

# **THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME**

## **PRAISE FOR THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME**

I have worked with Harold Hillman for a number of years and he has offered honourable and wise counsel at all times. He is insightful, thoughtful and trustworthy. Harold's ideas on Impostor Syndrome are very true: many executives lack confidence and belief in themselves. Leadership has to be practical; it has to be about who you are, not some kind of theory. The ideas and the exercises in this book can help business people at all levels find their way by giving them the courage to admit their weaknesses so they can work on them and improve, and allowing them to take that final step into the space of a true leader.

— **Andrew Thorburn, CEO, Bank of New Zealand**

Harold helped us realise at Refining NZ that when we employ people for their thinking, we have to make sure they aren't pressured to moderate their views to fit 'what is acceptable around here'. I understand so much more now after reading *The Impostor Syndrome*. The linkage between authenticity and leadership is magical. I hope the book provides that eye-opening experience to others.

— **Ken Rivers, former CEO, Refining NZ**

In my experience far too many people are their own worst critics. Women especially are vulnerable to the limitations of self-doubt. We worry too much about presenting what others expect of us rather than allowing ourselves to trust our own skills, experience and judgement. Harold Hillman's book is a must-read for anyone who has experienced this feeling, but it especially resonates for me because it conveys the power of authenticity in a practical yet compelling way. If we have the courage as leaders to be ourselves, to show our vulnerabilities as well as our strengths, then Impostor Syndrome will not flourish in our organisations and people will have a much better chance to reach their true potential.

— **Barbara McKerrow, Chief Executive, New Plymouth District Council**

Be yourself — it sounds simple, so why do we make it hard, particularly in a business context? It takes insight and reflection to really know yourself, and courage to live and show the true you. We've all been impostors at some time, hiding our true selves. Harold demystifies Impostor Syndrome, showing us that it's okay and common to feel that way, but that the sooner we get over it and live authentically, the better off we and everyone around us will be. Read it and find yourself!

— **Alison Andrew, Executive Global Head, Chemicals, Orica**

I love this book! It is brilliant, timely and in a form that can be easily digested by anyone who wants to understand why authenticity makes a difference. The strategies to cope with Impostor Syndrome will resonate on so many levels and with a broad spectrum of readers. This is an important must-read book for anyone who is ready to take their leadership to the next level.

— **Graham Stuart, CEO, Sealord**

Amongst the plethora of books written on leadership, *The Impostor Syndrome* stands out as providing valuable insight into the essence and importance of an authentic approach along with a practical 'how-to' toolkit. For those looking to become a highly regarded and effective leader or eager to create an environment where authentic leaders can flourish, this book contains much to recommend it.

— **Chris Black, Chief Executive, FMG**



# THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

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**BECOMING  
AN AUTHENTIC  
LEADER**

**HAROLD HILLMAN PhD**





## DEDICATION

I know what it is like to feel like an impostor. I have lived that experience a few times in my life, during the early years and well into adulthood. My stories are your stories. All of our impostor stories give rise to a powerful insight about the importance of finding and being our authentic selves.

This book is written for anyone who is currently wearing the impostor's mask, and is dedicated to everyone in the world who has ever worried that being yourself is simply not good enough.

Above all else, always remember that there has only ever been, and will always only be, one you.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Harold Hillman is the managing director of Sigmoid Curve Consulting Group. The sigmoid curve is an algebraic formula that shows how growth and momentum are best sustained by disrupting the status quo. Hillman's personal and professional experiences exemplify the curve, which has been the catalyst for numerous adventures in his life's story.

Based in New Zealand since 2003 and a citizen since 2008, Hillman coaches business leaders and executive teams to appreciate the strong relationship between leadership and learning. He believes that the best leaders are also the most skilled learners.

Prior to Sigmoid, Hillman served in senior executive roles with Fonterra, Prudential Financial, and Amoco Corporation. Trained early in his career as a clinical psychologist, he moved in the direction of leadership and management development after serving on the faculty at the United States Air Force Academy.

Hillman earned his EdM from Harvard University and a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Pittsburgh. An optimist who believes that change is a gift, Hillman lives every day through the prism of opportunity and possibility.



## FOREWORD

All successful executives have employed their personal ambition to advance their careers and influence. By itself, ambition is a motivating emotion or a personal attribute. Ambitious people have a history of pushing themselves to their learning edge and taking on big challenges, knowing that the stakes are high, inadvertently setting up their experience of Impostor Syndrome.

‘Ambition’ is an interesting word. In Latin, the original verb was *ambire*, to go around a circuit, usually meant for soliciting favour or votes. A driving force was *ambition*, or a desire for something. The *ambitus* is the circuit, edge or periphery. A person who has ambition is driven by a personal desire to ask others to support her/his advancement.

