



Feeling like a fraud: the symptoms
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Welcome to the first of six installments about the phenomenon of feeling like a fraud in your leadership role. These installments come directly from my new book, **The Fraud Factor**, to be published by Leader Press in April, 2016. This is only three months away! The six installments include these topics:

- Feeling like a fraud: the symptoms
- Feeling like a fraud: the dynamics of learning
- Feeling like a fraud: everything I know seems wrong!
- Feeling like a fraud: the big fat lie
- Feeling like a fraud: who am I at the core?
- Feeling like a fraud: getting real again!

Several years ago, as I began to build the chapters of **The Fraud Factor** and talk to various people about the main focus, the thought began to creep into my mind that I was not the best person to handle this fraud topic. Certainly, there must be an author and speaker who had spent more time in this area, who had better stories, and who would be a much more powerful presenter on the topic than I would. *I began to feel like a fraud about being the one writing and speaking on the topic of being a fraud!*

This reaction on my part illustrated to me how pervasive and insidious this fraud feeling can be, and how quickly it can surface. It reminded me how fragile genuineness often is, and how events and circumstances can undermine even the most confident and competent leaders.

When I use the word “fraud,” I mean feeling inauthentic, like a phony or charlatan in a particular situation that, in your mind, requires you to pretend to be someone very different from the person you really are.

In this first installment in our Leadersynth series, my hope is that you will come to recognize how the fraud factor undermines your success and that of the people you lead. I hope you will see that, while it is important to build new skills and perspectives throughout your life, you will be most effective when you stay true to who you are at the core. In fact, it is impossible to be highly effective if you stray too far from the nucleus of who you are.

On some level, in certain situations, every leader feels like a fraud. Even the most successful and confident leaders find themselves in settings where they begin to think that someone else would have been a much better choice to handle their duties. This is often the result of circumstances where they are placed in a new role with very challenging expectations, are given unanticipated critical feedback on a 360-degree instrument, or moved under a new manager with a very different approach. Things change, and you suddenly do not feel adequate to the task.

As an executive coach, I see these fraud feelings most frequently in situations where leaders move into a new role with increased scope of responsibility, often over functional areas where they have limited expertise. Sharon is an example of a person in this situation. She came into the department from a parallel position within a business recently acquired by my client company. Though she was put in charge of functions that included her area of technical comfort, she also now had responsibility for several areas about which she knew very little.

Sharon came in wearing heavy spurs and riding hard on the groups for which she was responsible. As she told me later, “During the interview process, I was informed that major changes needed to be made in the groups I managed. It was clear that their previous boss was too hands-off and lenient, and that a laissez-faire attitude had developed within the teams. A couple of the teams were worse than the others, but they all needed strong leadership.”

Instead of getting to know each person who reported to her and building a team collaboratively, Sharon quickly began to make dramatic changes in the organizational structure and in the expectations she set for individual members of the teams in her scope of responsibility. This kind of strain on the system would have created a problematic level of stress on the teams all by themselves, but she complicated things with her direct reports by displaying inconsistent behavior and occasional emotional outbursts.

When I first met with her, it became clear to me that Sharon was overwhelmed and anxious in this new role. She made comments to me like, “I’m not really an expert across all areas of my new responsibility, and the company took a bit of a chance bringing me in.” She also said, “I think my boss wants to leverage my confidence and strong leader presence to inspire and drive these teams to greater productivity and, ultimately, better success. However, they don’t seem too motivated to ratchet-up their game.” On another occasion, she confided in me, “I’ve got to show that I am successfully changing the culture in this group, and it has to happen within the first three months.”

Sharon did not want to fail in this new assignment with this new company. Consequently, she felt that she needed to cover her inadequacies by pushing hard to score quick wins. Her self-talk, as in the above examples, undermined her capacity to confidently and genuinely express herself as the leader of this department. This led to behaviors that very nearly undermined her success.

In her own way, Sharon was feeling like a fraud in the position. What are the symptoms that indicate you might be feeling like a fraud in your current situation? Here are some I’ve encountered:

- Avoiding situations or people that seem to drain your confidence, ability to think clearly
- Making quick, somewhat questionable decisions, just to assert your authority
- Not speaking up in situations where you should weigh in as the leader
- Trying to aggressively control the situation, drive your own agenda
- Failing to establish collaborative dialogue as the preferred approach for decisions
- Feeling tense, anxious, threatened, overwhelmed, or discouraged

We will learn in the next Leadersynth installment that a certain degree of tension helps move you from your current state to a more productive, effective one. However, too much tension can become destabilizing and, consequently, block your effectiveness. The optimal amount of tension pushes you to grow as a leader, and to develop new strategies and approaches, but does not destabilize you.

Weigh in on this topic and let us know what you think on our blog: www.roselleadership.com.