealand

‘*Quietly Powerful* explores the complexities of how people can become quiet and hidden, beyond introversion. It highlights the value of quietness, solitude and quieter approaches to leadership and shares the benefits of and practical strategies for quiet professionals to thrive in their careers while remaining authentic. A must-read for all to either develop their own quietly powerful leadership or that of their quiet team members.’

**Katrina Webb**, OAM, Paralympic Gold Medallist, international speaker, Leadership and Personal Mastery Consultant

‘In a world where those who speak the loudest are heard over those who might have something more constructive to say, Megumi and her book are a breath of fresh air. Having led projects for over 25 years, I’ve come across many people who dominate some poorly run project meetings, almost just for the sake of it. Unfortunately, this can come at a cost. That cost is not hearing

from those quieter people; those who think and reflect before speaking. This book can help those people whose voices deserve to be heard, yet are not quite sure how to go about it.'

**Mark Lowy**, Past President, Project Management Institute Melbourne Chapter; Principal, Guava Project Consulting, sessional university lecturer, board advisor

'A fascinating, insightful and practical book on the potential and power of quiet professionals. *Quietly Powerful* reframes the conventional view of "quiet" and challenges outdated perceptions of effective leadership. An essential read for anyone who has ever felt unseen, discounted, or bypassed due to their quieter nature, and for those not-so-quiet among us who are interested in discovering a better way of working and succeeding in our complex world.'

**Diana Renner**, co-founder of the Uncharted Leadership Institute, award-winning co-author of *Not Knowing: the art of turning uncertainty* and *Not Doing: the art of effortless action*.

'As an introverted CEO, I am definitely in the minority. I have been fortunate in my career to have mentors and champions who have recognised my potential, despite it being what Megumi would call quiet and hidden. I would have loved to have had this book 25 years ago, when I was first navigating the corporate world. For any introverts, this is critical reading on how to move from disempowered to quietly powerful without losing yourself. However, this book goes beyond introversion, and is equally applicable to extroverts who feel hidden. And, finally, anyone in a leadership position needs this book to understand the quieter half of their workforce and to take advantage of this diversity of thinking.'

**Peter Cook**, CEO, Thought Leaders

First published in 2020 by Major Street Publishing Pty Ltd  
PO Box 106, Highett, Vic. 3190  
E: info@majorstreet.com.au W: majorstreet.com.au M: +61 421 707 983

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN: 978-0-6485159-5-1

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Cover design by Simone Geary  
Internal design by Production Works  
Printed in Australia by Ovato, an Accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004  
Environmental Management System Printer.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Introduction

## **The quiet girl who didn't fit in**

I was only five years old when my family moved to Sydney from Japan. It was April and I had just finished kindergarten. While I was born in Melbourne during my father's first transfer to Australia, we'd returned to Japan when I was 18 months old, and the only English words I knew were 'yes', 'no' and 'toilet'.

I entered the wire gates of Turramurra Public School, holding my mother's hand, walking slightly behind her. It felt like a very big school with a very big playground, especially compared to kindergarten in Japan. We walked into a classroom and were greeted by the teacher. Lots of blue, green and brown eyes looked on as the teacher said something I didn't understand and pointed to two girls who were smiling at me. I didn't know what to say, but my mother left and the two girls came over and took my hand.

I didn't need to understand English to know what the kids meant when they made facial expressions and said, 'Eew, what's that?' while pointing to the rice balls in my lunchbox. That afternoon I told my mother that I didn't want Japanese rice balls for lunch anymore. It was long before the days of sushi shops in every suburb. My daughter has had rice balls in her lunchbox since she started school eight years ago and she receives looks of envy from her friends!

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A few weeks later, a boy came running over to me to pull the ends of his eyes up and down and yell out ‘Chinese, Japanese!’ I was the only Asian girl in my year level, so it was difficult to hide. It was the first time in my life that I realised I was not the same as everyone else – that I didn’t fit in. While I didn’t have a terrible time at that school, it was something of a relief to move to the Sydney Japanese International School two years later. In hindsight, years 3 and 4 at the Sydney Japanese International School were the only school years that I can say I really enjoyed.

We moved back to Kobe, Japan, when I started year 5. Surprisingly, it was just as difficult, if not more so, in Japan, particularly when I reached high school.

