

# The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake

by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

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**A** few years ago, a middle manager in a telecommunications company came to see me upon his promotion to a senior management role. I'll call him Tobin Holmes (all case study names in this article have been disguised). A young Englishman who had studied classics at Oxford before graduating in the top 5% of his class at Insead, Holmes was very clever. But he feared he couldn't take on the new job's responsibilities. At the root of Holmes's dilemma was his suspicion that he was just not good enough, and he lived in dread that he would be exposed at any moment.

Yet, at the same time, he seemed bent on betraying the very inadequacy he was so anxious to conceal. In his personal life, for example, he indulged in conspicuously self-destructive behavior, such as public affairs with numerous women and a drinking spree that resulted in a disastrous car accident. At work, he found it increasingly difficult to concentrate and make decisions. He worried—and now for good reason—that his problems at the office would be noticed by the CEO and other members of the board. When would they realize that they had made a horrible mistake in promoting him to the senior executive team?

When the fear and stress overwhelmed him, Holmes quit his job and accepted a junior position at a larger organization. Given his genuine talent, however, it didn't take long before he was asked to head up one of that company's major country units, a role widely known to be a stepping-stone to the top. In this new role, Holmes's feelings of doubt resurfaced. Rather than risk being exposed as incompetent, he left the job within a year and moved on to yet another company. There, despite his performance, top management looked at his employment record and concluded that Holmes just didn't have the right stuff to make it to the highest levels of leadership.

Holmes couldn't let himself move up to the most senior levels in an organization because, deep inside, he feared that he was an impostor who would eventually be discovered. In many walks of life –and business is no exception–there are high achievers who believe that they are complete fakes. To the outside observer, these individuals appear to be remarkably accomplished; often they are extremely successful leaders. Despite their staggering achievements, however, these people subjectively sense that they are frauds. This *neurotic imposture*, as psychologists call it, is not a false humility. It is the flip side of giftedness and causes many talented, hardworking, and capable leaders –men and women who have achieved great things–to believe that they don't deserve their success.

To some extent, of course, we are *all* impostors. We play roles on the stage of life, presenting a public self that differs from the private self we share with intimates and morphing both selves as circumstances demand. Displaying a facade is part and parcel of the human condition. Indeed, one reason the feeling of being an impostor is so widespread is that society places enormous pressure on people to stifle their real selves.

But neurotic impostors feel more fraudulent and alone than other people do. Because they view themselves as charlatans, their success is worse than meaningless: It is a burden. In their heart of hearts, these self-doubters believe that others are much smarter and more capable than they are, so any praise impostors earn makes no sense to them. “Bluffing” their way through life (as they see it), they are haunted by the constant fear of exposure. With every success, they think, “I was lucky this time, fooling everyone, but will my luck hold? When will people discover that I'm not up to the job?”

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Neurotic impostors can be found at all levels of an organization. Typically, the misgivings begin with the first job, right after graduation, when people are fraught with anxiety and particularly insecure about their ability to prove themselves. Promotion from middle management to senior management is another tricky time because an executive must negotiate the difficult switch from being a specialist to becoming a general manager. But neurotic impostors face their greatest challenges when they are promoted from senior management to CEO. In my work with senior managers and

CEOs, I've found that many neurotic impostors function well as long as they aren't in the number one position. Often, a leader's feelings of self-doubt and anxiety are less pressing when he is lower on the totem pole, because senior executives usually provide support and mentoring. But once a leader becomes the CEO, everything he does is highly visible. He is expected to stand on his own.

For this reason, people like Tobin Holmes abound in business. In my career as a management professor, consultant, leadership coach, and psychoanalyst, I have explored the topic of neurotic imposture with individuals and with large groups of senior executives. My experience has shown that feelings of neurotic imposture proliferate in today's organizations, and I encounter this type of dysfunctional perception and behavior all the time—particularly when working with executives in consulting firms and in investment banking. In the following pages, I will describe the phenomenon of neurotic imposture; explore how perfectionist overachievers can damage their careers by allowing their anxiety to trigger self-handicapping behavior; and discuss how such an executive's dysfunctional behavior can have a ripple effect throughout a company, hurting not just the morale of colleagues but also the bottom line.

