

Overcoming Imposter Syndrome as a Senior Leader

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A pattern that often gets worse, not better, with seniority

Imposter syndrome, first described by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, is commonly assumed to fade as a person becomes more experienced and accomplished. In practice, many senior leaders report the opposite: as the stakes rise and the number of people who could, in principle, evaluate their competence grows, so does the internal sense of being fundamentally unqualified for the role, despite clear external evidence to the contrary.

Why seniority can intensify it rather than resolve it

At senior levels, the work becomes more ambiguous, judgement calls replace clear right answers, and feedback becomes less frequent and less specific, all of which remove the kind of concrete, reassuring evidence of competence that lower-level roles often provide more readily. At the same time, visibility increases, mistakes are more consequential and more exposed, which can make the underlying fear driving imposter syndrome, that incompetence will eventually be discovered, feel more urgent rather than less.

What tends to help, based on how it actually operates

Externalise the specific thought, rather than accepting it as fact. Imposter syndrome tends to generate very specific, plausible-sounding thoughts, "I only got this role because of timing," "everyone else in this room actually knows what they're doing." Naming these as a recognisable pattern, rather than engaging with them as objective assessments, is often the first useful step, since the content of the thought is rarely true on examination, even though it feels true in the moment.

Separate confidence from certainty. Many leaders assume that genuine competence should feel like certainty. In practice, most genuinely skilled senior leaders operate with real, ongoing uncertainty about many decisions; the skill is making sound judgement calls despite that uncertainty, not eliminating it. Reframing uncertainty as a normal feature of senior work, rather than evidence of inadequacy, removes much of imposter syndrome's power.

Keep a concrete, specific record of evidence. Because imposter syndrome distorts memory toward perceived failures and discounts successes, a simple, ongoing record of specific things that went well, decisions that proved sound, problems genuinely solved, gives a factual counterweight to draw on when the feeling intensifies.

Talk about it directly with at least one trusted person. Imposter syndrome thrives in private; it is strikingly common even among highly accomplished leaders, and hearing this directly from a trusted peer, mentor or coach, rather than assuming you are uniquely exposed, is often immediately relieving in a way that self-reassurance is not.

What does not help

Pure positive self-talk, repeating "I am competent" without addressing the underlying pattern of thought, tends to have limited effect and can itself feel hollow. Similarly, achieving another success rarely resolves imposter syndrome on its own; the pattern is well documented to persist even after significant, undeniable achievement, since the underlying mechanism is about how evidence is interpreted, not a genuine absence of evidence.

A realistic expectation

For many leaders, imposter syndrome is better managed than permanently eliminated. The goal is not to never feel it, but to recognise it quickly when it appears, decline to treat its claims as fact, and continue making sound decisions despite its presence. Leaders who reach this point often describe a real shift, not from feeling nothing, but from the feeling no longer having the final word.