

How Does Imposter Syndrome Impact Senior Leader Performance and Decision-Making?

By

Joel Kotanko, University of South Florida

Imposter syndrome (IS) is a psychological pattern in which individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as frauds, even when they are objectively competent. While extensively studied in early-career professionals and high-achievers, IS among senior leaders—those responsible for strategic decisions and shaping organizational culture—remains underexplored. This Research Question Review (RQR) investigates how IS impacts senior leader performance and decision-making.

A systematic literature review using databases such as ABI-Inform and Google Scholar reveals that IS in leadership can have mixed effects. Some leaders report increased humility and receptiveness to feedback, while others experience risk aversion, decision paralysis, overcompensation, and burnout. However, research

directly addressing senior leaders is limited, indicating a critical gap in both scholarly inquiry and managerial practice.

From a business standpoint, recognizing and addressing IS among senior leaders offers a strategic advantage. Understanding this phenomenon can inform targeted interventions—such

Understanding the hidden effects of imposter syndrome in senior leadership opens the door to improved performance, healthier organizational cultures, and more effective decision-making at the highest levels of the organization.

as executive coaching, leadership development programs, and peer support systems—that not only improve performance and decision-making but also reduce isolation among leaders. By normalizing the experience of IS, organizations can foster a healthier leadership di-

alogue, reduce stigma, and create more psychologically safe cultures. This review encourages both further research and open conversations that support leadership effectiveness and organizational resilience.

Keywords: Imposter syndrome, senior leadership, executive performance, decision-making, organizational culture, psychological safety, leadership development, executive coaching, workplace mental health, leadership effectiveness

In high-level leadership roles, the expectations for competence, confidence, and clarity in decision-making are exceptionally high. Yet, despite these expectations, a growing body of research suggests that even accomplished senior leaders may experience persistent self-doubt, fear of being exposed as frauds, and anxiety about their performance—symptoms commonly associated with imposter syndrome (IS). Originally coined by Clance and Imes (1978), IS is defined as a psychological phenomenon in which individuals internalize their success as luck or external factors, rather than competence, leading to chronic feelings of intellectual fraudulence.

Although IS has been thoroughly studied in academic, healthcare, and early-career professional settings (Chrisman et al., 1995; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Fowler & Villanueva, 2022), its presence in senior leadership—particularly those responsible for shaping organizational culture and making complex strategic decisions—remains underexplored. This represents a critical gap in both the academic literature and leadership development practice (Downing et al., 2020). Research suggests that IS in senior leaders can manifest in detrimental ways, such as decision paralysis, micromanagement, risk aversion, excessive impression management, and burnout (Aparna & Menon, 2022; Leary et al., 2000), though such effects are inconsistently reported and rarely studied longitudinally. Conversely, some studies indicate that IS may promote beneficial traits such as humility and openness to feedback, albeit in a cautious, self-protective manner (Michalec et al., 2023; Leary et al., 2000), though such effects are inconsistently reported and rarely studied longitudinally. Conversely, some studies indicate that IS may promote beneficial traits such as humility and openness to feedback (Michalec et al., 2023), though such effects are inconsistently reported and rarely studied longitudinally.

Understanding how IS affects senior leadership performance and decision-making is particularly important from a business perspective. Leaders with unresolved IS may inadvertently erode trust, inhibit innovation, or model maladaptive coping strategies within their teams (Feenstra et al., 2020; Leary et al., 2000). Yet, IS often remains unaddressed due to stigma, lack of awareness, or confusion with other traits like humility or perfectionism (Bravata et al., 2020; Kark et al., 2021; Michalec et al., 2023).

This Research Question Review (RQR) emerged from a personal and professional interest in leadership psychology and its organizational consequences. The aim is to critically examine existing research on IS in senior leaders, assess its impact on performance and decision-making, and explore intervention strategies that can help reduce negative outcomes. By surfacing this often-hidden challenge, the goal is to provide value not only to researchers

Methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted using databases including ABI-Inform, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PsycINFO. Initial searches used keywords such as “imposter syndrome,” “executive leadership,” “decision-making,” “performance,” and “organizational behavior.” Over 60 peer-reviewed sources were initially identified. After screening for relevance to senior leadership and decision-making contexts, 19 articles were selected for in-depth review and tabular summary. Each source was evaluated for methodological rigor and relevance to the research question, with key findings and implications extracted into a structured table (See Table 1).

but also to managers, executive coaches, and human resource professionals seeking to support leadership development, psychological safety, and sustainable high performance in executive contexts.