## **Why You Might Feel like a Fake**

The term *impostor phenomenon* was coined in 1978 by Georgia State University psychology professor Pauline Clance and psychologist Suzanne Imes in a study of high-achieving women. These psychologists discovered that many of their female clients seemed unable to internalize and accept their achievements. Instead, in spite of consistent objective data to the contrary, they attributed their successes to serendipity, luck, contacts, timing, perseverance, charm, or even the ability to appear more capable than they felt themselves to be. (See the sidebar “Women and the Impostor Phenomenon.”)

Numerous doctoral theses and research papers have followed that original study. Although their findings have not always been consistent, most studies suggest that neurotic imposture is by no means limited to women. Men can also exhibit it—though, interestingly, genuine imposture (that is, deliberate fraud) is more common in men than in women (see the sidebar “Genuine Fakes”).

Further, the incidence of neurotic imposture seems to vary by profession. For example, it is highly prevalent in academia and medicine, both disciplines in which the appearance of intelligence is vital to success.

Not surprisingly, my clinical interviews with CEOs and other high-level executives suggest that specific family structures can be breeding grounds for feelings of imposture. Certain dysfunctional families—particularly those in which parents are overinvested in achievement and where human warmth is lacking—tend to produce children who are prone to neurotic imposture. Individuals who have been raised in this kind of environment seem to believe that their parents will notice them only when they excel. As time goes on, these people often turn into insecure overachievers.

Paradoxically, a predisposition to neurotic imposture is also quite common in individuals who are *not* expected to succeed. In socially disadvantaged groups (often with a blue-collar background, for example), parents may withhold encouragement because their children's ambitions are inconsistent with family expectations. Children who manage to advance to positions of real power as adults, however, often transcend their families of origin in such a spectacular way that a lingering insecurity remains about having become so “grandiose” in their success. Frequently, because of conflicting signals, these executives wonder just how long that success will last. This fear of surpassing one's parents can cause feelings of neurotic imposture to persist long after the parents have died.

Birth order also influences the development of neurotic imposture. Feelings of imposture are more common among firstborn children, reflecting the new parents' nervous inexperience and greater expectations of these children. For example, older children are often expected to help out in the care of brothers and sisters and are held up to younger siblings as models of maturity.

### **Women and the Impostor Phenomenon**

Women who reach successful positions that conflict with their family of origin's way of thinking about gender roles are especially prone to feeling fraudulent. The gender socialization that women are often exposed to—for instance, being told that they should become nurses or secretaries when choosing a career—tends to augment their sense of imposture when their achievements rise above those expectations. Ironically, this feeling might, at an unconscious level, carry benefits: A

### **How Your Fear Becomes Reality**

How does neurotic imposture get out of hand? The trigger is often perfectionism. In its mild form, of course, perfectionism provides the energy that leads to great accomplishments. “Benign” perfectionists, who do not suffer feelings of inadequacy, derive pleasure from their achievements and don't obsess over failures. Neurotic impostors, however, are seldom benign in their perfectionism. They are “absolute” perfectionists, who set excessively high, unrealistic goals and then experience self-

woman might be able to deal with ambivalence about her real career achievements by keeping them out of conscious awareness.

Inner confusion develops into genuine neurotic imposture for many women when they reach critical junctures in their lives concerning marriage, work, and children. These decisions are especially difficult for women who have had traditional mothers. Consciously or not, women tend to compare their chosen roles with the roles their mothers played. The fact that working women choose not to stay at home but rather to pursue a career—a lifestyle so different from what they witnessed as children—often makes them feel like bad mothers to their own children and bad wives to their husbands.

