



Wanted: Self-doubting employees—Managers scoring positively on impostorism favor insecure employees in task delegation☆



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ABSTRACT

Impostorism denotes individuals who are successful in their jobs but who doubt their abilities relative to the demands of their jobs. This study analyzes to what extent impostorism affects leadership behavior of these individuals. A core component of leadership is task delegation, implying the empowerment of employees to take responsibility for more or less challenging projects. In a vignette study, $N = 190$ managers assigned both routine and challenging tasks to employees who allegedly possessed varying levels of self-confidence regarding their job-related abilities. Managers holding negative self-views of their own abilities and perceiving themselves as impostors in their jobs, preferred to delegate both challenging and routine tasks to employees whose self-views resembled those of the managers. This study clearly shows that managers' self-beliefs bias their task delegation decisions.

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1. Introduction

In the 1970s, two psychotherapists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, were puzzled by patients and college students who expressed intense fears of failure. While these achievement-related fears per se were not exceptional, remarkably, though, they were experienced by successful women. Obviously these women's self-evaluations were incongruent with objective evidence regarding their abilities. Instead of gaining self-confidence from their professional or academic success, they felt uncertain about it and attributed it to some other factor than intelligence, such as charm, luck, or hard work. The significant discrepancy between these women's self-views and their achievements inspired Clance and Imes (1978) to coin the term "impostor phenomenon", which they defined as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women... despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise" (p. 241). Accordingly, the core characteristics of the impostor phenomenon have been described as (1) the sense of having fooled others into overestimating one's ability, (2) the attribution of success to some other factor than

intelligence or ability, and (3) the fear of being exposed as a fraud (Harvey & Katz, 1985).

In contrast to what was initially suggested, the impostor phenomenon seems to be equally prevalent among both genders; however, the majority of the empirical studies pertained to adolescents and student samples instead of people successful in their professional careers (e.g. French, Ullrich-French & Follman, 2008; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; Leary, Patton, Orlando & Funk, 2000; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Ross, Stewart, Mugge & Fultz, 2001; Sonnak & Towell, 2001; Thompson, Davis & Davidson, 1998). Moreover, the major focus of this research was measurement and well-being of individuals regarding themselves as impostors (for an exception, see Leary et al., 2000). But the impostor phenomenon is likely to have wider implications. Dispositional traits do not only affect how people experience their environment but also how they act upon it. The impostor phenomenon, which is per definition prevalent among professionally successful people, should also affect leadership behavior because traits including genetic, physiological, and neurological factors have been shown to indeed influence such phenomena as leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002; Arvey, Zhang, Avolio & Krueger, 2007; Becker, Cropanzano & Sanfey, 2011).

This study analyzes how impostorism affects a specific component of leadership behavior, which is task delegation. The decisions managers make when assigning challenging tasks or more routine assignments may have a significant impact on employees' careers. This is because employees who work on challenging tasks receive higher promotability ratings, irrespective of how well they actually perform (De Pater, Van Vianen, Bechtoldt & Klehe, 2009). Previous

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research has shown that leaders are biased in their delegation decisions as they are affected by task-irrelevant characteristics like employee gender (De Pater, Van Vianen & Bechtoldt, 2010; King, Botsford, Hebl, Kazama, Dawson & Perkins, 2012). This study goes beyond these findings and analyzes to what extent leaders are not only affected by what they think about others but also by what they think about themselves.

1.1. Managerial task delegation

The focus of leadership research has been on general behavioral styles, such as charismatic, transformational or transactional, but much less so on the everyday behavior of leaders (Yukl, 2006). A core part of everyday leadership behavior, however, is task delegation: For various reasons including time constraints, leaders assign a variable portion of their tasks to employees and monitor their performance. Employees' potential benefit from task delegation is multifold. First, as responsibility implies more autonomy, task delegation improves a core job characteristic that is known to increase job satisfaction and performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Schriesheim, Neider & Scandura, 1998). Second, in case of challenging tasks, chances are that employees will acquire new skills and expertise because challenging tasks are stimulating, new, and difficult. They require employees to leave routines behind and demonstrate general competencies such as strategic thinking, flexibility, and problem solving skills (McCauley, Ohlott & Ruderman, 1999; De Pater et al., 2009). As these skills are needed when occupying jobs at higher organizational levels, challenging tasks serve as realistic job previews for supervisors to judge their employees' promotability. Whether in the end supervisors undertake the risk of delegating will also be dependent on their trust in a certain employee to perform well (De Pater et al., 2010; Schriesheim et al., 1998). Employees signaling self-confidence about their abilities relative to their job demands are trustworthy candidates for challenging task assignment because they are more motivated to perform and less likely to give up in the face of difficulties: In an experimental task on solving anagrams, positive self-evaluations were related to self-reported motivation, time spent on anagrams and task performance (Erez & Judge, 2001). Likewise, insurance agents with positive self-evaluations set themselves higher goals, were more committed, and sold more insurance policies (Erez & Judge, 2001). Accordingly, supervisors aiming to maximize likelihood for successful task execution should tend to assign challenging tasks to subordinates holding positive self-views of their abilities with regard to their job demands.

