

CONQUERING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME: LESSONS FROM FEMALE AND MINORITY BUSINESS LEADERS

by Joyce Roché

When I arrived at Columbia Business School as a new graduate student, it was one thing to know in advance that there would be very few other people who looked like me and quite another to actually see how few. After the very first day of orientation, I had met most of the other African Americans in my class. Not surprisingly, we gravitated toward each other.

Years later, when I first saw a copy of Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's brilliant 1997 book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, my mind instantly conjured up the faces of my friends from Columbia. We were the Black kids huddled at a single table, painfully aware of just how different we were from everyone else around us. And that stark, inescapable difference was a constant trigger for impostor fears: Am I here by mistake? Can I really make it? When will they decide I don't deserve this chance?

In her book, Dr. Tatum cites David T. Wellman's definition of racism as a "system of advantage based on race." Being one of only about 20 Black students (and that number declined after the first term) in a class of 500, it was hard not to feel that we were there through the goodwill of the majority group. Seeing one's opportunities and accomplishments through such a lens, of course, raises all kinds of questions about your own merit and sense of agency. No matter how well-adjusted or confident you are, you cannot help but feel like an impostor.

During the first semester, I felt panic and the desire to flee—symptoms that I would later experience in some of the demanding positions I held during my career. It wasn't that I

Am I here by mistake?

was less competent than my peers. In fact, I excelled and was recognized for my efforts and results. The problem was that I felt like a fraud. When would my professors/fellow students/professional peers realize that I wasn't as competent as I acted?

Many successful people suffer from impostor syndrome. Impostor syndrome is the feeling that you'll be "found out" if you don't work longer and harder than everyone else. You believe others are more qualified than you, and every time you succeed, you're not confident you can do it again.

Impostor syndrome is surprisingly common among some of our most successful African American and minority leaders. It's also common among women. The reasons for this are complicated. To simply say that we live in a society where most of the business, financial, and political power is held by white males, many of them from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, gives the topic short shrift. It's more complicated than that—and well beyond the scope of this article.

A Brief Look at Impostor Syndrome

First identified by pioneering researchers Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes in an article published in 1978, the concept of impostor syndrome is more complex than simple insecurity. Those who suffer with impostor syndrome tend to be very successful, whereas those who are highly insecure are likely to be less accomplished. Impostor syndrome, which is at heart a social anxiety, drives those who suffer from it forward; insecurity, on the other hand, tends to make people shy away from taking risks. An insecure person may stay in a job she has outgrown because she lacks confidence in her abilities. A person who has impostor feelings, however, will work harder and longer to show

others that she can compete at a higher level and prove that she deserves new levels of responsibility.

Here are some other common symptoms of impostor syndrome:

- When people praise you, you fear you won't live up to their expectations.
- You feel your success is due to luck, despite your actual track record of achievements.
- You're afraid others will discover how little you know.
- When you succeed, you have doubts about being able to do it again.
- You believe others are more intelligent than you.
- If you're up for a promotion, you don't tell anyone until it's a done deal, in case higher ups "change their mind."
- You feel you need to work harder than others in order to prove your worth.
- You always have a backup plan ready in case you're "discovered" for the fraud you believe yourself to be.
- You seek external validation, yet don't fully believe it when it comes.
- You keep your real life—upbringing, degrees, etc.—secret from peers so they won't have even more reason to doubt your qualifications among their rank.

Impostor syndrome is blind, in the sense that it can strike anyone, even white male CEOs. Nevertheless, it's particularly prevalent among women, minorities,

"You're just as smart.

You're just as good."

Strategies for Confronting the Impostor Syndrome and Embracing Success

Fortunately, we all have the power within us to confront the impostor syndrome, to defeat it, and to find the success in our lives that we so richly deserve. Here are some of the most effective approaches.

