




Academic Paper

# Impostor phenomenon in leaders through the lens of self-efficacy and implications for coaching

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## Abstract

Leaders frequently report adverse effects of impostor phenomenon on their daily work and careers. Whilst impostor phenomenon research highlights raising self-efficacy and the benefits of focused social support, little is known about how self-efficacy influences impostor phenomenon. This study used reflexive thematic analysis to explore, via semi-structured interviews, seven leaders' perceptions of impostor phenomenon through the lens of self-efficacy. The results contribute to existing knowledge by offering new insights into the use of self-efficacy sources with two key themes: i) the perpetual cycle of holding on to impostor phenomenon identity and ii) reflexive awareness. There is also discussion of the implications for coaching and mentoring as focused social support.

## Keywords

coaching, impostor phenomenon/syndrome, leaders, self-efficacy

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## Introduction

Impostor phenomenon is a concept that has been debated and researched for almost 50 years. First defined in 1978 (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241) as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness" and an intense fear of being found out. Despite its non-medical nature, it is more commonly known in lay literature as impostor phenomenon, with increasing interest evident in internet searches for the topic rising ten times faster than other search terms (Kark, Meister, & Peters, 2021). Estimates on its prevalence (up to 82% - Kark et al., 2021) indicate it is a more common occurrence than previously believed and one which may benefit from additional guidance for coaches or mentors working with leaders experiencing the phenomenon. Research suggests impostor phenomenon can significantly affect the psychological well-being of those who experience it, potentially leading to stress, burnout, or depression (Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Non-peer reviewed literature suggests myriad solutions, yet there is little

empirical research on suitable interventions (Bravata, et al., 2019). More recently, Para, Dubreuil, Miquelon, & Martin-Krumm (2024) have highlighted a lack of rigorous empirical studies, and significant gaps in the existing intervention research, such as overrepresentation of student populations.

Whilst studies have explored imposter phenomenon in several populations, including academics (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), students (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Hutchins et al., 2018; (Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Wagoner Funk, 2000), librarians (Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2014), medics (Gottlieb, Chung, Battaglioli, Sebok-Syer, & Kalantari, 2020); clinical nurse specialists (Arena & Page, 1992), and young employees (Zanchetta, Junker, Wolf, & Traut-Mattausch, 2020), a growing body of literature is concerned with imposter phenomenon in leaders. Research suggests leaders experiencing imposter phenomenon can encounter crippling perfectionism, may self-sabotage their careers, have less career satisfaction and experience imposter phenomenon as a barrier to career progression (Ferrari & Thompson, 2006; Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Imposter phenomenon can negatively influence psychological well-being and job satisfaction (for themselves and their team) and is associated with lower organisational citizenship behaviours (Zanchetta et al., 2020). Internally the leader may struggle with a challenging combination of elevated expectations, responsibility, and visibility, balanced against external societal expectations that they arrive in leadership roles ready to perform at a high level (Kark et al., 2021).

Initial imposter phenomenon research focused on high-achieving women in therapy and causes of imposter phenomenon relating to internal psychological factors, contributed to by "early family dynamics" and "societal sex-role stereotypes" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p.241). Bernard, Dollinger and Ramaniah (2002) suggested that imposter phenomenon is often linked to emotional instability, characterised by anxiety and self-doubt as well as low core self-evaluations (how one views oneself). Researchers have identified low self-esteem, fear of failure and fear of success as essential preconditions (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Hutchins & Rainbolt (2017) suggest imposter phenomenon may emerge during the process of the early formation of professional identity, a view supported by papers connecting imposter phenomenon to early career phases and changes in roles (Kark et al., 2021). Beyond these trait-level behaviours, broader contextual factors must also be considered when exploring imposter phenomenon antecedents in leaders. For example, imposter phenomenon may be triggered by self-doubt and peer comparison in high stakes scenarios; fears over job security in the prevailing economic climate (Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015) and over-reward, where a person is promoted to take on additional roles for which they may not feel ready (Whitman & Shanine, 2012).

Research suggests a link between imposter phenomenon and the fixed mindset (Zanchetta et al., 2020) building on Dweck's work on motivational learning (1986). A fixed mindset, where there is belief that intelligence and ability are set, can lead to avoidance of challenges or giving up under pressure. Whilst this may seem contradictory to the nature of many high-achieving leaders experiencing imposter phenomenon (Kuna 2019) the connection appears to lie in perfectionism where those with both the phenomenon and a fixed mindset may see failure as exposing inadequacy rather than an opportunity for growth.

Three areas continue to dominate the intervention literature: cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), social support, and coaching. Recommended to support imposter phenomenon in earlier research, CBT is a structured, evidence-based psychotherapeutic intervention (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1962). More recent interventions include the use of CBT techniques (at a group or individual level) to address impostor feelings (Bravata et al., 2019); using cognitive reframing to prevent the use of avoidant behaviours (Hutchins et al., 2018); and cognitive approaches used in conjunction with coaching to enhance self-efficacy (Vergauwe et al., 2015).

