

BIG Thoughts™ Research

Written by Directors. Not Algorithms.

Kick Imposter Syndrome out of the Boardroom



BIG™

BEST IN GOVERNANCE

Imposter Syndrome in the Boardroom

It's easy to assume that by the time someone reaches the boardroom, self-doubt has long disappeared. Directors are accomplished leaders, selected through rigorous nomination and appointment processes. Yet self-doubt often persists.

Even highly accomplished leaders quietly question whether they belong at the table. Despite their experience and achievements, some directors hesitate to speak, second-guess their perspectives, or worry they will be perceived as less capable than others assume.

This experience is widely known as **imposter syndrome**.

Imposter syndrome remains under-examined in governance contexts. Its presence in the boardroom matters, particularly because it can disproportionately affect individuals from historically underrepresented groups, including women, racialized professionals, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities.

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As organizations work to diversify boards, unaddressed imposter syndrome can become a barrier to participation in the boardroom.



WHAT IS IMPOSTER SYNDROME?

Imposter syndrome refers to the persistent inability to internalize one's accomplishments or believe one's success is deserved. Individuals experiencing it often attribute achievements to luck, timing, or external circumstances rather than their own competence, and may worry they will eventually be "found out" as inadequate despite clear evidence of their capability.

In governance settings, this can manifest as hesitation to ask questions, reluctance to challenge assumptions, or discomfort contributing to complex discussions.

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"I still have a little impostor syndrome, it never goes away. It's sort of like, 'you're actually listening to me?'"

~ Michelle Obama, Former First Lady of the United States

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¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lucianapaulise/2023/03/08/75-of-women-executives-experience-imposter-syndrome-in-the-workplace/>

IMPLICATIONS FOR BOARD DIVERSITY

Board diversity initiatives aim to broaden perspectives and strengthen decision-making. However, when individuals enter environments where they see few people who share their background or experiences, feelings of self-doubt may intensify.

Representation matters. When aspiring directors cannot easily envision themselves in governance roles, they may be less likely to pursue board opportunities. Similarly, once appointed, insufficient onboarding or limited efforts to intentionally include diverse perspectives can undermine confidence.

When people rarely see others who share their background at the board table, it becomes more difficult to envision themselves there.

Research consistently demonstrates that diverse boards strengthen organizational performance and decision-making. Achieving these benefits requires not only diverse appointments but also environments in which all directors feel empowered to contribute.

RECOGNIZING THE FORMS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Research by Dr. Valerie Young, internationally recognized expert, identifies five Competence Types of imposter syndrome²:



The Perfectionist: Defines competence by flawless execution; even a minor flaw feels like failure.



The Natural Genius: Measures competence by ease and speed; needing effort or practice signals inadequacy.



The Soloist: Defines competence by independence; needing help feels like failure.



The Expert: Measures competence by how much they know; any knowledge gap feels like fraudulence.



The Superhuman: Defines competence by excelling in many roles simultaneously; falling short in any role feels like failure.

² <https://impostorsyndrome.com/articles/5-types-of-impostor-syndrome/>

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*“Imposter syndrome is not just an “interesting” self-help topic. It is costly to individuals and organizations impacting productivity, retention, advancement, innovation, and health & wellness”
~ Dr. Valerie Young, Co-Founder, Imposter Syndrome Institute*

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Imposter Syndrome can affect even the most accomplished leaders. Recognizing the patterns is the first step to mitigate their impact.

WHAT INDIVIDUAL DIRECTORS CAN DO

Directors experiencing imposter syndrome can take practical steps to address it:

Acknowledge the experience. Self-doubt is common among high achievers. Recognizing the feeling helps prevent it from quietly shaping behaviour.

Reframe internal narratives and give yourself grace. Directors are appointed for their experience, judgment, and perspective. Reminding oneself of the expertise that led to the appointment can counter negative self-talk.

Seek perspective. Discussing concerns with trusted peers often reveals that others share similar experiences. Be brave. Candid conversations give others permission to do the same.

Participate actively. Board effectiveness depends on the contribution of every director. Asking questions and offering insights is your role as a director.

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*“When I first joined the Board, I often felt the need to qualify my questions or opinions by first stating my credentials. Once I recognized why I was doing it, I stopped.”
~ Anonymous, Board Chair*

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WHAT CAN BOARDS DO

Boards play an important role in creating environments where all directors can contribute confidently. Practical steps they can take:

Strengthen recruitment practices.

Expand searches beyond traditional networks to access a broader, more diverse pool. A structured board composition matrix ensures

recruitment targets strategic capability gaps.

Provide structured onboarding and early engagement.

Clear orientation, access to key information, and early engagement with peers help directors build confidence and contribute sooner.

Create intentional boardroom dynamics.

Board chairs set the tone. Effective chairs invite perspectives, manage dominant voices, and ensure discussion reflects the full range of director experience.

Use governance processes to reinforce inclusion.

Board evaluations, director education, and structured agendas can surface participation dynamics and ensure all directors have opportunities to contribute.

Address bias and assumptions directly.

Boards should openly acknowledge and address biases that may discourage participation or undermine confidence. Governance education, or discussing which types resonate around the table, can help surface these issues constructively.

TURNING INSIGHT INTO ACTION

Imposter syndrome does not have to limit board effectiveness. When boards intentionally empower all voices and embrace diverse perspectives, they strengthen decision-making and governance outcomes.

At Best in Governance (BIG), we help boards move from awareness to action. Through solutions including Modern Board Evaluations, Board Composition Matrices, Board Education Workshops, and Accountability Frameworks for onboarding and succession, we equip boards with the tools and insights needed to build confident, high-performing directors and an inclusive board culture.

The future of governance depends on boards that are inclusive, confident, and accountable.

Let's build boards ready for it.

Get in touch to learn more or visit www.bestingovernance.com