Literature Summary

The existing body of research on imposter syndrome spans a wide range of disciplines and populations, but studies that focus specifically on senior leaders are limited and scattered across various contexts. Due to this diversity in scope and methodology, the Individual Source – Multiple Findings format was selected for the literature summary table. This approach allows for a more nuanced presentation of each source’s unique contributions, including specific findings, study populations, and implications relevant to the research question. In addition to the source-by-source summary, Table 2 distills the recurring themes that appear across those studies, along with the frequency of sources supporting each theme. Figure 1 further illustrates the recurring themes.

The table below synthesizes 19 peer-reviewed scholarly sources that examine imposter syndrome in leadership and high-performance settings. It highlights each study’s key findings and directly connects them to the central research question.

Discussion

The literature reviewed suggests that imposter syndrome (IS) is a pervasive and psychologically taxing experience that can significantly affect the performance and decision-making of senior leaders. While the phenomenon has been widely acknowledged in early-career professionals, academics, and healthcare workers (Fowler & Villanueva, 2022; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), research examining IS in high-level leadership contexts remains limited. This gap in the literature is concerning, given the unique pressures and influence associated with executive roles.

Table 1: Individual Source-Multiple Findings Table

Source	Findings	Relevance to Research Question (RQ)
Aparna, K. H., & Menon, P. (2022). Impostor syndrome: An integrative framework of its antecedents, consequences, and moderating factors on sustainable leader behaviors. <i>European Journal of Training and Development</i> , 46 (9), 847–860. https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2019-0138	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developed an integrative framework of IS antecedents and outcomes. - Identified organizational culture as a key moderator. - Linked IS to sustainable leadership behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides a model for predicting IS's influence on leader decision-making. - Shows how IS may alter leader consistency and sustainability. - Highlights the importance of organizational culture in moderating IS effects.
Bravata, D. M., Madhusudhan, D. K., Boroff, M., & Cokley, K. O. (2020). Commentary: Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of impostor syndrome: A systematic review. <i>Journal of Mental Health and Clinical Psychology</i> , 4 (3), 12–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reviewed prevalence of IS across diverse populations. - Identified perfectionism, anxiety, and minority status as predictors. - Assessed therapeutic options including CBT and mentoring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers empirical backing for IS prevalence in professional leadership. - Supports identification of IS symptoms that may disrupt executive function. - Suggests broad utility of treatment options in senior leadership coaching.
Chrisman, S. M., Pieper, W. A., Clance, P. R., Holland, C. L., & Glickauf-Hughes, C. (1995). Validation of the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale. <i>Journal of Personality Assessment</i> , 65 (3), 456–467. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6503_6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Validated the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS). - Demonstrated strong reliability and construct validity. - Widely adopted for measuring IS in workplace research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Enables consistent measurement of IS in senior leader samples. - Assists in comparative analysis across leadership contexts. - Vital for evidence-based IS intervention evaluation.
Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. <i>Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice</i> , 15 (3), 241–247.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduced the term 'impostor phenomenon'. - Analyzed psychodynamic roots of IS in women. - Discussed therapeutic strategies and internalized self-doubt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foundation for understanding IS in high-achievers. - Contextualizes senior leader self-doubt through early IS theory. - Suggests deep-rooted IS may shape leader personality.
Downing, M. S., Arthur-Mensah, N., & Zimmerman, J. (2020). Impostor phenomenon: Considerations for leadership practice. <i>International Journal of Organization Theory & Behavior</i> , 23 (2), 173–187. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOTB-05-2019-0065	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explored IS in leadership transitions. - Identified patterns of self-doubt among experienced professionals. - Suggested developmental frameworks for IS intervention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focuses on IS in organizational and leadership roles. - Connects IS to behavior patterns affecting decision quality. - Recommends institutional support for affected leaders.

