

Imposter Syndrome in the Boardroom – How Executives Handle Self-Doubt

What is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome occurs when people don't believe they deserve respect or rewards for their accomplishments. They live in fear that their accomplishments have been a fluke and they will be found out and exposed as a fraud.

In short, they don't feel they are being their authentic selves.

The way out is not to become more successful but to become more authentic. You have to want to make changes and control your own destiny; no one will do it for you.

Imposter Syndrome can get worse the higher you climb.

If you feel unsafe due to a politically charged, competitive environment, the constant need to prove yourself can take its toll. You may find yourself exaggerating your accomplishments and hiding your mistakes. This is the essence of imposter syndrome.

On top of that, your priorities in life may have shifted, and your idea of the role of work in your life may have changed. You can feel more like an actor than a leader.

Women are more affected by feelings of self-doubt due to gender inequality.

A salary negotiation can awaken feelings of not being good enough. Women have been taught for so long that they are “less than,” they often won't even negotiate salary. Men have a greater tendency to negotiate a higher salary, whereas [many women consciously or unconsciously show they will accept less money](#) and be grateful for the job.

This feeling of being a second-class employee can continue when it is time to ask for a raise or promotion.

How to deal with Imposter Syndrome.

The first step is to acknowledge that you're doing it.

Determine to what degree you want to stop or dial it back. Why do you do it and how is it working for you? Consider what the root cause is and how you can address it. Is it truly your

work environment? Or, is it something that happened in your life that gave you a set narrative? Do you feel you deserve to stop feeling like an imposter?

Step two is to determine the risks.

It may be that “faking it” is an unwritten part of your job description. Does your company frown on people who admit they don’t know something or can’t do something? Is there an unwritten code that says a general must always appear confident to the “troops?” Also, the competition may be cutthroat. You have to determine whether you are willing to pay the price for being authentic.

It’s essential to understand the true repercussions for expressing yourself and becoming comfortable with the real risk, which is often lower than your perceived risk. You can mitigate the risk by finding appropriate ways to be heard and seen that give you what you need without hurting innocents or blaming others.

Step three is about strategy.

You have to decide on actions to address the root cause. This can include having difficult conversations at work, diving deep into a past trauma through therapy, or finding a coach who can help to validate you. Perhaps you can get support from like-minded leaders who are outside of your organization. It could also be as simple as being honest when you need to learn something before making a decision.

Step four is commitment.

Once you decide to eliminate imposter syndrome, don’t back down. That will make you feel like even more of an imposter as you retreat from who you are for the sake of how you appear. If you feel your commitment is shaky, take small steps. Your confidence will grow with initial successes. Finding peers and support from other people in your role or one similar through outside groups and organizations can also give you that sense of belonging and help you value who you really are.

What Authenticity Looks Like

To pursue authenticity, you need a vision of how it will look. Here are some suggestions.

- Imagine how it would feel to be unabashedly yet invitingly authentic.
- Can you see yourself speaking their minds even when you know it might cause controversy--but with good intentions, seeking growth, not harm?

- Visualize seeking truth and transparency while being inclusive and empathetic. But also buck convention to make positive change happen.
- Can you picture a balance between being humble, collaborating with your peers, and showing a willingness to learn from opposing perspectives while trusting your gut?

Conclusion

Earlier in my career, I would hold my ideas back and not speak up. I felt like my thoughts were obvious to the group or potentially would put too much pressure on me to deliver against the norm. But, it was causing me stress and I was blaming it on the environment. As I dug deeper and gave myself permission to share my ideas, make mistakes, and even fail without fear, I found passion and enjoyment in my work. I had to realize how resilient I am before I felt comfortable taking small steps to test the outcome. What I found over time was that most people appreciated the fresh perspective and curiosity I brought.

I think you may find the same thing.