

Imposterhood is a major work issue, particularly in uncertain times



by Suzanne Mercier

While Imposterhood™ feelings can affect any area of our lives, most commonly they are experienced in our work environment.

To understand the impact of these feelings in the workplace, we need to examine two factors:

1. What happens when we experience the Imposter Syndrome? What do we experience and how do we cope? And importantly, what triggers those feelings?
2. What are organisations looking for from their employees? What do they need to build sustainable businesses? And how does the Imposter Syndrome impact on those needs?

“Imposters” fear discovery

The driving motivation for people experiencing feelings of Imposterhood™ is to avoid discovery and exposure. In other words, fear is a huge influence on our lives and performance.

To protect ourselves, we self-described “imposters” disconnect. First we disconnect from ourselves, which is a consequence of denying our own talents and abilities. Secondly, we disconnect from others to avoid people seeing through the facade of intelligence and competence.

This fear and disconnection can have a huge impact on our lives. We make decisions through that filter. We may lose sight of who we truly are. We may find ourselves playing roles based on “shoulds” rather than authenticity. We may deny

ourselves the right to make mistakes and learn from them. We may fail to live up to perfection and judge ourselves harshly because of it. We probably find we’ve not only lived inside our comfort zones ... but we’ve shrunk them through our fear.

Authenticity may be a word that’s fraught with danger for many of us - if people could see who we really are ...

None of this has a basis in objective reality, of course. It is simply our subjective experience and very real for us, though its clearly not other peoples’ experience of us.

When we experience feeling like an imposter, we may find ourselves unable to dream and connect with the values we hold around caring relationships, love, family, community, freedom, fulfillment, health & fitness, career and financial abundance.

Organisations NEED employee engagement!

Employee Engagement is a term that really describes the degree of connection the employee feels to who the organisation is, what it stands for and what it contributes to the broader community beyond putting money in the pockets of its shareholders.

The degree of connection then translates to any discretionary effort employees choose to give, depending on how they feel about their employer. This discretionary effort adds profit to the bottom line through motivation, productivity and directed performance; through innovation, collaboration and great customer service.

Therefore, they are unlikely to be as motivated and productive. They are unlikely to stick their necks out to make a contribution to innovation within the organisation. Self-protection and separation don't lend themselves to great team players either.

Imposters are not and cannot be totally engaged!

Broadly, people who feel like imposters have one primary motivation and that is to avoid discovery and judgement as the fake and fraud they truly believe they are. This fear-based motivation keeps "imposters" separate. They are unable to connect or engage in the same way as someone who doesn't experience those feelings

So, all the things that an organisation really needs from its employees are beyond the capability of someone experiencing Imposterhood feelings, particularly if someone is a chronic sufferer.

Uncertainty is one of the triggers for feelings of Imposterhood™

The driver for "Imposters" is to protect themselves from exposure and shame. We become hypervigilant, scanning the environment for potential threats. And when all we have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. We see threats because we're looking for them. When we pick them up on our Early Warning System, we can take steps to neutralise those threats. However, in uncertain times, it is far more difficult to tell the threats from the ups and downs associated with uncertainty.

We currently live and work in uncertain times. People are losing their jobs or living under that fear. Imposterhood™ feelings are running high, and that's not great for your organisation.

People will take fewer risks. They will separate themselves further in the vain attempt to protect themselves from discovery and loss of their job. Engagement levels are likely to drop - perhaps significantly, and fear levels will rise.

Now is the time to reduce uncertainty and support individual growth so they can bring the best of themselves to work.

Imposterhood™ is an expense you can't afford

Without exaggeration, the cost to organisations is huge.

Your training and development programmes to improve leadership and management skills and increase employee engagement in people who are experiencing feelings of imposterhood are wasted because they don't address the problem. They provide skills and learning the employee can't take on board, in spite of best intentions.

Any innovation programmes you have in place may be missing out on some of the best minds in your organisation. You see, imposters have to be talented and clever to have any success worthy of being denied.

We all know that two minds are better than one and that a group of people with complementary skills can form a high performing team that will really make a difference to outcomes in your organisation. People who experience the Imposter Syndrome are often quite defensive. They don't take feedback and constructive criticism at all well. They may even take someone else's opinion as criticism. These people find it hard to work effectively in a team and other people can find it hard to work with them.

Improving their performance can also be challenging for the same reason - in general they don't take well to feedback. I've heard managers saying that seeking to couch some feedback in a way their staff member could take it on board was like walking on thin ice with football boots!

These are just a few of the impacts on organisations when employees feel like imposters. And these self-described imposters aren't just in the lower ranks either. In fact, you'll find very few in the

lower ranks. The higher up the organisational ladder someone progresses, the more likely they are to have any existing imposter feelings triggered by the higher expectations and increased responsibility.

Can you afford to have your senior leaders and managers delivering below their potential and creating an environment where others do too? Especially when the problem can be addressed to the benefit of everyone!



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