

Is Your Leadership Style Amplifying or Accidentally Diminishing Your Team's Potential? with Elise Foster

SEASON 1, EPISODE 8 (August 2024)

Narrator: Why do some companies stand out while others seem to merely show up? That's what we'll explore with leaders across multiple industries to hear how they're creating better experiences by design. And now your host, Susan Quinn.

Susan Quinn: When you think about the leaders who have left a lasting impact on your personal or professional life, what qualities stand out and were those leaders or mentors just naturally inclined to lead? Or were they naturally dedicated to honing their leadership skills? Today's episode will explore how some leaders accidentally diminish the contributions and potential of others. While the best leaders, they learn how to multiply talent and make everyone smarter. Elise, welcome to the show. I am delighted to have you with us today.

Elise Foster: Well, it's such a privilege to be with you, Susan, and so good to see you again.

Susan Quinn: So, for our listeners, if you are interested in taking your leadership skills to the next level, you want to listen really closely because you are going to hear some pretty powerful tips. Elise, we will include your bio in the show notes, but let the audience know what your leadership background looks like.

Elise Foster: Yeah. Thanks, Susan. So, I come to this work by way of engineering and in the engineering world, you're there to solve problems and you get rewarded for solving problems. And what I started to notice in my work is that there were some leaders that they were able to solve those problems, but they were also able to grow really brilliant teams, and I got super curious about why some leaders were able to develop their teams, and other leaders were pretty terrible at it. And that set me off on a path to go back and get a master's in education with a focus on adult development theory. And in a nutshell, it's kind of how do we as adults make sense of the world, and how does that influence how we show up? How does that influence our behaviors around others? And so, I've spent about the last 18 years in and around leadership and learning and development organizations and then out on my own in executive coaching, supporting leaders to understand the mindsets that both support their behaviors and also get in the way of their effectiveness.

Susan Quinn: Give us a sense of what the multiplier effect means in your world.

Elise Foster: So, the multiplier effect is the education sequel to a bestselling business book called *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter* written by Liz Weisman. And in the essence of both books, we explore this core question: Why is it that we're smart and capable around some leaders, but we shut down around others? So, like when you think about leaders

that you've worked with, there are some leaders that absolutely light you up and they grow you in ways that you didn't even think possible. And there are other leaders around whom you might tend to shrink or question your intelligence. We call the leaders who amplify intelligence multipliers, the ones who drain it diminishers. And throughout both of the books, we outline a couple of things. The core mindset that leads to multiplying or diminishing behaviors. We also outline the five key differences between multipliers and diminishers because it turns out actually these leaders do a lot of things really similarly, but there are five things that make the biggest difference. And then the other thing that we add in is this idea of the accidental diminisher, so how we can be having a diminishing impact despite our really good, noble intention to grow the people around us, our belief in their capability, but subtly and without recognizing it, we're having a diminishing impact.

Susan Quinn: I know that I have taken the quiz and regret to say that I am, at times, an accidental diminisher. You do leadership training, you train others. We all want to make others smarter, and we all want to be a great leader, but maybe let's just start with the accidental diminisher, what are the things that show up that we maybe don't think we are doing in a negative way, but it doesn't lead others to be smarter. What are the things that surround that?

Elise Foster: Well, first I'll say, Susan, welcome to the club. I've taken the quiz, and I too am sometimes an accidental diminisher. You're in very good company. There are a number of things that can be seemingly accidental diminishing behaviors, and there are about nine profiles that we see over and over again. And if you go out and Google accidental diminisher, you'll see all nine. I'll talk about just a couple of them, and the one that is probably top of mind for me right now is something that is alive for me at home as much as it is sometimes in my coaching conversations, and that's the leader that we call the rescuer. This is the leader who believes in the people around them, sees their capability, but just doesn't want to see them fail. And at the first sign of failure, what they do is they offer a hand to help and very noble. They don't want people to fail. Catastrophic failure is not an option. But what we all know to be true is when we, as leader or as parent, in my case, offer a hand to help a little bit too early or a little bit too often, we start to create that cycle of dependency. And that person who we hired six months ago that we thought was brilliant and now we suddenly think is incapable, we start to wonder, like what happened to that person? The reality is we happened to that person because we're stepping in, offering them help, maybe completing a thing for them or saying, oh, well, you should do it this way. And we're not respecting the natural consequences in the learning cycle. That is, people need to try and do things and have some of those stumbles so they can learn how to be better and grow through that the next time. So that's one that is top of mind. I can share a couple of others if that would be helpful.