In year 5, I’d joined a swimming club in Kobe to train competitively, and at my peak I was swimming ten times a week. With that much training in a highly chlorinated pool, my hair started turning a reddish brown, and became lighter and lighter over time. My hair is naturally wavy, too, and the damage from the chlorine made it frizzy. In a school full of Japanese kids with black hair, I really stood out! High school rules were strict, and colouring, bleaching and perming your hair was not permitted. (There were also rules on the length of your uniform skirt and your hairstyle: it was the collectivist Japanese culture at its worst.) The ‘naughty’ kids used to deliberately bleach their hair to rebel against the school rules. So, you can imagine what the teachers thought of me!

Sure enough, I got pulled aside by the homeroom teacher in year 7. He told me off for bleaching my hair and, when I tried to explain that it was from swimming, he got angry. That night, my mother wrote a note to the teacher to explain the situation, and he stopped hassling me, but I felt like he was watching me all the time. I really had to blend in to avoid getting into trouble.

There was also the time when the popular girls in the class backed me into a corner in the schoolyard. They told me that I was a show-off for standing out with my hair, for speaking fluent Australian English in the English classes and for getting

good marks in all the core subjects. After that, I started telling white lies about my marks, saying that they were around average, and playing dumb in the English classes, trying to speak with a Japanese-American accent. I stopped swimming altogether by the time I was 14. It was safer for me to be quiet and hidden.

Over the course of my childhood, my family continued moving around a lot, and in total I went to eight different schools in three countries. I became a master at blending in. Being quiet was a survival mechanism; it was also my natural tendency.

I am an introvert and have always been the quiet one. In Japanese, I was always told that I was *otonashii* – ‘mild and meek’. If you look at the Japanese characters, however, they actually say ‘adult-like’, with connections to being honest, warm and rounded. I was praised for being calm, doing things at my own pace and handling pressure well – so being *otonashii* didn’t feel like a bad thing.

Staying quiet and hidden was safe and felt natural. Standing out made life difficult.

### **Putting quietness to the side**

After university in Adelaide, Australia, getting a job at a global management consulting firm was a shock to the system. As a twenty-something consultant, I was thrown in front of clients and expected to have intelligent conversations about their business. I had to look like I knew what I was doing, and I constantly worried about not knowing enough and being found out. I was expected to speak up in the presence of outspoken, articulate senior leaders – mostly white men – and to be considered for promotion to manager level, we had to make a presentation to a group of senior leaders and peers who knew more about the topic than we did. On top of that, we socialised regularly with our peer group, with an unwritten rule about working hard and playing hard.

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To get through this, I had to find a way to look more polished and confident, fast. So, I worked long hours to be as well prepared as possible. I did professional development in areas such as presentation skills and relationship management. I learned to project my voice, to watch my ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’, how I stood, how I used my hands and where I looked. And I put on my suit and high heels, hoping I looked the part.

I stayed six years, learned a lot and completed some excellent and not-so-great projects, and burned out at the age of 29. I lasted six years, only because I was still in my twenties!

A few years later, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to make a big change in careers, with a job as a facilitator and consultant for an organisation-wide cultural transformation program at ANZ Bank, doing leadership and culture work. It was a dream job in terms of what it allowed me to learn, my passion for the topics and the feeling of making a positive difference.

However, it required me to stand in front of groups to present and facilitate most of the time. I had a difficult time taking off my ‘professional’ mask due to all the presentation techniques I’d learned, and regularly got told to ‘be myself’ and bring more energy. Other times I’d be told to ‘be more confident’ and develop my ‘executive presence’. The feedback made me more anxious and self-conscious, which made it even more difficult to be myself.

Being on the road and in front of groups so much exhausted me, but I pushed on, telling myself and others that it was my dream job and I wanted to do it well. There were as many downs as ups through this period, but I learned a lot. I have been in the leadership and culture field for over 18 years now. It still gives me a buzz when I see pennies dropping for people, when the so-called ‘soft’ or ‘intangible’ work we do leads to positive, concrete outcomes. About six years ago, however, I had my own penny-dropping moment, and it changed how I see myself and started shaping what I’m about to share with you in this book.

## The penny drops

I was co-facilitating a leadership workshop with a colleague who has the opposite style to me – gregarious, entertaining and loud. He started the workshop and had the group laughing within the first two minutes. I enjoyed his energy until it got closer to my part of the workshop.

