

REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY - PART 3 - IMPOSTER SYNDROME

I am an anxious person. Not always, but there have been moments in my career when anxiety has taken hold. One of the biggest culprits? **Imposter syndrome** - that persistent voice telling you that you don't belong, that you're unqualified, and that sooner or later, everyone will figure it out. Even after 20 years of experience, publishing books, and leading in top organizations, I still occasionally think, *they're going to realize I don't know what I'm doing*.

The most vivid example came when I was 25. I convinced the head of HR for Europe to let me temporarily fill the role of HR Director for a commercial division overseeing \$1 billion in revenue. To my surprise, they agreed, and I joined a leadership team of seasoned veterans—all at least 20 years older than me.

I put on a brave face, but I was consumed by self-doubt. Every meeting felt like a test. At home, I wasn't the partner I wanted to be because I was too preoccupied with fear. Despite my anxiety, I performed well. The organization made me permanent in the role, and my reviews were strong, but inside, I was convinced my success was an illusion and that it was only a matter of time before I'd be exposed as a fraud.

Looking back, I see how much joy imposter syndrome robbed me of. The opportunity shaped my career, but I couldn't fully appreciate it because I was too anxious. That's the damage of imposter syndrome - it creates unnecessary fear, clouds your perception of yourself, and taints rewarding experiences.

For leaders, it's a reminder to look for signs of imposter syndrome in their teams. By fostering an environment where people feel safe admitting their struggles, we can help reduce its grip and create workplaces where everyone can thrive.

Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we're not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We're talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them — especially right now. It's the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn't come from nowhere. It's not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it's the result of deeper, systemic issues—things that exist across teams and organizations, baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we're exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety** — themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren't just theoretical problems. They're patterns I've seen in action, and in many cases, lived through myself.

Here's what we'll be digging into over the coming months:

1. **Toxic Work Environments** - when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.
2. **Imposter Syndrome** - when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.
3. **Lack of Supportive Relationships** - when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.
4. **Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** - when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.
5. **Neglected Well-Being** - when people are burning out, and no one's paying attention to the toll.
6. **Resistance to Change** - when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.
7. **Personal and Global Stressors** - when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.



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Each article in this series will explore one of these drivers in depth, offering real stories, research-backed insight, and practical tools to help reduce anxiety—whether you’re leading a team or just trying to get through the week with your sanity intact.

This month’s article kicks things off with something that many people silently struggle with: Imposter Syndrome. Let’s dive in.

What Is Imposter Syndrome?

Imposter syndrome is a persistent belief that your achievements are undeserved, that your success is due to luck, timing, or external factors rather than your abilities. First introduced in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, imposter syndrome isn’t tied to reality—it thrives on self-doubt and fear, regardless of evidence of competence.

What’s frustrating about imposter syndrome is that it doesn’t go away with success or experience. I’ve dealt with it at every stage of my career. Even while writing this article, I’ve caught myself thinking, What if people realize I don’t know what I’m talking about? The feeling sneaks in unexpectedly, whispering doubts that can be hard to silence.

Certain groups are more prone to imposter syndrome. Research shows that women, minorities, and high achievers in competitive fields are disproportionately affected. These individuals often face systemic biases, higher expectations, and intense scrutiny, which amplify feelings of inadequacy. Even those with advanced degrees or decades of experience report struggling with imposter syndrome.

The impacts are significant. People with imposter syndrome often overwork to “prove” their worth, which can lead to burnout. They may avoid risks, downplay their achievements, or shy away from new challenges out of fear of failure. Over time, these patterns affect not only the individual but also the team, limiting creativity, collaboration, and growth.

Understanding imposter syndrome is the first step to addressing it. It’s not just a personal struggle - it’s a workplace challenge that affects performance, morale, and well-being. Tackling it head-on can reduce anxiety and open the door to more confident, resilient teams.

How to Spot Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome often hides in plain sight. It’s not always easy to identify—either in yourself or in others—because it can disguise itself as behaviors that seem normal, or even admirable. Recognizing it requires looking beyond surface actions to understand the fears driving them.

One of the most common signs is **overworking**. People with imposter syndrome often take on excessive workloads, staying late or going above and beyond—not because they’re inspired, but because they’re afraid of failure. I’ve been there myself, working tirelessly not out of passion but out of fear of being “found out.”

Another telltale sign is **reluctance to delegate**. Those with imposter syndrome may struggle to trust others with tasks, fearing that handing something off increases the risk of failure—or worse, exposes their own perceived inadequacies. This need for control can lead to micromanagement or burnout.

Difficulty **accepting praise** is another indicator. When recognized for their accomplishments, people with imposter syndrome often downplay their role, attributing success to luck, teamwork, or circumstances. Phrases like “I just got lucky” or “Anyone could have done this” are common refrains.

Pay attention to **hesitation and self-doubt**, too. People with imposter syndrome may avoid taking on new challenges, constantly apologize for perceived mistakes, or express discomfort in their roles. Even their language—such as “I don’t belong here” or “I’m not qualified for this”—can reveal deeper fears.

