

Liz Wiseman with Greg McKeown. Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter. New York: HaperCollins, 2010, 268 pages.

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The author argues in this book that, at the extremes, there are two types of leaders – Diminishers and Multipliers. A fundamental distinction between Diminishers and Multipliers lies in how they use their own intelligence and how that affects the people around them, especially their direct reports. On the one hand, Diminishers make themselves look smart and indispensable. As a result, direct reports tend to wait for the Diminisher to make decisions and give instructions. Multipliers, on the other hand, make an effort to amplify the capabilities and performance levels of their direct reports; hence, the “Multipliers” label. Thus, Diminishers underutilize and discourage people, but Multipliers cause people to become better than they have been before.

Wiseman and her co-author conducted survey research to measure the effects that Multipliers and Diminishers have on their direct reports in 48 areas of leadership. Multipliers’ direct reports indicated that they delivered over twice the level of performance in those areas, as compared to Diminishers’ direct reports.

The underlying message of the book is that almost anyone can become more of a Multiplier by understanding and practicing the Five Disciplines of a Multiplier. A chapter is devoted to each of those disciplines. Each includes multiple real-life examples of Multiplier and Diminisher behaviors in that context and a series of concrete suggestions as to how a manager can become a better performer in that discipline. The final chapter offers ideas about how to overcome obstacles, such as what you can do if you are “stuck” under someone who is a Diminisher.

Chapter 1 (*The Multiplier Effect*) distinguishes between Multipliers and Diminishers in terms of what they do and how this affects the job performance of those who report to them. It also introduces the Five Disciplines of the Multiplier – Talent Magnet, Liberator, Challenger, Debate Maker, and Investor.

Chapter 2 (*The Talent Magnet*) argues that Multipliers are Talent Magnets, whereas Diminishers are Empire Builders. Both work hard at attracting talent, but for different reasons and with different results. Empire Builders “collect people like little knickknacks in a curio cabinet – on display for everyone to see, but not well utilized” (p. 36). Talent Magnets attract talented people and then use them to the fullest. The Talent Magnet’s approach leads to growth, recognition, and opportunities for direct reports, while the Empire Builder’s leads instead to limitations, loss of confidence, and little opportunity. Advice for becoming a better Talent Magnet includes looking for talent everywhere, finding what people naturally do well, and removing prima donnas who can block the progress of others.

Chapter 3 (*The Liberator*) depicts Diminishers as Tyrants (tense leaders) and Multipliers as Liberators (intense leaders). Tyrants dominate, judge, and create anxiety in others. Liberators create an intense environment that requires everyone’s best thinking. The author believes that

Liberators do so in three ways. One is by listening more (and talking less) to their direct reports. The second is by demanding people's best work, rather than certain outcomes. Focusing on best work creates pressure, while focusing on outcomes creates stress. And finally, Liberators admit their own mistakes, which encourages others to do the same and for all to learn from them.

In Chapter 4 (*The Challenger*), Wiseman argues that Diminishers operate as Experts or know-it-alls who "assum[e] that their job is to know the most and to tell their organization what to do" (p. 102). In contrast, Multipliers "push their teams beyond their own knowledge and that of the organization ... They create organizations that deeply understand a challenge and have the focus and energy to confront it" (p. 103). They do so by challenging fundamental assumptions, laying down challenges, and generating the belief that the challenge can be overcome.

Chapter 5 (*The Debate Maker*) explores how Diminishers and Multipliers handle decisions differently. Diminishers are *Decision Makers*, who are likely to dominate discussion and then rely on their own opinions to make decisions. Multipliers are *Debate Makers* who frame issues and then encourage others to engage in rigorous, fact-based debate about the best course to take. Debate Makers ask "hard" questions that get at the core of the issue, require people to provide data to support their positions, and make sure that everyone, not just the most vocal people, provides his or her perspective before a decision is made.

The fifth Discipline of a Multiplier is outlined in Chapter 6 (*The Investor*). Multipliers are Investors. They instill ownership and accountability in others by clearly identifying them as leaders with ownership of the process and the goal, by providing them with the coaching and resources they need, and then holding them accountable for results (and giving credit where it is due). Diminishers tend to be Micromanagers who maintain ownership and, thus, create environments where people wait to be told what to do, and sometimes become free riders who allow the Micromanager to do most of the work in the end.

In Chapter 7 (*Becoming a Multiplier*) Wiseman discusses problems a would-be Multiplier might encounter. Some will be interested in changing their leadership styles to be more of a Talent Magnet, Liberator, Challenger, Debate Maker, or Investor – but find themselves "stuck under a Diminisher," who is unlikely to support such changes. Another potential problem is the feeling that one is already too busy to give time and effort to making these changes.

For those who would become Multipliers, she offers three of what she calls accelerators, tools that have worked for others. The first she calls "Work the Extremes." The idea here is that although it might be overwhelming to tackle all five of the Disciplines of a Multiplier, a manager can focus first on identifying one area of weakness and one area of strength. Perhaps the weakness can be neutralized, with performance in that area moving from poor to acceptable (i.e., not fantastic, just not bad). She also advises building on one's greatest strength, "building a deep and broad repertoire of practices that allows you to excel at this discipline" (p. 206).

The second accelerator is to "Start with the Assumptions" (p. 207). This means to first really stop and think deeply about your basic assumptions about the people around you. Do you tend to think: *People will never figure this out without me?* Or does *People are smart and can figure it out* sound more like something you would say? Her point here is that our behavior flows from our attitudes, so changing our attitudes can change our behaviors. These changes might then create a self-fulfilling prophecy, where we expect people to perform well, thus we interact with them in ways that are consistent with the Five Disciplines of a Multiplier, and then good performance is the natural outcome.

The final accelerator was to pick one Multiplier practice and focus for 30 days on developing that one. Wiseman claims here that new habits can be formed in 30 days, and then less attention will have to be paid to that particular area.

There were a number of things I really liked about this book. The writing style is engaging and the use of many real-world examples is effective in building her case. The examples involve a significant number of people in a variety of industries from around the world. They include Multipliers (who are identified by name and company) and Diminishers (with names changed for obvious reasons).

Being an academic person, I like to see what went on behind the scenes. That is, how were people identified as Multipliers or Diminishers? How were the data gathered? What sorts of questions were asked, and of whom? How were their answers processed? These questions are addressed in some detail in an appendix.

Beyond all of that, the book's basic premise appeals to me personally and as an academician. I believe there are Multipliers and Diminishers out there. By the way, Wiseman sees this as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, and argues that most of us are neither pure Multiplier nor pure Diminisher. She believes, and I agree, that most of us lie somewhere on a continuum between those two extremes. That message is also consistent with my sense of the academic research literatures in the areas of leadership, motivation, and management.

As I read the book, I found myself eager to reach the end of each chapter where Wiseman listed a few unexpected or surprising findings. These were sometimes surprising, always interesting, and added to the insights resulting from their work.

I also liked the specific recommendations in Chapters 2-7 for how one can become more like a Multiplier. I found many of these to be straightforward steps that any interested manager could take. As practical and useful as many of them were, however, some seemed a bit simplistic. One example concerns one of the obstacles to becoming a Multiplier, as described above (being stuck under a Diminisher). The advice offered was to "Give yourself permission to be better than your boss" (p. 201). I'm not sure it's as simple as that.

Overall, however, I enjoyed this book and I believe it has a useful and largely practicable set of recommendations that, if managers give it a wholehearted chance, will improve our organizations and the work lives of those they employ.