Episode 50 – Emotion at Work in The Imposter Phenomenon

Phil Willcox: Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast where we take a deep dive into the human condition, and welcome fair listener to Episode 50. Not only is it the 50th episode, which is kind of a milestone in itself, also this month, May 2021, sees the fourth anniversary of the Emotion of Work podcast. And I want to begin with a huge thank you to all of you listeners out there who stick with the podcast. I said it on a couple of episodes ago, the idea that every single day I'm in somebody's ears blows my mind and as someone who, four years on, still wonders if the Emotion at Work podcast is good enough, I'm very, very grateful to all of you listeners who let me join you on your commute, or when you're ironing, or when you're gardening, or when you're walking, or when you're cooking, or whatever it is that you may be doing. Thank you for letting me accompany you in those tasks or on those journeys and I'm very, very grateful that you listen. So for this 50th episode, we're going to be looking at the imposter phenomenon. It's also known as imposter syndrome. Although more accurately, I think the term imposter phenomenon, well as what the author suggested it should be originally anyway. And what I want to do today is to look at the imposter phenomenon from a few different perspectives. So we will have a section on strategies which is okay, well, if imposter phenomenon is at play, what can happen that can help? And those strategies we're going to look at from an individual level, what can I do to help me? But also from a maybe a leadership or managerial perspective, what can you do to help others? And/or what can we do within organisations and teams to help as well. So we're going to look at strategies from those three different perspectives of individuals, managers, or leaders, and/or teams and organisations as a whole.

So there will be a section on strategies and stuff you can do to help. Also though, for me, there's two areas that I that I think are discussed less frequently than necessary. When imposter phenomenon or imposter syndrome is being discussed. One of those is context. And the other of those is comparison. So, within context, I'm thinking about the systemic-ness of imposter phenomenon. Even though it's something that individuals experience or individuals report experiencing, there is definitely a, well for me anyway, there is a contextual systemic aspect to it, so I want to pick up on that and also, for me, comparison is at the root of a lot of imposter syndrome or imposter phenomenon challenges that may be there. And so I want to get into that and unpick that a little bit more and explore it. As you'll have picked up or as you'll have noticed there is no guest on the podcast this time. So what I will be doing as usual, in my podcast episodes where it's just me, is I'm going to be encouraging you to pause at different points in time to do some reflection, to do some thinking, and then you can restart the podcast as and when that thinking has been done. Because there's a lot in this one today. Alright. So where should we begin then?

I want to begin with comparison. So if we think about where does imposter phenomenon come from? Let's do a bit of a background. So Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes back in 1978 were the first researchers to really talk about the imposter phenomenon. And it came from their experiences as academics, as researchers in universities, where they noticed that women in particular, seem to have a strong self-belief that they weren't intelligent or that they'd fooled others that if people do think they're intelligent, then they fooled others that that was the case. They were reporting that they were convinced that they were going to be found out, and they were unable to attribute success to their own abilities. And that could be despite extensive evidence to the contrary. Though

initially Clance and Imes posited that the imposter phenomenon was a female... was something that affected females, less so men, although they did suggest that men have less frequency with less intensity, and those that may be in touch with their feminine qualities, may experience it more and they acknowledge the need for more research. So, if imposter phenomenon then is this self-belief that, strong self-belief that we're not intelligent and that if we are we've fooled others to think differently, convinced that we'll be found out, and being unable to attribute success to your own, or others abilities, sorry, your own abilities, despite extensive evidence to the contrary. So what that means for me then, is that imposter phenomenon is rooted in comparison. So if you've got this strong self-belief that you are not intelligent, and you've fooled others that think differently, to say "I am not this" means there needs to be a "this" that you're comparing it to. Because to say that you're not something means that there that there has to be an "is something", there has to be a comparator within there. And if you're convinced that you're going to be found out, so you're convinced that you're not deserving or you're not worthy of whatever it is that you're doing, then there's a comparison aspects in that in terms of, I'm not as good as I should be. Or I'm not good enough for whatever this is. And if I'm unable to attribute success to my own abilities, maybe despite extensive evidence to the contrary, then again there's a comparative element within it. So where does that comparison come from? Now Clance and Imes talk about how that comparison could come from siblings or from family, it could come from experiences that individuals have had as part of their upbringing. And Jane Harrison, I've seen in a recent blog, talks about attachment theory and attachment as a child could be a component or an aspect of the extent to which you may or may not experience imposter phenomenon or imposter syndrome.

