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Kendra Kelly: I think for me it was this understanding that there's no way that I could really be successful in this. Like, I'm a fraud, and everyone's going to figure it out. I'm going to lose my job and all of my credibility, and it's going to go down the drain. And that was what I was hearing in my voice day in and day out.

Kurt Greenbaum: From Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, I'm Kurt Greenbaum, and this is On Principle. Have you ever walked into a room and wondered to yourself, "What am I doing here? With all the brains and talent and experience in this room, why do they need me?" Today, we'll take a deep dive into that sensation through the eyes of an accomplished business professional — someone I met on her first day at WashU Olin Business School. It's a sensation that's often misunderstood as the failing of an individual rather than an organization. It's a sensation that comes with a few different names. And our guest knows that sensation well. Well enough, in fact, that she calls it "my little friend."

Kendra Kelly: My name is Kendra Kelly and I am chief of staff to the president of the luxury division for L'Oréal USA.

Kurt Greenbaum: Tell us just, you know, what's the quick elevator pitch about what L'Oréal and the lux division do?

Kendra Kelly: L'Oréal is the leading beauty conglomerate globally and within the US specifically. Our luxury division is comprised of skin care, fragrance and makeup brands. We have iconic brands like Lancôme, IT Cosmetics and Urban Decay. Yves Saint Laurent Beauty. Giorgio Armani Beauty. Valentino Beauty. We also have brands like Maybelline and Carol's Daughter and so many more. And then within our active cosmetics division, brands like SkinCeuticals, I mean, just incredible brands. And I didn't even get to our professional products division, but that's all about professional grade hair care. It's incredible to work in an organization that has such beloved brands.

Kurt Greenbaum: What does that job entail? What do you do?

Kendra Kelly: When I think of my job, I group it into a series of buckets, if you will. The first is I act as a market expert. I work in the luxury division and so our market is luxury beauty. And so it's really important for me to be up on all of the trends, understand what's happening, who's winning, who's losing, why are they winning? Why are they losing? To not only better assess our performance, but to also try to get an edge on the competition by seeing where is the whitespace? How can we be playing differently? I think the second piece is really all about helping my boss

deliver the communication on how our division is doing and really ensuring that we're framing up our performance and our opportunities in a way that is most effective for us. The chief of staff role is a larger leadership development opportunity for L'Oréal. It's technically called the MBA chief of staff program, where recent MBA graduates serve in this role for a year, fresh out of business school. And so I've really taken this, as, you know, my own little masterclass, my own, you know, how I built this, essentially, because I have such incredible exposure to amazing leaders in the division. And so I've really been taking time throughout this year to better understand leadership at this level and personally really commit myself to better understanding what makes incredible leaders and figuring out how I can adopt some of what I'm seeing for my own gain as a future leader and people manager in the organization.

Kurt Greenbaum: How did you end up in this role?

Kendra Kelly: I like to say at least that I started as a politico turned marketing pro, and what that means is that my start really was in politics. I was super lucky to have come of age politically in 2008, which was a wild time for our country. Politically speaking, we elected the first Black president and I had the joy and honor and privilege of working on that campaign. I actually was in college at the time and physically left Atlanta to go work for the campaign on the Youth Vote team in St. Louis, of all places. That campaign really to me solidified the power of communicating the right message to the right people at the right time and through the right channels. Coming out of that time, I continued to work in politics, but really in like local and statewide campaigns. And once I graduated or really truly right before I graduated, I thought to myself, "How can I take this experience and ... and make it mainstream, if you will?" And so I went back to Atlanta. I was in DC at the time and went back to Atlanta to work in local politics there.

And after leaving, went into tech where I was responsible for creating email and SMS campaigns for partners across the NBA, the NFL, Major League Baseball, Live Nation and more. And these are partners, both domestic and international. But while I was there, I just really felt like I was being pigeonholed as a marketer, really kind of the CRM side of the house. And, you know, I wanted to have the opportunity to influence marketing at a larger level. And I knew even back when I had my first job out of undergrad that I would probably have to get an MBA. But that realization became clearer and clearer during my time in tech, and so that led me to WashU as a Consortium fellow and had the opportunity to really catapult my career. That ultimately led me to L'Oréal and in this chief of staff role.