Susan Quinn: I would definitely like to hear more. I think you said sometimes they have to stumble. Like, we can't always rescue them; we can't always solve for them. And it is a noble approach to trying to help people. But why is it important for people to stumble? What's on the other side of that if we're not always there to rescue our teammates? And you make a good point too, Elise, that it's hard to delineate between personal life and professional life. They all blend together, and probably what works in leadership in the professional world is similar to what works in your personal life. Would that be accurate?

Elise Foster: It's certainly been my experience. I think many of my very best leadership lessons I learned through parenting my daughter, and I think you asked this question around why is it

important to stumble? And I can speak for myself. We learn best often through our challenges and our discomfort. And so, if as a leader, we're constantly removing the roadblocks and creating a space where people don't struggle at all, they aren't invited to really exercise their thinking and push further and to grow through that experience.

Susan Quinn: Mm.

Elise Foster: So, I think it's really critical that people have the opportunity to struggle. It's not putting people out there so that they're going to crash and burn. You don't want to put people in a position where there's real potential for loss of life, limb or livelihood [laughter]. So, this is not about setting your people up for failure, instead it is creating the space for them to have a stretch, try it out, stumble through it so they can grow through it. Because we really don't grow much when we're comfortable and we know what we're doing, it doesn't push us to grow.

Susan Quinn: Yeah, no pain, no gain. We say all the time, be comfortable being uncomfortable, so you are validating that point. Create space and stretch, so that is a wonderful thought as a leader. Give us some other examples. You said nine profiles. What are some others?

Elise Foster: I'm choosing ones that maybe are a little bit resonant of me, and one is the leader who's always on. This is the leader who generally has something to contribute. They almost always have a thing to bring to the table, and they're usually pretty excited about it. And they're thinking nothing more than if I'm this excited about it, everyone else will be too. The way to get people to get engaged is to really light them up. But think about the last meeting you were in with a leader who didn't have an off switch. What happens to you [laughter] when you're in that meeting? Well, they don't have an off switch, but you tune them out, so you effectively turn them off. But worse than that, they've turned you off too, because they've taken up all of the available space in the meeting and limited the opportunity for others to contribute. So is the leader who's always on, and one of the things that I do to try to counteract that, particularly when I'm facilitating a session or in a coaching session, like I know about myself, dead airtime is one of my triggers, and even three seconds of dead airtime feels like an eternity. And so, I literally count to seven and just pause to see what space that opens up for others to contribute, because my excitement is not going to bring them along. It is allowing them to engage in the conversation and allowing them to have a voice so we can take that thing and make it even better.

Susan Quinn: I love that tip because I think people are uncomfortable when there is that silence, but counting to seven. So that is a long pause and we're going to do it right now. I'm going to count to seven so that everyone can feel that pregnant pause if you will. So, I'm doing it right now [silence]. That's a long time.

Elise Foster: [Laughter] Well, I'm totally curious. Like, I noticed in myself what was happening as I watched the seconds tick by. I'm curious for you, Susan. What did you notice in yourself?

Susan Quinn: It was we need to get on with it. It felt too long [laughter]. I was looking at the podcast minutes ticking by, and I want everyone to experience every minute of you. But I think there's so much wisdom that can come by being quiet [laughter]. I know that in executive coaching that I have done, I've learned from someone else the acronym, WAIT, Why Am I Talking? So, it's basically the same approach if you're that leader who's always on. I don't know that I'm always excited, but I could probably be on more than off. But people who then are going to turn

you off, that doesn't further anything in any way, shape or form. But what were you thinking during that period of time?

