



# Skirting Leadership:

the unspoken reason so few  
women make it up the ladder!

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## Up close and personal

On paper, I have had an illustrious career to date. Starting out as a Court Reporter travelling through Europe, I then studied marketing and began my career in fast moving consumer goods. Advertising beckoned as it does for many marketing people and I ultimately became the first woman on the Board of George Patterson Advertising, then Australia's largest agency.

In thinking about my career, it seemed to me that I had never consciously made decisions about where I wanted to go next. I had no career plan. I was simply "plucked" out of where I was and given the next opportunity which I responded to, usually so grateful that someone thought I could do the job. It didn't occur to me that there were more options out there than those I had been offered. As a result, I wound up in a senior position I hadn't asked for and in a role I didn't feel qualified for. Uneasily, I sat on the Board as the first female director for 2 years before leaving to start my own business.

With wonderful 20/20 hindsight, I recognised I hadn't stepped up as a leader. I thought it was because I wasn't good enough, wasn't smart enough, didn't have what it took to be successful at that level. I now understand that I was experiencing something called the imposter syndrome.

The Imposter Syndrome is a totally distorted self-belief; one that limits our perceptions of who we are and what we are capable of. It impacts around 70% of individuals resulting in the feeling of not being good enough, dismissing strengths and attributing successes to good luck or someone else's mistakenly positive view of them. 33% of individuals experience the Imposter Syndrome at a chronic level, meaning it impacts them frequently and intensely.

The Syndrome impacts men and women equally. However, the consequences of feeling like an Imposter are more obvious for a woman than for a man. I know I'm not the only woman who has stepped away from a high flying corporate career because I didn't feel I measured up. I know that many women deny themselves opportunities by not recognising a list of role competencies is a wish list, not the basic requirement and failing to recognise their own unique combination of capabilities and experience.

Here's the rub. By denying our talents, qualities and successes, we are denying ourselves the career we might want, the contribution we could make, the fulfilling and meaningful career we might enjoy.

It's not just about us, though. We are denying the organisations we work for the opportunity to increase their broader impact, their turnover and profit. We are denying them the opportunity to create sustainable businesses with high levels of engagement. We are denying them the benefit of our ideas and our unique perspective. We are denying them the level of collaboration that drives innovation and increases wisdom. And more ...

The results are in: all these business priorities are recorded natural outcomes of a generalised female leadership style. Business performance, together with the fact that women constitute up to 56% of the talent pool<sup>1</sup> depending on the industry, means it makes sense for organisations to ensure their talented women are supported to step up to their leadership potential.

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<sup>1</sup> EOWA Women in the Workforce Trend Data 2011

# What's going on with women in leadership?

Many years ago, I was delivering a presentation skills training course to one of the Big 4 Banks. Before the programme began, a woman came up to me and started chatting over coffee. It turns out she was in my programme. However, her warm and open behaviour was non-existent; she was avoiding participation as far as she could. At lunch, I sat next to her and in the course of conversation, I asked what was going on for her in the programme. She explained she was contemplating moving jobs within the bank because she was about to get a promotion! I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly – moving because she was about to get promoted? Yes, she felt she was already at the limit of her capabilities and didn't want to expose herself to the possibility of being found out as not good enough for the jobs she already held. She had been moving jobs every 12–18 months for about 9 years!

With my wonderful hindsight, I realise now that this woman was experiencing the effects of the Imposter Syndrome. She felt she wasn't good enough and engaged in behaviours to minimise the likelihood of others figuring that out. She certainly failed to step up into the leadership potential others saw in her.

## **The unspoken challenge for women in leadership**

There's no denying that the corporate world represents an uneven playing field for women. The challenge is that women aren't taking all the opportunities they have right now. Creating more opportunities isn't necessarily going to solve the problem of too few women in senior leadership roles.

## Many women fail to step up

As women – in leadership roles or aspiring to leadership – we deny our leadership potential in four ways:

1. ***We step back.*** Because we don't have 10/10 competencies for a particular role, we think we're not perfect and that we won't measure up so we don't put ourselves forward. That doesn't stop the men!
2. ***We move up but don't step up.*** We may be identified as high potentials and be promoted – as I was at George Patts – however, we fail to deliver on their expectations because we don't believe we belong there to begin with.
3. ***We opt out.*** Many women start creating room in their lives for husbands and children before they're a reality. In the words of Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, many women leave before they leave. We don't take opportunities, we don't take on additional skills, we take our foot off the accelerator. Which makes it very hard for us to compete if and when we come back into the workplace
4. ***We cop out.*** To achieve our career objectives, we may compromise our femininity. We lose out because we become something we're not. The organisation loses out because the value that women bring lies in their natural style, not in adopting a male approach to leadership.