As I watched people laughing, the little voice started in my head: ‘Gosh, I don’t get people laughing so much’, ‘I’m going to seem boring compared with him’, ‘What if they disengage?’ and ‘How am I going to keep the energy up?’ The silly thing is, I had been facilitating for over ten years by then and I’d had plenty of positive feedback in the past. I didn’t need to worry, but I did.

I stood up and facilitated my part of the workshop until morning tea. Nothing went wrong. People were engaged and ready to take on the rest of the day’s learning. At morning tea, however, I felt exhausted. A colleague I had worked with for a few years was participating in the workshop, and she walked over to me during the break. She said, ‘Megumi, what’s going on? You don’t seem your usual self.’ I thought to myself, *Oh no, so it was visible to the participants that I had all this internal turmoil?* I told my colleague about my inner voice and how it prevented me from being fully present.

She looked me in the eye and said, ‘Megumi, stop comparing yourself with your co-facilitator! You bring something very different to him and that’s what makes you valuable. If you keep trying to be like him or keep comparing yourself, we don’t get to see the best of you.’

That five-minute interaction was an absolute gem! I got myself back into being present and we had a fantastic workshop. People commented on how much they valued the contrasting styles of the two of us, and that they got a lot out of both.

In retrospect, there had been many hints before this that I needed to appreciate myself and my unique contribution. I was

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sometimes told not to try so hard to be like someone else or to be overly energetic. I only accepted this intellectually, however, and I didn't know how to fully embrace my own style.

After that penny-dropping moment, though, I began really understanding and appreciating the unique approaches I brought to my work. It was the seed for *Quietly Powerful*.

I started experimenting with reconnecting with my quiet nature and not hiding it. One such experiment was with a client who wanted to hold an all-team strategy review workshop with about 40 people. I designed the workshop so that there were many opportunities for pair, small-group and whole-group discussion. Pre-reading materials as well as questions were sent so that people could reflect before the workshop, should they prefer to do so. And I facilitated the workshop so that most of the talking was done by the client team.

The CEO who commissioned the work gave me feedback afterwards. 'That was a fantastic workshop. People were really engaged; great ideas came out of it and I could see the team taking ownership of the strategy. It was as if you were invisible: you guided us when there was a need, but you had us doing the work, and that made a big difference.'

As I continued to experiment, I kept receiving similar comments about my style, not only in facilitation but also presentations and consulting. The consistent themes that kept coming through were that clients appreciated that I listened and understood their needs, that I ensured that everyone was involved, that my understated style made everyone comfortable to engage, and that my observation skills allowed me to notice and engage the quieter people.

The successes helped me to believe that quietness is valuable and that more people should appreciate and leverage it. And so, in August 2016, I anxiously sent out my first email to a group of contacts, asking whether they or their colleagues would be interested in a breakfast to talk about the challenges of being a quiet professional woman.

## What is Quietly Powerful?

During its humble beginnings, my business Quietly Powerful was an experiment to see if quieter professional women could benefit from hearing my story. I hosted small breakfasts to share my learnings about why the workplace is challenging for quieter professionals, what holds us back and what we can do about it. The breakfasts kept selling out, so I did many more breakfasts and some learning programs.

When I had reached about 200 women, I noticed that it wasn't just introvert women who were attending. In fact, a few of the women who joined my coaching programs were extroverts. Some of these women were struggling with speaking up and being recognised; others were looking for ways to access their quiet powers.

Two major events convinced me that Quietly Powerful was more than an experiment. The first was a talk at the Vic ICT for Women, a member-based organisation that champions women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) in the Australian state of Victoria. The event sold out a few days before the registration close date, which had not happened before, and on the day, more than 100 people packed the room. Positive feedback comments included, 'one of the best ... events I've attended, great topic and speaker' and 'Sorry you had to turn people down, perhaps allow standing room?'

Soon after, men started to approach me and ask why I was 'excluding' them. If my experience as a quieter professional woman was relevant and useful to men, I was happy to share. This led to the second major talk at Ernst & Young, sponsored by both the Asia Professionals Network and Network of Winning Women. Both men and women were invited, and the organisers had chairs and catering organised for about 50 to 70 people, which was their usual turnout. As we opened the doors to the event, though, people just kept coming in; by the time I started the talk, rows of

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people were standing by the walls and windows, as there were not enough seats. We had about 150 attendees.

