

# Imposter Syndrome is a Workplace Culture Problem

The term "imposter syndrome" was first coined in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in a study of professional women in a clinical setting. It refers to a persistent feeling of inadequacy despite evidence of competence and success. People suffering from imposter syndrome experience self-doubt and fear that others will discover they are not as smart or talented as they seem. They often credit any success they achieve to good luck and cannot internalize their accomplishments. This phenomenon can affect high-achieving, successful individuals and isn't necessarily correlated with low self-esteem or overall lack of confidence. Prolific poet, memoirist and playwright, Maya Angelou once said, "I have written eleven 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.'" She felt like an imposter despite receiving awards, accolades, and experiencing financial success. She's not alone— highly successful people like Tom Hanks, Serena Williams, and Sheryl Sandberg have all reported feeling like a fraud at some point in their careers.

The [2020 KPMG Women's Leadership Summit Report](#) found that 75% of executive women report having personally experienced imposter syndrome in their careers. Additionally, 56% have been afraid that they won't live up to expectations or that their peers will not believe they are capable of succeeding in their role. While discussions about imposter syndrome often focus on women in the workplace,



it can affect anyone. In fact, [one study](#) found that men may be more likely to experience the imposter phenomenon when given negative feedback regarding their performance. They also experience higher levels of stress at the prospect that the negative feedback might be shared with superiors. So the lower rate of men that self-report feelings of inadequacy may have more to do with cultural gender norms motivating them to avoid appearing vulnerable than an actual absence of imposter syndrome. Likewise, culture affects how men and women communicate and how they display confidence. In many cultures, common and acceptable behaviors for men in the workplace would be perceived as "rude" or "bossy" if a woman behaved the same way. These gender stereotypes can prevent women from speaking up in meetings or pursuing promotions to positions of leadership.

Cultural norms may also influence how people of different races and backgrounds experience this imposter phenomenon. [A study of minority undergraduate students](#) revealed that Black students dealing with imposter syndrome reported higher levels of anxiety and depression related to perceived discrimination. However, Asian students with self-reported imposter syndrome also had increased levels of depression and anxiety but did not relate it to discrimination or racism. Interestingly, Latino students experiencing imposter syndrome did not report increased feelings of anxiety or depression. The authors of the study could only speculate on the reasons for these differences but felt strongly that cultural differences and backgrounds affect how people perceive and respond to feelings of being an imposter.



## The Cost of Imposter Syndrome

The cost of imposter syndrome can be high at both the individual and organizational level. [Intuit Mint](#) estimates that Americans experiencing imposter syndrome cost businesses about \$3,400 on lost productivity per employee each year. Individuals suffering from these feelings can lose as much as \$7,528 per year by not negotiating their salary. Add to that the health costs of stress, burnout, and lost sleep, and the need for leaders to address the problem of imposter syndrome in the workplace becomes clear.

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Organizations can also miss out on hiring the best talent simply because a great candidate was not convinced they were qualified to apply. When an opportunity arises, the person who puts their hand up first is not always the most talented, and confidence is not always equal to ability. Tackling imposter syndrome at work can help advance employees based on what they can actually do instead of what they think they can or can't do, leading to better results.

## How Workplace Culture Can Cause Imposter Syndrome

Knowing that organizations can pay a high price when employees struggle with imposter syndrome, leaders need to look closely at how they can help their teams overcome or prevent these feelings. Often business leaders are unaware of imposter syndrome in their teams and, worse, are unaware of how they create a culture that reinforces the imposter syndrome phenomenon.

Toxic workplace practices can trigger or exacerbate imposter syndrome in several ways:

- **Rewarding Overwork:** A workplace that rewards routinely working late, being available 24/7, or forgoing lunch breaks regularly can encourage burnout in employees that feel they have to work harder than others to prove their worth. The circumstances of the pandemic have only intensified this problem, as lines between work and home-life have become blurred, and economic fears have made employees unsure of their job security.
- **Perfectionism:** Setting unrealistic goals or expectations of perfection will set up any team for failure. For individuals suffering from imposter syndrome, these unattainable expectations only confirm their suspicion that they are not good enough or lack the competence to do the job.
- **Withholding Praise, But Not Criticism:** A manager that is overly critical or who publicly shames employees for mistakes can cause team members to avoid taking on new projects or speaking up in meetings. Likewise, a manager who never praises employees for jobs well done can cause employees to be unsure if they ever meet expectations. Uncertainty about job performance can lead to self-doubt and insecurity.
- **Creating an Overly Competitive Environment:** Friendly competition— such as a contest rewarding the person with the most sales— can motivate people and drive performance in the short term. However, in the long-term, a highly competitive environment where some employees are clearly favored over others will decrease collaboration, breed mistrust, and lead to higher staff

turnover.

