

THE

SECRET THOUGHTS

Why Capable People Suffer
OF **from the IMPOSTOR SYNDROME**
and How to Thrive in Spite of It

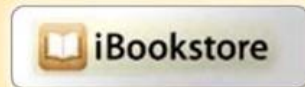
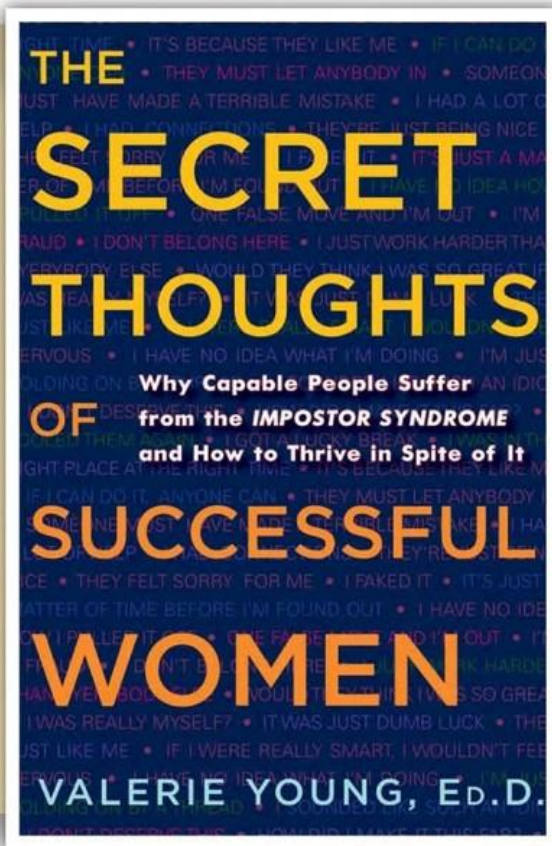
SUCCESSFUL WOMEN

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*The Competence Rule Book
for Mere Mortals*

I have offended God and mankind
because my work didn't reach the quality
it should have.

— Leonardo da Vinci

How will you know when you're "competent"? All achievers want to do their best. But when you feel like an impostor, "best" includes a host of self-expectations that go far beyond doing well. Whether you know it or not, your view of competence is a major contributor to perpetuating your belief that you are an impostor. Over the years you've adopted notions about what's required for you to be considered talented, knowledgeable, skilled, or,



in a word, “good” enough. And these notions have everything to do with how competent and confident you feel.

The fact that everyone else sees a highly capable individual where you see an inadequate fraud tells me right there that you operate from a competence playbook that bears little resemblance to reality. It doesn’t matter how intelligent or talented or skilled you are right now because I have news for you: You are never going to *consistently* reach that insanely high bar you’ve set for yourself – ever. That’s why if you truly want to beat the impostor syndrome, you *must* adjust your self-limiting thinking as to what it takes to be competent. This redefining process is, bar none, your fastest path to confidence.

What’s Your Competence Type?

Every impostor on the planet has a distorted view of competence. However, not all impostors skew it the same way. To show you what I mean, I’d like you to take a moment now to complete the following sentences with the first thing that pops into your head:

I’ll know I’m competent at _____
when _____.

If I were really smart, _____
_____.

I should always _____
_____.

If I were really qualified, I would _____
_____.

As you are about to discover, your answers tell a lot about your competence type. They are *the Perfectionist*, *the Natural Genius*, *the Rugged Individualist*, *the Expert*, and *the Superwoman/Man/Student*. Each represents one kind of erroneous thinking about what it takes to be competent — your inner competence rule book.

Competence rules include words like *should*, *always*, *don't*, and *never*. For instance, you might be guided by an inner rule that says, *If I were really smart, I would always know what to say*. This way of thinking may in turn drive rules of behavior like *Never raise your hand unless you are 100 percent sure you are right*, or *Don't ask for help*, or *Always overprepare*. At its core, your rule book represents a strong internal expectation that you meet a standard of performance that is rarely achievable and most definitely not sustainable — at least not for mere mortals like you and me.

As you learn about the five competence types, you may recognize parts of yourself in several of them. Typically, though, you'll have one dominant type. A clearer understanding of your own limiting self-expectations will go a long way toward helping you rid yourself of the shame and fraudulence you feel when you fall short.

Once you have a better idea of what you're up against, the next step is to swap your old, unreasonable rules for the *Competence Rule Book for Mere Mortals* you'll receive here. As you'll discover, these new rules represent a profoundly different mind-set than the one that currently fuels your impostor fears. And because your new rule book reframes competence in realistic terms, it offers the opportunity for you to *instantly* feel more confident and competent.

The Perfectionist's View of Competence

For the Perfectionist, there is a single focus, and that is *how* something is done. Your competence rule book is quite straightforward. *I should deliver an unblemished performance 100 percent of the time. Every aspect of my work must be exemplary. Nothing short of perfect is acceptable.* When you fail to measure up to these unrealistically high standards, it only confirms your feelings of impostorism.

Some Perfectionists hold only themselves to these exacting standards, while others impose them on other people. At home the latter might sound like this: *No, honey, that's not how you fold a towel – this is how you fold a towel.* There is a right and wrong way to do everything from packing the car for vacation to preparing a project plan. Since no one can measure up to your precise standards, your motto is “If you want something done right, you’ve got to do it yourself.” When you do delegate, you are often frustrated and disappointed at the results.

To be clear, perfectionism is not the same as a healthy drive to excel. You can seek excellence without demanding perfection. More important, non-Perfectionists will attempt difficult challenges and feel okay about themselves afterward – whether they succeed or not. And they’re flexible enough to redefine success as the situation warrants. That’s not to say they aren’t disappointed if they fail. But as long as they gave it their best shot there is no shame. Not so for the Perfectionist.