Employees' performance, however, is but one criterion for supervisors to decide on task delegation. Besides this, they also choose employees whom they perceive as similar to themselves (De Pater et al., 2010). In general, similarity in attitudes, values, and dispositions strongly predict interpersonal attraction and friendship (Byrne, 1971; Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998). At work, attitudinal or dispositional similarity may play out positively because it facilitates communication. It may reduce role conflict, as people have similar conceptualizations of their organizations and jobs, and it may reduce role ambiguity because communication on the job increases (Harrison et al., 1998). Therefore, supervisors will initiate high-quality leader member exchange with employees they perceive as similar to themselves (e.g. Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Given this, managers scoring positively on impostorism should be biased towards assigning challenging tasks to employees who doubt their own abilities – although self-confident employees are more likely to perform well.

The effects of perceived similarity should not be restricted to the delegation of challenging tasks. Because perceived similarity facilitates communication and interpersonal coordination, delegating tasks to

similar employees should be managers' preferred option in general. Therefore, we formally predict:

Supervisors scoring positively on impostorism are more likely to delegate both routine and challenging tasks to subordinates who doubt their own job-related abilities.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

To test this hypothesis, we recruited a sample of managers from different industries. First, we measured their own self-construal using a variety of questionnaires. Then we asked them to read different task descriptions developed specifically for this study. The tasks had varying challenge profiles: some described routine activities, others genuinely challenging projects. After reading the task descriptions, the managers were given brief profiles of two male and two female employees. All four employees were the same age, and were described as highly conscientious, with high levels of professional motivation. They only differed in terms of self-perception – in how they evaluated their own abilities relative to the demands of their jobs. One male and one female were described as very confident in their abilities, while the other two were described as lacking in self-confidence. Once they had read the employee profiles, the managers were asked to share out the tasks between the four individuals.

2.1.1. Sample

Various strategies were employed to recruit participants. First, participants were recruited via email distribution lists of three manager networks in Germany, one of them being a network for female managers. The lists included about 100 email addresses. Second, human resource departments of various organizations were contacted by email and were asked to distribute the link to the questionnaire among their managers. Finally, each invitation email including the link to the questionnaire asked participants to forward it to other managers.

In total, 457 people clicked on the link, and 242 people (53%) started to fill out the questionnaire. Of these, 190 (78.5%) filled out the complete questionnaire. As intentions more strongly relate to real behavior when habit strength is high (Ouellette & Wood, 1998), one might expect intentions of experienced managers to be more congruent with their real decisions at work. Therefore the question was whether the decision to drop out of the study was related to years of professional experience. In fact, participants who completed the questionnaire were more experienced than those who dropped out, $M_{participants} = 11.61$ years ($SD = 8.02$) versus $M_{dropouts} = 7.69$ years ($SD = 8.36$), $F(1, 240) = 9.58$, $\eta = 0.04$, $p < .01$. This effect concurred with a significant effect for age: Those who had filled out the questionnaire were older than the dropouts, $M_{participants} = 45.42$ years ($SD = 8.41$), versus $M_{dropouts} = 40.21$ years ($SD = 10$), $F(1, 240) = 14.39$, $\eta = 0.06$, $p < .01$. Neither was there a difference in gender, $F(1, 240) = 1.58$, $p = .21$, nor educational level, $\chi^2(7, 242) = 12.25$, $p = .09$.

The remaining 190 managers (34.7% females) worked in different lines of business including service (24%), finance/banking (18%), industry (15%), health/social sector (14%), education/science (6%), administration (5%) and IT, law, journalism, and the construction sector (with less than 5% respectively). The managers were highly educated, as the majority (69%) held a Master's degree, another 16.8% had completed a Ph.D. Half of them supervised up to nine employees. A minority of 21.5% of managers was self-employed.

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