

Imposterhood™ may be the barrier to iconoclasm



by Suzanne Mercier

The concept of an iconoclast really appeals to me: people who succeed in doing something others say cannot be done. Now I haven't had anyone in my life telling me what to do ... at least no-one external. My biggest critic has been me. That little voice inside my head that tells me "You can't be serious! You? You think you can be a respected keynote speaker? You think you can be published? You think you have something unique to say?"

I'm sure many of us can relate to that noisy voice inside our heads. And many will agree that it's a journey to get to the stage where I recognise that people "buy" me more than what I literally do. For me, this has been a milestone on my journey to authenticity.

Iconoclasm is essential for true innovation

To truly innovate, we need to step outside the square of traditional thinking. We need to do something that hasn't been done before. For that we need Purpose, courage, Vision, persistence and the ability to communicate along the way. We need Iconoclasts! We don't need fame and fortune although they may be the result of our work.

Iconoclasts have much in common while expressing it in diverse ways

Although I have long embraced the concept of people doing what others say they can't, I hadn't discovered the work around Iconoclasts until quite recently. First I discovered the book "Iconoclasts" by Gregory Berns, a respected neuroscientist who examines the difference in the brain

and the way it is used between iconoclasts and others. Wonderful! Then I was referred to the television series from the Sundance Channel "Iconoclasts" which paired two dissimilar icons and filmed them exploring each other. People like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Sir Richard Branson, Alicia Keyes and Ruby Dee (a civil rights activist in her 80's), Mike Myers and Deepak Chopra. Amazing combinations and what was even more amazing was that even though they were so different in their career / life choice, they were so similar in their philosophies, values, passion and desire to make a difference.

Key characteristics of Iconoclasts

Drawn from both the television series and book are the key Iconoclast traits:

- an iconoclast **sees and interprets things differently** from other people. This individual has broken the pattern of conditioned response that most people adhere to. This individual challenges established thinking and asks "why not?" Iconoclasts embrace wisdom.
- **iconoclasts are purposeful.** They are passionate about what they believe in. They find within themselves the energy and focus to live their purpose. They advocate focussing on what they love and are driven to do rather than the money.
- **an iconoclast is persistent.** He or she comes up with the original idea and then does whatever is needed in order to bring it into reality. Others say it can't be done; iconoclasts say yes it can - I've just got to figure out how. The iconoclast

is - at least in their specialty area - highly emotionally resilient.

- an iconoclast **recognises the fear** associated with being a lonely voice and the fear of social rejection that comes with holding a view that contradicts conventional thinking and works to reduce its power or to transform the energy into something that serves his or her outcome better.
- they accept that **failure will occur more than success** on their journey and they still remain focussed on what they intend to achieve
- iconoclasts have the **ability to persuasively articulate their ideas** which is a critical part of bringing their ideas alive.

Imposterhood™ is a barrier to many of these characteristics

The Imposter Syndrome is an embedded way of thinking about ourselves and our success. It was first identified by Drs. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978 while working with female senior PhD and Masters students. These women had been successful in every assignment and exam throughout their programmes, yet were afraid they would fail in the next one. Clance & Imes explored the situation further and found that approximately 70% of these women experienced feeling like a fake and fraud, unable to internalise and build on their successes, thinking they were more the result of good fortune and someone else’s mistakenly positive view of

their intelligence. These feelings can be grouped as “not good enough” and lead to fear of discovery, judgement and rejection.

In our fearful state, we seek to prevent our worst fears - discovery, judgement and rejection - from taking place so we engage in behaviours such as withholding, defending, blending in, hiding, judging or going for it with little or no assessment of risk or consequences, simply to prove we are good enough.

The key differences between Iconoclasts and people actively experiencing Imposterhood are captured in the table below and provide the strategic direction for addressing the tendency to experience the Imposter Syndrome.

Addressing feelings of fear and inadequacy is essential

An active experience of the Imposter Syndrome and the fear it entails stands in the way of true innovation. Addressing those feelings and the distorted self-view they entail will liberate the individual to recognise his or her true qualities and talents and with that acceptance to make their contribution, if they choose to do so. Yes, we need to accept that we can’t force anyone to do anything. However, by helping them recognise the way in which they limit themselves, we create awareness of those patterns, which provides the opportunity for choice and new decisions.

