4 Ways CMOs Can Manage Imposter Syndrome

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I've never met a CMO or any high-level executive who doesn't wrestle with a nagging fear of being "found out" or wonder if they are truly up to the task. A fear that is probably not helped by the fact that CMOs have the shortest average tenure in all C-suite at 3.5 years. The truth is that imposter syndrome is a daily reality for CMOs who must shoulder the responsibility of leading, performing, and delivering results.

The world spins fast and what worked yesterday might fail tomorrow. This unpredictability often prompts a panic of 'now what?' Technology is constantly evolving, so it's important to stay curious and always be willing to learn, even if it means facing doubts and insecurities. There's also the relentless pressure to do more with fewer resources while wearing more hats than ever before.

Even when you perform perfectly, things can still go wrong. Years ago, I was the CMO of a public company that filed for bankruptcy. For months afterward, I would wake up in the middle of the night, go downstairs, and pore over old media plans and creative and strategy decks, searching for where I had gone wrong. It turned out I hadn't; the company was just a victim of an industry that had collapsed.

Perhaps that’s why I was surprised when a journalist recently told me she’d been inundated with stories from women about their imposter syndrome but hardly any from men while writing a feature on the topic. Both genders face challenges, yet for some reason, women often seem more comfortable admitting it.

Maybe it’s because men in particular have a penchant for projecting confidence and authority at all times, viewing vulnerability as a sign of weakness and indecisiveness. However, women who step into leadership roles often face the added pressure of not just succeeding for themselves, but for all women—something no man has been forced to consider due to the abundance of opportunities. While imposter syndrome may manifest differently across genders, as well as across race, age, and background, we owe it to future marketers to talk about our experiences and how we’ve learned to cope.

During my time as a marketer working in both B2B and B2C companies like Mastercard, I’ve discovered a few strategies and resources that can help silence the inner critic—or at least make it more bearable.

Accept it’s not just you

The first is to acknowledge that you’re not the only one. It’s completely normal and universal to have these feelings, even if it’s not always discussed. Focus on the craft and the job at hand to prevent any negative fears from self-perpetuating. Have some grace with yourself. It’s as normal as the sun coming up in the East.

Paradoxically, it can be much more valuable than overconfidence and is likely to keep you in the seat longer. You don’t know everything. Nobody does. So don’t overcompensate as though you do. Being vulnerable is a

strength, maybe even a superpower. When things do go wrong—and invariably they will—get up, pull up your socks, and get back to it. It hurts, but you survive.

Balance intuition with data

Don’t be afraid to go with your gut, but balance the risk. While standard operating procedure calls for lots of data and peer review to support decisions, there will be times when you choose to go against the grain. The adage ‘here’s to the crazy ones’ still has a place, as long as it’s proportionate to more reasoned approaches.

Seek support

Community is also hugely important. I’m blessed with a lot of friends, some in similar roles, and am not shy about reaching out to bounce ideas off them. Sometimes you can know too much and see everything from an insider’s perspective but your audience (the one that matters) is external. An outsider’s perspective can help you see the value in what you’re doing, even if you can’t.

Remember that setbacks lead to success

Finally, it’s worth noting that feeling like an imposter doesn’t have to be negative. Growth comes from discomfort. There’s an old expression that ‘the price of security is insecurity.’ That’s very much true in my case. Past successes do not guarantee future ones. Being ever-vigilant is part of the job description. A little paranoia can also motivate you to do your best work and to push for more.

Ultimately, the first step is for men to be more honest about their imposter syndrome. By talking more about the challenges

that face us, marketers from all backgrounds and genders can learn coping mechanisms to reduce the pressure and inspire future generations.

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