<p>Feenstra, S., Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Rink, F. A., Stoker, J. I., & Jordan, J. (2020). Contextualizing the impostor “syndrome.” <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>, 11, 575024. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.575024</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contextualized IS within social identity frameworks. - Demonstrated that IS varies by organizational environment. - Analyzed collective vs. individual-level influences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Illuminates how workplace norms intensify IS. - Highlights IS’s influence on team dynamics and risk aversion. - Offers insight into systemic contributors to IS.
<p>Fowler, K. R., & Villanueva, L. (2022). From the bedside to the boardroom: Imposter syndrome in nursing leadership. <i>Nurse Leader</i>, 20 (2), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2022.10.003</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examined IS in nursing executives. - Discussed stress during clinical-to-administrative transition. - Recommended leadership training to mitigate IS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Directly addresses leadership-level IS in healthcare. - Connects transitional stress to IS-related executive burnout. - Supports training recommendations for emerging leaders.
<p>Hutchins, H. M., & Rainbolt, H. (2017). What triggers impostor phenomenon among academic faculty? A critical incident study exploring antecedents, coping, and development opportunities. <i>Human Resource Development International</i>, 20 (3), 194–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678868.2016.1248205</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identified specific antecedents of IS in academic roles. - Categorized coping strategies including self-talk and mentorship. - Proposed faculty development initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supports IS identification in faculty with leadership duties. - Demonstrates IS’s effects on confidence and initiative. - Reinforces the need for role-specific IS coping models.
<p>Kark, R., Meister, A., & Peters, K. (2021). Now you see me, now you don’t: A conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences of leader impostorism. <i>Journal of Management</i>, 48 (7), 1948–1979. https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211020358</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developed conceptual model of leader impostorism. - Linked IS to hiding behaviors and reduced leadership visibility. - Outlined organizational consequences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explains how IS influences leaders’ desire to stay hidden. - Shows decreased visibility harms decision credibility. - Framework helps evaluate impact of IS on performance.
<p>Kets de Vries, M. F. R. (2005). Leadership archetypes: Implications for organizational effectiveness. <i>Organizational Dynamics</i>, 34 (3), 219–230.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analyzed executive behavior through archetypal lenses. - Described how IS maps onto ‘Martyr’ and ‘Caretaker’ types. - Suggested coaching tailored to archetype. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suggests IS affects archetype-congruent leadership styles. - Provides insight into IS-based overcompensation and burnout. - Aids targeted executive coaching strategies.

Several consistent themes emerged across the literature. First, IS among senior leaders is often hidden behind high performance, creating a dissonance between external success and internal self-doubt (Kets de Vries, 2005; Clance & Imes, 1978). Second, IS can negatively influence decision-making by promoting risk aversion, overcompensation, micromanagement, and burnout (Kark et al., 2021; Downing et al., 2020). These behaviors may not only affect the lead-

er’s own effectiveness but can also ripple through the organization, influencing team dynamics, innovation, and psychological safety (Feenstra et al., 2020; Vergauwe et al., 2015).

However, some studies highlight a more nuanced view, suggesting that IS may occasionally foster humility, openness to feedback, and cautious deliberation—traits not inherently negative in leadership (Michalec et al., 2023; Leary et al., 2000). This con-

