



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Dealing with Diminishers



However vast the darkness,  
we must supply our own light.

STANLEY KUBRICK

Sean Heritage is a cryptologic warfare officer in the US Navy. He attended the US Naval Academy and earned graduate degrees from Johns Hopkins University and the Naval War College. He is representative of a growing class of military leaders who are not just brilliant commanders but also innovative thinkers, fierce learners, and collaborative leaders.

After a tour serving as commanding officer, Heritage was assigned to a joint command under the leadership of a colonel in the US Air Force. Commander Heritage's immediate senior wasn't just from a different branch of the military; he operated with a very different leadership style. This colonel apparently never learned that a leader's responsibility is to inspire others to accomplish the "what," not to dictate a specific "how." He told people exactly what to do and showed visible disappointment when subordinates took another approach, even when they delivered the desired outcome. While Commander Heritage and the rest of the team poured their hearts and souls into their



work, the colonel found ways to deliver consistently destructive criticism. After months of cutting remarks from his superior and his own stymied attempts to make progress, Commander Heritage finally hit a wall—quite literally, he punched a wall in the colonel’s office. After he collected himself and apologized for his unprofessional behavior, the sting of the wall still hurt, but it was nothing compared to the dull ache of knowing he was stationed at this post for two more years. He felt stuck and helpless and even contemplated leaving the navy.

Commander Heritage turned to his peers for guidance. Their response was affirming: “Don’t quit on us. You are our beacon of hope, our ray of light.” Commander Heritage sought additional guidance from his trusted Personal Board of Directors (PBOD), a group of senior mentors he consulted with regularly. His PBOD gave him a forum to vent and the opportunity to learn from their wisdom, and Commander Heritage began to reorient himself. Instead of complaining about the leader he didn’t have, he would be the leader his team deserved and attempt to inspire the colonel to do the same. To address his disappointing reality, he started pretending a bit more. He played the “as if” game, operating as if his boss were more of a Multiplier. Instead of keeping his superior officer out of his operation, he brought him in. He wanted the colonel to see the energy of the team, so he invited him to witness the party himself. Rather than criticize the work transpiring in his absence, the colonel began cocreating a movement that was shaped in his presence. Sean reflected, “We were on the same ship and on the same course, but we were now moving faster.”

Heritage began making fun at work a more visible priority and spent time developing the leadership skills of his peers and juniors. And, yes, he shared an abstract of this book, held discussions with his team, and even created a “culture club” for those who wanted to help create a more collaborative work environment. He reinforced all attempts at Multiplier leadership with the people around him, and all along the chain of command. He didn’t wait for perfect behavior; he celebrated anything in the right direction, even attempts that were

wobbly at first. He said, “If you want to change the culture, you have to be like Wayne Gretzky, the ice hockey legend, and ‘skate to where the puck is heading.’” Focusing on what happened to be in his control, he decorated his workspace, introducing a new piece of art each week. As a way to share his personality and lighten up the mood, he brought in some happy, hopeful pieces—graphic illustrations with titles such as *Making Ideas Happen* and *Stay Amazing*—which became affectionately known as the “Wall of Optimism.”

Two months later, the colonel removed his second in command and asked Heritage to serve in that role. This appointment served for the entire team as a visible validation of Commander Heritage’s leadership style and the culture they were now building together. A year later, when the colonel retired, he spoke at length during his retirement ceremony about Sean’s influence on him as a leader. Soon after, the four-star admiral leading US Cyber Command at the National Security Agency asked Commander Heritage, artwork and all, to join him in the front office and serve as his executive assistant. As Sean shifted his focus from confronting to constructing, he found greater purpose as a leader; he was no longer a victim of poor leadership but a respected leader who was shaping the future.

Sometimes, the best way out of a diminishing situation is to multiply up. When stuck under a Diminisher, what’s your best strategy? It is tempting to hit a wall and confront your Diminisher; it is equally tempting to fall back and comply. But there is a third, more productive, alternative: multiply your way out.

Too many well-intended managers are stuck beneath diminishing leaders. They aspire to lead by bringing out the best in others but find themselves being sucked down a Diminisher’s vortex. I often hear the following said in frustration: “I want to be a Multiplier leader, but my boss is a total Diminisher, so I can’t.” Or, as one group of South African managers put it, “We’ve all heard about Multipliers, but what the [bleep] do we do about the Diminishers around here?”

How do you work for someone who is sucking the life out of you,

slowly draining your energy? How can you possibly bring out the best in others when your boss brings out the worst in you? The research my team and I conducted, interviewing dozens of professionals and surveying hundreds more, showed that the five most prevalent reactions to Diminishers are: 1) confront them, 2) avoid them, 3) quit, 4) comply and lie low, and 5) ignore the diminishing behavior. My research also showed that the five least effective strategies in dealing with Diminishers are: 1) confront them, 2) avoid them, 3) comply and lie low, 4) convince them you are right, and 5) take HR action. In other words, the most popular strategies for dealing with Diminishers are also the least effective.<sup>1</sup>

However, we shouldn't be surprised that strategies for dealing with Diminishers are faulty and feckless. After all, that's the point—we aren't at our best around Diminishers. The anxiety they invoke triggers our brain's amygdala (our emotional brain), which reacts faster and hijacks our neocortex (our rational brain), which leads to irrational actions and destructivity.<sup>2</sup> When powers of reasoning are threatened, it follows that judgment and coping strategies for dealing with Diminishers are vulnerable as well. Dealing with Diminishers is difficult and requires our best thinking.

This chapter is for those of you stuck under diminishing leaders; it's intended to supply you with proven strategies to help you respond at your best. If you are fortunate enough to be surrounded by Multipliers, skip this chapter and proceed to the final chapter, "Becoming a Multiplier."

This chapter's message is simple: you *can* be a Multiplier while working for a Diminisher. With the right mindset and a set of smart tactics, you can minimize the diminishing effect. There are no templates, just sound ideas that must be executed with discretion and savvy. While leading like a Multiplier might be management science, dealing with Diminishers is an art form. But done thoughtfully and persistently, you might even find that you become immune to the effects of diminishing leaders. Ultimately, you might join the ranks

of those I call Invincibles—people who continue to work using their highest capacity and offer their greatest intelligence, despite being surrounded by diminishing behaviors.

