

REALLY?  
YOU TOO?

# Imposter syndrome

## THE LAST LEADERSHIP TABOO

by Alison Tisdall and Mike Griffiths

Just over a year ago, I asked an audience of senior leaders from multiple industries to put their hands in the air and to keep them up if they answered “yes”, and put their hands down as soon as they answered “no” to any of the following questions:

### Are you:

- ✓ a consistently high achiever and outstanding performer?
- ✓ recognised for the value you bring to your industry?
- ✓ working with other high achievers?
- ✓ feeling that any day now you’ll be exposed as a fraud?

Virtually every single hand in the audience stayed up. It was a room full of men and women that I aspired to be like, with captains of industry who had driven innovation, saved lives, built businesses, changed society and yet here they are falling short of their own super-hero expectations. I wasn’t surprised, in fact my hand was up too.

This experience of performing to high standards and yet simultaneously feeling like an imposter is pervasive. It is universally experienced in the senior ranks of organisations and yet also taboo to admit to. In an age where 'Authenticity' is celebrated, this secrecy has a high cost. Our most talented people are diverting precious and expensive leadership energy to the futile objective of 'not being found out' while also living lives where they are unable to be fully themselves at work.

This phenomenon is known as 'Imposter Syndrome' (IS) and is essentially a sense that everyone else is fully competent and able, while you meanwhile are winging it and succeeding only through a combination of luck and special effort. Neither extremes are true of course: other people around you are unlikely to be super competent and your success isn't entirely down to a set of external factors beyond your control.

### So what's really going on with Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter Syndrome was first coined as a phrase<sup>1</sup> in the 1970s, and subsequent research<sup>2</sup> suggests it is caused by a subtle blend of perception, judgement and confidence issues. It was long believed to be experienced by more women than men since women are more likely to ascribe the cause of success to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) rather than inherent ability. However there is increasing evidence that Imposter Syndrome affects us all and as the Head of People of a leading law firm said to me recently "Every single one of my senior male partners has it, but would never admit it."

The good news is that it is possible to change the Imposter mindset and undo the years of self limiting beliefs and behaviours that hold talented executives back. While it would be an oxymoron to try to teach 'Authenticity', leaders can create the conditions for authenticity by giving permission for talent to be themselves as work and fostering a feedback culture.

### What can we do about it?

There are five practical areas of leadership development that meaningfully address Imposter Syndrome:

1. Acknowledge Imposter feelings
2. Foster a culture of excellence and disclosure
3. Reframe to a growth mindset
4. Seek multi-source feedback
5. Develop judgement skills (and don't attribute your success to luck)!

Let's explore each in more depth.

## 1 Acknowledge Imposter feelings

Imposter Syndrome is one of the last business taboos. Admitting self doubt in the board room or leadership meeting is rarely publicly equated with strength. It is unsurprising then that it is rare for senior executives to openly acknowledge their perceived weaknesses to their teams or publicly acknowledge that it is entirely normal not to know everything especially when the team may feel out of depth or operating on stretch engagements.

### **Gianni Rometty: CEO of IBM ...**

On being offered a promotion earlier in her leadership career ...

*"I can remember my reaction: I said, it's too early. I'm not ready. Just give me a few more years and I'd be ready for this. That evening, my husband listened patiently to my story and then he looked at me and he said "I know you. In six months you'll be ready for something else".*

*And you know what? He was right. And I went in the next day and I took that job. Growth and comfort never co-exist. I have learned the most when I felt at risk ... So, when you feel anxious, maybe tomorrow, when you leave and start a new job, I guarantee that that is a good sign.*

(Abbreviated from interview)

### **Dr. Margaret Chan (Chief of the World Health Organisation)**

*"There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know."*

### **Alistair Campbell (Former Special Advisor to Tony Blair)**

*"It is the means by which I prepare, consider other options and perspectives, strive for clarity about what can be attained and what cannot – and then, critically, stop the doubting, and act."*

We often find senior executives have a firm belief system that public disclosure of any self-doubt makes them vulnerable to those colleagues that might prey on their weaknesses. This is why it's so important that this agenda starts from the top and that leaders serve as role models. We believe the act of bringing the subject out into the open to be enormously valuable:

it can be empowering to know that many of your colleagues feel much the same way but are just not talking about it. In fact Imposter Syndrome is a club that boasts some of the world's most creative and high achieving people from the CEOs of consulting and technology firms, to film stars, high flying politicians and authors.

## ② Create a culture of excellence and disclosure

Imagine a work culture where those in charge show up to work loudly projecting their expertise, full of bluster and confidence, closed to learning (since they've got it nailed), where failure is unacceptable and where excellence is celebrated. Sound familiar? Would you want to work there?

Imposter Syndrome has rarely been talked about and yet in twenty years of working with senior executives we are yet to meet a truly successful executive who hasn't been afflicted by self doubt during their careers. How then can leaders create cultures that both strive for excellence and also simultaneously create a work culture that allows people to try and fail and to be themselves in the workplace.

Culture change means talking about it from the top down. Within cultural norms, ask the CEO and direct reports to disclose their own insecurities much more. Create a culture of disclosure ... When we see leaders in positions we respect admitting they don't know everything, it makes it easier for everyone to have realistic and authentic representations.

