

The Impostor Syndrome--Part 1

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What actor or actress, in a moment of humility or doubt--or both-- once lamented, "Why would anyone want to see me in a movie? I don't know how to act, so why am I doing this?"

Did you guess that three-time Academy Award winner and eight-time Golden Globe winner, Meryl Streep, said those words? She is regarded as one of the most talented actresses of all time, even though she admits she has suffered from the impostor syndrome!

Sure, we all feel vulnerable and uncomfortable at times. It's part of the human condition.

However, take it a little further. Do you sometimes feel that you're not good enough for the responsibility you have? Perhaps you feel you're not skilled enough, knowledgeable enough, or experienced enough. Do you worry that someone will discover that you're not qualified for what you're doing? Do you fear that your facade may be stripped away, causing you horrible embarrassment?

Okay, maybe you don't personally worry that you'll be exposed as unworthy or incompetent. As a leader, however, you should be aware that this "impostor syndrome" exists, and that one or more individuals under your authority may struggle at least occasionally with these symptoms.

In our achievement-oriented world, where personal worth is often equated with successively greater accomplishments, some recognized successful individuals believe at a deep level that they do not deserve the recognition or status ascribed to them. They attribute their success to luck, abnormally dedicated work, timing, or effectively fooling others who made decisions about their assignments.

These unrealistic, insecure feelings have less to do with competence than with confidence. Truthfully, capable individuals experience recurring doubts more frequently and severely than those less gifted.

Psychologists have been working to understand the "Impostor Phenomenon" since 1978, when Dr. Pauline Rose Clance coined the term and initiated a study of high-achieving women. In 1985, she published *The Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success*.

In the same year, an independent professional colleague, Dr. Joan C. Harvey wrote *If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel like a Fake: The Impostor Phenomenon*. I recommend both books.

Dr. Harvey writes in her book, "It is now believed that as many as 70 percent of all successful people have experienced feelings of being impostors or fakes at some point in relation to their work." A few pages later, she writes, "Some impostor phenomenon victims may never accomplish what they are capable of because their fears continue to hold them back." That sentence should cause you great concern if you are at all interested in developing future leaders! You want people to grow, not hold back!

A study published in 1999 by two Cornell University psychologists suggests that successful individuals fall victim to the "false consensus effect" relative to their capabilities. The term refers to an egocentric bias we humans have about "other people." Stated bluntly, you erroneously presume that other people have the same opinions (and skills) as you do.

How does this affect your best employees who occasionally experience the impostor syndrome? They incorrectly assume that their skills are not unique, and that other people have competencies equal to (or even greater than) them. Their error in judgment is about "other people," not about themselves! Recognizing this truth can free such an individual from insecurity and self-doubt.

I'll share more about this concept in my next article. In case you miss that one, let me suggest a way of minimizing the effect of the impostor syndrome in your organization.

Expose the phenomenon by widely sharing this article. Consider hosting small discussion groups where you initiate the conversation and invite team members to talk about their experiences. Ask team members to freely offer informal, encouraging feedback support to their friends and colleagues.

Offer this question for individuals to ask their colleagues who are feeling inadequate. "Is what you are feeling real, or are you nursing an exaggerated impression?" Explored with a caring colleague, an individual may find that the feelings of incompetence are, indeed, an inflated, inaccurate perception.

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SPECIAL NOTE: In August of 2017, "Fast Company" magazine published an article on this topic, using Sheryl Sandberg, Natalie Portman, and Howard Schultz as examples of well-known individuals who have confessed to feeling the Impostor Syndrome:

fastcompany.com/40447089/its-not-just-you-these-super-successful-people-suffer-from-imposter-syndrome