## The Death Spiral Versus the Growth Cycle

Being diminished, especially chronically, is both stressful and exhausting. Although people react to being diminished in a myriad of ways, there are a couple of knee-jerk responses. As Dieter, a corporate middle manager from Europe, observed, “It is easier to align with the Diminisher and feast on the misfortune of other colleagues than it is to fight the battle and get eaten too.” It’s also easier to return a set of diminishing actions with a diminishing response. Unfortunately, this only perpetuates the problem.

Consider the following picture of the “spiral of despair.” Your boss is a micromanager—he controls, dictates, and obsesses over the minutest details of your work. In public and on the surface, you respectfully acquiesce to his directives and inquisitions, but in private, with the professional mask off, you feel disrespected, untrusted, unseen, and undervalued. We feel that our most basic sense of self-determination has been denied.

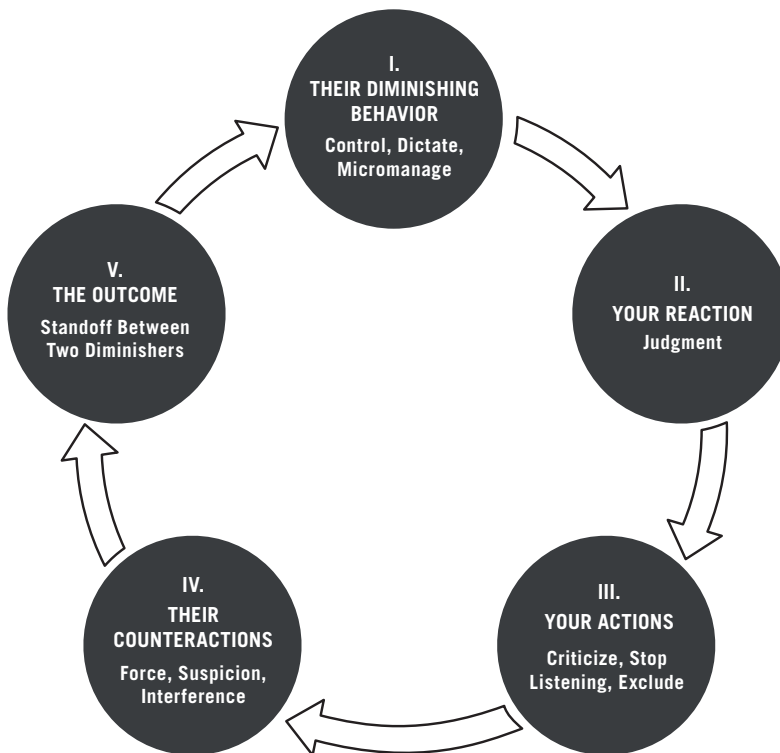
When we sense we’ve been wronged or wrongly judged, our natural instinct is to be judgmental in return. So we criticize. We stop listening and become dismissive of their input. We want the diminishing to stop, so we exclude the Diminisher, keeping the boss at arm’s length or further if we can. Or, if we’ve been made to feel like we can’t do anything right, we cease trying or tune out.

But the death spiral does not end there, with merely disaffected relationships, because the diminishing tends to increase. When bosses sense that their power is being threatened or their ideas not heard, they tend to respond with even greater force, typically doubling down on their point of view. When denied access to details, micro-

managers become nervous, even suspicious. Sensing that something is amiss, they interfere more, determinedly forcing themselves into discussions and decisions. Now there is a standoff—not between a Diminisher and a victim but rather, between two Diminishers—the original micromanaging boss and the newly minted Diminisher, who is now bringing out the worst in the boss.

As depicted in the chart below, the spiral continues: they prescribe, we withdraw; they decree, we give up; and once again they conclude that the only way to get something done is to be all over us. The research that I have conducted indicates this extended spin cycle lasts, on average, 22 months, which is 85 percent of the average duration of time the survey respondents worked with the person.

### THE DIMINISHING DEATH SPIRAL



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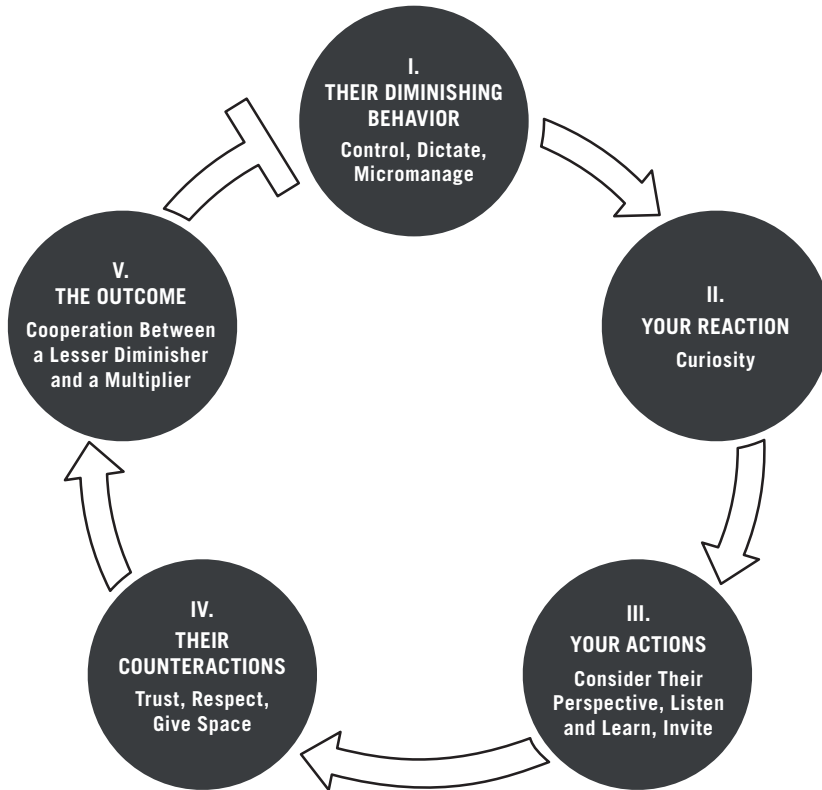
This scenario is, unfortunately, all too common. It is impossible to diminish someone out of being a Diminisher. The best way out of a diminishing death spiral is through multiplication—using the logic of multiplication and leading like a Multiplier yourself.

