

Imposter Syndrome in High Performers – by Stuart Mackenzie.

I have seen individuals stand on stage and mesmerise a conference for a whole day, or dazzle the most senior board of directors. And yet, despite appearances I know they walk away feeling that they ‘fooled’ everyone, that they ‘got away with it’, that they are faking it. Self-worth is different from self-confidence.

At Maynard Leigh we have been researching High Performance and Leadership for 30 years now. Often in one-to-one sessions, we will explore the strengths and weaknesses behind the effective masks of professionals from some of the most successful companies in various industries. The weight of evidence makes it abundantly clear that one of the biggest shared vulnerabilities amongst High Achievers is a level of elevated anxiety linked to a low sense of self-worth, regardless of their considerable accomplishments. It is called Imposter Syndrome, defined as high performing individuals unable to internalise their achievements.

People suffering from Imposter Syndrome, in spite of great achievements and power, never think they will do well and therefore feel insecure in their role. They may be remarkably skilled and passionately ambitious but are nonetheless driven by a fear that something will go wrong, they will fail and be found out; the house of cards will come crashing down around them. They have a profound sense of their own inadequacy, despite evidence to the contrary.

Mike Myers, the successful actor and comedian says, **"I still expect the ‘no talent’ police to come and arrest me."** Oscar-winner Kate Winslet admits, **"I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, I can't do this. I'm a fraud."**

Let me be open with you. I am afflicted by Imposter Syndrome, although thankfully only in a mild form. Having flunked out of two schools, and never completed my education I decided to pursue a career in theatre. I wrote, acted and directed. Then at about 28 I started a second career in business, and am now the CEO of a company that I love. My Imposter Syndrome takes the form of a fear that I am a fraud, that I am less intelligent than the evidence might suggest, and that if I relax for a moment it will become clear that I am inadequate as a CEO. I can receive a lot of validation and affirmation about how I lead, and yet a single negative comment about some small aspect will trigger in me a redoubled effort to shore up what I fear might be a crumbling edifice.

I am lucky: I work in an organisation that understands the psychological aspects of work, invites personal exploration and has people prepared to talk about their insecurities and concerns. It is a culture that allows one to work through these vulnerabilities. I can talk about my paranoia and not be disempowered by it or driven to a pit of despair.

In High Performance cultures where competition amongst colleagues is encouraged and everyone else looks like they are Premier League players, carrying the burden of Imposter Syndrome can be lonely, like a sentence of solitary confinement; which is paradoxical because it is such a commonly held condition and therefore there is no need to feel alone with it. The affliction ironically does not lead to lower performance or less productivity - if anything it drives it higher, but not in a sustainable way and at too high a cost to the individual.

While the source of insecurity is personal, it can be accentuated and reinforced by the systems and structures of these High Performance companies. The need to serve the client, the expectation of doing long hours, the sums of money at stake, and the adrenaline and craving for success all conspire to keep pressure on the 'insecure overachiever'. That's not to say there is anything wrong with success or building value. However, if one does not have a strong sense of self then the approval of clients or senior partners is a strong and addictive drug, and its 'high' is transitory.

The opposite of Imposter Syndrome is not complacency. It is possible to have a secure sense of self and still have drive; a healthy drive born of potential, not pathology. The danger for someone with Imposter Syndrome is that the strategies they develop to cope do not add to their resilience but deplete their reserves – such as sleeping less, working longer, sucking up the stress, and hiding depression.

Fortunately, some organisations are realising that to serve the client well, individuals have to be well. As a result, we are increasingly being asked to run programmes exploring Imposter Syndrome, Resilience and Supportive Relationships.

What are some of the strategies one can use to diminish the debilitating effects of Imposter Syndrome?

1. We work with people to help them see reality more clearly and noticing their triggers, or 'amygdala hijacks' as they are becoming known. This requires them instilling a discipline of 'being present'. When Imposter Syndrome is in operation one becomes blinded by anxiety - fear interferes with our thinking functions. The sufferers focus their attention on the strong inner critic and their antenna are scanning for imagined threats. We have tools for regaining control on the focus of attention so that we can see more clearly and, as the fog of nerves dissipates, the 'mask' of competence is dropped to reveal the authentic competence - one is present enough to see the real impact one has.
2. Another technique is to increase awareness of the subtle interpersonal status transactions that are being exchanged at every moment. Status signals communicate where we are in

an informal hierarchy (not based on title or role) if we are in meetings, pitches or around the water cooler.

Misreading these signals can increase the constant feeling of being less than others. Being aware of, and therefore in control of the status transactions can allow us to see, match and lead the status dance.

And so, like many other sufferers, I have learnt some skills and techniques to counter the internal and external attacks on my self-esteem. There is hope for all of us. After all, performance angst doesn't really serve anyone.