Elise Foster: I was noticing my urge toward action. I am the kind of person who likes to move, and that seven seconds of silence felt like we are not getting enough done. And I think not everybody is like that. There are other people who tend more toward reflection, and that seven seconds, it didn't feel like an eternity. It felt too fast to them. And so, for leaders to start noticing what's their action urge, are they the kind of person that could sit back and be okay? Or are they the kind of person that really wants to keep things moving? Because those are the very things that lead us to our accidental diminishing behaviors. There's something in us inviting us to offer that hand to help or to make that contribution. And there's something you said that I want to go back to for a second. You just said, you know, it's not that I'm necessarily excited. And I want to be clear, not all of the always on leaders have this, like effervescent, exciting personality. And they're always like, really, really excited about things. There are plenty of always on leaders who drone on. The thinking, though, is if I have some kind of energy around this topic, an energy could be muted energy or big energy, but if I think this is important, the more I say it's important, the more others will get that it's important.

Susan Quinn: Mm.

Elise Foster: And they think that it is by repeating it and saying it again and repeating it again for good measure [laughter], that they'll bring people along and often the exact opposite happens, because we're either seen as the Energizer bunny who can't shut down, or just the, Liz talks about this often, the Charlie Brown teacher that just goes on and on and on and ultimately all you hear is wah, wah, wah. And so, I just wanted to clarify, it's not always that you're excited about a thing. It's that you go on about it, which I might be doing a little bit of right now.

Susan Quinn: No, it's a good delineation between the two because one can be energy, excitable or just the exact opposite of that, for those that, I think they can suck the air out of the room if it's, you know, a little too deadpan and you don't feel the passion. So somewhere and maybe that can be a jumping off point of is there an energy that leaders should have or be aware of that will multiply and not accidentally diminish?

Elise Foster: It's a really interesting question that brings me back to something you said earlier, and I don't remember exactly how you said it, but essentially you were talking about the dynamic between the other person and you. So, we as leaders can see behavior out there in our team and we can say, well, they're doing this without looking at what am I doing that might be getting that behavior. It reminds me that we're an interdependent system. How I show up to this call influences how you show up to this call, and vice versa. And so, I think rather than there being a particular energy a leader needs to have, it's more an awareness of how your energy is influencing the others around you.

Susan Quinn: Mm.

Elise Foster: And how it probably goes beyond that as well. To think about what did I just read before I came into this call? And was it really, really bad news? Am I going to be distracted and have that heaviness weighing on me? And how is that going to influence how I show up here? Or is it something I'm super excited about that's going to then change my energy? The more we can

just be aware of what we're bringing into a conversation and taking that moment to pause, and it could be seven seconds, but really to pause and take a few breaths just to get centered into who's in front of me right now and what do I think is needed, and then how do I keep assessing that through the conversation? How do I read what's happening in the other person? How do I stay tuned and present? And that is really hard these days with the number of distractions. I was just on a call with a client yesterday and the comment was something like, well, I have three screens, and this is happening and that's happening. So, imagine if you don't have your intention set to be with the person, how easy those distractions are to creep in, and that will undoubtedly influence that interdependence.

Susan Quinn: Well, it's that self-awareness. And I know there are multiple ways that we can at least be informed. You know, there are 360s. There are a ton of tests. I do like the 360s where you have to assess yourself, but then to have direct reports and peers and others and then look at where do you see consistency. But let's assume that as a leader, I've taken the assessments. I know where I show up stronger. I also know where I am on the weaker side. What do I do with that self-awareness? Yes, you have to be intentional and keep assessing, but I think also we revert back to what is just normal to us. What are the learned behaviors to change our mindsets to do it differently, and can you multiply all the time? Or do you accidentally diminish just because we're human beings [laughter]? Does anyone get a perfect score?

