Don't Ignore the Damage Caused by Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome can infect your organization's culture like a pernicious disease. Root it out with these guidelines.

By Michael J. Carrasco

Award-winning author Maya Angelou once said, "I have written 11 books, but each time I think 'Uh-oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.' "

No matter who you are, you can experience imposter syndrome – the feeling that you're where you are because of sheer luck or a lack of oversight. Some of the most successful people in your organization, including yourself, could be struggling with this feeling. What's worse is that those afflicted with this malady suffer in silence. They could be the only minority (the only woman, person with a disability, person of color, LGBTQ individual) in your workplace, and your organization's culture could be undermining them without you realizing it. Here are some thoughts about how to approach this insidious problem:

Recognize the Damage It Can Do

Imposter syndrome can creep into your organization's culture. Don't miss the signs that you may be encouraging this disorder. Begin by asking these questions:

Does your organization encourage employees to overwork or be connected 24/7?

Is the feedback primarily negative?

Do some managers have favorites?

Is perfection demanded?

Do performance objectives change all the time?

Do you make your employees grateful that they have a job? (In healthy organizations, leaders show they're grateful for their employees, not the other way around.)

As a leader, you need to recognize imposter syndrome and train your management team to help fight it.

Use These Key Tactics

Normalize the fact that the work process includes making mistakes. Sometimes you'll miss the mark and fail, but that's no reason for others to criticize you or for you to blame yourself. Rather, failure is an opportunity to learn and grow.

Promote coaching and mentoring.

> "Those who are afflicted suffer in silence."

> "Talk about feelings of inadequacy when they arise."

Share feedback as teams. Encourage your teams to explain what they appreciate about each other and about other teams.

Make sure your management team understands why it's essential to create a healthier workplace and culture for all your employees. Ensure they know that doing so is part of your "culture strategic plan."

Pay Attention to Your Words

When it comes to leadership, nothing is more important than language. The words you use can drive connection and performance, not just for your employees but for yourself. One reason why people follow leaders is because of the language they use when they communicate.

Listen to how you speak about yourself. Do you downplay how you got to where you are? Do you say it was all luck or a mistake despite having the relevant experience, education, or training? Do you disregard compliments?

Don't compare yourself to others. You've had different experiences. Each of those experiences has contributed to your journey, like building blocks that made you who you are.

Find a coach or a mentor to help you talk about feelings of inadequacy when they arise.

Share your stories of recovery from failure. Revealing your imperfections will help people know they're not alone. As part of every story, describe the strategies you use to surmount defeatist feelings and prevail over setbacks.

Separate your feelings from the facts. We all feel inept at times. Realize that *feeling* inadequate doesn't mean you *are*.

Address People's Feelings

Make it normal for people to talk about their anxiety. Be sure they don't feel they must be perfect. Challenge their negative thinking, and reinforce the fact that no one achieves soaring goals on their first try. Many people have difficulty asking for help because they fear being incompetent, despite being extremely knowledgeable.

Leadership is all about human beings. Understanding the emotional difficulties that affect your team will help your long-term goals.

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Keep Your Culture Healthy

Read these articles (NonprofitWorld.org) to help maintain a positive culture for your organization:

- **Mental Health Challenges in Nonprofits: The Hidden Dangers** (Vol. 41, No. 2)
- **Build a Winning Workplace Culture** (Vol. 39, No. 3)
- **Making Better Mistakes** (Vol. 38, No. 4)
- **Keys to Finding (And Making the Most of) a Mentor** (Vol. 41, No. 4)
- **The Weight of Words in the Workplace** (Vol. 42, No. 2)
- **Employee Feedback is No Longer Optional: Satisfying a Demand for Dialogue** (Vol. 39, No. 1)
- **Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members** (Vol. 18, No. 3)
- **Has Your Organization Lost Its Soul?** (Vol. 28, No. 3)
- **Pain Shows You the Way: Navigating Emotional Triggers** (Vol. 42, No. 3)
- **Use Coaching to Retain the Leader's Edge** (Vol. 28, No. 2)
- **The Organizational Personality and Employee Performance** (Vol. 21, No. 1)
- **Board Members Beware! Warning Signs of a Dysfunctional Organization** (Vol. 16, No. 2)