Recognizing these patterns in yourself or others isn’t about labeling anyone as an “imposter.” It’s about fostering awareness and empathy. For leaders, spotting these signs is a chance to provide support and create an environment where individuals feel valued for their contributions, not consumed by self-doubt.



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Overcoming Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is powerful because it lives in your mind. It isn't rooted in your actual abilities but in the stories you tell yourself—stories of doubt, fear, and inadequacy. Overcoming it isn't an overnight fix, but it's possible with intentional effort and the right tools.

1. Reframe Negative Self-Talk - One of the simplest but most effective strategies is to tackle negative selftalk. Replace absolute, self-critical thoughts like “I can't do this” with a small but impactful addition: “I can't do this—yet.” This subtle shift reframes challenges as opportunities for growth rather than limitations.

2. Rethink Failure - Failure is often seen as proof of inadequacy, but it's actually part of growth. Reframe failure from “I've failed; I'm not good enough” to “What can I learn from this?” Perfection isn't attainable and understanding that mistakes are normal reduces the pressure to prove yourself constantly.

3. Recognize Accomplishments - Imposter syndrome thrives when you ignore your achievements. Create a habit of acknowledging your wins, no matter how small. Journaling your successes and reflecting on what you did well each day can shift your focus away from doubts. Over time, you'll build a clearer picture of your capabilities.

4. Normalize Vulnerability - As a leader, sharing your own struggles with self-doubt can be a powerful way to support your team. Phrases like, “I'm still learning this myself” or “I've been in your shoes” normalize vulnerability and foster trust. Psychological safety is crucial for encouraging openness and reducing imposter syndrome's grip.

5. Celebrate Strengths - Imposter syndrome often highlights what you can't do but balancing the conversation with what you're good at is key. For teams, activities like strengths mapping—where individuals identify and celebrate each other's skills—can create a culture of appreciation and mutual support.

Overcoming imposter syndrome is about creating new habits and shifting your mindset. Whether it's through self-reflection, small daily changes, or fostering a supportive environment as a leader, the key is consistency. The more you work to challenge the narratives of self-doubt, the less power they'll have over you.

The Role of Mentorship and Leadership

If you're grappling with imposter syndrome, one of the most powerful steps you can take is to find a mentor. A mentor offers perspective, guidance, and a safe space to share your doubts. Imposter syndrome thrives in isolation, but a mentor can help break the cycle by validating your experiences and helping you see your strengths.

I didn't have a mentor during one of the most challenging periods of my career, and looking back, I see how transformative that support could have been. A good mentor doesn't “fix” imposter syndrome; they help you reframe your self-perception, recognize your growth, and navigate challenges with greater confidence.

For leaders, even if you're not a formal mentor, you play a critical role in addressing imposter syndrome within your team. Leadership isn't just about managing deliverables; it's about creating an environment where people feel valued and supported. Here's how you can help:

1. Build Psychological Safety - Create a culture where team members feel comfortable admitting their challenges. If they're afraid of being judged, they'll keep their struggles hidden. Acknowledge their contributions and foster an environment of trust where self-doubt can be openly discussed.

2. Highlight Strengths and Achievements - People with imposter syndrome often downplay their accomplishments. As a leader, take the time to specifically acknowledge their successes and the unique value they bring to the team. Show them how their contributions fit into the bigger picture.



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3. Encourage Growth and Learning - Imposter syndrome can make people afraid to take risks or make mistakes. Remind them that failure is part of the process and an opportunity to learn. Share your own experiences with self-doubt and growth to normalize these feelings.

4. Provide Tools for Self-Reflection - Encourage team members to use tools like journaling to track their achievements and reflect on their progress. Self-reflection helps counteract the distorted narratives of imposter syndrome and builds confidence over time.

Ultimately, addressing imposter syndrome is about empathy, support, and creating a culture that values growth over perfection. When leaders model vulnerability and recognize the impact of imposter syndrome, they empower their teams to break free from the cycle of self-doubt and unlock their full potential.

From Self-Doubt to Confidence

Imposter syndrome can feel like an unwelcome companion, whispering doubts and undermining confidence, no matter how accomplished or capable you are. But it doesn't have to dominate your career—or your team's. By recognizing its signs, reframing negative thoughts, and fostering environments of trust and psychological safety, we can loosen its grip.

Whether you're grappling with imposter syndrome yourself or supporting someone on your team who is, the key is to take consistent, intentional action. Challenge the narratives of self-doubt, celebrate strengths, and normalize growth over perfection.

As leaders, our role is to create workplaces where imposter syndrome isn't allowed to thrive. That means recognizing it, addressing it, and providing the tools and support needed to overcome it. By doing so, we not only reduce anxiety but also unlock the potential for individuals and teams to do their best, most fulfilling work.

Imposter syndrome is a deeply personal experience, but it's one we can confront—together. Let's build workplaces that replace fear with confidence, doubt with growth, and anxiety with assurance.

The choice is clear: fear or trust, blame or learning, isolation or collaboration. The future of your team depends on how you lead today. Choose wisely.

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