

📄 Article • 10 min read

Related Articles

- 5 Ways Women Leaders Can Build Executive Presence
- How Women Leaders Build High-Performance Teams
- Embracing Work-Life Integration: Worksheet
- The Business Case for Gender Diversity
- Women Leaders and the Perfectionism Trap

How Women Leaders Can Overcome Impostor Syndrome

Breaking free from self-doubt in leadership

👤 Written by Dr Anneke Schmidt

👤 Reviewed by Keith Jackson



English ▾

Key Takeaways:

- Impostor syndrome affects 75 percent of women executives, leading to feelings of inadequacy despite clear success.
- These feelings often stem from systemic barriers and cultural expectations, not just individual insecurities.
- Women leaders may overprepare, avoid challenges, and downplay their achievements due to impostor syndrome.
- Effective strategies for overcoming impostor syndrome include cognitive restructuring, mentorship, and confidence-building actions.

What Is Impostor Syndrome?

"I still have a little impostor syndrome," former First Lady Michelle Obama told students during her second visit to an all-girls school in London in 2018. [1] "It never goes away, that feeling that you shouldn't take me that seriously."

Coming from one of the world's most accomplished women – a Princeton and Harvard Law graduate who reshaped so many people's views of power, grace and authenticity – these words might surprise you. Yet, they reflect a profound truth about female leadership: even at the highest levels, self-doubt often persists.

The reality is that 75 percent of women executives experience impostor syndrome, those nagging feelings of inadequacy and fears of being "found out" despite clear evidence of personal and professional success. [2]

While these feelings affect people across all genders and demographics, they manifest differently in women leaders, who tend to push themselves harder and experience higher levels of stress and anxiety, even when performing well.

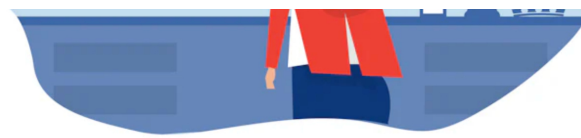


The essential assessment for modern managers

Take charge of your growth with the Manager Skills Assessment. Unlock clear, research-backed insights into managerial strengths and areas for growth – plus now with suggested resources to support skill development.

[Take Assessment Now](#)





75 percent of women executives experience Impostor Syndrome.

©useng / Getty Images

Your own leadership journey might include moments of questioning your achievements or feeling like you don't quite belong; experiences that often intensify during important career transitions. For example, you may find yourself:

- avoiding challenging opportunities that could lead to career growth.
- working extra hours to prove your worth to others.
- downplaying accomplishments or attributing them solely to luck.

But these feelings don't appear out of nowhere. What we traditionally call [impostor syndrome](#) often signals a more complex phenomenon: a response to real systemic barriers and cultural expectations rather than just individual insecurities.

In this article, we'll break down the real causes behind these feelings, uncover the systemic challenges at play, and give you practical tools to turn self-doubt into a quiet reminder of how far you've come, not a barrier to where you're going.

Why Impostor Syndrome Strikes Female Leaders

In 1978, Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes uncovered a pattern: high-achieving women often stand in rooms they earned their way into yet feel like visitors, not owners. In their study, they named this cycle the "impostor phenomenon": a deep-seated fear of being exposed as a fraud, no matter the evidence of success. [3]

Told they are either not enough or too much, many women internalize the doubt. The researchers, therefore, came to an unsettling conclusion: when success is met with scrutiny rather than celebration, confidence becomes fragile, always seeking permission to exist.

The Weight of Being "the Only One"

Forty-odd years later, the data tells a familiar story. Professional milestones become moments of questioning rather than pride. A promotion brings not just new responsibilities but the weight of representation – every move watched, every mistake magnified under the spotlight of being "the first" or "the only."

Where could you turn for guidance? The path ahead looks different when so few have walked it before. Women in leadership positions navigate this terrain largely alone, faced with [gender bias](#) that shapes expectations about how leaders should look, speak and act. In male-dominated industries, this often leads to tokenism, where women feel pressured to constantly prove their competence while battling isolation.

A Cycle of Over-Preparation and Anxiety

Without visible role models, many women find themselves overcompensating. Research tells us that career transitions, like stepping into senior roles, often trigger a cycle of overpreparation, anxiety and self-doubt. [4] Instead of growing into their leadership, they spend extra hours refining presentations, second-guessing decisions, and taking on additional work just to prove they

belong.

Three key factors fuel this coping mechanism:

1. Limited representation at the top leaves women without mentors who reflect their experiences. [5]
2. Gender bias in leadership expectations creates a double bind where women are seen as either too assertive or not assertive enough.
3. Workplace structures still reflect outdated norms about who "looks like" a leader.

The Hidden Cost of Traditional Leadership Norms

In many fields where men have traditionally been in charge, leadership is still measured by qualities like decisiveness, dominance and risk taking – traits long associated with masculinity. Women who bring different but [equally valuable leadership strengths](#) to the table find themselves swimming against this tide.

