



The Invisible String of Leadership: Lessons from a Kite and a Quiet Read

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Submitted: 09/06/2025

<https://doi.org/10.51595/INJHSR22/021>

Published: 20/06/2025

Abstract

In this reflective piece, Priyasha, a public health practitioner, draws inspiration from a quiet afternoon of kite flying with her son in Seattle's Magnuson Park to illuminate the often-overlooked leadership strengths of introverts in global health. Just as a kite soars through invisible winds guided by a steady hand, introverted leaders influence their teams through calm presence, strategic listening, and deep, authentic connection rather than loud commands or overt charisma. In challenging times and skeptical environments, their perseverance, patience, and quiet innovation help sustain momentum and reignite collective purpose. Echoing themes from Kahnweiler's *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength*, the reflection highlights how introverted leaders embody resilience and strategic influence, making them essential forces in global health leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, introverted leader, perseverance, presence, practice, resilience

Yesterday, I found myself in a familiar, yet always magical, moment: flying a kite with my son. It was his very first time attempting to fly a kite, and his initial excitement was palpable. He clutched the colorful fabric, eyes wide with anticipation. But as soon as the first gust of wind failed to lift the kite, his excitement deflated, and he braced himself for failure. He wouldn't even touch the string, wouldn't try again. He simply walked away and sat quietly on the grass, observing from a distance. And then, when the wind was finally on my side, the kite soared, high and steady. He slowly came to my side and finally participated. There was no going back.



Figure 1: Priyasha and her son's initial attempt at kite flying in Magnuson Park, Seattle, WA

As we watched the colorful kite dance against the endless blue, pulled by an invisible string, a profound connection formed in my mind. Just days before, I'd turned the final page of Jennifer B. Kahnweiler's insightful book¹, and suddenly, the soaring kite became a powerful, living metaphor for the quiet, yet deeply impactful, leadership I've come to appreciate.

Effective leadership doesn't always involve loud or dramatic actions. Watching the quiet beauty of kite flying, I saw a connection to introverted leaders who guide complex systems through quiet, strategic decisions. The kite moves with invisible winds, while the person flying it stays calm and still without shouting commands or performing big moves. This image, seemingly distant from the boardrooms and field operations of my profession, holds a profound parallel for introverted leaders. It got me thinking about how much of effective leadership, especially in complex fields like global health, isn't about the loudest voice or the most visible presence. It's often about those

¹ Kahnweiler, J. (2018). *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength. Second Edition*. United States: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

invisible strings. Their leadership is subtle, connections thoughtful – a deep understanding that they naturally cultivate and a masterful manipulation of an invisible string, guiding something complex and beautiful against the forces of nature.

In a world that often equates leadership with extroversion and constant outward projection, the unique strengths of the introvert leader are frequently overlooked. Yet, in the nuanced and interconnected realm of global health, these very traits can be the most potent. In an impromptu classroom with my son, he unknowingly taught me crucial lessons of leadership, resilience and perseverance. He became my most unexpected teacher.

The Power of Preparation: Anchoring Our Vision

My son, eager as always, wanted to get the kite up fast. But as any kite flyer knows, a little preparation goes a long way. Checking the wind, untangling the lines, finding the perfect spot – these quiet steps ensure a smooth ascent. This echoed a key theme from Kahnweiler's book: Preparation is an introvert's superpower. She emphasizes that our natural inclination to think deeply and plan meticulously before engaging is not a weakness but a distinct advantage.

In global health, where every decision can have far-reaching consequences, that deep dive into data, understanding the cultural nuances, and anticipating potential challenges isn't just helpful – it's crucial. It means our strategies are well-grounded, resilient, and ready to navigate whatever unexpected winds may come. My son's quick retreat highlighted for me how crucial this internal preparation is – not just for the task, but for the resilience needed to face setbacks.

The Art of Perseverance: Luring Back the Reluctant Leader

My son, initially so keen, faced immediate disappointment. His disengagement afterward was a challenge. He was excited by the idea of the kite not the efforts. So, I flew it. For short periods, repeatedly, trying to lure him back. And then, when the kite soared high, his eyes lit up again! His excitement was back, but still from a distance. He would not touch the string, wouldn't take control. He just enjoyed the spectacle I created.

