

# Biz Dev Impostor Syndrome May Actually Be Good Judgment

By **Paul Manuele** (February 19, 2026)

Impostor syndrome appears to be having a moment. For instance, in January, comedian Nikki Glaser, filmmaker Ryan Coogler and "Succession" creator Jesse Armstrong all spoke publicly about experiencing impostor syndrome over the course of their careers.[1]

In the legal profession, the term "impostor syndrome" is frequently invoked to explain why many lawyers hesitate to network, feel awkward promoting themselves or resist what they are told they must do to succeed: Ask for the work.[2]



Paul Manuele

Merriam-Webster defines "impostor syndrome" as "a psychological condition that is characterized by persistent doubt concerning one's abilities or accomplishments accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one's ongoing success." [3] On the surface, the term seems to align with the conventional view that discomfort in business development is mainly psychological.

According to that view, even when lawyers are highly confident in their legal skills, they may lack confidence in a sales setting, and the solution requires a mindset change to build resilience, silence self-doubt and push through the unease. But that explanation is incomplete. In many cases, it misidentifies an important source of discomfort and encourages advice that may only exacerbate the problem.

Often, what is labeled impostor syndrome is not only a psychological issue, but also a keen judgment that a contemplated action is inappropriate for the circumstances.

## Why Confidence Alone Doesn't Explain the Problem

True, many lawyers do lack confidence in explicitly promotional contexts. And advice that focuses on mindset can be useful in some situations. But not all discomfort is just noise to be blocked out. Sometimes, it's an important signal.

The hesitation lawyers feel when urged to ask for the work frequently reflects an intuition that the relationship has not developed to the point where such a request would be appropriate. Take, for example, a partner who has had a couple of good conversations with a key in-house contact and perhaps handled one small matter, but is being urged by colleagues to push for a bigger share of the company's work.

Reluctance in this case is not necessarily a sign of weakness or self-doubt — it could be a valid intuition that the ask is not yet appropriate for this particular relationship.

When lawyers are encouraged to override their intuition in the name of confidence, the classic advice intended to promote growth — "ask for the work" — may have the opposite effect. This is because an ask that feels premature to the lawyer may land the same way with the person on the receiving end — experienced as awkward, forced or self-serving, rather than responsive or helpful.

When that interaction goes poorly, it doesn't build confidence; it reinforces the lawyer's sense that business development is something they are bad at, entrenching the very self-

doubt the advice was meant to dispel.

### **A Different Kind of Discomfort**

Lawyers are trained to be attentive to fairness and to the limits of their authority. Over time, that training may contribute to a heightened sensitivity to asymmetries in professional interactions. When a lawyer feels uneasy about a particular business development tactic, this can reflect a judgment that the tactic treats the other person less as a person, and more as a means to an end.

This kind of discomfort is easily mistaken for insecurity or fear of rejection — a misreading that readily collapses into the shorthand of impostor syndrome. But that discomfort does not reliably disappear with greater confidence. If anything, it tends to sharpen as lawyers gain experience and develop a clearer sense of the right response for a given situation.

### **What Successful Rainmakers Do**

Conventional business development advice often fails to distinguish between different kinds of requests, glossing over subtleties of timing, context and the state of the relationship, and offering a single, blunt instruction: Ask for the work.

The instruction to "ask for the work" invites lawyers to imagine a high-stakes, asymmetrical request — one that places the burden squarely on the other person to say yes or no, regardless of whether the relationship or conversation has naturally arrived there. When that imagined scenario feels premature, it's almost inevitable that lawyers will feel resistant.

But this doesn't mean they are resisting business development; they may be correctly perceiving that the step being urged does not yet fit the relationship or the moment.

This helps explain a familiar phenomenon: Experienced rainmakers often insist that they do not ask for work at all.[4] This is sometimes dismissed as evasive or unhelpful advice. In reality, it is descriptive. Much successful business development occurs through continuation, clarification and sequencing — by recognizing when the next step is already implicit in what both parties are doing.

When the moment is right, naming the next step does not feel like as big an ask as inviting someone you've just met to go to a Yankees game. It feels more like walking across town with them and asking, "Should we cross at the next light?"

### **How to Exercise Judgment in Business Development**

Business development requires lawyers to be intentional, visible and willing to engage. But it does not require them to suspend professional judgment or override their sense of proportion and appropriateness. The task is not to push past discomfort reflexively, but rather to interrogate it, understand what it is signaling and respond accordingly.

#### ***Diagnose the discomfort.***

Lawyers who feel resistance around a business development action can benefit from pausing to ask what kind of discomfort they are experiencing.

One source of discomfort is familiar: fear of exposure, rejection or saying the wrong thing. In those situations, the conventional advice is often right. Confidence and courage are

what's needed, and the operative question really is, "How do I make myself take this step?"

But another source of discomfort is often overlooked: the sense that the proposed step asks for more than the relationship can reasonably support. When the discomfort is of this second kind, it reflects professional judgment rather than a confidence deficit.

