Ending Imposter Syndrome

Tags: #imposter-syndrome #inclusion

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Dialogue

What is imposter syndrome?

Managers in many organizations tend to address the symptoms but not the source. Can you illuminate that distinction for us?

The experiences of (women especially) who feel imposter syndrome is often "death by a thousand papercuts." You talk in the article about your experiences. Can you tell us more?

> The onus is on managers with employees from underrepresented backgrounds to spend time understanding that the frameworks determining these standards are already rigged against women, especially women of color, and likely reinforce self-doubt and unbelonging. Managers cannot be considered effective if they can only manage employees who are like them.

What's different about that than how managers and organizations typically approach imposter syndrome?

What managers can do:

> Individual women spoke to us about how managers could help them overcome feelings of self-doubt by reinforcing their own belief in their abilities and chances of success.

What does that look and sound like?

They said explicitly that they were there to support them.

> Most of all, managers best supported women by genuinely listening to their experiences of gender and/or racial bias, and expressing the view that it was the organization's responsibility to fix it.

Redirect perceptions about their employees.

Data:

- Feedback surveys
- Average time to promotion

Reminder: gathering feedback isn't the goal itself -- it's a means to an end.

Gaslighting

Definition from Merriam-Webster:

> Psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories and typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one's emotional or mental stability, and a dependency on the perpetrator

Your example of trying to open an unfamiliar door.

> Likewise, it's a form of gaslighting when employees whose identities are consistently marginalized are advised on various ways they can change their strategies to open the door. Instead, managers must be transparent about the organization's locked doors — the barriers that exist due to biases.

Problems:

1. Managers don't recognize the locked doors.
2. Managers do recognize the locked doors, but don't want to discourage the employee.

What have you changed your mind on?

Quotes

Highlight [page 2]:* Imposter syndrome is loosely defined as doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud. It disproportionately affects highachieving people, who find it difficult to accept their accomplishments. Many question whether they're deserving of accolades.

Highlight [page 3]:* Even as we know it today, imposter syndrome puts the blame on individuals, without accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that are foundational to how it manifests in both women of color and white women. Imposter syndrome directs our view toward fixing women at work instead of fixing the places where women work.

Highlight [page 4]:* Although feelings of uncertainty are an expected and normal part of professional life, women who experience them are deemed to suffer from imposter syndrome. Even if women demonstrate strength, ambition, and resilience, our daily battles with microaggressions, especially expectations and assumptions formed by stereotypes and racism, often push us down. Imposter syndrome as a concept fails to capture this dynamic and puts the onus on women to deal with the effects. Workplaces

remain misdirected toward seeking individual solutions for issues disproportionately caused by systems of discrimination and abuses of power.

Highlight [page 5]:* The answer to overcoming imposter syndrome is not to fix individuals but to create an environment that fosters a variety of leadership styles and in which diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identities are seen as just as professional as the current model, which Opie describes as usually "Eurocentric, masculine, and heteronormative."

Highlight [page 2]: While supporting your team members individually is important, take a "both/and" approach to meeting their unique needs while also making the organizational shifts required to address imposter syndrome at its true source. "It's easier to set up a professional development program, put money into training, or to even pay for a coach or a mentor rather than think about the values, ideologies, and subsequent practices amidst the severe underrepresentation in organizations that create imposter syndrome as a mainstay," says Dr. Kecia Thomas, an industrial organizational psychologist and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Developing structural solutions that address imposter syndrome triggers sets you on a path to helping make sustainable, systemic changes that can support others who share these experiences.

Highlight [page 4]: The onus is on managers with employees from underrepresented backgrounds to spend time understanding that the frameworks determining these standards are already rigged against women, especially women of color, and likely reinforce self-doubt and unbelonging. Understanding the unique challenges faced by people who are different from them builds the managers' capacity to fully grow in their roles. Managers cannot be considered effective if they can only manage employees who are like them.

Highlight [page 4]: When both of us entered our jobs at more junior levels, armed with recognized graduate degrees, we expressed our ideas freely, raised our hands for plum assignments, and expressed our ambitions openly. But as we encountered more pushback, especially from our white counterparts, our behaviors slowly changed. Ruchika started pulling back, speaking less in meetings and quietly guarding her ambitions. Jodi-Ann searched for reprieve across sectors and industries to little avail, until she, like a rapidly growing number of women of color, branched out as an entrepreneur. According to the American Express 2019 State of Women-Owned Business Report, women of color make up 89% of the net new women-owned businesses per day, despite only comprising 39% of the total female U.S. population. Despite wide disparities in women of color's access to capital for these businesses, many find they would rather take the risk to escape from toxic and biased workplace cultures.