Elise Foster: [Laughter] Well, so I mean, my belief is at the end of the day, we're humans and there probably is no perfect score. There are certainly some people for which this comes easier to them, and my experience suggests that they have a mindset that is tuned differently, and they are operating out of a sense of purpose more than they are a sense of who am I and who do I need to be for others. And what I mean by that, and, you said kind of what can you do? I guess there are two things that I really encourage leaders to do. One, to start gaining that self-awareness. I talk about, and this comes from, Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, something called balcony moments. So, this idea that when you are out there in the world interacting with folks, whether it's a one-on-one conversation that feels really difficult to you or it's a presentation to a thousand people that actually seems really easy.

What can you do to take a step up onto the balcony as if you are in a theater, looking down on the stage and watching what's happening on the stage? Because when you're on the stage yourself, you have a really limited view of just what's in front of you. But if while you're doing the thing you can hop up on the balcony and look down and get really curious. What's made this thing easy for me or, you know, less stressful, less tension? What's made this thing a little bit harder for me? So, the first part is really developing that self-awareness and trying to take those balcony moments. So, you may not interrupt the less effective behavior, but if you're learning about it and getting curious and then asking the second question, what did I want to do instead there? And once you have that thing, so if it's, take the example of the person who doesn't offer their voice enough in meetings, that is not me, remember I said I'm probably more of the always on leader, but that person who withholds their insights, their contributions, when they start to notice that, what do they want to do instead? They want to maybe be the first to speak, or they want to be willing to make a controversial or dissenting point. Then what they get to do is ask themselves, what feels risky about actually saying that thing I want to say, and asking themselves that a few times, and what feels risky. And for some people, it's going to be they're going to think I'm an idiot. For other people it's going to be they're not going to like me. And it could be something else. But the more you can find that texture in the flavor of that for

you, the more opportunity you have to say, is that who I need to be? Do I need to be this person that is, well liked, do I need to be this person that is seen as smart? And then there's a third one, and this comes from a 360 that I use often. It's called the Leadership Circle profile. And the other one is, am I seen as working hard enough? Humans go to great lengths to protect who they want to be seen as in the world, or who they don't want to be seen as in the world. And starting to put a profile together of who you think you are and who you want to be right now gives you an opportunity then to keep getting curious with that, to wonder, is that who I need to be tomorrow? And, so that's a lot of the work to unravel and recreate.

Susan Quinn: You know, in my career, I have seen just about every kind of leader. It is interesting. And I think that's a beautiful thing, because if we all had one style, we were all just marching along [laughter], everybody has the same attitude, I think life would not be fun. And you made a comment about some of the best leaders. They have a mindset that is maybe tuned differently, and they have a strong sense of purpose. Can you give us examples of how that leader maybe is multiplying a little bit differently, and how a sense of purpose is a really powerful way to guide others?

Elise Foster: So, one of the core beliefs of a multiplier, is that people are smart, and they'll figure it out. And if you contrast that with the diminisher they have a contrasting view that people just won't figure it out without me. So just imagine bringing on a new employee and inviting them into work, and you hold this core assumption that there's no way they're going to be able to deliver without a little bit of you as a leader. The multiplier assumes Susan's smart, and she'll figure it out. Think about how you invite the person into the work really differently. And so, when I'm talking about a sense of purpose, these two leaders are thinking about life quite differently. The multiplier sees their opportunity and their purpose to grow people to be at their very best. The diminisher sees things to be more about themselves and for them to be at their very best. And so, they're living more from a self-protective way, and one of the things that multipliers do a lot of is they lead with curiosity. They're often engaging people with their questions because they have a belief that that helps people grow, and it helps us create better ideas. The diminisher though who needs to be seen as smart—imagine how that gets in the way of them being able to ask really open, growth-oriented questions. And this is where I think I see some leaders struggle a little bit. They say I want to be a multiplier, okay, all I need to do is ask questions. Well, if you ask questions in a very diminishing way, where it's about showing how smart you are, your questions are going to sound a lot like, well, don't you think you should? Have you already tried? Did you? And those are questions that tend to feel more like an interrogation to people than an opportunity to grow our perspectives and grow the possibilities together.