Gender role socialization isn't the only thing that makes women more vulnerable than men to neurotic imposture. The fact that businesswomen have to function in an environment dominated by men compounds their insecurity, because when women are successful, they're not the only ones who suspect imposture. Many of their competitive male colleagues likewise assume that chance or an affirmative action program—not talent or skill—was responsible for the success. Though few men will express such an opinion publicly, subtle insinuations from male colleagues add to a woman's fear that the "luck" won't last. As a result, many very gifted women don't know that they have superior

defeating thoughts and behaviors when they can't reach those goals. They are driven by the belief that they are currently not good enough, but that they could do better if only they worked harder. For this reason, perfectionism often turns neurotic impostors into workaholics. Fearing discovery of their "fraudulence," they burden themselves with too much work to compensate for their lack of self-esteem and identity. Work/life balance is a meaningless concept to them.

I'm reminded of a cartoon that depicts a CEO handing over a dossier to one of his subordinates. He says, "Take your time. I'm not in a hurry. Take the whole weekend if necessary." Neurotic impostors commonly enter into abusive, self-defeating collusions of this sort. They don't realize that they may be pushing themselves and others too hard, often to the detriment of long-term success. By exploiting themselves so brutally in this way, they risk rapid and early burnout.

The vicious cycle begins when the impostor sets impossible goals. She fails to reach these goals, of course (because *no one* could reach them), then tortures herself endlessly about the failure, which incites further self-flagellation, accentuates the feelings of imposture, and inspires her to designate yet another unattainable set of goals—

and the entire cycle of workaholism and fraudulence begins again. That's what happened to Robert Pierce, an extraordinarily gifted trader at a highly prestigious investment bank, who set ever

increasing goals of financial compensation for himself to deal with his anxieties about being a fake. Initially, Pierce felt elated whenever he reached his goal; but he became more desperate every time he learned that someone else earned more than he did. This kicked off an orgy of self-blame that did little to improve his career or his organizational effectiveness.

## **When Fakes Court Failure**

Because they are so ambivalent about their achievements, neurotic impostors often appear to be engagingly humble. Self-deprecation, of course, is a perfectly respectable character trait and, from a career management point of view, can be seen as a protective strategy. Underplaying one's achievements defuses other people's envy and directs attention away from success, thereby lowering others' expectations—a useful maneuver in case of future failure. A display of self-deprecation also seems to convey a sense of modesty, which can elicit encouragement and support from others.

But the neurotic impostor's humility actually stems from another kind of protective impulse: the need for an exit strategy. Failure (at least at a subliminal level) becomes a desirable way out. Think of the journalist who wins a Pulitzer prize at a relatively young age. Such a "gift" can turn out to be a poisonous boon. When such good fortune occurs, what can one do for an encore? Great achievements have ruined many a neurotic impostor because they can lead to paralysis. Indeed, to neurotic impostors, granting wishes for success can be one of fate's cruelest jokes.

For many neurotic impostors, the heart of the problem is the fear that success and fame will hurt them in some way—that family, friends, and others will continue to like them much better if they remain "small." After all, people who covet success are likely to envy those who have achieved it. As Ambrose Bierce wrote in *The Devil's Dictionary*, success is "the one unpardonable sin against one's fellows."

In extreme cases, neurotic impostors bring about the very failure that they fear. This self-destructive behavior can take many forms, including procrastination, abrasiveness, and the inability to delegate. As Tobin Holmes's experience illustrates, it can also take such extreme forms as inappropriate womanizing or substance abuse on the job.

Neurotic impostors are also quite creative at destroying their own successful careers. It's as if they *want* to be discovered. Perhaps assisting in their own unmasking is a proactive way of coping with their anxiety; maybe it offers a sense of relief.

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Mike Larson, a senior executive I worked with a few years ago, exemplifies this propensity. After a brilliant career as a medical researcher, Larson was offered the position of director of research in a global company specializing in over-the-counter drugs. When he embarked on this challenging new research agenda, however, Larson's incessant fear of exposure harmed rather than enhanced his performance. It was one thing to be a member of a team, but taking on the number one research position was another question altogether. To be so visible made him feel increasingly anxious, contributing to his drive to do even better; but his inability to delegate and his tendency toward micromanagement led to a greater sense of malaise.