Indeed, for you just the opposite occurs. Quality-wise, Perfectionists always go for the gold, the A+, the top spot. Anything less and you subject yourself to harsh inner criticism, often experiencing deep shame at your perceived “failure.” Precisely because there is such shame in failing, you may avoid altogether attempting anything new or difficult. After all, getting things “right” takes a lot of effort, energy, and aggravation. It’s much

easier not to even try than to put yourself through those paces and risk the humiliation of coming up short.

Even if you are extremely motivated, success is rarely satisfying because you always believe you could have done even better. You get into a good school but are disappointed because you could have gotten into a better one. You deliver a top-notch presentation but kick yourself for not remembering to make some minor point. You broker a major transaction only to wonder if you could have struck an even better deal.

Perfectionism is a hard habit to break because it's self-reinforcing. Because you do overprepare, you often turn out a stellar performance, which in turn reinforces your drive to maintain that perfect record. *But it's a huge setup.* Because when you expect yourself and your work to always be perfect, it's a matter not of *if* you will be disappointed but *when*.

Perfectionism is not a quest for the best.
It is a pursuit of the worst in ourselves,
the part that tells us that nothing we do
will ever be good enough— that we should try
again.

— Julia Cameron, author, poet, playwright, and
filmmaker

Competence Reframes for the Perfectionist

What you consider to be merely “satisfactory” work probably far exceeds what's actually required. That's why it is so important to reframe your current thinking about things like “quality” and “standards.” In the sixteen-plus years that I've been helping people who aspire to be their own

boss, I have found that women are by far more likely than men to wait for everything to be perfect before they launch. They endlessly tinker and tweak and adjust, making sure everything is just so, but they never begin. In the end these high-minded notions of “quality standards” and “getting it right” equal paralysis.

On the whole, male entrepreneurs operate from a very different definition of quality. The mantra repeated by speakers at the numerous Internet-marketing seminars I’ve attended always comes down to some variation of “You don’t have to get it right, you just have to get it going.”¹

One marketing guru went even further, telling procrastinating Perfectionists that “Half-ass is better than no ass.” His wording may have been crass, but the fundamental truth remains: If you wait for everything to be perfect, you’ll never act. Whether it’s a product, a service, or an idea, you have to put version one out there, get some feedback, improve on it, then create a new and improved version from there. You can always course correct as you go. But at some point you must decide it really is good enough.

If you work in the corporate world or in academia, you may be understandably turned off by advice like “Half-ass is better than no ass.” So what if we repackage it into something more respectable, like a paradigm? As it turns out, the software-development world not only shares the basic mind-set of my Internet marketer friends, but the concept even has an official-sounding name. Paradigm creator James Bach calls it “good enough quality,” or GEQ.

Bach’s article “Good Enough Quality: Beyond the Buzzword” appeared in a well-respected publication dedicated to advancing the theory and application of computing and information technology. In it he asserts that GEQ is standard operating procedure in the software-manufacturing world, explaining that “Microsoft begins every project with the certain knowledge that they will choose to ship [a software product] with known

bugs.”² This is not a jab at Microsoft or, for that matter, any software company. Rather, it’s recognizing the reality that any manufacturer in the technology sector must operate with a degree of uncertainty.

To be clear: The principles of GEQ – or “Half-ass is better than no ass” – have nothing whatsoever to do with mediocrity. Nor are they about providing the minimum quality you can get away with. None of the seven- and eight-figure-earning entrepreneurs I know got rich selling schlock. And Bill Gates and Steve Jobs did not build the two dominant technology companies in the world by putting out inferior products. For a product to be considered “good enough,” Bach insists it must still meet certain criteria. To guide those efforts, his good-enough quality paradigm includes six factors and six “vital perspectives.” Notably, being perfect is not one of them.

None of this is to say that you have to relinquish your quest for excellence or do things willy-nilly. What it does mean is, with some obvious exceptions such as performing surgery or flying an airplane, not everything you do deserves 100 percent. It’s a matter of being selective about where you put your efforts and not wasting time fussing over routine tasks when an adequate effort is all that is required. If you get a chance to go back and make improvements later, great – if not, move on. There’s a reason why scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov is proud to describe himself as a “non-perfectionist,” telling fans, “Don’t agonize. It slows you down.” With five hundred books to his name, I’d say he’s on to something.

Reframing perfectionism is also a smart career move. If you work with other people, there’s a good chance that your constant need for everything to be just so is a problem for them too. A project manager at IBM told me things got so bad with one perfection-obsessed team member that she finally had to pull her aside to say, “Knock it off. You’re slowing the whole team down.”

Rather than enabling your success, perfectionist thinking is actually a gigantic barrier. The late author Jennifer White said it best: “Perfectionism has nothing to do with getting it right. It has nothing to do with having high standards. Perfectionism is a refusal to let yourself move ahead.” It’s that last line that is so powerful.

It will take some practice, but you really can learn to appreciate the virtues of non-perfection. The most beautiful trees are often those that are the most misshapen. Many of the most profound scientific discoveries were the result of mistakes. I once read that in some Islamic art, small flaws are intentionally built in as a humble acknowledgment that only God is perfect. How stupendously boring life would be if every wave was the perfect wave, every kiss the perfect kiss. There is utility, beauty, and grace in non-perfection. Learn to embrace it.

