



**School for CEOs**  
the alchemy of leadership

# Overcoming Impostor Feeling

How senior executives manage  
their insecurities



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# Overcoming Impostor Feeling

## How senior executives manage their insecurities

### Foreword

Since 2012 School for CEOs has been running programmes for senior business leaders from a wide range of sectors and industries. Despite their obvious success, a recurring theme raised by both delegates and speakers alike is the sense of feeling like an impostor; of feeling they are in a role they do not deserve and a fear of being 'found out'. Coupled with feelings of self-doubt and being out of their depth, the delegates were reporting feelings of what is more commonly described as Impostor Feeling ("IF").

Research on Impostor Feeling has evolved since the pivotal work of psychologists Clance and Imes in 1978. They defined the psychological construct that inhibits individuals from reaching their full potential and consequently hindering organisations' progress. If leaders are grappling with feelings of inadequacy, what could this mean for overall business performance?

It is important to acknowledge that Impostor Feeling is subjective. It is an unfounded perception of an individual's own intellectual inadequacy.

Given the weight of leadership, we were curious to understand Impostor Feeling more. How prevalent is it in both men and women in senior positions? How does it impact their performance and their leadership? And, most importantly, how could they develop coping strategies to deal with it?

Partnering with the Department of Psychology at Heriot Watt University, who share the School for CEOs' interest in this subject, we have undertaken some research to answer these questions, and to share our findings both quantitatively and qualitatively.

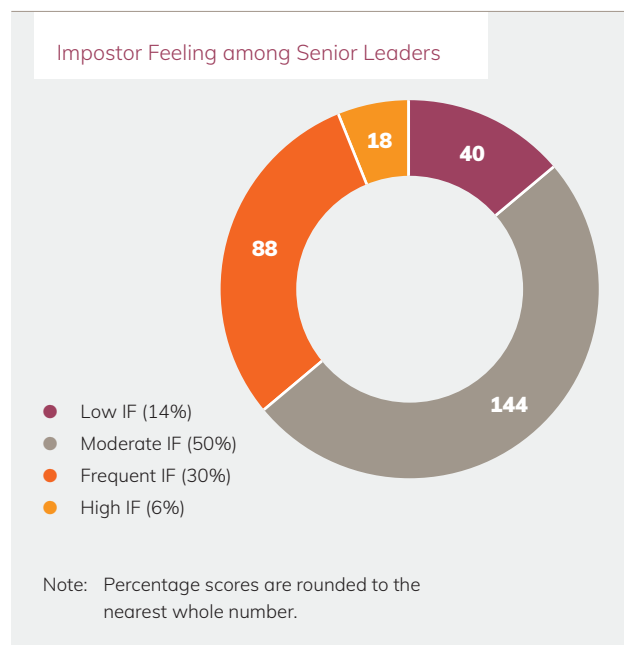
We are very grateful to all our participants for their time and input. The research has generated a great deal of interest and we are delighted to share the outcomes. Our collaborators from Heriot Watt University have also used the findings to prepare an article that will be shared with the scientific community as well as a larger audience.



# Executive Summary

We invited business leaders to answer a short survey, which determined whether they experienced lower or higher levels of Impostor Feeling. Following this, we interviewed a select sample of contributors to deepen our understanding of the impact of IF on leaders and to identify positive coping strategies.

The survey revealed that overall, over a third of contributors are regularly subject to IF in the workplace.

