



Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network Podcast: Real Talk

Episode 6 - Imposter Syndrome

By [Megan Monson](#), [Nicole Fulfree](#), [Rachel Moseson Dikovics](#), [Amanda Cipriano](#)
February 2022

Amanda Cipriano: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler Podcast Series: The Women's Initiative Network, Real Talk. I'm Amanda Cipriano, an Associate attorney and member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcasts, or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, Google Podcasts, and SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, an Associate in Lowenstein Sandler's White Collar Criminal Defense practice group.

Megan Monson: And I'm Megan Monson, Partner in Lowenstein Sandler's Employee Benefits and Executive Compensation practice group.

Nicole Fulfree: I'm Nicole Fulfree, Counsel in Lowenstein Sandler's Bankruptcy and Restructuring department.

Amanda Cipriano: And I'm Amanda Cipriano, an Associate in Lowenstein's Litigation group

Rachel Dikovics: On this episode of the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk, we're focusing on imposter syndrome, both what it is and tips for overcoming it.

Amanda Cipriano: Have you ever thought to yourself, "I have no idea what I'm doing?" This thought may be followed by the daunting suspicion that you will undoubtedly be exposed as a fraud at any minute. Instant panic ensues and because you know for certain, everyone will soon realize you're not qualified for this job, right?

Rachel Dikovics: Right. This happens to many of us. And our goal is to work through it together, as we're generally more than qualified for the task we undertake and often don't give ourselves enough credit.

Amanda Cipriano: So let's start with the basics. What is imposter syndrome?

Rachel Dikovics: So imposter syndrome is the name that's given to a feeling of self-doubt that well qualified and well trained professionals often feel when they're called upon to take on tasks and responsibilities that they are more than prepared to take on. And yet have this nagging feeling that, at any second, everyone will realize that actually they're not trained to do at this and they don't know

what they're doing. And a lot of studies have shown that women, and especially minority women, experience imposter syndrome at a much higher rate than their male, and especially their white male colleagues. So that's something that our women's group, the Women's Initiative Network has worked on addressing with our colleagues and that we are looking forward to talking about today.

Megan Monson: And I'll just add on that it also is the idea that you've essentially succeeded and gotten to wherever you are due to luck and that your actual job and accomplishments that you've achieved are really not a virtue of your talent. When in effect, that's not the case. As Rachel mentioned, you are qualified, but it's the internal feelings that you have that whatever you've achieved is not actually something that you deserve or that you've done on your own accord.

Amanda Cipriano: Now, have you ever experienced imposter syndrome?

Rachel Dikovics: I think that would probably be a resounding yes. And I'm sure we can each talk a little bit about some experiences that we've had. But I think that virtually everyone has encountered imposter syndrome at some point in their career. I hope personally as a relatively junior attorney, that that will be less common for me in the future. But I know from our conversations with people who are very senior to me, that that's not always the case. And it's important to take a step back and realize when what you're feeling is a symptom of imposter syndrome and not an effect of you actually being unprepared or unqualified.

So for example, recently I've had a situation with one of my clients where we're making strategic calls about the right thing to do in a particular situation. And sometimes the partner who I'm working with is just too busy to be on every call and is delegating responsibility to me. And I try to remind myself that if responsibility is being delegated to me, it's because I'm competent enough to deserve it. But it can be hard, especially if you are a more junior person in your career than many of the other people on the phone, for example. When you're dealing with people who have a lot more experience than you, it can feel like you're not qualified to be giving them advice. But what I try to remember is, if I've been asked to fill that role, it's because my boss feels that I'm competent to do it and able to stand in for them once in a while.

Amanda Cipriano: Do you have any other ways that you have overcome imposter syndrome or have seen other people overcome it?

Megan Monson: So I think one of the ways that I try to overcome imposter syndrome is a little cheesy, but it's making a folder of accomplishments. And so every time I get an email from a client or an email from a partner saying that I've done a great job on something, I file those away and use that as a reference when I'm having those days, that I don't know what I'm doing and discrediting the work that I've done. There's been many situations where I've been told that I did a great job on something. And instead of just accepting the praise, I essentially tried to discount it and saying, "Ah, I didn't really do that much work. It was mostly this person." And I think that's another side effect of imposter syndrome because you're not taking credit for the credit where it's due, you're

trying to excuse away your accomplishments. And so by trying to keep a working list, if you will, of successes that you've had, it helps, at least me, build up my confidence and show that there can't really be this many people who are wrong in saying positive things. That if there's one person in the room who's thinking something different, and it's me, I'm probably the one who's in the wrong.