Few of us instinctively want to do that – least of all those in fields where stereotypes hold that they can't 'handle it'. Think how risky this might be for a woman in investment banking or a high flying politician.

But what if we could create cultures that redefine failure as a learning opportunity for all and which look with scepticism on those 'blind' individuals who claim perfection and self confidence at all times. Perhaps that would be a place great talent would seek to go.

## ③ Reframe to a growth mindset

One of the keys to professional success is whether we operate in a fixed or growth mindset<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately most of us roll out of bed in the morning in a fixed mindset, where we see our capability and IQ as capped and continuously compare ourselves with others in our immediate network. To cope with any perceived gap we project competence.

This attempt at closing the perceived gap between our

actual capability and what we want others to believe is in essence what the person experiencing Imposter Syndrome is locking their energy into. The gap however is rarely as large as we perceive.

This compares significantly to operating in a growth mindset, where we see our IQ and capabilities as uncapped and where our careers and lives are marked by learning. By shifting mindset gears, we invest in our own development and view opportunity to learn as a positive and see no need to 'project' to close the gap. What's more we are inspired by others around us.

However, it takes a lot of effort to operate in a growth mindset. It requires us to reprogram how we think and take on behaviours that require significant effort and practice to become habits. It asks us to seek and value feedback from all sources, it demands we persist in the face of challenges, stop comparing ourselves to our peers and see a direct link between our own effort and mastery. Sound easy? Then give it a go for just a day.

## ④ Seek multi-source feedback

We have known for decades that each of us operates with a different public and private persona<sup>4</sup> with strengths and weaknesses that live in one of these three 'boxes':

- **A public self:** traits that we are aware of and are happy to share with others
- **A facade self:** qualities you feel you have but that you are keeping hidden from others
- **Blindspots:** characteristics hidden to us, but which others experience in our company

Imposter Syndrome is a disorder that inflates the sufferers number two 'facade' box. It is probable that Imposter Syndrome sufferers actually have significant strengths in both their public and blindspot 'boxes', but that the effort of keeping the facade box hidden is distorting their self-awareness.

The best route to better self-awareness is through feedback whether formal feedback via psychometrics, coaching, 360°, peer reviews or through fostering a feedback culture in the workplace. It may take multi-source feedback and repeated messages, one-to-one coaching to help senior leaders with Imposter Syndrome build a more authentic level of self-awareness relative to others around them.

## 5 Develop judgement skills (and don't attribute your success to luck!)

Isn't it really annoying that the true frauds and truly incompetent rarely seem to experience Imposter Syndrome?

The Dunning–Kruger<sup>2</sup> effect helps us understand these extremes of internal delusion in more depth. In effect, they show that relatively unskilled individuals suffer from 'illusory superiority', mistakenly assessing their ability to be much higher than is really is. Meanwhile highly skilled individuals typically underestimate their relative competence to others, mistakenly assuming that tasks that are easy for them are also easy for others. The end result is an internal illusion in both

*"The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt"*

- *Bertrand Russell*

extremes of talent. An overestimation of *self* by the unskilled and overestimation of *others* in the skilled combined with an attribution of personal success to luck. In other words a belief system that reinforces the ideas that:

- My success = luck + easiness of task
- Your success = skill to handle the complexity of the task

But how have we developed these delusions? Certainly we are not basing our judgement over the superiority of others based on objective evidence. Rather, each one of us operates in the world with a set of internal and unconscious biases. Our brain as an evolutionary necessity has developed to make judgements in a split second about our environment and others. This view of people and situations is based on our background, cultural environment and our experiences far more than the reality of others performance. Even worse, as we build up belief systems our brain unhelpfully filters the data we look for in the external world which reinforces that belief system. So for instance, if you have a belief that your colleague is an outstanding public speaker while you are not, you'll likely only see evidence to reinforce your world view. Once these belief systems are established, you'll likely see amazing competence oozing from your colleagues, they will be seemingly at ease in conversation and complex discussions - while you are full of self doubt.

It is of course a delusion. But it helps us understand that at the heart of Imposter Syndrome is a judgement disorder focused on how we assess the capabilities

of others. This is where the organisational benefits of creating a culture of disclosure and authenticity we talked about in steps one and two really kick in.

### In summary

It's time for Leadership Development professionals to talk about this loudly. Imposter Syndrome has been taboo for too long and the need for creating work cultures that foster innovation and retain talent are pressing. Tackling Imposter Syndrome increases the likelihood of creating a learning culture, driving innovation, retaining high performing talent, reduces operating risk and talent retention.

And finally I leave you with some good news — since you have to be competent to think you're not, if you think you're an Imposter then you are almost certainly not one.

In other words, go shine — you are better than you know.

1 Shamal Jumar and Carolyn M. Jagacinsjki

2 Carol Dweck, Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham, Dunning-Kruger

3 Carol Dweck 'Mindset'

4 Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham - Johari window (1955)

---

**Alison Tisdall** is a Founder and Managing Director at Mind<sup>3</sup> where she advises senior executive teams and leaders on issues of transformation and leadership and professional development.

**Mike Griffiths** is a Founder and Managing Director of Mind<sup>3</sup> and has worked for more than twenty years as a consultant and educator specialising in strategy development, leadership, change and business development.