Social support has been described as valuable in normalising the experience of imposter phenomenon (Hutchins et al., 2018) and in mitigating the detrimental effects of impostorism (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Subsequent research (Gardner, Bednar, Stewart, Oldroyd, & Moore, 2019) cautions that the success of social support can depend on *who* is offering the support. A more experienced mentor or someone external to a company may be more beneficial than peer support (Zanchetta et al., 2020).

Whilst there is growing evidence to support the efficacy of coaching in leadership support (de Haan & Nilsson, 2023) there is little research-informed evidence to support the volume of grey literature on how to support imposter phenomenon. Magro (2022) found that coaching had a greater impact in helping participants understand their impostor feelings, than personal research alone. Coaching also provided a range of coping strategies that equipped participants beyond the duration of the coaching programme. Whilst Kuna (2019, p.306) provides justification around the need for leaders to receive coaching support by highlighting the significant role that executive coaching plays in mitigating against “executive impostorism and loneliness”, their study does not explore recommended coaching approaches.

Coaching as an intervention is a specific and focused form of social support and has been proposed to reduce fear of failure or fear of success (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016); alleviate maladaptive perfectionism and raise self-efficacy (Vergauwe et al., 2015); develop a growth mindset (Zanchetta et al., 2020); and to boost self-efficacy and self-esteem (Hutchins et al., 2018). Indeed, a common thread woven through much of the imposter phenomenon research is a recommendation to focus on raising self-efficacy. Derived from Bandura’s social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is defined as “people’s beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (Bandura, 1997, as cited in Maddux & Kleiman, 2016, p. vii). A person’s level of self-efficacy determines behaviour choices; levels of effort and persistence in the face of challenges; performance-enhancing or inhibiting thoughts; and reactions to demands in their environment (Bandura, 1986). Bandura, (1977) also describes self-efficacy as domain-specific; a person may have high levels of self-efficacy for one aspect of their life and low for another. Accordingly, for this research the focus will be on self-efficacy in leadership roles.

For terminology consistency, this paper will refer to the term *sources* as conceptualised by Bandura (1977) and expanded by Maddux & Kleiman (2016) rather than the term *pillars* which appears in some contemporary discussions. Bandura, (1977, 1997) suggests that there are four sources of self-efficacy that can positively or negatively impact an individual’s beliefs. These are mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional and physiological states, and a fifth source offered by Maddux & Kleiman (2016) is imagined experience. High levels of self-efficacy are associated with greater job satisfaction and increased work performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). However, a study of 588 university staff found a significant negative correlation between self-efficacy and impostor phenomenon ( $r = -0.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ) with regression analysis confirming self-efficacy as a strong negative predictor of impostor feelings ( $B = -0.411$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (McDowell, Grubb III, & Geho, 2015). This suggests that despite high abilities, individuals experiencing impostor feelings tend to have lower levels of self-efficacy. A systematic analysis further supports this, theorising that self-efficacy is the strongest predictor (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Given that self-efficacy is considered malleable (O’Brien, 2006) work to raise self-efficacy could have a positive impact on those experiencing imposter phenomenon.

There are several challenges regarding raising self-efficacy as a means of reducing the effects of imposter phenomenon, and the extant literature is not clear on how to resolve these. Whilst mastery experiences are described as the most powerful sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) those with imposter phenomenon find it difficult to internalise success (Clance, 1985) meaning it is likely they will discount, and fail to integrate previous positive experiences. In addition, research by Hutchins et al. (2018) connects imposter phenomenon with the Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggesting that those experiencing imposter phenomenon tend to focus on the use of avoidant coping strategies, such as disengagement and denial, leading to a downward spiral

towards emotional exhaustion. Given this challenge, it is worth exploring how the self-efficacy sources could serve as a framework for leaders and their coaches to understand imposter phenomenon and utilise this knowledge in the coaching space.

## Research Questions

This paper aims to explore the sources of self-efficacy which may have the greatest influence on imposter phenomenon, by introducing leaders to the sources of self-efficacy and exploring their observations and responses. This paper seeks to answer the following question:

How might awareness of the self-efficacy sources influence impostor phenomenon in leaders?

It is hoped that the answers to this question will enhance coaching for leaders experiencing imposter phenomenon by providing deeper insights and ultimately leading to additional coaching approaches.

## Research Design

This study utilised a relativist ontology, as it is recognised that impostor feelings are deeply personal, subjective human experiences. A constructivist and interpretivist epistemological perspective acknowledges that reality is created, not discovered, through interpretation (Oades, Sioku, & Slemp, 2019). This research explores the co-constructed meaning-making between the human experience of participants understanding their imposter phenomenon through the lens of self-efficacy, recognising the importance of data interpretation through the researchers' analytic process and reflexivity. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was chosen to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning that may be useful for facilitating coaching with leaders with imposter phenomenon.