Nicole Fulfree:

Yeah, like the others mentioned, I think that imposter syndrome is something that I experience all the time, unfortunately. One experience that comes to mind is when I was a more junior attorney at the firm, I had spent days and days, if not weeks and maybe months preparing these documents called first day documents in a case preparing for a company's bankruptcy filing. And I was the main person speaking to the client on all the factual issues. I prepared every document myself. And I remember when it came time to attend the first day hearing, the day before my boss said, "Nicole, you're going to be presenting the first day motions." And I was terrified.

And I think, Rachel, you hit on one of these key points, and I think one of the main sources of imposter syndrome, I think at least for me, is the thought that everyone else surrounding you is more qualified than you are to do whatever task is at hand. And I think that's the reason why I was so terrified because I was thinking, "Why couldn't she do it? Why couldn't anyone else do it?" I was so junior, I was probably the least experienced person and I wasn't the right person to do it. I was going to mess up. I didn't know how to present and that I didn't really understand what I was doing. And I just shouldn't be the one to do it. But my boss told me, "You can do this. You're going to do this."

And I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind. And one of the things that I tried to think about in pushing those thoughts out of my mind was I was the one that prepared all the documents firsthand. I spent weeks and months preparing those documents. And that no one knows it better than me. And that people might have questions about it and maybe I would be able to answer them, maybe I wouldn't. But as far as doing the presentation that I was being asked to do, I was the person that knew the most about that. Even more so than my boss at the time. And so you have to have that reality check sometimes that even though there might be, and you know, I think there's often people in the room that know more than me about a particular subject, but I think that you have to realize as well, what you know and have confidence in your abilities based on what you've done in your preparation.

Rachel Dikovics:

Yeah. I think sometimes it's really helpful to be voluntold that you are going to be the person handling something. I've definitely had that happen in some calls with high level people where beforehand, a partner has said to me, "You did the research on this, you're going to take the lead in answering questions. I'll kick it off and then it's going to be up to you." And so knowing that you are the person who knows the most about the issue that's being discussed is extremely helpful. And I think that that goes for virtually everything that attorneys do, especially if you're going to be presenting in court or something like that, you want to be the most prepared person in the room. But sometimes you don't realize that you are the most prepared person in the room until somebody else tells you, "Actually, you're the one who knows the most about this. You're going to handle it."

Nicole Fulfree: Yeah. Rachel, I agree with that. And I think a lot of times we put unnecessary pressure on ourselves, or at least I definitely do. And I feel like I have to know every single thing about a subject. And if I don't, it's the most embarrassing thing that could ever happen. But in reality, as I became a more experienced attorney, I listened in on calls and I realize that a lot of people don't know the answer to everything. And if just because you don't know the answer to a question that's posed on a call, it doesn't mean that you're an imposter or you're not good at your job. It just means that you don't know the answer. And a lot of times attorneys don't know the answer. That's why we have jobs and that's why people do research. And so if you don't know the answer, I mean, sometimes you should know the answer, but at certain times it's okay not to know the answer and it's okay to be comfortable not knowing the answer. And you have to be confident in your capabilities to realize that sometimes.

Amanda Cipriano: Do you think that the more senior you get, the less you experience imposter syndrome, just because you have more opportunities to sit in and learn? Or do you find that it still hits you the same as it did when you were maybe a first year?

Megan Monson: For me, I'd say it still hits me on a pretty regular basis, but not as frequently as when I was first or starting out, because the more that you do things, you just gain more confidence and you're more comfortable working in a variety of settings, you know a lot more substantive information. But that doesn't mean that there's not times where I'm still getting accolades or if you're getting an award or a performance review and you're second guessing what they're saying and you're like, "Oh, I don't know if this is all really true. Do I really deserve this?" So I think to an extent, a lot of our personalities unfortunately lend themselves to always having some level of imposter syndrome. But I do think that the more senior you get, you have less instances of it. And there are more times that you feel more confident in your abilities.

