

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Turning the Mirror on Ourselves What Leaders Can Learn from the Experience of Impostorism

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The year was 1955, and (the now Sir) Michael Parkinson had enrolled into the British Army. He served in Egypt during the Suez Crisis as a British Army press liaison officer and later became the youngest captain in the British Army at the time. Sir Michael Parkinson went on to have an extraordinarily successful career as a TV broadcaster and journalist interviewing the likes of Muhammed Ali and John Lennon on his own BBC hit show named 'Parkinson'. Despite his success and decades of experience, he could not shake the feeling of being an impostor. His very humble beginnings, as a working-class boy from South Yorkshire, left him constantly questioning his right to his success. This inner struggle continued throughout his life, as revealed by his son Mike Parkinson, who spoke of Sir Michael's working-class guilt and consistent self-doubt despite his accomplishments (Hall, 2023).

Sir Michael Parkinson's journey illustrates the challenges of leadership impostorism poignantly. The narrative of a young Captain in the British Army turned iconic TV broadcaster shows us that the struggles with impostorism can be a common one, irrespective of accomplishments and success.

Now, let's turn the mirror around. Have you ever experienced a lingering feeling that you may be somehow 'faking it' in your leadership role, even when things are going well for you? Perhaps a question enters your mind every now and then, whether you are really as good a leader as others think you are? If you nodded in agreement, you may be familiar with

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an experience that scholars call leader impostorism (Kark et al., 2022). Leader impostorism describes when even highly accomplished individuals question whether they truly deserve their leadership position, despite their skills, abilities, and experiences. In some cases, the leader can even feel as if they are being deceptive to others in their occupation of the leader role because they think they do not truly belong there.

Leader Impostorism: Facts and Fiction

If you have just entered a new leadership role within the Army or recently moved up the ranks, it may feel as if impostorism has become a close companion. Research suggests that organisational tenure and career stage play pivotal roles in fuelling experiences of leader impostorism (Kumar et al., 2022). The newer you are to your position, the more likely you may be to question your capabilities. This feeling can be overwhelming but it can also have a positive effect. It can ignite a moment of reflection on what you currently know and what you need to learn to improve. Impostorism has the potential of becoming an important tool for leaders to become more self-aware of what they bring to the table and what support they require from others around them. It can be considered as a rite of passage on the path to becoming a better leader.

At the same time, however, fear of failure can be the nasty sidekick of leader impostorism with negative downstream implications for people's career progression (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). This fear stems from low self-confidence, leading individuals to avoid new opportunities, undermining their ability to perform as leaders, whilst stifling their willingness to express valuable opinions and ideas. In the Army context, the stakes are even higher. Assessment and promotion give a lot of weight to leadership skills, confidence, and the ability of personnel to put themselves forward. Impostorism pulls back individuals who have all the right skills but lack confidence.

Overdrive and overwork can add to the impostor experience (Hudson & González-Gómez, 2021). It is therefore crucial to recognize that impostorism can take a toll on our psychological well-being, impacting both the personal and professional domains of our lives, going along with burnout (Malouf et al., 2023) or a diminished sense of satisfaction in our roles (Vergauwe et al., 2015). It is important to acknowledge this link between the experience of impostorism and people's mental health and well-being.

Some contextual factors can also make the impostor's alarm bells ring louder, especially if your ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background, or education make you stand out (Nadal et al., 2021). The lack of role models who share your background and societal models of success can mean that leaders who do not fit that image question their own place and potential (Kark et al., 2022). Diversity is invaluable to the Army, though it may sometimes feel like it places people under intense scrutiny.

A New Take on Leadership Impostorism

It is not uncommon for individuals, whether they are new to an organisation or well into their careers, to grapple with a sense of being out of place and contending with impostorism. This experience is not exclusive to newcomers and even accomplished leaders may find themselves wrestling with a sense of inadequacy. However, it is not just about feeling out of place. Around 70-80% of individuals report grappling with impostorism at some juncture (Gravois, 2007) and leaders can be in a particularly vulnerable position (Kark et al., 2022). Leaders, especially the high achievers, can feel like they do not quite measure up to the standards and expectations that come with their role or rank. But let's reconsider and approach this from a fresh perspective. Instead of viewing impostorism as a hindrance, what if it can be an unexpected key to unlocking new leadership depths?