Let's look at how changing your response can break the cycle of diminishing. Say you work for a micromanaging tyrant. What if, instead of responding with criticism and avoidance, you respond with intellectual curiosity, a hallmark of Multiplier leaders? True intellectual curiosity is a deep and persistent desire to know or understand. While we hope that curiosity does not “kill the cat,” as the adage goes, we know that it can kill conflict. What if you took his perspective and asked questions like: Why is he worried? What does he need from me to feel confident and in control of his business? Or, simply, What causes an otherwise decent human being to act like a Diminisher?

As you ask these questions and build empathy for his concerns and reality, you might listen in order to understand the source of tension. With ego set aside, you might even find yourself noticing and appreciating his strengths or feeling less angry, and with this insight, you can then work in a more cooperative spirit that smooths ruffled feathers and makes everyone less defensive.

As you respond differently, your Diminisher is likely to respond differently as well. Feeling more respected, he is apt, in turn, to extend more respect. The same process works in building (or rebuilding) trust.<sup>3</sup> When you demonstrate understanding of his expectations, the diminishing manager is more likely to back off and allow more space to breathe and room to maneuver. He might even show more appreciation for your work. As depicted in the chart below, the diminishing death cycle breaks, and confrontation or tepid compliance is replaced with cooperation—not between a Diminisher and an employee, but between a more elastic Diminisher and a Multiplier, one who brings out the best in everyone, including a pain-in-the-backside boss.

### BREAKING THE DIMINISHING DEATH SPIRAL



Let me clarify further, for those of you thinking, *You don't understand my boss; this person is a hardened, lifelong, textbook Diminisher and isn't going to change.* Changing your response, no matter how enlightened you become, isn't guaranteed to change a Diminisher, but it will turn down the volume on the Perfectionism, the Rescuing, Pacesetting, and other diminishing practices, allowing you more space to think and work.



## Cycle Breakers

When dealing with a Diminisher, you can hope—dream even—that this person will become a Multiplier, and perhaps she will. Or you can choose to be the Multiplier yourself. Most great accomplishments require a great leader—but the leader may not always be the boss. Sure, no one likes having to be “the adult” to an incapable parent, but we all crave being allowed to work at our best.

Here we offer strategies to break the cycle of diminishing and mitigate the havoc of less-than-wonderful bosses and toxic colleagues. These tactics were suggested by my research as well as my own experience in the workplace and flow from a set of fundamental principles about the nature of humans at work.

1. **IT'S NOT NECESSARILY ABOUT YOU.** Although you are the one feeling the pain, your actions aren't necessarily the root cause. The Diminisher's behavior is more likely a function of the pressure they feel from above or the residual effects of ineffectual role models from their past. But, at the same time, it is entirely possible that your reactions to the Diminisher are inflaming the situation.
2. **DIMINISHING ISN'T INEVITABLE.** When dealing with a controlling boss, we have more control than we might think. We choose how much legitimacy we grant to a Diminisher's views; we choose whether or not we embrace lowered expectations for ourselves; we choose how she makes us feel. Those are choices. So, too, we can choose to maintain high expectations for ourselves, and our own analysis and evaluation of our contribution can help us to stand up to Diminishers in healthy and helpful ways. The diminishing may continue, but we can mitigate its destructive effect.
3. **YOU CAN LEAD YOUR LEADER.** Very few managers will ever know you as well as you do. Therefore, if you want someone to

utilize you at your best, you will need to guide them. You can be your own agent and advocate for your capabilities and defend yourself from well-meaning but overbearing management.

From my initial research, it was obvious that Diminishers were getting a reduced level of capability from others. But it wasn't until more research, after I'd heard from thousands of people who were stuck working for Diminishers, that I fully understood the deep crater carved by these leaders. People who are shut down, limited, and bullied at work feel the toxic effects seep into all aspects of their lives. People consistently reported experiencing increased stress, reduced confidence, low energy, depression, poor health, general unhappiness, and more. And the collateral damage doesn't stop there; if not addressed, diminishing usually intensifies. The majority of individuals also reported that they carried stress home and became angry and irritable, complained more, and withdrew socially.

Among the hundreds of comments in our study, there were two that especially struck me. One person wrote, "I doubted I could do anything right, and I doubted that anything I had done had been right. I felt like I was a disappointment to my family, my friends, and my coworkers. I unfriended most everyone on Facebook/Google+, had massive depressive episodes, and even contemplated ending my life." The other heart-wrenching story was from someone who said that the stress and self-doubt got so bad, "I couldn't even take care of my dog."

The strategies offered below are intended to improve your reactions to Diminishers, relieve stress, neutralize immediate problems, and halt the downward spiral. They are basic survival strategies—self-defense to help you work with the more entrenched, hardened Diminishers and to help minimize the magnitude of their sting. None of these strategies will immediately transform the Diminisher into a Multiplier leader (nor ever be able to solve deep psychological prob-

lems). What these strategies can do, when played well, is to greatly decrease the diminishing effect a person is having on you and allow your ideas to be heard, buying you some valuable thinking time and enabling you to play bigger.

All of these strategies work off the core assumptions that *It's not necessarily about you*, *Diminishing isn't inevitable*, and *You can lead your leader*. On Level 1 are defensive moves to enable you to deflect diminishing actions. On Level 2 you'll find proactive strategies, offense plays to aid your forward progress. Level 3 gives coaching strategies for you to help the Accidental Diminisher become more of a Multiplier.

It will be worth your while to try the strategies on Levels 1 and 2 before going on to Level 3. You might think of the three levels as loosely following a “research and development” timetable where you don't want to rush the new product to the market without performing due diligence. Though most people wish to start at Level 3, few find themselves with permission to coach before they've invested time in strengthening their own game skills.

