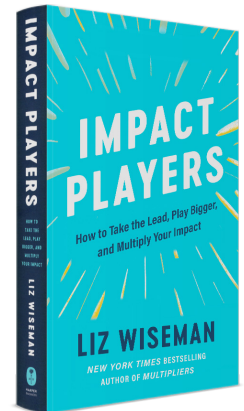


Impact Players

How to Take the Lead, Play Bigger,
and Multiply Your Impact

by **Liz Wiseman**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In every organization there are Impact Players—indispensable colleagues who can be counted on in critical situations and who consistently receive high-profile assignments and new opportunities. Managers know who these top players are, understand their worth, and want more of them on their team. While their impact is obvious, it's not always clear what actually makes these professionals different from their peers.

In *Impact Players*, *New York Times* best-selling author and researcher Liz Wiseman reveals the secrets of these stellar professionals who play the game at a higher level. Drawing on insights from leaders at top companies, Wiseman explains what the most influential players are doing differently, how small and seemingly insignificant differences in how we think and act can make an enormous impact, and why—with a little coaching—this mindset is available to everyone who wants to contribute at their highest level. *Impact Players* is your playbook for the new workplace.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The key differences between typical contributors and high-impact contributors.
- The five practices that Impact Players have mastered.
- Strategies to develop the Impact Player mindset.
- Tips for recruiting and developing Impact Players in your organization.

Introduction

Some people seem to know how to make themselves valuable. They pay attention. They look for the most productive places to put their capability to use. They make things work, and they get the job done, even when the job gets difficult. They not only deliver results but send ripples of positive impact throughout their team and across the organization.

Managers trust them when the stakes are high and turn to them in critical situations. They find a way to break through and make an impact while others are merely going through the motions.

Corporate leaders usually know who the superstars are and want more of them, but they struggle to explain what actually makes them different. Typically managers can articulate the more pronounced differences between their top and low performers; however, when it comes to their most influential, impactful players, the top of the top, there seems to be an ineffable quality about them.

The Wiseman Group's research based on 170 leaders from some of the most admired companies, including Adobe, Google, LinkedIn, NASA, Salesforce, SAP, Splunk, Stanford Health, and Target, from 10 different countries, revealed what managers need most from the people they lead, why it's easier for them to entrust critical assignments to certain people, and why they hesitate to fully support the efforts of others.

Additional interviews with contributors showed that it's not necessarily easy to become an Impact Player. You don't need special talent or capability, but you do need to understand the mindsets and behaviors that differentiate Impact Players from other contributors.

However, you can master these mindsets and practices. With a little coaching, this mindset is available to all those who want to step up and contribute at their highest level.

PART I: THE IMPACT PLAYERS

The Impact Players

Impact players make a significant contribution individually but also have an enormously positive effect on the entire team. Like an Impact Player in sports, the superstars in the workplace all have "game." They are smart and talented and have an extraordinary work ethic; but as with Impact Players in athletics, there is something more than just talent and work

ethic at play. There's also their mental game: how they view their role, work with their managers, and deal with adversity and ambiguity, and how willing they are to improve.

Three different categories of contributors are

- 1. High-impact contributors:** Those who are doing work of exceptional value and impact.
- 2. Typical contributors:** The vast majority of people, who are doing solid (if not great) work.
- 3. Under-contributors:** Smart, talented people who are playing below their capability level.

Here, the focus is primarily on the distinction between the top two categories (Impact Players and contributors) in order to explore the subtle, often counterintuitive differences in mindset that become big differentiators in impact. Each has a distinct mindset and way of working; one leads to a job well done, while the other carves a path to leadership and generates outsized value and impact.

Understanding Impact Players

Research data made it clear that the approach taken by Impact Players isn't just marginally different; it is radically different—and it's rooted in how these professionals deal with ambiguity and situations they cannot control. While others get frustrated and either check out or freak out, Impact Players tend to approach such situations directly yet sensibly. They dive into the chaos head-on, much as a savvy ocean swimmer dives into and through a massive oncoming wave rather than panicking and being tumbled in the surf.