## Research Participants

Leaders were defined as those holding positions of influence in their organisations regardless of title (D. V. Day & Antonakis, 2012) and were recruited using purposive sampling, which requires searching for participants with specific qualities (Coolican, 2018). Inclusion criteria initially stipulated those in work and experiencing imposter phenomenon within the last 14 days, later amended to include *any* experience of imposter phenomenon during their time as leaders, to gain insights from those who had overcome imposter phenomenon. Completing an imposter phenomenon scale (Clance, 1985) may have ruled out those no longer experiencing the phenomenon, instead participants self-identified using a check list of imposter phenomenon features. The participant group was deliberately broad to gain perspectives from a selection of leaders (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A minimum of two years' leadership experience and participation age of 25+ was set, to avoid including recent school leavers or those on graduate programmes who may experience imposter phenomenon due to age or lack of experience (Gardner et al., 2019). A small sub-group of those experiencing imposter phenomenon may experience chronic or clinical depression (Clance & Imes, 1978) and, as it would be inadvisable to work with them without relevant clinical experience (British Psychological Society, 2018) this was set as exclusion criteria.

Recruitment adverts were shared on LinkedIn, social media and direct contacts. A hashtag search was also carried out on LinkedIn for leaders writing about imposter phenomenon experiences. Participant information sheets were sent, and a preliminary phone call offered, to those expressing interest. Consent was obtained from participants and data were kept in accordance with the BPS

and University of East London (UEL) codes of ethics (British Psychological Society, 2018; University of East London, 2020).

Braun & Clarke (2013) suggest that six to ten participants are adequate for a small-scale study; the final number of participants was seven. All participants had significant leadership experience ranging from two to over fifteen years. Demographic data are shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Participant Demographic Data**

Participant	Gender	Age bracket	Ethnicity	Leadership experience (years)
NA	M	Unknown	White British	3
VY	F	46 - 49	Black British African	15+
SB	M	30 - 35	White British	5 - 6
BT	F	30 - 35	Indian	5
DN	F	40 - 45	White British	6 - 7
ML	F	40 - 45	British Asian	2
TF	F	40 - 45	White British	2 - 3

## Research Process

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to watch a short PowerPoint presentation via video (see Appendix A) explaining a self-efficacy model using the five sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences; vicarious experiences; verbal persuasion; emotional and physiological states; and imagined experience. Participants had a visual reference of the five sources at the beginning and at points during the interview. Participants were interviewed about their lived experience of imposter phenomenon through this lens of self-efficacy.

Interviews were conducted between March and July 2022 with six leaders from the UK and one from India. These lasted between 26 and 55 minutes with an average interview length of 43 minutes. The one-to-one interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams (online) using semi-structured questions (Appendix B). The questions were divided into two broad sections. The first section gathered participants' experiences of imposter phenomenon as leaders, for example, "What have been your specific experiences of impostor phenomenon as a leader?" The second section explored thoughts and behaviours around the five sources of self-efficacy, for example, "If we look at each of these sources in turn, what (if any) connections can you see in relation to your experience of imposter phenomenon?" Prompt phrases were used to elicit further detail (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and participants were encouraged to share and expand on thoughts freely to give depth to the data collection (Oliffe, Kelly, Gonzalez Montaner, & Yu Ko, 2021). On completion, participants were asked how they found the experience to ensure that they were not adversely affected by discussing imposter phenomenon. A post-interview email was sent to thank them, and to share debrief information.

The recorded interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams and all transcription files anonymised by changing participant names to code letters. Identifying references were changed or removed and each transcription document was cleaned following the interview; minimal amending of wording was made to avoid changing meanings and details of pauses were added to help indicate thought (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once interviews were transcribed, recordings were deleted to maintain confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data and identify relevant codes and themes. NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2014) qualitative data analysis

software was used to aid the coding process and coding was both inductive and deductive; for example, deductive coding linked the five sources of self-efficacy model to the data, and an inductive approach was required to examine other themes driven by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun & Clarke (2006, 2022) describe their six-phase process as a set of guidelines rather than strict rules. Accordingly, the process was not linear and involved several moves forward and back through the phases.

The first author brought an insider perspective to the research as a former leader who experienced imposter feelings. The first author acknowledged the potential for bias and committed to regular reflexive writing in a research journal to capture initial thoughts, support meaning-making, and to delve into what was being brought subconsciously to the interview process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). To enhance dependability there was regular supervision and critical reflection on themes with the second author (Stahl & King, 2020).

## Results

Two main themes were identified: the perpetual cycle of holding on to imposter phenomenon identity, and reflexive awareness. These were underpinned by five sub-themes and are presented here alongside illustrative quotations. In line with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) the number of respondents describing each theme is not reported. However, each theme was expressed by at least two-thirds of the seven leaders (five or more). Participants described perceptions of imposter phenomenon at both semantic (explicitly verbalised) and latent levels (implied, then interpreted by the researcher) (Byrne, 2021). See table 2 for an overview.