### Level 1: Defenses Against the Dark Arts of Diminishing Managers

**1. TURN DOWN THE VOLUME.** A colleague of mine was once described as “a dog that barks at everything,” meaning that she was overly reactive to potential threats and didn't differentiate between serious attacks and passing annoyances. My research showed that people who cope best with Diminishers don't bark at every disturbance. They've learned what to ignore. They don't avoid the Diminisher or pretend the problem doesn't exist; they merely tune out some of the interference. They choose to turn down the volume, reducing the Diminisher's intrusion into their head and the other person's consumption of their life and psychic energy.

When we are being nitpicked and undermined, we tend to turn inward and question ourselves. It's easy to assume that the Dimin-

isher doesn't value our contribution; however, in reality, they probably just value their own contribution more. Instead of reading too much into a situation, we can zoom out and take a broader perspective.

When Jackie,<sup>4</sup> a talented HR executive, took a senior management role at a hot start-up company, she was expecting both challenge and adventure. What she hadn't anticipated was that her biggest challenge would be working for an unpredictable CEO who flip-flopped on critical decisions and intruded into every situation in order to dominate. Jackie felt continually frustrated with her boss and contemplated leaving. After several agonizing months, she decided that she would neither take it personally nor let the situation define her. She stepped back, took inventory of her life values, and realized, "the worst thing that can happen to me is getting fired, and, in the grand scheme of things, that's not the worst thing that can happen to me." With her diminishing boss in perspective, she did what she could to create a positive environment. She didn't roll over and play dead, and she didn't let the situation kill her joy.

Ignoring a negative situation typically requires an active choice. This is how Glenn Pethel, a sage education leader from Georgia, has learned to manage through frequent brushes with uncooperative colleagues. After these contentious encounters, his close associates would ask him why he wasn't upset. Pethel, who speaks with a gentle, southern charm, would reply, "Because I don't want to be. Something caused this person to behave this way, and it wasn't necessarily me. Do I like it? No. But it's not going to dip from my bucket."

As when dealing with teenagers, a smart parent knows to ignore a lot of noise and negative stimulus. You need to continually remind yourself, *It isn't me, and it isn't forever*. Ignoring a persistently defeating and deafening message is a big task. But it becomes easier to filter it out when you turn down the volume of diminishing messages and

turn up the volume for other, more enabling, voices—your own, as well as those of supportive leaders and colleagues.

**2. STRENGTHEN OTHER CONNECTIONS.** Building on the idea above, we can reduce the effects of the Diminisher by increasing our connections to different people and work. In other words, if you can't get inside the Diminisher's trust circle, build other circles of influence.

When Chuck, now a director at a large accounting firm, was a project manager, he worked several levels under one of the firm's tyrannical partners, who created a tense environment, gave erratic feedback, and led people around in circles. Chuck couldn't figure out how to please this partner or make progress, and he was spending most of his time editing and reworking documents based on this partner's random feedback. Feeling stuck and miserable, he wallowed for a couple of months while he contemplated a complete career change. After some therapeutic venting with his colleagues, his immediate manager gave him some good advice: "Quit whining. Do something about it or leave."

He realized that he wasn't going to change the tyrannical partner, but he could change his perspective. He divided his day into chunks in order to minimize the time he spent responding to the plethora of comments from the partner. Instead of trying to perfect the work, he made it directionally correct and then passed it to the partner, knowing that another iteration was inevitable. He didn't avoid the partner, but he began spending much less time fending off diminishing feedback. He spent his newly freed up time with clients and in benchmarking work with other colleagues, both of which he found fulfilling. His confidence returned, and he even mustered the courage to send an email to the partner providing feedback on the ineffectiveness of their work process. The partner offered only a mild apology, but taking action felt empowering to Chuck. The lesson he learned was simple: Don't let your domineering boss dominate your day.

Like Chuck, the individuals who most effectively deal with Diminishers take steps to broaden their support base and strengthen other relationships, much like a torn ligament requires the strengthening of proximal muscles. A petty officer in the US Navy described it this way: “When I find myself dealing with a bad leader, I still take their orders, but I latch on to another leader that I trust, someone who can give me an alternative point of view, especially about myself.”

When you find yourself weakened by an overbearing or undermining colleague, invest elsewhere, in places where you can build collateral strength. Create an internal or external advisory board—a group of trusted colleagues or mentors who can guide you as you navigate a difficult relationship. Find a safe sounding board—colleagues where you can test your ideas and sanity-check your work. (Make sure, though, that this does not become merely a place to vent or an echo chamber for your current thinking.) Build a cheering squad—people who know your real capabilities and can give you a useful second opinion and a healthy new perspective on yourself. Their alternative view will remind you that you are smart and will figure it out. Lastly, develop a career network—supporters who will help you advance when your boss isn’t actively advocating for you.

**3. RETREAT AND REGROUP.** It is never wise to go head-to-head with a head-strong person, especially the boss. My research showed that a frontal attack, such as trying to prove the merits of one’s ideas, only accelerated the death spiral (you might recall that confrontation is the most used yet least effective approach). Even when you win, the victories are usually pyrrhic.

When facing an impasse, try regrouping and resetting your aspiration—instead of attempting to win, just stay in the game. A former executive at Apple Inc. shared her strategy for pitching ideas to Steve Jobs. She knew there was little chance of prevailing once Steve became agitated or opinionated. Rather than argue her points, she listened, acknowledging his point of view. She then asked for time

to think through his ideas and come back with a plan. While she regrouped, Steve became less entrenched. When she returned a few days later with a plan that incorporated the best of both their ideas, she found a receptive audience, and the plan advanced. While some people like to argue more than others, everyone likes to hear that someone is seriously considering their opinions. When you retreat and regroup, you give the Diminisher a way out as well—an opportunity to gracefully rethink an issue and to save face.

