



## Standing With Women and People of Color to Overcome Imposter Syndrome

Funny, you don't look like a... Too often this phrase has been used to marginalize women and people of color in a variety of professions, leading to widespread Imposter Syndrome. How can organizations support diverse leaders to overcome these feelings?

For women in fields traditionally dominated by men, or for people of color achieving in professions where they have been historically underrepresented, Imposter Syndrome is a real and serious phenomenon.

These feelings are described by the Harvard Business Review as perceptions of "inadequacy that persist despite evident success." Imposter Syndrome keeps top achievers from fully realizing their success, as their internal dialogue continues to criticize or diminish their accomplishments.

Imposter Syndrome is now endemic to the U.S. population, as the Journal of Behavioral Science reports approximately 70 percent of Americans have felt this way at some point. For many women and people of color, these internal emotions have, at times, been fed by external experiences of bias and discrimination.

How can organizations recognize signs of Imposter Syndrome among their employees, especially women and people of color? What support can HR departments and managers provide? And where can companies make changes to mitigate the effects of Imposter Syndrome?

### Recognize Imposter Syndrome

Talented employees will all experience self-doubt at some point. But there are noticeable signs when Imposter Syndrome may be psychologically impacting a worker, negatively affecting both the employee and the organization as a whole.

Has the employee stopped speaking up at meetings? When self-doubt reaches a level where one no longer feels comfortable offering comments, the organization is losing a valuable source of input and feedback. This can become a downward spiral, as the employee's voice is no longer heard, influence is lost, and the feelings of being a "fraud" only increase.

Is the employee intensely self-critical? Perfectionism is common among both high-achievers and those who experience Imposter Syndrome. While excellence is always desirable, excessive perfectionism can lead to clinical anxiety, a refusal to delegate, and, somewhat paradoxically, procrastination of important tasks. The employee may even avoid the risk of taking on difficult or unfamiliar assignments out of concern that perfection cannot be achieved.



Does the employee hold back from promotions or taking on responsibility? This reluctance can have its source in perfectionism, a fear of being revealed as an imposter, or a lack of confidence in someone's ability to contribute meaningfully to the organization. All can be signs that Imposter Syndrome is having an undue effect.

### Effectively support individual employees

When a manager suspects Imposter Syndrome is preventing an employee from reaching his/her full potential, there are several ways to offer support through productive feedback, strategic networking, and personal coaching.

Offering specific, positive feedback can be extremely effective in helping an employee reframe his/her experience of success or failure. However, be mindful that someone who struggles with feelings of inadequacy may be suspicious or dismissive of praise. Exaggerated accolades will be ignored and may even breed distrust, exacerbating the underlying problem. Many with Imposter Syndrome are tempted to ascribe success to mere luck. Specific, measured commendation refutes this false idea.

Strategic networking is another tool HR departments can use to offer support to talented achievers who feel deep self-doubt. Encourage employees to build a "tribe of support," urges Kara Altenbaumer-Price, an SVP in the insurance industry. Having a network of co-workers and leaders with similar experiences offers validation and inspiration, which may provide the nudge to apply for promotions and take risks.

Personal coaching can help workers identify the ways Imposter Syndrome is negatively affecting their performance and mental health. Work with the employee to help him/her visualize success. Remind him/her of the skills and qualifications she brings to the organization. Recast failure as an opportunity to grow and learn, rather than hide. Always keep the relationship open.

### Address organizational systems that feed Imposter Syndrome

While much of the advice surrounding Imposter Syndrome is directed toward individuals, there are also key systemic changes organizations can make toward addressing bias and creating a supportive work culture.

Examining explicit or implicit biases can be revealing, and an easy way to start is by looking at the current leadership. Are there certain marital statuses, racial backgrounds, colleges, or genders preferenced more than others? If so, why? Have promotions happened because leaders tapped those similar to themselves, or the best candidate for the position? Are sexist or racially insensitive comments permitted in company meetings or laughed off in the break room? Stereotypes and lack of representation feed into employees' sense of Imposter Syndrome.



Crafting a supportive work culture begins with fostering open communication and clear feedback loops. When workers are comfortable engaging with their supervisors, harassment or discrimination can be dealt with early. Failure is not something to be feared or avoided at all costs. Rather, mistakes can be signs that risks are being appropriately taken and opportunities to develop new creative ideas. Feelings of inadequacy can be dealt with during performance reviews, and successful employees can be encouraged in their achievement.

Hopefully, having clear ties between performance and promotion can dispel any notion that advancement only happens due to luck or sporadic cleverness. When clear metrics are used as the basis for pay increases, employee self-assessment is more accurate and based on reality. This is imperative not just at higher levels of compensation, but also on the ground floor. This creates trust and reasonable expectations for employees to seek advancement as their output warrants.

Organizations that train their managers and HR departments to recognize the signs of Imposter Syndrome, effectively coach their employees, and address systemic issues that inhibit worker development are well on their way to creating supportive work cultures for women and people of color. These inclusive office environments will not only be great places to work, but will also reap all the benefits of diverse voices contributing to the organization on every level.