## Where are all the talented women going?

Sourcing data from EOWA, Women on Boards and ABS, it becomes clear that the pipeline is far from robust for women within organisations. 59% of graduates (average across all industries) are women. 53% of new recruits into organisations are women. 37% of first level managers are women. 26% of Senior Executives are women.

14% of Executive Committee members are women. And 8.7% of CEO's in ASX200 companies are women.



### Representation of Women

You could explain some of the severe drop-off as women leaving to start families. However, many women are choosing careers over families or delaying having their first child in order to progress further in their career and their mortgage. Some of the reduction in numbers of women could be attributed to women leaving to start their own small business. Women own and run around one-third of small businesses, (employing <20 people) of which there were approximately 1.23 million in 2001 (ABS). In addition, 80% of new businesses started every year are started by women. How many of those talented women could have been retained within the corporate environment if they had been better understood, supported and guided? This is a particularly important question when you consider that the cost of losing a talented employee is between 200% and 500% of their annual salary (recruiting, getting up to speed, loss of corporate knowledge from previous incumbent ...)

### **We play small!**

As a gender, we tend to play small. What a price we pay for that self-limitation though! We take smaller jobs; we play in smaller industries or soft industries; we accept promotions without pay increases (as I did); we minimise our achievements, sharing the glory with others which often diffuses the contribution we made to the outcome; we have small voices at the table, often remaining unheard; we can be quick to point out our faults during performance reviews believing the honesty stands us in good stead; we opt out of politics, thinking our work will be the way we are judged when often others aren't even aware of what we do; then we leave to set up small businesses, the vast majority of which remain small.

We play small in so many ways. And according to Marianne Williamson who wrote Nelson Mandela's inaugural speech, your playing small does not serve the world.

If the company you work for is typical, you will have access to programmes that support development of leadership capability. You and your colleagues may receive training on unconscious bias, emotional intelligence, career resilience, leadership skills and behaviours. However, this issue goes beyond unconscious bias, EQ, resilience and acquisition of skills. The Imposter Syndrome – that feeling of not being good enough – is a limiting belief about who we are and what we are capable of. It is not true in an objective sense, yet it is rooted deep within us to emerge unexpectedly at times, undermining our capability and confidence.

# The Imposter Syndrome distorts the way we perceive ourselves

The Imposter Syndrome is a deep seated belief that the person experiencing it – you or me – is not good enough and that the success we have achieved is due to factors other than our own talent, skills and experience. Resulting behaviour is designed to protect ourselves from discovery as the fake and fraud we believe we are. It is this behaviour that can sabotage opportunities to step up as a leader.

Depending on how old you are, you may have already figured out that, much as you would like to, you can't change other people. You can only change yourself – the way you interpret situations and the way you choose to respond. Without being able to guarantee the outcome, each time I have changed the way I approach or interact with a problem, it has positively impacted the behaviour of others and as a consequence, the problem itself.

When we change the way we think about ourselves, accept our talents and skills, understand and address our own sabotage patterns, we can change our experience of our journey to leadership, and just perhaps, change the environment and behaviours of others, making our journey easier. That's the potential domino effect. If and when they handle that totally distorted self-view, they can then show up more authentically, with personal power, incorporating the feminine values that make an impact on the performance of an organisation and ready to make their contribution.

# The Imposter Syndrome is a rigorously researched phenomenon

I didn't make up the Imposter Syndrome. I didn't find it in the pages of popular magazines. It is a rigorously researched phenomenon.

In 1978, Psychologists Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes identified the condition after a significant number of high achieving female academics studying for their Masters or PhD became stressed and convinced they would fail in their final exams.

Clance and Imes investigated this phenomenon and ultimately coined the term "Imposter Syndrome". The key characteristics were identified as:

- Feeling like an intellectual fake or fraud in the context of their current success
- Believing that they do not deserve their success and that others have been deceived into thinking otherwise
- Convinced that they are less intelligent and competent than appearances would suggest
- Believing that their success is due to luck, fate, charm or anything other than their own talent
- Over-emphasising their weaknesses or deficiencies and downplaying their strengths.

Subsequent research has confirmed that the syndrome impacts around 70% of the working population, with 33% of the population experiencing it at a chronic level: frequently and intently.

## **The possibility of feeling like an Imposter is created by nature and nurture**

The tendency towards feelings of Imposterhood™ is a matter of both nature and nurture. Science is now claiming that more than 50% of our personality factors are influenced by our genetics. Two of the Big 5 Personality Factors are associated with the Imposter Syndrome: low level of conscientiousness (order, delayed gratification) and a high level of neuroticism (taking things personally, emotional reactivity).