Impact Players respond differently to these perennial forces and frustrations at work: messy problems, unclear roles, unforeseen obstacles, moving targets, and unrelenting demands. Impact Players see everyday challenges through an opportunity lens, while others view the same challenges through a threat lens. This fundamental difference in outlook separates Impact Players from others.

The following practices are the five key differentiators between Impact Players and their colleagues.

- **Do the job that's needed.** While others do their job, Impact Players do the job that needs to be done.
- **Step up, step back.** While others wait for direction, Impact Players step up and lead.
- **Finish stronger.** While others escalate problems, Impact Players move things across the finish line and

The most impactful players don't just do their jobs; they do the job that's needed.

build strength along the way.

- **Ask and adjust.** While others attempt to manage and minimize change, Impact Players are learning and adapting to change.
- **Make work light.** While others add to the load, Impact Players make heavy demands feel lighter.

These five practices, along with the outlook that drives each, constitute the Impact Player Mindset, a framework for high-value contribution. Let's explore each of the five practices of Impact Players in detail.

Make Yourself Useful

The most impactful players don't just do their jobs; they do the job that's needed. They venture out of the comfort of their role and work on the front lines of all types of problems. At the most fundamental level, this is about how to make yourself useful—how to understand what is important and then do the things that are important in a way that is extremely beneficial to your career.

The Choice: Do Your Job or Do the Job That Needs to Be Done?

The world of work is getting messier—more complex, more chaotic, and more interconnected—thanks in part to the combined effects of globalization and technology. Complex problems—those involving too many unknowns and interrelated factors to reduce to rules and processes—are on the rise. These problems include challenges such as standardizing customer experience worldwide, reacting to disruptive innovation, creating a personalized learning experience for all students, controlling health care costs, and transforming a culture.

As problems become messier and mutate faster than a formal organization can respond, agility must come from the culture—the daily decisions and actions of people—not the organization structure. This leaves professionals with a messy problem of their own: “Should I stay in my lane, do my job, and attend to my duties? Or should I leave my post

to pursue work in no-man's-land? If the latter, how can I make sure I still excel at what I've been assigned to do?”

Contributors see themselves as position holders. They do the work they're given and stay within the boundaries of their role but risk becoming so myopic that they lose sight of the overall strategy and veer off the agenda.

In contrast, Impact Players see themselves as problem solvers. They aren't trapped by antiquated organizational structures or overly enamored with their positions. They don't just do their job; they find ways to serve where they can be of greatest value. An overarching idea seems to govern their work: “I can be of service and solve problems.”

Add to the service mindset a strong sense of agency (“I can act independently and make decisions”) and internal locus of control (“I, not external forces, control the outcome of events in my life”). Now we have a winning formula for dealing with complex, messy problems that require more than a perfunctory response.

The High-Impact Habits

Habit 1: Learn the game. To be of maximum value inside an organization—to be of service—we first need to know what is valued. We need to know the game being played. How clearly do you understand the skills and capabilities that are most prized in your organization? What are the top priorities?

Habit 2: Play where they are needed. When you know what's important now, you can focus your energy on doing the job that needs to be done and playing where you can have the largest impact. While Contributors play their position, Impact Players play where they are needed.

Habit 3: Play with passion. Impact Players work with a sense of purpose and conviction, but they work in service of the organization's unmet needs rather than their personal interests. Managers rarely described them as being passionate about a topic but often described them as being passionate about the work itself. Impact Players work *with* passion, not *on* their personal passion.

Step Up, Step Back

The most impactful professionals aren't just loyal followers; they are ready leaders—the adaptive breed who are willing to step up and lead but who can also step back and follow others.

