

Career Women Becoming Fearless Podcast

Ep 11. Imposter Syndrome & Belonging

Welcome to this week's podcast. I'm so happy you're here. Today we are going to dive into imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is when you feel you don't belong, when you haven't quite stepped into your power yet. When you aren't seeing yourself as the leader or the person others do or that you are capable of.

It's so real. In fact, almost 70% of women have experienced it at one time or another. Men can experience it too, but not at such a staggering rate.

If you suffer from imposter syndrome research shows you can experience emotional exhaustion which causes conflict not just at work but at home too. Women have a never-ending juggling act of roles to play and society has certain roles that are expected of us at work and at home. We aren't born with a sense of imposter syndrome – it's a logical reaction to the world we live in, experiences from how we were raised and our inner beliefs about ourselves and others.

Imposter syndrome shows up in some different ways. For me, this showed up as me going to a meeting and not speaking up. Waiting until the perfect time to offer my idea, wondering if it was the right time, then not doing it. Looking around and sizing people up – what will they think? Do they know more about this than me? Is my opinion valid?

Most of the companies I worked for had town halls or all employee meetings to give business updates and for the leadership to connect with the workforce. These days these meetings are virtual, but back when these were in-person, they were all kind of set up the same.

All the employees would come together in a large auditorium or cafeteria with rows of chairs. Leadership would assemble in the front and stand in the front of the room with some PowerPoint slides and a microphone.

It was always interesting to watch where people sat. I found my comfort level of where to sit changed dependent on the leadership and always, the first row or two was for the important people, like an invite only. Except it wasn't an actual rule, there were rarely name tags, except when executives would visit. It was an unspoken rule, leave the front for the leaders, for the outspoken.

I usually sat in the front half, so not in the back, not even in the middle, but not the front, 4-5 rows in. I wouldn't sit on the end, too visible. I wanted the comfort of my peers.

Other leaders would tell me to sit in the front, and I would say no, that's not for me, I want to sit with my people, my peers. Eventually I sat in the 2nd row and even the 1st on occasion, but it was difficult to do.

I didn't feel I belonged there. This is so common, especially for women and for women who work their way up from entry or mid-level. You can feel like an imposter.

Leadership also plays a role with this. When I had an authoritative dictator style leader who encouraged competitions among staff, I was less comfortable being visible. I didn't want to be called on or picked on. Now this was all in my head of course. This fear was my own lack of confidence that if I was picked on that what I said may not be valued or I would be judged. I didn't have the confidence to accept that even if that happened, it didn't mean it was true, that their perspective was valid or that it meant anything negative about me. I wasn't there yet. It's something I had to work on.

I did though, and I overcame it, and spoke up without fear, I saw myself as a leader and advocate for employees and I took that job seriously. I knew my perspective mattered. I felt I belonged because I decided I did.

I encountered this again when I opened my coaching practice. Here I was again, less experienced in being a CEO and so many other coaches with flourishing businesses, in some ways I was starting over. Do I belong? Can I be a CEO? Can I run my own business and be profitable? Do I know how to solve my own problems?

Turns out I do, but it did come up and I did have to work through it.

So, see, regardless of what change you're making or where you sit in the organization, it's normal to feel a bit of imposter syndrome.

I see this a long with my clients who are moving from mid-level to leadership positions. They are so used to be the worker bee, and playing a certain and valuable role, that when they are asked to present at large events, pitch to senior leadership, attend meetings with executives, they wonder why they are there and if they are supposed to talk.

They may ask questions like – am I here to listen or to speak? Should I take notes? Maybe I was just invited to take notes? Maybe this was just a development opportunity for me?

We put ourselves in the very position we don't want to be in, before someone can tell us we are too big for our britches, we decide we are.

I will never forget a senior leadership meeting I was invited to. It was for senior leaders and their direct reports. It was my first one like this. There was enough room at the table for about 20 people and chairs lined up all around the walls of the room.

I walked in and wasn't sure where to sit. Like the town halls, I questioned was there an unwritten rule? Is the table for the senior leaders and the direct sit against the wall? So, I took the safe choice, I sat against the wall, but toward the front, I felt it was a compromise for me.

I wasn't in the back, but I didn't have the confidence sit at the table. I thought what if someone asked me to move? How humiliating.

It's like the town hall, not in the front, not in the back.

I was there early, because I was always and still am a very punctual person.

I watched as each person walked in the room. The senior leaders sat at the table. Some of the directs sat at the table, but only the men.

I then watched some strong, amazing women who were leaders of departments and large groups, sit against the wall. I was taken aback. I mean, I did, but I was just invited I wasn't a direct yet, so I totally rationalized it.

These women were, in my mind, very worthy of sitting at the table. They didn't. Even those that worked there for 10 years or more.

Once everyone was in the room I looked around, only the senior leaders, 1 or 2 that were women, and directs that were men were at the table.

Around the wall were some men – there weren't enough spaces for all, and all the women that were not senior leaders, including me.