By this time, Quietly Powerful had become a movement with the aim of shifting collective beliefs about what good leadership looks, sounds and feels like. I had started researching Quietly Powerful leaders – interviewing people who had successfully progressed in leadership careers using their quieter nature. This research is still continuing, and these interviews have solidified my belief that Quietly Powerful leadership is not only important for giving opportunities to people who feel quietly disempowered, it is important for improving the quality of leadership in organisations and in society. We need Quietly Powerful leaders now more than ever.

A shift in our beliefs about leadership will allow talented quiet professionals to view their quiet nature as a strength and to succeed in their own way, rather than seeing it as a disadvantage. It will also enhance diversity in leadership and help organisations to stop wasting their hidden talent – those quiet achievers that get either overlooked or taken advantage of without recognition. Ultimately, valuing and developing Quietly Powerful leaders and instilling their attributes in not-so-quiet leaders, as well, will address the leadership gap (poor-quality leadership) we are experiencing today.

Quietly Powerful initially drew attention from professionals who are quiet, but now senior organisational leaders, human resources, leadership and talent, diversity and inclusion professionals are seeing how this approach can improve leadership capabilities, gender and cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and coaching capabilities.

### **How to use this book**

This book challenges quiet professionals to reframe the story they tell themselves about their leadership potential and encourages



organisations to expand their ideas about what good leadership looks, sounds and feels like.

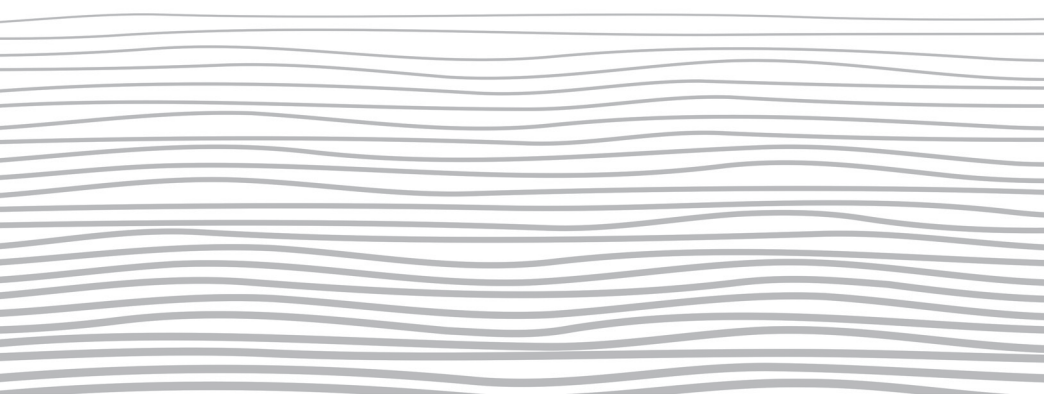
Here's a short description of what you will gain from the various chapters:

- **Part I** (Chapters 1–3) describes the organisational and individual cost of undervaluing our quiet nature and quiet approaches to leadership. Most quiet professionals would recognise these challenges, but organisations and not-so-quiet individuals may be surprised to discover the high price of undervaluing their quiet nature.
- **Part II** (Chapters 4–7) offers the reasons why individuals may remain quiet and hidden. It goes beyond introversion, which is often what people talk about. You will find out that being quiet and hidden is a lot more complex and requires further exploration.
- **Part III** (Chapters 8–11) explores why organisations overlook and underutilise their quiet talent. It is an invitation to them to challenge their cognitive and structural biases and to update their thinking on the type of leadership they need and how to get the most out of quiet talent.
- **Part IV** (Chapters 12–17) describes what Quietly Powerful leaders are like, and the quiet superpowers that set them apart as leaders and distinguish them from simply being quiet leaders. Chapters 15 to 17 give individuals the strategies to move from being quietly disempowered to Quietly Powerful.
- **Part V** (Chapters 18–19) invites not-so-quiet people and organisations to also reap the benefits of Quietly Powerful.

My hope is that whether you are quiet or not-so-quiet, you will start to see the power of your quiet nature, so you can use it for your benefit and in your leadership. You might find that you need it more than you realise.