Ambient problems are the nonglaring, low-grade issues where the status quo is suboptimal but tolerable, such as a clunky business process that everyone complains about but isn't broken enough to fix. Some of these perpetual problems manifest themselves as organizational drag, a collection of institutional factors that interfere with productivity yet somehow go unaddressed, costing the US economy more than \$3 trillion each year and reducing productivity by 25 percent.

Most people learn to live with these problems, but ambient problems erode performance over time. They are particularly damaging because they are easy to ignore. These problems become white noise in the organization. Left unattended, they become institutionalized, as people begin to accept them as inevitable or intractable.

That is, until someone takes notice and decides that the organization can, and should, do better.

When roles are unclear, people operating with a Contributor mindset look to their leaders for direction. They are loyal followers and supporters who carry out requests from their managers and collaborate with colleagues.

In contrast, Impact Players take charge of situations that lack leadership. When they see an opportunity for improvement, they don't wait for permission to act. They step up, volunteering to lead long before higher-ups in the organization ask them to do so. They are disruptors of the status quo who choose to lead rather than let things be. They offer a higher value proposition; instead of just carrying out the boss's direction, they can also rally others.

The High-Impact Habits

Regardless of the impetus that propels them forward, Impact Players follow a distinct pattern as they step up and lead, bring others along, and, at the right time, step back.

Habit 1: Step up. When you see an opportunity to step up, the first step is getting into the room. And often, you won't receive an invitation. There are times when it's appropriate to invite yourself. Once in the right room, Impact Players aren't satisfied with passive participation. When an opportunity to contribute surfaces, they present themselves

as capable leaders and take charge.

Those who take charge without a formal commission need tacit approval from their would-be supporters. Essentially, their peers and colleagues need to vote them into office. Voluntary leaders need the initiative to step up and take charge, but they must also demonstrate the humility to seek permission and garner support. When they can do both, other people choose to follow of their own volition.

Habit 2: Enroll others. Impact Players can lead without authority because they've acquired the power of assembly. By using their colleagues' time in efficient, productive, positive ways, they earn a reputation as someone who not only makes things happen but also respects others in the process. When they call a meeting, people come ready and willing to contribute.

With a common view of the problem, the group can establish a collective intent and a game plan. The leader continues to guide the nascent effort, ensuring the team takes action, achieves interim wins, and builds the momentum needed to sustain the effort.

Habit 3: Step back. Impact Players are versatile players who can both lead and follow, who pass the ball and share the glory. This flexible approach to leadership is again similar to the role of playmakers on a sports team, whose ability and willingness to move the ball to another player so he or she can make an attack is as important as their ability to take possession of a ball. This willingness to share and rotate the lead role creates a fluid, on-demand leadership model that enables organizations to respond quickly, adapt, and sustain commitment for the long haul.

Impact Players are not just heroes; they are hero makers. They pull others into the spotlight and lead the team so that there are multiple winners and potential leaders. And when the entire team looks good, so does the boss.

Finish Stronger

A lot of professionals play a good game. They take action and work hard but too often stop before the job is finished. What happens when we stop just short of the goal line or celebrate early only to find that something we thought was done became undone? The most influential professionals—and entire teams—make a greater impact because they finish the job and finish stronger than others.

This practice is about how the highest-impact players deal

with adversity and unforeseen obstacles and get work done once things become difficult. It's about how to take ownership and move work across the finish line.

Impact Players have a touch of special agent in their blood—like Mary at NASA, dubbed “Mary the Mission Slayer” by her colleagues for her relentless drive to resolve problems that jeopardized her team’s mission. They are ordinary people who have developed an extraordinary mental ability to withstand opposition and survive the gauntlet of everyday problems and ordinary challenges. They get the job done—hardships, villains, and all. As in the movies, they complete the mission without constant direction but summoning support from headquarters as needed.

Being reactionary is often seen as a negative quality, but actually Impact Players are reactors.

