



## Improving Organizational Systems to Mitigate Imposter Syndrome

The Journal of Behavioral Science estimates that around 70 percent of the U.S. population has experienced Imposter Syndrome. What can organizations do to combat this disruptive phenomenon?

In every workplace, some employees struggle with feelings of Imposter Syndrome. The Harvard Business Review characterizes Imposter Syndrome as a “collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success,” with those suffering from it “unable to internalize their accomplishments, however successful they are in their field.”

This sense of chronic failure can be experienced by anyone, but it was first noted among women in higher levels of academics and is especially prevalent among high-achievers and minorities in a variety of fields. Ironically, it can be those who on paper are the most successful who feel the deepest feelings of being a fraud. Despite praise, they wonder if they are worthy of their accolades.

While it may be tempting to address only the individuals who struggle with Imposter Syndrome, systems within organizations can feed these feelings, negatively impacting not just employees but also the organization as a whole. Healthy organizations can and must identify problematic company dynamics in order to combat Imposter Syndrome.

### Why does Imposter Syndrome negatively impact not just individuals, but entire organizations?

Individuals who feel like “fakes” are less likely to produce results up to their full potential. As perfectionists, they may unduly procrastinate, refuse to take on projects where they are not already well experienced, forgo appropriate delegation, or even self-sabotage to avoid being revealed. They will be less willing to take risks that could end in failure, which may also reduce innovation and creativity, leading to markets lost or new ideas not being implemented. At meetings, these employees will not speak up as often or give important feedback. Since Imposter Syndrome often affects individuals of high intelligence and achievement, their input would especially benefit the organization.

More women than men report struggling with Imposter Syndrome, or they are even told outright that they do not belong in certain fields or leadership roles. Additionally, there may be fewer female mentors and role models to inspire employees in entry-level positions to see pathways for professional development within the organization. Women who feel like frauds will not seek advancement opportunities as often. Company cultures that feed these feelings are more likely to lose female representation in higher levels of leadership. This lack of diversity can reduce the variety of perspectives that influence company decision-making.

The internal stress felt by employees can affect their physical health, leading to more sick days and healthcare costs, along with the loss of productivity and lack of momentum that occur when



employees are absent. Overworked employees who are highly stressed about their performance may not do their best work. Imposter Syndrome is linked, unsurprisingly, to depression, anxiety and poor self-confidence. Mental health is estimated to cost businesses more than \$225 billion every year. Taking a proactive approach to improving employee mental health and well-being saves organizations money in the long term.

### How do organizational systems feed Imposter Syndrome?

While companies may bemoan the losses due to Imposter Syndrome, whether from reduced productivity, lack of diversity, or increased mental health costs, some organizational systems may be feeding into employee feelings of inadequacy through these problematic work cultures.

#### No room for failure.

When companies promote the idea that “failure is not an option,” there is incredible pressure to hide mistakes in order to preserve a flawless perceived performance. As this pressure mixes with the perfectionism that many with Imposter Syndrome already embody, feelings of being a “phony” are exacerbated. This can happen with any person, of any gender or color, and it is especially common among the highest achievers in a field.

#### If you have a problem, you need to change.

Some companies assume that any employee’s issues are unique and personal, with all the burden to resolve the problem placed squarely on that worker alone rather than addressing broader company culture. This includes organizations with implicit biases toward certain alma maters, genders, hobbies, racial backgrounds, or marital status. Employees who are generally high performing but subjected to unfair discrimination may find feelings of doubt magnified even further, often leading to disengagement from the organization.

#### To succeed, you just need to be better than the next guy.

Pitting employees against one another in a competitive environment reduces the likelihood that employees will share information and insights. Overwork becomes common. Organizations that discourage collaboration feed into Imposter Syndrome as workers retreat into themselves as the only safe person.

### What can healthy organizations do to successfully combat Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter Syndrome is costly, but it is not inevitable. Here are three ways an organization can change the systems that feed Imposter Syndrome.

#### Train managers to recognize and coach employees through self-doubt and insecurity.

Positive encouragement helps combat feelings of inadequacy, but too much can reduce its effectiveness. If employees do not trust the feedback received, they may continue to believe that success is only happening because of luck or somehow deceiving supervisors. Direct mentoring or



coaching is particularly valuable for addressing an employee's personal strengths and weaknesses, and enabling them to reach their full potential.

#### Treat failure as an opportunity for future adjustments and learning.

An open company culture that welcomes feedback means mistakes are not swept under the rug, but instead are discussed in ways that foster growth. Remind employees that nothing always works perfectly, especially the first time. No one needs to hide when asking for help is acceptable and encouraged.

#### Tie promotions to measurable metrics.

When a pay raise or increase in responsibility is directly linked to past success, an employee is less likely to attribute their rise to mere "luck." Rather, it ensures that employees can track their performance growth, appropriately celebrate their successes, and cement their role within the organization.

Additionally, when promotions are openly discussed, employees are less likely to hide behind appearances and more equipped to assess themselves in a more realistic light.

Organizations that successfully implement these strategies will have more productive, engaged and diverse employees who are confident of their continued achievements.