New Competence Rules for the Perfectionist

- Perfectionism inhibits success.
- Sometimes good is good enough.
- Not everything deserves 100 percent.
- Your perfectionism impacts others.
- Non-perfection is to be embraced.

The Natural Genius’s View of Competence

The Perfectionist is perhaps the most obvious and familiar of the five competence types. There is an entirely different set of competence rules that is also highly characteristic of impostors typified by the character I’ve dubbed the Natural Genius. According to Webster’s dictionary, *competence* means “having the capacity to function or develop in a particular way.”

The operative words here are *capacity* and *develop*. Unfortunately, no one told that to the Natural Genius. Rather, for you *true* competence means having inherent intelligence and ability. Since intelligence and ability are seen as innate, the thinking here is that success should be effortless. If you identify with the Natural Genius, what you care mostly about is *how* and *when* accomplishments happen.

Like the Perfectionist, the Natural Genius has set the internal bar impossibly high. But instead of the key measure being flawlessness, you judge yourself based on ease and speed. You expect to know without being taught, to excel without effort, and to get it right on the first attempt. You think, *If I were really smart, I would be able to understand everything the first time I hear it, or If I were a real writer, it wouldn't be this hard.* When you're not able to do something quickly or fluently, your impostor alarm goes off.

The reason Natural Geniuses want to go from novice to expert without having to suffer the in-between stages is not because they're lazy. It's because they don't even realize that an in-between stage exists. You look at people who are at the top of their field, and it all looks so effortless. So as a new job hire you expect yourself to hit the ground running. As a student, you believe you should have emerged from the womb knowing how to do advanced calculus or write a dissertation. You start a business and expect to earn a profit on day one. When learning how to play an instrument or master a sophisticated procedure, you expect to pick everything up right away.

Because you believe a more competent person would be farther along by now, when you do run up against something that is not easily understood, that's difficult or time-consuming to master, you think, *It must be me.* This thinking is reinforced by a culture that has lost the notion of apprenticeship, one that reveres talent over effort and overnight success over slow, steady progress.

If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn't seem so wonderful after all.

— Michelangelo

The Natural Genius's perspective is similar to what Stanford researcher Carol Dweck refers to as a "fixed mindset." In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dweck summarizes three decades of research that demonstrates the enormous impact your views on intelligence and what it takes to succeed have on how you see your own capabilities.

Briefly, when you have a fixed mindset, your energies are focused on performing well and being smart, both of which require you to continually prove yourself. Succeeding does inspire self-confidence — for a while. When you're faced with a setback, however, your confidence tumbles. And because not performing well evokes such shame, you often go to great lengths to avoid challenge and failure.

To the fixed-mindset person, intelligence and skill are seen as a sum game. Either you can do math or you can't. You're artistic or you're not. You have what it takes to sell or to be a great speaker or you don't. Not surprisingly, Dweck found that people who have a fixed mindset are more likely to rate high on the impostor scale.

Competence Reframes for the Natural Genius

A major reframe for the Natural Genius involves the recognition that innate talent has remarkably little to do with greatness. Not only can you learn how to do any number of things, you can even become great at them — if you're willing to work at it. As extensive research in the United

States and Britain reveals, people who excel in fields from music to sports to chess are the ones who devote the most time in engaged “deliberate practice.”³

This involves not just repeated practice but repeated practice based on highly targeted measures and goals. Even people who’ve already reached the top know that *staying there* requires constant practice. That’s why just before he’s scheduled to appear on one of the late-night shows, comedian and actor Chris Rock readies himself by doing a couple of nights of stand-up.

This emphasis on continuous improvement is indicative of what Dweck calls a “growth mindset.” In direct contrast to the fixed mindset we looked at earlier, the growth mindset sees intelligence as malleable and capability as something that can be built over time. Success is not considered a function of being inherently intelligent, gifted, or skilled. Instead the path to mastery is seen as one of lifelong learning and skill building.

And because growth-mindset people know how to learn from mistakes and failure, rather than withdrawing from difficult endeavors or becoming discouraged, they redouble their efforts. When you see yourself as a work-in-progress, you’re automatically less likely to experience feelings of inadequacy.

Not only is natural talent not required to be competent, having it does not automatically guarantee success. Dweck cites example after example from the world of sports and art of people who started out with only average abilities but were willing to persevere and wound up doing as well and *often better* than those who are naturally gifted but fail to apply themselves. The good news is that effort is available to anyone willing to use it – and that includes you. With practice you get better, and when you get better, you feel better. Best of all, you’ll have the hard-won confidence to prove it.

In the midst of difficulty lies opportunity.

— Albert Einstein

Will you encounter setbacks along the way? Bet on it. The difference is that instead of seeing difficulty and challenge as signs of your ineptness, you now approach them as opportunities to grow and learn. Here's where the power of self-talk and reframing comes in.

Instead of thinking, *I'm unqualified*, think, *I may be inexperienced but I'm fully capable of growing into the role*. In the past, when you were faced with something you'd never done before, you thought, *Yikes, I have no idea what I'm doing!* Now you tell yourself, *Wow, I'm really going to learn a lot*. Words really do matter. Simply changing how you talk to yourself about a difficulty or a challenge changes how you approach it.

Michelangelo said, "Genius is eternal patience." Writing a dissertation or building a practice or doing anything of consequence takes considerable time, effort, *and* patience. Remember that your first draft, first presentation, first painting, or first anything is never going to be as good as your second — or your two hundredth. Swap your false notions of overnight success for the ideal slow, steady progress, and you'll discover the true meaning of genius.

New Rules for the Natural Genius

- Effort trumps ability.
- Challenges are often opportunities in disguise.
- Real success always takes time.

