Imposter Syndrome: How Leaders Find Authenticity

From the day that Roger began his new job as a senior manager at a mid-sized technology firm, he was overcome by a secret fear: that the people he worked with would soon discover that he was a fraud, undeserving of his promotion.

For Roger, it didn’t matter that his past supervisors had always praised his work, or that he had a track record of solid accomplishments. He constantly worried that the people who now reported to him were more technologically advanced than him. He worked long hours and hid in his new office, while in meetings he could be too eager to appease his supervisors to compensate for his constant feelings of inadequacy.

What Roger didn’t know was that business psychologists have been studying this phenomenon for several decades and have given it a name: “the imposter syndrome.” Other experts have dubbed these feelings “the authenticity paradox,” an executive’s sense that co-workers will see him as “a phony” if he reveals his true personality. In fact, some of the most successful executives in Silicon Valley and elsewhere have confessed to struggling with the imposter syndrome.

“I felt like I was the dumbest person in the room at every meeting,” wrote Mike Kail recently of his experience when he was promoted to chief technology officer of Yahoo in 2014. “I was fortunate enough to have inherited a tremendous set of direct reports, but their competency made me start to feel as if they would be better suited for the role than I was.”

The problem, experts note, is that feeling like an intellectual fraud can hamper actual job performance if these feelings persist. And some authorities in management fret that current business trends are exacerbating the problem.

The increasingly international nature of large corporations or organizations, for example, means promotions for executives raised in cultures that emphasize modesty or restraint, not the brasher American style of C-suite leadership. In addition, the growth of social media means that business leaders are required to craft a more public identity that’s more frequently on display. Millennial workers can be overwhelmed keeping up with rapid technological change; one recent study in the United Kingdom found one-third of millennial workers there reported feeling the imposter syndrome.

Finding Authenticity Through Education

Lisa Larson said she felt occasional anxiety and even, at times, a lack of belonging after she accepted a leadership job at a large engineering consulting firm in Seattle, where she focuses on business development and long-term strategy.

There were times when she was concerned her understated, collaborative leadership style might hinder her in business negotiations because “the consulting world is competitive and I have seen the loud voices win too many times.” Larson wanted to establish herself as a leader while staying true to her style—what she calls her “not-in-your-face” demeanor.

“‘I needed to learn how to use my authentic style in a manner that was just as competitive,’” Larson says.

Larson found a solution in the form of executive education at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. In a professional yet collegial setting in Philadelphia, she signed up for highly focused, immersive one-week programs offered by Wharton Executive Education. Taught by some of the world’s top business faculty and surrounded by executive peers with similar career dilemmas and remarkably diverse backgrounds, Larson gained new business acumen as well as unexpected insights into how top leaders function and thrive.
This fall, Larson completed her Wharton Certificate of Professional Development, but she reported that she already had been enjoying greater self-assurance on the job. “I feel like I have confidence in my own style,” she said.

Other rising executives have reported their authenticity doubts brought them face to face with the imposter syndrome, a term first used by clinical psychologists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne A. Imes 40 years ago. “It’s experienced by people who are high-achieving and always set high standards for themselves and yet they evaluate themselves very harshly,” said Ilene Wasserman, PhD, head executive coach for Wharton’s Advanced Management Program.

And it’s remarkably common. Writing about the imposter phenomenon in the International Journal of Behavioral Science in 2011, researchers Jaruwann Sakulku and James Alexander found that some 70 percent of executives experienced it during at least one point in their career, and that the problem was more pronounced among high-achieving women.

Other studies have also found a higher prevalence of imposter anxieties among non-white or ethnic business leaders. More recently, experts believe that a tech-oriented economy where engineers, programmers, or other specialists suddenly find themselves in a broader management role and dealing with company-wide strategy is a source of stress.

Michael Useem, a management professor who heads the Wharton Center for Leadership and Change Management, said the imposter syndrome arises when success as an executive can depend on talents like public speaking or managing layoffs—“skill sets they haven’t had to think about earlier in their career.” He said newly minted leaders face an unexpected array of challenges—dealing with regulators or investors, for example—that require a more strategic mindset.

Wasserman said that executives who adjust to higher-profile leadership roles are ones who ask questions of themselves, acknowledge any real deficiencies, and develop a plan to address them. She and other experts recommend that executives confronting the imposter syndrome make an inventory of areas where they feel the greatest insecurity and consider addressing them through a program that can involve mid-career executive education, one-on-one coaching, career mentoring, or a combination of all of these.

**Comfort Through Professional Coaching**

One upwardly mobile executive who has found that coaching has been a source of reassurance and newfound confidence is Debi Kuchka-Craig, who steadily rose through the ranks to become vice president for managed care at a Maryland health care firm. She said her one-on-one work with an organizational psychologist in Philadelphia allowed her to feel...
more comfortable and embrace a more direct management style on thorny issues such as negotiating prices.

Kuchka-Craig said executive coaching helped “my ability to have courage to speak up when I might be the only dissenting person in the room.” Her work with psychologist Karen DiNunzio was part of a broader program her employer, MedStar Health, arranged with Wharton Executive Education that also included classroom work on topics of business acumen and leadership. She said, “Coaching reminded me as a professional to pay attention to my authentic self and style.”

Mid-career executive education is one way to address intimidating new business challenges. For Larson, who’s married with two young children, Wharton’s Certificate of Professional Development program—four highly focused one-week courses that can be spread out over several years—was also a perfect fit for her lifestyle.

Larson looked for programs that would sharpen her emotional intelligence as a leader and help her find ways to “mentor staff by helping others to refrain from overreacting before approaching a difficult situation.” So far, she’s chosen to focus heavily on honing her management skills, with programs such as Global Strategic Leadership, The Leadership Edge, Women’s Executive Leadership, and Strategic Persuasion—topics that aren’t offered in most technical programs such as engineering.

On the Wharton campus, Larson says she’s been introduced to new ways of thinking in an intellectually stimulating campus setting, surrounded with classmates from a wide array of industry groups and backgrounds—most of them at a similar career crossroads. The experience has reinforced what experts say about the imposter syndrome—that such anxieties are typical to most executives but that confident management abilities can be learned.

Indeed, Larson has grown so comfortable with her own leadership style—not loud, but informed by business acumen and greater emotional intelligence—that she increasingly finds herself mentoring younger rising female business leaders. She says her increased confidence is a huge asset as she deals with lawyers, accountants, and large international clients on the bigger strategic issues facing her company. And she said she’s even thinking ahead towards possibly pursuing an executive MBA—echoing other business leaders who’ve found that improvement is continual.

Lisa Larson
Associate Vice President, HDR, Inc.

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