- Don't stay silent. Find a way to speak about your fears with a trusted friend, a coach, a mentor, your partner, a therapist, or in a journal.
- Get a reality check. Test whether your way of seeing yourself and your abilities and accomplishments is realistic.
- Become familiar with your impostor. What are you trying to prove? To whom? And why?
- Listen to your heart. Work to clarify your own values and build connections with people who share those values.
- Question your work habits. Ask whether all your hard work is making you feel less like a fake. Then begin to consider what makes you feel truly worthy in your own eyes.
- Get centered in yourself. Don't give power to assumptions other people may make about you.
- Analyze your success. Develop a written inventory of your skills, accomplishments, and experiences to understand your success.
- Know your fear. Learn to distinguish between the stress of moving up into new levels of responsibility and influence and the conditioned response of impostor fears.
- Build self-awareness. Practice looking at your strengths and challenges as a whole person; don't overestimate one or the other.
- Learn to metabolize external validation. The next time someone compliments you on something you have done well, put aside your habitual response and allow the information to sink in.
- Ask whether you are satisfied. Consider how satisfied you are with your life, and if you aren't, make a change.
- Recognize people for who they are. Practice seeing other people as they are, with their own needs and foibles. See their strengths and weaknesses.
- Exercise your sense of humor. Try to keep a sense of perspective and to laugh as often as possible—especially at yourself.
- Show up for life as your whole self. Connect with your spiritual essence.
- Pay it forward. Share your joy, zest, and power.

and people from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

Lessons from the Trenches of Leadership

I interviewed dozens of leaders—men, women, African American, and Latino—in diverse areas of business, media, academia, and entertainment to find out how they dealt with the problem of feeling like an

impostor. The following are some of the lessons they imparted.

Embrace the Life You Want: Debra Lee

Debra Lee, now chairman of BET Networks, went from the humanist campus of Brown University to the hard-driving atmosphere of Harvard Law School. Her experience offers a particularly striking example of the powerful role race plays in triggering

the impostor syndrome. She recommends that you ask yourself whether you're satisfied with your life and your job, and if you aren't, make a change. Sometimes the need to prove ourselves to others keeps us stuck in a position that's not conducive to real growth and fulfillment. When Lee was at Harvard Law School, she felt that the professors ignored the Black students and women. But instead of letting it defeat her ambitions, she applied to the Kennedy School of Government, which felt like the right place for her. "On my own path again, I did really well... and no longer felt like an impostor," she said. Living an authentic life will help you minimize worries about not fitting in.

Learn to See Others Clearly: Angel Martinez

Angel Martinez, CEO and president of Deckers Outdoor Corporation, came to the United States as a baby from Cuba, and grew up poor. But he didn't let his situation or others' opinions define him and went on to run a \$1.4 billion company. "There's a social bias that kids observe from a very early age. And then they internalize it and it becomes a reality for them," he said. Martinez says you need to practice seeing other people as they are, with their own needs and foibles. See their strengths and weaknesses. Learning to see and accept flaws in others will allow you to see yourself in the same way, with compassion and understanding. He advises other people of color: "Be aware of the fact that you're going to have this voice in your head trying to convince you of things that are not true about you."

Don't Remain Silent: Dr. Ella Edmondson Bell

Dr. Ella L.J. Edmondson Bell, a professor at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, said she used to feel like "a con artist" until she sorted out her attitude by seeing an outsider's perspective. "Don't be afraid to go and talk to a professional about the way feeling like an impostor is affecting your life. And put people around you who can reinforce that you have a right to be where you are," she recommends. Find a way to

speaking about your fears with a trusted friend, a coach, a mentor, your partner, or a therapist. Or confess your true feelings in a journal. One of the symptoms of impostor syndrome is isolating from one's peers and suffering in silence. "You're just as smart. You're just as good," she says.

Keep Your Perspective with Humor: Bernice Bennett

Try to keep a sense of perspective and to laugh as often as possible—especially at yourself, says Bernice Bennett, former assistant vice president of the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Services. She got through many insecure moments early in her career by telling herself, "The sky is not going to fall, and there's going to be tomorrow." People with impostor syndrome sometimes find it difficult to joke and relax in the workplace, because they fear they'll be perceived as slackers. Enjoying your work and your life needn't be a luxury that's for everyone else but you. "It's really important to master the skills of positive self-talk," says Bennett, even if you have to make light of your situation to do it.