So what I wonder, then, is is that comparison only external? Comparison with siblings, comparison with family members, comparison with colleagues, peers, others that may be around you. Or is that comparison with me and myself, I'm not good enough, I'm going to be found out, I'm not intelligent enough, this success can't be down to me. And in which case then if that comparison is with our sense of self, especially if that's come from within which I would argue then would fall within the working title of being an idealised self, so I'm making a comparison with who I who ideally think I am, and if I was good enough, I would be like this. If I was intelligent enough, this would be happening. If the successes were down to me, it would be like this. So I'm creating or the individual is creating a sense of themselves that they are comparing themselves against. Within the imposter syndrome, imposter phenomenon research, it talks about discrepancies and these discrepancies with it could be my self-view, so the self-discrepancies where I'm saying who I am is different to or not as good as or not intelligent or not capable or not as successful as this idealised self I could have created. But it can also be about other view discrepancies. So when I'm comparing myself to others, and how I see others or how others see me.

So when we think about imposter syndrome or imposter phenomenon, who we're making comparisons with or who those comparisons are against is an interesting area for further exploration and for further reflection. Though, in the workplace, we might not be able to look into things like attachment theory, or the experiences that people had when they were... these formative experiences that people may have had when they were young, and at the same time, we can start thinking about what we do within organisations, within teams, that allow that to happen. So when I

think back to my Master's research that I did back in 2015, one of the things I noticed was the comparative nature that line managers were using in appraisals and performance review discussions. And when I think about my children and how they approach their lives, they compare themselves with others all of the time. And Theodore Roosevelt has been attributed with the quotes of "comparison is the thief of joy". So if there is this comparative aspect that seems to be prevalent within humanity, and this is going to link into my second point about being systemic and contextual, to what extent are our interactions with others in the workplace, or the conversations with our managers or leaders, or the conversations we have with our colleagues, or the things we will look at in teams, or the broader meritocracy of the workplace... There's a hypothesis, at least in my head, that's suggesting that the meritocracy and the individualistic structure of the workplace, and this idea that you've earned it. So you earn your promotion, you earn your pay rise, you earn your recognition, you earn your performance rating, you earn your reputation. So when you have this meritocracy and individualistic structure, actually, is that creating the comparisons that may then be used, I guess, maybe use isn't the right word, but I've done it now, to make up the comparative nature of imposter phenomenon or of imposter syndrome?

So what gets really interesting for me is so for example, Breeze in 2018 suggests that imposter phenomenon is a public feeling, which isn't a deficiency of self, but a problem of society. So, I'm moving now from this comparison into this wider contextual systemic side of things. So if we go with this idea that imposter phenomenon is a public feeling, not a deficiency of self, but a problem of society. So, therefore, society, we keep to organisations or teams, if they're creating this meritocracy and individualistic structure, to what extent are the way that we set up our teams, and the way that we set up our organisations, and/or the way that we might have conversations with individuals, or the way we as individuals might look against our peers or to our colleagues or to our team leaders, or our managers or whoever, if we're creating this comparison as part of the system of work, is the system of work then creating feelings of imposterism? Is the system of work creating the conditions that allow the imposter phenomenon to be a thing?

So if I take us back to comparisons for a second then, where could those comparisons originate? Well, it could be from ourselves, from our family, from our idealised self, we could be comparing with our friends, with our colleagues. Those comparisons could also originate from a social perspective, we could be looking at things like class, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, other narratives that may be at play in the workplace all of the time.

