

To find the authentic leader within, we need to go beyond the surface



by Suzanne Mercier

Authentic Leadership is a term we hear a lot these days. What does authenticity and authentic leadership actually mean to you and to me?

Leadership can be a position in your organisation's hierarchy. Additionally, individuals at any level of the organisation can emerge as leaders with ideas and with purpose, leading from their values and inspiring others.

Authenticity is about being real. It's about knowing and accepting in ourselves the magic and the warts. It's about coming from integrity, being transparent, trustworthy and trusting others. It's about claiming our personal power and using our internal compass to guide our actions. Knowing who we are and what's important to us allows us to find meaning in our lives and to continually evolve. It's about connecting with our passion and being both inspired and inspiring. And it's about accepting that while authenticity is a destination, most importantly, it is a work in progress. Authentic Leadership is about leading authentic transparent and passionate lives ourselves so we can inspire other to do the same.

With all those benefits, most of us want to be authentic, don't we. Well actually, no!

For many of us, the idea of being authentic is frightening. The last thing we want people to do is really see who we are. We feel like fakes and frauds even though we look like successful people on the outside. We deny

our success, dismiss compliments or think others have an exaggerated view of our capabilities. We think we're incredibly lucky to have made it this far in our careers and it might be pushing our luck to think we could do it again or progress further. We may desperately want to be successful to prove to ourselves and others that we are good enough and yet, inside, we have difficulty enjoying our external success, when it comes.

Yes, the last thing we want people to do is really see who we are. Yet, it's the very thing we want most - someone to see us and accept us for precisely who we are. Those of us who feel this way, suffer from the Imposter Syndrome.

The Imposter Syndrome was impacts the commercial world, academia, men and women equally

In 1974, Psychologists Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes identified the condition after a significant number of high achieving female academics studying for their Masters or PhD became stressed and convinced they would fail in their exams. However, they did very well in their exams in spite of their earlier concerns. Clance and Imes coined the term Imposter Syndrome and identified the key characteristics as:

- Feeling like an intellectual fake or fraud in the context of their current success

- Believing that they do not deserve their success and that others have been deceived into thinking otherwise
- Convinced that they are less intelligent and competent than appearances would suggest
- Believing that their success is due to luck, fate, charm or anything other than their own talent
- Overemphasising their weaknesses or deficiencies and downplaying their strengths.

They found that 70% of people interviewed had experienced feeling like an imposter.

Subsequent research has broadened the impact of the Imposter Syndrome to include males in the same proportion as females. It has also established that the Syndrome is alive and well in commercial environments, although there is far less research to support its commercial manifestation.

If we're successful anyway, why worry about the Imposter Syndrome?

The condition of Imposterhood™ creates duality: separation and disconnection within ourselves. We are no longer integrated and are out of touch with who we are and what is really important to us. Our thoughts are disconnected from our feelings - our highest truth! When we're internally disconnected, we are also disconnected and separated from other people.

We can step into roles and play them in the way that we believe we should play them. We can go through the motions yet not show up as our authentic selves. And when this happens, everyone misses out.

Often when we are externally successful - for example making it to the top - the price we're paying for that success is significant. Keeping up a facade of confidence and

competence when that is not experienced internally - even when it is totally unconscious - is exhausting beyond measure and highly stressful. Our health and other areas of our lives are impacted.

The other factor, and perhaps even more important, is that when a leader isn't leading from integrity, rather is leading from a personal mindset of not being good enough, fear of discovery and the need to control to avoid that discovery, it influences the business culture. Imposterhood™ leaders create imposter cultures. Those important values of transparency and trust do not thrive in such a culture. Politics and game-playing take their place sabotaging a sustainable, positive and profitable business in the long-term.

Imposterhood™ exacts a high price

When we feel like imposters, our primary motivation becomes self-protective. We do everything we can to avoid discovery and to prove that we are worthy. We may become overachievers who do significantly more work to achieve the same outcome simply because they're afraid they're not as intelligent and have to work harder. We may become chameleons and do what we can to blend in - not standing out through achievement or underperformance. We may become shrinking violets, doing all we can to stay under the radar. We may act like maniacs, feeling like imposters and yet driven to prove we are worthy so we climb the ladder, building our internal stress the whole time. There are so many ways we can play out the Imposter Syndrome. The net results, regardless of how we manifest the syndrome, can include:

- feeling unfulfilled because we can't appreciate our own success
- sabotaging our career opportunities because to go higher in the organisation brings higher expectations, greater pressure and risk

- abandoning our dreams as being totally unattainable
- settling for relationships that aren't really connected
- not belonging - being on the outside which is a very lonely place to exist
- by denying our success we may deny its accompanying recognition and reward
- giving away our power by being a victim to our own distorted self-image

These are personal costs. The organisation we work for pays too through decreased engagement, lower productivity and performance, inability to work effectively in teams, not contributing to innovation and not living up to the potential that is so obvious to others.

You may not be aware you're paying this price. Think about it and ask yourself this question: "Is this where I want to be in my career? Is this where I thought I'd be?" Listen carefully to your answer by listening to your feelings when you respond.

If you recognise the importance of Authentic Leadership and how you may be sabotaging it, there is a clear path forward

Step 1: Become aware of what you are doing to yourself

Awareness is the first stage of any change process. We need to understand what we are doing, when we are doing it and how it is manifesting. These symptoms may be clues for you:

- You may seem to be an observer of your own life. You watch it as though it were a movie. You do not feel emotionally engaged in your own story.
- Feedback may devastate you as you probably take it personally rather than as information that

can be used for some positive purpose.