**Table 2: Overview of Themes and Sub-themes**

Main themes	Sub-themes	Description
1.0 The perpetual cycle of holding on to imposter phenomenon identity	1.1 The role of familiarity in maintaining imposter phenomenon identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding on to imposter phenomenon identity as something known</li> <li>• Knowingly being held back by imposter phenomenon identity</li> <li>• Habitually sourcing negative information creating a reinforced perpetual cycle of imposter phenomenon identity</li> <li>• Resigned acceptance of imposter phenomenon defining identity</li> </ul>
	1.2 Double edged sword undermining compensatory behavioural strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies for enhancing performance have become unconsciously stuck in psychological and emotional states of stress.</li> <li>• Existing strategies have become consciously reinforced through awareness of the patterns of perfectionism / procrastination / pessimism / rumination</li> </ul>
	1.3 Distortion of attributions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successes are attributed to luck, chance, or others' abilities (externally)</li> <li>• Perceived failures attributed to the 'self' (through doubting, critical internalised voice)</li> <li>• Failure to internalise positive performance experiences, positive verbal feedback</li> </ul>
2.0 Reflexive Awareness	2.1 Developing metacognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deeper awareness about imposter phenomenon</li> <li>• Understanding of thinking, behaviours and beliefs towards themselves; past, present and future</li> </ul>
	2.2 Conscious competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conscious awareness of positive self-efficacy sources, and ability to attribute causation to experience</li> </ul>

## 1.0 The perpetual cycle of holding on to imposter phenomenon identity

This theme is explored through three sub-themes highlighting different aspects of how participants internalised their imposter phenomenon identity. After introduction to the sources of self-efficacy, participants reported observations that explored their imposter phenomenon identity, behaviours, and attributions. Participants expressed various aspects of self, representing the perceptions they hold of themselves and how they experience their internal voice.

### 1.1 The role of familiarity in maintaining imposter phenomenon identity

Participants described a strong familiarity with the sensations and impact of imposter phenomenon, often using metaphor to describe its pervasive, internalised, and all-encompassing nature. For example, from DN, "Almost like a balloon blowing up and then it explodes. It's all consuming but afterwards you think, what was I worrying about?" Also, "You do get to points where you can kind of almost cage it up. But then sometimes it just, it breaks out and it becomes bigger and bigger." (ML)

Supporting the perpetual cycle, a descriptive pattern was observed of both holding onto and being held back by imposter phenomenon. Metaphorically, participants described being caught in vicious circles. “Being held back” represented the negative impact on their careers (lack of promotions and missed opportunities).

*I feel it's stunted my growth and my leadership because I'm focusing too much on the operational stuff and not focusing on the leadership and the strategy in the long-term vision and that's a rough feel. (TF)*

Participants recognised, when viewing the topic through the self-efficacy lens, that they were habitually sourcing negative information and there was a resigned acceptance that this was the way they were.

*So it kind of undermines my own growth because I internalise those negative messages so much that instead of taking them positively, I get into that spiral loop that no, no, no. I still have a very, very long way to go. (BT)*

### **1.2 Double-edged sword undermining compensatory behavioural strategies**

Leaders employed behavioural strategies which could be described as compensatory, offsetting weakness in one area by developing strength in another (American Psychological Association, 2022). Perfectionism was described by several participants as manifesting in various ways; a perceived pressure to know all the answers even beyond their own role; over-preparation; not appearing fallible. For example, “These rules that have been set out by no-one other than me about things having to be, it's got to be 100% perfect. Perfect. That's a good word. I use that a lot.” (VY) Also:

*You've got to show this kind of front because I think if you kind of admit that you're not sure what you're doing. Sometimes you think [...] that almost affects people's opinion of you. (DN)*

Participants identified additional compensatory strategies that fed the cycle: procrastination, pessimism, and rumination. Although leaders noted that these led to negative emotional states and reduced self-efficacy, they also observed these behaviours helped them prepare for worst-case scenarios, hence the double-edged sword. “I think to some extent it kind of reassures you that everything is sorted and ... you've got everything you need so that you can continue on. You're in a good place” (ML). This framing reflected how participants perceived impostor feelings as something they were unintentionally “feeding,” allowing the cycle to grow.

### **1.3 Distortion of attributions**

Here, most participants reported attributing successes to chance, luck or the wider teams' abilities. In contrast, recalled failures were mainly attributed to themselves, often despite firm evidence to the contrary. Several participants recognised these attributions contributed to the impostor cycle because of the repetitive nature of the behaviour.

