

Imposter Syndrome in the Workplace

By Leyla Hussein • 12 November 2021



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One of the best people I ever worked alongside used to physically wave a hand in front of her face whenever anyone praised her, as if she could bat the compliment away before it landed. She closed more than anyone on the team. She also told me, more than once, that she had just been lucky and was waiting for everyone to work out she did not really know what she was doing.

She was not fishing. She meant it. And she is far from alone.

What Imposter Syndrome Looks Like

Downplaying [our own achievements](#) is something a huge number of us do without noticing. Have you ever felt you did not really deserve the praise or the reward, even when everyone around you clearly thought you did? That is [imposter syndrome](#). It is the quiet belief that you are not good enough, held in the face of plenty of evidence that you are, and it comes with a nagging fear of being found out as a fraud who somehow slipped through.

In a fast-moving workplace it is becoming more common, not less. The pressure to perform feeds the doubt. People carrying imposter syndrome will turn down compliments, avoid asking for help or feedback in case it exposes them, work themselves to exhaustion trying to be certain, hesitate over decisions, and quietly step back from goals they are frightened of missing. Every one of those habits holds a good person back, and the maddening part is that it tends to grip the capable ones hardest.

How to Push Back

The better news is that it can be worked on. A few things genuinely help.

1. **Learn from failure.** Mistakes are how anyone gets better. Treat a failure as information rather than a verdict, and it loses most of its power over you.
2. **Focus on what you have actually done.** Keep a real list of your wins and the reasons you are qualified to do your job. When the doubt arrives, and it will, read the list instead of replaying the one thing that went wrong.
3. **Build a [support network](#).** Talk to the people around you. Say out loud how you feel, because the odds are strong that the colleague next to you feels exactly the same, and two people naming it can steady each other.
4. **Keep perfectionism in check.** High standards are a gift. The belief that you must be flawless is not. Learn to accept, and forgive, the times things do not go to plan.

What all of this comes down to is a change of mindset. Seek support, remember that everyone makes mistakes, and judge yourself on how you respond to them rather than on the fact that they happened. Do that consistently and the imposter feeling starts to loosen its grip. You begin to trust your own results, and you carry your ability with a bit more ease.

Final Thoughts

I never did convince that colleague she was as good as her numbers said. But I did watch her stop flinching at praise, and start letting it land. That, honestly, is most of the battle.

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