Impostor Syndrome: Confronting the Practical Realities

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Have you ever felt like you don't belong or that you're cheating those around you? It's likely you've experienced Impostor Syndrome. Yes, it's a real feeling experienced by many, and one that's hard to shake. Tessa Desatnik discusses the five strategies you can implement with immediate impact in getting rid of your inner imposter and advancing your career.

If you've ever watched the animated show *BoJack Horseman*, you'll know the character, Vincent Adultman. He's actually three kids stacked on top of each other under a trench coat, pretending to be an adult. To quote him, he likes "business… uh… transactions…?" and has "adult stuff" figured out. It's a humorous portrayal, but haven't we all occasionally felt like a kid dressed up as an adult, spouting adult-sounding buzzwords?

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The real-life version of this is well known as *impostor syndrome*. It can manifest into serious doubts of our own

abilities—sometimes to the point of feeling like a fraud and worrying that everyone will eventually find out what an impostor we truly are.

There has been a lot of discourse on the subject lately—most notably in an HBR article titled *Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome*. In it, authors Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey denounce researchers and writers who have tried to pathologize those feelings as a syndrome, arguing that the real fix is to change the environment. There's no question that societal issues like racism, sexism—along with other biases that perpetuate discomfort, anxiety, and second-guessing—need to be combatted. On a systemic and individual level, we all need to work towards making these biases a thing of the past—in general, as well as in the workplace.

With that said, this large-scale and much-needed shift isn't going to happen overnight. If you experience the feelings associated with imposter syndrome, there are strategies you can use today to help overcome them. Here are some tangible steps to take:

1. Recognize that you're not alone. Impostor syndrome is well documented, and the feeling is or has been, shared by more people than anyone would care to admit. While it was originally identified as affecting women, it turns out these feelings are very common, with an estimated 70 percent of people experiencing them at some point. The other 30 percent? Hard to say, but they may need to check out the *Dunning–Kruger Effect*.

2. Try to isolate the types of events or comments that trigger negative feelings of insecurity or intimidation. For the most part, you can't shelter yourself from the onslaught of workplace transgressions, but if there are certain individuals or situations that keep popping up as provocative interactions, you may want to consider acting—either by addressing the person or the situation.

3. Target a behavioural change you can make within yourself the next time you feel that way. Instead of shrinking away, use your body language, voice, eye contact, or gestures to show your confidence in the moment. Try practicing it outside the stressed environment to get comfortable and be ready. Even if you don't *feel* confident, "fake it 'til you make it". It does work in this context.

4. Use your energy to empower yourself. Strip away the subjective feelings from your objective qualifications. Sometimes we just need to remind ourselves why we're right for the job at hand. Your skills and experience are the reason you were given the responsibilities you have. There's nothing wrong with giving yourself a little pep talk every so often.

5. Seek support if you need. You will have colleagues and friends who've experienced similar challenges and can relate and provide comfort and support. There are also professionals who are well versed in the challenges of impostor syndrome. Psychologists handle the mental health aspects of it and executive coaches can help you hone your strategies to deal with the practical aspects of your work situation. They can lead you through the tangible, small steps you can take to start seeing results.

Impostor syndrome can unsettle even seasoned executives who have every reason to exude confidence in their roles. However, it hits with even greater force when we take on a new role or feel out of our element. The same strategies can help here too. Giving us the confidence we need to adjust, learn, and assimilate the skills we need—without toppling over like the three kids inside Vincent Adultman's trench coat.

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