In relation to our upbringing, several key factors influence our tendency to experience the Imposter Syndrome: perfectionism and well intentioned criticism reinforce that feeling of not being good enough. Labels in families with more than one child serve to define what we're good at, particularly in comparison with our siblings: when we take those labels on they also limit the way we see ourselves.

## **Imposterhood™ is latent until triggered**

Nature and Nurture merely set up the potential to experience feelings of Imposterhood™. We remain stable through until something in our environment triggers the feeling of not being good enough. It could be an idle comment made by someone; or a comparison we make of ourselves (with the warts exaggerated) with the best behaviour someone else can put forward. Here are a few of the triggers we have encountered working with women in leadership:

- promotions (particularly unexpected & without experiencing solid steps leading to new role)
- highly competitive environment
- challenge and conflict in the workplace
- political work environment which creates high level uncertainty
- gender bias: stereotype threat, gender behaviour expectations.
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- lack of transparency
- being micro-managed
- speaking and not being heard
- change: direction, expectations, structure, power
- lack of clarity around goals and measures
- high risk situations such as status risk, financial risk or reputation risk

Uncertainty can trigger latent feelings associated with the Imposter Syndrome.

# Feeling like an imposter triggers the need for self-protection

At its core, the Imposter Syndrome is a severe case of not feeling good enough. When we experience feeling like an imposter, the last thing we want is for someone else to see that in us. Feelings of Imposterhood™ lead to fear of discovery, judgement, exposure and rejection. We distance ourselves from others and from situations to create a feeling of safety. But it's not just other people and situations we distance ourselves from; we become disconnected from ourselves. Our thoughts are disconnected from our feelings. We are no longer integrated. We are out of touch with who we are and what is really important to us. We feel out of control and vulnerable.

Over the past 24 months, I have conducted the Imposterhood™ questionnaire with thousands of emerging and existing female leaders. Drawing on the results, I have identified seven different coping behaviours we engage in to restore the illusion of control and safety.

In reviewing the behaviour types, you may recognise yourself, your colleagues, your family or friends.

**Withholder:** overtly refusing to play the game; to avoid judgement and rejection, this behaviour involves withholding ideas and even withholding ourselves. This may include not putting ourselves forward for career developing and leadership opportunities

**Chameleon:** is driven by the desire to be accepted and belong. This may mean dimming our own light so we doesn't outshine others. It could also involve taking on male values and behaviours in order to appear more qualified and acceptable for senior positions. This

negates the significant benefits of having women on the board and at senior executive levels.

**Defender:** everything is taken personally as an attack. The response is to defend either through return attack, or deflection. For women aspiring to leadership, this may take the form of not listening to feedback that could help position or qualify them to move up the ladder. Also, being defensive and prickly can make us hard to work with.

**Workaholic:** in the mistaken belief that the we are not as intelligent, qualified or capable as others, because we seems to work harder for the same result (perfection driver), the workaholic behaviour is about putting in long hours to ensure she won't get caught out, not knowing all there is to know. This behaviour has significant productivity implications. The perfection driver of this behaviour would also impact our capability to make decisions, wanting one more piece of information, one more opinion.

**Shrinking Violet:** is about safety lying in invisibility. If we aren't see, we can't be judged and rejected. In women aspiring to or occupying leadership roles, this behaviour is akin to living under the radar, hoping we won't get noticed, yet dreaming we will – a true double-bind. When people engage in this behaviour, the organisation has no access to their talents.

**Judging:** driven by perfection and criticism, this behaviour is about setting impossibly high standards and pointing out where others fall short. The judge is also highly self-critical. This behaviour can be quite covert. In women aspiring to leadership roles, this may take the form of “unintentionally” pulling others down in the race to leadership.

**Dare Devil:** aka Kamikaze. This behaviour is more common in males although it does appear in females as well. It is driven by the need to prove ourselves as worthy by being overtly successful. The challenge with this behaviour is the lack of assessment of risks and consequences. Dare Devil behaviour is often about achieving a goal and then moving directly onto the next goal without pause or celebration. They never get to experience satisfaction. The Dare Devil can be difficult to work with and may trample others in the rush to leadership

# The Imposter Syndrome exacts a high price for women aspiring to leadership

When we feel like imposters, our primary motivation becomes self-protection. We do everything we can to avoid discovery and to prove that we are worthy. We may become overachievers who do significantly more work to achieve the same outcome simply because we're afraid we're not as intelligent and have to work harder. We may become chameleons and do what we can to blend in – not standing out through achievement or underperformance.