The High-Impact Habits

Impact Players offer a low-maintenance, high-accountability proposition: They take ownership, anticipate and wrestle down problems, and do what it takes to complete the whole job. They can finish strong because they anticipate problems and develop a plan.

Habit 1: Finish the whole job. The most impactful players tend to stick with problems longer. An Adobe manager described one such member of her team: “She’s highly persistent. The harder the problem, the more she’ll persist. The intellectual challenge drives her.” Because these players persist longer, they make progress in the face of ambiguity.

Research showed that there were certain things that high-value contributors always (or nearly always) did: (1) take ownership and get a job done without being reminded; (2) act with integrity and do the right thing; (3) be easy to work with, likable, approachable, and positive; (4) learn quickly; and (5) apply their strengths to the work at hand.

Habit 2: Maintain ownership. It’s not surprising that Impact Players take full responsibility. What is remarkable is

that they retain it, even during setbacks and obstacles beyond their control. They don’t hand it back when things get tough.

The most influential professionals can escalate an issue and ask for help while maintaining ownership of the solution. Google’s Fiona Su manages to do both. She’s known for her tenacity, independence, and ability to manage various internal stakeholders, but when she runs into trouble, she has no qualms letting her manager, John, know that this one is over her head and she needs help. She’ll get him involved but more as a consultant than as a new owner.

Habit 3: Anticipate challenges. Impact Players don’t have a superpower to see through walls or into the future; their strength lies in understanding that problems are constantly lurking around corners. They expect unpleasant surprises and normalize the challenges. With this mindset, obstacles aren’t destabilizing or even distracting. Roadblocks become building blocks for growth, providing the resistance needed to become stronger and smarter and prove one’s mettle.

Ask and Adjust

The most valuable players are never finished. They are continually adapting, adjusting to hit the mark. How might the smallest adjustment to your approach lead to greater performance? This isn’t about making radical, disruptive change; it is about the power and importance of making micro-changes, the small adjustments needed to stay on track. It’s about tune-ups, not transformation.

For many professionals, work used to be like a game of darts: a game of skill with a clear target and a scoring system that makes it obvious how well you are doing. But as business needs continually shift, business targets are set into motion as well. The shot you once perfected no longer guarantees you’ll hit the target. It now requires continual recalibration.

This constant shuffle creates so-called wicked problems—problems that change faster than we can solve them. You’ll need to learn new rules, work with new players, and develop new skills and strategies. When targets are continually moving, you need continual feedback, guidance, and correction so you can adjust your aim.

Being reactionary is often seen as a negative quality, but actually, Impact Players are reactors—responding to changes in their environment and the feedback they are given. By being reactive (but not reactionary), they adapt to a chang-

ing environment, much like a chameleon changes color to fit its surroundings.

The High-Impact Habits

When the world of work is changing fast, the critical skill isn't what you know but how fast you can learn. Savvy leaders know they need more than just a team of smart, capable people; they seek out players who have both the confidence and the humility to learn.

Habit 1: Ask for guidance. The Impact Players in the study showed greater levels of coachability, or responsiveness to guidance, than their peers did. It's easy to watch for signs of affirmation, but staying in tune with our stakeholders (and working on the right agenda) requires that we search for gaps: unmet needs, mismatched expectations, unflattering data, and contrary points of view. The top contributors didn't seek constant validation; they sought guidance.

Habit 2: Adjust your approach. Leadership expert John Maxwell once said that change is inevitable, but growth is optional. Instead of making big changes, fine-tune your approach by making a series of small adjustments in the right direction.

Jonathon Modica, a former HR leader at Adobe, exemplifies this ability to shift directions. When assigned to a high-profile project developing a new program for two senior business leaders, he started a meeting by framing the conversation: "I have some hypotheses to run by you." When one of the executives poked at his idea, he didn't become defensive or overreact.

Instead, he stopped, leaned back, and said, "Help me understand what you want to see differently." He asked a series of clarifying questions to help understand the issues and objectives. After the meeting, Jonathon took in their feedback and began testing each suggestion until they discovered an approach that fit best.