If the feelings of imposter phenomenon then are around this deficiency, so deficiency of intelligence, or this fraudulence that convinces me that I'm going to be found out, or the unable to attribute success to my own abilities despite evidence to the contrary, so again, that deficiency side of things, it poses us an interesting challenge I think, as individuals in the workplace, colleagues to others, managers, leaders, whatever that might be, to think well, how are we, or to what extent are we, creating conditions where imposter phenomenon could be a thing? So that's the first time I want to pause then, is to say take a moment and have a think about, either for you or... let's be more specific, sorry. Take a moment here's a few questions for you to consider. If imposter phenomenon is something that you experience, what comparisons are you making? Who are you comparing yourself to when you're feeling like you're not good enough? Or when you're feeling like you're not intelligent, or you feel like you're going to be found out, or that your success isn't down to you?

What comparison are you making? And who are you comparing yourself with? Question for you if you interact with other people, whether that be as a manager, as a leader, or as a colleague. When or where do you use comparison in your narrative? So in the discussions that you have, the conversations that you have, how do you compare yourself or others in the discussions, narratives, conversations that you have? And are they necessary? Because if we don't need to make a comparison, do we have to make one? Does it help? Is making that comparison a useful or helpful thing? And it is something I think about a lot. My son plays football, plays in a team, there's a number of other players and often he asks me who was the best? And looks to discuss things in a comparative way. And even there's an element of meritocracy in that because you know the player can win man of the match, or player of the match and in which case, there's a systemic comparative nature in it. Now, I keep the focus when I'm talking with my son on him, and what he could do better, what he could learn, what he could do, what he does well, and how he can improve without making the comparison across to others as well. Yet, that's a really... that takes effort on my part to do. So I said I was going to ask some questions and then I was going to pause and I carried on asking questions, so I will now pause to give you a chance to think about those questions. If imposter phenomenon is something that you're experiencing, who are you comparing with? Where does that comparison come from? If you are interacting with others, whether that be as a manager, as a leader, colleague, whatever that might be, where are you allowing comparison to feature in the discussions and the narratives that you have? So press pause, come back in a few minutes whenever you're ready, and press play again.

Hello, and welcome back. So before you paused, then, I was talking about the comparison and the contextual systemic aspects of imposter phenomenon. What I thought might be useful to do here is to take a bit of a deeper look into what is imposter phenomenon, and maybe what isn't it, and what are some of those components that sit in and around it? And I do that because if we think about what it is and what it isn't, and some of the components that sit in and around it, then it might help us with the comparison aspects and or the contextual systemic aspects of what we've talked about so far. So if we look at imposter phenomenon and what does it have a general association with? So what I mean by that is what does the research tell us about what happens or what often happens around imposter phenomenon. So it's not if you have this then that, that if you report experiencing imposter phenomenon, that means these things are going to be present as well. It's then there seems to be when people report imposter phenomenon, they report these other things as well. So within that then is general anxiety. And so for me, there's an, there's an interesting thing to think about around if these feelings of not being adequate, feelings of not being intelligent, being found out, unable to attribute our success to our own abilities, despite potentially extensive evidence to the contrary. Where does that end and anxiety begin? So when, when exploring imposter phenomenon, the word fear or the emotion of fear is almost synonymous with it. So it's that fear of being found out, fear of success and that our role in success, fear that we're not intelligent enough, so the fear seems to be commonly associated with it and fear is about a threat. So fear is an emotion, if you look at it from a basic emotional perspective, the universal trigger for fear is a threat of harm. And that threat can be to our physical self or to our psychological self. And I would argue that within imposter phenomenon, it's a threat to our psychological self. So anxiety then is the more debilitating condition as compared with the emotion of fear. So one of the questions for me is where does imposter phenomenon end and say trait anxiety or generalised anxiety begin? Because it may be that it's more generalised anxiety than it is imposter phenomenon. So here that links back to the