<p>Leary, M. R., Patton, K. M., Orlando, A. E., & Funk, W. (2000). The impostor phenomenon: Self-perceptions, reflected appraisals, and interpersonal strategies. <i>Journal of Personality</i>, 68 (4), 725–756.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investigated how IS shapes self-perception. - Found IS leads to excessive impression management. - Linked IS to interpersonal stress and isolation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarifies how IS disrupts authentic communication. - Indicates increased stress and self-monitoring in decision-makers. - Useful for diagnosing relational dysfunctions.
<p>Michalec, B., Gómez-Morales, A., Tiliburt, J. C., & Hafferty, F. W. (2023). Examining impostor phenomenon through the lens of humility: Spotting conceptual (dis)connections. <i>Mayo Clinic Proceedings</i>, 98 (6), 905–914. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mayocp.2023.01.020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Studied humility as it overlaps and diverges from IS. - Argued that IS lacks the confidence base of humility. - Implications for leader self-awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frames IS as qualitatively different from humility. - Emphasizes IS's emotional toll on decision capacity. - Encourages nuanced self-awareness training.
<p>Neff, K. D. (2003). The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. <i>Self and Identity</i>, 2 (3), 223–250.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Created self-compassion assessment framework. - Proposed self-compassion as antidote to IS. - Encouraged inclusion in leadership development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Validates self-compassion as IS buffer. - Relevance to executive wellness and confidence programs. - Encourages internal leadership resilience building.
<p>Neureiter, M., & Traut-Mattausch, E. (2016). An inner barrier to career development: Preconditions of the impostor phenomenon and consequences for career development. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>, 7, 48. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00048</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identified IS as barrier to upward mobility. - Explored psychological roots such as fear of failure. - Emphasized early intervention in career paths. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlights early IS symptoms affecting future leaders. - Aligns with preventive approaches to senior role dysfunction. - Informs developmental pipelines.
<p>Ogunyemi, D., Lee, T., Ma, M., Osuma, A., Eghbali, M., & Bouri, N. (2022). Improving wellness: Defeating impostor syndrome in medical education using an interactive reflective workshop. <i>PLOS ONE</i>, 17 (8), e0272496. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0272496</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designed and tested IS-reduction workshops. - Participants reported greater confidence post-intervention. - Promoted reflection and peer support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intervention relevance for performance-impacted leaders. - Supports confidence restoration and judgment improvement. - Demonstrates scalable training utility.
<p>Pákozdy, C., Askew, J., Dyer, J., Gately, P., Martin, L., Mavor, K. I., & Brown, G. R. (2024). The impostor phenomenon and its relationship with self-efficacy, perfectionism, and happiness in university students. <i>Current Psychology</i>, 43, 5153–5162. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04672-4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Surveyed university students on IS correlates. - Found negative link between IS and happiness/self-efficacy. - IS positively correlated with perfectionism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifies core IS traits that impair executive function. - Data supports targeting IS in coaching for self-efficacy. - Relevant for confidence-dependent decision roles.

<p>Para, E., Dubreuil, P., Miquelon, P., & Martin-Krumm, C. (2024). Interventions addressing the impostor phenomenon: A scoping review. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>, 15, 1360540. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1360540</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mapped intervention types across IS studies. - Evaluated success of group coaching and CBT. - Recommended holistic strategies for professionals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consolidates effective intervention methods. - Framework can inform HR policy for senior development. - Applies cross-industry best practices to IS.
<p>Traut-Mattausch, E., Zanchetta, M., Junker, S., & Wolf, A. (2020). Overcoming the fear that haunts your success: The effectiveness of interventions for reducing the impostor phenomenon. <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>, 11, 405. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00405</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tested interventions for chronic IS sufferers. - Found reduction in IS after structured coaching. - Advocated workplace integration of strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourages proactive mitigation of IS in workplaces. - Strong alignment with performance and wellbeing goals. - Promotes measurable impact on leader behavior.
<p>Vergauwe, J., Wille, B., Feys, M., De Fruyt, F., & Anseel, F. (2015). Fear of being exposed: The trait-relatedness of the impostor phenomenon and its relevance in the work context. <i>Journal of Business and Psychology</i>, 30 (4), 565–581. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-014-9382-5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explored IS as personality-linked trait. - Associated IS with neuroticism and emotional instability. - Found IS impacts leadership trust and openness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Confirms trait-level risks for senior leaders. - Explains IS's link to indecision and fear of failure. - Foundation for psychological screening tools.