Another factor to consider is that these same cultural expectations also shape how aspiring women leaders view themselves. Studies show that women are more likely to second-guess their abilities, even when outperforming their peers. [6] Experts call this the “confidence gap,” a socio-psychological phenomenon that often leads women to hesitate before pursuing new opportunities. [7]

Add to that the fact that women typically earn 82 cents for every dollar their male colleagues make in similar roles, and you can see why many women would start underestimating their true worth or, worse, wondering if they really deserve more. [8]

In other words, what may appear as personal insecurity is often the result of organizational structures that fail to recognize and reward women's contributions. [9] So, it's fair to say that the seeds of feeling like an impostor are sown long before individual leadership is even tested.

Recognizing Your Impostor Archetype

Self-doubt speaks different languages. Through her groundbreaking research with high-achieving professionals, Dr Valerie Young uncovered five distinct patterns of impostor syndrome that shape how leaders perceive and question their success. [10]

- **Perfectionists** believe excellence is the only acceptable standard. Even a small flaw in execution feels like failure. Delegation becomes difficult, as handing over tasks means risking imperfection. Their inner voice whispers, “If I don’t control every detail, I’ll be exposed as inadequate.”
- **Superwomen** define success by how much they can handle alone. Leadership, to them, means shouldering every crisis, proving their worth through exhaustion. They tell themselves, “If I were truly competent, I wouldn’t need help.”
- **Natural Geniuses** expect leadership to come effortlessly. When faced with a challenge outside their comfort zone, they hesitate, mistaking struggle for incompetence. The thought of asking for help feels humiliating. They wonder, “If I were really talented, this wouldn’t be so hard.”
- **Soloists** see self-reliance as a badge of honor. Accepting mentorship or collaboration feels like admitting weakness. They refuse to seek guidance, convinced that, “If I were truly capable, I wouldn’t need anyone’s input.”
- **Experts** measure leadership by knowledge. No matter how much they achieve, it never feels like enough. Promotions are delayed and qualifications stack up as they tell themselves, “I can’t step up until I know

everything.”

Note:

No matter which archetype you might recognize in yourself, self-awareness is the first step. Take our self-assessment, [What's Your Impostor Syndrome Archetype?](#), to identify your specific archetype(s) and to explore targeted strategies for building authentic confidence in your leadership style.

Turning Insight into Action

One thing we can learn from this is that high-stakes leadership roles tend to amplify these archetypal patterns. For instance, a senior executive might embody the **Perfectionist** archetype, scrutinizing every decision until opportunities slip away. Meanwhile, her colleague displays classic **Superwoman** traits, believing her worth as a leader depends on handling every crisis personally, at any hour.

Or, to give another example, **Natural Geniuses** in the C-suite struggle when strategic challenges don't yield immediate solutions. Their hesitation to engage with complex problems that require learning and adaptation can limit both personal growth and organizational innovation.

Yet, understanding your pattern changes everything. Each archetype points to specific growth opportunities: **Perfectionists** can build trust through delegation, **Superwomen** can redefine success beyond pure effort, and **Soloists** can discover strength in connection.

3 Strategies for Women Leaders to Overcome Impostor Syndrome

Feeling inadequate as a leader doesn't mean you lack ability – it means you care. So, the key to overcoming impostor syndrome should never be ignoring self-doubt but cultivating a healthier relationship with it.

To diminish its impact, you could, for example, combine strategic mindset shifts with intentional actions, as outlined in the following three key steps:

1. Shift Your Mindset

As we have seen, impostor feelings typically spike during periods of professional growth. Try reframing these moments as evidence that you're expanding your capabilities rather than struggling to measure up.

When self-critical thoughts arise, pause to examine them objectively:

- What concrete evidence supports or contradicts this belief?
- How would I evaluate this situation if it happened to a colleague I respect?
- What specific feedback have I received that challenges my self-doubt?
- How are my current challenges helping me develop as a leader?

This [cognitive restructuring technique](#) helps to separate emotional reactions from workplace realities.

2. Build a Strong Leadership Support System

Structured support accelerates confidence-building. Your journey begins with finding the right mentor – someone who's navigated similar challenges and can offer genuine guidance based on lived experience. This relationship often naturally evolves into sponsorship, where your mentor actively champions your advancement.

As your network grows, executive coaching can provide professional tools to tackle specific leadership challenges, while peer groups create safe spaces where vulnerability becomes a strength, not a weakness.

Pay special attention to women leaders who actively lift others up. Their willingness to [champion fellow women](#) often signals confidence and commitment to changing workplace dynamics.

And male allies play a vital role, too! Look for senior colleagues who demonstrate commitment to women's advancement by amplifying female voices in meetings or sharing institutional knowledge.

3. Develop Confidence Through Action

Rather than pursuing perfection, focus on [steady confidence building](#) and competence building in specific areas. Here, you could start with small wins in challenging situations – perhaps leading a difficult conversation or proposing an innovative solution. Each successful interaction builds evidence against impostor thoughts.