wording itself: imposter phenomenon. I've said earlier on, I mentioned that imposter phenomenon is also known as imposter syndrome. So a syndrome is something that's enduring. A syndrome is something that is always there. Whereas a phenomenon is something that comes and goes. And Clance and Imes originally were talking about imposter phenomenon being something that comes and goes, as in its context dependent. So those feelings of inadequacy, or the lack of or the feeling of strong self-belief that we're not intelligent, or that we're unable to attribute our own success to our own abilities, despite maybe extensive evidence to the contrary, then that would be contextually dependent. So we wouldn't be there all of the time. Whereas, generalised anxiety or trait anxiety is something that is there consistently. That's not to say that if an individual experiences general anxiety that they therefore will experience imposter phenomenon as well, that's not the case. Likewise, somebody may experience imposter phenomenon and not have generalised anxiety. What I would encourage you to think about it then, is for yourself or for others that you may work or interact with, is this imposter phenomenon or is this generalised anxiety? There are also general associations with avoidance and that could include procrastination within that, the avoidance of doing something, we procrastinate over it because we don't feel like we're ready, we don't feel like we're prepared, we don't feel like we're good enough. And if I think back to one of my earlier episodes with Amanda Arrowsmith on, she talks about that not feeling prepared, not feeling ready, not feeling like I've done enough preparation to be ready and prepared for what it is that we want to do.

So as well as anxiety, you can have avoidance. You may also have poor self-review, and perfectionism. And sometimes these are referred to as the different types of imposter. And for me that's a little bit categoric in terms of saying these are different types of imposter phenomenon. For me, it's more about these things are or can be associated with imposter phenomenon. So anxiety avoidance, poor self-review, perfectionism can be there.

In addition, the externalisation or the downplay of personal agency for our own competence or performance is another aspect that's associated with it. And that links back to, or I'm going to link that back to, if we work in merit based individualistic structures within our workplaces, if there is a general association between imposter phenomenon and externalisation or downplay of our personal agency for our own competence and performance, the challenge may be that the way our workplaces are organised and structured, or the way that in particular competence is assessed, and performance is assessed in of themselves can contribute to the experience of imposter phenomenon, as well. So again, I'm linking the contextual systemic aspects of work to the individual experiences that people may have with imposter phenomenon. So that poses real problems for in the workplace, I argue, because a lot of this self that we carry at work is to do with our competence and our performance. Are we capable? Are we competent? Can I do my job? Can I do my job well? Can I do you know, can I do my job effectively? Am I performing? Am I doing a good job? All of those things. So you may then argue, well, what's causing that imposter phenomenon or that imposter syndrome to occur? Is it something that's happening within the individual and/or is it something that the system of work... Now, I would always say there's going to be a bit of both. So when I think about emotions more generally, I often get asked are emotions nature or nurture? And I say well, they're both. Some things are there through our evolution. Other things are there because we learn them from others and we learn that through the experiences that we have. And I think imposter phenomenon is part of that as well. It also, though, poses questions for you, fair listener, about the

role that you and/or the workplaces have, sorry, you and/or the workplaces that you work in, and the teams that you work in, and/or the bosses that you are, or that you may have, or you may employ. What role do they have in potentially cultivating these feelings of imposter-ism. That might not be a nice thing to hear. As a business owner myself, with a team around me, the idea that I may be contributing to that doesn't sit nicely for me, that doesn't sit easily for me. And it's a challenge that that I'd need to work with and I do work with regularly. I guess that's part of the reason I wanted to put this particular episode of the podcast together, to give some context and some explanation, and to give some strategies which I'll do shortly. But to get people, or to get you fair listener, I say people, you fair listener thinking about these things.

So my questions for you then, as I asked you to pause for a second time. What's happening in your teams or your organisation where you may be contributing to individuals experiencing imposter syndrome or imposter phenomenon? So pause it there, have a think and when you're ready, come back and we'll move into one other area and then into strategies.

