

Friday October 15th, 2010

## Interview with Suzanne Mercier on the impact of the Imposter Syndrome on Women in Leadership

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### Skirting around female leadership

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I'm incapable of a high-level position, or am I? *Photo: istock photos*

A report released last week by Macquarie University showed that when it comes to women in leadership, Australia is a nation of

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Posted in: [Work In Progress](#)  
Date: Oct 15, 2010, 9:26AM

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*“ With the current push to to have goals and quotas for women in leadership positions, more ... ”*

followers, lagging behind much of the developed world. And while gender targets set by companies like Westpac are a welcome trend, a school of thought is laying the blame for this under-representation not with any boys club, but with women themselves.

It's called the 'imposter syndrome'. It was first coined in the 1970s at Georgia State University when therapists worked with accomplished women who didn't believe they were successful despite evidence to the contrary. It's a state of mind resulting in diminished confidence and feelings of phoniness, making them think they're incapable of holding senior positions or running thriving companies.

I spoke to Suzanne Mercier, whose business, Imposterhood, teaches women how to overcome the imposter syndrome. “At the seat of the syndrome is the fear of not being good enough,” she said.

It's a fear where people, once they attain a position of power, worry they'll be found out for being a fraud. They're convinced they've gotten to where they are not because of aptitude and perseverance but because of luck. It's a syndrome that affects men as well as women, albeit in different ways.

“Men are conditioned from a very early age to be successful, so success is expected,” says Mercier. “Their fear is a fear of failure. However, women are conditioned to be

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feminine. Career success might be wished for, but not expected. Their fear is more commonly the fear of success because they know they'll have to give something up if they're successful, such as family, partner, children, friends, and life balance."

A conundrum of the imposter syndrome is this: some people are inflicted by it because they actually are an imposter. Everyone's known a bumbling and incompetent leader out of his or her depth to an excruciating and embarrassing extent. But the real imposter syndrome reflects people who deserve their position, can excel at it, and yet suffer from secret convictions of low worth.

According to Mercier, "nature and nurture create the latent possibility to experience feeling like an imposter." In some people there are personality factors, such as emotional sensitivity, performance anxiety, and a lack of conscientiousness, while in others it could be the impact of having a perfectionist as a parent. Whatever the cause, the imposter syndrome is often triggered by an external event that creates uncertainty and vulnerability.

"That might include a highly competitive male dominated environment; unexpected promotions; challenges and conflict in the workplace; changing goalposts, and so on," she says.

The consequence of the imposter syndrome is that women don't achieve their potential. In the

corporate world, they refrain from making big decisions that could advance their career. In entrepreneurship, they shy away from taking the risks that could grow their business.

Mercier provides a checklist of symptoms to help recognise whether you've fallen into the imposter syndrome.

- Feeling caged in and unfulfilled
- Sabotaging career opportunities
- Neglecting the use of talents and skills
- Giving away power
- Procrastination
- A self-view different from what others think
- Becoming defensive when receiving feedback

"Recognise what you're doing," says Mercier. "Get someone you respect to help you identify your strengths and successes. Increase your emotional resilience by putting mistakes into perspective and looking for learning."

She also suggests women should push through the fear by applying for jobs they may not be fully qualified for, which is a habit men are more accustomed to doing than women.

Psychology researchers at the Dominican University of California estimate that 70 per cent of people have felt they were an imposter at some stage during their career. But while men are more likely to fake it 'til they make it, women are more likely to brake it and not make it.

Written by [James Adonis](#), author of '*Corporate Punishment: Smashing the management clichés for leaders in a new world*'. Follow on [Twitter](#).



## Comments:

Can sort of relate to this... however it usually comes after the period where I tackle an ambition (job, project etc) with the attitude 'how hard could be ???!', jump in, then realise after I've committed myself 'oh crap, this is really hard what the hell was I thinking'... but usually manage to struggle through somehow, making my life hell in the process (relationships, work-life balance take a backseat and usually wither on the vine for extended periods). The price of mastery IS devotion to the task to the point of obsession - involving agony and ecstasy, but not 'normality' in terms of frame of mind or lifestyle. Artists will understand what I'm getting at.... So perhaps there might be many women out there who shy away at reaching this level of devotion in their work because it does necessarily impact on relationships and work-life balance, and this is problematic because women tend not to have wives who will pick up the slack on the home front..... think about Einstein - in the period after he left his first wife (and collaborator)... how much work would have he got done on the theory of relativity if he hadn't had a devoted wife who took care of all the mundane things in his life like cooking and child rearing and housework? Not much, I'll bet you. But I digress.....

Posted By: **Tealight** - October 15, 2010, 11:52AM

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Personal factors may be relevant in individual cases but let us not overlook more systematic, cultural and social issues.