Susan Quinn: Yeah, that is a really interesting point. What would be some questions that invite people in without a diminishing tone? What do those questions look like?

Elise Foster: Well, first and foremost, those questions always have curiosity at the center. If you aren't really curious about what the response is going to be, it's not a worthwhile question to ask. And I don't remember the source of this, but I remember early on in my career someone said something along the lines of, you know, if you can ask a question and then add comma, you idiot, to the end, it's probably not a question that's worth asking. So that's kind of one piece. The other piece is often the questions that begin with what and how tend to be questions that are more open and spacious. When you start to ask people why, hey, Susan, why did you ask that question in this way? Even if I say it nicely and pleasantly, it could, especially if our dynamic has some sort

of hierarchy in it, it could come off as you feeling like you need to defend yourself. Well, I asked it this way because... And so if you can focus on open and spacious curious questions, those tend to start with what and how. And this is from Warren Berger, but even just adding the word might, so when you're talking with somebody about solutioning or idea creation and you say something like, well, how should we solve this? There's a different mindset when you just add the word "might." How might we solve X? It gives people kind of this freedom to go, oh, well, I don't actually have to solve it. So, if it's not my responsibility, what would I come up with? And that may not be the best way to say it, but you're looking for ways to give people space and freedom to say whatever comes up and not to protect themselves from sounding a particular way, or to question whether what they're going to say is valuable or on point.

Susan Quinn: Elise, I want to role play with you a little bit, because I'm thinking about probably the company where I spend a lot of my time and wanting to grow leaders. And we have, one of our core values is around collaboration. We come together early and often. I mean, we're problem solvers too in that we are creating strategic plans because maybe you're not hitting the mark somewhere. We're also creating brands. I mean, there's so much I think this is the way it should be because we have our personal bias of what a color should look like, and I mean, there's so many options. And when we are up against a timeline, and that's our world, I want to be able for people to figure it out on their own. But if you see that it's going in a bad direction, how do you not diminish that situation, where in your experience, because you've done it 40 years, that it's really not the way to go, or at least from maybe my perspective or some others? How can I learn from what you are guiding us on today to do that differently and not jump in and save, because are we really going to fall off the cliff? Or do we just present stuff that feels and I'm going to say half-baked and then when my team listens to this, they're going to all run out the door and say, we can't stand you as a leader [laughter]. But I mean, does that make sense, that question of, you know you want to give people enough space to figure it out on their own, but if there isn't time and it will maybe make the company not feel at the highest level of what you deliver, how do you create something different if you know it's not the right approach?

Elise Foster: There are a number of things baked in there, and I think I noticed you catch this. I think that last statement is one of the really critical ones—when you think you know. There are some things in this world that are very knowable, but as things get more complex, more and more we don't actually know. We have some expertise that leads us in this direction. What is it that you really, really know? Is it the design principle you really, really know? Or is it that, you know, this is the only way it's going to work for this group? Because I bet there are ten other ways that probably would work. So, all of that is just an invitation to say, what are the knowns and lay those guardrails down for people. So back to what I said earlier about if you know the answer, it's a terrible question to ask. So how do you work with folks to use your expertise in a way that helps them grow through things? We talk about these as guiding questions. How do you ask a question that helps people see what you can see? So instead of telling them this is the wrong direction to go in, how do you ask them a question that gives you some insight about why they want to go in that direction, and also gives them some insight about why you think that might not be a great direction to go in. I don't remember exactly what it was you said, but things that I found to be helpful are saying, you know, especially when you're at an impasse and they want to go in this direction, and you know the right direction is over here, you might just pause and say, hey, it seems really important to you, or my sense is it's really important that you want to go here. What's driving that? And so, what I encourage leaders to consider is how can you ask questions that point in a direction rather than to a particular destination? And if you happen to see you're

at an impasse with a leader and they have one destination in mind and you have a different destination in mind, or it could be two opposing directions. I've found it really useful to pause and name what you're hearing. So, Susan, it seems like it's really important for you to go in this direction or to land here. What's driving that for you? You learn a little bit of something, and then your next question brings that in, and then helps them to see something you can see about this other direction. So, between both of your sets of information, you're coming to a new location, which probably is not the destination you had in mind, nor is it the destination they had in mind. But because there's an openness and you're getting really curious about what's driving them and what's driving you, you have an opportunity to craft something new.

