An Inspection of Imposter Syndrome in the Corporate Sphere

by Victoria Lee

Imposter syndrome is the feeling of being not qualified, experienced, or skilled enough to be where one is, yet so entrenched in the situation that there is no other way but to 'fake' it. It is neither the fear of failure or success, but the fear of being exposed as fraudulent. In today's business landscape the neurotic impostor is a well-known role, especially as individuals climb up the corporate ladder. However, its consequences are often not touched upon.

This phenomenon was first described by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in the 1970s as a failure to internalize and accept success. Over the span of five years, Clance and Imes (1978) worked with 150 women who had obtained PhDs in various concentrations, were respected professionals, or were students recognized for academic excellence. The two found a shocking majority of the women considered themselves to be 'impostors' and did not find themselves deserving of their accomplishments (Clance & Imes, 1978). Similar to which, studies by Deaux (1976) indicate that those who have encountered the impostor phenomenon attribute positive performance outcomes to temporary causes and negative performance outcomes to stable causes. Clance (1985) found confirming results in later studies where interviewees often associated their successes to temporary

causes and negative performance outcomes to stable causes. Clance (1985) confirmed in later studies where interviewees often associated their successes to temporary causes, such as luck, timing, or lowering of standards, while failures were tied to stable causes such as skill sets or personality traits.

Those in the corporate sphere are especially susceptible to impostor syndrome as both professionals and secondary education systems encourage people to fail forward and fast (McDevitt, 2006; Maxwell, 2000). While there are merits to this strategy, this steep learning curve often fills the early stages of one's career with repeated critique which may not always be constructive in nature. Juniors who are trained to focus more heavily on learning from failures in comparison to successes often result in this inability to connect achievements to a stable cause (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). Furthermore, the competitive nature of commerce encourages individuals to brand themselves in a way that is most appealing to their most important stakeholder (i.e., a future employer or their notable peers). Although it is an effective strategy, if the individual is not fully behind their branding, this may cause further fraudulent feelings if and when they succeed. This may be a contributing factor to why those who face impostor syndrome feel strangely accepting or even relieved of the aspect of failure. For example, in Clance and Imes (1978), one interviewee admitted that she "was somewhat relieved at this prospect [of failing] because the pretense would finally be over." Lastly, the impostor syndrome is noticed more frequently higher up in the corporate order (Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, & Leonhardt, 2016). Juniors are provided with necessary mentorship, performance feedback, and praise while in contrast, management roles have less support and greater accountability.

So, how does this discussion impact the modern business generation moving forward? Firstly, workers facing impostor syndrome are more vulnerable to risk aversion, indecisiveness, and procrastination (Range, 2018). In particular, those who advance quickly through the corporate hierarchy are likely to question the quality of their decision-making and judgement while doubting their own abilities. Manfred F.R Kets de Vries, a professor and expert in leadership development, and organizational change at INSEAD, observed a skilled senior manager's self-destructive behavior. According to Kets de Vries (2005), this talented individual would rise through the ranks, then resign from the fear and stress of being exposed as not qualified enough and restart the cycle all over again in a new position. Without the confidence to lead and take risks, even the most qualified individuals will be unable to drive an organization to success. Additionally, increased burnout and loss of motivation can be the devastating results of this syndrome. Lou Solomon (2016), CEO and founder of Interact Studio, breaks down the syndrome further into the four passing symptoms, which she coins as the 'Fantastic Four': anxiety, perfectionism, self-doubt, and fear of failure. All of these are personality traits associated with business leaders and entrepreneurs; these individuals usually being recent graduates, high performers, and those just entering the business industry (Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, & Leonhardt, 2016). This ultimately spells for a self-destructive work ethic and hinders organizations more than it helps. Finally, while there is no easy fix for this syndrome, it is important for those entering the business environment to be conscious of the impostor syndrome. While its consequences are real, this syndrome can also be taken as a sign of growth (Weir, 2013). Kolligian and Sternberg (1991)

proposed another approach after noticing a correlation between entering preset roles and fraudulent feelings. The comparison between an individual and their predecessor's qualifications in a specific role is a key factor of impostor syndrome (Kolligian and Sternberg, 1991). They suggest that creativity in the workplace and establishing one's role is key in diminishing the depression and anxiety from this affliction. Meanwhile, Bothello and Roulet (2019) suggest that the solution lies in feeling completely immersed in and passionate about one's work. The two recommend making fieldwork compulsory in academic institutions, pointing out that feelings of impostorhood become more pronounced with physical and temporal distance from the practical implications of the applied expertise. In their case, both found self-affirmation during their own fieldwork and were reminded that they became professionals to solve tangible problems.

The impostor phenomenon is a challenging hurdle for businesspeople to face and cannot be solved with more achievements or critique. Simply put, successes and failures are but two sides of the same coin, both being valuable lessons of personal and organizational development, and each success and moment of growth should be celebrated.

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