Kurt Greenbaum: Now, even with those impressive experiences and credentials, I don't want to skip past Kendra's two years at Olin Business School. In addition to working on her classes, the dean appointed her to serve on a task force to recommend action on a diversity, equity and inclusion strategy. She was president of the Graduate Business Student Association. She was an MBA ambassador to prospective students. Her classmates elected her to deliver their commencement address. And for me personally, I got to see Kendra in action directly. She wrote a

competitive analysis of business school podcasts for me, way back before On Principle was a fully formed idea. So we're not talking about a slacker here. And yet, none of that stopped her from getting a tap on the shoulder as she started her career. Now that you're in this role at L'Oréal USA, tell us about the visitor.

Kendra Kelly: My long-time friend. So imposter syndrome is definitely something that I've struggled with. You know, I think we all do. But in terms of my journey, something that I've struggled with and have named it as such since my first job right out of undergrad. L'Oréal was really tough in the beginning because I was supposed to intern during the summer of 2020, and that was the summer, our first summer with COVID. And it just so happened that the time that COVID came about, it just wasn't right for the business at that time to have the class of interns. And so my internship was rescinded and I was lucky enough to interning with another company. I had a CPG internship, a brand management style internship. It was great. That said, most MBA chiefs of staff at L'Oréal come in having received their return offer from the summer internship. And so, you know, even if you're new to beauty, you at least have the experience of interning with the organization before. I hadn't worked in the industry before, so everything was new to me. So not only is the industry new, but the organization is new. You know how we're looking at our data, reporting our numbers — like, everything was new to me. And so I just very much felt like, "Oh my God, someone's going to figure out, I know, I know nothing," and they're going to say "thank you for being here, but it's time to go."

I was just so consumed by this idea of, am I the right person for this job? I think for me it was this understanding that there's no way that I could really be successful in this. Like, I'm a fraud, and everyone's going to figure it out. I'm going to lose my job and all of my credibility, and it's going to go down the drain. And that was what I was hearing in my voice day in and day out. At different times I have heard that in my head. Even in business school where I was fortunate to receive a full ride and, you know, definitely worked my butt off to study for the GMAT and be a great candidate. It wasn't given to me. I earned it, right? And yet I was still thinking of this as someone's going to find out that I'm a fraud. I felt like a fraud because it was something that I naturally gravitated towards and enjoyed but was also good at. But I couldn't understand why if I didn't have formal training in it.

And I definitely now, looking back on my journey, downplayed the value of learning on the job and the value of kind of real-world experience. You know, I now think of education — like formal academic experiences — as supplementary, but not necessarily like imperative to one's success. And even still thinking of, you know, advanced education as supplementary, I would have, I thought of it as necessary and absolutely imperative, but I still would have gone back to get my MBA even if I had that thought then. I've now come to realize that it's in part a lack of confidence in certain areas. It is also, for some absolutely the result of your environment. And I think for me, at different times, it's in a combination of both. Thankfully, I've been able to adopt some tools to help me with my old friend.

Kurt Greenbaum: How was it affecting your work? Can you characterize that?

Kendra Kelly: I just second guessed everything to the point where it truly became inefficient. As someone who has struggled with mental health challenges at different points of my life, it definitely resulted in an increased state of anxiety, even led to a period of depression. I don't know if I can say that my imposter syndrome gave me anxiety and depression. I don't think I would say that. But the imposter syndrome did not help the anxiety and depression that was already there. It was just so hard to do my job. But as someone who takes a lot of pride in her work and never wants there to be a mark on my credibility, I spent a lot of time ensuring that I deliver good work and this nagging voice of you're not supposed to be here, you know you're going to be found out. It made it harder to show up as myself.

Kurt Greenbaum: This sensation, as I called it earlier, this phenomenon known as imposter syndrome, isn't new. But if Google Search Trends are any indication, there's been a marked jump in interest around the topic since early 2019. In fact, in our conversation, Kendra talked about a 2021 article in the Harvard Business Review. In that piece, the authors acknowledge the tendency of accomplished individuals to feel inadequate or out of place. But they were also clear about this: Ascribing blame to women or underrepresented minorities for these feelings is ridiculous. Instead, they called imposter syndrome a workplace-induced trauma. And yet, as Kendra described it, it wasn't that simple.

