The Imposter Syndrome is Real, But It Can be Overcome

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“Impostor syndrome is the voice in your head that overlooks, discounts and discredits your accomplishments.”

Jerry Colonna, author of “Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up”

We have written about the Imposter Syndrome before, but it may have become an even more prevalent concern for business professionals. Just last week, Entrepreneur magazine published a series of interviews with business leaders who have dealt with this challenge in an article titled: “10 Successful Leaders Share Their Struggles with Imposter Syndrome and How to Overcome It” (view the article). Moreover, the Imposter Syndrome is not confined to leaders at the top of the corporate chart as more than half of the employees at Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, and Google who responded to a survey in 2018 reported that they sometimes feel they don’t deserve their job despite their accomplishments. ¹

Finally, research from the International Journal of Behavioral Science indicates that 70% of people experience imposter syndrome at one point in their lives (view the article). It is time to look again at the Imposter Syndrome, and to consider ways this problem can be dealt with effectively by businesspeople when they experience feelings of inadequacy.

What is the Imposter Syndrome?
Back in 1978, two American psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, first labeled the impostor syndrome, which they described as a feeling of “phoniness in people who believe they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement.” The term describes individuals who “are highly motivated to achieve,” but who also “live in fear of being ‘found out’ or exposed as frauds.” (view the article)

In his article, “Nobody Knows What The Hell They Are Doing”, Oliver Burkeman states that, “The truth, deep down, is that we all feel as though we’re just winging it.” He points to the late Maya Angelou, renowned as a novelist, poet, and memoirist, who said that “I have written 11 books,” “but each time, I think ‘Uh-oh. They’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody and they’re going to find me out.’” Burkeman praises Angelou’s remarkable talent, but notes that she was equally remarkable in being willing to admit that she didn’t usually feel that way. (view the article)

Even one of the world’s greatest thinkers, Albert Einstein, suffered from feelings that he did not measure up. He essentially referred to himself as a fraud when he stated that “the exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindle to have been struck by it.” (view the article)

Surmounting the Imposter Syndrome

Recognizing the symptoms of the Imposter Syndrome is not difficult, but there is no quick fix when feelings of anxiety or depression arise, along with the sense that someone is not good enough to succeed. The syndrome describes an accumulation of insecurities, which is a trap waiting for high achievers. (view the article)

When these feelings of inadequacy first begin, however, there are steps that a business person can take to overcome crippling doubts and move forward in a positive way.

Be Open to Getting Help From Others

Perhaps the most important advice for someone dealing with the Imposter Syndrome is to resist the temptation to power through it alone. There are many resources available that will help someone dealing with the issue to understand and not become overwhelmed by these feelings. Giving vent to the negative feelings is critical, and they can be discussed with business coaches, individual peers outside the business, mentors within the company, peer groups (such as EO and Vistage) and psychologists who focus on working with business professionals.

Jenn Lofgren, a member of the Forbes Coaches Council puts it this way:

“Remember that you are not the only person who feels this way. There is nothing like talking to someone else about your feelings of self-doubt, and the best way to get comfortable with asking for help is to start, even if that means starting slow at first. Talk to peers, mentors and coaches. Ask your mentors and peers about times they’ve felt in over their heads and
experienced similar feelings of self-doubt.”

Lauren Romansky, VP of HR at Gartner, comments that individuals “need to take the initiative to place themselves in supportive environments. Mentorship is important. If you have somebody who’s willing to step in and give you those pep talks as well as actually build your competencies and support your decisions, those relationships are worth their weight in gold.”

For someone experiencing self-doubt, getting advice, support and encouragement from someone else will provide valuable guidance, helpful insights and renewed enthusiasm in facing the daunting challenges that regularly arise in business.

Be Real In Admitting Lack of Knowledge

For company leaders, especially those who have been newly appointed, the Imposter Syndrome may be especially acute if they conclude that they don’t know everything they should and are fearful that they will be perceived as a fraud due to their lack of knowledge.

