



ARE YOU A VICTIM OF CORPORATE GASLIGHTING?

Feel you're not very good at your job? Think your colleagues know something you don't? Well, maybe it's your boss that needs to wise up, says *Alex Holder*

I FIRST HEARD the phrase 'impostor syndrome' 10 years ago, at a networking event for women in the advertising industry. Surrounded by bouncy blow-drys and lacquered nails, the woman on stage spoke of the 'many women who don't think they are capable of their role and believe they are impostors at work: this feeling has a name'. It resonated immediately. I was relieved I wasn't alone in thinking I couldn't do my job and wasn't the only one lying awake at night worrying if I was going to be exposed as a fraud.

Four decades after the phenomenon was first identified, in 1978, by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, many other women will have had a similar moment. Lucy, 28, then a manager at a large recruitment firm in the City, instantly recognised herself when she read a listicle about it. 'I went down the list ticking off everything,' she remembers. 'I don't deserve these accolades – tick. I fear I'm going to be fired any moment – tick.' She's not

alone; research shows 66% of women experienced impostor syndrome in the last 12 months.

But while Lucy was quick to blame herself, reflecting on her City workplace experience now she realises the culture – in particular, her relationship with her former boss – was far from healthy. 'I felt undermined by my [male] boss constantly,' she told me. 'He would always call me a Millennial or a snowflake, which looking back on was a way to keep me down. He would tell people different things and give contradictory feedback, and then when I'd question the plan he'd ask, "Why don't you trust me?" I felt like I was going insane.' Was it any wonder then that Lucy was struggling to feel confident at work? She has now left, works for herself and says she 'no longer identifies with that feeling of not being good enough'.

I had similar feelings when, three years ago, I finally quit the corporate life to try working as a freelancer, and my internal

angst disappeared. So what, I wondered, was really driving how I and other women felt? I certainly don't want to doubt what women are feeling – but I do want to rename our experience. Impostor syndrome, by its very nature, contains a self-blaming note. *You're* the impostor; the implication perhaps being that you can just change how you feel. And I'm tired of the expectation that my friends, colleagues and peers should internalise external problems.

The truth is, most businesses are still suffering from a decades-long hangover of discrimination against women. We are still underpaid compared to our male counterparts and outnumbered at the top, whether on the back-benches or in the boardroom. Even office air conditioning is geared to men, with thermostats generally set for the comfort of a 40-year-old male. And it's this problematic work culture that creates an environment where women doubt their ability to perform – but then blame ourselves, not the obstacles we are faced with. Simply put, we are victims of corporate gaslighting.

To be gaslit is to doubt your own sanity (the term comes from the 1944 thriller *Gaslight*, where a husband manipulates his wife into wondering if she is losing her mind). Rob Campbell, who started the site theytriedtokillmebuti.live – aimed at exposing corporate gaslighting – explains it as, 'The systematic destruction of employees' confidence and experience to either leave them questioning their ability, their future or forcing them to be a complicit robot to the whims of management.'

It can manifest in various subtle, yet damaging, ways. Tiffany Philippou, co-host of the work-culture podcast *Is This Working?*, found that as a young woman working for start-ups, she was unwillingly cast in a 'female' role. 'I constantly had to do stuff that wasn't in my job description, like being the "emotionally intelligent" one,' she remembers. 'I'd have to be the voice of the people to the founder. I was doing that and absorbing everyone else's crap – the office politics, etc – while the men were just getting on with delivering their numbers.'

I've often seen women assigned the role of the 'office mother', expected to arrange the social events and volunteer as the first aider. And then, when they can't do it all, they doubt themselves.

Tiffany also explains how much of her feedback at work was personality driven: she was told she was 'grumpy', and on one occasion described as a 'queen bee'. Again, this is something women are more

likely to experience. Dr Paola Cecchi-Dimeglio, a senior research fellow at Harvard Law School, found that gender bias corrupts performance reviews, with women 1.4 times more likely to receive critical subjective feedback than men.

Maternity leave, inevitably, can be a flashpoint for corporate gaslighting. Rachel, a 37-year-old property developer, had worked for the same firm for more than 10 years. 'I always felt lucky to be there,' she says. 'The internal propaganda was that anyone could lose their job at any moment.'

When Rachel went back after having her second child she asked to work four days a week, but this didn't go down well. 'Because there were so few females, and so few mums, I felt it was on me to prove it could work.' However, she soon found her (male) colleague would always schedule important meetings on a Friday – the day Rachel was off work – and she was made to feel 'difficult' because she couldn't jump on a work call at 8pm.

'I was already doubting myself, and I was being left out of big decisions,' she says. But her colleagues' behaviour felt too subtle to call out, so rather than questioning how she was being treated, she did what many women do: 'I thought I wasn't good enough, so I left.'

Rachel, like Lucy, now works for herself; she earns more and has higher-profile clients. She *was* good enough; it was her company's culture that was the issue. So how can we combat this pervasive problem?

'If you've been pushed out of a workplace, honour how you felt,' advises life coach Samantha Clarke, founder of change consultancy Growth & Happiness. 'But in the future, make sure you examine the culture of anywhere you are going to work. See your interview as an opportunity to question them – ask, "When people leave here, what reasons do they give?"'

Karin Killander, head of breakthrough at the creative workspace Second Home, says women also 'shouldn't underestimate the difference confiding in each other makes. Speak to peers, don't hold it all in. If many people are feeling the same, chances are it's not the individual's fault.'

But above all, we need to stop doubting our abilities and instead turn this angst outwards: to start asking not what do I need to do better but what needs to change at work for me to thrive? It's time to question our work environments, rather than our ability to work well in them. And if you do start feeling that creeping sense of doubt? Before you start to blame yourself, take a look around you...