Kendra Kelly: Your brain is not your friend when this is happening. It can feel all-consuming. And that's why I've had to work really hard to mitigate the effects of it. You know, you have to say to yourself, This is what I'm telling myself. This is not what my environment — I'm so lucky that this is not what my environment is telling me. Although I know that for some people that's not the case. But, you know, I had to get over it. If that's what you're focusing on, then you're not going to be able to do your job well. I had to get to the root of it and develop some practices that could help me manage the effects of imposter syndrome on my work life. Really, what I was struggling with was understanding my superpowers within the context of where I work, and when I was in kind of the lowest points of my imposter syndrome, and it was very hard to recognize, you know, my X factors, if you will, and lean into those. And the result of that is that I instead tried to change the way that I work to adjust what I perceived the environment to be. The environment, beauty is incredibly competitive. It moves very quickly. You have to be like up on trends, up on the market at almost hyperspeed. That's not a problem, though. You know, like MBA — you are used to working quickly, used to working with agility. That's not the problem. That's not the challenge. But for me, you know, I had to realize that one of my skills, one of my superpowers, is that I'm like a very methodical person, you know? And part of that is working in politics and needing to, like, think, you know, 10 steps ahead. But I'm just always try to think through things as comprehensively as possible. And I thought that that was going to be seen as a disadvantage, that that

was going to be seen as something that would make me less like qualified or less capable to do the job.

Kurt Greenbaum: You mentioned in our earlier conversation that you, at some point during all of this, realized you needed to bring this to your manager. And I wonder if you could talk about how you approach that conversation.

Kendra Kelly: I was very nervous, too, and I had no need to be. I mean, my manager's incredible. But I was because I realized that my mental health in particular was in a really challenged place. And I asked her, you know, essentially for a quick update on my performance. I didn't want to go in there with what I thought was happening. I wanted to hear from her, you know, how she felt like things were going. She thought I was doing great. I'm doing very well in my role. And so, you know, it's fine. It was fine. But I you know, I told her that I was struggling with my mental health and I essentially just asked for grace, but I also asked for transparency. You know, that in the moments when I wasn't delivering or in the moments I wasn't showing up to please, you know, don't hesitate to bring that to light because I really value positive feedback and critiques. And, you know, I think you have to be informed to be able to do better and to be better. These moments in life do not hold you back. If you can harness them, they can make you strong and stronger and a better employee, a better person, a better people manager because of it. But I think that's really where you lean on empathy to be able to kind of harness those experiences.

Hannah Birnbaum: The imposter phenomenon describes high-achieving people who feel as though they are being fraudulent, right? They're fooling people despite their objective level of success. People fail to internalize their accomplishments and they have these feelings of self-doubt and fear that they are being a fraud. First, there's this fear that you worry that other people think you are better than you actually think yourself are. So I might believe that I'm not as great as other people think I am. There's also a worry, number two, that other people might think you are a fraud, that you don't belong, that you really have not earned your place in an organization. Finally, there is a worry that what you have accomplished is actually not that great. So even if you won a Pulitzer Prize and in writing right, you still might feel like this is actually not that great of work. I don't know why I received such a prize.

Kurt Greenbaum: That's the voice of my colleague, Hannah Birnbaum, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at WashU Olin Business School. She'll describe how her research and teaching center on issues around equity, diversity, and most importantly to this conversation, inclusion. In our conversation, she helped me understand the connection between her academic focus and Kendra's little friend. And as you'll hear, we also talked about whether impostor syndrome is the right name for what we're talking about. What is your academic focus and what drove you to be a researcher in that area?

Hannah Birnbaum: So I study specifically diversity, equity and inclusion. So I look at how we can make organizations more diverse, uncovering some of the hidden challenges to promoting inclusion and figuring out solutions that can help render more successful diversity initiatives. We actually start from the very macro perspective, thinking about organizational structures, right? So it's really kind of an intro course into all things OB. In organizational behavior, we teach some of the soft skills that we find are really important for people's success.

Kurt Greenbaum: I want to pick up on something you just said. And we were talking about this briefly before we got the mics turned on here. In all of the popular literature and, you know, news articles and things like that. And even in in Kendra's own description of this, she's been referring to it as the imposter syndrome. And you referred to it as imposter phenomenon. First of all, why and why does it make a difference?

