

Impostor syndrome helps no one - invest in yourself

By [Kgomotso Mbalusi](#)

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Self-doubt creeps up on all of us. Throughout my entire career, working in some of the more traditionally male-dominated spaces - newsrooms, the finance sector and even a trade union - I've fought the battle against uncertainty.



Source: www.unsplash.com

There was always an expectation, usually self-imposed, that I had to work twice as hard, put in the overtime hours, and always try to be the best to ensure that I wasn't overlooked. It's a dangerous strategy, and one that I think is more likely to lead to burnout than success.

Across Africa – where we still need to double the number of c-suite and executive female leaders to reach true gender equality – women suffer greatly from impostor syndrome. You may be the first person in your family to earn a university degree, but when you enter the world of work, you see that this doesn't give you the advantage you thought it did.



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In South Africa, women of colour in particular are repeatedly placed under the microscope when they hold positions of power, their capabilities undermined, usually through accusations that they were hired to simply 'tick the box'. It's no wonder self-doubt is ingrained in young women when they're constantly seen through this lens, but impostor syndrome helps no one.

We have to defy the stereotypes. Women are suite thinkers, we are operations specialists and brilliant managers. Yet when women occupy c-level positions, they are expected to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to be perceived as competent.

Women have always been boxed into the caregiver role within society, and female workers up to the very top are made to feel like they must choose between being homemakers and pursuing a rewarding career. Unfortunately, this pressure isn't just coming from men. Rather than having a mentality of paving the way forward for the next woman to have a better experience – there are often siloed and non-sharing cultures even in the female leadership space.



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These archaic attitudes have been proven wrong by research institutions across the world. Women are vital to a successful business. It should no longer be a point of debate for women to earn a seat at the table – it simply makes sense to include them as an absolutely invaluable resource for the next generation of leaders and those who support them.

If there is one thing I've learned through my career, it's that the key to a woman's success is through investment:

Invest in yourself

Your confidence is key, and the best way to build it is through introspection. Start journaling, so you can keep a log of your work decisions to examine them later. We don't always make the right decisions at every moment, especially when we haven't been given the time to fully consider them. But be forgiving. Once you improve your levels of self-awareness, confidence follows, the confidence you need to see the opportunities that are right in front of you.

In the words of Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube, "Rarely are opportunities presented to you in a perfect way. In a nice little box with a yellow bow on top. 'Here, open it, it's perfect. You'll love it.' Opportunities – the good ones – are messy, confusing, and difficult to recognise. They're risky. They challenge you."

Invest in mentorship and networking

My own pathway towards success is a story that features many other players. Along my journey, I met incredible teams, mentors, and coaches that were always committed to getting the best out of me, even when I least believed in myself. I was lucky to have them, but they didn't always just insert themselves into my life. We as women have to be the ones reaching out. Ask for advice from the people you admire - even those that are different from you. They're usually more accessible than you think. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you should only be learning from other women. A diverse skillset and understanding of the working world will come from many sources.

Invest in setting boundaries

Do your best to avoid the situation I found myself in early in my career. You can't be everything to everyone. I have come to accept that I have a complex role – I am a working woman, daughter, partner at home, mother, healer, aunt, and sister. Which means I have many roles that I need to fulfil. The reality is that no role is more important than the other.



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I make sure that I am never put in a position where I should pick – it is simply unfair and just not possible. For balance, I make sure that I make time for myself to do the things that I am passionate about personally and professionally. I believe that when I feel fulfilled as a person, that is when I can show up as the best version of myself in all of my roles. It is possible to set the work-life boundaries, and as more women leaders cement themselves in the corporate world, there will be more understanding.

Invest in your team

The importance of listening can't be understated. Making people feel heard is a challenge – more so when you lead in an executive position – but this is the opportunity to change the way businesses operate by listening to the concerns of those diverse people around us. Help them set healthy boundaries, build up their confidence and bring new talent into your networks.

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