We may become shrinking violets, doing all we can to stay under the radar. We may act like maniacs, feeling like imposters and yet driven to prove we are worthy so we climb the ladder, building our internal stress the whole time. There are so many ways we can play out the Imposter Syndrome and our response may be different according to the circumstances and triggers.

The net results, regardless of how we manifest the syndrome, can include:

- feeling caged-in and unfulfilled
- unable to make our unique contribution because we can't appreciate our own talents & success
- sabotaging our career opportunities because to go higher up the ladder brings increased expectations, greater pressure and risk
- feel threatened by others who are more qualified or successful than we are
- abandoning our dreams as being totally unattainable
- feeling as though we don't belong at the executive table
- denying ourselves the recognition and reward that would come with success if we valued it ourselves and insisted that others did too.

- giving away our power by being a victim to our own distorted self-image

These are personal costs.

My question is this: Is the pain enough yet? Because change is so challenging that we won't change anything until the pain of remaining the same has become too great.

We, as individuals aren't the only ones who miss out. Organisations miss out on our female style of leadership. They miss out on our collaborative and inclusive approach. They miss out on a higher level of innovation. They miss out on the higher level of engagement women invite; they lose the pass-on effect of that in terms of internal customer service, external customer service, higher customer loyalty and advocacy, increased turnover and bottom line.

Most of all, though, the organisation misses out on women leaders who make a positive impact on the turnover, Return on Equity, Return to Shareholders and other critical business measures.

Back to you. Think about the Imposter Syndrome and the way the totally distorted self-view limits our willingness to go for opportunities that may be sitting right in front of us. Ask yourself: *“Is this where I want to be in my career? Is this where I saw myself? Do I want to make my contribution at the leadership level? Do I want to put myself in the picture?”* Pay attention to your answer by listening to your feelings when you respond.

Then ask yourself “Am I willing to do what it takes?”

# If you currently sabotage your opportunities to step up, there is a solution

If your response to the question on the previous page was “*Yes, I’m willing to do what it takes. I really want to step up as a leader*”, then broadly, these five steps will get you started:

1. Become aware
2. Get to know and accept you
3. Use outcomes as litmus test
4. Find your Purpose and Vision
5. Anchor and celebrate success

## ***1. Become Aware***

Become aware of what you are doing to yourself. Awareness is the first stage of any change process. We need to understand what we are doing, when we are doing it and how it is showing up.

Go back to the descriptors of the seven coping behaviours. Which ones do you use and how do they play out at work?

A second level of awareness is to recognise the situations or triggers that awaken your feelings of being a fake or fraud. When does it occur? What circumstances surround you at that time?

Remember that uncertainty triggers the Imposter Syndrome. So, recognising what creates uncertainty for you is an important step in healing the distorted self-view you hold and the feelings of Imposterhood™.

Once you’ve broken the cycle of unconsciously reacting to the triggers, you’ve given yourself a chance to recognise them. On page 15, I provided a list of thought starters. Which ones apply to you? Or

have you recognised other triggers from thinking about times when you have felt uncomfortable or caught out?

The challenge is to see them ahead of time and to avoid them if at all possible. If it's not possible to avoid them, perhaps they can be neutralised. One solution is to find a great coach or mentor who can help you develop appropriate strategies and multiple perspectives which lead to wisdom. In other words, to give you tools to make better choices.

A third level of awareness consists of developing an understanding of who you are.

## ***2. Get to know and Accept YOU***

For you to reduce stress and experience fulfillment at work, you need to acknowledge that you have the qualities, skills and talents to make a contribution. Many of us have been brought up to believe that it is immodest to say that we're good at something. We feel more comfortable denying those qualities. Yet we all have talents and qualities that are unique to us in their contribution. There is no-one else like you. It is equally true that despite our wishes, we can't be great at everything. Far better to focus on what you do really well and let someone else whose talents operate in that direction to handle the areas you aren't strong in.

If you feel you undervalue yourself, as many of us do, find someone you would normally trust implicitly and ask him or her to help you identify your talents, strengths and successes. They will see you better than you see yourself.

## ***3. Use Outcomes as Feedback***

There are several ways to become increasingly aware of who we are and what is important to us. One is to ask someone you truly trust to

help you identify your qualities, strengths and successes. Another is to use situations to identify what you believe and how you perceive the world around you.

