

How to Bring Out the Best in Your Boss

Liz Wiseman; Harvard Business Review

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Why do some leaders drain intelligence and capability from their teams while others leaders amplify it? That question prompted me to spend years researching the two types of bosses I now classify as "diminishers", who get less than 50% of the capability of people around them, and "multipliers" who approximately 20% of managers are under-utilizing their employees. Five hundred executives enrolled in a recent webinar indicated that an average of 43% of leaders in their organizations qualify as diminishers, compared with 10% per cent for multipliers and 47% who fell in between. And the anecdotal evidence is everywhere. As one frustrated high school science teacher wrote in an email to me: "The principal of our high school is a diminisher. At meetings he does 90% of the talking, always has to have the last word, and will usually say something that puts the listener down. He walks into classrooms while instruction is being given and interjects his thoughts on how the lesson could go differently. How can I help him become a multiplier?"

It's important for people in such circumstances to realize they do have the power to fix the problem. While you might not be able to transform your diminisher boss into a multiplier, you certainly can change the dynamic of the relationship. The secret is to multiply up. Most corporate managers are multipliers "down" to their direct reports and staff, but not out to their peers or up to their bosses. Yet, my research has shown that people can serve as multipliers from any direction, even to a diminisher. Here's why: Diminishers want to be valued for their intelligence and ideas; in fact, many are overly fixated on this. Multipliers find other people's genius and engage it. So, instead of trying to change your boss, focus on trying to better utilize your boss. Here are two ways to be a multiplier to your manager and thrive, not just survive. Exploit your boss's strength. Tap into his or her knowledge and skills in service of the work you're leading. You don't need to cede ownership, just use his or her capabilities at key junctures. 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 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 out of the process as much as possible. Instead, Ron sought out his insights at critical development points. He took the product design to Jobs and openly asked, "How can we make this even better?" Jobs responded not with criticism, but by rattling off numerous ideas for how good features could become great. Ron allowed his team to do their best work without interference, 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 do the same.

Listen to learn. A common mistake people make in interacting with diminisher bosses is dismissing their criticism too easily. In my years in senior management at Oracle, I watched numerous people present to Larry Ellison, the company's brilliant and often mercurial 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." If you are stuck working for a diminisher, you can change the dynamic by figuring out how he or she can still help you succeed.