**4. SEND THE RIGHT SIGNALS.** The primary cause of micromanaging (the most prevalent form of diminishing) is concern that something won't get completed fully or correctly. As one Diminisher said, "I only become a micromanager when I think it won't get done." You can ward off this form of diminishing by providing delivery assurance. When you deliver the goods as promised, you earn the Diminisher's trust. As Stephen M. R. Covey says, "Trust, once lost can indeed be rebuilt."<sup>5</sup> Trust gets built in layers, brick by brick. Each brick is a win, a small success that tells the Diminisher that this person will make them look good. And the positive cycle continues: every time you deliver, you earn the opportunity to ask for the space and support you need to do your best work.

Our recent research showed that there is a greater risk of extreme diminishing when the two individuals have dissimilar personality types or processing styles. For example, a manager with a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Judging style (methodical and results oriented) is more likely to diminish an employee with a "perceiving" style (flexible and good at multitasking) than an employee with the same style as his own.

To counter this dynamic, employees can send signals that keep their manager's inner Diminisher from leaking out. Heidi, a marketing executive with a high Judging style, said, "People on my team who are Ps [Perceiving] just don't send me the signals I need to feel confident. I need them to do more than tell me, 'things are in good

shape.' I need them to give me updates without being asked and say something more like, 'we've hit each milestone, and we will be ready to go by 8 a.m. tomorrow.'" Conversely, individuals with a Judging style might need to demonstrate flexibility and let their Perceiving boss know that they are open to new possibilities. They might need to say, "We have a plan, but we are open to last-minute changes." In either case, you can earn more space by determining what is important to the Diminisher and then send signals that it is also important to you.

**5. ASSERT YOUR CAPABILITY.** Megan Lambert, an extremely bright business consultant, was working as a volunteer in a meditation community that she belonged to. Megan was to coordinate an event for members of their meditation community but fell behind when she got caught up with several urgent work projects. The volunteer leader, who was also a friend of Megan's, was "all over her" and began treating Megan like she was suddenly incapable, texting frequently to check on her progress. After several frustrating days, Megan could feel herself becoming halfhearted and lazy in her role, and she knew she needed to reverse this cycle. An avid practitioner of Multiplier leadership, Megan said to her friend-colleague, "Hey, let's play a game. For three days, I want you to believe that I'm amazing at this job. Just pretend I'm totally competent." Her friend agreed, and stepped back. Megan stepped up and began fulfilling her volunteer responsibilities wholeheartedly again.

Sometimes you need to tell an overly helpful manager or colleague that you don't need help. If you've ever tried to help a three-year-old do something that the child could do alone (like put on a coat or carry a plate), you know exactly how the child will react. With a mix of conviction and outrage, the child will say, "No. I can do it by myself!" As the child asserts her independence, the adult remembers that the child is maturing and every day more capable than the day before. Similarly, it is easy for corporate managers to overlook the



growth of the people they lead. However, by the time we enter the adult workplace, our inner three-year-old has been socialized out. Instead of pushing back against micromanaging bosses, we tend to let them step in when we could otherwise handle it ourselves.

The next time a diminishing boss or colleague tries to do something for you that you can do independently, try reminding the person that you can do it yourself. There's no need to throw a tantrum; just announce and assert your capability. For example, you might say, "I appreciate the help, and I think I can handle this one," or "Can I try this by myself and come to you if I get stuck?"

When asking for some breathing room, a little humor goes a long way, especially with the Accidental Diminisher. Ben Putterman, a longtime and dear colleague of mine, had a delightfully direct way of letting me know when I was micromanaging. If I was overly involved or prescriptive in a meeting, he would wait until we left the room and then he would yank at an imaginary rope around his neck, start gasping for air, and pretend to eek out, "Hey boss, you could probably loosen the choke chain a bit." We'd laugh, and more important, I'd get the hint, back off, and let him lead.

If your boss doesn't have a sense of humor (incidentally, humor is the trait most negatively correlated with Diminishers), just play it straight. A simple If-Then statement works, such as, "If you give me the meeting topics in advance, then I'll come prepared with ideas" or "If you let me run the meeting, then I'll make sure we fully resolve the problem." Whether your tone is lighthearted or serious, asserting one's capability is best done with humility and respect, especially in cultures that value respect for authority. Lastly, when you assert your capability and someone gives you space, be prepared to deliver your finest thinking and work in return.

**6. ASK FOR PERFORMANCE INTEL.** It's hard to be brilliant if you lack critical information. In particular, people generally need two types of information to achieve top performance. The first is clear direction—What

is the target, and why is it important? Diminishers often become so preoccupied with telling people how to shoot that they forget to first establish the target. When a Diminisher becomes immediately prescriptive, you can ask them to back up and provide more context and direction.

When Kevin Grigsby, an organizational development expert in academic medicine and science, got off the phone with an overly directive physician leader, he faced a dilemma. The leader had been very clear what he wanted Kevin to do and specified the exact technique he wanted him to use. But Kevin knew that if he simply followed the doctor's orders, the situation wouldn't improve. So, instead of blindly taking the prescription, he elevated the conversation by asking, "Can you tell me more about what you want as an outcome? What are you trying to accomplish?" After listening and acknowledging the desired impact, he asked, "Are you okay if I take a different route to get there?" The leader hesitated momentarily and said, "Sure, as long as you get the same impact." The next time someone gives you a statement of work, ask to begin with a problem definition instead.

The second type of critical information is performance feedback: Am I actually hitting the target? When someone is missing the target, Diminishers tend to reiterate how to do it, rather than give information that would help the person to adjust their technique or their aim. When faced with a deluge of criticism, ask for feedback instead. The term *feedback* often carries the connotation of criticism or judgment; however, technically speaking, feedback is simply information to help recalibrate something. For example, a thermostat takes periodic readings to determine if the room temperature is warmer or cooler than the established target. This information is then used to raise or lower the temperature. If you are receiving too much criticism but not enough critical performance intel, ask for it. Try asking, "What should I be doing more of? Less of?" And, if you want to be on target more often, request feedback at more frequent intervals.

