
THE SHARPER LAWYER



Helping
Lawyers
Generate
More Fees

Cynthia Sharp, Esquire
Business Development Strategist

Unmasking the Impostor Syndrome

Cynthia Sharp, Esquire - The Sharper Lawyer

UNMASKING THE IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

By Cynthia Sharp, The Sharper Lawyer

Many talented lawyers shortchange themselves and their law firms by failing to implement a strategic business development plan. Some claim that they don't have time to market while others lament that marketing doesn't work - for them. While these and a variety of other excuses are offered, it may be productive to dig a little deeper to determine whether some other factor is really at play.

Throughout 30 years as a mentor and/or professional coach for attorneys, I have noted that one of the major obstacles faced by lawyers is a phenomenon first identified in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes: The Impostor Syndrome ("IP"). They describe it as a feeling of "phoniness in people who believe they are not intelligent, capable or creative despite evidence of high achievement." Attorneys affected by IP are held back because their confidence level is constantly and erroneously undermined.

Case Study

Roger, a senior associate in the tax department of a major law firm, has consistently received positive reviews from supervising partners and has proved to be a profit center. However, he falls short when it comes to business development activities which is jeopardizing his long term prospects for advancement. I was retained by the firm to coach Roger and observed the following thought patterns and behavior which are typical of those affected by IP:

- * Underestimates experience and expertise - When I suggested that Roger write an article for a professional journal on a hot topic in the tax arena, he replied: “Why would anyone care about what I have to say?”
- * Feels unworthy of the success already achieved - Roger was recently honored by a community organization at its annual gala. He told me that the award was just a fluke and the organization had obviously run out of deserving people to honor.
- * Minimizes achievements - During law school, Roger worked full time, was on law review and managed to graduate magna cum laude. When I complimented him on his robust resume, he replied: “If I were really smart, I would have graduated summa cum laude”.
- * Attributes success to good luck - When I congratulated Roger on receiving a referral from a prominent accountant, he told me that he happened to be in the right place at the right time. Otherwise, the client would have been referred elsewhere.
- * Holds self to unattainable standard of perfection - While we must always be mindful to maintain exceedingly high professional standards, Roger remembers every little mistake and constantly beats himself up over trivialities.

As Roger began to trust me, he confessed that since he was young, he has “lived in fear of being ‘found out’ or exposed as a fraud.” He further related that he is amazed how he has been able to deceive so many smart people into thinking he is more intelligent than he really is.

I introduced Roger to the concept of Impostor Syndrome and explained that lawyers can have a particularly difficult time with this phenomenon especially since we are by and large held to a standard of perfection in our work. We ultimately become our own worst critic.

He became interested in learning more after taking an online assessment developed by Pauline Clance. The scale measures a person’s level of IP and is available at <http://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoreing.pdf>

Overcoming Impostor Syndrome

While the ultimate goal is for Roger to implement his business development plan, he will most likely have limited success until he rids himself of his negative internal script.

Most of us have a “Little Voice” in our head that can either support us or sabotage us and it’s our responsibility to take control of the message of that Little Voice. Although there is no “sure cure” for The Impostor Syndrome, steps can be taken to minimize the effect of The Impostor Experience. The following perspectives and suggestions should have a positive impact on mindset and attitude:

1. Realize that many high achievers have felt less than adequate at some juncture. Yet, they have overcome their feelings and soared to fame and prosperity. For example, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director and Chairwoman of the International Monetary Fund has confessed that earlier in her career, giving presentations made her feel nervous and that the act of speaking up on an issue, rather than staying silent required courage. Also, consider this excerpt from Facebook’s COO [Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead](#) written by Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook’s COO:

“Every time I was called on in class, I was sure that I was about to embarrass myself. Every time I took a test, I was sure that it had gone badly. And every time I didn’t embarrass myself – or even excelled – I believed that I had fooled everyone yet again. One day soon, the jig would be up ... This phenomenon of capable people being plagued by self-doubt has a name – the impostor syndrome.”

The lesson to learn from these eminent women is to leave your comfort zone and burst through your own terror barrier. The next time, the feared action won’t seem so intimidating.

2. Develop a relationship with a confidante (colleague, mentor or coach) with whom you can share your vulnerabilities. Once I began revealing my inner landscape to others, I was amazed to hear that many have had Impostor Experiences as well. Also, it is helpful to get objective feedback from someone you respect. I often tell my coaching clients: “If only you could see you as I see you” and then outline their finer qualities.
3. Recognize your own strengths and achievements. For the next 30 days, write down 3 positive actions you took or positive feedback you received that day. Anytime that you start doubting your worth or ability to achieve, look back on this list for positive reinforcement.

4. Define with specificity what success looks like for you and build a written navigation plan that will guide you toward your objectives. For example, over the past 18 years, I have completed a document (One Year Challenge) each December outlining the 10 key goals that I must achieve the following year in order to be satisfied that it was a year well spent. Progress is recorded quarterly. Measuring your personal and professional growth year after year is a powerful method by which to minimize Impostor-like thinking - provided that you are indeed moving forward in your thinking and actions. If you would like a copy of the One Year Challenge, please email me at cindy@thesharperlady.com.

5. Adopt the following “Referability Habits” taught to me by Dan Sullivan, founder of The Strategic Coach:
 - A) Show up on time.
 - B) Do what you say you’re going to do.
 - C) Finish what you start.
 - D) Say please and thank you. The confidence level of attorneys who live by these seemingly simple maxims will increase as a result of doing the right thing at all times. They will never be in the position of apologizing for being late to a meeting or for not delivering a work product on a timely basis. The reward will be cultivation of a loyal cadre of referral sources as well as repeat business.

6. Become “Cutting Edge” in your field. Attorneys who stay up to date on the latest legal developments and tailor their strategies accordingly will naturally shed feelings of being an Impostor as other professionals and judges compliment them on their fine legal work. I highly recommend that every lawyer set aside at least 2 hours a week for structured professional development. This would include reading the latest cases in your field or better yet writing your own analysis of emerging law as it happens. There is nothing like seeing your name in print to increase your confidence.

Conclusion

Taking steps to overcome the Impostor Syndrome will help lawyers develop the confidence to engage in productive business development activities. Perhaps there is a promising attorney in your firm who would benefit from the perspectives discussed throughout this article.

Business development strategist and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlady.com. She can be reached at cindy@thesharperlady.com or 609/923-1017.