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The Impostor Syndrome—Part 2

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“Welcome to Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” Garrison Keillor, in his PBS radio show, A Prairie Home Companion

“All the children are above average.” That’s not possible, of course. Garrison Keillor’s description is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the psychological phenomenon known as “illusory superiority,” more commonly called the “above average effect.”

Because of the popularity of “A Prairie Home Companion,” this cognitive bias (where people tend to overestimate their positive qualities and underestimate their negative qualities) is also sometimes called “the Lake Wobegon effect.”

Whatever you call it, we humans have a tendency to inaccurately skew our judgment when we compare ourselves to others. For example, if you poll a room full of adults regarding their driving abilities, far more than half will rate themselves “above average.” That’s mathematically impossible. However, that doesn’t stop any of us from having an inflated (or sometimes understated) opinion of our intelligence, our performance, or our personality traits.

This naturally occurring human bias showed up in some interesting research reported in 1999 by two Cornell University psychologists, Justin Kruger and David Dunning. They were seeking to determine if individuals who are unskilled in a particular area are able to accurately evaluate their competence (or lack of it) relative to others.

Note: Kruger and Dunning continued their research. In 2003, they published “Why People Fail to Recognize Their Own Incompetence” in the “Current Directions in Psychological Science” magazine. Their research validated their 1999 studies.

Also, the 2003 research is cited by Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller in their 2009 book entitled *The Power of 2*, published by Gallup, Inc. Specifically, on page 25, they write, “Most people see themselves as more well-rounded than they really are, above average where they are weak, and close to average where they are incredible.” On page 26, they write, “Your strengths are stronger and your weaknesses weaker than you realize. You need help. You are also precisely the help someone else needs.”

Each person estimated his or her ability in a particular subject area prior to taking a standardized test on that topic. To ensure that the subject matter did not distort their research, they conducted the study three times using very different topics. The results were similar for each subject matter tested.

Consistent with the “above average effect,” most individuals prior to each test rated themselves above average. Their predictions were compared to actual performance on the test by quartile.

As hypothesized, those least capable grossly overestimated their knowledge. Though they were actually in the lowest 25% of test takers, on average they estimated their competence at about 65%.

Those in the next quartile (25% to 50%) were a bit more accurate. Their estimate was also 65%.

Those in the next quartile (50% to 75%) were even more accurate. Their estimate was 70%.

The big surprise to me as I read the research report occurred among the top performers. Those in the 75% to 100% quartile estimated their competence at the 75% level. Note that this is the only group whose actual performance exceeded their estimated performance!

No wonder the impostor syndrome is experienced by such a high percentage of capable people!

Kruger and Dunning explained, “Top-quartile participants did not underestimate themselves because they were wrong about their own performances, but rather because they were wrong about the performances of their peers. We believe they fell prey to the *false consensus effect*. They mistakenly assumed that their peers would tend to provide the same correct answers as themselves.”

The “false consensus effect” is a term from research conducted in 1977 by Lee Ross, David Greene, and Pamela House. It is another common human bias where we tend to overestimate how similar other people are to us. We assume that our opinions, beliefs, values, and skills are “normal” and that others think and perform the same way that we do. **(This common way of thinking can be very damaging for leaders. For valuable additional information on the false consensus effect, look on my website in the article entitled “Your Colleagues Often Don’t Think Like You.”)**

Thus, people who experience the impostor syndrome assume that they are no different, no more productive or competent than anyone else. Under that premise, they conclude they don’t deserve the unique recognition or responsibility they’ve been given.

Here’s another potential explanation. Since your weaknesses are weaker than you realize (see quote above by Wagner and Muller), perhaps when you start feeling inadequate, it’s because your weaknesses are most prominent in your mind. Focusing on those limitations seduces you into believing they are characteristic of your performance. You diminish the importance of your strengths, and you cave in to feeling inadequate. Since you falsely presume everyone around you has the same strengths you have, there is nothing to pull you out of your sense of inadequacy. You are trapped, duped, and stuck!

Good news, sufferers! Kruger and Dunning’s research not only confirmed their hypothesis that incompetent people are not able to accurately judge their competence relative to others. Their research also implies that top performers are likely to experience the impostor syndrome.

So, when you start doubting yourself and feeling like a fake, pull out this article. Consider that your feelings of inadequacy could be prima facie evidence that you are a respected, capable contributor!

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