The Expert's View of Competence

For the Expert, your primary concern is how much knowledge or skill you possess – and as far as you're concerned, you can never have enough. This emphasis on knowledge, experience, and credentials leads to self-talk that sounds like this: *If I were really competent, I would know everything there is to know. Or, If I were really smart, I would understand and remember everything I read. Or, Before I can put myself out there, I need in-depth education, training, and experience.*

Women are especially prone to the Expert trap, some astonishingly so. Mary was valedictorian of her class, had a full academic scholarship to college, and scored so high on the LSAT that the dean of the law school agreed to admit her even without seeing her application. Mary decided instead to pursue a doctoral degree.

She worked at it for a few years until her husband was accepted into medical school in another state. With the move and a pregnancy, she dropped out. A few years later she contacted the university to inquire about her transcripts. That's when an administrator pointed out that she was just shy of completing all of the requirements for a master's degree. He even offered to help her get reinstated. "Oh no," she said, "I couldn't possibly know enough to deserve a master's degree." In hindsight Mary wonders, *What was I thinking?*

Actually, Mary was thinking what a lot of impostors think, namely, that there is a defined threshold of knowledge and understanding that a person must meet in order to be deemed expert "enough." Women don't just fixate on garnering more and more education and credentials, they are also more preoccupied with how much *experience* they have. Among entrepreneurs, for example, experience was found to loom larger in women's estimation of their own success than it does for men.⁴

It makes sense that men would be less rattled. After all, they grew up

with the pressure of other people assuming that they know what they're doing. All that time having to act confident while peering clueless under the car hood or at a frozen computer screen forced males to become comfortable with diving in despite a lack of knowledge. As a result, when a man takes on a new job or project he's more likely to be okay having only a basic (or no) understanding because he's comfortable figuring things out as he goes.

Women grew up with a different set of messages – ones that often assume a lack of knowledge or ability. As you learned in chapter 3, the cultural bias against female competence is well documented. So it's not without reason that you've come to believe that you need to know *150 percent* before you consider yourself even remotely up to the task. You read a job description that requires a couple of minor skill sets or some previous experience you don't possess, and you disqualify yourself right off the bat. And in an economy where jobs are being eliminated and the job market is increasingly competitive, this reluctance to jump in and learn as you go has real consequences.

The irony of striving to be the Expert is that even when you really are one, you're probably uncomfortable seeing yourself as such. For a lot of women the title of "expert" feels somehow presumptive. Then there's all that pressure: If you make that kind of public declaration, then you had darned well better be able to back it up. And since you're pretty sure you can't, naturally you're going to worry about what people would think.

This concern about how you're perceived is a frequent theme among women. On numerous occasions Sara Holtz, the former vice president and general counsel for Nestlé, invited me to speak on the impostor syndrome at the practice-building seminars she conducts for female partners of major law firms. In these sessions Sara has participants craft a thirty-second answer to the question "What do you do?" – often referred

to as your “elevator talk.” It was during this exercise that I met an extremely successful attorney named Stephanie.

Since approximately 60 percent of Stephanie’s practice involved representing manufacturers of medical devices, her first instinct was to describe herself as an expert in this type of litigation. On second thought, she worried that it might make her sound “too full of herself.” So she ditched the term “expert” and instead decided to say she had a “special interest” in that area of law. You know, like it was her hobby or something. When I told this story to a male attorney who very definitely did not feel like an impostor, his response was, “Sixty percent? I would have said I was a *leading expert!*”

If you identify with the Expert, know that operating out of the mindset that competence requires absolute knowledge has consequences. This idea that you need to know a subject backward and forward keeps you from speaking up or offering an opinion for fear of being wrong. And because you accept the false notion that you need to know everything there possibly is to know before you consider yourself remotely competent, you may not even attempt things you’re perfectly capable of doing.

This endless pursuit of ever more information, skills, and experience is also what drives a lot of women to chase after additional and often unnecessary training, degrees, or credentials. Indeed, 2009 marked the first time in history when more women achieved doctoral degrees than men. This is of course great news. But I’ll never forget finishing a talk at the University of Pennsylvania when the husband of a woman who was working on her third Ph.D. pleaded with me: “Please make her stop.” Easier said than done.

It’s hard for the Expert to stop because in her mind there will always be one more book to read, one more class to take, one more experiment to run, one more degree or designation or certification to earn before she

dares pronounce herself “expert.” Unfortunately, this relentless pursuit to reach the elusive “end of knowledge” can cause you to take months or sometimes even years longer than necessary to achieve a goal.

Obviously, there are professions where testing, matriculating, licensing, and other methods of credentialing are and should be mandatory. But unless your dream is to perform open-heart surgery or design aircraft or something of that ilk, with obvious exceptions, this notion that you need a piece of paper in your hand that “proves” you can do something is nonsense. It’s also a serious impediment to success.

I know you feel more “comfortable” when you have a solid grounding in a field or endeavor. However, it’s also possible that you’re acting in part out of a hyper concern for how your work affects others. The more typically female compulsion to “go by the book” credential-wise is partly a function of insecurity. But it also has to do with not wanting to act irresponsibly. You don’t want to go off half-cocked, especially if your actions impact other people. And you certainly don’t want to promise something unless you’re absolutely certain you can deliver.

All of this is admirable. However, you may think that you’re protecting others when you’re really just protecting yourself – protection you wouldn’t need if you understood that it really is okay to pick up knowledge as you go along and that being an “expert” often comes just as much from doing as it does from degrees.