### ***Reframe the question.***

Once a lawyer recognizes that their discomfort reflects judgment rather than fear, the question shifts. The more productive question is no longer "how do I make myself ask for the work?" but "have I created the conditions in which the next step genuinely makes sense?"

That question reframes business development as an organic human interaction rather than a sequence of scripted moves to be executed. Instead of treating conversation as something that can be engineered — where the right line triggers a predictable response — it asks whether the relationship itself has developed to the point where the next step follows naturally.

When lawyers approach business development this way, confidence becomes a byproduct — not because doubt has been silenced, but because action aligns with professional judgment.

### ***Read the situation.***

Most new matters do not begin with a dramatic request. They emerge from conversations that have already established relevance, trust and shared understanding. A client raises a concern, a lawyer asks a follow-up question and the scope of engagement expands organically.

Learning to structure interactions so that requests are appropriate begins with attention, not assertiveness. The lawyer's task is not to manufacture momentum, but rather to notice what is already present in the conversation and the relationship.

In practical terms, this means listening for signs that a client is articulating a concern that exceeds the scope of the current engagement, revisiting an unresolved issue or implicitly inviting further discussion. These moments often signal that a next step may be warranted.

A lawyer exercising judgment at this stage resists the urge to treat every interaction as an opening to pitch for new business. Instead, they respond in a way that keeps the conversation coherent and proportionate to what has already been established.

### ***Continue the conversation.***

When a direct request would feel premature, the appropriate move is often one that extends what is already underway rather than redirecting it.

For example, if an in-house contact mentions a recurring operational frustration but does not ask for help, a premature response might be to suggest a proposal or new engagement. A more proportionate response might be asking a clarifying question that deepens the discussion, or offering an observation that frames the problem more clearly, allowing the client to decide whether further assistance would be useful.

Similarly, if a client raises a regulatory or litigation concern in passing, the next step may be

to share a brief insight, flag a risk the client may not have considered or offer to follow up with relevant information — not to press immediately for additional work.

In these moments, the lawyer is not failing to act. They are matching their action to the state of the relationship and the conversation, allowing the engagement to expand organically if and when it makes sense to do so.

### ***Make the ask.***

This does not mean that direct requests are never appropriate. Where a relationship is well developed and the client has clearly expressed an ongoing or unmet need, naming the next step can feel natural because it is helpful.

In those circumstances, proposing the next step carries little pressure or emotional weight. It is not an attempt to extract something unearned, but an effort to clarify what logically follows.

The difference is that the request arises out of shared understanding rather than the lawyer's own agenda and internal sense that it is time to ask. When that alignment is present, the request does not feel like a solicitation to anyone — it feels like a practical response to a situation that calls for it.

### **Trusting Your Intuition**

This reframing challenges the reflex to diagnose the cause of discomfort and hesitation in business development as impostor syndrome. That interpretation often obscures what lawyers are rightly sensing and leads them to doubt their own judgment.

Sometimes hesitation simply reflects nerves in situations where courage is required. Other times, it reflects sound instinct, where the move being contemplated is simply inappropriate. In those moments, the better response is not to push through, but to listen — deepening the dialogue or offering help that builds naturally on what is already there.

Business development does not require anyone to become someone else — someone more outgoing or sales-oriented. It draws on the professional intelligence lawyers use every day, such as understanding context and timing, as well as acting when conditions align. When lawyers trust their instincts, they build confidence and stronger, more rewarding relationships.

---

*Paul R. Manuele is the founder and principal at PR Manuele Consulting.*

*The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of their employer, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.*

[1] See Nikki Glaser, interview with The Hollywood Reporter (Jan. 6, 2026), discussing impostor syndrome in connection with hosting the 2026 Golden Globe Awards (<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/nikki-glaser-golden-globes-2026-host-interview-1236465894/>); Ryan Coogler, interview with The Hollywood Reporter (Jan. 3, 2026), reflecting on impostor syndrome in relation to directing Sinners

(<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/ryan-coogler-recalls-chadwick-boseman-sneaking-into-1236460397/>), and The Guardian (Jan. 11, 2026), reporting that Succession creator Jesse Armstrong says he struggles with "impostor syndrome" (<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2026/jan/11/succession-creator-jesse-armstrong-says-he-struggles-with-impostor-syndrome>).

[2] See, e.g., How Law Firms And Attys Can Combat Imposter Syndrome (<https://www.law360.com/pulse/articles/1459509/how-law-firms-and-attys-can-combat-imposter-syndrome>).

[3] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impostor%20syndrome>.

[4] Some rainmakers do report that they "ask for the work" and often encourage others to do the same. In these accounts, however, the language of the ask is divorced from the circumstances in which it occurs. What is described as a direct request typically arises after substantial groundwork has already been laid, such that the ask is experienced by both parties as a natural continuation of the "conversation" rather than a high-stakes, all-or-nothing request. The phrasing can sound strikingly assertive — for example, "So, when are you going to send me a matter?" — when considered apart from the unique contours of the relationship in which it occurs.