



Facing Down the Demon of Self-Doubt

MEDI Leadership

By Robert Porter, JD, MBA

In my coaching practice it is surprisingly common for me to encounter experienced and highly accomplished leaders riddled periodically with crippling self-doubt. Known as the “imposter syndrome” or “inner critic,” that internal voice of self-doubt is something that seemingly every leader battles to some extent at some time, regardless of overwhelming, objective evidence to the contrary. There are certainly degrees of this affliction and those with extreme cases would do well to investigate therapeutic help. But I am convinced that most of us, if not all of us, need to develop tools to face down this demon on those occasions when it creeps into our thoughts and impacts our effectiveness.

Having personally fought this battle over the arc of my career, I have become convinced that, in the words of an old country song, it isn't something you get over, it's something you get through. The goal of this exploration of the imposter syndrome is to help you understand its damaging impact on individuals and teams, recognize the circumstances which are likely to provoke its appearance, and provide some tools with which to combat it and move through those moments back to center.

Signs of Imposter Syndrome

“Imposter syndrome is prevalent among healthcare students, residents, and experienced professionals and is a risk for burnout and psychological distress.”

- Inability to accept or internalize one's success
- Tendency to attribute one's success to luck or chance
- Difficulty accepting praise about one's intelligence or accomplishments
- A discrepancy between one's self evaluation and external evaluations
- Tendency to recall mistakes over accomplishments
- A fear of being revealed as a “fraud”
- Disappointment with present accomplishments
- Frequent comparisons to others, believing others are more accomplished
- Hesitancy taking on new challenges for fear of failure, despite past success

[\[National Library of Medicine\]](#)

The Impact on Leaders and Teams

The impact of self-doubt on leadership and team effectiveness is profound. It is in essence an emotional threat that puts the leader into a self-protective mode. Here are just a few of the many ways in which it can inhibit growth and leadership effectiveness:

Up to 82% of people face feelings of imposter syndrome, according to the [American Psychological Association](#).

- Ideas that differ from one's point of view are perceived as a threat to their status and self-image. As a result, the focus of conversation shifts from a gathering a full understanding of a complex issue in search of the best solution to a contest between limited options, reducing the chance for a creative, collaborative outcome.
- Those who hold different ideas become perceived as adversaries in a zero-sum game of wins and losses. Competition takes priority over learning and the development of relationships can be inhibited or become contentious.
- Ideas that challenge conventional thinking can provoke an array of troubling responses:
 - They are never offered for fear of looking out of sync with the prevailing point of view.
 - Those challenged by an unconventional thought engage in subtle (teasing) and not so subtle actions to discredit the ideas of others and draw them back to the mainstream point of view.
 - In order to conform to the prevailing view of the group, those with dissenting opinions stifle their concerns and silently go along (which, over time, can grow into resentment over the concessions they have made).
- Fear of failure diminishes the willingness to take business risk, leaving transformational ideas unexplored and giving preference to predictability over the possibility of progress.
- Opportunities for career growth are not pursued due to fear of inadequacy resulting in unrealized potential, diminished personal impact, and diminished professional fulfillment.
- The fear of "not being enough" creates a level of stress that can distort perspective and diminish critical thinking. Self-protection takes center stage at the expense of creativity and collaboration.
- At its worst, self-doubt can exact a physical toll as well through all the ways stress impacts well-being, including an exhaustive work schedule as one tries to "outwork" the sense of inadequacy as if one more accomplishment with affirm one's competence.

While there is no easy answer to this pervasive problem, I would like to offer a few suggestions drawn from my experience and that of my clients. You may want to experiment with one or more of them to see if they might be helpful to you.

Identify the Circumstances Which Trigger Periods of Self-Doubt

It is helpful to become aware of the circumstances that trigger self-doubt in order to develop healthy ways with which to confront it. Triggers are likely to be different for each person but there are a few common patterns which tend to distort perspective and provoke the voice of doubt:

- When one is physically or emotionally depleted by extended periods of intense workload or prolonged stress.
- When dealing with issues of significant scope and complexity for which the path forward is uncertain and fraught with risk. This is particularly true when others involved in the situation speak with a surprising clarity and confidence about those same issues.
- In moments of conflict and disagreement, particularly when the stakes are high, the discussion is high profile, and the disagreement plays out among important colleagues and stakeholders.
- When one makes a mistake, even an insignificant one, that requires corrective action.
- In situations of evaluation when an outcome for which a person is primarily responsible is given a grade or rating (other than exceptional). While we all like to acknowledge we are not perfect, when someone else “grades” our work it almost naturally provokes a combination of defensiveness and self-doubt.

Become Aware of, Challenge and Shift Your Mindset

Much of the work to drown out the voice of self-doubt is inner work, examining, challenging and shifting one’s perspective on the provocative situations that trigger that voice. Much of our behavior and emotional reaction is derived from long established patterns that operate at a sub-conscious level. By becoming mindful of those patterns, you create the opportunity to be more intentional in selecting the lens through which you choose to look at a situation and the behavior which flows from that mindset.

Consider whether you have the opportunity to reframe your perspective in the following ways:

- Redefine the concept of “conflict,” letting go of the notion it is a contest to be won or lost or a measure of competence. In place of the word “conflict” substitute “difference” and recognize that a differing point of view is borne of experiences, data and assumptions that are not the same as your own.
- Recognizing that the nature and pace of change is relentless and adopt the posture of a lifelong “learner” rather than “expert.” Recognize the value in those people, experiences and practices which push you outside of your comfort zone and keep you open to new ideas and ways of thinking.
- Consider the talents, ideas and perspectives of others which are different from your own as a gift which, when fully explored and appreciated, can deepen your perspective and strengthen your own capabilities.