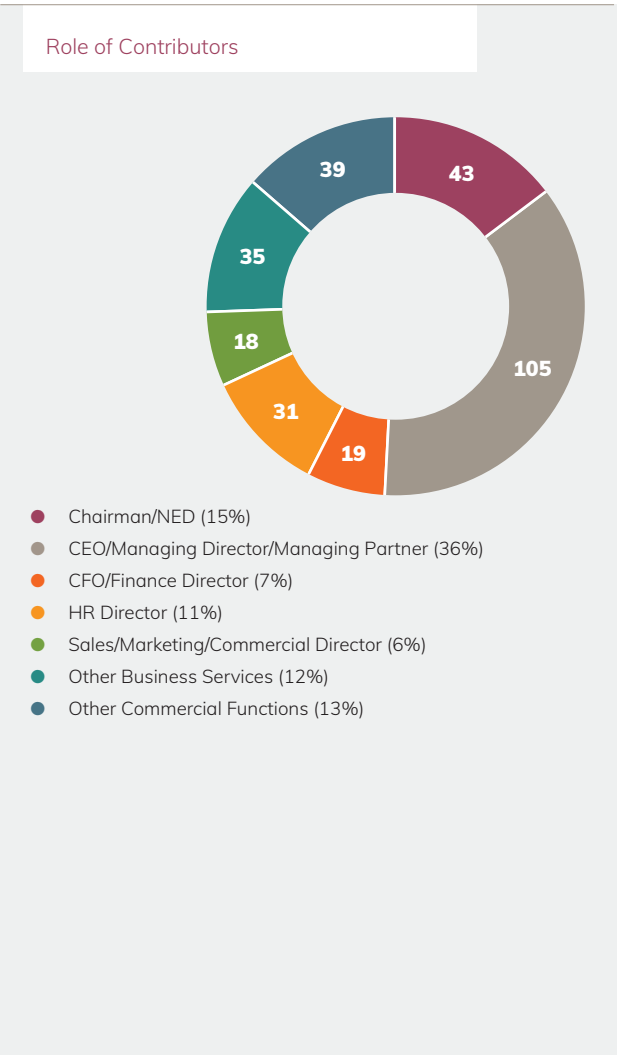


- Both survey data and interviews point to a connection between age/experience and Impostor Feeling. In particular, those who experienced intense stretch and challenge early in their career, developed self-confidence and personal resilience that enabled them to maintain a broader perspective as their careers developed. They normalised failure and reframed it as a learning opportunity, rather than a career-damaging event.
- Impostor Feeling is directly linked to confidence and authenticity. Both male and female contributors who experience high levels of IF have lower self-confidence and find it difficult to truly be themselves in the workplace. Contributors who have lower levels of IF have high self-confidence and consider themselves authentic leaders.
- Authenticity impacts relationships in the workplace. Those who identify with Impostor Feeling experience intense pressure to perform and lead in a team-based environment. By comparison those with lower IF stress the importance in recruiting others who are better than them, in order to drive the overall success of the team.
- More of our female contributors feel like impostors than our male contributors (54% of women scored frequent or high versus 24% of men). In subsequent in depth interviews, female contributors with High IF referred to gender as a contributing factor which may allude to an unconscious bias around gender roles in leadership.
- **Leaders will always be under extreme scrutiny and this will only increase with the evolution of technology and digital. Our conclusions from this research are that leaders must learn to accept who they are and be resourceful in order to be their best selves; they must start to positively reframe how they perceive others and different experiences, remembering that their team want and need them to succeed and that setbacks often provide the best learning opportunities. Finally, leaders can help reduce the feelings of isolation and learn to become more authentic through the nurturing of strong networks, founded on trust.**

# Contributors

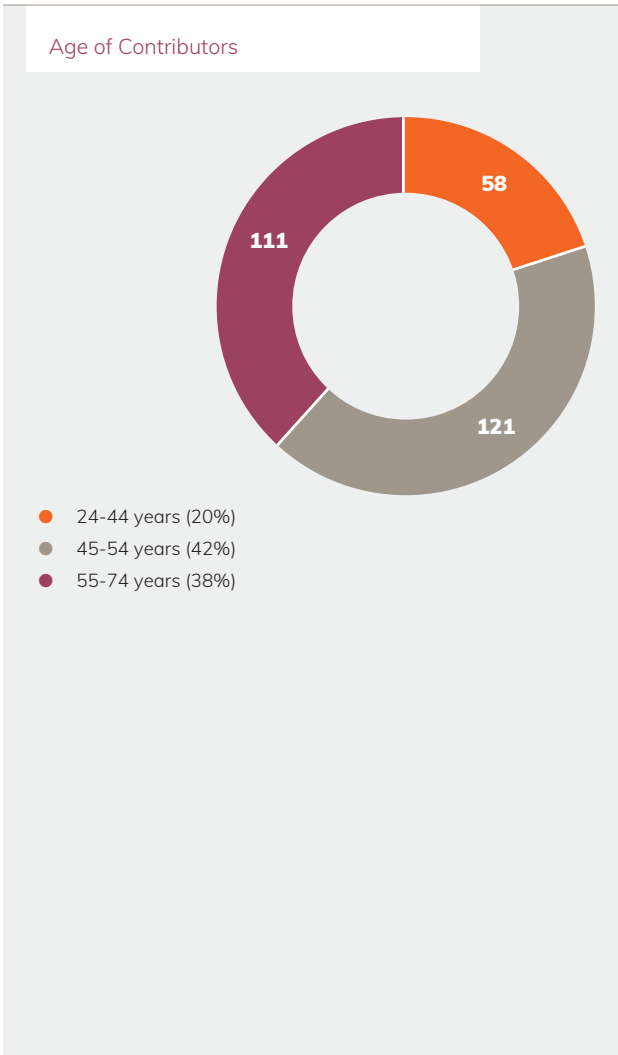
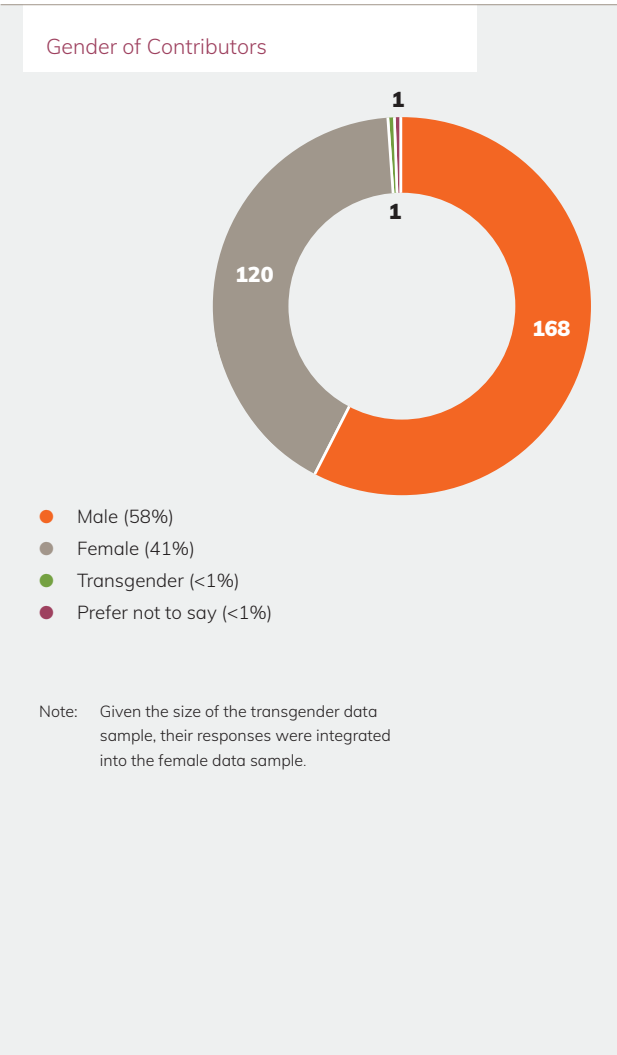
We surveyed just under 300 senior executives from a broad range of organisations. We used the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale to determine whether or not they have IF characteristics and subsequently invited an equal number of men and women at each end of the scale to participate in in depth interviews in order to better understand their experiences.

Contributors represented a wide range of senior leadership roles:



The gender split of our contributors is biased in favour of men and the age profile was mixed.