- You may not be willing to share yourself or your ideas with others for fear of making yourself even more vulnerable.
- You may be hyper-vigilant, watching to pick up any early warning signs of threats that may expose you as the fake and fraud you feel yourself to be.
- You probably need to control what goes on around you - again to minimise the likelihood of being surprised and exposed.
- You may not let people very close to you, just in case they get to see the real you. On the surface you may be very charming and you may have a wide circle of friends. In truth, though, you may not be truly close to any of them.
- You may have defenses instead of boundaries, ever watchful for attack rather than quietly stating what is appropriate for you, or not.

If any of those symptoms resonate with you - in addition to some of the descriptors identified in the research - perhaps you are experiencing feelings of Imposterhood™.

A second level of awareness is to recognise the situations or triggers that awaken your feelings of being a fake or fraud. When does it occur? What circumstances surround you at that time.

Uncertainty triggers feelings of Imposterhood™. Uncertainty can be generated in a highly competitive environment, or when the "imposter" feels he or she is not as qualified as others. Perhaps the "imposter" has been given a promotion but feels incapable of fulfilling the role and is really fearful. When an individual has been promoted too fast through the ranks without consolidating anything as a foundation, he or she can feel unworthy and uncertain,

crippling their own performance. Another circumstance that creates uncertainty is in a vulnerable situation when the risk is high - risk to reputation or financial standing for example.

Recognising what creates uncertainty for you is an important step in healing feelings of Imposterhood™.

Step 2: Build personal resilience

The Imposter Syndrome is actually an extreme set of limiting beliefs. Beliefs are statements of what we believe to be true about the world around us, about situations to which we are exposed. They may or may not be true.

Often beliefs exist in the face of evidence to the contrary. We can collapse such beliefs by consistently exposing the contrasting evidence, particularly if the source of the information is someone or something that is normally considered to be credible.

Everything we feel, think and do comes from either fear or love. Fear is the energy that contracts, withholds, runs, hides and harms. Love is the energy that expands, embraces, heals and shares. Ask yourself in the moment or as soon as possible afterwards "What would love do now?" And listen to your feelings.

We can start focussing on the things we have in our lives that give us cause to be grateful, starting with the fact that we are alive! A gratitude journal changes your state of mind from one focussed on our own shortcomings, for example, to one of open-hearted appreciation for the joy and majesty of life.

We can meditate to find personal peace. We can turn around negative thoughts about ourselves or others, by consciously choosing to focus on positive qualities.

We can take personal responsibility for every situation we find in our lives, even if we initially consider it to be someone else's fault. Because there are always at least two sides or two experiences in any situation, looking at what we could have done differently will change the dynamic and may change the outcome. At the very least, we will progress on our journey to authenticity by learning something about ourselves and adjusting our behaviour if we need to.

Each of us has voices in our heads although some may not be aware of them. Listen to the voices and to what they say. If they are supportive, you are truly fortunate. If they aren't and if they undermine you in anything you seek to do, they are reinforcing your limitations. In which case, change the script. Consciously stop the voice, do a "rewind", and run a different tape, one that does support you.

These are just a few ideas on how to increase your personal resilience which is an important step in releasing you from the Imposter Syndrome.

Step 3: Change the way you respond to situations.

If you are from Generation X or a Baby Boomer, have you noticed that, as we have grown older, our comfort zones

have contracted. The risk assessment centre of our brain reaches full development after our 20's which certainly explains some of that. However, the more impactful explanation is that at the edge of our comfort zone, we feel fear associated with venturing beyond what is familiar and comfortable to us. Our normal reaction to fear is to pull away and retreat to safety. If we can push through the fear, we feel exhilarated and expand our comfort zone completely, not just in the specific area we just pushed through.

So, instead of the knee-jerk reaction you may currently have to situations that feel threatening, try sitting with the fear and allowing it to become more familiar. Stephanie Burns, an internationally renowned teacher and author, believes the answer to fear is to “come closer and stay longer”. Certainly from my experience, if a situation comes up which has created fear in the past, it doesn't have quite the same impact second-time around. I've been there before and I came through it.

When you break the pattern of reacting unconsciously and instantly, you give yourself the opportunity to choose your response. Choice brings power. You may still choose to react as an “imposter”. The other possibility is that you make a different choice and anything you do differently will give you a different result. Once you've broken the cycle and are moving towards change, you can correct as you go, using your results (your feelings and thoughts) as an indicator of whether what you are doing is working for you.

Step 4: Recognise the triggers and avoid them

I talked of triggers under Step 1 - those things that create or exaggerate uncertainty which in turn awakens the “Imposter” in us. Once you've broken the cycle of unconsciously reacting to them, you've given yourself a chance to recognise what those triggers are. The challenge is to see them ahead of time and to avoid them if at all possible.

If it's not possible to avoid them, perhaps they can be neutralised. One solution is to find a great coach or mentor who can help you develop appropriate strategies and multiple perspectives which lead to wisdom. In other words, to give you tools to make better choices.

With the Imposter Syndrome handled, the path to Authentic Leadership can unfold

When we stop denying the talents, skills, qualities and accomplishments that represent truthfully where we are now, we can see the next level of our own amazing potential as it is revealed to us. The more we are, the more we can be.

Authenticity is a journey that continuously unfolds. The first stage of that journey is to dismantle the roadblock - the Imposter Syndrome. Then you can expect a ride beyond any of your wildest expectations. Your life can be an adventure, discovering who you are and choose to be as you lead first yourself and then others.

The journey to Authentic Leadership is certainly worth going beyond the surface, wouldn't you agree?

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For information on how to increase the level of authentic leadership and engagement in your organisation, visit www.purposetoprofit.com.au or www.imposterhood.com

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