Part I

The  
quiet  
wasteland



**WE** MAY NOT realise it, but there are costs to overlooking quietness and quiet professionals. The first is the obvious waste of talented quiet achievers who feel misunderstood or disempowered. In addition, we may be failing to notice real leaders who could reduce the range of leadership problems we are experiencing today and develop into the leaders we need tomorrow. By not valuing quietness enough, we may also be wasting an opportunity to address serious workplace and societal issues.

Part I will outline the individual, organisational and societal costs of undervaluing quietness and quiet professionals.

## Chapter 1

# The hidden waste

While I had my own struggles as a quiet Japanese professional woman, I encountered others who were struggling in similar ways, and sometimes worse.

A colleague, who I will call Sally here, worked in a large company as the ‘go-to person’ for three general managers (GMs) while the company was going through a transformation. The GMs were trying to engage over 100 senior managers to lead the transformation.

When I started to work with her as a change consultant, I saw Sally in action with the GMs as well as the 100-plus senior managers. In her quiet and amiable way, she influenced the way in which the senior managers were engaged and pushed back on the GMs’ ideas when she thought they wouldn’t work. She presented logical reasons, and the GMs would generally take her advice. The senior managers treated her like a friendly peer, but when Sally asked them to do something, they would do what she asked. And when they had concerns or questions, Sally was usually the first person they spoke to. From what I could see, she was the ultimate influencer and leader with ‘soft power’, as Yamini Naidu

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terms it in her book *Power Play*. However, Sally saw herself as a support person to the GMs, someone who did the work in the background.

After I finished my work with Sally, her organisation assessed 200 or so leaders at her level, via an assessment day. The activities included group problem-solving while being observed by assessors, and presenting after 30 minutes' preparation. After the assessment day, each person was debriefed by one of the assessors. I heard that Sally was in tears after the debrief, as she was told that she did not have leadership potential. She went on sabbatical soon after this experience.

Sally was overlooked and misunderstood due to her quieter nature and approach. I was so disappointed to hear this. How could a person's leadership potential be assessed in one day when the role of leadership requires more than a day's work? How could they discount the influential leadership she had demonstrated over months and years?

I have since heard many other stories of talented professionals being overlooked for this reason.

In the early days of *Quietly Powerful*, I asked over 200 professional women to respond to a survey which asked them whether they felt being quiet was a disadvantage. I remember getting a shock to see that 91 per cent of respondents stated that they often or sometimes felt that they had to behave like an extrovert to get ahead in their careers. In our public breakfast conversations, there were a staggering number of people who felt frustrated that their high-quality work and achievements were overlooked.

The other common experience of quiet professionals is exhaustion from being in noisy work environments where they have to be vocal to be heard or taken seriously. People feel like they have to 'fake it till they make it'. Women are regularly told to do this, and so are quieter men.

One of the depressing aspects of my early days of *Quietly Powerful* was hearing how quiet professionals had to hide their

natural styles and unique talents, as they felt that their quiet nature would hold them back. It was as if they saw their quieter nature as a disadvantage; some even felt that there must be something wrong with them.

This is not only disappointing, but concerning, as a professional in the field of leadership and culture. Firstly, real talent is being wasted because of the bias toward style against substance. Secondly, we are compromising on leadership quality. The best leaders are not being selected due to an outdated mental model of what good leadership looks, sounds and feels like.

### **Quietness is seen as a weakness**

When someone describes a person as ‘a bit quiet’, what words come to mind?

I’ve asked this question of hundreds of people in my talks, and the words that commonly come up include ‘reserved’, ‘shy’, ‘not confident’, ‘aloof’, ‘antisocial’, ‘doesn’t contribute’, ‘passive’ and ‘meek’. Then a few will share words such as ‘considered’, ‘thoughtful’, ‘good listener’, ‘reflective’, ‘deep thinker’ and ‘observant’.

The second group of words – which are more complimentary – usually come up after a few of the first group of words have been stated. It is almost as if people remember, ‘Oh, that’s right, quiet people can be valuable’.

In any case, the word ‘powerful’ never comes up. Sometimes, in fact, people ask me, ‘How can one be quiet *and* powerful?’ ‘Quietly powerful’ is not an idea that is in our collective mindset – yet.

A recruiter once told me of a candidate she put forward to a client who had successfully managed multi-million-dollar projects and was perfect for the role. The candidate completed a psychometric test which indicated he was more on the introvert and agreeable side of the scale, whereupon the hiring manager said he didn’t want a ‘pussy cat’ and decided on another person. The client

hiring manager assumed that an introverted and agreeable leader would be too 'soft' and that he wouldn't deliver.