Watch how confident actions transform your leadership:

- Speaking first sets the tone for a meeting.
- Owning decisions builds team trust.
- Sharing credit creates loyalty.
- Admitting mistakes role models growth.
- Taking calculated risks inspires innovation.

Leading Beyond Self-Doubt: Rewrite Your Leadership Story Now

Women's leadership experiences reveal a powerful truth: self-doubt arises more from systemic barriers than from personal shortcomings. Yet, this same challenge that tests your confidence also offers a unique opportunity to reshape leadership culture.

Your experiences navigating these obstacles equip you with invaluable insights. Each time you mentor an emerging leader or speak openly about your journey, you demonstrate what [authentic leadership](#) looks like. These actions create ripples of change throughout your organization, showing others that impostor feelings signal growth rather than inadequacy.

By creating cultures where diverse leadership styles flourish, and different paths to success are celebrated, you help dismantle the very structures that fuel self-doubt. Your story becomes part of a larger transformation – one that makes leadership more accessible and rewarding for every woman who follows.

So, how will you lead? With the insight of someone who understands struggle, the empathy of one who remembers the climb, and the vision to light the way forward.

Let's Act

Explore these articles and other resources from Mindtools' range of tools to help you to overcome impostor syndrome.

- **Podcast:** [The Imposter Cure: How to Stop Feeling Like a Fraud and Escape the Mind-Trap of Imposter Syndrome](#)
- **Article:** [5 Confidence-Building Strategies for Women Leaders](#)
- **Interview:** [How Women Rise](#), with author Sally Helgesen
- **Article:** [How Women Leaders Can Champion Other Women](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is impostor syndrome?

Impostor syndrome is a psychological pattern where individuals doubt their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite evident success.

How prevalent is impostor syndrome among female leaders?

Approximately 75 percent of women executives experience impostor syndrome, feeling inadequate despite their achievements.

What are some common behaviors associated with impostor syndrome in women leaders?

Common behaviors include avoiding challenging opportunities, working extra hours to prove worth, and downplaying accomplishments.

How can female leaders overcome impostor syndrome?

Strategies include shifting mindset, building a strong support system, and developing confidence through action.

References

- [1] Brown, M. (2018). 'Michelle Obama Tells London School She Still Has Impostor Syndrome.' The Guardian. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]
- [2] Paulise, L. (2023). '75% of Women Executives Experience Imposter Syndrome in the Workplace.' Forbes. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]
- [3] Clance, P. R. and Imes, S. (1978). 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High-Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.' Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 15(3). Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]
- [4] Mirabal, S. C., Chodoff, A., Wright, S. M. and Levine, R. B. (2024). 'Breaking the Cycle: A Qualitative Study of Factors That Mitigate Impostor Phenomenon Among Internal Medicine Residents.' Journal of Graduate Medical Education, 16(4), 427-435. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]
- [5] McCullough, L. (2020). 'Barriers and Assistance for Female Leaders in Academic STEM in the US.' Education Sciences, 10(10), 264. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]
- [6] Pedler, M. (2011). 'Leadership, Risk and the Impostor Syndrome.' Action Learning: Research and Practice, 8(2).

Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]

[7] Zenger Folkman (2021). 'The Confidence Gap in Men and Women: How to Overcome It.' Zenger Folkman. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]

[8] Aragão, C. (2023). 'Gender Pay Gap in U.S. Hasn't Changed Much in Two Decades.' Pew Research Center. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]

[9] Tulshyan, R. and Burey, J-A. (2021). 'Stop Telling Women They Have Impostor Syndrome.' Harvard Business Review. Available [here](#). [Accessed February 4, 2025.]

[10] Young, V. (2011). 'The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women,' New York, Crown Currency. Chapter 6.

Discover more content



Self-Assessment 15 mins

What's Your Impostor Syndrome...

A self-assessment exercise...
: Actions



Quiz 12 mins

Where Are You on the Introversion...

Take our female leaders'...
: Actions



Top Tips 5 mins

3 Top Tips for Women Leaders to...

How to raise your profile...
: Actions



Top Tips 5 mins

4 Ways Women Leaders Can Help t...

Actions you can take tod...
: Actions

AS

Comment here



Add comment

Comments (0)

Be the first to comment!

Mindtools



Useful Links

[Signup](#)
[How It Works](#)
[FAQ](#)
[About Us](#)
[For Organizations](#)

Top Trending Topics

[Johari Window](#)
[Root Cause Analysis](#)
[Emotional Intelligence](#)
[Learning Styles](#)
[How to Stop Procrastinating](#)
[How to Make Decisions](#)

Top Quizzes

[Leadership Quiz](#)
[Communication Quiz](#)
[Time Management Quiz](#)
[Problem Solving Quiz](#)
[Decision Making Quiz](#)
[Management Skills Quiz](#)