**7. SHOP FOR A NEW BOSS.** If you are in a diminishing environment, you have to ask yourself if this is the right place for you. If you are being forced into a small box where you can't grow, you might need to take the hermit crab's approach and find a bigger home where you can grow. It is probably not surprising that quitting your job is by far the most effective defense against Diminishers. (Unfortunately, against some diminishing managers, it is the only reasonable defense.)

Of course, for many people quitting isn't an option. But if you do quit, don't just swap one bad manager for another. Instead of simply searching for a new job, go shopping for your next boss. You'll be living with this decision for years, so, just as you would when making any major purchase, get information first. Ask good questions and then watch for evidence of Multiplier leadership. Pay attention to their talk-to-listen ratio. Listen to how they talk about their team. Do they mention people's brilliance or do they list their duties? How much ownership do team members have? How do decisions get made? Check reviews and see what former employees say. There are a number of websites that provide transparency into the actual inner workings of a company and its management culture.<sup>6</sup> You might also try before you buy and work initially as an independent contractor or consultant. If this isn't feasible, ask to sit in on a team meeting or participate on a conference call to better understand how the team works. For further guidance, see the Multiplier Experiment "Shopping for a New Boss" in appendix E.

As you seek to ward off Diminishing actions, a couple of caveats are in order. First, all of the above strategies are defensive moves that minimize the reductive effects of Diminishers. Deploying any of the above strategies need not be big conversations (other than quitting your job); they are little adjustments, part of your day-to-day interaction, that help you remain whole and work at your best. They are meant to project your strengths, not expose the Diminisher's weaknesses. These strategies aren't likely to change the leader, but they can certainly alter the dynamic.

Second, remember that if you are constantly surrounded by Diminishers, at some point you have to ask yourself, “Is it me?” You might be taking things too personally, reading malice into otherwise well-intended criticism or even looking for insults in compliments. It might be time to see your Diminishers as Accidental Diminishers, leaders with good intentions. Or you may have to admit that you are diminishing in the other direction—upward. The remedy in all cases is the same: be a Multiplier, down, out, and up.

### Level 2: Multiplying Up

Many corporate managers have experience as Multipliers “down” to their direct reports and staff, but fewer are Multipliers “out” to their peers or “up” to their bosses. Our analysis of the Multipliers 360 assessment<sup>7</sup> has shown that, on average, managers are utilizing approximately 76 percent of the intelligence of their direct reports and only 62 percent of their peers and 66 percent of their supervisors. Yet my research has also shown that people can serve as Multipliers from any direction, even upward to a diminishing supervisor.

Here’s why: Diminishers want to be valued for their intelligence and ideas; in fact, many are desperate for it. On the other hand, Multipliers enjoy finding other people’s genius and engaging it. In many ways, Diminishers need Multipliers. It may not be a match made in heaven, but it is a strategy to help you escape a hellish experience, because when you bring out the best in your boss, you help create the conditions under which you can work at your best. When Diminishers feel smart, valued, heard, included, and trusted, they extend more trust in return. Essentially, by being a Multiplier to your boss, you’ll create your own Multiplier environment, a place where you can thrive, not just survive.

The following are several ways you can be a Multiplier to those above you in the organization or to diminishing colleagues at your side. They aren’t meant as defenses against the raving, tyrannical Diminishers; rather, these are offense plays, intended to help you

move your contribution forward, especially with Accidental Diminishers, the otherwise good people who fail at being good bosses.

**1. EXPLOIT YOUR BOSS'S STRENGTHS.** Instead of trying to change your boss, focus on trying to better utilize his or her knowledge and skills in service of the work you're leading. You don't need to cede ownership; just make sure to use his or her capabilities at key junctures and in ways they can be most helpful. If she has a critical eye, could you use her to help diagnose an underlying problem in a project? Or, if he's a big-picture thinker, could you have him share his vision to help win over a key customer?

Ron, a senior executive at Apple Inc. widely regarded for his own creative genius, was asked to build a new, highly strategic business for Apple. He could have let Steve Jobs, the company's notoriously hands-on CEO, dictate the details of the project, or he could have tried to keep Jobs from interfering in the process. Instead, Ron sought out Job's special insight at critical development points. He took the product design to him and openly asked, "How can we make this even better?" Jobs, whose native genius had been invoked, responded not with criticism but by rattling off numerous ideas for turning good features into great ones. Ron allowed his team to do their best work, and then used the strengths of his boss to take it to the next level. Even if you don't work for a genius like Steve Jobs, you can use the same technique.

**2. GIVE THEM A USER'S GUIDE.** If you are one of the fortunate few, you have a manager who is perceptive and takes note of your native genius—the thing you do easily and freely. If, on the other hand, you are among the underutilized majority, you needn't sit idle, waiting to be discovered. You can broadcast your capabilities and help your colleagues pick up the signal. Or you can simply tell people what you are good at and how you can be best used.

Think of it like giving someone a user's guide to you. A good

manual tells you what the product is designed to do and how best to use it. Let's say you're considering buying a cordless reciprocating saw. The guide would indicate that the saw can cut through a variety of materials—wood, plastic, and metal—and could be used to cut wood studs, tree branches, PVC, metal pipe, and even nails. The promotional literature might also indicate that it's especially handy for demolition and for working in hard-to-reach spots.

Likewise, you can give someone a user's manual to you. What are you good at? What do you do naturally, without much effort, and what do you do freely, without being coerced or incentivized? Think of this as the thing you were built to do. For example, your brilliance might be fixing broken processes—you find the source of the derailment and get things back on track. Once you've figured out your genius, give it a name, like "troubleshooting," (or even a superhero name like the Process Surgeon) and then outline a number of ways that your genius can be put to work. For example, you could help your department get a late project delivered on time, win back a troubled account, or lead a cross-team task force to reduce bureaucracy. Once you've got your "guide" together, discuss these ideas with your boss or the person who can cast you in these roles.

If you want to work at your highest point of contribution, you need to let people know your value. Remember, getting to develop your natural brilliance at work is a true privilege, so don't play the prima donna. Just because you know your native genius doesn't mean you are excused from the parts of your work that feel foreign or involve quotidian tasks.