He left such an impression that the two executives later asked his manager, "When do we get to work on another project with Jonathon?"

Habit 3: Close the loop. Managers are willing to invest, but they want to invest in a closed-loop system, not a black box. When you ask for guidance and then close the loop, you let people know that their investment in you has yielded results.

Make Work Light

This fifth and final practice is about how top contributors and leaders deal with pressure and unrelenting demands. When things are tough and the load is heavy, the most valuable players on teams make work lighter. Though they may not be able to reduce the workload, they make the work process easier and more joyful. They are like a bouquet of helium balloons.

Our workload can feel like a mounting debt that grows perpetually and follows us everywhere we go. There is too much work to get done each week, too many new tools and technologies to master, and more information than we can process, let alone retain.

Yet, our actual workload accounts for only a portion of the burden we experience at work. In one survey, over half of respondents said that their primary source of work-related stress didn't have to do with their workload; rather, they cited stressors such as people issues, juggling work and personal lives, and lack of job security.

When the pressure is on and the workload increases, typical contributors seek help rather than offering to help, becoming dependent on their bosses to relieve their burden.

Yet, other people, faced with the same workload and unrelenting demands, help lighten the load. While others create a tax, the most vital players offer a time rebate. They make hard work easier; the work doesn't necessarily become easier, but the process of working becomes easier and more enjoyable. They provide lift, not by taking on other people's work but by decreasing the phantom workload. They foster a light environment that lowers stress and increases the joy of work, both of which reduce burnout.

The High-Impact Habits

Habit 1: Be low maintenance. Impact Players steer clear of noisy, taxing, and fruitless efforts like finger-pointing, complaining, showboating, and land grabbing. They eschew politics and dramatics that foment conflict but don't produce results. Each of these is an unproductive activity, a friction point that slows progress or stymies collaboration.

Habit 2: Lighten the load. Impact Players not only do their job well, they help their colleagues do their jobs well, too, which decreases the manager's worry load. When they lighten the load for their bosses and colleagues, they benefit as well.

Habit 3: Lighten the atmosphere. People enjoy

Failure to change is typically due to an overabundance of ambition, not a lack thereof.

working around Impact Players because they offer help and are easy to work with. While some players create a heavy, humid environment, they provide a light breeze. They help other people do their best work and create a sunny atmosphere, which helps eliminate the phantom workload.

Here are three of the ways Impact Players improve the environment and make work easier and more pleasant for all: bring levity, recognize others, and be human.

PART II: DEVELOPING THE IMPACT PLAYER MINDSET

Increase Your Impact

Carving a path to new behavior takes time. The road may have occasional epiphanies or transformative experiences; however, these changes are usually gradual, occurring in almost imperceptible increments. But each successive step strengthens nascent beliefs and reinforces new behaviors.

Failure to change is typically due to an overabundance of ambition, not a lack thereof. We generally fail by trying to adopt too many new behaviors at once. Instead of trying to simultaneously implement myriad outward behaviors, focus on one of the fundamental internal practices. These are called master skills—two core competencies that all the high-impact contributors in the study seem to possess.

Master Skill 1: Changing your perspective. Too many professionals are stuck in their own head, working on what *they* deem most important, not seeing beyond their own perspective. To increase our impact, we must know what is valuable to others. We must see through the eyes of those who benefit from our work.

Try pulling back from your position in the organization or work process and viewing your situation through a wide-angle lens. Ask yourself, “Who are the other players, and what do they need from me to be successful? Who are the people downstream who are affected by my work? Who are the people who benefit most from the work I do? What would benefit them most?”

Master Skill 2: Changing your lens. The five everyday challenges introduced above—messy problems, unclear

roles, unforeseen obstacles, moving targets, and unrelenting demands—were like a Rorschach test. In the same situations, most people saw threats to avoid, but Impact Players saw opportunities to add value.

