

The Accidental Diminisher

by Jill Rose

Is it possible that by following commonly accepted business practices, like providing a clear vision for your team, you are unwittingly holding back the people around you? That's what Liz Wiseman thinks, and she's got the research to back it up. Wiseman, along with Greg McKeown, is the author of *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter* (Harper Business, 2010).

The book is a great read and a fascinating look at the difference between multipliers, who use their intelligence to amplify the capabilities of people around them, and diminishers, whose resolve to be the smartest person in the room tends to drain the intelligence and capability out of the people with whom they work.

In the book, Wiseman uses a combination of research and case studies to show the difference between these types of leaders and the results of their approaches. For example, multipliers are talent magnets, attracting the best talent, utilizing it to its fullest, and readying it for the next stage.

In contrast, one of the fastest ways to spot a diminisher, said Wiseman, is realizing that the people around them aren't growing. "I often find this when I'm called in to coach someone who's had a terrific track record of promotion," she said. "The organization wants to get he or she ready for the next level, but the capability gap between s/he and the people just below is huge."

Although the examples in the book tend toward the extreme in an effort to explain the multiplier concept and demonstrate the benefits of these types of practices, Wiseman stresses that this is not a binary framework. Rather, it's a continuum, with just a small number of people falling at either polar extreme.

This is critical for two reasons. First, multiplier behavior is learned. So even if you tend toward being a diminisher or have picked up some diminisher behavior during your career, it's entirely possible to reverse that. "Acknowledging that there's a spectrum is important because you can say, 'Where am I on that spectrum, and how can I inch my way along toward becoming a multiplier?'" noted Wiseman. (There's a quiz at www.multipliersquiz.com to help you determine your place on the continuum.)

Second, many people using diminishing behavior don't realize they are doing anything harmful. Said Wiseman: "The thing that most surprised us was how few of the people we studied who were diminishers realized the impact they were having on others. Virtually all of them felt like they were good managers."

Withhold nothing

But the evidence is clear. Research conducted by Wiseman and McKeown shows that multipliers get almost two times (1.97) more out of people than diminishers. And multipliers not only access

people's current capability, they stretch it. Wiseman wrote that people reported actually getting smarter around multipliers.

This may sound far-fetched, but there is recent evidence from Carol Dweck of Stanford that when children were recognized for their efforts to think, they created a belief, and then a reality, that intelligence grows.

Imagine what your team could accomplish if they held nothing back, offered the very best of their creativity, and gave more than their jobs required. Now imagine an entire company like that.

But first, you've got to get diminishers out of leadership roles (or at least get them to behave like multipliers). And remember, they may not realize their behavior is harmful. For example, Wiseman said, leader-as-visionary is an accepted, popular business management practice.

"This idea can be done right, but what usually happens is that these visionaries are such big thinkers and lay out such a compelling vision that they don't leave room for other people around them to think," she said. "They do too much of the thinking for their organization and can't then figure out why people aren't motivated by this vision."

The solution, Wiseman said, is to turn that visionary into a challenger. She gives the example of Shai Agassi of Better Place, which is creating a solution to switch out a car battery in less than two minutes. Clearly, Agassi is a visionary, but he is known in his company for being a "tailwind" for what the team is doing. A classic challenger, rather than laying out a plan, he asks his team questions like: how can we make this process location independent, car independent, user friendly, and cheap so it can be scalable?

"Challengers have a clear vision, but they appeal to people's natural intellectual curiosity. Instead of giving someone a vision, they give them a puzzle. One of the things we found multipliers do is ask these crazy interesting questions," explained Wiseman.

Multipliers also do not expect their managers to have all the answers at their fingertips, Wiseman said. "So many leaders, especially in technology, feel incredible pressure to have all the answers at their fingertips, as opposed to being able to say, 'Let me go to the experts, to other people who can help me solve that.'"

By encouraging people to find answers by drawing deeply from their organization, you shape an interesting culture: one of going out and finding intelligence and harvesting it, she continued.

And should you actually get rid of diminishers who don't want to (or can't) change? Wiseman said it sounds harsh, but yes. If you don't want to remove them entirely, then take them out of key leadership positions. Explain that because of the need to be the "big brain," that person belongs in an individual contributor role rather than a leadership role. You say, "We love you, you're smart, you're great—but you cannot lead people if you cannot allow others to be more smart and capable around you."

Take heart

If learning to be more of a multiplier sounds like one more thing to add to your 17-page to-do list, take heart. Wiseman gives readers a way to quickly incorporate the behavior. She suggests picking one practice within one of the multiplier disciplines and working it for 30 days, or adopting the assumptions of a multiplier and allowing the behavior and practices to follow naturally, or focusing on two extremes (bring up your lowest low and take your highest high to the next level).

If you've got any doubt that you're capable of making the shift, Wiseman's research contradicts that. "When the brain is challenged and stretched and given hard things to work on, intelligence actually grows," she said.

In fact, it's a virtuous cycle. "It starts with just the belief that it's possible, and then a challenge laid down in front of us that stretches and literally grows our capability, which leads to a permanent belief that something is possible."