

## 6 tactics for dealing with a Diminisher leader

*“There is a hidden assumption in many organizations that people are not expected, or even allowed, to outlead their bosses. But give yourself permission to be better than your boss. Be the Multiplier in the relationship.” — Liz Wiseman*

Leaving you out of important meetings. Laying on excessive criticism. Dismissing your ideas. When you face this kind of behavior from your leader, it's easy to get angry or withdraw and stop performing at your highest level of contribution. But that only perpetuates the spin cycle of judgment and distrust that can create a standoff where you bring out the worst in each other.



Instead, focus on improving the dynamic between you, which is almost always possible — especially if you try techniques like these to break the cycle and become a Multiplier in the relationship.

### 1. Know that it's not necessarily about you.

Does your boss wake up every morning thinking, *How can I make my team miserable today?* Probably not. There could be many factors driving their diminishing behavior, including common explanations like:

- Pressure about their own role or standing with *their* leader
- Big-picture information you don't have access to, like an upcoming strategic change
- Bad management behaviors they learned from previous leaders, such as trying to control people or giving overly critical feedback

- Their personal ambitions, which may not align with yours
- Style differences between you (e.g., you freely share your disagreement while they don't like their ideas questioned)

Most of these underlying forces have nothing to do with you (though your responses may be compounding the situation). Understanding what's behind your leader's diminishing behavior won't fix things between you — but it may help you tune out their slights, or at least stop taking them personally.

So, rather than reacting to every order or outburst from your leader, observe what matters to them and ask well-timed questions to tease out their perspective and expectations (e.g., “*What's our most important goal for this project?*”). And listen carefully to them and the people they work with: What does your boss complain about? What do they praise? How do they make decisions? What are their ambitions, values, and skills? Use what you learn to improve your work and help you find better ways to interact with the person.

## **2. When you notice frustrations rising, pause to ask for performance intel.**

A well-timed question can shift the conversation dynamic from potential confrontation to curiosity, signaling that their perspective matters to you and giving them the chance to clarify what they mean.

So, when your boss drops a directive, begins to rip apart your proposal, or anything else that makes you think, *Here comes another conflict*, try asking a question to help them pause and elaborate on what they want and why. And explain your positive intent in asking. Here are examples of clarifying questions you can try when your leader says:

- “You need to keep me better informed!”
  - “*Could we take a minute to dig into this so I give you the information you need? Are you imagining more frequent updates, like a weekly status report? Or do you need more detail in each update?*”
- “I need your team to design three new features next month.”
  - “*Could you tell me more about what you'd like to see as an outcome? Like what is it that we're trying to accomplish? And would you be open to other ways to meet that objective, if they have the same or better impact?*”

- “This isn’t what I wanted!”
  - *“I want to be sure I’m hitting the mark for you going forward. Could you share more about what you were after? And what you think I should be doing more or less of to get there?”*

Ideally, you’ll come away with a better understanding of their perspective, even if you disagree with their aims or tactics. And if your leader is receptive, you may be able to share your own thoughts — or even change their perspective if you have information they didn’t take into account.

But what if you ask questions and still don’t gain clarity — or the conflict continues to escalate? “Try regrouping and resetting your aspiration,” says Liz Wiseman, rather than pushing further and risking a blowup. For example, *“Thanks for that extra context. Could I take some time to think this through and then propose a way to address your needs?”*

The extra time might allow your leader’s thinking to evolve, too.

### **3. Send a clear signal that you’ll deliver by giving your leader the information they crave.**

In an information vacuum, your leader may fear that things aren’t getting done or that surprises will crop up that make them look bad. This lack of trust can lead to their wanting endless updates or even intervening in your work. So, think of your providing detailed updates as insurance against micromanagement.

**Liz Wiseman pro tip:** Let your leader know “I’ve got this.” ([transcript](#))

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The key is to proactively communicate the level of information they want to know (e.g., data and details versus a high-level reassurance that the work is getting done) in the format they want to receive it (e.g., a weekly email, daily phone call, project dashboard, etc.). Then, give them peace of mind in your messages.

For example, in a weekly email update you might say, *“We’ve hit all our production milestones and will have the new catalogue ready by 5 p.m. tomorrow.”*

“Every time you deliver, you earn the opportunity to ask for the space and support you need to do your best work,” says Wiseman. To be sure you’re delivering like you think you are, ask for feedback about how well your updates are working and adjust as needed. And when you start a project that you know your leader really cares about, consider ratcheting up the detail or frequency of your updates — at least until they’re confident you have the work under control. Overcommunicating in the short term can earn you a lot of trust in the long run.

#### **4. Connect with peers to strengthen your support system.**

“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,” says Wiseman.

If you’re not getting the support you need in your work from your leader, could others inside or outside your company serve as mentors and sanity-checkers — helping you brainstorm ideas and offering second opinions on your work?

Wiseman suggests creating an “advisory board” of trusted peers or other leaders to help balance out the criticism or indifference you get from your boss. They can act as a safe sounding board for you to talk through your ideas, as well as a cheering squad to remind you what you’re capable of — and maybe even advocate for you in your organization.

**Caution:** Be careful not to let your advisory board become just an outlet to vent frustrations about your leader or reinforce your own points of view. You want to hear honest outside opinions — not create an echo chamber.

#### **5. Instead of shutting your leader out, invite them in.**

Resist the urge to seal off your team from the whims and edicts of your leader; when your boss feels shut out, they’re likely to double down on their diminishing behavior.

**Liz Wiseman pro tip:** Don’t shut your leader out — invite them in. ([transcript](#))

Instead, be proactive in building your leader's confidence in you and your team. Make a point to showcase your team's good work in updates, and invite your leader to see your team in action (at meetings, demos, etc.) or to give specific input on your team's work. And when you invite your boss to the party, let them know how you want them to participate or what feedback you'd like to receive. That way, you include them without giving them free rein.

For example, you might ask your leader to:

- Review an important document before publication, highlighting specific questions you'd like them to answer.
- Offer more context around your team's latest sales data (e.g., *"Are these data what you'd expect to see, based on trends in our industry?"* and *"Is our department on track to meet our quarterly goals?"*).
- Join a project kickoff with your team and spend the first five minutes talking about why the project is important to your company.
- Give you their input on an issue your team is facing so you can take ideas back to your team for consideration.

## **6. Recognize any improvements in your diminishing dynamic — but also know when to call it quits.**

It's rare to see big improvements in a diminishing relationship overnight. Instead, progress may come in fits and starts as you change your approach to working with your leader.

Over time, as you become more of a Multiplier for your leader, you may start to see them respond to you differently — in ways that are more helpful. If so, thank them. For example:

- *"I really appreciate your taking time to talk through your expectations for the upcoming Atlas project because now I have a clearer picture of our end goal. Could we try this again before future projects?"*

On the other hand, if you've made a good-faith effort but the dynamic between you isn't changing — and the diminishing relationship is wreaking havoc on your job satisfaction and personal life — consider whether it's time to shop for a new role and leader with the characteristics you want.

**Next:** [5 questions to help you address diminishing behavior productively](#)