



**Feeling like a fraud: the dynamics of learning**  
**Bruce E. Roselle, PhD**

Welcome to the second 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 less than three months away! Following this current article, the four remaining installments in this series include these topics:

- 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!

Learning comes through change, but change can be difficult for anyone. Depending on the enormity and abruptness of the change, some of us get pushed back on our heels and struggle to respond effectively. We start to feel like a fraud, inadequate to meet the challenge of the change.

A participant in one of our Great Leaders workshop series, Diane experienced this when her job changed from supervising others in the parts department to managing an entire function. When she had worked the parts supervisor job, she could clearly measure her progress and track her success with her team at the end of the day. In her new leadership role, however, the impact of her work was much more intangible. She indicated she had felt like a fraud in the new role for months.

At first, she felt alone in these emotions and was convinced that her peers did not suffer from feeling like frauds. She finally found enough courage one day to mention her feelings of inadequacy to others. To her surprise, all of them, both male and female peers, indicated that they also had moments where they felt like frauds. Despite finding out that this feeling was shared by most others around her, she kept beating up on herself every day. She also lived in fear that her boss would come into her office, shut the door, and say, “you’re fired!”

After experiencing a high degree of upset for several months in the new supervisory role, Diane’s thoughts began to shift in a healthier direction. She thought about the attributes that had earned her this role in the first place. She realized that, having started her career in customer service rather than operations, she actually was quite gifted at taking care of people’s needs and using her common sense to solve problems. She also recognized that at previous jobs in her career, she had stepped into roles for which she was not fully qualified, but she had handled them very well. Using logic and perspective helped her overcome the fear associated with being found out as a fraud.

In this new role, however, she also sat at the senior leadership table for the first time. This intimidated her, because she was now sitting with men and women she had admired and felt were “way beyond” where she was at that point. They were more educated and more experienced at the company;

consequently, she hesitated to speak up in these meetings. Diane's story illustrates what happens when individuals feel pushed outside their confidence zone far enough that they become destabilized, at least for a time.

**Dissonance versus destabilization.** When things change in your role or responsibilities, you need to learn quickly and grow into the new expectations. This typically creates a degree of **dissonance**--*a temporary lack of consistency or compatibility between your actions and beliefs in a particular situation. It is a short-term instability that feels unpleasant and motivates you toward resolution.* A temporary **dissonance** brought about by challenging circumstances is usually a healthy road to learning and developing new skills, and often the catalyst for thinking in a new way, or approaching people in a different, more effective manner.

By contrast, **destabilization** *is a deep and lasting instability that undermines and overwhelms your ability to function with consistent actions and beliefs. It disrupts and weakens your capacity to fulfill your role over time.*

This dissonance/destabilization distinction forms the basis for a seeming paradox as it applies to creating sustainable growth in people. That is, to show evidence of true growth (like Diane), you must accommodate to new circumstances and demands by changing some of your core beliefs and shifting your behavior. However, to sustain this growth, you must not stray too far from who you genuinely are at the core.

**Sustainable learning.** To create sustainable growth, then, new learning must occur within the context of your existing personality, abilities, motivators, and thinking—your core. At the same time, true growth seldom occurs unless events or circumstances challenge the basis upon which you think and respond. *This is the paradox!* You feel dissonance in this kind of situation, and then respond by either finding ways to incorporate new learning, or ignoring the circumstances and continuing in your old paradigm.

However, when you encounter dramatic and discontinuous learning situations, you might begin to feel inadequate inside your existing internal framework (like Diane did, for a while). Instead of just a bit of dissonance, you might feel a much stronger level of destabilization that threatens to undermine your very sense of self. When you become destabilized--feeling upset, losing confidence, or being overwhelmed by the challenges in your environment--you start to feel and act like a fraud.

This dynamic tension is a learning dance that takes place throughout your life. It started when you first went off to school, and then continued every time you entered a new school or class. Each one of these experiences probably stretched you, shifted the way you thought or felt about things, and forced you to generate new approaches.

Feeling *dissonance* is a natural part of the growth process, but it can become immobilizing if this feeling turns into *destabilization* and threatens the very core of who you are as a person and a leader. Recognizing the feelings you have of being a fraud and how these have changed your behaviors into much less effective ones is the first step in becoming real again as a leader and a person.

We encourage you to weigh in on this topic on our blog:

<http://roselleadership.com/stay-informed/roselle-leadership-blog>