Even with the kite soaring, there were moments I needed to "push" – a gentle tug to lift it higher, or a subtle release to steady it in a gust. This moment underscores the subtle "Push" that Kahnweiler speaks of for introverted leaders. A leader often needs to step outside of our comfort zones to create the conditions for success and show what is possible, even when others are reluctant to take the lead. It is about consistently leading by example.



Picture 2: My son finally takes the rein in his hands
Photo Credit: Priyasha Maharjan

In global health, this perseverance means continuing to advocate and innovate in difficult time and different context, to demonstrate success even when facing skepticism or fatigue, slowly building buy-in and reigniting passion in our teams and partners. This deliberate approach, combined with an introvert's natural tendency to think before speaking, often results in communication that is more concise, impactful, and persuasive. In the high-stakes dialogues of global health, a few well-chosen words, delivered with purpose, can carry immense weight.

Strategic Presence and Listening: Feeling the Currents

Once the kite was up, my focus narrowed. I wasn't distracted by the chatter around us. I was keenly attuned to the subtle tugs on the string, the shifts in the breeze, responding to cues that others might miss. This is the Presence Kahnweiler speaks of, and it deeply resonated with me. For introvert leaders, being truly present often translates into exceptional listening.

I recall reading in a Harvard Business Review piece how introverted leaders often empower proactive teams because they genuinely listen to, and act upon, their team's ideas rather than dominating conversations. In global health, this translates to truly hearing the voices of communities, understanding frontline challenges, and building interventions that genuinely meet needs. For my son, enjoying the kite from afar, my role was to maintain that presence, to keep the possibility alive, to show that even when he wouldn't engage with the string, the flight was still possible. It's about feeling those unseen currents, just like with the kite, to guide effectively.

The Invisible String of Influence: Building Trust

Interestingly, despite his reluctance to control the kite, my son found a way to engage. He would proudly showcase this majestic flying kite to people who would pass by, and tease other children in the park, pointing out their kites were smaller! This was humorous, yet telling, moment. Even when not directly involved in the effort, he found a way to assert himself, to feel connected to the larger narrative of kite flying. After some time of connecting to the kite, internalizing its ownership and trusting the flying process, my son finally took control of the kite. He was ecstatic when the kite kept soaring in his command.

This made me reflect on how introverted leaders build influence – not through overt displays of power, but through authentic, deep connections. Kahnweiler beautifully articulates how introverts often prioritize depth over breadth in their relationships. It's about cultivating meaningful one-on-one interactions that foster lasting trust, even when the path to engagement isn't straightforward.

In the collaborative world of global health, where partnerships are the bedrock of all progress, this ability to forge genuine, trusting relationships is invaluable. It's not about being the loudest voice in the room, but about building a network of strong, reliable connections where empathy and understanding form the foundation of collective action, even with those who might initially resist or playfully challenge the norms.

The Cycle of Perseverance: Learning from Every Landing

When that kite eventually came down, my son was happy to enjoy the descent but not interested in winding up the string – the less glamorous, more meticulous part of the process. This final piece of the puzzle cemented the lesson of perseverance and practice. Leadership, like kite flying, isn't about the soaring moments; it is also about the sustained effort, the willingness to pick up the pieces, and the methodological winding of the string for the next attempt.

Kahnweiler's framework includes "Practice" reinforcing new, impactful behaviors. For me, this means consistently demonstrating the value of persistence, even when it feels like the effort is unappreciated or the "string winding" feels tedious. It is about understanding that influence is built not just in triumphs but in the quiet, consistent work of preparing for the next flight.

Watching my son, flying that kite, and reflecting on "The Introverted Leader," was a powerful, firsthand lesson in leadership. It reaffirmed that effective leadership isn't confined to a single personality type. It's about leveraging our unique strengths. For introverted leaders, our power often lies in our quiet observation, our patience, our thoughtful approach, and our ability to build deep, authentic connections, and crucially, embodying resilience and perseverance even when others disengage. Like the invisible string guiding the kite, our influence may not always be seen, but it's undoubtedly felt, steering us towards impactful change in our field of work and beyond.

Author Profile



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Priyasha is a public health practitioner passionate about strengthening primary healthcare systems to reduce health disparities. Her work focuses on using qualitative research and human-centered design to implement, evaluate, and scale interventions that improve health outcomes for communities that have been historically marginalized—particularly in maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition. Priyasha has experience working across cultures and sectors, and is deeply committed to culturally responsive practices, inclusive collaboration, and ongoing reflection to advance equity and long-term impact.