Our research team at Durham University Business School's Centre for Leadership and Followership has been diving deep into the world of leader impostorism. We are the hub of a multi-year research project funded by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences that examines the dynamics of leader impostorism, and the question of whether it changes over time and in different contexts. We see leader impostorism as a momentary experience bound to a specific time and situation. In other words, nobody is born an imposter. Impostorism is an experience that anyone can encounter, depending on where they find themselves in their careers, who is around them, and the challenges they face.

We started collecting stories from leaders in various organisational sectors about their self-doubt, especially when transitioning to new roles or navigating unfamiliar responsibilities. Within these discussions, leaders often spoke of the profound impact of judgments from both superiors and peers on their confidence levels. One leader's experiences highlighted the vital role of supportive teams in providing reassurance and positive feedback to bolster confidence in their leadership capacity. Having a team that you know has your back can help manage situations in which you feel like an impostor. Keeping doubts to yourself can make them worse, especially with the pressure brought on by a leadership position. We also heard about the importance of consulting with more experienced team members and of acknowledging the strength in emotional vulnerability.

The experience of leader impostorism, widely encountered within the Army and beyond, should be viewed not as a barrier but as a catalyst for professional and personal development. It reminds us of diversity and supportive systems as critical elements that enhance leadership authenticity and inclusion in organisations. Impostorism experiences can offer an opportunity to reinforce the value of supportive networks and allow diversity to shape resilient and effective Army leaders.

Transforming Leader Impostorism into Power

Our research into impostorism suggests several actionable strategies for resilient and authentic leadership within the British Army. Here are a few key lessons we would like to put forward:

- **Change your mindset:** Remember that feeling like an impostor is more common than you think and many around you feel the same way as you do. Do not see it as a setback. It is a growth opportunity in a sneaky disguise. Embrace the power of vulnerability by fostering an environment in your team where sharing doubts, uncertainties, and successes is encouraged. As a leader you can role-model this by being open about your own experiences. This approach can help demystify feelings of inadequacy and build a supportive community focused on learning and development.
- **Be 'one of us':** Recognise that even top-level leaders sometimes feel like they are frauds. This can be a good thing. The less we glorify leaders, the more we can speak truth to power and influence decisions. As a leader, actively demonstrate how you engage in learning and development processes alongside your team. Highlight best practice examples of growth, and show continuous learning and professional development as continual processes that everyone, no matter their rank or prior experience, should engage in.
- **Authenticity:** Realising that leaders do not know it all can help us feel more confident in ourselves. For instance, admitting to your team when you are unsure and seeking collective input can foster a more collaborative environment. This will also lift some

of the pressure that you may feel as a leader to get it right all the time. When we feel free of the pressure to be perfect, we can be who we are and act authentic to our true selves.

- Be open: Do not be afraid of sharing your experiences of impostorism. Explaining that sometimes you too feel like an impostor might just be the thing that allows you to connect with your team. For example, organising regular team sessions where everyone shares their challenges and learnings, promotes a culture of mutual support. This practice not only makes you more approachable as a leader but it also encourages others to embrace change and learn from others.

Embracing Leader Impostorism

We want you to take away that impostorism is a common experience for many leaders. In fact, it is a tool that creates growth and personal development for yourself and others around you. Think back to Sir Michael Parkinson. Yes, he (like many of us) experienced impostorism. Did this put an end to his incredibly successful career that spanned multiple decades? Quite the opposite! Leaders within the Armed Forces need to understand that impostorism is part of what it means to be a leader. The key step is recognising it not as a flaw or inadequacy but as a signal for growth. You can use your impostorism experience as a motivation to self-improve. If you are unsure what you can do to develop as a leader, ask trusted colleagues and mentors. By opening up about your own vulnerabilities or doubts, you have the power to foster an environment in which people around you feel safe and valued. By redefining leader impostorism as our ally, we can catalyse a shift towards a leadership culture that celebrates self-improvement, continuous learning, and authenticity.

Questions

1. Have you ever felt like an impostor? What triggered this feeling?
2. How can you encourage an environment in which others feel safe and valued?
3. How can impostorism contribute to building stronger relationships with your team?

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