Rachel Dikovics: Yeah. I agree. I think that the more senior you get, you experience imposter syndrome in a different way. So whereas when I was a very, very junior attorney, I would feel frequently like, "Oh, maybe I missed something. I don't know if I gave the right answer to something." Now, I experience it when I'm asked to do something new. So something with more responsibility or less oversight by a partner than what I've done in the past. That's when I feel like, "I'm not the right person to do this. Somebody more senior than me should be doing this." But most of the time it actually works out. And the partner who's asked you, or your boss, who's at asked you to do something, knows what they're doing and has asked you to do it for a reason. But I don't experience it really anymore when I'm asked to do something that I'm really comfortable doing and that I know, I know how to do. And I think a lot of times the metric for knowing when you really know something is whether you can explain it really well to somebody junior to you. And if you can, you probably understand it pretty well.

Rachel Dikovics: But I do think it's important as attorneys to have a good read on when you're experiencing imposter syndrome and when you really don't know the answer. So following up a little bit on what Nicole said before, feeling like you're unqualified, when you really are qualified, is imposter syndrome. But feeling

like you're unqualified because you're unprepared or because you've been asked a question you just don't know the answer to are two different things. And it's important. I think another reason that I feel like I experience imposter syndrome less frequently these days is because I know what I don't know and what I do know. So I'm confident in the facts and law that I'm aware of, but I'm comfortable saying, "I don't know. Or I need to look into that," when I'm asked something that I'm not prepared to answer. And I think that over time, from experience, you learn that there are lots of times when the person being asked the question does not have the answer, either because it's just an unanticipated topic that came up, which I think is what happens most of the time. And it's generally pretty acceptable to say, "I'll circle back. I need to look into it."

Megan Monson: Similar to what Rachel just said, I've also found that seeing partners and others who are more senior to me take that approach and that tactic, whether it's in a conversation with a client or frankly, whether they want to have internal conversations, because they're not sure about an issue and they want to bounce it off you, really helps me to recognize that there are situations where it's completely appropriate and you do not know everything. And so, as Rachel said, being able to distinguish the difference between the scenarios where you're not going to know everything and when to recognize that and that that's okay. Versus you do know what you're doing, and you're just not feeling like you're qualified, I think are two very different settings. And just making sure that you know how to understand the difference.

Amanda Cipriano: What are ways young attorneys, or really anyone, can go about increasing their confidence in a professional setting where you're talking with people who are very knowledgeable, but you also, when you do have that knowledge want to come across as you do?

Megan Monson: I think honestly, one of the best things that you can do is take on more opportunities and get exposure to more things. Because by being willing and eager to learn, you're increasing, not only your substantive knowledge, but your skill sets. And by virtue of doing that, that tends to decrease the instances where you have this imposter syndrome. It also shows those who are more senior than you, that you're capable and that you take initiative. And that will generally result in them giving you more responsibility. And so I think it's very cyclical that the more responsibility they give you, it shows that they trust you, they trust your abilities and are confident that you know what you're doing. And so I think that gives you more confidence in executing whatever the task is.

I also think that having a sense of confidence, even if you don't fully feel it and trying to project that is also helpful. So just in the way that you display yourself, whether it's verbally or with visual cues, but coming off with a confident presence, makes others take more command of what you're saying. And I think, again, that's something else that tends to negate the imposter syndrome, because if people are taking credence and thinking that what you're saying is accurate, you'll also feel that you know what you're doing because of how they're responding to it.

Rachel Dikovics: I totally agree. I think practice makes close to perfect, in a lot of ways. The more often you step out of your comfort zone and ask to take on more responsibility, the more you'll build your confidence and your ability to do those new things. And the more successes you have, the more you'll feel like people are right in placing their trust in you.

Nicole Fulfree: So I think one way to prevent imposter syndrome is to have an open line of communication with your colleagues. I found that it's really helpful for me to use one of my trusted peers as a sounding board, before raising an idea that I might be unsure of at first. And I think that flushing out those issues with someone that you trust is a good way to gain confidence in what you're saying and to talk through the issue. And then I think, once you have that confidence to raise a certain issue with a senior colleague or your boss, I think they'll see that you're adding value to the conversation and it'll help them understand your thought process and understand your questions and it will help them trust your work product even more.

Amanda Cipriano: So what do you think has to change, within a legal work environment at least, to overcome imposter syndrome? Or for women not to experience that in a legal setting?