Competence Reframes for the Expert

Will Rogers once said, “Everyone is ignorant, only on different subjects.” For the Expert the main task is to practice being more comfortable with not knowing everything and trusting what you do know. Your obsession with being credentialed and your shame about what you don’t know is

keeping you from attempting all kinds of things you're perfectly capable of doing. Can you imagine not buying an exquisite piece of art because you found out the artist didn't earn an M.F.A? It's easy to see how silly the preoccupation with formal training is in a subjective area such as art. But what about other fields, like technology, for example?

In an article on the prevalence of the impostor syndrome among women in the high-tech sector, former national director of DigitalEve Canada Jennifer Evans makes the case that a "lack of confidence is a more critical ingredient to women not advancing in technical fields than is their lack of formal education in technology itself."⁵ True, the people who head up corporate IT functions often do have impressive degrees after their names. But at the same time, most of the techies Evans knows are self-taught. One of these was a former street kid with little formal education who found some discarded computer parts, began tinkering, became a self-taught computer "engineer," and went on to earn a six-figure income installing firewalls.

Successful people who had the confidence to act on their goals despite a lack of formal training are great role models for the Expert. Take Jean Nidetch. When the overweight homemaker felt her resolve to diet waning, she invited friends to join her for weekly support meetings. Before long she was squeezing forty people into her small Queens apartment. Nidetch's approach of mutual support and empathy coupled with sensible eating was so successful that a few years later she incorporated her business, rented space to hold her first public meeting, and set up fifty chairs. Four hundred people showed up. As you may have guessed, Nidetch went on to found what is now a multibillion-dollar international empire called Weight Watchers.

Notice, she did not have a degree in nutrition or exercise physiology. Nidetch was a high school graduate whose work experience consisted of

raising her sons while helping support the family selling eggs door-to-door for an aunt who owned a chicken farm in New Jersey. Her credentials were her success stories.

Finally, there's the unlikely story of a *self-taught* weapons-system expert named Jeff Baxter. Baxter was initially interested in learning about the technology behind music-recording equipment and in the process discovered that it used hardware and software originally developed for the military. With his curiosity sparked, Baxter began to study weapons systems and ultimately wrote a five-page paper proposing a missile-converting option.

Despite having zero formal education on weapons systems, Baxter went on to chair the Congressional Advisory Board on Missile Defense and become a highly paid consultant to such military contractors as General Atomics and Northrop Grumman. What was his previous job? "Skunk" Baxter, as he used to be known by his fans, was a guitarist with rock bands Steely Dan and the Doobie Brothers. If a former rock star with no formal training is good enough for the Pentagon and major aeronautics companies, then trust me, you can become a self-made expert on just about anything!

The reason I'm sharing these stories is not to deter you from getting an education. It's because I want you to know that there are many paths to expertise. You can get multiple degrees and never have the same knowledge as what can be gained from your own firsthand experience. If your approach works, then it's just as valid as anyone else's. If you have no track record or if there is no recognized path from where you are to where you want to be, then design your own "degree" program, minus the degree.

Think about the course topics you'd include, the books that should be required reading, the publications you'd subscribe to, and the field trips or internships that could provide valuable experience. If you need to establish a track record or credibility before applying for a job or hanging out

your shingle, then volunteer, run a pilot project, or offer a few freebies to prospective customers or clients in exchange for feedback, testimonials, and referrals.

On the flip side is the famous Clint Eastwood line in *Magnum Force*: “A man’s got to know his limitations.” And so do you. Having a healthy respect for the limitations of your own knowledge and expertise is also a sign of competence. You don’t want your financial advisor dispensing your medications or your pharmacist managing your investments. Why should you expect yourself to know it all? Instead of judging yourself, respect where your expertise ends and someone else’s begins.

As coaching legend John Wooden said, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” There is no “end” to knowledge. When you try to know everything, especially in such fast-moving and information-dense fields as technology and medicine, it’s like trying to get to the end of the Internet. It’s simply not possible. The quest for ultimate knowledge is based on a delusion. Instead relax and just do the best you can.

Besides, you don’t need to know everything. You just need to be smart enough to figure out who does and take it from there. Once you reframe knowledge this way, you no longer need to apologize or to judge yourself or to fret when you don’t understand something. Instead you know you have just as much right to ask questions or to not understand as the next person. Gone are the days where you sit in a group feeling hopelessly lost only to be totally relieved when someone else asked the very question you didn’t out of your fear of appearing “stupid.”

From now on, you’re going to confidently raise your hand and say, *Can you explain what you mean by that?* or *How would that work exactly?* or *I’m not following you; can you go over that again?* And if someone asks you a question about which you have no clue, channel Mark Twain, who said confidently, “I was gratified to be able to answer promptly. I said, ‘I don’t know.’”

New Competence Rules for the Expert

- There are many paths to expertise.
- There is no end to knowledge.
- Competence means respecting your limitations.
- You don't need to know everything, you just need to be smart enough to find someone who does.
- Even when you don't know something you can still project confidence.

The Rugged Individualist's View of Competence

As a Rugged Individualist you've spent years quite literally laboring under the misguided notion that true competence equals solo, unaided achievement. Don't confuse this with the Perfectionist, who prefers to do things herself as a means of quality control. The reason the Rugged Individualist likes to go it alone is because she believes she shouldn't need help. The misguided thinking here is, *If were really competent, I could do everything myself.*

In your mind, the only achievements that really count are those you reached all on your own. If you acted as part of a team or were engaged in any sort of collaborative effort, then it somehow diminishes the achievement. Similarly, if you were admitted to college as a so-called legacy student or if someone so much as put in a good word for you with a potential employer or client, it doesn't count. You see ideas the same way. If you are a writer or a scholar or a budding entrepreneur, you expect your work or idea to be totally new and original. If someone else got there first, you're crushed.

