

MANAGING PEOPLE

Mentoring Someone with Imposter Syndrome

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Nearly all of us have felt like imposters at one time or another. We suffer anxiety-inducing thoughts about our incompetence or lack of qualification. We wonder if we got admitted or hired by mistake. In silent agony, we wait to be revealed as frauds and shown to the exit.

For most of us, these imposter moments are transient — often most acute immediately after accepting a promotion, starting a new job, or entering a workplace in which our minority status is obvious. For some, imposter feelings become more pervasive and begin to hinder performance.

Enter what's known as imposter syndrome, which was originally coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their study of professional women in a clinical setting. For people with imposter syndrome, self-doubt, insecurity, and perpetual trepidation that their inadequacies will be discovered is a way of being in the workplace. Any successes and accomplishments can trigger anxiety. Women and ethnic minorities are often the hardest hit because hierarchical and masculine cultures can contribute to imposter distress.

How can you mentor someone suffering from imposter syndrome? It's hard to encourage someone's glaring talent, achievement, and creativity when it doesn't jibe with the mentee's self-perceptions of potential and performance. Here are several strategies for mentorship that can help.

Normalize imposter feelings: If a mentee confesses imposter anxiety, shrug your shoulders, smile warmly, and say, “You and 70% of the people around you. Welcome to the club!” Feeling like a fraud at times is decidedly normal. After all, members of the self-admitted imposter club include Nobel prize winners, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, actors Tom Hanks and Tina Fey, Tennis icon Serena Williams, and yes, the authors of this article. Remind your mentee that nobody knows everything and that those who don't struggle with imposter concerns are no more intelligent, competent, or capable than the rest of us. In many cases, they are simply more adept at faking it till they make it. When advising women in particular, it's worth reminding them that, while men tend to be more comfortable “winging it,” they don't actually know more than you.

Empirically challenge negative self-talk: Quite often, mentees struggling with imposter syndrome offer telltale blanket assessments of their capacity or performance. Stay attuned to vague self-downing comments such as: “I am so stupid!” “I totally botched that presentation!” or “I have no business being in this job!”

In these moments, stick with the data, stay concrete, and work to create dissonance between the evidence and your mentee’s self-statements. Focus on their progression of professional competencies and strengths: “Stupid? What exactly do you mean by that? If you’re stupid, we’re all in trouble!” “I’ve heard from nobody that you ‘totally botched’ the presentation. Do you mean there are a couple of things you’d like to improve next time?” “No business being in this job? So, you’re saying that the committee of really smart people who offered you the job are incompetent?” or “Help me here, I’m a bit confused. I’ve observed that you’ve accomplished ..., and yet you say you don’t belong?”

Affirm, affirm, and affirm some more: Excellent mentors are attuned to imposter worries and are quick to counter them with copious doses of affirmation and encouragement. With good humor and grace, the wise mentor seeks opportunities to express belief in a mentee, reminding them that they *do* belong and *are* in fact competent. This is also an excellent opportunity to review their progress and milestone achievements.

Remember that there are two dimensions of affirmation. First, affirm your mentees as human beings, acknowledging their inherent worth, accepting them without condition. Second, affirm them as professionals, persistently calling out their achievements and celebrating them.

Deliberately counteract stereotype threat: When mentoring women and people of color in predominantly male or white work environments, remind your mentees that context matters. When marginalized at work they don’t just *feel* like imposters; they are *made to feel* like imposters, regardless of how self-assured, smart, and confident they are. Research reveals that stereotype threat-based performance anxiety can be mitigated

by reminding your mentee that key tasks are not affected by gender or race, and helping them to develop high self-efficacy in their work. For example, “so, if you apply, you would be the first woman to lead a venture capital firm. I sure hope you realize that women are as or more effective than men as leaders in venture capital. You got this!”

Share your own imposter stories: If you’re like most people, you’ve had imposter feelings at different moments in life and career. Tell your mentee about it! Nothing is so uplifting to an imposter than the epiphany of discovering that a respected mentor and role model also has wrestled — and perhaps, continues to wrestle — the dragon of imposter anxiety and managed to endure.

Do not allow your mentee to give you all the credit: Be vigilant to the tendency for imposters to credit luck, extreme preparation, or their own mentors for their professional successes. Women are especially likely to attribute success to luck or their teammates, or credit mentors for achievements while downplaying their own talent and achievement. When a mentee with imposter syndrome gives you the credit, express thanks and then highlight in no uncertain terms how she deserves the lion’s share of credit — and explain why.

If you want to be an excellent mentor, start by assuming that most of your mentees will, at one time or another, suffer bouts of self-doubt and imposter anxiety. With patience, warmth, and steady affirmation help your mentees to see themselves through your eyes.

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Great article. I have been both the mentee and mentor in the situations you describe and you have provided wonderful, practical advice. Thank you.

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