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The fear of being found out

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Many people wear a mask at work – of competency and of being in control. But sometimes behind this lies the anxiety that they are incapable of doing their job and a fear of being found out. As a result they go to unhealthy extremes to ensure they get things right in an effort to avoid what they imagine could be a catastrophic outcome if exposed.

Most people will have experienced these feelings in their working lives, and such self-doubt can be healthy. Reflecting on one's strengths and limitations is essential and makes people strive harder at work. Furthermore, the damaging consequences of the extreme opposite characteristics – stubbornness, arrogance and denying one's limitations – have been seen in the chief executives who led their companies to irresponsible risk-taking and ruin. Feelings of insecurity are particularly common when people are promoted to a leadership position.

But it is when these anxieties fail to subside, even when one becomes settled in the new role, that the problem can become serious. The individual's creative performance and ability to manage are affected. Moreover, the tension between how these individuals perceive themselves and the image they project can become intolerable. Such people usually dismiss their success, putting it down to luck or personal charm rather than skill. They cover their imagined incompetence with excessive work and perfectionist traits in a desperate attempt to appear in control and avoid mistakes.

One man who reached a senior level in the information technology sector describes his predicament: "You never let yourself go, you always feel you have to be in control of the situation, you're never comfortable in your own skin. You try to give the impression that you are. I'm good at presenting myself as a relaxed person but it's all simmering underneath."

For another individual, a successful engineer, his fear of being "found out" consumed his thinking and seriously interfered with his work performance. "My objective the first year was not to be fired," he says. "I was always feeling a fraud and terrified that I would be exposed for not doing my job properly. I did work very hard but I found it exhausting. Part of doing well at my job required taking risks but I could never do that because I was scared of being found out."

Fear of taking risks is one of the most damaging effects of this syndrome, according to Matthew Stone, a business coach who heads The Stone Partnership. He says the feeling of being a fraud "is an absolute virus in the heart of good professional performance. It robs the person of their quality of thinking and problem solving . . . Their willingness to be innovative is diminished so that [their] exposure is minimised." Mr Stone says another consequence is that the person can become a harsher manager and "have higher expectations of their team to ensure that the business – and by extension, they themselves – don't appear deficient".

Team members who suffer with this syndrome can be overly preoccupied with looking for praise and reassurance from their boss in regards to their own performance. "They end up doing what the boss wants, rather than what's best for the job in a profound way," says Mr Stone.

Other irrational characteristics of such people are obsessive double-checking of their work to avoid mistakes, and feeling overly responsible when things go wrong. Both can become all-consuming and impede the capacity to perform to one's potential.

Michael Bader, a psychoanalyst and senior adviser for Institute4Change, a leadership development and organisational change group in San Francisco, has an explanation for this mindset. “The unconscious fantasy is that the person is somewhere that he or she doesn’t belong, that he or she isn’t supposed to be successful and powerful, that he or she has sneaked into a club to which they don’t belong,” he says. “And if you follow this metaphor, someone who has sneaked into a club to which they don’t belong has to have perfect manners, never making a mistake, while others who were supposedly ‘born’ as members, can make all sorts of mistakes with impunity.”

The former IT manager found himself checking his work to extremes. “You feel if anything goes wrong it’s your fault, you become paranoid about double-checking work, it consumes all your energy and slows you down.”

Counselling helped him to understand the origins of his fears and overcome them. He came from a poor family of nine children, his father was an alcoholic and his mother was preoccupied by trying to hold things together. He was desperate for his father’s attention but was repeatedly disappointed. With no one available to look after him, he felt, as such children tend to, responsible for his family’s problems.

These extreme feelings of responsibility played themselves out in the workplace many years later, manifested in the obsessive checking and paranoia.

Although fear of failure is the dominant feeling in these cases, Mr Bader believes that often it is actually a fear of success that is at the root. The unconscious guilt of being successful is often a reaction to the fear of others’ envy or resentment. “The crime is success or power, or the feeling of being superior and more successful and advantaged than others,” he explains. “The punishment then involves fantasies of failure, the resentment of others, and shame or humiliation.”

This was the case for one talented entrepreneur who was unable to launch his own business until his father had died. His father had repeatedly humiliated him as a child, and he unconsciously feared that by becoming successful he would again risk further humiliation and ridicule from his father.

A further consequence of this predicament is that one can sabotage promotional prospects because the anticipation of added responsibilities and fear of exposure is too great. Instead of providing evidence of competence and success, promotion would mean that even more shortcomings have to be covered up.

The engineer suffered in this regard, and expresses it as follows: “If I am promoted again, that’s even more uncomfortable. You do well, then you go another step up, and then there’s more pretending.”

Mr Bader believes that these fears can be overcome with insight and a conscious attempt to separate rational from irrational beliefs. Sharing doubts and fears with others can help one can untangle these feelings. Finding compassion for oneself is also important in combating the endless self-defeating thoughts. Perfectionism can be dealt with by recognising that uncertainty and the potential for failure are essential traits in all levels of work.

One should remember that our childhood fears never leave us entirely. We are mistaken if we believe that fears have no place in our adult or work lives – they can surface any time and travel with us everywhere. Knowing this is understanding what it means to be human and fallible. This is the first step.

The writer is a psychotherapist and this article is based partly on her clinical experience. People not named have asked not to be identified.

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