

THE DIMINISHER AFFLICTION

Beware the leader too smart to be wise.

WHAT IS A DIMINISHER?

Author and consultant Liz Wiseman’s book, *Multipliers*, features two distinct and contrasting types of leaders; multipliers and diminishers. Multipliers are strong and capable leaders in their own right, but they use their talent and organizational power to access and leverage (multiply) the strength and talent of others. Multipliers believe most everyone is smart, are capable of figuring things out, and will get even smarter along the way. They affirm that a top priority of a top leader is to identify and multiply the intelligence, talent and insight of others on behalf of the organization. In the words of Wiseman, multipliers are talent magnets.”

Diminishers are also strong and capable individuals; smart, articulate, motivated, and highly competent. But here is where the similarity with the multiplier ends. For the diminisher, a top leadership role provides the opportunity to showcase their superior intelligence and ability, and correspondingly, to suppress (diminish) the talent and insight of others. In this sense,

diminishers are elitists—they believe they are the best and brightest; that intelligent, insightful and creative, people are few and far between, and of course they are members of this rare breed.

Additionally, they adhere to a static mentality—they believe that most people lack sufficient intelligence to get the job done and won’t get any smarter along the way. Correspondingly, diminishers do none of the listening and all of the talking; they do all of the thinking and make all the important decisions.

THE PERSONAL AFFLICTION.

Multipliers, secure in their own identity and capabilities, develop and support others, and explore opportunities for their further contribution.

Diminishers, afflicted with low levels of emotionally immaturity and prone to destructive narcissism, have an unrealistically high regard for their own intelligence and expertise, often elevating themselves to genius level. Operating from a paradoxical combination of a low self-regard and an elevated assessment of their abilities, diminishers must put others down to lift themselves up.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL AFFLICTION.

Diminishers afflict the organization in three ways.

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First, diminishers drain the organization of talent. Like the alpha and toxic leader, diminishers provide no space for others to contribute to the leadership work. Since diminishers must, out of emotional necessity, play the role of smartest person in the room,” by definition, at least in their own minds, they generate all the correct, best and brilliant answers and ideas.

Diminishers see it as their birthright and public duty to monopolize conversations, shut down discussions, and ignore or devalue the insight of others. Answers and ideas from others are, by definition incorrect, faulty or just plain stupid. Mature adults pick up on this pretty quickly, with most fleeing the diminisher, hopefully to work with a multiplier.

A few months after reading Wiseman's book, I had the misfortune to encounter a leader that insisted on dominating discussions, believed he was not only the smartest person in the room, but also the only smart person in the room, and ignored the input of other talented and insightful leaders. Wiseman's framework was enormously helpful in interpreting his attitudes, behaviors and decisions, and, as it turned out, the future trajectory of his leadership.

As I observed this leader over a period of months, it was obvious he was a master diminisher, and in fact had raised the practice to an art form. He was always right—and I do mean always—and anyone—and I do mean anyone—who disagreed with him was by definition dead wrong. This became painfully evident as I sat in a meeting where the diminisher discounted the perspective of other strong and capable leaders—all stronger and more capable than he—leaders with decades of experience in the subject matter at hand. Instead of listening and learning from these colleagues, the diminisher used his organizational authority to impose his decisions—not supported by research or facts—on the organization

He was adamant, fully convinced that his plan was brilliant, genius in fact. He made it abundantly clear that his thinking was superior to all of us in the room. He monopolized the conversation with a lengthy, mind-numbing PowerPoint presentation sprinkled with anecdotes about why his plan was superior to the recommendations of the experienced leaders in the room. He used conversation-ending stock answers to respond to questions about his decisions, as in

You obviously don't have all the information," and
If you knew what I knew, I think you would agree with me."

My favorite was,

I know you don't have access to the information I have access to, so you'll just have to trust me on this."
Embedded in his responses was a not-too-subtle put down,

"I know more than you and your dissent only reveals your ignorance."

While this individual retains significant formal authority—that's for another discussion—with the exception of a few sycophant omegas, he has lost any semblance of moral authority in the organization. People don't trust his "expertise" and whenever possible, steer clear of him—within months every leader in the aforementioned "discussion" found other places to contribute.

If he keeps this up—and he most likely will—he will indeed become the smartest person in the room, because he will be the only person left in the room as others flee from his influence.

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www.Lead2Transform/Education
info@lead2transform.com