Ultimately, when women and men form their self image, they are taking in messages from the world around them. If the world around them is giving them slanted or unhelpful messages, a more negative self image is more likely to result.

Since, as the article points out, men's success is 'expected' they are more likely to be able to count on support, encouragement and reassurance in their role as leader. Women's success however is not seen as 'expected' or 'inevitable' therefore are told 'this obviously isn't making you happy' or 'you are obviously stressed by this, have you considered that it might not be worth it?'

I am not in any way making inferences of maliciousness against women. This is to illustrate that it is not being instilled in women that they can and should achieve, hang in their and keep going even on a social level.

It is not difficult to see how a women could begin to feel like an imposter when she is not given the reassurance and encouragement that she belongs in the role. We need to culturally and socially view women as natural business leaders in order to overcome this.

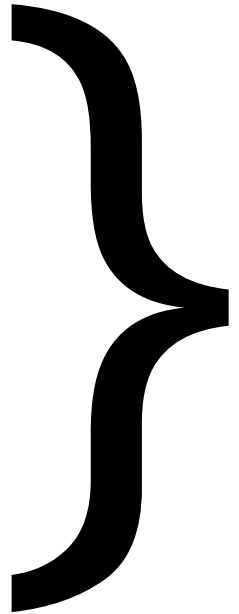
Posted By: **Marie** | Melbourne - October 15, 2010, 3:25PM

Thanks Tealight and Marie for your comments. I'm the woman James interviewed for this blog and I agree that the issue of why there aren't more women in leadership is a highly complex one. There are many influencing factors including that the issue is not a strategic imperative (yet), that most organisations have an hierarchical, command and control structure that conflicts with womens' collaborative style, that women are commonly uncomfortable with power over others, preferring influence, that gender stereotypes and expectations are entrenched, that there is no recognition of WIIFM for men to encourage and support women into leadership positions. Of course, I'm talking very generally and there are significant exceptions to this last comment. Organisations seem to not yet have registered that more women in senior leadership positions increases their financial performance.

Most gender diversity programmes would address the mindset, behaviours and environmental factors that contribute to so many women leaving the corporate world (brain drain). However, the point I would make is that the barriers we create ourselves are rarely addressed and one of these is feeling like an imposter, denying our talents and successes and thinking they are due to good luck or someone else's mistakenly positive view of our capability. If we can recognise and address how we sabotage our own opportunities as a result of feeling this way, more of us may be ready to take up the available opportunities.

And yes, wouldn't it be great to have a "wife"!!!

Posted By: **Suzanne** | Sydney - October 15, 2010, 4:14PM



@Marie - agree with your argument. Social conditioning plays a huge role here.

I'd be interested to see how this type of research compares with foreign cultures, because I suspect (at least based on my friends and personal experience) that this is something particularly strong in Australia. The German, Russian, Asian, Italian, English and even some American women I have met in Australia are astounded at how unimaginative our gender roles are here.

I read one study that said female mentors are one of the biggest ways of helping younger women push through the 'fear factor'. So since then I've always tried to find an older woman to guide me & give me advice.

I think it's also worth mentioning something that really feeds into this "imposter syndrome" is the fact that the cultures of so many Australian organisations (not all) are still so masculine. For instance in my workplace, I will do something very well & get recognition for it, I'm never quite part of the power network & hence feel like I still somehow don't belong.

This isn't necessarily explicit sexism - most of the men don't do this intentionally or knowingly - but there is a culture built around traditionally male interests, inclinations and pursuits.

I'm sure it happens the other way around in some schools or government departments, but so far I've never experienced a workplace culture that gives women an equal advantage.

Posted By: **snomo** | Sydney - October 15, 2010, 5:17PM

I think it's great that women have a way out and don't feel that they absolutely MUST succeed. Men feel far more compelled to be 'the hunter' and 'the breadwinner' and so they must push themselves - they don't have so many lifestyle choices. Perhaps this is why male suicide is between 400% - 600% that of females (depending on age group).

Posted By: **Tera** - October 15, 2010, 6:39PM



Hmmm...

These lines of reasoning presuppose that all men (sic) are created equal.

There are a ton of things that build up and define a person, in such a way that we are not all the same. Some of it is the nurture/nature stuff, but there are hormonal differences too, surprise surprise there are tonnes of hormonal differences between individuals and particularly between genders.

Hell, just being taller will make a difference to the effect of 10% better income on average, merit universally does not get you ahead - in fact having the best cut suit in spite of your ability will help you get ahead in some cultures. The job market is mostly about connections, referrals and who you know and not all cv/interview merit based.

Much of what we do and who we are is in our control, you can choose to work easy, gasbag and leave at 5pm on the dot (not always an option even if you chose), or work to get all work done and better than expected and compete. All well and true, but the decision to do so will be tempered by testosterone to compete and get ahead, it's not just an intellectual decision.