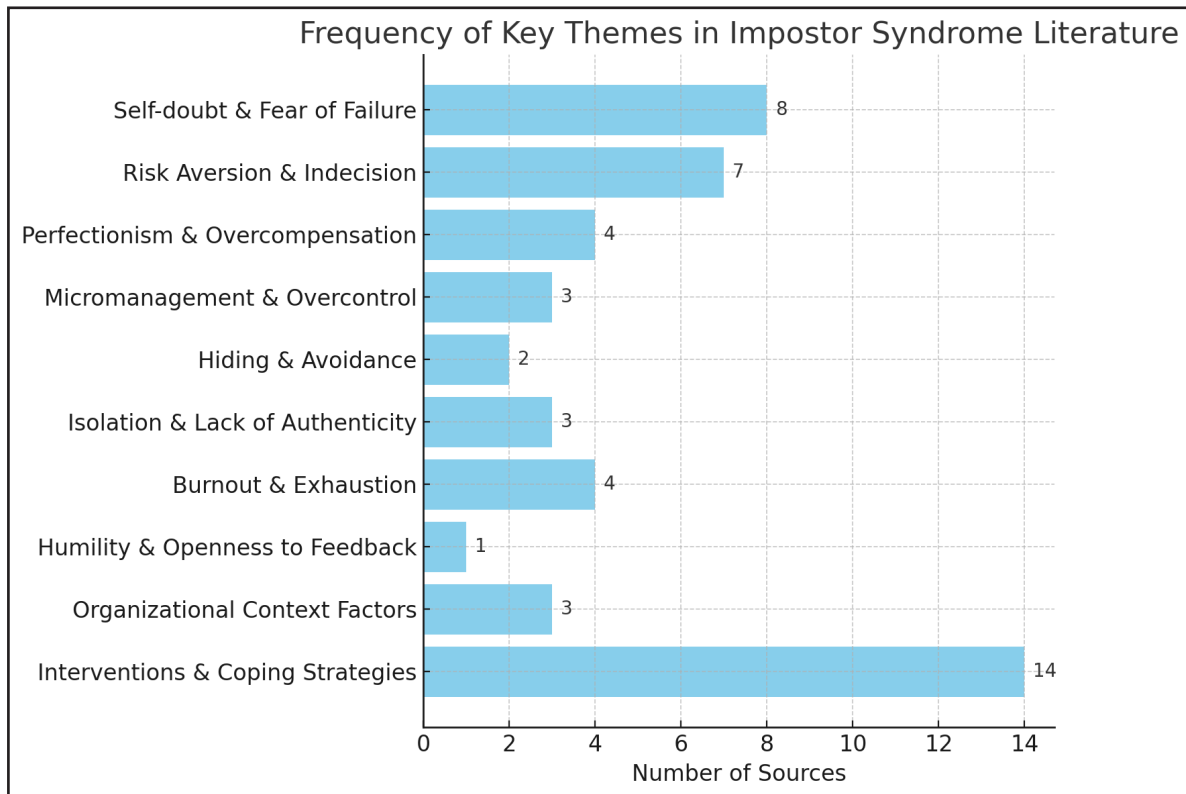


Figure 1: Recurring Themes Frequency

Table 2: Recurring Themes Table

Recurring Theme	Frequency (# of sources mentioning)
Chronic Self-Doubt and Fear of Failure – Persistent feelings of intellectual fraudulence, low self-confidence, and fear of being “found out.” Impairs leaders’ self-assurance and willingness to take on new challenges.	8 sources (e.g. Clance & Imes, 1978; Downing et al., 2020; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Pákozdy et al., 2024)
Risk Aversion and Indecision – Propensity to avoid risks, delay decisions, or stick to safe choices under pressure. Stems from fear of failure and criticism; can lead to missed opportunities and slow decision cycles.	7 sources (e.g. Downing et al., 2020; Kark et al., 2021; Feenstra et al., 2020; Fowler & Villanueva, 2022)
Perfectionism and Overcompensation – Setting impossibly high standards and overworking to meet them (“workaholic” or “martyr” behavior). Often a response to feeling “not good enough,” it can yield short-term performance gains at the cost of exhaustion.	4 sources (e.g. Bravata et al., 2020; Kets de Vries, 2005; Pákozdy et al., 2024)
Micromanagement and Overcontrol – Excessive control of details and reluctance to delegate tasks. Driven by the belief that one must personally ensure everything is perfect to avoid exposure. Can demoralize teams and limit strategic focus.	3 sources (e.g. Downing et al., 2020; Fowler & Villanueva, 2022; Kark et al., 2021)
Hiding and Avoidance of Visibility – Tendency to shy away from the spotlight, downplay one’s contributions, or decline advanced roles. Leaders with IS may “play small,” avoiding public praise or challenging assignments to evade scrutiny.	2 sources (e.g. Kark et al., 2021; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016)
Isolation and Lack of Authenticity – Feeling isolated and unwilling to share true feelings or ask for help, leading to a façade of competence. Includes excessive impression management (carefully curating how others perceive them) and difficulty trusting others.	3 sources (e.g. Leary et al., 2000; Feenstra et al., 2020; Vergauwe et al., 2015)
Burnout and Exhaustion – Heightened risk of stress-related burnout due to chronic anxiety and overwork. Leaders with IS often operate in “survival mode,” which over time can erode their health and capacity to perform.	4 sources (e.g. Kark et al., 2021; Kets de Vries, 2005; Fowler & Villanueva, 2022)
Humility and Openness to Feedback (Positive Outcome) – In some cases, IS is associated with a form of cautious humility, where leaders are very open to others’ input and avoid arrogance. Unlike genuine confident humility, however, this often coexists with anxiety. This nuanced, paradoxical benefit of IS is inconsistently reported.	1 source (Michalec et al., 2023)
Organizational Context Factors – Recognition that certain cultures and situational factors (e.g. non-inclusive climates, stereotype pressures) exacerbate IS. Conversely, supportive, psychologically safe environments can lessen IS’s occurrence and impact.	3 sources (e.g. Aparna & Menon, 2022; Feenstra et al., 2020; Vergauwe et al., 2015)
Interventions and Coping Strategies – Emphasis on solutions such as coaching, mentorship, peer support, and training programs to manage IS. Many works stress that acknowledging and addressing IS can improve performance and well-being.	14 sources (e.g. Bravata et al., 2020; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Neff, 2003; Para et al., 2024)

