Faking It Is A Loser’s Game



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Strive For Authenticity Rather Than Faking it

It’s become the new mantra: Fake it till you make it. Technology and markets are changing too fast for people to keep up. The way to succeed, says the conventional wisdom, is to assume a capability you don’t have. Only then can you

project the confidence you need to rise in your career and attract clients and colleagues. And it's ok to do that, because we're living in a post-truth era where presentation matters more than reality.

It's helpful to understand the origins of "fake it till you make it." In the 1920s, the Austrian psychoanalyst Alfred Adler advised patients to "act as if" they were confident, in order to overcome their inferiority complexes. So far so good – you really can improve yourself with visualization, power posturing, and other self-help methods. But over time, "acting as if" mutated. What started out as a tongue-in-cheek comment crossed the line into bad advice: to disguise your situation not just to yourself, but to the people around you and at their expense!

Having spent decades in the most fast-paced, disruptive sector around – Silicon Valley high tech – I can tell you that's dead wrong. Faking it isn't just risky – eventually you'll get found out, and you'll face bigger problems. More important, it's self-defeating. Once you start lying to yourself and other people, you might achieve some outward success, but you're letting in a worm that will destroy you from the inside out. You'll start to believe that you have to be someone you're not, and that effort will consume you.

The only way to survive the stresses of leadership or entrepreneurship is to have authentic confidence in what you're doing. Without that true confidence, you'll eventually lose the swagger that really matters for success.

Surviving the Musical Chairs

I saw this upfront, working as a publicist for a great many tech firms trying to get attention in turbulent markets. Everyone wanted to stake out a position as the leading provider of a hot new product or platform. Every day was a round of musical chairs, with startups and established

firms wondering if they'd have a place to sit when the music stopped.

My colleagues and I often talked with clients competing against rivals offering what we suspected was vaporware. Some clients wanted to respond in kind, to prey on customers' fear, uncertainty, and doubt, or to sling mud on their competitors. We worked hard to persuade them otherwise. PR is a marathon, not a sprint, I said. Building credibility with solid provable claims will matter more than a few quick wins based on exaggerated statements.

Yes, in PR, presentation counts for a lot, but not without substance. Faking the substance of your pitch won't work for long. You might get away with lies for a while, and even become the toast of your industry (Elizabeth Holmes, Adam Neumann). But then you crash.

I learned this lesson early in my career. Fresh out of college, I was eager to join a prominent public relations firm, and I told them I was already a good writer. They found out soon enough that I wasn't – and put me on probation. I was lucky to have a job at all.

From then on, I stayed with reality and built up my confidence through real accomplishments. I struck out on my own and ran what became a national PR firm based in Silicon Valley. Under the constant pressure to succeed, I still made plenty of mistakes as an inexperienced CEO, setting myself back along with my company. But I built an authentic confidence and swagger.

Preventing the Imposter

Faking it is closely tied to the imposter syndrome, which affects an estimated two-thirds of people in business nowadays Imposter syndrome, the feeling that you don't deserve your position, can either tempt a person to fake

things, or result from fakery. We suddenly get new power or influence, but we're the same person, so we're uncomfortable in the new role.

That's natural, and most people grow out of it as they hit their stride. Staying close to mentors, reminding yourself of your achievements, seeking information to fight the fear of the unknown, and understanding and setting expectations – all of this can help you work through this scary period. I tell people to imagine the worst that could happen, visualize success, and then learn to live in the middle.

Still, it's common to feel insecure and vulnerable in that transition, and to be tempted to pretend you're someone different from your authentic self. You hear the common advice and decide to fake it until you make it – to hurry up the natural process of gaining confidence and comfort with your new position. But the faking only entrenches the imposter syndrome, because now you actually *are* an imposter. And you can't grow out of it because you keep reinforcing it with continued fakery.

I've seen this phoniness play out in two ways. First are the entrepreneurs who get swept up in the tornado of potential success and lose their grounding in reality. I recall meeting with a founder who intended to revolutionize the delivery of products to remote locations. "We are the leaders in delivery logistics with our patented software and have hundreds of customers around the world!" he arrogantly told me. In fact, I knew he had five other competitors, all much larger, along with zero revenues to date (his three "customers" had received his solution for free), and his only patent was still pending. He soon faded away, full of regrets, with lost potential and credibility, ultimately changing careers and industries.

The other kind of phoniness happens within large organizations. People find themselves on a fast-track to

leadership, and start misrepresenting themselves in small ways. That only feeds their insecurity, as the more they fake, the more they doubt themselves, if only subconsciously. The job becomes a fearful grind, as they're always trying to protect themselves from being exposed. Some people maintain the charade all the way to the C-suite, but then are crushed by terrible feelings of isolation and loneliness. Their health and their families suffer because they're hiding a terrible secret.

I'll never forget Heather, an ambitious young marketer at a global business software company. She was more effective at promoting herself than her company's products. She played everyone around her so well that she became Chief Marketing Officer. Once in the role, realizing she was in over her head, she started blaming everyone for her missteps, creating chaos wherever she went. It was a disaster. She was soon "transitioned" to a different role and ultimately left the company. I wondered at the time if she would continue a career of faking her way to top positions at different companies, or if she learned her lesson.

I myself succumbed to imposter syndrome when I sold my company after 25 years. My acquirer put me in charge of their entire technology practice, a role I wanted. But I was unsure of myself in my new surroundings, thinking I didn't deserve all the accolades and doubting I could deliver. I felt so awkward, I had a hard time even introducing myself at one particularly important sales pitch. I wanted to say more, or just something different, from what I had actually accomplished.

While imposter syndrome is a gender-neutral affliction, women and members of minority groups are uniquely susceptible. Being a trailblazer and breaking the glass ceiling comes with its own set of pressures, challenges and emotions.

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We don’t have to resort to fakery when hit by the imposter syndrome. Committing to authenticity, staying grounded in core values, gathering information, disarming fear and organizing risk, are all techniques to resist phoniness. We can stay with reality, and keep our authentic energy flowing for long-term success.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/376803