

The Introverted Safety Professional A SURVIVAL GUIDE TO NETWORKING

By Jaime K. Ingalls

Over the past 20 years, I have had many roles: student, professional and instructor of higher education. During this time, I have worked closely with people from various backgrounds.

I have participated in activities such as speaking to large and small groups, routinely meeting new people in unfamiliar environments, making cold calls, working through confrontational situations and socializing with strangers. None of these roles and activities is out of the ordinary for a safety professional, but they all can be emotionally stressful for an introverted one.

An introvert is an individual who prefers minimally stimulating environments. Unlike their extroverted counterparts, those who identify as introverts tend to feel drained after socializing and may regain their energy by spending time alone. I am an introverted safety professional who has found success in the field by embracing this trait. Throughout my career, I have relied on some coping skills that help me when working through some of the traditional introverted characteristics that can present challenges to engaging in social situations. Three factors that have helped me get through these tough moments are 1) preparation; 2) support community; and 3) personal reflection time.

Preparation

Making sure that I adequately prepare for any situation that I am about to face has been a fundamental part of my career. One of the biggest challenges that the introvert faces is being overwhelmed when participating in a new activity. Being prepared for the space and people you may encounter is an easy task that can be completed prior to any event. Whenever possible, make sure to visit the location before an event. This gives you a chance to become familiar with how to get there, identify safe locations where you can take a break and recover, and gives you a visual representation to help practice any social interactions that may occur. It is also important to study the backgrounds of the individuals you will contact. This gives you some topics for conversation that can reduce awkward silences that may occur.

Support Community

Another important part of introverted success is having a supportive community that is accessible at all times. It does not have to be large, but it must be quality. The individuals who you include in your support community must be aware of your needs up front. They can be professional or personal connections that you have made, and may represent coworkers, colleagues in the profession, or friends and family members. You can find support in a variety of locations, so do not limit yourself in opportunities.

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Personal Reflection Time

Being in a situation that requires an introvert to be an active and engaged part of the conversation or performing a leadership role is emotionally exhausting. As an introvert, one thing that is essential to the recharging of my emotional battery is to make sure I schedule personal reflection time. It could be a 10-minute break alone in the office, car, bathroom or hotel room, but those moments of solace are critical to reducing anxiety and recentering yourself. They provide a chance to reflect on the events that have taken place, your reactions and behaviors, and prepare for the next set of events. It is imperative that you recognize the necessity of this

time, and that you are clear to others that you cannot overlook it.

How It Worked for Me at the ASSP Professional Development Conference

One group that has provided me with the best support system in my professional life has been ASSP's Women in Safety Excellence (WISE) Common Interest Group. Several years ago, I took a risk and attended an ASSP Professional Development Conference. At this event, I wandered into the WISE Lounge to check it out. It was a quiet place that provided an inviting atmosphere. Of course, I sat down at a table by myself, but was quickly approached by a kind face with a big smile. From that point on, I was introduced to more WISE members over the years, adding to an amazing network of professional and personal contacts who are there when I need support. Whether it is a workplace question or looking for a companion to a safety function, these folks are always there for me.

Over time, my involvement in this network has grown. I became a volunteer leader on the WISE board, have participated in the group's PPE fashion show, engage in leadership at the local level, and get excited about attending large conferences. Preparing myself for the WISE events (e.g., lounge, retreat, networking night out), building a strong support community, and scheduling personal reflection time (e.g., time alone at the hotel, taking a walk, sitting in a quiet place) have made my conference trips a success. They have also provided me with the skills to work through other professional and personal times that are stressful to the introvert in me. **PSJ**

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