*The positive experience seems to be like on a 10% setting. So you've got this disproportionate, you know my mind knows that my previous experience is good, yet somehow it keeps going, “so what?” Attaches itself to these one or two rare experiences that didn't go well, and that becomes everything. (VY)*

*If one thing was wrong and ninety-nine things were right, I'd probably put the ninety-nine things being right down to it being a good day or having luck on my side that day and then focus on the one thing that was wrong, even though that was a really small thing. That's just my outlook. (TF)*

In addition, participants recognised a critical internal voice, characterised by low self-assessments of ability and competence, reflecting distorted attributions. “So predominantly for me, it presents as a, I'm not capable of, or a people like me don't achieve things like that” (TF). Sometimes there was a sense of self that appeared to stem from perceived negative views of others, as if mind-reading. For example,

*Other people always look better, sound better and have greater impact in my mind than anything I can do with the exception of, you know, somebody that is that, that's an absolute disaster. (VY)*

and

*You start looking at yourself through other people's eyes in a negative way, but you don't actually know what they're thinking. It's all in your head. ((laughs)) (ML).*

Participants described self-doubt as a common response to critical or lack of feedback. For example,

*Because it's the absence of feedback, I think from certain people, certain sources, that then starts to feed that doubt and you know that second guessing. (VY)*

*It would just be incidences of extremely low confidence that I could actually do the job. Umm, and all of the doubts that that brings [...] Essentially, it wasn't just that I couldn't do it, it was that feeling of letting the people around me down. And you know, failing them as well, as well as myself. (SB)*

Participants exhibited a pattern of attempting to rationalise thinking but repeatedly struggled to internalise the positive experiences and feedback, making it difficult to trust their own self-evaluations.

*But I'm sure, I'm sure. Well, I hope I'm sure, I think that I am capable but there's just something there that just doesn't go away. That says, “No, they'll find you out! ((laughs)) You can't do it.” And it, it's really weird, it's, it's a very strange feeling. (TF)*

## **2.0 Reflexive awareness**

This theme is characterised by participants' reflexive behaviours, marked by new realisations, and emerging insights into imposter phenomenon, self-efficacy, and their leadership roles. These insights occurred after being introduced to the self-efficacy model, which was previously unknown to most participants. There was an iterative relationship between theme 1 and 2, with participants revisiting elements of both as part of their developing awareness and the reflective process, examining their feelings, reactions, and motives for their behaviours.

### **2.1 Developing metacognition**

For all participants, there was recognition that a metacognitive process was at play as deeper reflections upon their past, present and future reasoning emerged. Some participants suggested possible changes to their future thinking as a result of their reflection during the interview, including the consideration of adopting more self-compassionate or proactive strategies in future leadership situations. For example, VY described a potential future approach to raising self-efficacy:

*Maybe it's something that I have to do deliberately. That [imposter phenomenon] doesn't, you know, it doesn't just remain. Maybe it's something that you have to feed consciously. But right now [...] my sense of self is feeling, yeah it's feeling balanced and it's feeling strong.*

For all participants, there was recognition of their thoughts and beliefs underpinning their decision-making processes in key leadership situations; including reflections on how they had connected specific sources of self-efficacy and impostor feelings in those moments.

*There may be times perhaps where [self-efficacy] is higher than other times, but that's making me wonder now whether that is more to do with your physiological and emotional of how you're feeling about that, rather than actually what's happening? (DN)*

Participants articulated recognition of their clear orientation towards negative thinking, for instance, participants described negative events creating a stronger and more memorable effect than good experiences. SB suggests that:

*I thought I was just inspired by watching good people do stuff. But you know now that I've sat and I've thought about past instances, it's also clear that watching someone good at something also can cripple my confidence in things as well. So that needs a bit of self-analysis I think.*

Another element of this metacognitive process was a realisation that positive beliefs about successful experiences were not internalised. "I guess in terms of the performance experience there is positive and there is negative, but the negative feels way bigger than the positive." (VY)

When considering vicarious experiences and learning from others, a pattern across all the participants was that of frequent negative comparison:

*I was trying to think of situations where I probably learned by watching others. But in my case, whenever I see someone performing well, I feel as if I don't have those skills. Like I'm not able to learn from others' experiences but I end up comparing myself to others' experiences. (BT)*

None of the participants found that imagining a future event going well would raise self-efficacy beliefs. Indeed, this source - imaginal experiences - was more commonly described as one that would lead to worsening impostor feelings; an inner voice would counteract perceived successes. Participants also described how combinations of negative elements from the self-efficacy model reinforced the negative feelings and contributed to the perpetual cycle described in theme one.

*I feel like it's a bit of a perfect storm, isn't it? [...] If you're feeling tired, and you've got something new to do that you don't feel that confident about. You see somebody else is doing great at something else and then you start imagining that it's not gonna go very well. (DN)*

## 2.2 Conscious Competence

After reviewing the self-efficacy model, participants described an emerging awareness of the useful sources helping them to generate improved self-efficacy beliefs and increased feelings of competence. Participants highlighted four key areas: receiving verbal support; repeated action (mastery); applying logic; and analysing vicarious experience. These raised a sense of competence in their thinking, beliefs and behaviours, a more conscious competence.

Engaging with a trusted other as a form of verbal support; experienced line manager, family, or friends, building rapport with others, or a combination thereof, supported them as they made sense of their impostor feelings through the lens of self-efficacy. This verbal support played a key role as some reflected on connections between different sources.