Another senior manager was unsuccessful in obtaining a senior executive role despite being told that he delivered the best strategy presentation out of all the candidates. The feedback from the recruiter who was on the interview panel included, 'Can he step up and go to war?', 'He is too polite' and 'His team is too happy'. It was implied that you need to be dominating and less polite and supportive to be in a senior position.

People may not say this, but some do assume that quieter professionals are not leadership material, or not great speakers, not influential or not engaging. Sometimes quiet professionals are also not seen as confident, which can lead to being perceived as incompetent. What a tragedy, when creative, observant, deep thinkers can be seen like this just because they don't open their mouths as much as others.

### **Quietness is misunderstood**

It's a myth that quiet people are all aloof, not very social and uninterested in other people.

Quiet people don't necessarily dislike people. Many of the Quietly Powerful leaders I interviewed shared how much they enjoy working with people and seeing them grow and thrive. Jane Bird, a quietly spoken senior leader in technology, is one of these. Jane is no geek. Her passion for technology comes from thinking about what technology enables people to do differently. She thrives when working with a team.

Jane shared her experience with me of taking over a team that was rolling out an internally developed software program into supermarkets. Quite a few people had come and gone in the role, and by the time Jane was asked, it was a position no one wanted. She described what it was like:

## The hidden waste

*I thought, Well, it can't get any worse than this, right? We set about [the work] with the people that had lived through that, the ones that survived, [who had] true resilience and passion for the environment... [W]e created something magnificent. Both in terms of culture and automation, and the relationship with our business customer flourished as a result.*

Jane loved taking on the role, especially with a team which was so diverse. She was the only Australian-born person: the rest were from New Zealand, China, Vietnam, Jersey, England, Delhi. She and members of this team still catch up regularly, 15 years later.

Susan Allen, former Executive General Manager at RACV, never thought of herself as a leader until she was appointed to her first leadership role and realised how much she enjoyed developing people, and helping them and the organisation to achieve outcomes that she could not on her own. She said:

*Even though I'm an introvert, I do like spending time with people and finding out about them and their motivations... What do they want to do? What are their goals, and how can I help them get there?*

Being quiet doesn't mean that people are disengaged, either. It may be that they are very engaged and listening actively. They could be thinking deeply about the issues being discussed.

Another myth is that quiet people are not suited to public speaking.

Public speaking is scary for many people, not just quiet professionals. However, it's a skill that can be developed through training and practice. Lisa Evans, Director of Speaking Savvy, has coached many people in public speaking – and she herself is an introvert and shy when not on stage. In her experience, quiet professionals can be excellent speakers. She said:

*I've discovered in my work that introverts and quieter leaders make excellent public speakers. That's because a lot of the success*



## Quietly Powerful

*around speaking is in the preparation. Those of us who are quieter – we don't mind staying home and doing all that work. We're [also] very audience-centric, and we really are in tune with those who are in our audience and really understand ... that speaking is all about sharing a message. It's not about me: it's about the audience and what gifts I can share with them through the power of a message. I meet plenty of fellow professional speakers who are introverts, who are quiet, and who absolutely shine on stage.*

It's also a myth that you can't influence others if you're quiet.

Most of us associate influence with persuasive speech. If you look closely at people who have influence in the workplace, however, you may notice that there are other approaches to influencing. Paul Boasman, Executive, Financial Strategy & Performance at Telstra, has found that he's able to influence more effectively by speaking with people one at a time or in smaller groups than by speaking to a larger group. His strategy is to share ideas, listen to concerns, ask for their views on what would work, and then incorporate their ideas before taking a concept to the larger group. In most cases, Paul found that this collaborative approach resulted in an endorsement by the time the idea got to the group, rather than him having to persuade the group at that point.

Other examples of influence involve action more than words. Greta Thunberg is a quiet Swedish teenager who decided to organise a school strike to make the point that we need to take more action on the climate crisis. She started protesting outside the Swedish Parliament on her own in August 2018, and by November 2018 a global 'school strike for climate' movement had formed. On 15 March 2019, an estimated 1.4 million students in 112 countries around the world joined her call to strike and protest. Greta has since become a vocal climate activist, speaking in a range of public forums including the World Economic Forum.