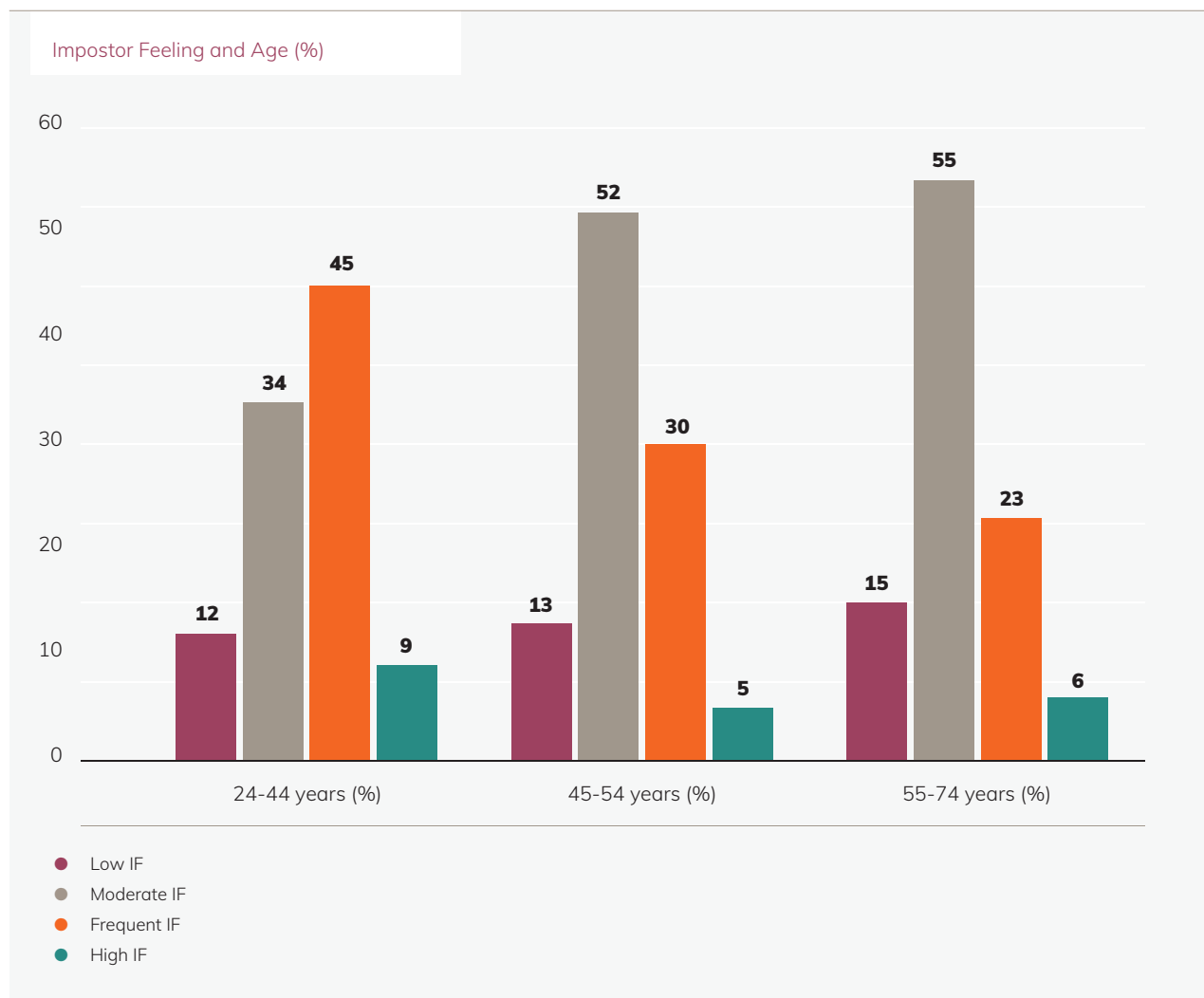
The breakdown is as follows:



## Headline Statistics

Analysis revealed the following headline findings:

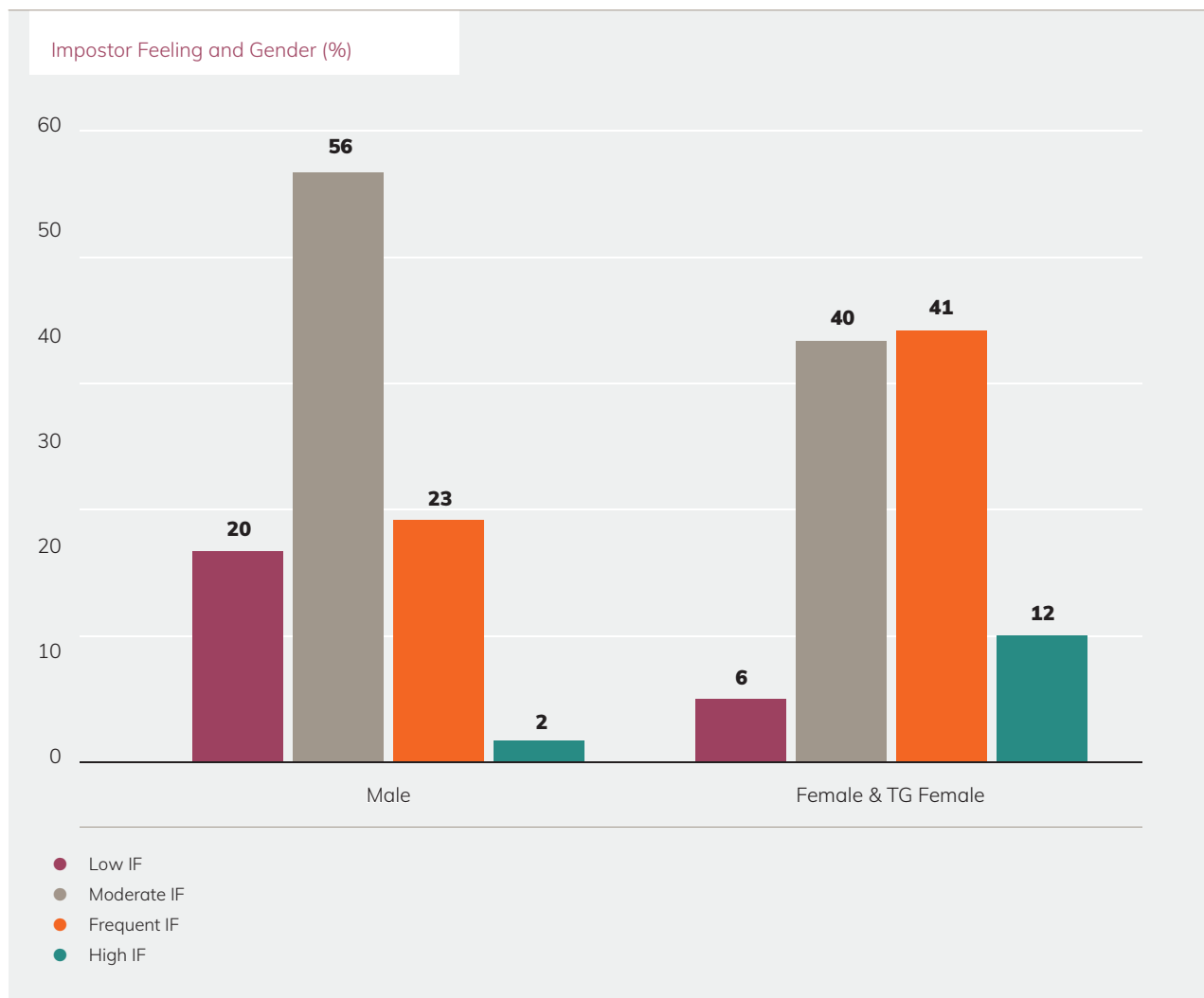
Experience of Impostor  
Feeling diminished with age:





Women expressed slightly higher experiences of Impostor Feeling compared to male respondents:

Finally, a pattern emerged between levels of Impostor Feeling and the number of employees that participants were supervising – experience of IF diminished as number of employees increased.



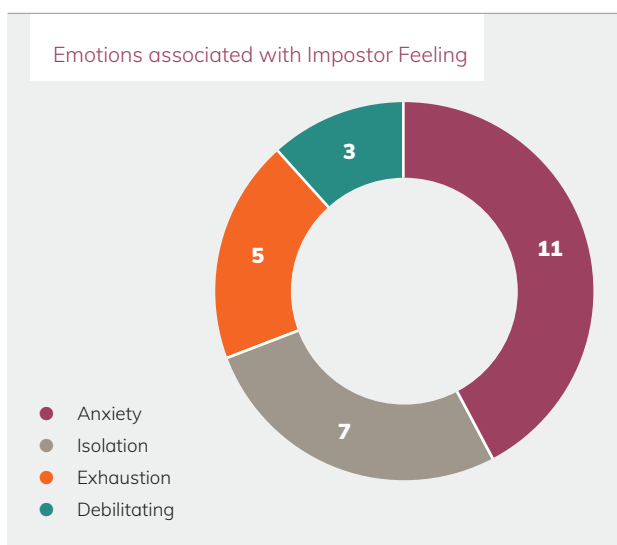
# Understanding Impostor Feeling

Semi-structured interviews with 20 executives helped us deepen our understanding of how our male and female contributors were, or were not, affected by Impostor Feeling. The interviews were recorded then analysed to draw out themes and identify coping strategies and ways to develop greater resilience.

## What is it like?

For those who experience Impostor Feeling, participants described various emotional associations, thoughts, actions and physical sensations related to it.

The charts below reflect the number of times a particular theme was raised.

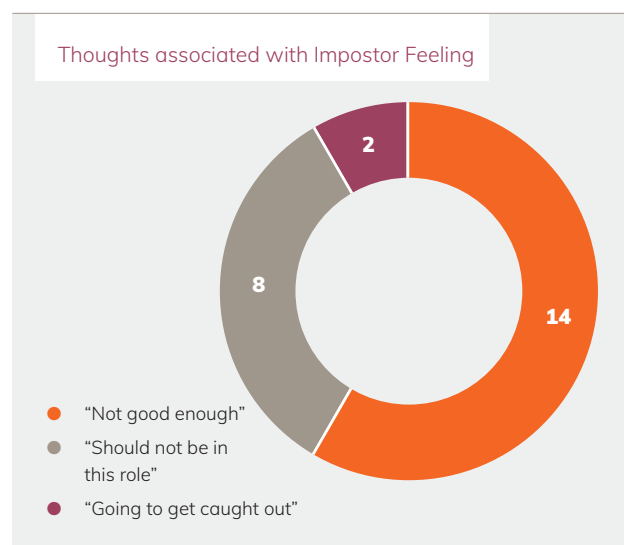


Feelings of anxiety, isolation and exhaustion were often quoted while thoughts of not feeling good enough or being under-appreciated were identified consistently by contributors.

*"Impostor Feeling is that idea of - I'm not wanted here or I'm not welcome here... I'm not valued here."*

*"It is the feeling that I'm going to get caught out at some point."*

*"It's a feeling of - I can't quite believe that I'm here... or that I'm doing that... that I'm getting away with it... they don't really know that I'm not that good."*

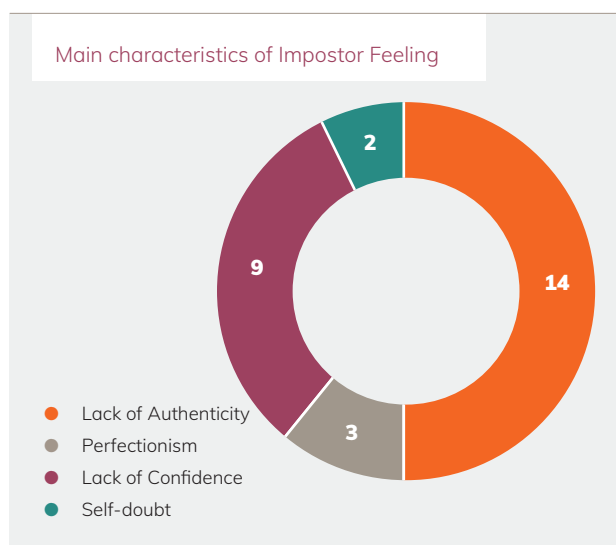


*"I would be staying up all night to do these things to prove that I was good enough to other people."*

IF also had a very physical impact on some participants, ranging from crying or finding it hard to sleep to being highly distracted by physiological effects.