Larson realized that he was digging a hole for himself, but it was difficult for him to ask for help. He was afraid that doing so would give his colleagues proof of what they surely suspected—that he was an impostor, a fraud. To avoid being found out, he withdrew into himself, agonized over what his colleagues thought about him, worried about not living up to their expectations, and waffled over every decision. The result was anxiety-filled days, sleepless nights, and an intense fear of making mistakes—a fear that made him unwilling to experiment, develop, and learn.

Like most neurotic impostors, Larson engaged in faulty reality testing. This distortion in his cognition caused him to dramatize all setbacks—he blew small incidents out of proportion and cast himself as the helpless victim. Larson lived with the misconception that he was the only one prone to failure and self-doubt, and this made him feel even more insecure and isolated. Like other neurotic impostors, he focused on the negative and failed to give himself credit for his accomplishments. He also harmed his career by becoming a master of catastrophizing—reaching exaggerated conclusions based on limited evidence.

Only when Larson was awarded the top research position did he realize how much he missed the mentors he'd had at earlier stages of his career. Those mentors had helped him to deal with the pressures of his job and to maintain equilibrium under stress. But when he was promoted, he found it much harder to ask for advice and to find people who would challenge his faulty cognition. As a result, he executed a number of poor management decisions that contributed to his organization's ineffectiveness. Eventually, he was asked to step down from the director's position.

## **The Neurotic Organization**

Neurotic impostors can, and do, damage the organizations they try so hard to please. Their work ethic can be contagious, but because they are so eager to succeed, they often become impatient and abrasive. Neurotic impostors are extremely tough on themselves and thus not predisposed to spare others. They drive their employees too hard and create a gulag-like atmosphere in their organizations, which inevitably translates into high employee turnover rates, absenteeism, and other complications that can affect the bottom line. Moreover, neurotic impostors can intimidate others with their intensity. And because they don't have what it takes to be effective leadership coaches, they are not generally talented in leadership development and succession planning.

More dangerous, however, is neurotic imposture's effect on the quality of decision making. Executives who feel like impostors are afraid to trust their own judgment. Their fearful, overly cautious kind of leadership can easily spread across the company and bring about dire consequences for the organization. For instance, a neurotic impostor CEO is very likely to suppress his company's entrepreneurial capabilities. After all, if he doesn't trust his own instincts, why should he trust anyone else's?

Neurotic impostor CEOs are also highly likely to become addicted to consulting companies because reassurances provided by "impartial" outsiders compensate for the executives' feelings of insecurity. Of course, judicious use of consulting advice does have its place; but neurotic impostor executives all too easily turn into puppets whose strings are completely manipulated by those same advisers. Ralph Gordon, the CEO of a global engineering firm, suffered just such an experience. In a group session during one of my seminars, he explained that he really didn't choose engineering—his father had chosen it for him. Gordon conceded to his father's wishes and entered the business world, where he never felt comfortable in his corporate role. When he reached more senior

positions, Gordon began to rely on consultants, some of whom took advantage of his insecurity at a very high price. Not only did they charge Gordon's firm substantial fees for their services, but their predatory behavior increased Gordon's feelings of dependency.

This type of behavior is exacerbated when neurotic impostors work in an organization that punishes failure. If the company culture does not tolerate mistakes, the leader's level of anxiety will increase, making neurotic behavior all the more likely. This is paralyzing for the perfectionist whose fear of failure will have an even more negative impact on the organization.

Consider Lynn Orwell, who had a successful career at a consulting firm before accepting an offer from a prominent media company. In her consulting job, Orwell had functioned exceptionally well. But this changed when she accepted an assignment to run the new firm's European operation.