*I've linked vicarious and verbal quite strongly. I'm not sure why, but I guess because they're arguably the more external. Cause you know, you're watching people, you're listening to people, that'll be the tie between those two? (SB)*

Participants observed that stronger self-efficacy beliefs resulted from repetition, whereas one-off successful performance experiences provided only a temporary confidence boost. For instance, “When I first started this job, that idea of doing your first [event], ‘Oh never be able to do that’. And then when you’ve done five hundred, it’s not really a big deal.” (DN)

All leaders also described applying logic and reason to the phenomena, which at times led to a temporary feeling of increased competence by recognising that imposter phenomenon thoughts were based on flawed evidence:

*That’s that argument I have with myself where the thought pops up and I recognise that’s what it is, and I try and rationalise it and it makes it go quiet for a little bit. (VY)*

Participants reflected how their leadership identity was strengthened by witnessing trusted, credible role models accomplish achievable goals and thus boosted their self-belief. For example, “I’ve watched someone and thought, ‘they’re fantastic, I’m gonna emulate them and I will be just as good if not better’.” (SB) And “I think I’m very much being influenced by previous managers and other sort of leaders on my team around me.” (NA)

Witnessing those they perceived as ineffective, also proved a useful source of information; in these cases, they found that identifying ineffective actions, approaches or failures in others’ leadership, strengthened their self-efficacy beliefs, reinforcing their confidence in their own leadership abilities.

*This is where what I found interesting [in the model] was how you assign value to what people tell you and who it comes from. And you know the weight of that depends on their expertise or how you value their expertise. (SB)*

Role models varied between those more senior within their organisations and well-known personalities; “I look at somebody like Obama and I think my god, I wish I could deliver a presentation like that.” (VY)

## Discussion

A common thread woven through much of the imposter phenomenon research is to focus on raising self-efficacy (Hutchins et al., Vergauwe et al., 2015). The literature suggested that cognitive behaviour therapy and coaching as a focused form of social support are useful interventions for supporting those with imposter phenomenon (Bravata et al., 2019, Hutchins et al., 2018). A scoping review of interventions for imposter phenomenon (Para et al., 2024) also identified education through training and support in the form of counselling as the principal interventions (group support, not individual support was the focus). Taking the premise that interventions are useful for imposter phenomenon, this paper sought to understand if using the self-efficacy model, as a purposeful intervention, could facilitate improvements on imposter phenomenon perceptions in leaders, and as a secondary factor, how this understanding could contribute to a social support framework (Hutchins et al., 2018) through coaching or mentoring. The results contribute to existing knowledge by offering new insights into the use of self-efficacy sources with two key themes: The Perpetual Cycle of Holding on to Imposter Phenomenon and Identity and Reflexive Awareness.

Participants’ experiences of the imposter phenomenon identity perpetual cycle were strongly aligned with aspects of the original imposter phenomenon definitions: negative spirals of impostor feelings, strong tendencies to discount or deny praise (Clance & Imes, 1978), difficulties with internalising success, and fear of being identified as a fraud (Leary et al., 2000). No comments were made in interviews about fear or guilt connected to success (Clance & Imes, 1978) although this does not mean this was not experienced (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Compensatory strategies were described such as perfectionism and pessimism, which were both experienced by leaders as

resulting from impostor thoughts. Existing literature supports the described negative impact of these behaviours on leaders' careers (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Whitman & Shanine's (2012) description of pessimism as a defensive approach, complements participants' descriptions of using impostor phenomenon as a motivator to enable preparation. This also links to research by Pákozdy, et al., (2023) which found that perfectionism was a mediator between impostor phenomenon and self-efficacy. Whilst in the existing research trait level behaviours of perfectionism and pessimism and low core self-evaluations were described as antecedents to impostor phenomenon, participants instead viewed these as an integral part of the impostor phenomenon experience.

Impostor phenomenon was not connected to starting new roles, forming a professional identity (Kark et al., 2021) or key events (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017) instead it was seen as something more constant and pervasive as described here by DN, "It's not often specific kind of incidents. It's a general kind of [...] low level kind of rumbly feeling" and VY, "It's about what happens after that in the gaps, the pauses and the quiet moments between being active and inactive. That's when it all kicks in". This is potentially problematic as leaders may not deem this pervasive feeling important enough to bring as a coaching topic. Yet this process contributes to a negative cycle that is challenging to confront and risks feeding both a fear of failure (de Souza & Tomei, 2016) and negative leadership behaviours (KH & Menon, 2020). The Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) offers a lens to understand underlying feelings that may have previously been blind or hidden in the coaching space. It may enable coaches and mentors to intentionally integrate their impostor phenomenon and self-efficacy knowledge into the client's exploration.

