

The Imposter Syndrome

A very specific thought process can relieve the sensation that you're faking it when stepping into a higher position. BY SARAH LEVITT

You might have a rather loud train running through your head that sounds like: “Do-I-have-what-it-takes-to-do-this? Did-they-make-a-mistake-in-choosing-me? What-if-I’m-revealed-to-not-be-who-they-think-I-am?”

Rest assured you are not alone.

Very seasoned leaders tell me that they wrestle with self-confidence. They wonder if they're up to the job; are afraid they'll be revealed; are intimidated by the weight and responsibility of what's on their shoulders; and are concerned that others see them as having all the answers. Being promoted into larger, more highly visible roles can set this train to high speed.

A few ideas:

First, remember that very bright and capable people put you where you are. You wouldn't be there unless you were up to it. You might wonder if an error has been made to land you in your role, but there was deliberation that went into it. That in and of itself can provide some reassurance.

Second, growth requires stretching. When we risk, we grow. It's an equation. Despite the fear.

This also means that we're getting better along the way, even when our learning is the most difficult of all – what I've come to call our Stephen Colbert moments – where the only way to get better is by doing it and iterating, publicly. (I'll never forget the time I was walking across a stage to deliver a keynote to many hundreds of people at a corporate event, and the heel of one of my Manolos went through the floor.)

The only way we get better is to continually try things that we're not sure we can accomplish. If we didn't, we'd stagnate. So, keep in mind that as frightening as greater leadership responsibility is, it's also an opportunity that you've been given.

Third, know your values, what you stand for, what matters. Align with all that. Not only will it serve as a rudder through difficult waters, but you won't feel as if you're trying to be someone you're not. Your role

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have to imitate anyone; you simply have to be the best version of yourself.

Fourth, find a trusted space where you can get input from others who have walked your path and continue to walk it. Part of what I consistently see with clients is that they think they are alone in feeling like an imposter.

Hearing from colleagues and peers that they (no matter their position and experience), sometimes question whether they belong where they've landed can help to dispel the notion that you're alone in feeling like you're going to be found out. One of the great surprises for many leaders is

discovering that their colleagues grapple with the same concerns that they do.

Fifth, get tactical and practical. Whether you're preparing for a media interview, a board presentation or a high-stakes, all-hands meeting, don't wing it. Get coaching from someone who is experienced and knowledgeable about your goals and can craft specific, customized strategies tailored for you.

For a presentation, that might mean slowing down your rate of speech (when we get nervous, we tend to talk faster); engaging the audience more often; grounding yourself with somatic exercises; or being aware of what to do during the first 10 minutes. For a new leadership role, it might involve evaluating everything from influence and key stakeholder buy-in, to setting strategic priorities and building a rock star senior leadership team.

The goal should be to hit the ground running; lead your initiatives with confidence; and accelerate your learning in that first, crucial year to avoid common pitfalls and achieve your objectives with greater ease. I tell clients that the key objective, when they're under the bright spotlight, is to be confident, comfortable, connected and capable. That combination is hard to beat.

Lastly, leverage your fear into self-mastery. I haven't met an exemplary leader yet who isn't still learning, still stretching, still risking, still venturing into uncharted waters, still asking questions, still scared sometimes, still unsure they can pull it off. That's what makes them exemplary.

Be that kind of leader, with pride and humility. And forget feeling like an imposter.



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