If, in spite of any cerebral decisions that we can make as humans, we are cajoled by pheromones to make our choices in partners, don't think for a minute that we aren't subconsciously attuned as to who is boss cookie that we instinctively tend to follow in spite of the intellectual notion of merit.

The less testosterone and shorter you are, the less likely you are to be the boss and that doesn't matter if you're male or female, the reality is that you will likely have less testosterone as a female.

Posted By: **DaniAm** | Forrest Hill - October 15, 2010, 6:46PM

Thank you for drawing attention to such an important topic. I just delivered a talk on this very subject called "How to Feel as Bright and Capable as Everyone Seems to Think You" at IBM in New York yesterday.

Management there is looking at a similar trend as you cite of women self-selecting themselves out of the exec track.

It is true that women identify w/the impostor syndrome more often. However, over the course of 25 years studying and speaking on this topic I've found there to be what I refer to as 10 perfectly good reasons why someone might feel like a fraud. My goal is always to normalise the experience and put it into a larger context whether that be social, organizational culture, family, chosen field, etc. That's why I'm so excited to see Ms. Mercier address the organizational angle as well.

As you point out there are many legitimate reasons why women are especially likely to experience impostor feelings. Which is why my own book (The Confidence Project, Crown Publishing Sept 2011) is aimed squarely at helping women.

I must point out though that at my university engagements, invariably half the audience is male, and when I spoke at Boeing, 80 percent were men. In the later case, this reflects in part the demographics of that workforce. But it's also a good reminder that whether due to social class, messages learned growing up, being in a racial minority, etc. men can feel like impostors too.

The key as you have done so well here is to let people know there is name for these feelings, it is incredibly common, and there are many ways to "unlearn" this needless self-doubt. Thanks again.

Posted By: **Valerie Young** | Montague Massachusetts, US -  
October 16, 2010, 1:41AM

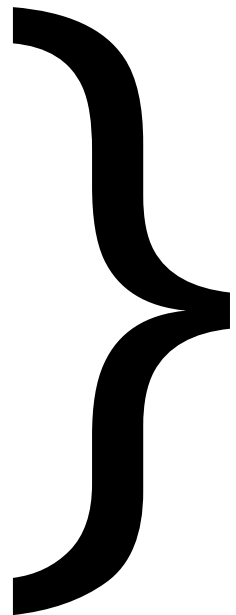
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@Valerie Young. Great to see you enter the discussion. I have long admired your work.

I agree that men experience the Imposter Syndrome too. In fact, all of my coaching clients at the moment are men in very senior positions dealing with their feelings of imposterhood. From my observation, men experience this syndrome differently. There is more at stake for them to acknowledge their feelings because they are expected to be successful. In spite of experiencing these feelings, they are able to move to the top (or as far up as they want to go) because they are "conditioned" from an early age to be the "breadwinner". Generalising of course, feeling like an imposter doesn't stop them from achieving what they want. Whereas for women, the price of those feelings is much higher and in many cases, prevents them from taking opportunities as they come along. And of course, then there's the equal pay issue!

What I'm curious about is whether women experience a perfection driver more than men. We see regularly that women will not apply for jobs when they have 9 out of 10 competencies worrying that they just don't measure up, whereas men will go for it when they only have 4, seeing the competencies as a wish list rather than requirement. Anyone have any ideas on that?

Posted By: **Suzanne** | Sydney - October 16, 2010, 9:51AM





snomo | Sydney - October 15, 2010, 5:17PM

A mentor! Oh how I've \*pined\* for an experienced wise and compassionate female mentor to help guide me through the pitfalls and oilslicks of my career... they're few and far between in my very male dominated industry though... I've had to mentor myself with no guidance from anyone... \*sniff\* :-(

Tera - October 15, 2010, 6:39PM

Hmmm where'd you get those stats.... true men do succeed at suicide more than women (i.e. more men die), but women attempt suicide at a greater rate than men... we're just not as good at topping ourselves, apparently. I've read this stat a few times now, so there may be some truth to it.

DanIAm | Forrest Hill - October 15, 2010, 6:46PM

I'm sorry but the latest cognitive research points to a lesser role for biological determinism... testosterone is NOT the best indicator of who's likely to become a leader, off the sportsfield anyway. It IS perhaps a pretty good indicator of who's more likely to end up in jail though.... (to emphasise my point, think of Obama, Bill Gates, that facebook dude - not what I would consider 'macho', testosterone driven men. On the female side, think of our very own PM, Nanci Pelosi, Madeleine Albright, Condi Rice, Angela Merkel.... again, I would question whether these women are any more 'testosterone driven' than average. And most of them are NOT tall.

Thanks for this discussion everyone - it couldn't have come at a better time for me...I think I'm going to go out and buy the Confidence project book....

