

Liz Wiltsie: Welcome to the quest to become sustainably human at work. I'm Liz Wiltsie and I'll be your curator. My goal with every episode is to share insight from someone I admire. That will help you on your own quest. So I ask you to join me.

Today, I get to welcome Dr. Lisa Orbé-Austin. She is a licensed psychologist and executive coach with a focus on career advancement and leadership development. She is a co-founder and partner of Dynamic Transitions Psychological Consulting, a career and executive coaching consultancy where she works mostly with high-potential managers and executives. She earned her doctorate in Counseling Psychology from Columbia University. She recently gave a TEDx Talk entitled *The Imposter Syndrome Paradox*, and her book, *Own Your Greatness: Overcome Impostor Syndrome, Beat Self-Doubt, and Succeed In Life*, co-authored with her partner Richard Orbé-Austin, was released in April 2020. So I came to Lisa's work because of Instagram, which I'm really grateful in the pandemic that so many of you with so much to offer have offered it on Instagram. And I think imposter syndrome is something that we just all, and I guess, it doesn't hit all of us, but it hits a lot of us in really specific ways-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: And so I would love for you to talk about how that became your work.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Sure and the numbers are somewhere between I think, 70 and 75% of us that it hits, so it hits a lot. I just saw a KPMG study, I just posted about it, that they said that 75% of female executives have imposter syndrome. And so really I came about it to it personally first before I started really talking about it, writing about it. It was my own personal experience that I talk about in the TED Talk where I had a really intense case of imposter syndrome right after I had finished my Ph.D., and was in a job that was really oppressive and really horrible, and had a really awful boss, and I was watching how the imposter syndrome was, like, disintegrating all my hopes, my dreams, my future. And so that's when I first came to it, and I started writing about it here and there.

And then I was approached by our publisher to write this book on imposter syndrome. They had seen some other work that we had put out here and there, and they wanted us to potentially consider writing this book. And they were really wonderful and open, and were, kind of, "You can write whatever you want. You can-," and we were like, "I only want, we only want to write a book that actually does something for people, that will actually help them change their experience of imposter syndrome." And so that's how we came to the work.

Liz Wiltsie: So, when you're advising folks when you're thinking about the 75% of us... I'm always scared to universalize my experience and say that lots of people feel this way, and then I find lots of people.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: But there's data. Yes. [laughs].

Liz Wiltsie: Right? So, when you're talking to that 75% of us, what are the biggest things that you think people can do to, sort of, take a stab at it?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah, and I think it's a great question because I think oftentimes people are, like, "I have imposter syndrome", and they're like, "That's it." It's, no, you don't always have to have imposter syndrome. It can actually shift in the way that it operates in your life, and I think, to me, that's the number one thing you can do is recognize that it doesn't have to always be like this. And then I think what we've talked about in the book, and then what we have formulated as a plan of how to deal with it requires understanding where it came from, understanding its origins. You know, a lot of people joke, "Oh, imposter syndrome comes from social media", and it does not, it comes from early experiences. And then really thinking about how you're going to change your behaviors to really combat the imposter syndrome really proactively. And the third piece of it is really build a system around you that helps you to continue to make sure that you're actively combating your imposter syndrome.

The book really is three phases that really are about knowing the tools and skills to combat it consistently.

Liz Wiltsie: When you say "system," does that mean people? Does that mean calendars? Does that mean notebooks? Like-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: [laughs].

Liz Wiltsie: What does that mean? [laughs].

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah it, kind of, means all of those things but specifically we talk about having a dream team, having a set of people around you, and we name who they are, somebody's who's like a mentor, someone who's like a cheerleader, someone who's a strategy planner. Having these people around you that can help you to not do this alone. So oftentimes when we have imposter syndrome, we struggle in it quietly and alone because we're embarrassed about having it, one, and two, it feels very scary to be able to tell somebody because maybe you are truly a fraud and they will actually know that you are. And so, we often do this alone, and the idea is to build a system around you of people.

I think also, too, we talk about building a system of skills around you. So thinking about, for example, imposter syndrome often creates these automatic negative thoughts, really learning how to combat automatic negative thoughts and proactively engage them as opposed to thinking you are the thought and the thought can never change. So really having a bunch of skills and tools, having really good self-care habits because oftentimes we are really bad at self-care and we deprioritize ourselves over all the performance stuff that really we feel like is central to who we are. We don't take care of ourselves. So having a bunch of different systems that are really important to combating the imposter

syndrome, so all of those things. Plans, schedules, people, that are proactively thinking about that.

Liz Wiltsie: And do you see that the stats, anecdotal evidence, that I have seen is really talented women, particularly women of color, saying "I struggle with this"? Do you see it there as well?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah. The research is inconclusive, so initially, this phenomena was studied by two psychologists in the late 1970s and they mostly looked at it in women, so it has this history of being studied with women, so a lot of people think it just happens in women, but the data of it being studied in men and people of color is inconclusive. Sometimes they say it's more women, sometimes they say it's not. I would probably suggest it's probably evenly occurring across the population, but I do think with women, people of color, first-gen, there's an experience of what we call the double impact, where you not only are both experiencing this internally, but you're also being told externally by the system that you are an imposter, that you're not capable, that you're not good enough. So you're not only combating it internally, but you're combating it externally and that creates a more difficult process of overcoming it.