When paired with avarice, ambition mutates into greed. Greed has been a part of recorded history since biblical times, and has thrived since the 1980s — the decade of greed. Peter Koestenbaum, published philosopher and mentor, explains that this avaricious expression of ambition ‘feeds on other people, takes away in order to get, offends, breeds envy, and . . . leads to isolation from the world’. People seem to have a limited tolerance for unbridled greed, and eventually respond with policies and practices (including violence) to control such ambitious people. Unfortunately, significant if not irreparable damage has been done. This book isn’t interested in this type of ambition.

Pair ambition with aspiration and greatness can happen. Servant leadership can emerge. Aspiration is the driving force behind a personal vision, a desire to create something good or better, a longing for perfection. Koestenbaum sees this strain of ambition as ‘an ongoing dissatisfaction with what is and an insatiable appetite for realizing potentials that, by definition, can never be fulfilled’. Servant leaders envision a better future for their organisation, neighbourhood



or society, and believe they can bring people and circumstances together to create that desired future. Servant leaders engage their own ambition to inspire and guide the collective aspiration of the people they serve. All are served well and benefit.

Ambition can be channelled by two governors: integrity and self-awareness. Integrity means adherence to a moral code or ethics. Moral codes are determined by families, tribes, religious groups, societies, or any social organising force, such as armies and gangs. If ambitious leaders believe they should not lie, cheat, steal or covet, their behaviours will be channelled away from those choices. If ambitious leaders believe 'the end result justifies the means', their behaviours will reflect a diversity of methodologies and techniques for achieving their goals regardless of collateral damage. Finding one's moral code requires deep reflection on lessons learned from others, difficult choices made in the course of becoming an adult, and strategies employed to advance in one's career. Being ethical requires knowing the lines of integrity that are firm, not to be crossed.

Self-awareness is the other governor on the expression of ambition. Knowing the essence of one's self — without the costumes of executive or politician or parent — is the foundation of making choices that align with one's ambition, i.e., who I want to become and what I believe I am capable of achieving. Having direct contact with one's inner private world of beliefs, thoughts, emotions, fears and hopes is the first step of self-awareness. It is a heightened understanding of one's self — the good, the bad and the ugly. It is where authenticity is rooted.

Harold Hillman and I met in the 1990s when he was chief learning officer for Amoco, a former oil company based in Chicago. He invited me to help design and deliver a development process to take Amoco's leadership to another level of complexity. My work was grounded in learning organisations with *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* series I co-authored with Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Rick Ross and Bryan Smith.

I work with executive teams and boards of directors to build their capacity to think and act together in the best interest of the enterprise. The ability to perceive the foundation of one's own mental models, as well as be open to others' thinking and build a shared strategic model, are at the heart of my work.

I have collaborated with Harold on projects that have spanned the globe over the past 20 years. We have pushed each other to expand our models of leadership and personal mastery. We have coached each other to be better advisers on how to accelerate personal and team learning for our clients. We have laughed loudly, sent secret signals across a room, cried together and shared family time. I value Harold's professional perspective, which is built from his experience as a clinical psychologist, a business executive and an executive coach. You'll learn more about his character when you read the book. And you'll see why I cherish the time when we get to work together.

As Harold has done, leaders with aspirational ambition put themselves on the edge of their world time after time to learn and grow and achieve. Their dissatisfaction with reality generates their own discomfort by choosing to be in new and difficult situations about which they have limited knowledge. It is inevitable that they feel like an impostor for a period of time while they learn the new situation. When this happens, the challenge is how they — and you — respond to the temptation to be someone you're not, just to alleviate the pressures that come with navigating through uncertainty. You might argue that this is the ultimate challenge of life.

The purpose of this book is to offer clarity and strategy. Harold masterfully exposes the Impostor Syndrome, and you will see that he owns this territory, from both his personal and professional experience. When I read it, I breathed a sigh of recognition. I invite you to take the book home and get comfortable. As you read, reflect on how the profiles may relate to you and the people you know. Then consider how best to channel your aspirational ambition as you develop your capability to monitor your motivations, intentions and desired outcomes in real time, all the while remaining true to yourself and your vision.

## **Charlotte Roberts**

*Co-author of **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** and **The Dance of Change***

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# 1.

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## Where does the term 'Impostor Syndrome' come from?

Impostor Syndrome, sometimes called 'Impostor Phenomenon' or 'Fraud Syndrome', is a term coined first in 1978 by two American psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. It is a psychological phenomenon in which people — often facing a new or big challenge — are unable to internalise their accomplishments, attributing their success instead to luck, timing or some other external factor beyond their own making. Despite a continual striving for excellence that usually results in success, these individuals believe that they have tricked others into thinking they are bright and that it is only a matter of time before someone 'outs' them as frauds. Impostors experience terror when they think of failing at some goal that they set for themselves, and they take drastic measures not to make a mistake or lose the respect of others.