Hannah Birnbaum: Sure. The imposter phenomenon was originally described or historically described as a personality trait that originates within people who have these impostor feelings. So there's this focus on the individual having a negative self-concept. And the reason that I think it's problematic and others think it's problematic is because it focuses on fixing the individual. So, for example, if we think that having this impostor feeling is a problem of an individual, we might think of strategies like people should have greater therapy, they should have coaching sessions, they should lean in and so forth. But what I, as I would say, a social psychologist and organizational behavior scholar think is that people don't behave in a vacuum, right? Their social context fundamentally shapes who they are and how they feel about themselves. If we think about the term more as a phenomenon, we can think about changing the context to reduce these feelings people are experiencing.

Kurt Greenbaum: Is it possible to quantify how commonplace this is in the workplace?

Hannah Birnbaum: Yes, it is. Some people argue that everyone has experienced or will experience some form of impostor feelings in their life. Meta analyses have found that the prevalence of this imposter phenomenon ranges in groups from only 9% to a whopping 92%. So it really depends on the groups that we're looking at. As I said before, much of the early research focused on women. But there is work showing that both men and women do have these feelings of being an imposter at work. And one reason, of course, why these imposter feelings might be more prevalent among women in racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation students is because they are less represented. So if you're going to be in an organization where you are the only one, where there are no women, for example, in leadership roles, it's likely that there will be high prevalence of imposter syndrome among those women who are in lower ranks. So it really depends on the organizational context.

Kurt Greenbaum: So if the imposter phenomenon is an organizational problem rather than something you and I have to overcome, what should leaders do about it? Hannah offered three strategies, some based on her reading of the research literature, some based on her own research.

Hannah Birnbaum: The first is creating healthier expectations and cultures where mistakes are not seen just as failures, but as actually something that we can grow and learn from. So I would call this having a growth mindset. The idea of a growth mindset is one in which we tell individuals that intelligence can grow and change over time, right? You aren't just you aren't just good at math or not good at math, right? It's something that you kind of work towards and get better at. And when people have this growth mindset, they're more likely to be engaged, they're more likely to persist and work harder. So if someone struggles on an exam, they won't think, I'm a fraud, someone's going to find out I don't actually belong here. Right? But instead they're going to say, this is an opportunity for me to learn and grow. The second strategy I would encourage is affirming people that questions of belonging, questions of self-doubt, questions of feeling like a fraud are common part of the workplace experience.

So this is similar to a social belonging intervention done by Gregory Walton and Geoffrey Cohen. Basically, in this intervention, they find that telling people that it is normal to have these feelings leads people to sustain effort in challenging activities and ultimately greater performance and engagement. So if people don't have this affirmation, right, they feel like, "Oh, I don't belong here." And so then they withdraw from the environment. So instead we can say this is a normal experience that everyone has. The last strategy is part of my research and my advisor's research. And what we find is that actually affirming differences and talking about how differences can be a strength can be a really useful strategy. People tend to not want to talk about our differences or talk about our backgrounds, but actually encouraging people to acknowledge their differences as a strength can really encourage people to bring their full selves to work and increase their engagement and performance in the workplace.

Kurt Greenbaum: One of the things that Kendra was sort of hung up on was this idea that it's a really fast-paced environment. People are sort of bang, bang, bang, getting the work done. And she felt like I need to have time to digest and really dig into these projects. Kind of, I guess combining two of the interventions you talked about. Her manager was like, no, you know, it's fine. We we need that. We need somebody who can take a step back and take a deliberative approach. Is that what you saw?

Hannah Birnbaum: Yeah, exactly. That's exactly right. So I saw that her manager kind of had a social belonging intervention saying everything is normal. And Kendra was able to understand that her differences were strengths, that this was not something to hide and ignore. Right? She should bring her full differences to the workplace.

Kurt Greenbaum: Were you judging yourself in a way you would never judge other people?

Kendra Kelly: That's it. That's it. That's it. 100%. When I look at people in their journey, you know, I sometimes forget. For instance, I look at my manager and she's incredible at what she does, but I forget that she's had a journey. Part of the reason why my manager is so great and so talented and so successful is because she's had a journey. She has been with the organization for 20-plus years and has developed this craft. You know, I expected myself to be three months in and be as good — I mean, it's just crazy. It's crazy. And so I needed to kind of take a step back and say, You are on a journey. You are exactly where you were supposed to be. You were doing exactly what you were supposed to be doing. It is up to you to be all in on this journey.