Veeral Rathod, co-founder of men’s custom clothier J. Hilburn, had doubts about his ability to succeed based on his unfamiliarity with manufacturing clothing. “I was a first-time entrepreneur and it was my first time in apparel,” said Rathod. His approach was to counteract rather than succumb to his self doubts, first by acknowledging that as a leader in a new industry he needed to rely on others’ experience. Rathod also worked to build trust with his team by conveying how he values their input, and he learned that not knowing everything doesn’t mean he’s unqualified to lead. “You need to show an understanding that you’re a part of a team and your role is to think ahead and rely on the expertise of the team you have,” he said.

Business consultant Colonna says that “a leader’s job isn’t to have all the answers but to create the conditions for really, really talented people to find them. It’s to ask ‘What resources do you need to succeed?’ And then see if you can get them.”

A leader who is willing to show that he or she does not have all the answers is open and vulnerable. In the past, these traits might have been seen as weaknesses that would undermine leadership, but current research proves that the opposite is true. Augusto Giacoman, a Director with PwC who advises companies on people and organizational issues puts it this way:

“Leaders do not have to be perfect in order to be successful. Quite the opposite. Admitting mistakes, being open and honest, and accepting foibles and flaws yields far more effective results than projecting an untouchable facade. Tough leaders may inspire through fear or intimidation. Vulnerable leaders inspire with authenticity and humanity. And it’s the latter that is more likely to yield better results.”

Be Willing to Learn and to Grow

Even the negative feelings of Imposter Syndrome can provide a benefit. British
clinical psychologist Jessamy Hibberd points out, “Self-doubt promotes self-improvement and often comes with conscientiousness, high standards, and a strong work ethic. The person who knows it all doesn’t see that need and misses out. Uncertainty—another part of self-doubt—means that you acknowledge that you still have things to learn. This drives you to grow and change, which is hugely important for maintaining good mental health and improving self-esteem. (view the article)

One executive coach, Bill Carmody, suggests that Imposter Syndrome can be seen as a gift that provides important guidance. In an article in Forbes, Carmody states that experiencing this syndrome will keep a business leader humble, and if someone who questions his or her value, they are not likely to be a narcissist or an egomaniac. He also explains that the Imposter Syndrome can lead to personal growth.

“Before you can grow into something, you first must be aware of your own weaknesses. That awareness can help you avoid blind spots as you look to build out your action plans. While the fear itself has little to no value, when imposter syndrome shows up, it’s best to acknowledge it and see it for what it is: an opportunity to step back and look at where you are at this moment in time.” (view the article)

Conclusion – Be Kind to Yourself

The last point in heading off the negative feelings associated with the Imposter Syndrome is to appreciate that perfection is not attainable, and it is therefore unwise to set perfection as a goal that always results in failure. Returning to the interviews last week with business leaders in Entrepreneur magazine, Stevon Lewis, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, stresses the importance of not holding oneself to unreasonable standards.

“Temper your expectations of yourself. People that struggle with impostor syndrome frequently hold themselves to a standard of perfection that isn’t sustainable or achievable. If you are like this, you may convince yourself you are failing. It would be better for you to temper expectations by using scaling techniques to evaluate their performance. For example, if you have a list of 10 things to accomplish and you accomplish 9 out of 10, it would be more effective to say you’ve accomplish 90 percent of your plans, as well as reminding yourself that 90 percent is still an “A.”” (view the article)

In her Forbes article regarding the Imposter Syndrome at the executive level, Jenn Loffgren wrote: “Most importantly, practice self-compassion. Be kind to yourself. Challenge your expectations of yourself, especially where they might be unrealistic.” (view the article)

This final point can be distilled from something that many of us were told at some point by our parents or by other wise, caring supporters. You can’t do any better than your best. So, do your best and let that be enough to give you satisfaction and peace.

¹ Among the 17 companies examined with survey results from 10,402 respondents, Expedia had 72.88 percent of employees suffering from impostor syndrome, followed
by Salesforce with 66.88 percent, then Amazon with 64.48 percent. Apple was last of the 17 with 45.45 percent. Apple is one of only three companies that have less than 50 percent of employees experiencing impostor syndrome, the other two being Cisco (46.67 percent) and eBay (49.69 percent). (view the survey)

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