The stereotype is that men don't ask for directions because it's a sign

of weakness. The Rugged Individualist feels equally vulnerable. After all, what if you do ask and it's perceived as a sign that you really *don't* know what you're doing? That was Diane's big fear. Shortly after a promotion into a role and at a level that were *both* firsts for a woman in her company, Diane was assigned to head up a major project three hours away from the home office. Complicating the situation was the fact that she worked in a very male-dominated field. Diane knew that, at least in the minds of some, asking for assistance may have been viewed as "proof" that women weren't fit for the job. So she didn't.

Seven days a week Diane left her house at four in the morning and often returned past midnight. This madness went on for months. Everyone could see that both Diane and the project were floundering, but still she refused to ask for help. The impossible hours and workload finally took a physical toll, to the point where Diane was forced to take a medical leave.

In her absence the project was assigned to a man named John. John took one look at the job and said, "I'm not going to do that job. That job will kill somebody! I want an apartment near the new facility, four more staff members, and complete access to all of the division heads back in the home office." And he got it. Was it because he was a man? Maybe. Especially when you consider the work environment. However, Diane's belief that the only true achievements are those accomplished entirely on her own certainly played a role as well.

On some level you really do know that all of the things you are being asked to do cannot be done – at least not as fast as is expected or as well as you'd like, and definitely not all by yourself. Even if you didn't feel competence was contingent on doing it all yourself, women don't want to be a bother or put anyone out. So you knock yourself out sacrificing your health or personal life in order to perform miracles. And when you

do somehow manage to pull it off, you think, *What a fraud I am. If they only knew I'm just holding on by a thread, they wouldn't think I was so great after all.*

Competence Reframes for the Rugged Individualist

Of course the major competence reframe for the Rugged Individualist is to reject the myth that in order for an accomplishment to “count,” you have to do it completely on your own. That’s why I wanted you to meet Diane. Her story contains a powerful lesson for counteracting the go-it-alone mentality. The truth is that Diane *couldn't* handle the job. But under the same circumstances neither could John or anyone else. The critical difference is that he knew it, which is why he felt perfectly entitled to ask for what he needed in order to do it.

Even taking double standards into account, the real story here is that John understood a cardinal rule of competence: *Competence doesn't mean knowing how to do everything yourself. Instead, competence means knowing how to identify the resources needed to get the job done.* Whenever I tell that to my female audiences, every woman in the room reaches for her pen.

Resources come in different forms. For example, you may need

- additional time to complete a project
- access to content experts or decision makers
- additional information before you can fully assess a situation, make a recommendation, or proceed to the next stage
- hands-on assistance to carry out certain tasks
- physical space—meeting rooms, a laboratory, technology—or equipment
- a bigger budget or other financial resources

In addition to recognizing what to ask for, you need to know *how* to ask for what you want. Obviously, having a confident demeanor helps. But you also always want to frame your request in terms of the requirements of the project and not your needs as a person. In other words, “*I’ll never meet the deadline without help*” could be construed as a personal deficiency rather than an objective analysis of the situation. Instead take yourself out of the mix with, *This is what’s required to meet the deadline, or In order for X to happen, the project requires Y.*

I use not only all the brains I have, but all I
can borrow.

— Woodrow Wilson

Recognize too that only a true impostor would be afraid to ask for help. Years ago I heard Secretary of State Henry Kissinger nonchalantly tell a reporter about a potential nuclear crisis he didn’t know how to handle. What did he do? He picked up the phone and called the guy who’d held his job before him. Not only did Kissinger see no shame in seeking outside counsel, he seemed downright tickled with himself for thinking of it. “I make progress by having people around who are smarter than I am — and listening to them. And I assume that everyone is smarter about something than I am,” he said.

As the nature of the work becomes more complex, sometimes all you need is someone to help you think things through. If confidentiality is an issue, hire a consultant or a coach to serve as a sounding board. You also need to be cognizant of where *not* to seek help. As the thirteenth-century poet Rumi warned, “When setting out on a journey, never consult someone who has never left home.” If your dream is to license an invention or you

want to quit your job to attend cooking school in Paris, don't seek advice from your well-intentioned but uninformed friends and family. Instead ask for counsel from people who have done it.

Truly competent people not only ask for advice, but they delegate wherever and whenever they can. In some cases it really does take less time to just do it yourself than to train someone else. In the long run, though, delegating will save you time and stress, and if you are self-employed, delegating saves money as well. The rule of thumb is to assign a task to the lowest level in the organization at which it can be performed competently – not perfectly, competently. If you don't have the option to delegate, see if you can tap some coworkers now and then.

And what about all that stuff that's been delegated *to you*? Now that you understand that your being competent does not hinge on being a combination of the Lone Ranger and a miracle worker, you may want to practice the art of "delegating up." The next time another major project, client, or function is added to your already overflowing plate, put the ball back in your boss's court by asking which deadlines need to be completed first so you'll both know which will have to wait. Better your boss put some deadlines on the back burner than you knock yourself out.

Finally, not only don't you have to do everything yourself, but you don't have to come up with everything yourself either. Students, aspiring entrepreneurs, and writers are particularly prone to thinking their work or idea has to be totally groundbreaking and original to be of consequence. This belief that *If I didn't think it up first, then it's too late* is utter nonsense. Whether it's coming up with a new cookbook or doing scholarly research, there is always more to say on any subject.

