

End Imposter Syndrome in Your Workplace

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In February 2021, we offered one simple idea: [Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome](#). Since then, fixing the *places* where women work instead of fixing *women* at work has become a rallying cry for women of all races across the world. More than that, the pushback against imposter syndrome continues the push toward sustainable, systemic solutions to ensure work is a place where our most underrepresented employees can belong and thrive.

Since the article went viral, we've been asked frequently: *If we're not supposed to diagnose women with imposter syndrome, then what? How can*

workplace leaders step up to create an environment where imposter syndrome doesn't exist?

Here's how managers can make it happen.

Pivot the language employees use to describe themselves

We must take seriously the language we use to describe our experiences at work. If members of your team describe having feelings of imposter syndrome, or even name it directly, listen intently. Honest conversations about what it takes to “win” in your company culture can help your team members adjust inaccurate self-assessments. Share your own experiences of imposter syndrome and highlight the conditions that triggered that response, such as chronic underrepresentation, uncredited work efforts, and microaggressions. Likewise, probe your team members more about their experiences at the company that led them to discount their success or feel like they don't belong.

While supporting your team members individually is important, take a “both/and” approach to meeting their unique needs while also making the organizational shifts required to address imposter syndrome at its true source. “It's easier to set up a professional development program, put money into training, or to even pay for a coach or a mentor rather than think about the values, ideologies, and subsequent practices amidst the severe underrepresentation in organizations that create imposter syndrome as a mainstay,” says Dr. Kecia Thomas, an industrial organizational psychologist and dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Developing structural solutions that address imposter syndrome triggers sets you on a path to helping make sustainable, systemic changes that can support others who share these experiences.

Be honest about the impact of bias

We must be honest about our professional landscape as it stands today: There are multiple models of leadership and confidence for men, but not many for women of color. Male leadership models range from raging tempers (former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer) to soft-spoken (Google’s Sundar Pichai), from sharp suits (French president Emmanuel Macron) to hoodies and jeans (Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg). This means that we give far more latitude to a number of ways men show up and appear in the workplace. Leaders with underrepresented identities then find themselves walking the [tightrope bias](#) and approach their self-expression and leadership styles with strategic intention. Discrimination and bias shape our expectations of how leaders should look, sound, and act, making an invisible impact on seemingly neutral terms like “professionalism.”

“What does executive presence even mean? When 46 out of 46 American presidents have been male and straight and 45 have been white, what do we automatically think when we say ‘presidential?’” questions Siri Chilazi, research fellow at the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School. A history of “think male, think leader” has been a pervasive barrier to accepting that women are perfectly capable leaders even if they express self-doubt or hesitation. We must widen definitions of leadership and the words we use to describe leaders.

“The Eurocentric model of professionalism is a cage for everyone, most tightly constraining Black women,” says Dr. Tina Opie, associate professor of management at Babson College and founder of [Opie Consulting Group](#). Dr. Opie has faced colleagues’ bias for wearing her natural hair in the workplace. Jodi-Ann, who’s hosted webinars on navigating racial microaggressions for thousands of professional women of color, noted that the most common racial microaggressions among participants were about hair-touching or comments about their hair. Hair is a main signifier of racial difference in the United States and still stands in many states as legal grounds for workplace discrimination — a cause [The CROWN Act](#) is working to address.

The onus is on managers with employees from underrepresented backgrounds to spend time understanding that the frameworks determining these standards are already rigged against women, especially women of color, and likely reinforce self-doubt and unbelonging. Understanding the unique challenges faced by people who are different from them builds the managers' capacity to fully grow in their roles. Managers cannot be considered effective if they can only manage employees who are like them.

For managers with underrepresented identities, Dr. Thomas acknowledges that “every move to a new position of leadership just narrows the number of people who can be considered peers or in a cohort. Layer on top of that being the only one just exacerbates that sense of isolation.” As we advise our team members about what worked for us, “we have to also be mindful that sometimes we get to positions of leadership as a reward for towing the status quo,” Dr. Thomas adds. All managers, including those who share social identities with people on their team, must help filter out and address biased decision making and communication to their employees. Bias isn't just something *other* people do; understanding these frameworks helps managers address their own biases as well.

Reduce biases against women of color at work

When both of us entered our jobs at more junior levels, armed with recognized graduate degrees, we expressed our ideas freely, raised our hands for plum assignments, and expressed our ambitions openly. But as we encountered more pushback, especially from our white counterparts, our behaviors slowly changed. Ruchika started pulling back, speaking less in meetings and quietly guarding her ambitions. Jodi-Ann searched for reprieve across sectors and industries to little avail, until she, like a rapidly growing number of women of color, branched out as an entrepreneur. According to the [American Express 2019 State of Women-Owned Business Report](#), women of color make up 89% of the net new women-owned businesses per day, despite only comprising 39% of the total female U.S. population. Despite wide disparities in women of color's access to capital

for these businesses, many find they would rather take the risk to escape from toxic and biased workplace cultures.