And also, too, men deal with it differently. So, what the research shows is that women actually face the things that they're afraid of, and so they constantly are exposed to the imposter syndrome and the feelings of fraudulence. Where men are much more concerned with how they appear, so they tend to put themselves in situations where they'll be, like, top dog and they're in a less competitive spaces with less competitive peer s, so they're not directly confronting it as, as much as women tend to, you know?

Liz Wiltsie: That's so interesting. That makes sense, right?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: When you think about it, it totally makes sense.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yes.

Liz Wiltsie: And then part of your consulting is around equity and inclusion work, as in workplaces-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yep [affirmative].

Liz Wiltsie: What do you tend to talk about to help folks combat it at an organizational level? Does that question make sense?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yes, absolutely. And I think what is very interesting is that there are systems in place that also help to reinforce imposter syndrome dynamics. So, what we are largely focused on when we work with an organization who is committed and doesn't want

this to happen in their employees, is we talk about imposter-syndrome-sustaining cultures in workplaces where, for example, overworking is normalized, where you're expected to be accessible 24/7, where the goalposts change constantly around your targets. We teach them the kinds of cultures that actually sustain us and how to change that cultural dynamic, so in essence, you are not accidentally also reinforcing the imposter syndrome in your employees, and then wondering why they have imposter syndrome. [laughs]. So we teach them the ways in which their culture and what they need to do to change it, is affecting this kind of dynamic.

Liz Wiltsie: The number of businesses that I see that are, like, "Yeah, I want you to work 80 hours a week, but here meditate--"

Lisa Orbé-Austin: [laughs]. Yeah, exactly.

Liz Wiltsie: And probably going, "What are you doing?"

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah, what are you doing? And it's offensive. It's offensive to be, like, work needs to be your number one priority and have balance. It's just it's window dressing. It really doesn't understand the philosophy around mindfulness and being present, and really learning how to have balance in your life. They talk about greenwashing, it's like mindfulness washing, you know? [laughs].

Liz Wiltsie: [laughs]. Right. So, this is the question I ask everybody, what are you grappling within this moment?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: I think it's a great question. I think one of the things I'm grappling with currently is really trying to work with these ideas of systemic change and getting people to buy into them, even if they don't necessarily want to make those changes. So D&I issues, how to help organizations to actually put into place systems, processes, procedures that actually help the entire organization be more inclusive, be more open, be more engaged with these ideas, even if everyone if doesn't want that. So thinking about how to tie this systemically to performance, and to compensation, and thinking about how do you motivate people who don't really have skin in a game or care, to actually do what is best? And so it's a complicated question, because in every situation it's, different, every organization is different, every situation I work with a manager, it's different, but I think it's so important that we make systemic change and grapple with how that actually happens productively.

Liz Wiltsie: Yeah, I'm constantly holding this tension between we enact systems of oppression relationally, like--

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: One on one, and then--

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: We also have a responsibility to the larger thing-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: And so how are we constantly acting in those ways and recognizing that I may be doing a certain thing, but it may not be happening for the whole-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: Rest of the company?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: Yeah.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah, but I think that to me that's the that's so what I'm really tackling and trying to...how to make systemic change one action at a time, but make it systemically? I think I'm always thinking about that piece because I think a lot of people are following the summer and the George Floyd, the protest, there was a lot of fervor around it, and now I've seen a lot of backlash. And so in that moment of backlash, we have to think about how to institutionalize these changes because it can't just be the will of the people in the moment because it goes away.

Liz Wiltsie: And these changes that, you know, fly under a sort of, diversity and inclusion flag-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: Are things like you're talking about where people are not working 80-hour weeks-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: Where people are not expected to have 24/7 availability. It's not-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: That is everybody that's going to-

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Yes.

Liz Wiltsie: Benefit from these changes, right?

Lisa Orbé-Austin: Exactly. Yeah, because you can see how it ripples across for all of us. It, it makes a difference for all of us, and like a lot of the data suggests in more diverse environments, you get more creative thinking, you get better outcomes you actually, their bottom lines is affected in greater ways so it affects us all positively to do these things.

Liz Wiltsie: Indeed. I feel like we could have this conversation for the remainder of the day.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: [laughs] Yeah.

Liz Wiltsie: But I'll avoid that. But thank you, Lisa, for being with me. I really appreciate it.

Lisa Orbé-Austin: You're so welcome. Thank you for having me, Liz.

Liz Wiltsie: If you've appreciated Dr. Lisa Orbé-Austin's insight in this episode, you can hear more from her on her Instagram, which is chock full of super, super useful, and accessible information. And then also, get her book. Her book is called *Own Your Greatness: Overcome Imposter Syndrome, Beat Self-Doubt, and Succeed in Life*. She wrote it with her partner, Dr. Richard Orbé-Austin. It is well worth picking up because it has so much actionable insight about what you can actually do to defeat imposter syndrome.

If you've enjoyed this episode, please see the show notes at 4needs.work/podcast and you can see the rest of the episodes of Sustainably Human at Work.