Frequency of key themes across the 19 sources reviewed. “Interventions & Coping Strategies” (appearing in 14 sources) was the most frequently cited theme, underscoring a strong focus in the literature on addressing IS. This is followed by internal factors like “Self-Doubt & Fear of Failure” (8 sources) and behavioral consequences such as “Risk Aversion & Indecision” (7 sources). Some themes, like positive humility, were noted rarely.

tradition points to a potential moderating role of factors such as self-compassion, organizational support, and leadership development programs (Neff, 2003; Aparna & Menon, 2022).

Despite growing recognition, there remains a lack of longitudinal studies, cross-industry comparisons, and targeted interventions specifically designed for senior leaders. Many existing interventions are oriented toward general employees or students (Para et al., 2024; Traut-Mattausch et al., 2020). This gap offers a significant opportunity for future research and practical innovation.

Conclusions

Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that imposter syndrome can meaningfully impact senior leader performance and decision-making. Leaders experiencing IS may struggle with confidence, second-guess critical choices, and inadvertently foster unhealthy organizational climates. While IS is not exclusively detrimental—and in some cases can encourage humility and receptivity—the negative consequences are more consistently reported and pose risks to organizational effectiveness.

This review concludes that IS in senior leadership is both real and underacknowledged. Leaders often feel isolated in their experience, unaware that others at their level struggle with the same phenomenon (Bravata et al., 2020). Addressing this issue through executive coaching, structured mentorship, psychological safety initiatives, and leadership development programs could help reduce IS's influence on critical decisions and organizational health.

Future research should focus on developing and testing IS-specific interventions for senior leaders, including longitudinal impact assessments and industry-specific case studies. For practitioners, creating space for vulnerability, reflection, and peer support within leadership teams may be one of the most powerful tools to normalize the experience and reduce its negative impact.

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Review

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Author



Joel Kotanko is an information and data systems engineer in the U.S. Army's Signal Corps. As a Data Systems Engineer, he is responsible for planning, managing, and securing Army networks, as well as overseeing the flow, storage, and protection of critical data. Joel has served as a Data Systems Engineer Course Manager and Instructor, as well as a Brigade Senior Communications Officer, where he led teams supporting both tactical and enterprise-level operations. He has managed military and civilian personnel in a wide range of environments—from deployed combat zones to garrison-based technical missions. Currently, Joel works as a technology instructor at MacDonald Training Center, helping individuals with disabilities earn technical certifications and obtain long-term employment. Joel earned a master's degree in writing from National University, a master's degree in management and leadership from Liberty University, and a bachelor's degree in English from Andrews University.