Our experiences are consistent with research. Chilazi recalls a year-long research study in a large multinational company where her team studied the most senior people in the organization. “Despite the fact that the men and women we looked at were incredibly accomplished, women systematically reported much worse experiences than the men, and lower perception of fairness of the organization overall,” she says.

Much of it is the “death by a thousand papercuts” phenomenon where women were told conflicting pieces of feedback, like, “Don’t be so aggressive but also speak up and pound the table, but don’t be so assertive and show that you’re a leader but don’t override other people,” Chilazi says. “Then, as they rise up the ranks, women see men in lower-seniority positions making more money than them, and at some point women decide they don’t need to deal with this,” she adds. Her study found that many high-potential women started leaving the organization — not because they lacked ambition or experience, but because the experience of cumulative bias wore them down until there was often a final incident that “broke the camel’s back.”

“Our experiences create us,” says La’Kita Williams, organizational designer and founder of [CoCreate Work](#). In her work with startup founders, Williams finds that women across races “typically create organizations where it’s a priority for people to feel more fulfilled and more like themselves.” As a result, “we’re building different systems where people can bring the fuller version of their experiences, talents, and backgrounds and the way that they communicate to these businesses.” When we receive the message that *our* leadership isn’t welcome, it’s no surprise women of color start pulling back or even away from their employers.

Reducing bias against women at work requires action at all levels, including interpersonal relationships. Individual women spoke to us about

how managers could help them overcome feelings of self-doubt by reinforcing their own belief in their abilities and chances of success, using phrases like, “I know you can lead this big project; I’ve seen you succeed before and I believe in you.” It also helped to expressly be told that they would be supported by their managers. Most of all, managers best supported women by genuinely listening to their experiences of gender and/or racial bias, and expressing the view that it was the organization’s responsibility to fix it.

Managers can also help change how other people perceive their team members. For example, if a colleague warns of your team member’s contrarian approach in meetings, you can easily assert the value of their social style by saying something like, “Contrarian? I would not put it that way, but I will say how much I really enjoy having her on my team. I can always count on her to think deeper about our work and offer new insights and perspectives.”

Be data-driven and rigorous

Seek to understand bias and your role in reducing it, but don’t stop there. Act on that understanding to create a measurable impact on your employees’ day-to-day experiences at work.

Many leaders hesitate to assess their workplace cultures for bias and exclusion for fear that it will upset employees or set expectations for quick fixes. Despite these concerns, asking direct questions about bias can help answer the question on everyone’s mind: *What can we do?* Start by understanding what may be the specific processes that create barriers for women and people of color, which may have been written off as individuals’ imposter syndrome.

As Chilazi reminds us, many organizations employ rigorous measures when launching new products, such as market research, multiple rounds of testing, identifying challenges and barriers, setting goals to overcome them, and collecting customer feedback. She questions: “Why not manage

talent, inclusion in the same way?” Our organizations spend inordinate resources to know so much. Why not use them to understand how our systems and practices harm the women and people of color on our teams?

We recommend two places to start. First, measure employee sentiment through anonymous feedback surveys — both at dedicated times throughout the year to capture trends as well as through “always on” surveys that allow employees to share feedback at any point in time. Make sure to include questions about how much an employee feels like they can contribute to and grow and learn at the organization, as well as about the barriers to doing those things. Assess the data not just by gender (as many companies do now) but also by race and the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, disability status, and other marginalized identities where possible. If women of color, especially Black women, report that they don’t feel like they belong in or can grow at the organization, consider this your canary in the coal mine. How Black women experience your organizational culture may serve as the litmus for the inclusion levels at your company. Instead of seeing the experiences of the most underrepresented as outliers to the data, center them to drive the next steps for organizational change.

Second, assess your organization’s performance criteria and average time to promotion. If the last 10 promotions were largely of white men, and their average time-to-promotion is much shorter than that of women and people of color, then it’s not uncommon for those women and people of color to ask themselves, “Do I have what it takes to advance here? Do I belong here?” If your company rewards vague traits like “executive presence” and “leadership skills” without measurable behaviors and skills, bias is likely to creep into advancement decisions. If only white men are promoted as a result of those advancement criteria, then the process is systemically racially inequitable. It’s not uncommon for a woman of color to then believe that she lacks those traits, which is likely to overfeed benign feelings of self-doubt. Unfortunately, instead of addressing this at an organizational level, managers often allow their employees to question themselves and then support them with solutions to address that self-

doubt. Instead, expand your skills in race- and gender-coded language and create advancement criteria that measure tangible outcomes, skills, and behaviors. Then, promote accordingly.