Susan Quinn: Oh, that is so beautifully said. I love that. If I were to summarize, and this may be a great way to wrap up high level, what I've heard. This intellectual curiosity needs to be front and center for everyone, even if you've got a very long career and decades of experience, to show up thinking that we know the right answer is a diminishing way to lead. And so, it is incumbent on us as leaders to guide and ask questions to better understand how the person you're managing or your colleague, how did you get there? If you can guide proper questions, maybe the outcome is going to be quite different, but it is something that is shared, that you can then see a common path together. So, that doesn't happen just showing up and okay, today I'm going to ask better questions. But you really do have to be intentional about it, don't you?

Elise Foster: Yes, you have to be intentional. And the other thought that came to mind, as you said that is you have to be open. You have to be open to there being other ideas, different ideas, and other kinds of expertise that will enhance things. And if you are in a position where you think that, well, my 40 years of expertise says we need to do it this way and you're not open to hearing any other perspectives, even if you ask questions, that's going to shape every single question you ask. And so, I think intentional and open to new things.

Susan Quinn: So that's a good introduction to my last question for you, and this whole community that we're building, it's around experiences that create excellent outcomes. And you know they're just better experiences by design. We're intentional about it. And one of the mindsets that I know that does propel growth is around this remaining curious and bettering your best. So as a terrific leader who's helping others do it the best that we can, what do you do, Elise, to better your best?

Elise Foster: Well, that's a big question. I think the few things that are coming to mind about bettering my best, I do practice what I've shared today, which is having those balcony moments when I find myself not at my best. I'm getting really curious with myself about what's at stake for me here. What is it that's driving me to go in this direction and learning from that so I can see if I can do it differently the next time. And that takes a bit of an experimental approach to wonder. Oh, well, it felt like people maybe didn't think I was smart or capable here. How do I know that's true? And how can I test for that? So, one piece is really paying attention and experimenting and noticing, and I think the other piece is I do a lot of reading around questions, books that are around curiosity and questioning and getting curious about how they've framed the questions. And I think probably the number one thing that I'm learning through all of this is it's not about the list of questions you have, it's about cultivating your curiosity. And my biggest stumbling block is when I think I know. When I hear something, a client says and I think, oh, well, the solution is this. Nine times out of ten, I'm probably actually wrong about the solution. And what I mean by that is not that I've sized it up incorrectly, but my solution, the way I would approach their situation is fundamentally flawed because I don't live in their world and I'm not them. And so, when I think I

know those solutions and I ask questions that try to draw them to my solution, that's a problem. And so, I reflect on each of my coaching conversations to see how did I do there, how open and spacious were my questions? How, you know, how did I create space for them, to find their own solution. And so, I'm constantly reengaging with different methods of asking questions and doing a lot of reflection.

Susan Quinn: Cultivating curiosity. What a beautiful thing. You have invited me to think about those words in a different way. And so, appreciate your time today. Thank you. And we will get you back on the show, because I think there's much more to talk about as we figure out the best way to be multipliers and never, ever, ever accidentally diminish anyone, ever.

Elise Foster: Thank you, Susan. And that's a tall order to never, never accidentally diminish anyone. It's something the world needs, and I endeavor to do it every day and appreciate you being willing to engage and explore these ideas and your interest in continuing.

Susan Quinn: I look forward to it. Thank you. Elise.

Elise Foster: Thanks, Susan. See you soon.

Narrator: Thank you for being part of our best in class community. And until next time, keep bettering your best.

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