

Are you an “Accidental Diminisher”?



A while ago, I wrote an [article](#) about the climate we create as leaders, and I promised to discuss some avenues to help manage this impact more mindfully. Among others, I alluded to Liz Wiseman’s work on “Multipliers and Diminishers” – so let’s explore this.

The concept is quite simple: for her, some enlightened leaders “multiply” the individual and collective capabilities of their team members (including, it seems, their intelligence!), whereas other leaders “diminish” these capabilities by being micromanagers, tyrants, know-it-alls, etc. You get the idea.

I was initially attracted by the idea of “multiplying” the capabilities of a team. Yet, to be honest, as soon as I felt that the whole thing could err on the side of yet another simplistic saga of Good vs. Evil, I lost interest. Yet, one thought leading to another, I recently remembered the Multipliers. I looked it up on the internet, where I stumbled on Liz Wiseman’s idea of “accidental Diminishers”. That one, finally, re-triggered my curiosity. So, what does she mean with this?

Well, the starting point is that quite many executives are not really aware of their impact. Some ‘multiply’ others without giving it a thought, some have to work at it (my favourites! ;). Similarly, there’s only very few people who are evil enough to *consciously* diminish others. Diminishers are mostly well-intentioned, and that is exactly the problem. These are the ones that Liz Wiseman calls “Accidental Diminishers”. Let me take a real-life example to illustrate the idea and its importance.

A while ago, I got a call from David, someone I had assessed a year before. I knew David as a highly confident type, so I got alarmed when he told me: *“I’m afraid my demons are haunting me again... you know, these things you told me about myself during my assessment...”* We talked for two hours the next day, and I scrambled my schedule to meet with each of his team members as soon as possible.

(A bit of context: David was an executive-level advisor in a large local banking establishment. Bright, congenial, he had a knack for shaking things with unconventional views. He was being considered for the role of CHRO, which was a new career for him, and the reason for the assessment. As a candidate he had quite a few flaws – he accepted that I called him a “court jester” in my assessment report – but he was brimming with ideas about how to rejuvenate the HR function, and he got the job.)

When I met with his team a year after his appointment, I could only see a lot of damage. I remember a usually highly forward-looking and proactive lady, now at her wits’ end, close to throwing the towel. A male senior manager, a long-standing servant of the bank, was literally shaking with nervousness. This stern person was on the verge of tears. To him, David had become a bully, out to get him in the most vicious way.

In the following weeks, I took David and his direct reports off site. We managed to create a safe moment of open and respectful dialogue, and to start putting the team back on the tracks.

Then came the hard part, working with David. After the team meeting, I invited him for a good drink and a good conversation.

A great deal of David's identity and success – at the bank and outside – was about being an unconventional thinker and a provocateur. He took his appointment to lead the HR function as a mandate to “make it less stuffy”. Impatient to bring about change, he was constantly bombarding his team with a firework of innovative and daring ideas. Gradually, confusion built up; people were sent in all directions, stopped thinking usefully, spread themselves thinly, and didn't achieve much.

That was bad enough, and I could stop my story here - but David made it even worse.

Confronted with slow progress and mounting dissatisfaction, he got increasingly frustrated. His identity as a change agent was at risk. Over the months, he started becoming angry about “resistance to change” and pushed others harder and harder. The long-standing company servant was a frequent target for his ire: the more that man sternly commented about the need to “*translate these nice new ideas into solid processes*”, the more scathing David became. Overwhelmed by a crossfire of ideas and criticism, people were diminished on all fronts: disoriented, disempowered, disheartened.

David's story ended up being a road to hell paved with good intentions: his desire to trigger innovation led to exactly the opposite result. That is precisely the dynamics behind the behaviours of most Accidental Diminishers. While David's stinging reactions brought it to the extreme, Liz Wiseman stresses that more nuanced and 'positive' cases are commonplace. She does a great job at highlighting the underlying good intentions, and how these backfire to create the opposite result.

Let's look at a few examples of the different types she identified: “Perfectionists” who strive for excellence discourage others by their excessively high standards, and even create the negligence they abhor (“*Why bother? However hard I try, my boss will re-do my work anyway!*”). “Rapid Responders” who jump in to take care of all queries? They encourage their team members to delegate upwards instead of addressing core issues by themselves, and they become a bottleneck rather than the accelerator that they aspire to be. The list goes on, from overly caring “Protectors” to “Strategists” who suck up all the intellectual oxygen in the room...

While I'm not a fan of boxing people into typologies, I find that part of Mrs Wiseman's work to be quite seminal. It stresses how easily good intentions can get derailed, and how likely it is that most of us can slip into these diminishing behaviours without even being aware of it. Perhaps her work will also be useful in collaborating more effectively with that “difficult” colleague, by helping re-connect with the good side of their core intention and assumptions, and build down the vicious circles that may have taken root¹.

Last but not least: let's not forget about Liz Wiseman's work on the positive, multiplying behaviours. Very briefly, I would summarize them in four key threads. First and foremost: speak less, tell less. This immediately calls for the second thread: believe in the 'genius' of others; create a space for them to think by themselves and contribute. Third, encourage intensity: set the bar high, push people to think harder and debate deeper. Lastly, foster empowerment and accountability in action. I would certainly add here the idea of *psychological safety*, which I will explore later on. While these recommendations may sound quite obvious, the dynamics of Accidental Diminishers do add a level of depth to them.

I hope this article triggered your interest in exploring your own multiplying and diminishing habits. Don't hesitate to [reach out](#) to discuss this. Enjoy the journey!

Olivier Schobbens, November 2021 & January 2023 (yup, 2022 was busy!)



¹ *Workplace harassment does exist, and David had irreparably slipped into these unacceptable behaviours. I am certainly not trying to excuse harassers; this is neither the intention nor the topic of this article. You may be a victim of harassment, and you may already feel diminished in spite of your best efforts to cope with the situation. If this is the case, I strongly encourage you to consult with an experienced professional.*