Highlight [page 5]: Much of it is the "death by a thousand papercuts" phenomenon where women were told conflicting pieces of feedback, like, "Don't be so aggressive but also speak up and pound the table, but don't be so assertive and show that you're

a leader but don't override other people," Chilazi says. "Then, as they rise up the ranks, women see men in lower-seniority positions making more money than them, and at some point women decide they don't need to deal with this," she adds. Her study found that many high-potential women started leaving the organization — not because they lacked ambition or experience, but because the experience of cumulative bias wore them down until there was often a final incident that "broke the camel's back."

Highlight [page 6]: Reducing bias against women at work requires action at all levels, including interpersonal relationships. Individual women spoke to us about how managers could help them overcome feelings of self-doubt by reinforcing their own belief in their abilities and chances of success, using phrases like, "I know you can lead this big project; I've seen you succeed before and I believe in you." It also helped to expressly be told that they would be supported by their managers. Most of all, managers best supported women by genuinely listening to their experiences of gender and/or racial bias, and expressing the view that it was the organization's responsibility to fix it. Managers can also help change how other people perceive their team members. For example, if a colleague warns of your team member's contrarian approach in meetings, you can easily assert the value of their social style by saying something like, "Contrarian? I would not put it that way, but I will say how much I really enjoy having her on my team. I can always count on her to think deeper about our work and offer new insights and perspectives."

Highlight [page 7]: We recommend two places to start. First, measure employee sentiment through anonymous feedback surveys — both at dedicated times throughout the year to capture trends as well as through "always on" surveys that allow employees to share feedback at any point in time. Make sure to include questions about how much an employee feels like they can contribute to and grow and learn at the organization, as well as about the barriers to doing those things. Assess the data not just by gender (as many companies do now) but also by race and the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, and other marginalized identities where possible. If women of color, especially Black women, report that they don't feel like they belong in or can grow at the organization, consider this your canary in the coal mine. How Black women experience your organizational culture may serve as the litmus for the inclusion levels at your company. Instead of seeing the experiences of the most underrepresented as outliers to the data, center them to drive the next steps for organizational change. Second, assess your organization's performance criteria and average time to promotion. If the last 10 promotions were largely of white men, and their average time-to-promotion is much shorter than that of women and people of color, then it's not uncommon for those women and people of color to ask themselves, "Do I have what it takes to advance here? Do I belong here?" If your company rewards vague traits like "executive presence" and "leadership skills" without measurable behaviors and skills, bias is likely to creep into advancement decisions. If only white men are promoted as a result of those advancement criteria, then the process is systemically racially inequitable. It's not uncommon for a woman of

color to then believe that she lacks those traits, which is likely to overfeed benign feelings of self-doubt. Unfortunately, instead of addressing this at an organizational level, managers often allow their employees to question themselves and then support them with solutions to address that self-doubt. Instead, expand your skills in race- and gender-coded language and create advancement criteria that measure tangible outcomes, skills, and behaviors. Then, promote accordingly.

Highlight [page 8]: Jodi-Ann likens it to making several failed attempts to open an unfamiliar door. You may question whether to push or pull. When that fails, you might question whether the door is too heavy or its handle too slippery. Problem solving to open the door falls mostly on questioning your own abilities before you ever resolve that the door is actually just locked. Likewise, it's a form of gaslighting when employees whose identities are consistently marginalized are advised on various ways they can change their strategies to open the door. Instead, managers must be transparent about the organization's locked doors — the barriers that exist due to biases. This helps build the trust needed to better support underrepresented members of your team. Honesty reciprocates. Listen to your employees without doubt. It's the work of managers to leverage their influence to open doors for their employees and keep them open for others like them.

Highlight [page 10]: Listening tours, culture surveys, and other means of gaining insights into employees' experiences are valuable tools in DEI strategy development. However, companies often treat gathering employee feedback as the goal itself, not a means to an end. Companies may offer training on diversity, equity, and inclusion principles, but may resist the uptake of that training to shift the policies and practices creating inequity at work. "For any other type of training, we expect that we would attend to the climate for training transfer," Dr. Thomas attests. She goes on to explain:

References