Although Orwell was an outstanding source of good ideas, her fear of failure led her to manage in ways that seemed countercultural. In an organization that had always been decentralized, for example, she decided to centralize many of the functions in her part of the business. But what really grated on many people was that Orwell wanted to make most of the decisions herself. Her perfectionist attitude and her need for immediate results made delegation anathema to her and dampened the team's productivity and creativity. Orwell's coworkers started to worry about the abrasiveness that had crept into her manner, and her prickliness about criticism—whether real or perceived—began to irritate a growing number of her colleagues. She reacted with defensiveness and hostility to comments about any of her proposals, reports, or decisions. Furthermore, anxious not to be found wanting, she took ages to prepare for meetings, trying to anticipate every conceivable question that could be asked. Such precautions extended her already lengthy workweek into weekends, and she expected others to show the same commitment.

Orwell's sense of neurotic imposture deeply affected the organization. As time went on, many of Orwell's team members began to ask for transfers to other parts of the organization. Others quietly sought out headhunters. Those who stayed took a passive-aggressive attitude toward Orwell. Since they felt it was not worth the effort to reason with her, they let her make all the decisions but undermined them in subtle ways. As a result, her European division—once hailed as the flagship operation—was increasingly seen as a liability. By the year's end, profitability for Orwell's division

had fallen into a deep slump, confirming the company's belief that she was truly incompetent. Ultimately, the division was sold to a competitor. Orwell's neurosis had ruined not only her career but a perfectly robust business as well.

## **Genuine Fakes**

In contrast to neurotic impostors, true impostors are con artists—and they tend to be men. Consider Ferdinand Waldo Demara, for example. In the fall of 1951, this real impostor's career came to an abrupt halt after a woman became alarmed by an article she saw in her daily newspaper. The article described a successful emergency operation performed by Joseph Cyr, orried, the woman contacted her son, also a physician named Joseph Cyr, who assured her that he was safe and sound and practicing medicine in New Brunswick. Unsettled by the odd coincidence of names, however, Dr. Cyr then contacted the police, an initiative that led to the unraveling of Demara's bizarre career.

It didn't take long for the authorities to find out that Demara was masquerading as Dr. Cyr. In fact, the bogus doctor's medical "training" had been limited to a few weeks working as an unskilled hospital orderly in the United States. That experience, however, along with the help of the ship's medical attendant and the navy's generous supply of anesthetics and antibiotics, was enough for him to successfully play the role of medical doctor. Fortunately, despite Demara's lack of qualifications, his patients survived their treatments.

Further investigation revealed that Demara had gone through most of his life masquerading as other people. His career

## **The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

Neurotic imposture is not an inevitable part of the human condition, and it is avoidable. Early prevention, for instance, can completely ward it off. If caregivers identify and deal with factors that lead to this phenomenon very early in life, the dysfunctional effects will never surface. Parental awareness of the downside of setting excessively high standards for children goes a long way toward preventing later misery. But there is hope for late-diagnosed impostors as well. Experience has shown that psychotherapeutic interventions can be very effective in changing distorted self-perceptions.

Yet the best—and often most appropriate—way for you to manage feelings of imposture can be to evaluate yourself. After all, you are the best person to assess the source of these problems. And though a leadership coach or psychotherapist can certainly help you on this journey of self-discovery and change, a mentor or good friend can also put things in perspective. Realizing that you may repeat with your children the same pattern of behavior you learned from your parents, for instance, can be a great motivator.

as an impostor spanned three decades and included a wide variety of pseudo-identities, such as deputy sheriff, prison warden, psychologist, university lecturer, Trappist monk, and cancer researcher. This chameleon-like career didn't come without a price, however. At one point, Demara's impersonation resulted in a term of imprisonment.

Apparently, his inability to figure out what to do with his life motivated him to masquerade as other people, with the professed hope of eventually "finding" himself. Personal gain wasn't a major part of the equation. Interestingly enough, his talent at playing different roles was remarkable, and many of his unsuspecting employers were quite satisfied with his work. He was a master of improvisation, gathering from textbooks and observation the necessary knowledge to fill each role he took on.

