BLOG

Imposter Syndrome in the Workplace

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Understanding the Challenge at a Glance

Imposter syndrome is a common workplace challenge that can quietly undermine performance, retention, and wellbeing. For nonprofit organizations, where teams are often lean and mission-driven, the effects can be especially costly. This article explores what imposter syndrome looks like in the workplace, why it matters for nonprofit leaders, and how to identify the risks and behaviors it creates. It also offers practical strategies for managers, including giving clear feedback, normalizing collaboration, and connecting staff to wellness resources. By addressing imposter syndrome directly, leaders can reduce burnout, strengthen team cohesion, and build healthier, more resilient organizations.

Why This Matters for Nonprofits

The growing awareness of mental health as a key factor in workplace performance has helped managers uncover new behaviors and dynamics which may be limiting personal and team performance. Although the workplace and management styles should not be considered as a stand-in for therapy or other mental health assistance, acknowledging instances of stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy can be helpful when promoting a healthy and sustainable workplace. It can also help improve productivity and efficiency and increase team investment, which is why employee wellness initiatives and workplace mental health resources are receiving greater attention.

Because nonprofits have a unique set of challenges when it comes to hiring and retaining employees, they often are more willing to explore and embrace new management approaches, including those which can help alleviate workplace stress and other issues. Long-term team retention, cohesion, and institutional knowledge are all important for mission-driven work. One of the most common issues is imposter syndrome, a psychological phenomenon which is experienced by a majority of professionals at some point, according to multiple studies. Here's some key information about how it can manifest in the workplace and what you can do to help:

Defining imposter syndrome

Although it does not have a clinical definition, imposter syndrome can be understood as a persistent undervaluing of self-worth or the sense that one is being credited and lauded for achievements they don't deserve. As a result, high-performers can feel like 'frauds' who are only impersonating a successful person.

Although this phenomenon can manifest itself in many areas of life, it is most commonly observed at work, where employees at all levels may feel that they are undeserving of their role, job title, or any praise they receive. What can make this so challenging is that it often manifests in behaviors which are considered desirable, as it can push people to work very hard to "mask" their feelings of inadequacy.

There are many reasons why this phenomenon occurs, but it is most frequently observed among knowledge workers, where the actual impact of day-to-day work can be difficult to quantify and value, and where collaboration is more common. For example, in nonprofit fundraising or program design, where results are shared across many contributors, it can be harder for an individual to see the tangible impact of their work.

Risks and signs of imposter syndrome

Because there is no set definition, discussing the exact risks and impacts can be tricky. However, there are some identifiable patterns which can contribute to productivity loss, burnout, and other issues:

- **Perfectionism:** Many who deal with imposter syndrome are perfectionists, as they are dogged by the feeling that they aren't doing enough or that their work is of a lower quality than anyone realizes. While being committed to quality isn't necessarily a bad thing, perfectionism can sometimes cause employees to miss deadlines or focus too much on one project at the expense of others.
- **Cycles of overwork and exhaustion:** Someone with imposter syndrome may struggle to calibrate the appropriate amount of work, investing more and more time into their tasks until they 'crash'. This can make the imposter syndrome self-fulfilling, as they take the period of unproductive burnout as a confirmation of their inadequacy.
- **Difficulty accepting praise or rewards:** This is most often seen after someone receives a promotion or raise and, rather than celebrating their success, struggles to adjust to what they feel is an undeserved acknowledgement of their work. This can lead to self-sabotage, overwork, or other destructive patterns.
- **Difficulty handling criticism:** Similar to their reaction to praise, criticism can be extremely challenging for those with imposter syndrome to accept, even if it is constructive. This can either lead to an overreaction (I need to stay up all night to redo this entire project) or shutting down (I'm not good enough to do this, I give up), both of which can cause significant productivity issues.
- **Reluctance to ask for help:** Many who deal with imposter syndrome prefer to work alone, even when they take on new responsibilities. This comes from the fear that collaboration will lead to them being "found out" as not as skilled or smart as others believed. However, this can contribute to burnout and can hurt team chemistry and cohesion, while also limiting the productivity gains which come from collaboration.

What you can do to help

Although these issues might be rooted in issues outside of work and beyond your control, if you worry that they are limiting your team's ability to succeed, there are some steps you can take to counteract them.

- **Be specific when offering praise, and constructive with criticism:** When offering either praise or criticism to an employee with this issue, being detailed and descriptive is helpful, as it offers direct, undeniable "evidence", which makes it tougher for them to dismiss it as false or deflect it. Criticism can be phrased in the context of their own good qualities, such as saying, "this is a good start, but it's not yet up to the standards of your past work. I'm confident you can do better."
- **Normalize asking for help:** You can do this a lot of ways, but one method is to go to them for help with a project you are working on, as this can illustrate the value of collaboration without them having to 'risk' anything. It also shows that you trust them and value their work.
- **Keep communication open:** One-sided praise and affirmation is easy to dismiss when it comes from someone they don't trust. Being available to talk through any issues and build a strong working relationship will help strengthen the value of your input.
- **Provide resources:** You are not their therapist, but you can still indirectly offer help by ensuring that everyone on your team has access to mental health resources, a health plan which helps cover therapy, and other resources.

Creating a Culture of Confidence

Imposter syndrome may not always be visible, but its effects on team wellbeing, productivity, and retention can be significant, especially in mission-driven organizations where every staff member plays a vital role. By fostering open communication, normalizing support, and ensuring employees feel both valued and equipped, nonprofit leaders can create an environment where staff are more resilient, engaged, and aligned with the mission. Addressing these challenges proactively not only strengthens individuals, but also builds healthier, more sustainable organizations.

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