In an interview, the young activist said, 'We introverts can make our voices heard'. Greta was inspired by Rosa Parks, an

American activist in the civil rights movement – also a quiet introvert, and best known for her pivotal role in the Montgomery bus boycott. Parks rejected the bus driver's order to relinquish her seat in the 'coloured section' to a white passenger, after the whites-only section was filled. Both Greta Thunberg and Rosa Parks used deliberate action as their influencing tool.

Yamini Naidu, business storyteller, speaker and author, outlines different types of influence tools in her book *Power Play: Game changing influence strategies for leaders*. Yamini shared her thoughts about influencing with me:

*I often talk about that evolution of influence. So 'hard power' is 'yell and tell'. Hard power, command and control, is very much about rules, about following the rules, and we know now, living in a disruptive world, that just doesn't work anymore. Soft power, which is about collaborating, connecting, consulting, is very much about relationships... if hard power is about rules, soft power is about relationships.*

A related myth is that quiet people cannot sell ideas, services, products or a cause.

If you ask people whether they like being 'sold' an idea, services or a product, most people will say they cringe at the pushy sales approach. The quieter approach to selling involves more listening and less pushing. It's less about the sale, self-promotion or self-interest, and more about helping people with what they're buying, whether it's a product, service or a cause.

Matthew Pollard writes in his book, *The Introvert's Edge: How the quiet and shy can outsell anyone*:

*Introverts make the best salespeople... when armed with a plan that lets them be their authentic selves. You've been sold a lie: you have to be pushy to be successful in sales. But that's simply not true. You don't have to have the gift-of-the-gab.*

Quiet professionals and leaders are highly effective in many activities but are overlooked due to the stereotypes and myth that they are not. Part of the reason is that they're not 'in your face': they go about their business quietly and don't go telling people how wonderful they are.

### **Lost in the self-promotion battleground**

One of the challenges for quiet professionals in the workplace is the emphasis on self-promotion and the notion that 'Your work does not speak for itself'.

I still remember the first time I wrote an article to post on LinkedIn and to send to my very small newsletter list. I enjoyed the thinking and writing part, then when it was time to post it, I froze. I read and re-read the article ten times. I sent it to my husband and a few friends asking for feedback. After incorporating the feedback, I re-read and edited it a few more times. I worried about what comments I might receive. Before I knew it, days had passed and I still hadn't posted the article. Friday afternoon arrived, and I told myself that if I didn't post it that week, I would never do it. My heart was in my mouth as I placed the mouse cursor on the 'Publish' button. It was 4:49 pm; I pressed the button and I closed my eyes. When I opened them, nothing bad had happened! Millions of people post articles every day. While I knew that, my first time felt as if I was about to jump out of a plane!

As an independent consultant, speaker and author, I am regularly reminded of the need to promote myself and my business. However, whenever I think about promoting myself, my business or my programs, I find myself attacked by a barrage of inner criticisms such as 'You're showing off', 'Who are you to promote how good you are?' and 'What do you know that others don't know?' The only way I get over this is to tell myself that I am sharing useful information to help people, and that if I don't share, I'm

letting people down. It has gotten easier over time, but I still find that I have to put my brain into a different gear to do marketing and promotion work. It feels very different to when I am doing what I love: the creative work of thinking and writing.

So, when people tell me that they loathe self-promotion, I totally get it. It feels like attention-seeking and that feels foreign and uncomfortable for quiet professionals. Being told to self-promote regularly is like being told to play your least favourite music because it's good for you. You can do it if you have to, reluctantly, but it doesn't *feel* like it's good for you, and you probably want to run away from it. The worst part is that the music will stay in your head, even if you do move away!

Quiet professionals are regularly told to be more visible, speak up more and work on their personal brand. Many women are sent to women's leadership programs to improve in these areas and given tips on looking confident and powerful. Quiet professionals often find this frustrating, and at times feel at a loss when their talent, good work and solid results are not recognised and others who are good self-promoters do get recognised. It feels like organisations value style over substance. (More on this issue in Part III of the book.)

Often, quiet professionals give up before they even begin, by saying that they're 'not good at self-promoting'. Most of these people have not been given the strategies or tools to help them to be visible without feeling like they are bragging or being fake.

How much talent is wasted in your organisation? In the environment of talent shortage and needing better quality leadership, organisations which find and develop this hidden talent will have an advantage over others.