- Recognize the power of a team, that the richest, most creative solutions come not from the lone genius but from the dynamic creativity that emerges from an aligned group of collaborative partners in the pursuit of a compelling shared goal.
- Shift from a mindset that sees mistakes as evidence of incompetence, accept them as inevitable in a world of uncertainty, and use them as a powerful opportunity to learn. Resist the desire to defend or explain and, instead, harvest all the insights you can from the experience. Recognize that acknowledging mistakes and learning from them is a powerful way to build trust and credibility with others. Rather than diminishing others' confidence in you, it demonstrates that, even when difficult to do so, you will always communicate in an honest, unvarnished and forward-looking mode of learning and development.
- Increase self-awareness around your core strengths, leadership style and motivators, and recognize that not every role is the right fit for your particular set of gifts. See career transitions, by your choosing or the organization's decision, as a matter of "fit" not "failure" and accept the opportunity you have to write your next professional chapter.
- Shift your lens from a mindset of scarcity and risk to one of a belief in possibility and abundance. Recognize that the best of what you have to offer will only be possible when you are not afraid.
- Remind yourself that the greatest fulfillment most of us will get from our professional lives is in the impact we can have on others, not the acclaim we secure for ourselves. Reconnect to your sense of purpose and to those who are your allies and collaborators in that pursuit.

Adopt a Set of Behavioral Practices to Move Through Moments When Doubt is Triggered

Once you can recognize the triggers which provoke the demon of self-doubt, it is helpful to develop a set of behavioral practices to draw upon which can help you confront and "shout down" the voice of that inner critic.

Here are a few suggestions with which you may wish to experiment:

- Explicitly call out that inner voice, write down the elements of doubt, and subject them to critical review. When brought out into the light of day it often becomes clear that the risk is exaggerated emotionally well beyond the objective reality. This practice also creates opportunities to explore steps which can be taken to mitigate the risk and increase the probability of success.
- Reflect on situations from your past which are comparable to the circumstances which have triggered doubt. Reflect on what that "data" says about the probability of success in this instance. Draw confidence from past challenges you have successfully met as evidence you are more than equipped to do so again. Identify the steps which helped you achieve success and add those insights to your "toolkit" for moving forward.
- Seek the counsel of those whose opinion you respect, not the "fan club" which will offer blanket encouragement, but those whom you trust to help you assess the situation, identify the

magnitude of the risk, chart the most promising path forward and offer words of encouragement to build confidence.

- In keeping with the mindset of a lifelong learner, establish a network of thought partners and a set of practices designed to keep you open to possibilities and new ways of thinking. The more learning becomes a habit, the less likely ideas which challenge your own will be viewed as a threat and the more they will be valued as a gift.
- When someone offers an idea which conflicts with your own, adopt a standard response of genuine curiosity first, instead of debate. Seek to understand the underlying data, experiences and assumptions which have formed their point of view and add those insights to your own, enriched understanding. When you hold differing assumptions, explore ways to gather additional insight to close the gap and find common ground.
- Celebrate the gifts and success of others and appreciate the way in which they add to your strength and that of the team. When the light shines on a colleague or teammate it does not diminish the light which shines on others. When tempted to see others' gains as your loss, choose instead to celebrate and learn from them.
- Develop a regular practice of gratitude. A powerful antidote for the feeling of inadequacy is the periodic practice of humbly taking inventory of the many talents and gifts with which we have been blessed.
- Develop a roadmap or checklist to guide your approach when confronted with a new and complex challenge. Trust that if you follow the right process, involve the right people, and are guided by the right values and principles, the right answer will emerge. Amid the uncertainty and turbulence of a new and dynamic situation, use that roadmap as your anchor and source of confidence for yourself and others.
- Set aside periodic "heads up" time to assimilate information, prioritize focus, reframe your mindset and restore your confidence. Of all the practices which can help tamp down the voices of doubt, this may be the most important as it enables the others. In the midst of the overwhelming pace of most leadership roles, it is easy to lose perspective and let our minds run away with emotions and stories which diverge significantly from reality. Unless we take time to reflect, we act on those emotions and stories in ways which fall well short of our best authentic self. It is essential to pause and get our bearings, reflect on our assumptions and stories, and choose the approach which reflects our best authentic self.
- Take care of your physical well-being. Closely related to "heads up" time, this practice recognizes the growing body of evidence in the leadership literature that when we are physically depleted the quality of our decision-making suffers. In order to function at our best, assess situations accurately, think creatively and exercise good judgement, we need to invest in self-care. Adopting this practice starts with shifting our mindset and recognizing that self-care is not selfish. It is a business imperative so that leaders are equipped to be at their best as they navigate the complex, intense demands of their work.

Closing Thoughts

As I compiled my thoughts for this article, it became as much a personal diary as professional observations. I found myself reflecting on my own professional journey and not without some regret.

I think about ideas not advanced for lack of courage to challenge conventional thinking. Of job opportunities not pursued and personal potential left on the table. Of relationships not fully developed because I thought of strong colleagues more as competitors than valuing them as people from whom I could learn and grow. Of teams which fell short of their potential because the members worked in siloes and didn't leverage their interdependence. Of times I said "yes" in my efforts to please others to the detriment of myself and the quality of my work. Of the emotional burdens I bore punishing myself when I made a mistake. Of trying to outwork my inner critic, believing that doing more would quiet that voice of doubt. I am proud of the arc of my professional life but I now see ways in which I might have done so much more.

I encourage you to consider how you can confront and face down the demon of self-doubt in order to become fully the leader and person you were meant to be. The world will not be served by you playing small. Recognize the gifts you have and stride confidently amid complexity and uncertainty to make the most of them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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