Hello, and welcome back. So I said one other area and then into strategies because they kind of overlap, really. So one of the things that I've not explicitly discussed in this podcast episode so far is the role of gender. So, imposter phenomenon I've mentioned originally was talked about by Clance and Imes as being a female thing and there is inconsistent research. So, different findings or different studies suggest different things, when it comes to gender and imposter phenomenon. Some suggests that different participants experience different feelings, or frequency, or intensity of imposter phenomenon, and the openness to discuss or share these things as a feature as well. Now, I can report that as a man imposter phenomenon is something that I experience. So, from a personal lived perspective, it is something that I grapple with. And at the same time, I wonder if the gender roles, or gender expectations, or gender norms then have a perspective to play in the extent to which imposter phenomenon may be present in men or women. And I say that because imposter phenomenon is a self-report aspect. So, it's something that you say you have. So it's something where the individuals say to others, this is something that I hear, this is something that I say to myself, this is what the voice in my head says that I'm not good enough, that I'm going to be found out, that I'm not intelligent and others that think I am I've fooled them. I'm unable to attribute success to my own abilities despite maybe extensive evidence to the contrary. So, if I'm self-reporting and this societal or the gender norm is that men talk about their feelings less, both less frequently, less openly and with less intensity. Is that the same for imposter phenomenon? So, when we think about imposter phenomenon, is it that men have it, they just talk about it less or they're less willing to talk about it because of the gender norm expectations around behaviour? And I say that because talking about imposter phenomenon is one of the strategies. So talking to others about it is something that both individuals and the research reports as is a sense of feeling like you're not in it alone. And I think that links back to the comparison thing. Because if you're feeling like you're not good enough, or you're feeling like you're going to be found out, or you're able to attribute your success to your own abilities, then finding out that other people think the same then provides some validation for that. But if you're a man, and nobody else talks about it with you, and nobody describes or discusses having it, then that can be problematic. In the same way, I saw a fascinating article in HBR which was titled "Stop telling women they have imposter phenomenon", well actually no it was titles "Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome." And again, the idea being if that potentially plays into the gender norm expectations around discussing emotion, because if women

talk about it more that doesn't necessarily equal women have it more, or experience it more intensely, or experiencing more frequently. It could be there's a greater acceptance of discussing it among women than there are men.

Now, as I said, the research is inconclusive. So, some studies say women experienced it more than men, or with more intensity, or with more openness to discuss it, or with different feelings. Others say no, there is no gender difference in it at all. And I'll put some links to some different papers in the show notes. And at the same time, discussing it, acknowledging it, and talking about it is one of the strategies that people report as being effective. Now Barr-Walker et al in 2020 did a really nice meta analysis of the different strategies that are suggested or researched within the imposter phenomenon field, and they grouped them into two camps. So, one being external and one being internal. So, external being there were three different subcategories of that external. So, one is education, as in more learning. So if we've got this strong self-belief that I'm not intelligent, and I've fooled others that think differently, one of the imposter phenomenon regulation strategies reported was education, do more learning. And I would argue that plays into that first one of if I do more learning then I'm more intelligent, therefore, it can help address those feelings of lacking by filling. Now depending on what you read some research says well, that will never happen because there's a almost a self-fulfilling prophecy with imposter phenomenon. And I'll put a link to that paper in the show notes as well. Now, the second one within external, I said three earlier on but there's actually two, sorry, I misread my notes. So the second one then is about mentorship, which is support from colleagues. And then the third one which is linked into mentorship, second/ third, is about the support from friends and family. And this links into the willingness to share then. So this mentorship, having a mentor or support from colleagues, friends or family who can provide some feedback to you, or for individuals around what they experienced to maybe challenge some of our narrative that the individuals hear. One of the potential issues with that is the self-fulfilling imposter phenomenon cycle, while they're only saying that because therefore, I can't be good enough, therefore, and then it goes around that cycle again. Now, within the same research paper from Barr-Walker et al, the findings suggested that external strategy, so this education, more learning or the mentorship, was reported as more useful or impactful than the internal strategies when used in isolation. So, just using those external strategies was, without any of the internal strategies, were suggested to be more effective. So if we look at those internal strategies then. So one of those was acknowledgement. Acknowledgement that yes, imposter phenomenon is something that I have, and reflection, and over preparing. So these are three of the eight that were listed. So acknowledgement, reflection and over preparing, and I've linked those three together, because they were what Amanda Arrowsmith talked about in the previous episode of this podcast. Acknowledging: yes, I've got it, reflecting on it: okay, thanks very much for that, and over preparing: I use that as a way to keep me grounded and make sure that I'm prepared and ready.

