

OUR INSIGHTS

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How to overcome imposter syndrome

How many of you have felt, at some point in your working lives, the fear that you're not up to the task at hand and therefore you will be found out? I have – and that's imposter syndrome creeping in.

For some of us, 2020 exacerbated this syndrome as our working life became less structured and predictable, without the normal stabilisers which a coffee with a colleague, or face-to-face 1-2-1 meetings can bring.

Here are three tactics which I use to embrace and ultimately overcome imposter syndrome. Hopefully, they will help you build confidence, feel better about your work and gain the support and acceptance of those around you.

1. Start with some numbers

My first tip is to start your talk, presentation, or meeting with some numbers. The good news is that almost everything can be measured numerically, and companies measure their performance financially. So, grab the bits of numerical information which are available – there will be plenty of sources – and then start your conversation, or build your presentation around some numbers.

Look at the way the Government begins almost every press conference on the vaccine rollout. They start with some current numbers, provide some projections and then tell us the % of the population already inoculated. This gives them immediate credibility and provides the foundation for their presentations and subsequent messaging.

Another positive benefit about using numbers is that they can be presented visually and in many different ways, perhaps either graphically or by using charts or tables. So, think about your audience, tailor your graphics and give it a go.

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2. Target your words to your audience

My second tip is to only use words, expressions, acronyms or phrases which your audience will know and understand. This will mean that what you're presenting will resonate with them and subconsciously it will help you gain their acceptance and build trust.

I was a private equity backed CFO for over 20 years. When I started out, I became conscious that I was using financial language that others would find tricky to understand. Naively I thought that this demonstrated knowledge and self-worth. Actually, it was preventing me from building a rapport and gaining trust.

So, I changed tack. Rather than talking about different ways of measuring profitability – there are over 10 by the way – I asked which method worked best, presented it and stuck to it. I softened my language in other ways too by, for example, mentioning investment rather than “capex”. When talking about performance, I referred to sales or revenue rather than “turnover”.

Guess what, it worked. Watch how your audience reacts to your words. From this you can see which ones resonate most with them. This will enable you to engage with language which they are comfortable with, building that all important peer-to-peer trust.

3. Use realistic deadlines

Sometimes to avoid imposter syndrome, we feel the need to demonstrate our value and effectiveness quickly. We naturally want to impress and deliver that killer piece of work speedily. Yet we all perform better when we feel we are in control and on top of the delivery timescales.

How many times have you inadvertently put pressure on yourself or others by setting, or being given, deadlines based on artificial milestones or timescales? How often have you said or heard the most common deadline “the end of the week”? Why then?

If possible, try taking a different approach. Take the time to think about the fixed, immovable deadlines and then work back from there to gauge how the work fits in. Come up with a delivery plan which enables you to demonstrate the progress which is being made, while simultaneously working towards a deadline which you are confident everyone can meet.

It often surprises me how much time flexibility there is in deadlines. By understanding the actual timeframes, you'll feel more confident not only about delivering your own work, but also helping your team deliver theirs.

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Many leaders, managers, team members, professional advisers and freelancers deal with imposter syndrome as they grapple with dynamic, hard-to-grasp problems from day one. It is a normal and common occurrence, as you can't really grow as an individual without experiencing it.



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My recommendation is to start numerically, understand your audience and cultivate acceptance from your colleagues or clients by setting, agreeing and delivering your work to manageable deadlines. If you're able to do this, you will establish your credibility, deliver value and, crucially, overcome imposter syndrome.