Rachel Dikovics: So I think that some experience of imposter syndrome is natural and happens to everyone, including men, at various points in their career. But studies have shown that women, and especially women of color, experience this a lot more frequently than their male peers do. Interestingly, Harvard Business Review put out an article in February of 2021, that was titled [Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome](#). And the summary of the article stated among other things, "The answer to overcoming imposter syndrome is not to fix individuals, but to create an environment that fosters a number of different leadership styles and where diversity of racial, ethnic, and gender identities is viewed as just as professional as the current model." I think that that's a really interesting point and one that it would be great for us to talk about a little bit, which is do women experience imposter syndrome at a higher rate because our leadership styles and speaking styles and working styles can frequently be a little bit different than the traditional styles that are accepted by and among our male colleagues? I don't know if you guys have any reactions to that, but I thought it was an interesting point. I've stunned the room.

Nicole Fulfree: I almost spit out my water.

Megan Monson: So I do agree with you, Rachel. I think that, because women speaking styles and command of room tends to differ, there can be a perception that they are less confident and that they do experience more imposter syndrome than is actually the case. So I do think that's a really interesting observation. I think there's a couple of other things that we can all do to help other women to limit the imposter syndrome they experience. And one of the things is helping to raise up others that you work with and elevate their successes to others that are more senior in your organization. I think again, being able to showcase their accomplishments will help show them as respected in their practice group, as well as that they are doing a good job. So those are all things that tend to help build confidence.

Megan Monson: And also giving yourself and other more junior attorneys opportunities for taking on leadership roles and other scenarios where they can build confidence, such as working on CLEs, client alerts, other opportunities that allow them to get themselves out there as knowing what they're talking about in their particular practice area or becoming known internally and externally. I think again, any type of things that can help build confidence and reduce the situations where they're experiencing imposter syndrome. As Rachel said, having some level of imposter syndrome at varying levels of your career is normal. But I think if there's things that we can do to try to help mitigate and limit that and help promote one another, I think that can tend to go a long way in helping people overcome this, at least to an extent.

Nicole Fulfree: I agree with you, Megan. I think one thing about women, and I don't want to draw a stereotype, but I think that it is true that women generally tend to downplay their accomplishments more so than men do. I think maybe it's seen as more socially acceptable to be super humble about anything that you've accomplished. And I think that's a major negative thing for women. And I think that one easy way to overcome that is along the same lines as what you were saying, Megan, is to sing the praises of other women. If you know somebody that works with you or for you and has done an excellent memo, sing their praises, let everybody know that they did a really good job on the memo. And even if they want to say, "Oh, I found a really helpful article about it that helped me draft it." Say, no, you did a great job on that memo and tell other people for them to help promote them. And even if they're not comfortable to do it themselves, I think it's really important to have someone promoting them.

Megan Monson: I also think by having women in more senior positions in an organization, such as a law firm, and taking on leadership roles is another thing that can help more junior attorneys overcome imposter syndrome because now they have somebody that they can look up to that they can see and use as a role model that has achieved X status in their career. And also using that person as mentor potentially and learning from their experiences. One of the things we've talked about throughout this Real Talk session, and others, if you've joined in for prior episodes, is the benefit that you can get from learning from others' experiences. And so with anything else, knowing that others experience imposter syndrome, but also understanding how they've navigated through that and how they've overcome it, I think is another very powerful tool. So part of it is continuing those conversations and building those relationships so that you can learn from others who've come before you.

Rachel Dikovics: If I were there, I would say, "Like Megan said, X, Y, Z." Or, "Remember, Nicole said," whatever it was. And they found that using those phrases and really emphasizing what contributions the other women made to the conversation made people actually remember that the women were the ones who made those contributions. I know one of the things we talked about was we often see that our male colleagues, much of the time, are very comfortable detailing their accomplishments and taking credit for things, where it's very much due, but women are often less comfortable taking that credit. And so it can be really helpful for other women to give the credit so that if people are uncomfortable saying to the room, "I said, that that was my idea." Other people can remind them that that's the case. And I think that

over time, knowing you have the support of your colleagues, especially your female colleagues, will help reduce imposter syndrome because you know that you have their confidence as well.

Rachel Dikovics: Thanks everyone for joining us for this episode of the Women's Initiative Network Real Talk. Thanks to our host, Amanda, and thanks to Megan and Nicole for sharing their thoughts as well. Hopefully this discussion has left you feeling like less of an imposter and more like the empowered and confident and well trained person that you are. We hope that you'll continue to join us for future episodes as we continue the Real Talk.

Megan Monson: Thank you so much for joining us. We hope you'll join us for the real talk again next time.

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