

How to Fake It When You're Not Feeling Confident

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Sometimes you feel like you're in over your head. Perhaps you got a big promotion or are leading a new, high-profile initiative but you worry that you don't have the right skills or experience to succeed. Are there strategies you can use to jolt your confidence? How do you "fake it 'til you make it"? And are there risks to that approach?

What the Experts Say

Feeling anxious about a new professional challenge is natural. In fact, imposter syndrome — the creeping fear that others will discover you aren't as smart, capable, or creative as they think you are — is a lot more common than you might guess. Most people feel like a fraud from time to time, and "many of us never completely shed those fears — we work them out as they come," says Amy J.C. Cuddy, a professor at Harvard Business School and the author of *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*. The key to doing that, she says, is "to trick yourself out of the state of self-doubt." Faking it 'til you make it is not about pretending to have skills you don't, she adds. It's "about pretending to yourself that you're confident" so you can work hard and get the job done. So, for starters, "let up [on] the self-flagellation." Often, the root of the insecurity involves your personal leadership style, says Herminia Ibarra, a professor at INSEAD and the author of *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader*. Your task is to figure out "how you come across as credible, how you convey your competency to others, and how you communicate your ideas in an authentic way." Here are some ways to go about it.

Frame it as an opportunity

The more you focus on what's scary about the new team you're leading or the project you're steering, the more intimidated you'll feel. Instead, "frame the challenge not as a threat but as an opportunity to do something new and different," says Cuddy. "Don't think, 'Oh no, I feel anxious.' Think, 'This is exciting.' That makes it easier to get in there and engage." Remind yourself that the professional challenge you've been asked to take on is probably "not categorically different" from what you've done before. "It's just a *little* different. [So] you need to scale up."

Think incrementally

If you approach a new position or responsibility with the goal of "killing it right off the bat, you're setting yourself up for failure," says Cuddy. Rather than setting a grandiose objective, she suggests making "small, incremental improvements" in your performance. Think of these steps as "the opposite of a New Year's resolution," she says. For instance, you might say to yourself, "In today's meeting, I'm going to make sure everyone on the team feels heard." Or, "At this networking session, I am going to make two new connections." A growing body of research supports this approach, notes Ibarra. "Goals are a moving target," she says, requiring constant setting and resetting.

Watch and learn

When you're developing your personal management style, you should observe how others lead, according to Ibarra. One role model will not suffice; "you need a panoply of them," she says. "It's helpful to be exposed to many different styles." Watch how these people influence others, use humor, and come across as charismatic and self-assured. Also take note of their verbal tactics — when they use silence, how they pose questions, and how they intervene. "Pay attention and then try to emulate [what they're doing]," she says. "You can borrow bits and pieces and tailor them to you."

Be bold in your body language

One surefire way to come across as self-confident when you're feeling insecure is to use "body language that makes you feel bold and victorious," says Cuddy. Your aim is to make "yourself feel more powerful psychologically." Take long strides. Sit up straight. Walk with your chest held high. And don't slouch. When you "carry yourself in a way that conveys power, poise, and healthy pride," you feel more self-assured and others perceive you that way. "You feel less guarded, more optimistic, more focused on goals, and more likely to take a stand," she says.

Heed red flags

If you're so overwhelmed that every day nearly brings on a panic attack, faking it may be inadvisable. The goal is to "step outside of your comfort zone," Ibarra says, not to set yourself up for failure or a breakdown. Cuddy agrees: "When you are in serious fight-or-flight mode, it's very hard to get yourself out of it; it's like a death spiral." So if you have deep-seated concerns that the challenge you're being presented with is too much too soon, or is unrealistic given the time frame and resources at your disposal, it's important to speak up.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Create goals based on making small, incremental improvements in your performance.
- Jolt your confidence with bold and expansive body language.
- Observe how your role models comport themselves in various professional situations. Seek ways to incorporate their strategies and tactics into your leadership repertoire.

Don't:

- Beat yourself up for feeling like an imposter — feeling nervous about a professional challenge is natural.
- Be overly daunted or scared by the challenge at hand. Consider it an opportunity to do something new and different.
- Fake confidence if you have legitimate concerns that the challenge you're being asked to take on is not feasible. If it's too much, say so.

Case Study #1: Focus on the opportunity and set small, achievable goals

Alex Mohler admits that when he first started as director of client services at Crubiq, a B2B sales company based in Raleigh, North Carolina, he felt like a fish out of water. Most of his prior experience was in the frozen dessert industry. “Crubiq sells to tech and analytics platforms,” he says. “Coming from the ice cream world, I didn’t know a lot about this.”

But he didn’t let his nerves get to him. “I had to be willing to go into the unknown and embrace it,” he says. “I looked at my new job as an opportunity to learn about an exciting, cutting-edge technology, and that was very motivating for me.”

He reminded himself that Crubiq represented a new business for him, and he had a proven track record in sales. He needed to have faith in his abilities. “I was still selling a product and selling a concept to people,” he says.

Alex says he’s learned the importance of sometimes thinking small. At Crubiq he and his team members each make a daily list of three things they want to accomplish. For example, Alex recently took on a new client in an unfamiliar industry, so one of his goals was to spend two hours doing research on the sector. Another of his goals to improve his Excel skills. To accomplish it, he set a goal of completing three sections of Excel Everest, a training program, each week.

“When you’re working on something as daunting and overwhelming as creating a brand and starting a company, it helps to be able to look back at those lists, check off boxes, and have a sense of accomplishment,” Alex says.

Case Study #2: Emulate successful role models and exhibit strong body language

When Radhika Duggal took over as a director in the marketing division at CommonBond, the student lending service based in New York, she “panicked a little.”

Although she had experience leading a team, this felt different. “I was inheriting a team of four people — all of whom had been at CommonBond for some time,” she explains. “They knew the business, whereas I had to learn it.”

To rev her confidence, she reminded herself that she had applicable skills and expertise. Before CommonBond, she had worked at Pfizer and Deloitte. “Because of my time as a consultant, I understood processes and I knew how to get work done,” she says. She also had directly relevant experience from doing social media and email marketing in previous jobs.

She reflected on past bosses and role models who struck her as particularly confident, and then created a working list of the leadership skills she wanted to emulate. “I once worked with a creative, talented manager who knew how to work a room,” she recalls. “But he told me he was not very well organized, he was not a detail person, and that’s where he needed my help.” His candor and willingness to admit his faults were eye-opening to Radhika. She now tries to be as open and honest with her direct reports.

Radhika also understands that her body language has a direct effect on her job performance. She works hard at coming across as authoritative. “I want my presence to be bigger than it is,” she says. “I pay attention to standing up straight, using hand gestures, and using intonation in my voice to engage people. I notice that it has a big impact on the dynamic and energy in the room.”