**3. LISTEN TO LEARN.** Even if you find yourself stuck working for a Diminisher, figure out what this person can teach you and how he or she can still help you succeed. A common mistake people make in interacting with Diminisher bosses is dismissing their criticism too quickly. In my years in senior management at Oracle, I watched numerous people present to Larry Ellison, the company's brilliant and relentless

CEO. Those who struggled (and barely survived) got into intellectual standoffs with him. Those who thrived shared their ideas with confidence, backed them up with data, but then stopped to really listen to Larry's reactions. They didn't do this to placate him or merely to find a better angle for selling their idea. They listened to learn. One of Larry's executive staff said, "Too many people don't take the opportunity to really see what Larry can teach them."

Instead of going into battle, look for common ground. Glenn Pethel, the education administrator mentioned earlier, is a master at working across divides and building bridges. Perhaps there is something about going to war that helps one learn diplomacy. As a young man in the late 1960s, he served as a soldier in the Vietnam War and learned there his most important lessons on leadership. He discovered that in the dark of the night, when you are exposed and afraid, you learn to see differently. You look beyond outward appearances and differences—be they race, religion, circumstance, or status—to truly see people and know them for who they really are. Even shrouded in darkness, you can learn to trust and find common purpose. This profound experience helped him to see beyond diminishing behavior to discover ways to work together, even with very difficult people.

Pethel offered this advice: "Diminishers want to be heard. They want to know that the ideas that they put forth are really good ideas. If you start by acknowledging their worth and that their ideas do have merit, you've got a good beginning." But, Pethel does more than just listen; he makes sure the person knows he is *genuinely* listening. He faces them and asks, "Do you mind if I take some notes? I like to go back and think about what you said." He then summarizes what he's heard and looks for mutual agreement. In the process, the other person becomes less of a Diminisher and more of a partner.

Instead of dissenting the next time your boss shifts into Diminisher mode, ask questions that help your boss weigh both the upsides and downsides of her ideas. Ask about her fundamental objectives.

You might even take the Extreme Questions challenge and keep asking sincere questions until you truly understand the boss's point of view. Once you are clear on what she really wants, you can talk through alternative ways to help meet the objective.

When Shaw, the director of customer success for his company, took a fourteen-day “dealing with Diminishers” challenge, he decided to focus on listening to learn with his micromanaging boss, with whom he seldom agreed. Shaw noted, “When I asked questions, I found out we were actually on the same page more often than I had thought. I had been shutting her out and making assumptions too early.”

Wahiba, a sales manager in Tunisia, took the same fourteen-day challenge with her hypertalkative boss and said, “When my boss discovered that I listened carefully and took notes, she was more supportive, less nervous, and we had a constructive discussion. And, when I listened without interrupting, my boss shared critical information my team needed.”

**4. ADMIT YOUR MISTAKES.** You'll remember that at the core of Diminisher logic is the belief that *people aren't going to figure it out without me*. Nothing fuels this cycle like the unrepentant mistake. When an employee makes a mistake and hides their misdeeds, it leaves the manager to question both their capability and their judgment and to assume the mistake will be repeated. This can place the manager on a trajectory to be overly prescriptive or to intervene at the first hint of an error.

Consider breaking this cycle by talking frankly about your mishaps and sharing what you've learned, both from successes and failures. The conversation quickly shifts from blame and cover-up to recovery. When you transmit what you learned, you earn the space you need to get it right the next time. Instead of a Micromanager, your boss becomes more of an Investor—giving you ownership and the accountability that goes with it. But not only do you earn more



space for yourself, you create space for others to share their mistakes also—maybe even your boss. A boss sharing his or her own mistakes! That could liberate an entire team and create a culture where experimentation and innovative risk taking are legitimized.

So, don't wait for your boss to hold a "screwup of the week" conversation where people can confess and laugh off their mistakes. Set the tone by readily admitting your mistakes, sharing your learning, and letting the boss know that you're smarter each time. Doing so will reinforce a core Multiplier belief that *people are smart and can learn from their mistakes and figure it out*.

**5. SIGN UP FOR A STRETCH.** Managers can get stuck in the routine of giving people additional work, somehow thinking that more work equates to more growth opportunity. But doing the same thing over and over, faster and faster, does not develop your skills (unless you happen to be a knife juggler). The rest of us grow and learn by doing something hard, something we haven't done before, something we don't yet know how to do. A good Multiplier would define an opportunity that causes you to stretch; but just because your boss hasn't asked you to take on a new challenge doesn't mean you can't volunteer.

Send signals that you are ready to tackle a challenge that is a size too big. Let your boss know that you are willing to do something uncomfortable. But be careful: indicating a willingness to take on a new challenge can easily be misconstrued as a request for a promotion or new job. Most managers don't have an endless supply of promotions to dole out, and their defenses flare when employees come looking for "bigger jobs." Most managers do have a heap of challenges that they might be willing to share. We are suggesting that instead of unilaterally seizing control of a bigger job, you show willingness to work beyond the scope of your current one. You might extend your skills to a new domain or staple yourself to a problem outside your immediate job description. Or simply ask your manager what work

you can take off her plate. Start small and prove yourself. Instead of pining for an illusive promotion, construct a new challenge and show your boss how it might lead to more.

**6. INVITE THEM TO THE PARTY.** Instead of keeping the Diminisher out of your business, trying bringing them in. When someone is wreaking havoc on us and others, our instinct tells us to keep that person away, to hold the enemy at bay. Diminishers, when blocked, typically work even more aggressively to insert themselves. Keeping the Diminisher on the other side of the door can weaken an entire team. As discussed in chapter 7, “The Accidental Diminisher,” when we attempt to protect people from harsh forces, we leave them disconnected from reality and render them incapable of fending for themselves.

Rather than having your party crashed, what if you invited the Diminisher to join the fun? This is, perhaps, the most revolutionary strategy for multiplying up. What if you shared more data, invited them to meetings, and asked them to weigh in on important issues? They might torment you and make your life miserable (though, if that’s the case, they are probably already doing so). What if, instead of barely tolerating them, you invited them along? Your transparency is likely to signal that all is well and that you have nothing to hide. You might even find that they enjoy the interaction and really feel good about working with you. One middle manager made a point of including an otherwise diminishing, interfering senior executive in a critical project. Although she could have run the meetings without him, she included him on the agenda, asking him to kick off the meeting, set the context, and then turn it over to her. At the end of the project he remarked, “When I work with you, I feel like we can do anything.”