*"It is quite a physical thing... so it does come out as struggling to speak or I can feel tears in my eyes."*

*"I felt a big black hole in my tummy that was getting bigger and engulfing me."*



Many people experience Impostor Feeling at some point in their lives, either professionally or personally. In a professional context, contributors often recalled experiencing IF when presenting in front of colleagues or when chairing meetings.

*"It's most typically in formal settings with people who are more senior than me."*

Impostors fear appearing to be imperfect and therefore there is a tendency towards a negative form of perfectionism – in particular, people are excessively concerned about making mistakes. This can lead to individuals putting on an act, which undermines their authenticity as leaders.

*"I can have a very good guise of seeming highly functional... it builds up as lots of acting I have to do."*

*"I think there is an aspect of putting on a mask at work."*

## Understanding Impostor Feeling (continued)

### What are the consequences of Impostor Feeling?

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A number of consequences have been identified for those impacted by Impostor Feeling, most of which have a negative bias. Behaviours such as over-working, procrastination and emotional exhaustion have long-since been associated with IF and our respondents were no different.

Interviewees talked about feeling incapable of speaking up in front of others or expressing their opinions on subjects. Others talked about the need to work harder than others in their drive to perform well; the tendency to procrastinate about decisions and other issues and of feeling burnt out and emotionally exhausted.

*“From a professional perspective I find it quite difficult to say out loud what my opinion is... I’m better just not to speak.”*

*“I think maybe it’s affected me in that it keeps you pushing and striving to do the best that you can... if you don’t do that, then you are going to get found out or you’re going to make a mistake.”*

*“I think it has definitely affected my decision-making capability – actually, both decision-making and delegation. People were wondering why I was asking for permission because they explicitly expected and gave me the trust anyway.”*

*“Six months after I left, I was diagnosed with clinical burnout syndrome.”*

There is also a strong link between Impostor Feeling and loneliness, specifically when transitioning into a more senior role in an organisation where, by dint of the role, you become more distanced to many colleagues in that organisation.

*“So... I guess that leaves you feeling a bit lonely actually.”*

*“Owning and running a business is a very lonely place to be.”*

IF also had an impact on leadership. Those who experienced IF questioned their capacity and capability to lead, particularly when it came to expressing their own opinions.

*“The main way that it affects my leadership is cross-organisational... that feeling I get actually prevents me from saying what I really think a lot of the time.”*

Leaders also felt personally responsible for the performance of their employees and considered themselves to be bad leaders when colleagues under-performed.

*“I think sometimes I’ve not had the confidence to deal with situations that I should have dealt with because I start to think it is my fault not theirs.”*

## What are the characteristics of those who have low experience of Impostor Feeling?

A recurring theme amongst those who experience high levels of Impostor Feeling is fear of failure. This manifests itself in increased drive but can also cause people to put things off, avoid new challenges and be reluctant to ask for feedback. On the upside, some leaders experience a feeling of modesty and humility about their achievements which they viewed as a positive aspect of IF.

*“I think what it has given me is a great sense of humility.”*

*“I think it drives me to be diligent. It drives me to be precise. It drives me to really try hard, to go the extra mile because I’m fearful of failure.”*

*“I have a massive fear of failure. I’m right up there in the fear of failure category.”*

*“100% afraid of failure. It is my biggest challenge in my career.”*

IF can also impact on individuals’ personal lives. Some participants referenced it having a negative impact on their physical fitness e.g. gaining weight, not exercising or eating unhealthily, while also feeling the need to over-compensate for the long weekends taken up by working rather than socialising with friends or family.

Participants who experienced Low IF talked about confidence and authenticity as being key personal attributes – of not being afraid to show off their true self at work. They attributed this to having been encouraged to be confident when growing up, by their family or while at school. They also referenced their experience as being a key factor in a professional context, confirming to a point that younger participants expressed higher levels of IF than older participants.

*“I think innately I’m a fairly confident individual. I feel that I was encouraged to be confident and to have a sense of self-worth.”*

*“I would attribute that to my age and my experience and that I am in my second CEO role. I think some of it comes from being well-established at this level of seniority.”*

## Understanding Impostor Feeling (continued)

### What do those with low experience of Impostor Feeling attribute success to?

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The key factors leading to a successful career for those who experienced Low IF included both personal traits as well as professional factors. Most frequently, participants talked about determination and hard work, risk-taking (being capable to adopt new challenges and putting themselves 'out there') being resilient, passionate and confident.

*"I think not being afraid to go for opportunities, even if they don't look like I have the attributes to be able to do it."*

*"The glib answer is hard work and luck but it's probably mostly hard work... it breaks down into knowing what you're good at and knowing what you're not good at."*

When exploring factors affecting performance, participants again referenced both individual factors, such as conscientiousness, resilience, ambition and passion. They also highlighted organisational factors, such as their teams, being supportive of colleagues, sharing responsibility for performance with their teams and creating a positive culture, founded on trust, respect and empowerment.