Tightly woven internalised states of emotions and behaviours held within the impostor phenomenon identity, are supported in the impostor phenomenon literature by descriptions of internalised core self-evaluations (Clance & Imes, 1978). Due to the conflicting relationship between perfectionism and impostor phenomenon (Grubb & Grubb, 2021) the motivational effect may be less beneficial when it impedes performance. However, strongly held as a motivational force for improvement, it cannot be assumed that subconsciously a leader wants to let go of impostor phenomenon. This is important to recognise, as within the grey self-help literature, there is a common theme that impostor phenomenon needs to be removed or eradicated in some way, when reality is far more nuanced. Both positive and negative factors are related to motivation in the impostor phenomenon identity; coaches who may unintentionally assume that impostor phenomenon is a problem to be removed, may find themselves stuck in the perpetual cycle with the leader.

Responses connected to impostor phenomenon identity impacted several sources of self-efficacy. Aligned with Bandura (1992) and Maddux & Kleiman (2016) self-efficacy beliefs were drawn (to varying extents) from the five areas outlined previously. Self-doubt and the critical inner voice made it especially challenging for the leaders to draw on positive rather than negative self-efficacy beliefs. Whilst self-efficacy is described as malleable (O'Brien, 2006) for those experiencing impostor phenomenon there is a significant block to making that change.

Considering this, and given the negative-leaning pattern observed, it seems relevant here to consider negativity bias, where the brain attends naturally to negative over positive as a protective mechanism against threat, as recognised in the field of neuroscience (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Raichle, et al., 2001). However, with impostor phenomenon we see that even when good is outweighing bad, the pattern persists. This suggests that to make use of the self-efficacy model, this internalised process and the underlying tensions, would need to be addressed with care and sensitivity at the outset of any supportive coaching or mentoring relationship.

By creating a safe space (O'Broin & Palmer, 2007) to understand the constraining and supporting nature of their impostor phenomenon identity (theme 1), it becomes evident that this impostor phenomenon identity is not something to be removed but rather gently unfolded through reflexive awareness (theme 2). This process expands the edges of identity and opens new ways of

understanding the self. The two themes are interchangeable and should perhaps be explored as an expanding cycle, rather than in a linear manner. Bachkirova (2018) suggests that the strength of coaching lies in facilitative support tailored to the client's unique needs. In this scenario, this includes the client's identification with their imposter phenomenon identity.

Participants discussion of the self-efficacy sources seemed to produce greater reflexive awareness of imposter phenomenon, which is promising for future support. Leaders affirmed areas of the model from where they drew positive self-efficacy beliefs. Among these, positive verbal feedback and vicarious experiences – whether separately or in tandem – were deemed most powerful, albeit externally driven. Prior research highlights the role of reflection, where thoughts being heard and fed back are core elements embedded in coaching (Jackson, 2004) supporting an awareness-raising approach to counteract inner messages. Strengths-based approaches can boost self-esteem and confidence (Green & Palmer, 2018) while solutions-focused approaches enhance competency building and seeking exceptions (O'Connell & Palmer, 2019). Additionally, according to Sabouripour, Roslan, Ghiami, & Memon (2021) self-efficacy mediated the relationship between components of psychological well-being (autonomy, self-acceptance, positive relations with others) and resilience.

Building on these connections with current research, there are several practical applications of the study pertinent to coaches and mentors working with leaders. Hutchins et al. (2018) recognised that social support helps normalise the experience of imposter phenomenon, and Gardner et al. (2019) suggested that the effectiveness of the social support may depend on who is providing it. A coach's experience in observing and identifying imposter phenomenon blind spots and their individual ability to use effective ways in providing this feedback could vary. For example, coaches' awareness of the potential for co-dependent transference (Hay, 2007) may help to avoid unintentionally reinforcing imposter phenomenon identity. Through self-efficacy sources, coaches can mindfully offer the right balance of challenge of the imposter phenomenon identity, whilst maintaining the supportive relationship (I. Day & Blakey, 2012). Coaches and mentors who have an opportunity to deepen their understanding of imposter phenomenon through the self-efficacy source lens, may positively inform their use of integrated coaching approaches.

Given the levels of rumination and inward focus described by leaders, first coaching steps may need to explore successful strategies to address worry, followed by an incremental approach to explore self-efficacy sources, prior to leadership goal setting. Recognising the malleable nature of self-efficacy (O'Brien, 2006) could prove powerful and useful for coaches in exploring how their clients' imposter phenomenon functions; with aims of a) softening the hold of the imposter phenomenon identity and moving toward a developing sense of self through b) awareness building utilising the self-efficacy sources model.

## **Limitations and Recommendations**

Although Braun & Clarke (2013) advise that six participants is adequate for a small-scale study, the data from the seven participants in the current study may not provide enough information power (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, the topic of imposter phenomenon is difficult for some leaders to discuss and may have posed a barrier to recruitment or participation (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Further research would be valuable to corroborate and expand upon the themes identified in this study.

Using thematic analysis offers an overview of patterns across participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006) however it does not allow for an in-depth examination of individual impact. Future research could extend this study by exploring the impact of a 12-week coaching and mentoring programme incorporating this framework, to better understand how to support individual leaders with imposter phenomenon.

