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Overcoming "Imposter Syndrome"

An interview with Joyce Roché, author of *The Empress Has No Clothes*

Joyce Roché felt like a fraud.

On the outside, she was successful — a high-achiever. Roché rose from humble circumstances to earn an Ivy League MBA. She became the first female African-American vice president of Avon Products, where she led global marketing. She was COO and president of Carson Products Company, now part of L'Oreal.

But on the inside, Roché says she was "filled with self-doubt, which sometimes verged on panic."

"I kept waiting to be discovered as the imposter I felt myself to be," Roché explains in her new book, [*The Empress Has No Clothes: Conquering Self-Doubt to Embrace Success*](#).

It wasn't until much later in her career, when she accepted the CEO post at the national nonprofit Girls Inc, that she had quieted the voices of doubt.

"When I first shared my feelings of not deserving, of being a fraud, I didn't know that other people had similar experiences," says Roché. "I didn't know it had a name: imposter syndrome."

"As I told my story, it really resonated with people and I was encouraged to write the book," she continues. "I want others to know that, one, if you are experiencing these feelings, you are not alone. And, two, this doesn't have to be a weight you carry forever."

Roché recently spoke with CCL about imposter syndrome and how to overcome it.

CCL: How do you describe imposter syndrome?

Roché: I describe imposter syndrome as fear and self doubt that cause us to question our ability, even as we are being successful. We see our success as a façade that will come crashing down if we don't work tirelessly to maintain it.

Usually imposter syndrome is triggered when you are different than everyone else in some way, for example, being a woman in a predominantly male environment. You start to question whether you can measure up. You are waiting to be "found out" the moment you stumble. You think others will say, "We knew she couldn't cut it."

If you look at the situation objectively, your credentials are equal to or better than others. But you are not looking at it objectively; it is an emotional reaction. It's an internal churn.

Feeling like an imposter is also a very secret thing. We don't want this to be visible. We hide it at all costs. People I've worked with say, "I never would have known this about you, you seem so assured." And that's the point. We pride ourselves in hiding this fear and churn.

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access



to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the August, 2013 issue was author Joyce Roché

CCL: It seems there are some benefits to this churn — it motivated and fueled you to push yourself time and again. Without the fear or doubt, I wonder if some people worry they might lose their "edge" or what made them successful so far.

Roché: That question always comes up: Is it really that bad? Doesn't it drive you to be successful? Yes, there are some positive outcomes, but at what cost?

Living this way creates a high level of stress. It can cause health problems and personal problems. In the book, Ron Parker of PepsiCo tells how at one point in his career he was so consumed with not being "exposed" that he compromised his family. His relationship with his middle son still suffers today. For me, I was so singularly focused, I had no personal life. I was not living a full life.

We can be driven and successful without fear and hiding.

CCL: You suggest quite a few strategies or tips for confronting and overcoming imposter fears. What's a good place to start?

Roché: Writing to yourself is an easy one. It starts to break the silence and help you get clear on what is going on at a particular moment. Just grab a piece of paper and ask yourself, "Why am I having anxiety and stress?" "What am I feeling?" "What drove me to feel that way?"

For example, if I had received a promotion and started to feel the churn, I would write down what is required at this new level or new position. Then I would write down my skills or experience or accomplishments that I can use to be able to do an effective job. Yes, there may be a gap and I'll have to learn some things. But by writing, I can see the value that I'm bringing, and what I have to learn becomes a manageable thing.

Writing starts to calm the stress and puts things in perspective.

CCL: How can organizations or bosses be different? What role can or should they play to help develop leaders and combat imposter syndrome?

Roché: To some degree, it's classic diversity training and understanding differences. Leaders need to understand important triggers of imposter feelings — race, class, gender, education, sexual orientation are some big ones. If you are not creating a culture that values the authentic self, you are not going to get it. People will be parking part of themselves at the door.

It's also about building a culture that doesn't make people so afraid of failure. If you look around, you see some of the signs of imposter syndrome: overwork, over-preparation. A woman I worked with was in the office all the time, and she had a family. I had to tell her, "Go home, this will be here, you need to get a life."

As a manager, realize how your experiences may impact you and how you lead. Ask yourself, "If I could feel comfortable enough expressing myself, what kind of environment would I want?" And then, create it.

CCL: In your book, you share stories of accomplished, experienced people of a certain age who have imposter feelings. What are you hearing from younger people?

Roché: I'm finding that my story resonates very much with younger people. They are feeling the same kinds of things I did and others of my generation did, but probably the triggers are different. The gender part of it has changed. When I was going into the workplace there were not many women in power. Today, there are more women in these roles, but competition is more aggressive. Young women are saying in a tight job market, I really have to stand out; I have to produce more and more in order to be successful. So the drivers or triggers of fear may be different, but the issues are the same.

CCL: What's the big win when you overcome your imposter feelings?

Roché: It's the internal comfort and feeling of that authentic self. I can feel comfort in who I am and what I know. I'm using my knowledge and skill to make a difference.

If you have imposter feelings, you need to know that comfort does come. You need to work on it, but you can do it and you will feel freer. Don't let this be something you wait too long to make happen.