Competent people (scholars included) are always building on the work of other competent people. Dale Carnegie wrote one of the bestselling books of all time. Where did he get all those great techniques he included in *How to Win Friends & Influence People*? "The ideas I stand for are not

mine,” said Carnegie. “I borrowed them from Socrates. I swiped them from Chesterfield. I stole them from Jesus. And I put them in a book.” Even Einstein understood that “the secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources.” (If you are a student, I hasten to add that he was not talking about plagiarism!)

New Competence Rules for the Rugged Individualist

- To get the job done, you first need to identify the resources required.
- Competent people know how to ask for what they need.
- Smart people seek out people who know more than they do.
- When seeking advice, it’s important to ask the right people.
- Your work does not have to be groundbreaking to be good.
- Competent people know it’s okay to build on the work of other competent people.

The Superwoman/Man/Student’s View of Competence

It’s easy to confuse the Superwoman/Man/Student with the Perfectionist. The major distinction is that a Perfectionist really can be content to perform flawlessly chiefly in school or on the job. But for the Super Woman/Man/Student competence rests on the ability to juggle multiple roles masterfully. Although you likely have some perfectionist tendencies, for you competence has as much to do with how *many* things you can handle as it does how well you do them.

Unlike the other competence types, the Superwoman in particular is largely a cultural creation. It came into being when the traditional roles of mother and homemaker were extended to accommodate the additional

role of full-time paid worker. Suddenly “having it all” became “doing it all.” With help from Madison Avenue and the now famous seventies Enjoli perfume commercial that celebrated the modern woman’s ability to “bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan,” and still have the energy and desire to “never let you forget you’re a man,” a collective bar had been raised for women everywhere.

Think of the Superwoman as the Perfectionist, the Natural Genius, and the Rugged Individualist on steroids. Instead of seeing the pressure to have the looks of Halle Berry, the ambition of Anita Roddick, the financial savvy of Suze Orman, the munificence of Mother Teresa, and the domestic flair of Martha Stewart as societal in origin, you tell yourself, *If I were really competent, I would be able to do it all.*

Increasingly I hear from students – male and female – who relate to trying to be the “Superstudent.” You may not be concerned with domestic prowess but you may feel pressure both internal and external to overextend in other ways. You play sports, serve on student government, spearhead any number of civic or charitable activities, maintain a perfect grade-point average – and make it all seem effortless to boot. You can do it for a while, but sooner or later you’re bound to drop a ball. And when you do, you’re extremely hard on yourself. Even if you can keep up, you never feel satisfied because you think you could do more.

And when the Superstudent meets the Superwoman/Man – look out! After a presentation at Duke University I was approached by two doctoral students who were managing to meet rigorous academic demands while simultaneously holding down full-time jobs. That would be impressive enough, but they were also raising young children who had their own overly full roster of extracurricular activities. I was exhausted just hearing about their overextended lives. I assumed that they approached me for advice on how they could offload some responsibilities. Instead these

women wanted to talk about how guilty they felt about not having time to do volunteer work in their community.

Competence Reframes for the Superwoman and Superstudent
Perfection is impossible to sustain in even one area. To shoot for it in all aspects of your life is a recipe for failure – and disappointment. By striving to be the best student, worker, spouse or partner, mother, friend, home-maker, hostess, and more, you’ve succeeded at only one thing – setting yourself up to fall short in multiple roles.

The major reframe for the Superwoman/Man/Student is that competence is not a function of how many things you can do. In fact, rather than make you feel better about yourself and your level of competence, your constant striving to be everything to everybody can make you feel even more inadequate. Plus there’s a good chance that sooner or later you’ll hit a wall in the form of illness or exhaustion, and possibly resentment.

On the bulletin board at my post office hung a quote from the Women’s Theology Center in Boston. It read: “We must go slowly, there’s not much time.” Instead of attempting to operate at warp speed packing ever more into your already jammed schedule, experiment with what it feels like to ease up now and then. Years from now no one will remember all the extra projects you took on or your meticulously organized garage. What they – and you – will recall is the time you said no to a work assignment to take your kids to the science museum or when you ignored household chores to enjoy the sunset.

The major behavioral change for the Superwoman/Student can be summed up in two words: Do less. One reason why it’s easier for men to say no is because their interpretation of competence keeps them from taking on more than they need to in the first place. Just like the Rugged

Individualist, you need to ditch the guilt and recognize that truly competent people delegate whatever and whenever they can.

If you live with anyone over the age of five, chances are you can delegate more on the home front. In addition to saving you time, you also instill in your children a strong work ethic and give them the opportunity to learn how to function as part of a team – both of which will serve them for the rest of their lives. Not a parent? You can still offload more tasks at home. Delegate the holiday planning to a sibling, set up online bill paying, or, if you can afford it, hire someone to clean the house, paint the living room, or mow the lawn, and use the extra time for yourself.

I know you pride yourself on your ability to multitask, but just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *need* to. There are some things on your to-do list that you can eliminate altogether. If you like the idea of gardening more than the backbreaking reality, grass over your garden and support your local farmer instead. Instead of baking holiday cookies yourself, buy them from the PTA fund-raiser. Use the saved time for more important things like catching up with an old friend, reading, or any activity that renews you.

Once you've shed some nonessential roles and responsibilities, recalibrate your success measurements by establishing attainable goals and realistic due dates. Things always take longer than you expect. If you think the project will take a week, give yourself three. Having a realistic picture of how long things really take will help you say no when new requests come along.