Kurt Greenbaum: You're literally attuned to this now.

Kendra Kelly: Yeah.

Kurt Greenbaum: You can hear the door opening when your old friend arrives.

Kendra Kelly: Yes.

Kurt Greenbaum: And you have developed some strategies in your brain to address it when that happens.

Kendra Kelly: A big part of it is just asking myself, why? Like why do you feel this in the moment? And almost always it goes back to something that has to do with a lack of confidence. And then I have to take the next step and say, "OK, I mean, you can feel like that, but you're here, you're doing the job, and there's no reason that you should feel this way. And in fact, you're wasting time thinking about it. Get to what you need to get to." One of the things that I almost always say to myself in these moments is you have all the tools that you need to be successful in this moment. And I say that a couple of times and then I push on. It's almost impossible to truly compartmentalize work from everything else. And so I think the first thing is leading with empathy. When I think about my experience with my manager and going to her and having a very candid conversation that truly, you know, was in many ways a huge part in my journey to being on the other side of this, you know, it was the fact that she really led with empathy in that moment. Just realizing that in order to have these powerful companies that deliver these incredible products and resources and widgets, if you will, to the world, you have people behind you that are making these things happen and that we are not robots.

You know, I think another thing is just thinking about institutionally, what are your systems in place that allow for transparency, that allow for feedback, that allow for opportunities for employees who are struggling to be able to say I am struggling, and

for that to not be looked at as a mark on their ability to do the job, a mark on their credibility, on their character. You know, again, it's this idea that we are not perfect and that we all struggle in things and there needs to be trust and transparency. And if your organization lacks that, then that will be a challenge. And then I think the last part is all about inclusivity. Does this person feel like they are truly a part of the community, the inner workings, if you will, of the organization? Because if they don't feel as if they were invited to dance, then the trust won't matter, the transparency won't matter. You know, even having a leader that's empathetic won't really matter as much either.

Kurt Greenbaum: I wonder if you could characterize where you stand with all of this now.

Kendra Kelly: I still call it my friend. If I take a step back, I think that I've just put more of the ownership on myself than I ever have. You know, I realize that there are almost triggers that I need to look out for, and if I feel them, I deal with them as quickly as possible. I don't let it fester. I don't let it grow. Because, one, as I said, I don't have time for it personally. I'm on a mission. I'm on a mission to be a game-changing, glass-ceiling-shattering businesswoman. And so I don't have time for it. Because I don't have time for it, I have to invoke the tools to deal with it. And so, you know, I say I'm on the other side of it, not because I've cracked the code, but I have adopted a cheat sheet. But I know that it's something that I'll continue to feel at different points in my life because I aspire to be, you know, very successful. And so it'll happen again and maybe a few more times, but that's OK. Even though it feels very uncomfortable to talk about, I felt like this was a really, dare I say, powerful opportunity to shed light on something that is challenging to talk about and to hopefully let young professionals know that you're not alone. It can be managed, even conquered, and it may require more introspection than you leveraged in the past. But you can you can manage it. And most importantly, you are where you're supposed to be. You are doing the role that you're supposed to be doing, and you're killing it.

Kurt Greenbaum: And that's a wrap for this episode of On Principle. Thank you for joining us. And a huge thank you to Kendra Kelly for having the courage to make herself a little vulnerable by sharing this story. And here's a little postscript. Since Kendra and I recorded our interview, she's moved to a new position at L'Oréal — director of marketing for the company's Lancôme brand, running its \$200 million face and lip makeup businesses. And she says she hasn't had a visit from her little friend since she's been in the role. Meanwhile, many thanks to my colleague Hannah Birnbaum for the context and perspective she brought to the topic. If you're interested in learning more, we've got links to that Harvard Business Review article we mentioned, as well as Kendra Kelly's LinkedIn bio and a story from Poets & Quants, when Kendra was named one of its best and brightest MBA students. You can also learn more about Hannah's research on her website. You'll find all those links as well as past episodes of this podcast at onprinciplepodcast.com. As always, I encourage you to subscribe to On Principle in your favorite podcasting app so you'll

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