Quit gaslighting and listen

Gaslighting, a type of psychological manipulation that causes one to question their own reality, can take many forms in the workplace. When it comes to women of all races and people of color of all genders, acknowledging imposter syndrome without naming its context within systems of racism and bias is arguably a form of gaslighting.

Jodi-Ann likens it to making several failed attempts to open an unfamiliar door. You may question whether to push or pull. When that fails, you might question whether the door is too heavy or its handle too slippery. Problem solving to open the door falls mostly on questioning your own abilities before you ever resolve that the door is actually just locked. Likewise, it's a form of gaslighting when employees whose identities are consistently marginalized are advised on various ways *they* can change their strategies to open the door. Instead, managers must be transparent about the organization's locked doors — the barriers that exist due to biases. This helps build the trust needed to better support underrepresented members of your team. Honesty reciprocates. Listen to your employees without doubt. It's the work of managers to leverage their influence to open doors for their employees and keep them open for others like them.

Sponsor and mentor women of color

We often fail to recognize the outsized role of support, advocacy, mentoring, and coaching that advances men's careers. "Most men also don't walk into the workplace on day one and say, 'here I am, I deserve to be CEO, I've got everything it takes,'" says Chilazi. "But they are getting reinforcement from senior people who see themselves reflected in them. We've completely failed to take into account the role of all that constant

reinforcement and encouragement in making men ‘confident’ and self-promoting.” Men, especially white men, learn that confidence from the reinforcement they receive in the workplace.

To strive for a culture of inclusion, more managers and leaders must offer women of color equal support and reinforcement. In environments where we receive the sponsorship we need to succeed, there’s more likelihood that we will, without expending energy determining whether and how to belong. [This excellent resource by Dr. Rosalind Chow](#) highlights the ABCDs of sponsorship: managers must amplify, boost, connect, and defend women and people of color to sponsor them, not just mentor them.

Set up accountability mechanisms for change

When women of color don’t see leaders who look like them, they often assume there’s no place in the executive ranks for them — or that the reward of getting there isn’t worth the cost of their health, self-worth, and well-being. Not only can this fortify insecurity and self-doubt that they “couldn’t cut it,” but it may also contribute to colleagues and managers treating them as if they might not belong in or want to aspire to these leadership positions.

From the most senior leadership positions to the most junior roles, organizations seeing high levels of imposter syndrome among their employees — through both anecdotal and quantitative data — should interpret that data as a call to action for structural change. Actions may include:

- Evaluating all employees on how their work performance advanced DEI-specific company goals
- Making current and past demographic data publicly available, including measures on pay equity across race, sex, ability, and other key indicators
- Empowering the chief diversity officer with a direct reporting to the CEO, a healthy budget, and clear decision-making authority

- Mandating a minimum threshold for participation in year-round educational and cultural awareness–building activities
- Implementing performance improvement plans with associated consequences for employees struggling to meet expectations for fostering a welcoming, inclusive, and psychologically safe work environment for all employees across social identities

Listening tours, culture surveys, and other means of gaining insights into employees’ experiences are valuable tools in DEI strategy development. However, companies often treat gathering employee feedback as the goal itself, not a means to an end. Companies may offer training on diversity, equity, and inclusion principles, but may resist the uptake of that training to shift the policies and practices creating inequity at work. “For any other type of training, we expect that we would attend to the climate for training transfer,” Dr. Thomas attests. She goes on to explain:

What I mean by that is, I don’t teach someone how to use Excel and then put them back in a workplace where they don’t have computers. We train people around these issues and then we put them back in the context where they’re the only one trained and no one else knows what they’ve learned, and there are no rewards for using that training. And in fact, you may be discouraged or restricted from using that training if it is perceived as disruptive. And that’s the organization’s responsibility.

Organizational change becomes sustainable and effective when managers at all levels are held accountable to those changes. Without accountability mechanisms in place that reward change, “there’s very little motivation,” says Dr. Thomas. When leaders take responsibility for tackling the imposter syndrome issue by creating more inclusive environments — not trying to fix individual women — everyone stands to benefit. And workplace cultures that foster imposter syndrome risk losing key talent.

Let’s stop calling natural, human tendencies of self-doubt, hesitation, and lack of confidence “imposter syndrome.” If you want women to lend their full talents and expertise, question the culture at work — not our

confidence at work. Instead, recognize and celebrate a variety of different leadership styles and create work cultures where all are welcome and thrive.



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Jodi-Ann Burey is a sought-after speaker and writer who works at the intersections of race, culture, and health equity. She is the creator and host of *Black Cancer*, a podcast about the lives of people of color through their cancer journeys. Her TEDx talk, “Why You Should Not Bring Your Authentic Self to Work,” embodies her disruption of traditional narratives about racism at work.

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