*"Three things: a good memory; an ability to distinguish what is important from what is less important and to focus on the important stuff and preparedness to work hard."*

*"It's about how you deal with people, how you are with people, how you lead people, how you enthuse people. You need really good people around you that can complement your skills. Bringing people along on the journey, motivating people in the right way is absolutely key."*

*"Flexibility and being firm, but fair."*

*"When you sit around the board table with myself and my management team you wouldn't know who is leading the business in many respects, because it's a very open, it's a very fair debate. Everybody has a voice and I think, for me, it's just staying grounded, that you know you are all equal in the business."*

*"I think the number one is actually humility... the most effective leaders don't shout from the rooftops. They also have a will to win - they are competitive. People have got values of integrity, honesty and they are also competitive so that means they will move mountains. I think the combination of that is what I aim for."*

Among the organisational factors were aspects such as creating a high performing and functional team as well as luck. Participants with Low IF were happy to have good people around them or hire people who were better than them.

*"It's making sure you have a good team around you. I think teamwork is absolutely critical."*

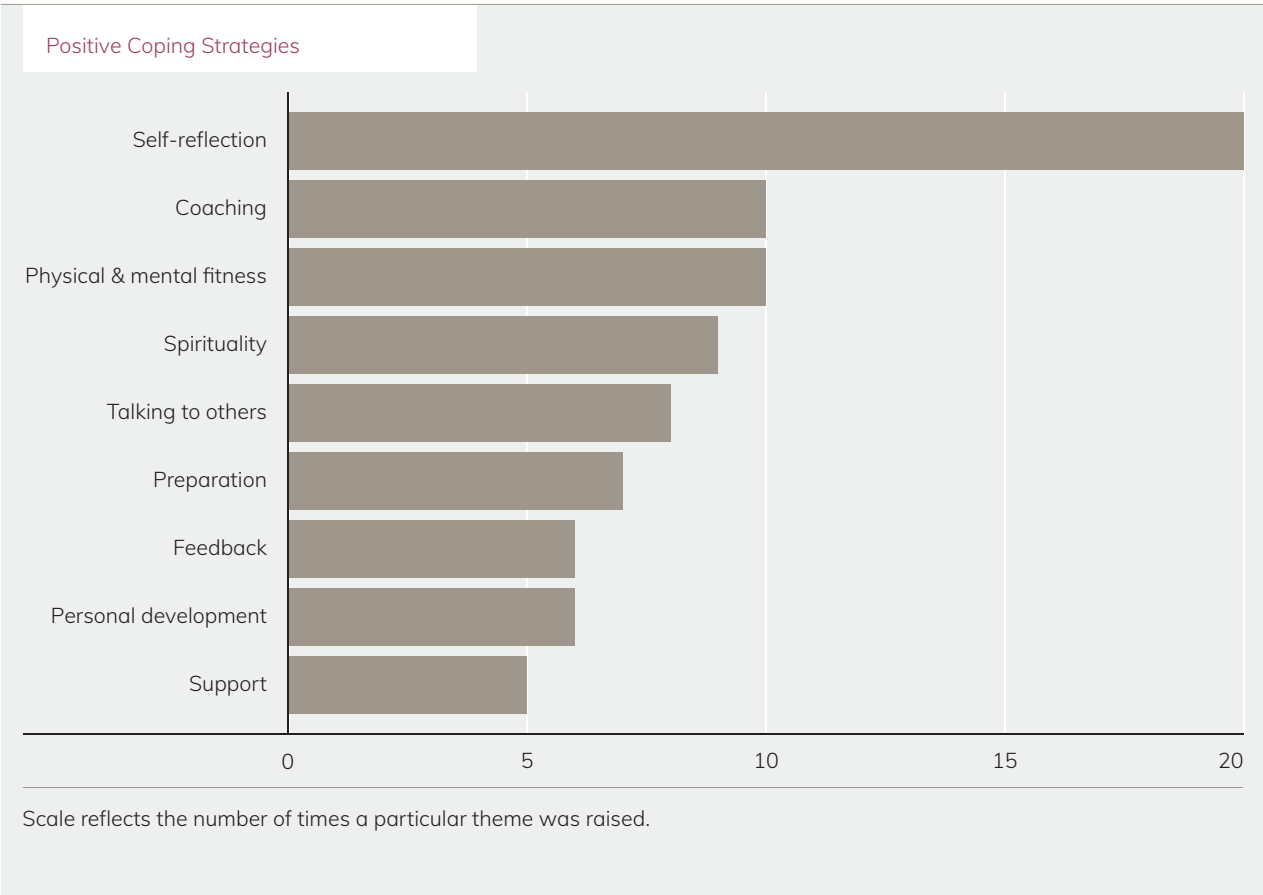
*"Luck is another, being in the right place at the right time. I was lucky enough to be placed on some very exciting assignments that transformed industries."*

## How do those who frequently experience Impostor Feeling cope with it?

A number of different coping mechanisms were employed by those who experience IF. These included avoidance and distraction as well as getting upset or suppression of the feelings, although the latter approaches were not efficient or effective. Instead, using adaptive coping strategies such as emotional or active support

were more effective in reducing emotional exhaustion (which itself could have contributed to greater experiences of IF).

The graph below indicates the number of times each a positive coping strategy was referenced by participants in the High IF interview process.



Understanding Impostor Feeling  
(continued)

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Strategies such as self-reflection and self-awareness; maintaining physical and mental fitness by exercise and good nutrition; as well as seeking active emotional support such as coaching or talking to their network(s) and eliciting feedback were all deemed helpful.

*“When they were at their worst, I would literally try and hide away, or I didn’t want to go into work.”*

*“I’ve concentrated a lot of energy in fitness; physical fitness and mental fitness and nutrition and have found those things to be very helpful.”*

*“I think if you feel it’s holding you back and you’re not going to fulfil your potential then talk to people and you’ll suddenly realise you’re not alone. Sharing your feelings, sharing your thoughts with other people and recognising that you’re not alone would be the best way of dealing with it.”*



## What resilience mechanisms and resources do people call on to cope with Impostor Feeling?

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### High IF

A number of different resources were mentioned, ranging from focusing on personal development through learning and reading to seeking active support from their team, mentors or leaders as well as their family. Some engaged in coaching and counselling sessions while others adopted self-reflection and self-awareness practices. Finally, taking time off to re-energise was also cited as a positive thing to do.

