



## CLAIMING BELONGING: STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Imposter Syndrome has been defined as “the persistent inability to believe that one’s success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one’s own efforts or skills.”<sup>1</sup> Generally, this means feeling not good enough or deserving enough in or for your role – thinking of yourself as a fraud.

Forty-five years ago, the term “imposter phenomenon” was examined in the context of “high achieving women,”<sup>2</sup> which over time evolved to, simply, “high achievers.” With this evolution, research also suggested that imposter syndrome could be experienced by members of minority groups in the professions, but more recently it has been accepted that imposter syndrome can also affect any group or individual. It is reported that as many as 70 percent of people experience imposter syndrome at some time in their life.

Although not officially recognized as either a medical or mental health disorder, imposter syndrome can impact self-worth and enjoyment of one’s professional role, and it could lead to depression and anxiety. It could also negatively impact businesses if employees do not perform to their full potential because imposter syndrome prohibits them from clearly and objectively recognizing their own abilities. While fears of being “found out” as inadequate for a role, and other feelings associated with imposter syndrome, might prompt some people to work harder in the short-term to overcome their perceived shortcomings, persistent feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt can have a negative effect on overall health and performance in the long-term.

Members of the legal profession, in particular, are repeatedly called upon to project confidence and deliver strong results day-to-day and throughout their careers. Lawyer coach Martha Newman notes that unrealistic standards of achievement, combined with hyper self-criticism, make members of the legal

profession uniquely vulnerable to this syndrome, resulting in high achievers plagued with anxiety and chronic self-doubt no matter how successful they are, or how well they perform<sup>3</sup>.

Feelings associated with imposter syndrome can be present for a brief period, they can be recurring, or they can even be a permanent weight affecting someone daily. Left unresolved, these feelings can negatively impact health and critical functions of the brain, including rational thinking, sleep, emotions, and the ability to accurately assess skills and abilities.

In the leadership context, it is important to recognize and address imposter syndrome in yourself and in members of your team so that it can be managed and, if necessary, support can be provided. Team members may be reluctant to admit to colleagues, and especially to supervisors, that they are experiencing feelings of inadequacy, absent a strong relationship characterized by open and frequent communication. In addition to fostering such relationships with your team members, leaders can watch for signs of imposter syndrome within their teams. These signs could include perfectionistic attitudes, such as consistently delaying delivery of work product because it always “needs just a little more work.” Similarly, while strong effort is of course highly valued in the legal profession, consistently working longer hours to the detriment of other important commitments may in fact be an attempt to compensate for perceived inadequacies. Those experiencing imposter syndrome may also find it difficult to manage workflow by delegating or accepting help when offered, thinking they need to “prove themselves” without assistance. While any one of these situations may not be an indicator of imposter syndrome, by itself, if this seems to be part of a broader pattern, or is interfering with the employee’s and team’s efficacy, it is worth considering—and possibly discussing with the employee—whether the imposter syndrome might be at play.

Our own INTA Members in leadership positions in firms and organizations have shared personal and practical insights that have helped them address imposter syndrome. A member of INTA’s Leadership Development Committee suggests that when leading a team that includes a team member dealing with feelings of inadequacy or being an imposter, giving the individual some extra personal support, attention, and encouragement can be useful, as can public praise of the team member. Regular positive reinforcement along with frequent check-ins can also be helpful.

There is immense value in being approachable as a leader, so that your team knows they can come to you for support in both recognizing and celebrating success, and frankly discussing setbacks and needed improvements.

Finally, it is important to recognize that imposter syndrome is distinct from, but can often interact with, feelings that result from actual discrimination or exclusion due to systemic bias. While imposter syndrome results from one's internal beliefs, and the experience of discrimination results from the actions of others and from social structures, bias and discrimination can also impact one's internal beliefs. Consequently, members of underrepresented groups may be more likely to experience imposter syndrome, and at more intense levels. Managers must actively work to eradicate discrimination from within their organizations and to create a culture in which all employees feel respected, valued, and heard.

For those personally dealing with imposter syndrome, there are various tools available at the individual level. Experts recommend keeping a log or a journal of your successes, even compliments received over the years, and to revisit this often. Praise received from clients, or from organizational leaders and stakeholders, can be especially powerful reminders of our skill and effectiveness as lawyers.

Joana de Mattos Siqueira, a partner in Brazilian IP firm Montauray Pimenta, Machado & Vieira de Mello, suggests that when you feel impostor syndrome "approaching," you can take a look into your past, consider all the obstacles you have successfully overcome, and think about your concrete achievements. This way, your own past serves as encouragement for the future.

Mary L. Greico, who chairs the IP Law Practice at U.S. firm Olshan Frome Wolosky LLP, notes that the imposter syndrome, for her, calls back feelings from her youth; a part of her feels "like an awkward 14-year-old who doesn't 'belong' and is going to be laughed at by the 'mean girls.'" She suggests not trying to stifle these feelings or being too hard on yourself for having them. She shares that "what I've learned is to recognize when those feelings are there. That way, I can tell myself these are old, historic feelings that have nothing to do with the reality of today. I don't have control over my feelings, but I do have control over my actions. I have also learned—probably just through years of experience—that everyone makes mistakes, and no one is perfect. Those tiny mistakes that can seem so huge at the moment always have a way of dissipating over time and will become less and less important. A mistake does not make us worthless." Another suggestion she has is to take advantage of the many great therapists and career coaches out there who can help with this.

Another Leadership Development Committee member suggests to those grappling with feelings of being an imposter to "remember that you are smart—a lot smarter than you sometimes might think—and have the confidence to state your mind and opinions. More often than not, you will find that you are just as skilled, if not more skilled, than those you may perceive to be 'better' than you.

Having a successful career proves that your clients and colleagues value your skills and expertise.”

As evidenced by the ever-growing body of research and discourse, imposter syndrome is a complex issue, and it can manifest itself in many different ways. Our aim with this brief article is to highlight how common the experience of imposter syndrome can be, particularly in the legal profession, and to offer some practical tools for managing it, both individually and in our leadership roles.

### Further Information and Reading

- [How to overcome imposter phenomenon](#) (American Psychological Association)
- [Self-esteem as a mediator of the link between perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon](#) (Personality and Individual Differences)
- [Bias, Burnout, and Imposter Phenomenon: The Negative Impact of Under-Recognized Intersectionality](#) (Women’s Health Rep.)
- [5 Ways Latinas Can Break Free from Imposter Syndrome](#) (Hispanic Executive)
- [Among Us: Imposter Syndrome and Barriers to Black Success](#) (Cardozo Journal of Equal Rights and Social Justice)
- [Impostor feelings and psychological distress among Asian Americans: Interpersonal shame and self-compassion](#) (The Counseling Psychologist)
- [Lawyering While Black: Perceived Stress as a Mediator of Impostor Feelings, Race-Related Stress and Mental Health Among Black Attorneys](#) (Journal of Black Psychology)
- [“I must have slipped through the cracks somehow”: An examination of coping with perceived impostorism and the role of social support](#) (Journal of Vocational Behavior)

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