# 2.

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## What is Impostor Syndrome all about?

Beyond the research of Clance and Imes in the 1970s and a few studies and articles in the popular press in the 1980s, there has been little empirical research on the incidence and prevalence of Impostor Syndrome. We do know that it is neither an official clinical disorder nor a psychological disorder. It is fairly common and is situational — experienced by up to 75 per cent of all individuals at some point in life — although most people who are burdened by the symptoms don't know this, have no idea how to describe what they are feeling, and prefer not to talk about it.

There is a common misconception that 'no one else can possibly feel this way', which reinforces the need to stay quiet about it. Impostor Syndrome creeps into the psyche of the newly appointed captain of the football team, the newest member of the debate team, a first-time mother holding her baby, the successful applicant to the Harvard MBA programme, the recently appointed assistant professor who will teach that same programme, the surgical resident assisting with her first open-heart operation, the salesperson of the year being celebrated at the AGM, and even the incoming CEO who won the role over two widely respected internal candidates.

**I WONDER WHEN  
THEY'LL DISCOVER  
I'M A FRAUD?**



The syndrome is impervious to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social strata and gender, although there is evidence that it may be especially problematic for women. In the business world, female CEOs are still newsworthy and are likely to believe that their performance is being watched and assessed more closely than that of their male counterparts, and also that their performance reflects directly on women in general. Regardless of demographics, we do know that the syndrome is partial to people who impose pressure on themselves to be perfect, thereby limiting themselves by their unwillingness to learn, and by missing opportunities to be genuine and authentic people.

# 3.

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## The focus of this book

Impostor Syndrome is a big topic which can cover a vast domain. In this book, our focus will be primarily on the business world and how employees and managers at all levels often struggle to find the defining line between being themselves and being who they believe others want them to be. Sadly, many end up choosing the latter.

I hope the book generates good dialogue and debate about how authentic leadership can and does make a difference, both to individuals and to organisations. It is important that Impostor Syndrome be normalised, as an important first step to diminishing its potency. Executives, managers and boards can play a key role in this, by learning and modelling behaviour that counters the syndrome, and by creating a positive and open environment where there is no need for people to feel like impostors. Organisations that create the conditions for authentic leadership to thrive, can then make it easier for all employees to bring the 'whole person' to work.

# 4.



## Unplugged

The beautiful thing about aspiration is that it typically comes with some aspect of a higher standard — wanting to be more, to give more, to have greater impact. For many of us, a big source of our pride and sense of contribution and self-worth stems from a history of being ‘mostly’ right about how life works. And being mostly right most of the time perpetuates the need for a higher bar — a higher standard that is typically self-imposed and brutal in its judgement of oneself if you dare to disappoint.

Life presents you with many dichotomies that fit nicely on horizontal continuums. The vast space that sits between perfection and degrees of imperfection is one of those dichotomies you can likely relate to. At the extremes on this particular continuum, absolute perfection and unalloyed imperfection are dangerous places to live indefinitely. They are best regarded as stakes in the ground that can give you some bearing on the wide space that serves as a bridge between the two extremes, where there is room to appreciate the benefits of both. The need for perfection turns your focus to high standards, quality and consistency — a rigour associated with delivering something or presenting yourself in a way that reflects extreme pride and ownership of the outcome. And being at peace with imperfection brings you a sense of comfort with vulnerability — that space in your head where



seconds can seem like minutes, when you are waiting to see if people still think you are cool, still respect you, even though you didn't get it right this time.

It is in the space between perfection and complete imperfection — on that bridge — where authenticity resides. And where exactly that point is between the two extremes is going to be different for any two people. It is a very personal space, full of self-appraisal, doubts, fears, concerns, hopes and dreams. And it's in this space that you can find your core persona — the one that is sometimes referred to as the 'unplugged' persona.

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An unplugged persona is just like that of the rock star analogy where there are no flash stage lights or voice synthesisers, and no chorus of background singers or flurry of dancers moving about at Mach speed with everything choreographed to the second. It's just you in front of the microphone, while behind you

a sole guitarist and maybe someone on the keyboard plays a quiet melody. It's just you at the mike with no synthesisers to correct a pitchy note or cover for unforgotten words. But it really doesn't matter, because people are drawn to how raspy and, in some cases, how earthy your voice is, and they are far more focused on your words than they are on the tune.

When you are unplugged, the thing that most people remember about their time with you is how you were, not what you did. They remember their experience with you. They remember that you were confident, yet relaxed. You were assertive, yet conciliatory to better ideas. Your presence was undeniable, yet you never overshadowed others' contributions. You brought forward the best of many dichotomies in a way that positioned them as interdependent rather than mutually exclusive worlds. When you are unplugged, there are fewer either/ors and a whole lot less of the harsh judgement you impose on yourself for not being perfect. Paradoxically, the sweet spot of authenticity — of being unplugged — is to realise that comfort with

imperfection often begets a greater result. These are not mutually exclusive extremes.