The difference between these two worldviews is much like the difference between a convex and a concave lens. Seeing ambiguity as a threat is like looking through a convex lens that causes light rays to converge at a single focal point, which tends to be ourselves. When we use a threat lens, we become myopic: We look inward, consider the situational impacts, and tend to see ourselves as standing alone, lacking control or organizational backing.

When ambiguity is viewed through the lens of opportunity, the resulting image is more expansive, and we tend to see what is happening around us. This is similar to the effect produced by a concave lens that disseminates light rays. With the opportunity lens, we view a broader context; we can see the upside as well as downside of our choices and the benefits to our stakeholders.

You can use cognitive reframing (a psychological technique to identify, challenge, and change the way a situation is viewed) to help you see opportunity in otherwise threatening situations. Specifically, recognize ambiguity, check your lens, reframe the situation, and replace with an opportunity lens.

Build a High-Impact Team

A dream team isn't just a dream; it results from carefully curating players with the right mindset, developing them as individuals and as a team, and nurturing a robust, healthy culture. It is an act of bold, aspirational leadership. It requires purposeful development and the right type of coaching.

Recruiting Impact Players. Put simply, the best strategy for building a team of Impact Players is to hire people who already have the qualities that are most difficult to develop and then actively cultivate the other qualities. Insights from top executive coaches suggest that companies should hire candidates who are self-directed, community-minded, have a high tolerance for ambiguity, and are fun to work with, even in stressful times.

When these traits become table stakes, leaders can invest their training and coaching resources where they can produce real gains.

Developing Impact Players. More often, managers must create a dream team by conjuring brilliance from a group of inherited employees, an unruly cross-functional team, or a surprise summer intern who was a “gift” from a higher-up. In this case, it’s the leader’s job to grow the talent they already have. Managers need to create an environment in which the right mindsets and behaviors can grow.

If you want people to have a positive attitude, you need to create a positive environment. The best leaders cultivate a climate that is both comfortable and intense. They remove fear and provide the security that invites people to do their best thinking. At the same time, they establish an energizing, intense environment that demands people’s best efforts.

The following five leadership habits will encourage the right behavior in a team:

Define the W.I.N. (what’s important now). If you want the people on your team to venture beyond artificial job boundaries and do the job that’s needed, help them see what’s most important at any given time.

Redefine leadership. Show your team that you can work as passionately as a follower as you do as a leader and that excelling as a follower is not a dead-end job but part of growing as a leader.

Ask them to stay until the job is done. When we hold people accountable for finishing their work, we send a powerful message that their work matters and that we believe they are strong enough to stay in the game, even when things get tough.

Critique the work, not the person. Think of feedback as critical information—data people need to calibrate and adjust their approach—rather than a critique.

State what you appreciate. Managers, if you want your staff members to make work light for you and others, make a practice of flagging behavior that you appreciate.

Though all people have value and bring capability to their jobs, some make themselves more valuable than others. They play bigger. They find a need and fill it. They turn uncertainty and ambiguity into opportunity.

Yet, the way they work is anything but random. They find out what’s important to those they serve, and they make it important to themselves. They take the lead and finish the job. They stay light on their feet to adapt quickly, and they make work light for others.

How big do you plan to play? Where can you be of greatest value? What is life summoning you to do?

Tap into your passion and your purpose, and find a way to contribute, to create impact, to play bigger and better. Imagine the impact of starting right now.

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Liz Wiseman is a researcher and executive advisor who teaches leadership to executives around the world. She is the CEO of the Wiseman Group, a leadership research and development firm. Some of her recent clients include Apple, AT&T, Disney, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Nike, Salesforce, Tesla, and Twitter. She is the author of *New York Times* best-sellers *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, *The Multiplier Effect: Tapping the Genius Inside Our Schools*, and *Rookie Smarts: Why Learning Beats Knowing in the New Game of Work*.

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