*"I read a lot of Harvard Business Review and I listen to podcasts."*

*"I just prepare, and I ask questions. I have never been afraid to ask a stupid question. I think the preparation, learning... not being afraid to look stupid. I don't believe there are stupid questions – so often it is the obvious question that nobody asks but when they do, it is 'we hadn't thought of that'."*

*"I usually get to a point where I'm exhausted, and I stop. I might just take a couple of days off."*

### Low IF

The importance of resilience or bouncebackability has been identified as a trait used by leaders who have low experience of Impostor Feeling. They see failures as temporary setbacks and are able to maintain a positive attitude and see a crisis as an opportunity rather than a problem. Not being afraid of failure and instead re-framing failure as a learning opportunity was frequently referenced – as opposed to those who experience frequent IF for whom fear of failure is constant and all-consuming at times.

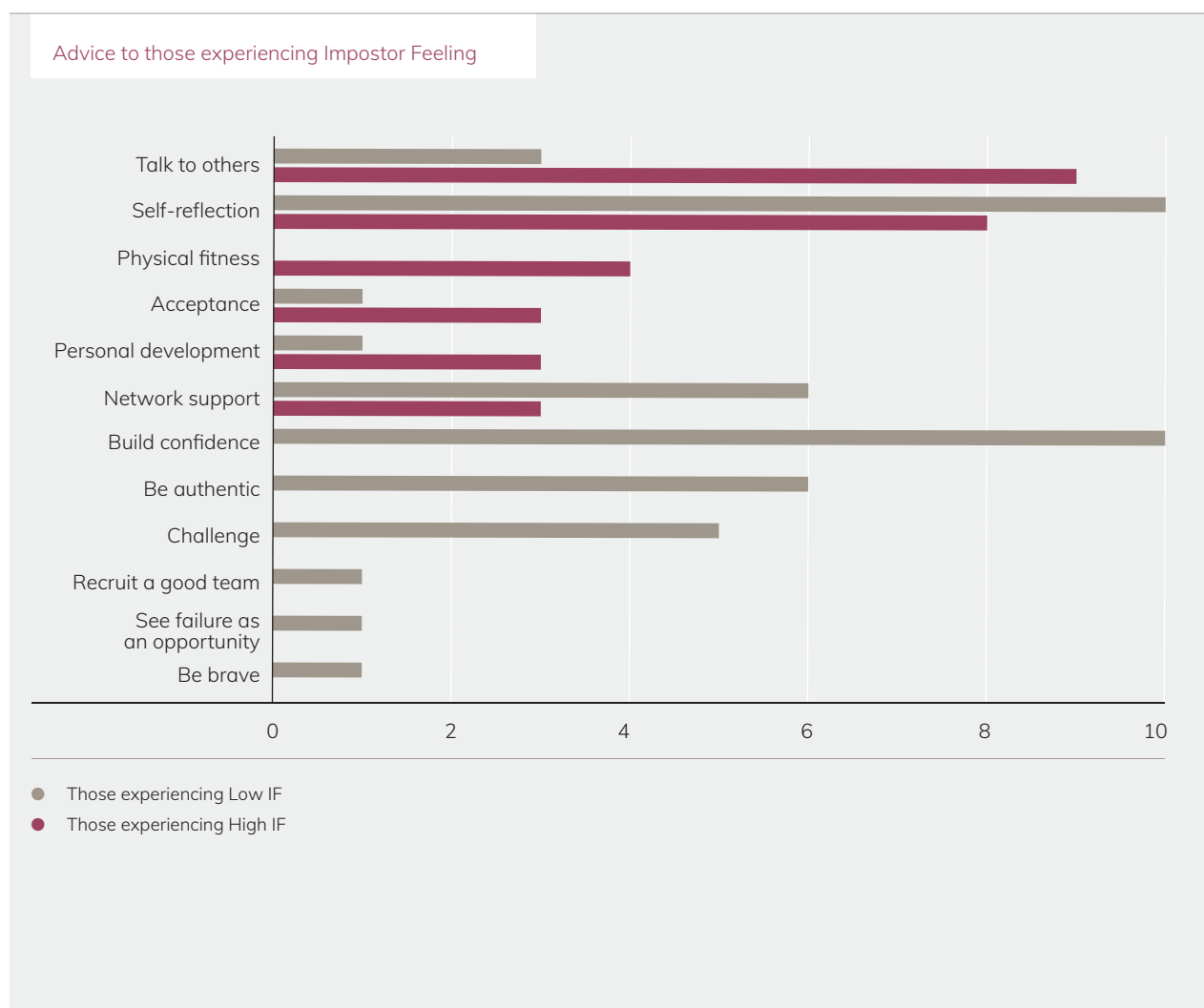
*"You learn some of your best lessons from mistakes. I think to be afraid of failing means that you won't take some of the risks and some of the chances that then make you successful."*

*"I don't think anybody likes to fail but I'm not afraid of failing because it's part of learning. Getting things wrong teaches you to do things better in the future. I'm not frightened of that."*

## Understanding Impostor Feeling (continued)

### What advice can be offered to those who experience Impostor Feeling?

There was some commonality in advice offered to those experiencing Impostor Feeling from those who have high and low experiences of IF and there were also aspects where advice differed:



### High IF

Participants suggested a number of different ways to help deal with Impostor Feeling such as seeking active support by talking to others and sharing their experiences, thoughts and feelings with them. They also suggested accepting that they have feelings of IF while others proposed further self-reflection and self-development.