Do a Reality Check: Sandra Timmons

Sandra Timmons, the president and CEO of A Better Chance, recommends that you develop a written inventory of your skills, accomplishments, and experiences to understand your success. Use logic and facts to assuage your fears. This will help you strengthen the skill of internal validation. Successful people get validation from others, but they most need it from themselves. Avoid slipping into what she calls "a manufactured persona" in order to fit

*Honor yourself for who
you are.*

in. Having struggled to be accepted by her white, privileged peers in college and grad school, she now helps young people of color conquer impostor syndrome and find educational opportunities where they can blossom. She advises, “Honor yourself for who you are. There is a place where you belong and where you will be truly valued. It takes faith and time to find it.”

Try to Metabolize External Validation: Yvonne Jackson

Yvonne Jackson, the president of BeecherJackson Inc. and a former senior vice president at Pfizer, admitted that it took her about 15 years to trust her “inner self” so she had the confidence to communicate her ideas. She had to learn how to take in, or metabolize, the positive feedback she was routinely getting from others. She recommends that the next time someone compliments you on something you’ve done well, put aside your habitual response and allow the information to sink in. Another way to practice this is to ask a trusted ally what your special gifts are; listen carefully and absorb it.

Build Alliances with Like-Minded People: Ronald Parker

Early in his career, Ronald Parker, former senior vice president of PepsiCo, had a lingering fear of not being up to the job. So he took on more and more responsibility to prove he was capable. The higher he reached and the more he achieved, the greater that fear weighed down on him. His advice to others is to work to clarify your own values, and build connections with people who share those values. Own who you are and what you believe in, and then find people who see the real you. For him, the turning point was “the discovery of my own personal power. I began to share my unique experience, the part of me I had worked so hard to keep in the shadows.” Soon, he said people began seeking him out for his point of view. “And that’s when it clicked that I have nothing to be afraid of or concerned about. I started to blossom when I fully understood and began to appreciate my personal power.”

Let Your Inner Voice Guide You: Paula Banks-Jones

Paula Banks-Jones, former president of the BP Amoco Foundation and senior vice president for global diversity at PepsiCo, talked a lot about the impostor fears that shaped her early career arc as she moved up through the ranks of leadership at Sears. She said it wasn’t the challenges of the job and the promotions that came every 12 to 18 months for several years, but the challenge of feeling like an impostor. “To keep my sanity, I needed to find a way to release all the stress. I started leaving a tape recorder under the armrest in my car. At the end of the day, when I’d leave work and get off the parking lot, I would stop somewhere quiet and spill out all of my frustration and insecurities onto the tape.” Once home, she would listen to the tape and sift through “the things I needed to deal with and the stuff to which I was just overreacting.” Banks-Jones recommends that “you must have a place where you go at the end of the day and let your inner voice guide you and keep you strong.”

You Deserve Your Success!

All of these leaders have been successful in their careers, myself included. But it’s critically important to conquer impostor fears as early in your career as possible, so you can live your life with joy, zest, and power—and be an inspiration to others who are struggling with self-doubt.

Each one of us has the power within us to defeat the impostor syndrome and to recognize our accomplishments and success. Remember that you are not alone in confronting impostor fears, and that many

*Let your inner voice guide
you and keep you strong.*

others have successfully challenged the inner voice that whispers you aren't good enough or you don't deserve the success you have achieved. You deserve your success, and it's up to you to recognize and embrace it, and then to help others push past their fears and fully enjoy their own accomplishments and success.



*Joyce Roché has been a trailblazer in the corporate world for 25 years, as Avon's first African American female vice president; COO of Carson Products Company, now part of L'Oreal; the former CEO of the national nonprofit Girls Inc.; and a board member on four Fortune 500 companies. Her new book about impostor syndrome is *The Empress Has No Clothes: Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013). Learn more at www.empresshasnoclothes.com.*