Activated “Imposters”	Iconoclasts
Subject to the conditioned response	Challenge established thinking
Are into survival and self-protection	Are purposeful
Are reactive	Are proactive
Inconsistent	Persistent
Subject to fear	Recognise and handle fear
Dread failure	Recognise failure will occur more than success
Fear can make them inarticulate	Able to persuasively articulate their ideas

Key differences between Iconoclasts and Activated “Imposters”

From Imposterhood™ to Potential Iconoclast

To open up the possibility of iconoclasm, we need to remove the barriers or step around them in some way. Yes, there are organisational barriers that can create an environment of fear which makes it near to impossible to be innovative. I may deal with that subject at another time. Here, I am more interested in what makes it challenging for us as individuals to step up to the significant potential we have and yet, commonly we don't see or accept.

Here is a 7-step process that will help move beyond the limitations of Imposterhood.

- 1. Awareness.** We firstly need to know that we are limiting ourselves before we can change our thinking and actions. Awareness breaks our conditioned response and gives us the opportunity to choose differently.
- 2. Reframe Mistakes.** Too often, we have made the decision, from past experiences, that it is not alright to make a mistake. People who experience feelings of Imposterhood often have a finite view of intelligence - like a big pie - that is diminished by mistakes. We become less intelligent, so we avoid making mistakes. Also, making mistakes exposes to others our secret fear that we are simply not good enough. We need to reframe mistakes as learning opportunities and the results as information we can take on board to guide changes in our approach. Mistakes are not there to deter us from living our Purpose and achieving our Vision. They are signposts along the way.
- 3. Handle the fear.** Fear is a conditioned response, so by breaking the automatic reaction we have to a situation, we have the opportunity to recognise what is happening and change our response.

Psychological Fear relates to something that may happen in the future. I say may happen, because roughly 90% of the things we fear never take place. Certainly there are times we need to plan for a situation that may take place. However, we then need to let it go and live in the now, the only time frame where we can actually change things. Fear also comes up when we push ourselves or are pushed outside our comfort zones. Instead of seeing the edge of the comfort zone as dangerous, reframe that danger to excitement - they have the same physiological symptoms and excitement is the presage to something wonderful happening when we push through that barrier.

- 4. Shift the Imposter Mindset.** When people feel like imposters, they are ignoring their past successes and their obvious talents (to others at least). They are holding a distorted self-view so we need to challenge that view. Find someone you would normally trust implicitly and ask that person for feedback on your strengths and successes.

Watch that little voice inside your head that denies the feedback of that trusted adviser. You would normally trust the words of this person, so trust him or her in this situation too.

- 5. Build Emotional Resilience.** This is not about ignoring our emotions or burying our feelings. The term relates to how quickly we can bounce back after a set-back. Separate behaviour from identity. We are not "imposters". We may feel like imposters and take action to protect ourselves. Behaviour can be easily changed.

Start cultivating an optimistic frame of mind. Optimism or pessimism are learned behaviours. Iconoclasts have an optimistic frame of mind - one that

allows them to see possibilities. To shift the energy from pessimism and focussing on what is not working - which is a frame of mind many people in the grip of Imposterhood feel - focus on all you have in your life to be grateful for.

6. Expand your Wisdom. Wisdom comes from multiple perspectives on the same issue. When we can let go of judgement, of right and wrong, we can embrace possibility and possibility enables us to consider other perspectives. In that way, we open up our own understanding of “reality”. Wisdom is a characteristic of authenticity and iconoclasm.

7. Find your Purpose. Purpose relates to the BIG WHY. Why are we here? Why do we have the talents and skills we do? For what purpose? Purpose relates to the contribution we can make beyond ourselves to the broader community. Purpose is about being of service and making a difference. Purpose fires us up on an emotional and even spiritual level. It allows us to find energy, focus and support to bring to life something that is really important to us. And, importantly for those of us who experience feelings of Imposterhood from time to time, it puts our fears and feelings of insecurity into perspective - they're not real, they can be overcome in our mind and we are neurologically and biologically driven to find meaning in our lives.

Now here's the secret and this may make your journey beyond imposterhood faster and easier. If you are able to identify a purpose for yourself - and that requires you to see and accept your talents and qualities humbly and with gratitude - you may be able to connect with how you can be of service. When we come from a higher space, an expansive space of giving,

we are able to find the best in ourselves to make it happen.

How could it be if ...

What if you made it past your self-imposed limitations? What if you were able to clearly see just who you are and what you are capable of? What then? And perhaps that is part of the problem. We might actually have to step up if we saw the truth. You are so much more than you think you are. You may well be an iconoclast in the making!

I'd like to leave you with some powerful words from Ruby Dee, the civil rights activist, spoken in her Iconoclast interview with Alicia Keyes.



*“Today is ours,
let’s live it
Love is strong
let’s give it
Our world is wrong
let’s right it
the battle is hard
let’s fight it
Is faith asleep?
Let’s wake it
Today is ours
let’s take it.”*
Ruby Dee

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step beyond your limitations