*“Find somebody that you feel able to talk to about it. Just to say ‘Actually, I’m not sure how to cope with this.’ If you have got somebody that you can open up to they can give you both input and advice, but actually probably largely confidence and reassurance – that’s a very helpful thing.”*

*“Find someone you trust that you can talk to about it. That’s probably the first thing.”*

*“Accept it; recognise it and don’t try to fight it.”*

*“It is understanding yourself and really getting to understand you as a person – rather than just focusing in on all the things that people don’t rate about you... you will build a picture of self-doubt and you actually forget any of the positives.”*

*“Read and reflect, I think those two things go together anyway. You can’t address it if you keep just burying things or pushing them to the back of your mind.”*

### Low IF

Those experiencing Impostor Feeling less often suggested that building a strong support network to share experiences, thoughts and feelings would be of real benefit to people who experienced High IF.

*“Don’t be afraid to talk to someone more senior or experienced about it. Find a coach or a mentor or someone that you can talk to on a regular basis about your career and how you are feeling and have a creative toolkit – I think you will absolutely fly.”*

*“I’d say be brave. Don’t be frightened to challenge and don’t be frightened to fail. I think especially as a woman it’s really important.”*

## Concluding remarks

Some of our findings confirmed what we already knew or at least suspected. However, the results also raised a number of questions and theories that we now present.

### Fatalism

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The relationship between Impostor Feeling and age suggest that leaders might feel less like an impostor as they grow older. Our in-depth interviews revealed that when an individual experiences significant or testing challenges early in their career, it enables them to build confidence and maintain a sense of perspective in subsequent years, so that when things perhaps don't go to plan, they aren't as consumed by it.

In contrast, individuals with High IF carry a sense of fatalism, which surfaced when asked if they were afraid of failure. They attributed huge weight to the word 'failure' – almost considering failure in terms of their career or existence. On the other hand, 'failure' was normalised among those with Low IF. There was an acceptance that failure is inevitable sometimes and that it creates an opportunity to learn and grow and achieve greater success in the future.

This sense of perspective and ability to see the bigger picture differentiates the two populations.

### Authenticity and Trust

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The struggle to be truly authentic was frequently raised by both men and women who experience Impostor Feeling, to the extent that they described putting on a performance or adopting a persona when at work, expending significant amounts of energy while doing so. Those with Low IF feel more self-confident and this confidence allows them to be authentic and transparent in the workplace.

It is easier to be authentic around those who you trust. Those with Impostor Feeling struggle to internalise positive feedback from colleagues – they don't believe them.

## The Team and Peer Group

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The ability to be authentic carries into leaders' relationships with their teams and peers. The team setting is more intimidating for impostors as they feel intense pressure to perform and to lead. By comparison, scorers on the lower end of IF stressed the importance of recruiting people into their team who are 'better' than they are. This is driven by self-confidence. We would also propose that the leaders with lower IF have more clarity around their purpose and personal contribution to the business.

Additionally, we found that leaders responsible for larger numbers of employees feel less like impostors than those who are responsible for smaller numbers. We can assume that those who are responsible for larger numbers are not directly managing all of those employees and there will be a diffusion of responsibility through layers of management in the organisation. Contributors who are responsible for smaller numbers may belong to smaller organisations and may have less diffusion of responsibility, meaning that they could be the sole person accountable for the performance of their team. Given that they deem the performance of the team to be dependent upon their own performance as leader, this can increase the perceived pressure on the leader which has particular implications for those with High IF.

## Male vs Female Experiences

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We did not set out to conduct a piece of research about gender, but we cannot ignore the fact that women expressed a higher sense of Impostor Feeling than their male counterparts. Interestingly, in the follow up interviews, women who scored highly on Clance's IF scale all referred to gender in their interview.

It is only in recent decades that women have started to occupy a significant portion of leadership roles in business. We are curious to know to what extent our female contributors with High IF might be suffering from an unconscious bias that senior leadership roles in business are masculine and that they are therefore not suited to occupy them.

Notwithstanding that, our research confirms that Impostor Feeling affects both genders and is not restricted to individuals with a certain background or upbringing.

# Recommendations

## Accept who you are and be resourceful to be your best self

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Impostor Feeling is tied to many self-limiting traits. When you accept that you are susceptible to feeling a certain way, you can begin to normalise these feelings and train your thought processes so that you can start to influence the way you are affected by them.

Look after yourself. In keeping yourself physically fit you will build self-confidence and be in prime condition to develop your mental fitness.

## Learn to reframe how you perceive others, and different experiences

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We are the sum of our experiences. How we perceive those experiences is our choice. Our interviews revealed stories of individuals who overcame significant challenges that have shaped who they are and how they lead, but only because they chose to take the learning when they experienced a set-back, rather than internalise the failure.

Your team and your peers are on your side. They want you to succeed.

## Build strong networks, founded on trust

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Those who experience Impostor Feeling need to invest time and energy in developing their network of professionals who they trust, both inside and outside their business. In doing this, leaders both broaden and deepen their relationships with others. Deeper relationships will help break down any facades to reveal the true person, helping them to be more authentic. They will also reduce their sense of isolation and may even find that they are not alone in feeling insecure in their professional life.

Seek out a network of trusted advisors and use this to support you and your career.

# About the School for CEOs



The School for CEOs was co-founded by experienced Chief Executive and Chairman Patrick Macdonald and Executive Coach David Sole OBE in 2011. The purpose was to create a programme to support leaders as they transitioned into the role of CEO and other senior roles in organisations by offering practical lessons for immediate use.

David and Patrick recruited a Faculty of experienced business leaders and began by designing the Vital Few programme; a short intensive programme for small groups of senior executives, designed to help them step up to the CEO and other senior executive roles.

Since the first Vital Few programme in 2012, the School has continued to grow, developing the Alchemy Suite of six complementary leadership interventions to support leaders at different levels, while maintaining the ethos of purposeful and pragmatic learning on a personal level.

Interventions range from one to one development through Executive Coaching, to open programmes and also consolidated in-house leadership development programmes for larger groups.

School for CEOs also promotes inclusive leadership through tailored development programmes and have a number of programmes available to all-female audiences to help address gender imbalance in executive roles.

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