This study did not include member checking, which may limit the interpretative validation of findings. These findings reflect leaders' imposter phenomenon experiences through a self-efficacy lens, but alternative perspectives may yield different themes and readers should consider how these findings apply to their own experiences and organisational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

## Conclusions

This research explored whether the self-efficacy model, as a purposeful intervention, could improve imposter phenomenon perceptions in leaders, and began to develop understanding of how coaches might apply it within coaching or mentoring as a social support framework (Hutchins et al., 2018). The findings suggested that, without intervention, self-efficacy beliefs of leaders experiencing imposter phenomenon are often negatively focused, thus feeding a perpetual cycle of impostor feelings. However, it was also evident that discussing imposter phenomenon and self-efficacy increased awareness and internalised understanding. This suggested the potential for using the five self-efficacy sources as an intervention to help leaders actively explore imposter phenomenon through the social support of coaching or mentoring. Given the paucity of empirical research to support leaders with imposter phenomenon, this could provide a more nuanced approach for those with imposter phenomenon, and the coaches, managers and mentors who support them.

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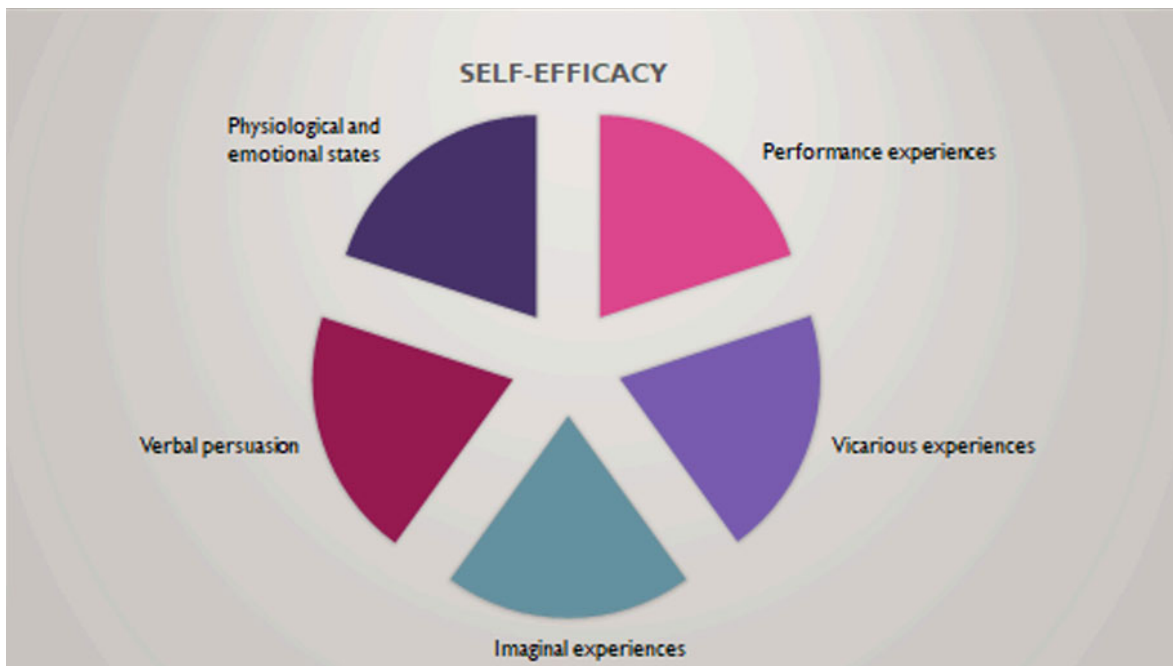
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## Appendix A

### Self-efficacy Presentation

This is the self-efficacy presentation shown to participants. The presentation lasts for 6 minutes and 20 seconds.

<https://youtu.be/mOxmsJctykQ>



Slide shown to participants during the call.

## Appendix B

### Question Guide

Tell me a little about your leadership role.  
How long have you been a leader?  
How does imposter phenomenon show up for you?

What have been your specific experiences of impostor phenomenon as a leader?

How has impostor phenomenon affected you specifically at work or at home?

What has been the impact of that?

Let's look at the self-efficacy model. I'll do a quick recap of this. We know that both positive and negative senses of self-efficacy come from these different sources.

- Performance experiences (reflecting on previous success and failures)
- Vicarious experiences (observing others succeed or not)
- Verbal persuasion (listening to affirming or negative messages from others)
- Imagined experience (effective or ineffective behaviour)
- Emotional states (enthusiasm versus anxiety)

If we look at each of these sources in turn, what (if any) connections can you see in relation to your experience of imposter phenomenon?

What was the impact of that/those for you?

How did it make you feel? What did you notice?

How do you reflect on that now with hindsight?

What has been the impact of this on your career?

How do these connections show up in your role as a leader?

How do these connections show up in other areas of your life?

How do these connect with what you believe about yourself (sense of self)?

Is there anything you would like to mention that I haven't asked?

**Further prompting questions:**

And for you?

And what else?

Can you tell me a bit more?

What sort of...

What kind of...

And that's like what?

What's the relationship between...