And then with the *ding* of an incoming email or the vibrating mobile phone alerting you to yet another text message, you are called back to the demands of the real world. *Try being unplugged on your own time, buddy. The company, and particularly the boss and the team, are counting on perfection . . . on being right, not 'mostly right', every single time. A little bit of flash lighting won't hurt you, the synthesiser might smooth out a couple of those rough edges, and the background chorus can cover up for glaring mistakes. And whatever you do, get it right this time. And just in case you weren't aware, the world is watching.*

Enter Impostor Syndrome, stage left. It kicks in with a fervour that is teeming with anxiety, apprehension, self-doubt and pessimism, all swirling around in your head and causing you to be completely self-absorbed. It is hard for you to focus your attention outward when all these crazy thoughts are prodding you toward the extreme and making you cringe at the thought of bringing forward anything short of perfection. You can't be open, because that will expose potential flaws in your thinking. You can't profess your lack of expertise in anything, because that will render your voice less significant with your peers, or even your own team. And you don't take kindly to others probing you with questions when you are not quite sure how your answers will be judged or possibly used against you.

There are two things that are intriguing about Impostor Syndrome. The first is: the syndrome is largely self-imposed. Over time you find yourself listening more and more to an inner Critic, a voice that resides somewhere on that continuum between perfection and disaster. And that voice is typically far more critical, far tougher, than any boss might ever be with you. That inner Critic warns you that you are going to make a fool of yourself if you don't get it right. The inner Critic's booming voice warns you that, unless your solution is air-tight, others are going to soon discover you are a fraud.

The second thing that is intriguing about Impostor Syndrome is that it tends to strike those who have been asked to step up to take on a bigger role, perhaps where the decisions have far more influence and impact on the organisation and on overall results. But perhaps that's

not so intriguing after all. Success breeds success in a virtuous cycle that can, over time and with several promotions, turn vicious. This cycle can entrap senior executives in a bubble that reinforces the need to be right, to never be wrong, and to be omnipotent. To be all-knowing and all-powerful is a mighty tall task to pull off. But your CV tells us you are up for the challenge. There is absolutely no room for a vulnerable moment in the world of an impostor. No room whatsoever.

A huge number of people who wear the title of 'leader' have experienced Impostor Syndrome at points in their career, most often following a promotion or when newly assigned to a role. Often this is amplified if you are new to a company and in a role where no one internal was deemed suitable or qualified to take it on. Or it may be that you have been with the company for a while and are in the same role, but you are now on a new learning curve with a major deliverable and it suddenly feels like a new job. It may be that you didn't ask for the role, but someone more senior has deemed you the best person to help the company work its way out of a situation. Or you just may be the only person around the table who reminds you of . . . you. Sometimes being the only one who looks or thinks differently, or simply *is* different from the others, increases the pressure to be perfect.

Like most ailments, treating the symptoms will bring only temporary relief, enough to get you over a hurdle or two, but you know from experience that the symptoms will return at the next big challenge, where once again you will have to put on the mask of perfection. Like most ailments, treating the root cause may take longer, but it breaks the cycle and leaves you confident that you are not going to be knocked back at the next major hurdle. In the case of Impostor Syndrome, the real cure comes about when you are able to concede that your own thinking — your own thought patterns — may be working against the positive impact you could be having as a leader. Your own thinking may be getting in the way of others seeing you as a truly authentic person.

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This book is written to appeal to each individual reader. As much as possible, I leave out the proverbial 'we' and talk instead to the definitive 'you'. Over years of coaching hundreds of leaders about Impostor Syndrome, I have had so many people exclaim: 'So that's what it's called!' Yes, it has a name. No, you are not alone. No, you are not going crazy. Yes, you can absolutely beat Impostor Syndrome.

In this book there are profiles of four people (a blend of real people and real scenarios) who have been on the emotional roller coaster caused by Impostor Syndrome. Chances are you will recognise elements of yourself in the profiles. You will probably also take note that their experiences aren't X-factor stories, but rather common experiences that you encounter in every day's challenge to be the best that you can be. Through others' experiences described in this book, and comparing those with your own, you will start to get good at diagnosing the symptoms of Impostor Syndrome, catching them earlier in the cycle, and often preventing them from taking hold. Finally, I will introduce some strategies that will enable you to treat Impostor Syndrome at its very core, removing a major impediment to you being your true authentic self.

As with any ailment, the symptoms are common enough to recognise. What makes the difference is the treatment, and that is where you come in. The cure comes from *within* rather than beyond you. There is no magic pill or injection. There is no brain transplant. In the great majority of cases, there is no need for a psychotherapist. The cure comes from within. And you most definitely are the one to make that happen. Unplugged.