Demara's exploits fascinated the public. After his discharge from the Canadian navy, he sold his story to *Life* magazine and became the subject of a book by Robert Crichton, which led to the making of the film *The Great Impostor*, starring Tony Curtis. Crichton reported that he'd had a hard time pinning down the impostor's motives for engaging in all his masquerades. At one point, Demara is said to have told him, "I'm a rotten man," adding that he was prompted by "rascality, sheer rascality." But Demara also suggested that his activities served a

If you are unable to take the initiative to deal with your feelings of imposture, however, your boss needs to intervene. Such was the case with John Stodard, the CEO of a large telecommunications company, who came to talk to me upon the recommendation of his chairman. In our sessions, Stodard wondered if he needed pointers on how to be a more effective executive. A 360-degree feedback exercise showed that he was inclined toward micromanagement and perfectionism and that he possessed poor listening skills. Some of the written comments also noted that his impatience put intense pressure on his directors and that morale at the office was quite low. As we discussed the problem together, Stodard began to realize the extent to which he had internalized the expectations of his extremely demanding parents, and he started to change. He began to experiment with new behavior in the office and received a surprisingly positive reception, which increased his sense of self-efficacy. When I met him a year later, Stodard mentioned quite proudly how morale at the office had dramatically improved, how the company had become more profitable, and how his ability to let go of his controlling tendencies had contributed to these successes.

Like Stodard's chairman, good bosses remain alert for symptoms of neurotic imposture in their employees: fear of failure, fear of success,

perfectionism, procrastination, and workaholism. In performance reviews, bosses should signal

(uncritically) any danger signs to their direct reports. They should also explain how anxiety about performance can take on a self-destructive quality, and they should emphasize the value of work/life balance, pointing out that extreme strength can easily become a weakness.

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Above all, bosses need to make sure that a subordinate suffering from neurotic imposture understands that with responsibility comes constructive criticism. This means teaching—by word and by example—that open, honest, critical feedback is an opportunity for new learning and not an irredeemable catastrophe. They must point out that *everyone* in a responsible job occasionally feels unequal to the task and needs time to adjust and learn the ropes. The worst thing a neurotic impostor can do, especially in a new position, is to compare his abilities with those of seasoned executives. This is guaranteed to be an exercise in self-flagellation.

At the same time, leaders must strengthen the perceived link between positive achievements and efforts. They can do this not only by offering praise when it's due, but also by acknowledging that making mistakes (though not repeating them!) is part of a successful corporate culture. The wise organization does not punish “smart” mistakes; indeed, to “fail forward” should be part of an organization's implicit cultural values. Mistakes can offer great opportunities for learning and personal growth, and leaders need to help neurotic impostors understand that a fear of failure is normal and need not be debilitating.

When it's the CEO himself who feels like a neurotic impostor, the situation is more complicated. A leader at the top does not find it easy to ask for support from mentors or from subordinates who feel their boss “has it all.” For this reason, many high-performance organizations now have leadership-coaching programs to help their executives cope better with the vicissitudes of working life. When leadership coaches recognize the signs of neurotic imposture, they are in a good position to give constructive advice. In the 15 years that I have been running top-level seminars at Insead, I have listened to executives discuss significant experiences in their work and personal lives. Being willing

to talk about these neurotic imposture problems and accept peer support not only has a profound effect on leaders but also has a deep impact on the organization that the neurotic impostor has helped to shape.

It's often said that a person's strengths are also his weaknesses. The same is true for an organization. In most well-run organizations, senior managers remove low performers or develop them to become high performers. But these same managers are less effective in managing people who appear to be problem-free. By their very nature, neurotic impostors are very hard to detect because the early stages of an executive's career are so conducive to high performance. It is, in fact, a rare leader who does not suffer from neurotic imposture. All the more reason, therefore, for managers to be on the lookout for it in themselves, their reports, and their potential successors. Failing to recognize and deal with neurotic impostors has serious consequences both for individual sufferers and for the organizations relying on them.

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