- **A Love It or Leave It Mentality:** A workplace culture that perpetuates the attitude that employees should be grateful just to have a job, even if they are treated badly or have to work under difficult conditions, is not healthy for anyone. Likewise, a manager that tries to motivate employees by reminding them they are replaceable will see decreased productivity and increased anxiety in workers.
- **Not Addressing DE&I:** One often overlooked aspect of imposter syndrome is the impact of systemic racism, classism, and other biases on self-perception. Women and minorities are less likely to find role models in positions of power that look like they do or face the same challenges. Because of this imbalance, they are more likely to feel they don't belong, leading to self-doubt, triggering imposter feelings. On a recent episode of [NPR's Weekend Edition Sunday](#), Author and Professor Christy Pichichero recently explained how she first experienced imposter syndrome when she was accepted into Princeton, and a classmate angrily accused her of getting in only because she is Black. "I sort of internalized this assumption that came from other people that no level of accomplishment by a Black girl could open the doors of the aptly named Ivory Tower, that only affirmative action could do that. And so, from that point on, I really did start to doubt myself. Could Princeton have made a mistake? Perhaps I was a fraud. And these thoughts really plagued me throughout college and into my years as a professor." Organizations that do not address diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring and management practices create an environment where some people will feel like outsiders, leading to self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy.



## Coaching Employees with Imposter Syndrome

In addition to addressing issues within the workplace culture, leaders can help employees overcome imposter syndrome with intentional coaching strategies. It can be challenging to encourage the talent and achievement of an employee that can't see their own strengths, but there are some things a leader can do to help someone overcome their self-doubt.

### 1. Let Them Know They Are Not Alone

Suppose a team member confesses to feeling like a fraud or imposter. In that case, it is helpful to remind them that imposter feelings are both normal and common and happen to everyone, from Nobel Prize winners to famous athletes. Leaders can share stories of their own experiences of imposter syndrome, or point out that even though some people seem more

comfortable "winging it," it doesn't mean they are smarter or more capable. They may just be better at faking it!

### 2. Challenge Negative Self-Talk

People struggling with imposter syndrome are prone to negative self-talk. They might say something like, "Are you sure you should trust me with this?" Or, "I always mess everything up." They may refer to themselves as stupid or say that they are not as good as other team members. Countering these statements with objective data can help the employee re-evaluate their self-view. A manager can counter self-doubting statements by reminding an employee of recent success or telling them something like, "I think I'm pretty smart, and I know you will do a great job on this project. Why do you disagree with me?"

### 3. Provide Training and Development Opportunities

Giving employees the opportunity to develop and strengthen relevant skills can build confidence and create opportunities for objective evaluation of their abilities. Being able to point to the successful completion of a class or certification can help individuals counteract imposter feelings and self-doubt.

### 4. Share Feedback as a Team

Create opportunities to share positive feedback as a group. Encourage team members to share something they appreciate or admire about another team member. Positive group feedback can boost confidence and build trust within the team. When something has gone wrong, have team members focus on what they learned from the experience and what steps to take to move forward, avoiding any finger-pointing or blame. Staying solution-focused can help employees with imposter syndrome practice resilience in the face of setbacks or failures.



## Leading the Way

With recent studies and polls revealing that [70% of people](#) have experienced imposter syndrome at some point in their career, today's leaders must start looking at the problem from new perspectives. It is time to address the systemic bias and cultural norms that can lead talented individuals to feel unqualified or incapable of success. By creating more inclusive workplace cultures, leaders can change the narrative about what confidence looks like and how competence is defined and recognized. While there is no one magic trick to convince struggling employees that they are capable and worthy, managers can intentionally coach employees to channel healthy amounts of self-doubt into motivation for success and improve both their self-perception and performance.



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