Another strategy that was listed was that of recording praise. So keeping a record of those achievements, either those achievements or praise along the way, so when achieving something having that record of it, to go back and revisit and review to potentially address that inability to attribute success to your own abilities, despite extensive evidence to the contrary, by building a really comprehensive list of those evidences, by building a comprehensive list of evidence that is a way that internally we can deal with that. You also have perseverance. Mindfulness was also listed as an internal strategy, as was 'fake it till I make it.' And then the final one was avoidance. So as a

way of regulating imposter phenomenon was to avoid those situations where you feel like an imposter. So if imposter phenomenon is, as I talked about earlier on, context specific, if you know what those contexts are, then you can avoid those contexts so that you don't experience the feelings.

So when we think about those two aspects then, internal and external. External being education, more learning, or in the mentorship or support from colleagues, friends and family. Internal strategies being acknowledgment, reflection, recording praise, perseverance, mindfulness, over preparing, fake it till I make it, and avoidance. Now those external strategies were reported to be more successful than the internal ones, but most successful was where there was a combination of strategies used. So the most impact is where there was a combination of strategies, both internal and external, when used together people reported that as being helpful. So my question then for you fair listener, is how can you either individually, as a manager, or as a leader, or as a colleague, and/or when you're thinking about the teams that you're in, or the organisations that you're in, how can we use this combination of internal and external strategies to support people that may or may not be experiencing imposter phenomenon?

One of the final things I want to say then before I wrap this up, is in 2017 there was a really interesting study done that suggested that imposter phenomenon can be used performatively. What I mean by that is people may report having imposter phenomenon because they think they need to within the workplace. So for example, when surveyed, respondents in this particular survey, they reported imposter self-concept as in I see myself as an imposter. But then they didn't pick up on those other areas that I talked about earlier on that are generally associated with imposter phenomenon. So for example, they didn't talk about anxiety, they didn't talk about negative emotions, or poor self-review, or dysphoric moods. So, that suggests that potentially some people report imposter self-concept or imposter phenomenon as a way of doing strategic self-presentation.

So, with the rise in discursive or discussion around imposter phenomenon, is that creating potentially a situation where people feel like they need to report having it because if they don't how might they be seen? Might they be seen as overconfident, or arrogant and so on? And again, there's that comparison happening. That comparison to how I see myself and how other people may see me, that discrepancy between self and/or other, for me, is another really fascinating area that's worthy of additional exploration and research within imposter phenomenon.

Okay, so I'm going to bring it together and close this off then. So I've looked at the importance of context and comparison within and when thinking about imposter phenomenon. And I've looked at the different strategies that can be used either individually, with colleagues, or across organisations as a whole that may help. So thank you so much for listening to this episode of the podcast. I will also say if you're a fan of the podcast, we've recently launched a new Instagram profile solely focused on the Emotion at Work podcast. So if you're on Instagram, give the Emotion at Work podcast a follow and you will get to hear all of the podcast news and pick up on previous episodes all together in one place. For now, though, I will say thank you very much for listening to this, our 50th episode and we'll see you soon. Thanks for listening.

You've been listening to the Emotion at Work podcast and if you've got this far you must be interested at the role emotions have in the workplace either within individuals, between people or in teams or in organisations as a whole, so head over to the Emotion at Work hub which you can find at https://community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups. Thanks for listening.