

# Leadership

Excellence



## HOW LEADERS- AS-COACHES CAN COMBAT IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN THEIR TEAMS

- **Melanie Ho**,  
Speaker and Facilitator,  
Strategic Imagination

**10**

**Coaching Leaders Effectively Through Post-Pandemic Fatigue**  
- Brady Hansma,  
Multi-Health Systems Inc

**17**

**What Leading With Emotional Intelligence Looks Like**  
- Carolyn Stern,  
EI Experience

**24**

**Compassionate Leadership Is Key To Company Growth**  
- Geri Johnson,  
Next PR

**31**

**Is A "Great Reckoning" For Business Leaders Coming?**  
- Lee W. Frederiksen, PhD,  
Hinge

# How Leaders-as-Coaches Can Combat Imposter Syndrome In Their Teams

Ensure self-doubt doesn't harm organizational objectives

By **Melanie Ho**, Strategic Imagination

Most experience “imposter syndrome” at some point in their careers, but feelings of self-doubt are most acute during times of rapid change. Due to shifts in the market landscape, employees at all levels now must take on challenges with no precedent or playbook. Faced with burnout, demands to do more with less, and continued uncertainty, even high-performers are more likely to question their own competence.

As leaders struggle to retain talent, imposter syndrome among their teams can exacerbate departure risk. Imposter syndrome can lead employees to self-sabotage, resulting in lower job performance. Finally, imposter syndrome can make it hard for managers to differentiate between employees that require concrete skill development vs. those needing assurance that they already have what it takes.

A coaching mindset is critical for leaders to combat the rise in imposter syndrome in their organizations. Here are three ways that leaders-as-coaches can combat self-limiting beliefs among their teams.

## 1. Normalize Trial-and-Error as a Necessary Part of Uncertainty and Change

It's normal to fear failure when we take on new responsibilities. What's even harder is when we're facing so much uncertainty and change that as soon as we get a handle on a problem, the situation shifts.

Complexity theory can help explain why imposter syndrome is on the rise today. Rick Nason's [It's Not Complicated: The Art and Science of Complexity for Business](#) talk about the distinction between complicated vs. complex problems. While complicated problems aren't easy to solve perse, at least they can be addressed through predictable processes. By contrast, complex problems have too many unknowns. There's no standard rule book, and plans need to continuously evolve. This can exacerbate imposter syndrome, as employees internalize what's challenging about the *situation*—one where trial-and-error is necessary, and the goal post keeps moving—as their own fault.



When there aren't replicable processes or single right answers, it's even more critical for the leader's role to be coach, mentor, and guide—not an all-knowing expert. In coaching employees to navigate the twists and turns, leaders-as-coaches emphasize the importance of trial-and-error. They guide employees to think about pilot phases and how to assess and course-correct after calculated risks. They also celebrate failure as a key element of cultures of innovation, such as by [holding "ideas funerals" or displaying "failed ideas hall of fame."](#)

When leaders normalize—and support employees through— trial-and-error, individuals understand that growth necessitates failure and risk, rather than feel like imposters when things don't go perfectly right away.

## 2. Diagnose the "Why" Employees Are Experiencing Self-Doubt

Push for systemic solutions, especially those needed to support women and employees of color.

Leaders-as-coaches look to diagnose problems, rather than assume one-size-fits-all solutions. While imposter syndrome impacts everyone, the challenges can be especially acute for women and employees of color. To combat this discrepancy, leaders-as-coaches need to understand the "why."

In my book, [Beyond Learning In: Gender Equity and What Organizations are Up Against](#), we look at several fictionalized case studies that demonstrate how women's confidence gets unintentionally whittled away. In one example scenario, we meet two

employees who are promoted to the same position. The firm's congratulatory memo applauds Mike for the revenues he's brought in, and Mara for the brownies she bakes for meetings. Moments like this give Mike an extra confidence boost for his revenue ability, and can lead Mara to question whether she's only valued for her baking skill.

In interviews with hundreds of professional women, I've found that women often wonder if they did something wrong in these situations, blaming themselves for their wide range of talents not being seen as recognized. Many leaders assume women arrive in the workplace with a "confidence gap," rather than looking at how imposter syndrome can be created, or at least exacerbated, by these types of unintentional biases. Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey's viral 2021 *Harvard Business Review* piece ["Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome,"](#) has recently started bringing more attention to the systemic bias and exclusion that lead women of color to feel self-doubt. They argue that employers need to address the underlying systems rather than assuming the solution is to "fix" the women.

Leaders must [foster psychological safety](#) with their employees, helping staff feel comfortable raising their experiences with bias, rather than internalizing it as their fault. Honest conversations—paired with the leader's own work of learning what biases are most prevalent in the workplace—can help leaders know where they need to develop systemic solutions. For example, this can include codifying expectations of different roles so that women do not take on [disproportionate office housekeeping tasks](#), or doing a "bias check" on formal communications.

## 3. Develop Clear Expectations and a Coaching Plan for Team Members Assuming Complex New Roles or Tasks

Imposter syndrome can spiral when employees aren't sure what constitutes success. Some may overwork to the point of burnout in a quest to prove themselves. Others may suffer analysis paralysis and indecision due to fear of being exposed. Leaders can help by setting clear expectations as to what "victory" looks like at the end of a process or project.



Expectations also need to include a coaching plan, or how the leader—and others in the organization—will support the team member along the way. Too many leaders end up worsening imposter syndrome when they throw their employees into the deep end. To develop a coaching plan, leaders need to ask themselves questions like:

- What are the “new” things the team member needs to learn, and which will be harder than others?
- How will the leader phase coaching, support, and expected independence accordingly? What needs to happen in the first two weeks vs. three months or beyond?
- Where will the leader provide targeted training, draw on other leaders or the employees’ peers within the organization, or expect the employee to pursue self-directed learning?
- Does the employee know where they’re accountable for their own development, while also feeling comfortable asking for help?
- What does success look like in 30, 90, 120 days? How will goals be course-corrected as organizational needs and context evolve?

Both leaders and their teams today can feel like the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, running hard just

to stay in place. Self-doubt is a natural byproduct of these constant shifts. However, by normalizing trial-and-error, addressing the systemic biases that exacerbate imposter syndrome among different groups, and prioritizing clear expectations and a coaching plan, leaders can counter self-limiting beliefs and help all employees thrive.



**Melanie Ho**, Ph.D. is a leadership consultant, keynote speaker, and workshop facilitator who has worked with leaders at Fortune 500 companies, leading universities, and small start-ups on organizational design, future visioning, leadership development, and DEI. She is also the author of [\*Beyond Learning In: Gender Equity and What Organizations are Up Against\*](#), a 2022 recipient in the Axiom Awards recognizing the world’s best business books.



▶ Would you like to comment?