Start by examining the outcomes or results you achieve in any given situation. Ask yourself “Is this the outcome I wanted to achieve?” If your answer is ‘yes’, that is wonderful. If not, examine the behaviours that led to that particular outcome. What did the other person / people do? What did you do? The next step is to ask yourself what were you thinking or believing that your behaviour seemed like the best way to go. You can then examine your beliefs and perspectives to determine whether they serve you or not. Change your beliefs and perspectives, your behaviour changes and so do the results.

#### ***4. Find your Purpose and Vision***

What do you want to achieve and why? The why is so important as it provides you with motivation and energy to overcome any challenges that may come up on your journey. Your Vision gives you something to aim for and is the practical application of your Purpose – what does your Purpose look like in terms of a large goal and what does it look like on an everyday basis.

When we’re in the grip of the Imposter Syndrome, we are in an emotionally reactive space and we may feel as though we’re in survival mode, particularly if the feeling continues over a period of time. From this perspective, it can be challenging to envision a bright future. We may feel that we have lost touch with our dreams or that we had no right to dream them.

Here are some questions that may help you define what you really want.

- Do I want to be successful?
- If so, what does success mean to me? Is it about position, status, money, lifestyle, freedom, contribution or some other measure?
- How important is being successful to me? Is it more important than other things I am putting energy and resources into in my life? If I only had one month to live, what would I spend my time doing? What am I willing to give up in order to be successful?
- What will success help me achieve?
- what needs to be around me (in my work environment) for me to be successful? What support facilities need to be there? What conditions?
- If I imagine my life in 5 years time, what would I like it to look like?

### ***5. Anchor and celebrate success***

One of the challenges we experience when are influenced by the imposter syndrome is that we dismiss our talents and our successes. Sometimes, we can't even see them. Other times, we don't recognise their value because our perspective is that we are not good enough. Following on from asking a trusted colleague, friend, partner to help you identify your strengths and successes, you need to anchor and celebrate them to mark them in your conscious and unconscious. Claim them – they are yours. Celebrate them so you can internalise that success and build on it with future endeavours.

# With the Imposter Syndrome handled the path to leadership can unfold

When we stop denying the talents, skills, qualities and accomplishments that represent truthfully where we are now, we can see the next level of our own amazing potential as it is revealed to us.

If stepping into leadership is what you really want and yet you feel held back in some way, I really encourage you to address this issue.

Business needs talented female leaders whose feminine values encourage collaboration, great team work, engagement and contribution. Women in Leadership see the organisation in its broader context – as part of the community from which it draws its people, its resources and where it makes its money. Female leaders recognise the opportunity to contribute beyond putting money into the pockets of shareholders. Female leaders tend to assess their decisions from this broader perspective. This is one of the keys to sustainable business and higher returns.

Business needs you. If you want to step into leadership in the corporate arena, you need to recognise that you are worthy, you do have something major to contribute, your talents, skills and experiences are unique to you and are valuable. Allow yourself to be guided by your values to develop an internal compass that will support you in all your decision-making. Ask for support and be willing to support other women in their journey to leadership. The more we drop the masks that keep us separate, the more you'll see that underneath it all, we're really similar. Plus, they'll be great company on the journey.

Then use your story to inspire other women.

First though, you need to dismantle the roadblock: the Imposter Syndrome. It's a protective mechanism you no longer need. And it stands in the way of you really stepping into leadership. Peel back the layers and see who you really are! It will be a fascinating journey and an exciting outcome.

Please let me know if I can help you along the way.

# About the Author



Suzanne Mercier, CEO of Liberate Leadership, is a highly experienced strategist, leadership advocate and expert in the area of human potential. With her focus is on removing the barriers to performance for talented Leaders and Managers within organisations, she has been improving business results for more than 25 years.

As the first female Board Director of George Patterson Advertising and a strategy planner for the agency, Suzanne worked to create maximum customer engagement for leading brands in banking, food, cosmetics, animal products, beverages, fine china and crystal.

In her high level marketing roles with Coca Cola Amatil and Schwarzkopf, Suzanne was responsible for the launch of several well-known fast moving consumer goods brands that remain on the shelves today.

For 20 years, Suzanne has run her own business and for the past 15 years, has focussed on speaking, training, coaching and facilitative consulting to create sustainable and profitable businesses. Her Clients come from a wide variety of industries including shopping centre management, financial services, technology, heavy equipment, health, fitness, cosmetics, commercial real estate, publishing and industry funds.

Suzanne develops and delivers transformational keynotes, activities-based workshops, facilitative consulting and Executive Coaching designed to identify and remove the barriers at all levels, to liberate leadership, improve management capability, lift sales results and identify potential to enhance business performance. She is a thought provoking speaker and a published author.