What did this say about our culture? What did this say about us as women?

No one told us to sit against the wall. We just did.

We put ourselves there.

We at some level, felt we didn't belong, that we were imposters.

And as a result, we are probably treated like we are, not as worthy not as smart or capable.

Now, is that 100% of the time, no. Is that the reason there is gender inequality, of course not. But I think it plays into it.

Just like the meeting, when you go and don't speak up because you're questioning if you should or if it will be rejected so you take really good notes, but then when women are asked to be the note taker we are offended. Because well it's a bias, but think about – how often are we making ourselves the note taker?

How often are we not speaking up?

Now, company culture plays a role. 100% - some cultures are more inclusive than others, some are aggressive.

I've heard stories from clients of when they were yelled at, when their male bosses have behind a closed door, shouted at them. That isn't ok, in any environment or regardless of gender. Let's be clear.

Imposter syndrome can be a real show stopper for your career and keep you stuck where you are. It causes feeling of doubt, fear, and even self-sabotage. You worry you'll be too visible, you'll be rejected, and that you don't really belong. So, you start looking to others to see how you should act and you keep yourself small.

So how can you feel you belong and get over imposter syndrome, regardless of your company culture?

First – you need to be aware of how you're feeling and what you do as a result of those feelings. The next time you're feeling like an imposter, write it down. Write down what the circumstance was, what you thought about it, how you felt, and what you did or didn't do as a result.

For example – you're invited to a meeting – you don't share as much as you want to, and you feel like people don't want to hear what you have to say or that they don't value what you have to say.

As close to the meeting as possible, write down what your thoughts were about the meeting. What did you think your role was in the meeting, what did you think of the people in the meeting, and so on. Get it all out without editing.

Then take one of the thoughts that really sticks out to you and write down how that thought made you feel. Do that for as many thoughts as you want. Each thought generates a feeling.

Then for that feeling, what action or inaction did you take? Did you speak up? Did you get defensive? Did you stay quiet? Did you look at your phone? Did you spend time talking to yourself in your head instead of listening?

When I work with my clients I call this think – feel – heal. We bring awareness to our thoughts and our feelings, so we can see how we act or don't act and decide if that is what we want. If not, we work on changing that pattern, so we can get a different result.

So first you're going to take an event or circumstance – write down all of your thoughts about it, your feelings, then what you did or didn't do.

Second – I want you to look at all of your thoughts and question if it is factual. For example – if you think “they don't want to hear what I have to say” – is that true? Could you prove it in a court of law? Would all 7 billion people agree with you?

Take notice of how many thoughts are factual. We have thousands of thoughts every day and 80% of them are negative. Our brain is wired to protect us, to avoid pain and make things easier for us. So, our brain's default is going to be the negative it doesn't think in possibility or positives a lot of the time.

So, these thoughts can feel true, like they are fact.

So, you've documented the event, your thoughts and feelings, and your actions. You've also separated the facts from the story.

Third – notice the patterns. What results are you getting from your thoughts? Those negative thoughts – how are they not true? How are they helping you? What thought would you need to have to have a different feeling and action? How would your results be different?

For example – instead of “they don't want to hear what I have to say” what if you could tweak it to say “they might want to hear what I have to say” would that generate a different feeling and action?

So that is a simple 3 step process you can use to help you overcome imposter syndrome.

The other advice I would offer is to work on your self-confidence.

It's really interesting but many of my clients don't think they struggle with confidence. But once we get into the details of where they are having challenges, they see it is coming up for them and holding them back.

Self-confidence is trusting yourself, being willing to experience any emotion, and the thoughts about yourself – your capabilities, skills, value, etc.

Thinking back to the town hall, when I say my self-confidence wasn't where it needed to be, it's because I didn't trust that I could handle any emotion. I knew what I had to say was important or that I am smart and capable, but I was worried I'd be embarrassed or rejected, and I was avoiding that feeling.

It's why this podcast is Career Women Becoming Fearless – the Fearless piece is to act from a place that you know you can handle anything. That you go after your goals regardless of what it takes, what you might feel, or what others think. It's the ultimate in self-confidence and once you experience it, you'll be unstoppable. You won't question if you are right for a job, if you belong at the table, or if your goals matter.

I have a mission to help 10,000 women like you get there, to achieve your goals and live a life you wouldn't otherwise. To feel what it is like to know your value and not let other people impact what you think of yourself or the choices you make about what you're capable of and to

see the possibility that exists for you. Like I said about the brain – it's not wired for that – and I want to help you re-wire it to live in possibility and fearlessness.

Alright my friends, if this is something you could use help with, I invite you to apply for coaching. Coaching is the best development experience you could have. It changes your life because it changes how you think and that lasts forever. You will experience results you wouldn't otherwise, and you'll do it quickly and in a fun way. If you want to learn more, go to my website at www.melissamlawrence.com to schedule a free call. We'll talk about your goals and see if coaching is a good fit.

Have an amazing week.