I understand that it may be hard for you to lay down your cape for your own sake. If that's the case, I invite you to consider the message you're conveying to the next generation, a message that can only contribute to ensuring a never-ending stream of capable females growing up to feel like they're never good enough. Not that they need your help,

mind you. A study titled “The Supergirl Dilemma” reports that 60 percent of girls grades three through twelve say they often feel stressed. As one ninth-grader puts it, “Girls are very pressured today to get good grades, look good, have a lot of friends, do a majority of the chores, and still have time for family.”⁶ Sound familiar?

New Competence Rules for the Superwoman/Man/Student

- It’s okay to say no.
- Delegating frees you and gives others the chance to participate.
- When you slow down and cut out unnecessary tasks, you get to focus on activities that really matter.
- Being a Superwoman sends an unhealthy message to your daughters and sons.

Banishing Competence Extremism

In their own way, all five competence types hold an extreme view of competence. Whether you are a Perfectionist, a Natural Genius, an Expert, a Rugged Individualist, or the Superwoman/Man/Student, for you there is no such thing as a competence middle ground. Instead, from moment to moment you judge yourself based on where you think you are on a continuum represented by dazzling brilliance on one end and a dimly lit bulb on the other.

If you’re not operating at the top of your game 24/7, then you’re incompetent. Since your view allows for no in-between, you are left with the belief that *If I don’t know everything, then I know nothing. If it’s not absolutely perfect, it’s woefully deficient.*

It's understandable that you constantly teeter on these extremes. After all, you *really do know* what it's like to feel brilliant. Like everyone, you've experienced those exhilarating times when your brain is firing on all cylinders, when everything just seems to click, when you think, *Damn, I'm good!* Of course, being human, you also know what it's like to not be able to think to save your life. To feel like you are wearing a big sign that says, *Sorry, brain closed for the day.*

And herein lies the problem: Because you know you're *capable* of brilliance, if you're not there all the time, you automatically thrust yourself to the other end of the continuum. And once there, you're very unforgiving of yourself.

To be clear, it's not that extremes don't exist; they do. In fact, when it comes to achievement, extremes go with the territory. Whether you're conducting a scientific experiment, creating art, managing a project, starting a business, or doing anything of significance, it's always an exercise in extremes. Clarity and confusion, deficiency and mastery, knowing and not knowing, all are part of the creative actualization process. However, once you recognize these extremes for what they are, you'll be able to accept your own low points without self-incrimination.

Regardless of your competence type, you can and should strive to do your best. Just stop expecting yourself to remain in a constant state of extreme brilliance. Instead strive to feel comfortable with being fabulously adequate. The reality is, even the brightest and most talented among us spend the majority of their waking hours smack in the middle of the competency scale. Just like me – and you.

When you feel yourself sliding into competence extremism, recognize it for what it is. Then make a conscious decision to stop and really savor those exhilarating mental high points and forgive yourself for the inevitable lulls. That's what Tina Fey does. "The beauty of the impostor syndrome," says Fey, "is you vacillate between extreme egomania and a

complete feeling of: 'I'm a fraud! Oh God, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!' So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud."⁷

Few things are black or white, and that includes your competence type itself. Obviously, your old rule book has enormous downsides. However, you don't have to ditch it entirely. For example:

- As the Perfectionist you are welcome to hold on to your pursuit of high standards, but shed the shame you feel when you fall short.
- As the Natural Genius you can keep your desire for mastery, as long as you recognize the time and effort that's required to get there.
- As the Expert you can still value the importance of knowledge, but ditch the unrealistic expectation that you should know it all.
- As the Rugged Individualist you can take pride in the knowledge that you can go it alone if you have to, just stop thinking you must.
- As the Superwoman/Man/Student you can honor your desire to be the very best you can on multiple fronts, but abandon the idea that you have to do it all.

The trick is to make a conscious choice to hold on to these positive aspects of your type while letting go of the far-more-numerous unrealistic and self-limiting tendencies that are fodder for impostor feelings.

The Bottom Line

Everyone has a personal definition of competence. The extreme and unrealistic notions of what it takes to be competent only perpetuate the lie that you are an impostor. If you continue to measure yourself using this same warped yardstick, it will

not just be harder to beat the impostor syndrome, it will be impossible.

Fortunately, there is a solution. Lower your internal bar by adopting the healthy rules in the *Competence Rule Book for Mere Mortals*. The quicker you can “right-size” your unsustainably high performance standards, and the more effort you make to integrate this new way of thinking into your life, the more competent and confident you will feel. Guaranteed.

What You Can Do

- Identify your primary competence type.
- Pick one of the new realistic rules for your competence type, ideally the one that would give your confidence the biggest boost, and start there.
- Spend the next few weeks consciously looking for opportunities to put your new rule into action.

What's Ahead

At the heart of each of the competence types is a fundamental fear of failure. In the next chapter we'll explore how your response to failure, mistakes, and criticism contributes to your fraud fears and how learning a new response can boost your confidence.

[6]

The Competence Rule Book for Mere Mortals

1. Credit for this saying goes to motivational speaker Mike Litman.
2. James Bach, "Good Enough Quality: Beyond the Buzzword," *Computer* 30, no. 8 (August 1997): 96-98.
3. K. A. Ericsson, et al., eds. *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 658-706.
4. J. McGrath Cahoon, Vivek Wadhwa, and Lesa Mitchell, "Are Women Entrepreneurs Different Than Men?" A study by the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation 2010.
5. J. Evans, "Imposter Syndrome? Women, Technology and Confidence," *Globe and Mail*, June 6, 2001.
6. *The Supergirl Dilemma: Girls Grapple with the Mounting Pressure of Expectations*, Girls Inc./Harris Interactive: 2006.
7. "Tina Fey: From Spoofer to Movie Stardom," *Independent*, March 19, 2010.