Posted By: **Tealight** - October 16, 2010, 12:19PM

Suzanne | Sydney - October 16, 2010, 9:51AM

I would say it's not the case with \*some\* women - I've always had a 'cast my line and see if I get a bite' attitude when job hunting... sometimes it's worked (i.e. I'll get a job even when I haven't met all stated criteria - it's more about attitude and enthusiasm and selling your ability to learn on the job, and of course the transferability of the skills and experience you do have).... and sometimes it hasn't (win some lose some, but you have to be in it (i.e. apply) to win it (get the job)...

Posted By: **Tealight** - October 16, 2010, 12:40PM



@Tealight the challenge with generalisations is that there are always exceptions. I too have been put forward for jobs that on the surface of it, I didn't seem to be qualified for. My personal experience and that of working with senior business people is that if we don't feel good about ourselves, that comes through when we are in the interview process.

Another aspect to this complex challenge is that we may experience similar feelings when influenced by the Imposter Syndrome (fake, fraud, not good enough, success due to good luck ...). However, we can have a range of behavioural responses from a desire to live under the radar and not be noticed to the 'to hell with it - I'm going for it anyway' attitude of a dare devil, often without adequate concern for risk or consequences.

What's great, though, is the feeling of personal acceptance, authenticity and grounded confidence when we come through the other side.

Posted By: **Suzanne** | Sydney, Australia - October 16, 2010, 3:11PM

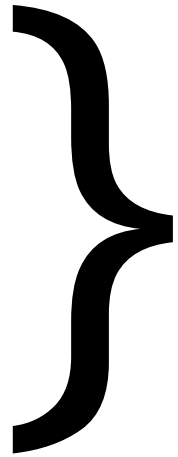
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With the current push to to have goals and quotas for women in leadership positions, more and more women will be promoted who are real imposters - they got promoted not because they were the best candidate, but because they were female.

Inevitably, many of them will feel like imposters - either because they know they didn't deserve their promotion, or because their male colleagues subtly remind them of this.

I'm sure this will lead to more counseling sessions for these women, to help them get over this feeling of being imposters, and convincing them that they actually deserved to be promoted over more qualified men.

Posted By: **kittykat** - October 16, 2010, 9:37PM



@ kittykat

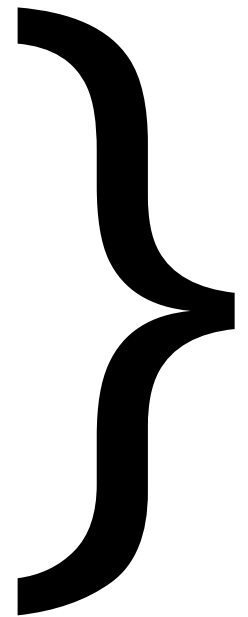
I assume you're referring to the ASX Guidelines and Principles. They aren't saying there are quotas to fill. What they're doing as far as I can see is requiring listed entities to establish a diversity policy which includes setting measurable objectives and to annually assess against those objectives, to disclose those objectives in their annual report together with their progress towards achieving them, and to disclose in the report the number of women employees as a proportion of the whole organisation, together with the proportion of women in senior leadership positions and the proportion on the board. Given the quantity of data that is now available proving women in leadership increase an organisation's performance, that makes good business sense to me.

Tokenism is an unattractive practice and the person who is favoured with such a practice generally feels uncomfortable about any benefits they gained because of it.

I don't believe this is tokenism. I believe it is a genuine attempt to shake up the current male entitlement and boys club attitude towards leadership. There are so many talented and qualified women who could do at least as good a job if they were supported on the journey through to leadership beyond the level of middle management.

You say that women will be promoted over more qualified men. I hope that's not the case. Turn it around and look at how many men are in senior leadership and board positions that aren't as qualified as some of the women waiting in the wings. Plus, the time has come for the inclusion of feminine values in the workplace to transform the traditional transactional style of male leadership and open up for greater collaboration.

Posted By: **Suzanne** | Sydney, Australia - October 22, 2010,  
1:05PM



I'm going to be very controversial here and say the problem with some women (not all), is that in feeling like 'a fraud', they become the biggest bullies in order to prove they can be aggressive and play hardball like the 'blokes'. I can honestly say from experience my worst managers were females that thought they had something to prove. As a female friend relayed to me recently "female bosses can be the biggest b\*\*tches".

Posted By: **The Problem With Some Women** | Sydney -  
October 22, 2010, 4:22PM

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@The problem with some women

Yes, unfortunately when some women feel insecure and that they don't belong or deserve their success, they have something to prove and can become aggressive or bullying in their attempt to prove themselves. One more reason to get the imposter syndrome handled because when they truly accept themselves, they don't need to bully others in order to feel strong and positive about themselves.

Posted By: **Suzanne** | Sydney, Australia - October 23, 2010,  
6:22PM

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