Sharing your space doesn’t mean giving free rein. By initiating interaction, you can maintain more control over how the boss contributes, thus minimizing the dreaded bungee-boss dynamic. For example, when you invite them to a meeting, you can suggest what role you’d like them to play and specify when you would like them

to chime in. Or, when you submit a document for review, point out specific questions you'd like them to address. In this way, you focus their energy and steer their contribution to where it is most valuable or, perhaps, simply to where it is least damaging.

While multiplying up is a great way to break a diminishing cycle, it's not limited to working with Diminishers; it works in 360 degrees, with everyone around you. It is the hallmark of the Invincible Contributor—the individual who is undeterred by otherwise diminishing superiors or depleting colleagues and who steadily performs at his or her highest level no matter what.

### Level 3: Inspiring Multiplier Leadership in Others

A natural consequence of embracing Multiplier leadership is the desire to aid others in becoming Multipliers—especially if the other person happens to be our boss and we feel their dulling effects on a daily basis. And, with the best intentions, we set out to help others grow as leaders. But often it is with the noblest intentions that we do the greatest damage. No matter how just the cause, we cannot diminish someone into being a Multiplier.

People cannot change others, only themselves. And change will occur only if an individual recognizes the problem of their own volition and has a deep desire (and incentive) to change their mode of operation. How do you help leaders: 1) to recognize the collateral damage left in their wake, and 2) to find a better way of leading? How do you help the Accidental Diminisher become a more intentional Multiplier? Here are a few strategies that raise awareness and incentivize leaders to make the shift.

**1. ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT.** Few Diminishers are willing to engage in a conversation about their diminishing ways. However, most managers are eager to explore their good intentions. If you begin by assuming that your colleague has positive intent, it will not only help you interpret their actions in the most flattering light, it will provide a

shared goal. Standing on common ground, you can help your colleague see that they are not getting what they seek. For example, to your Rapid Responder colleague, you might say, “I know you want to create a responsive team, but when you are so quick to respond, other people don’t get a chance to. If you were slower to action, other people would be faster.”

**2. ADDRESS ONE ISSUE AT A TIME.** As we’ve seen, those who work with Diminishers feel worn down and burdened. But if we unwisely unload all our frustrations, the Diminisher will only feel attacked and retreat to what they know how to do best—shut down ideas that are not their own. Instead, introduce one small idea at a time.

**3. CELEBRATE PROGRESS.** When training a dolphin, the animal trainer doesn’t wait until the dolphin jumps twenty feet out of the water and does a flip (the end goal of the training) before giving the dolphin a bucket of fish. All behavior in the right direction is rewarded with fish or other positive reinforcement. Likewise, if you want to help someone lead in new ways, recognize and appreciate every attempt in the right direction, even the smallest acts of good leadership.

While it is easy to see diminishing in others, it is most important to see it in ourselves. Most of us have an inner Diminisher that may be triggered during times of stress or crisis. Like a recessive gene that carries a predisposition for a certain illnesses, the gene can lie dormant until environmental conditions trigger the illness and you present symptoms. Your biggest opportunity to inspire Multiplier leadership might be in learning to recognize your own Diminisher traits and convert these conditions into Multiplier moments.

Or perhaps your breakthrough will come as you realize that you can be a better leader than your boss. There is a hidden assumption in many organizations that people are not expected, or even allowed, to outlead their bosses. The layers of the org chart appear to form a glass ceiling that caps leadership effectiveness. Given the extraordi-

nary results that Multipliers achieve through others, I believe one can lead like a Multiplier in a Diminisher environment. Give yourself permission to be better than your boss. And then watch the organization take notice.

### Supply Your Own Light

Being underutilized or actively diminished can be a difficult, dark time in one's career. The gloom can spread across other facets of your life and feel all-consuming. It is easy to succumb to the fate of the unseen worker and fade away; or to join in the diminishing and respond with your own disapproval, disregard, and disengagement; or to keep quiet and hope that your diminishing boss changes.

Or, you can be a cycle breaker. You can break the downward spiral of diminishing leaders by better asserting your capabilities or by becoming the leader that you wish you had. In our research process, the biggest regret people expressed is that they didn't take action sooner.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said:

*The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. . . . Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.*

When dealing with Diminishers, we may need to be the light that cuts through the dark. In modern organizations, leadership does not only come from the top; it radiates from the middle and ascends from the bottom. When you are trapped working for a Diminisher, sometimes the only way out is up—multiplying up. Because the only Diminisher you can change into a Multiplier is yourself.

## Chapter Eight Summary



### Dealing with Diminishers

You *can* be a Multiplier while working for a Diminisher.

#### ***Breaking the Cycle of Diminishing***

1. It's not necessarily about you
2. Diminishing isn't inevitable
3. You can lead your leader

#### ***Dealing with Diminisher Strategies***

##### *Level 1: Defenses Against the Dark Arts of Diminishing Managers*

Basic survival strategies intended to improve your reactions to Diminishers, relieve stress, neutralize immediate problems, and halt the downward spiral.

1. Turn down the volume
2. Strengthen other connections
3. Retreat and regroup
4. Send the right signals
5. Assert your capability
6. Ask for performance intel
7. Shop for a new boss

##### *Level 2: Multiplying Up*

Offense plays to help you be a Multiplier to those above you in the organization or to diminishing colleagues at your side, especially Accidental Diminishers.

1. Exploit your boss's strengths
2. Give them a user's guide

3. Listen to learn
4. Admit your mistakes
5. Sign up for a stretch
6. Invite them to the party

*Level 3: Inspiring Multiplier Leadership in Others*

Strategies that raise awareness and encourage leaders to make the shift from Accidental Diminisher to a more intentional Multiplier.

1. Assume positive intent
2. Address one issue at a time
3. Celebrate progress

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