IMPACT PLAYERS

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

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Chapter 1

THE IMPACT PLAYERS

Talent is everywhere, winning attitude is not.
—DAN GABLE

Monica Padman left college with two degrees in hand—one in theater and one in public relations, the latter acquired to appease her parents. She moved to Hollywood to follow her dream of becoming an actor and comedian—to make people laugh and feel. Like most striving actors, she worked a variety of part-time jobs in between auditions and small roles.

Padman scored a small part on Showtime's *House of Lies*, where she played the on-screen assistant to the actress Kristen Bell. They became friendly, and when Padman realized Bell had a young daughter, she mentioned that she did some babysitting. Bell and her husband, the actor Dax Shepard, took her up on the offer. As she became a trusted part of the household, she saw the challenges Bell faced juggling multiple acting and producing projects and offered to help her with scheduling. Though it might have been tempting for the aspiring actress to ask the Hollywood A-lister to help her get on-screen roles, Padman worked where she was needed—ironically, as Bell's off-screen assistant.

When Bell and Shepard asked her to work for them full-time, Padman was understandably reluctant—how would she find time to audition? The job could be a detour. But she decided to take it. Over time, she became more than just a trusted employee; she became a friend and creative partner to both Bell and Shepard. She worked en-

ergetically wherever she saw a need and was soon reviewing scripts and collaborating on projects. "Everything she does is at 110 percent," Bell said of Padman, "but she's so not a person who walks around showing you that she has 110 percent. [She has] no bravado." Before long, Padman had become so essential that Bell wondered aloud, "How did I do any of this without Monica?"[1]

While working for the family, she spent many hours sitting on the porch debating with Shepard, known for his contrarian ways. Their arguments were as fun as they were fierce, so when Shepard suggested they develop their banter into a podcast, she was up for that too. Thus was born *Armchair Expert*, a podcast where cohosts Shepard and Padman explore the messiness of being human with experts and celebrity guests. Smart, funny, playful, and thought provoking, the podcast became 2018's most downloaded new podcast and has continued to grow in popularity.

Two years and roughly two hundred episodes later, Padman reflected, "It's very, very easy, especially in pursuit of a career in the entertainment industry, to have tunnel vision. I think that's universal about any job. You have your sights set on something, and you have a tunnel to that goal. In my experience, it's better to have a looser grip on that."[2]

Padman could have pursued a direct path to her passion. Instead, she worked wholeheartedly where she could be most useful. By playing passionately where she was most needed, she found a bigger opportunity and, perhaps, her true purpose.

THE IMPACT PLAYERS

Professionals such as Monica Padman, and many more like her in other industries, are the all-stars of the workplace who bring their A-game everywhere they go and to everything they do. They are people who could be dropped into any of a dozen different roles and would find success. They are professionals who become instrumental to their or-

ganizations and thrive in times of economic hardship and change. They work with purpose and passion, but their passion is channeled, focused on what matters most to the organizations they work for and the issues of our time. These professionals often become influential voices in the world, known as much for their unique capabilities as for their broad impact.

They are *Impact Players*: players who make a significant contribution individually but who 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.

In this chapter, I'll share the insights gleaned from our study of Impact Players and will introduce the practices and the mindsets that cause their work to land with impact and differentiate them from other hard-working contributors. First, some definition is in order. In the research, my team and I studied these three different categories of contributors:

High-impact contributors: Those who are doing work of exceptional value and impact

Typical contributors: The vast majority of people, who are doing solid (if not great) work

Under-contributors: Smart, talented people who are playing below their capability level

This book will focus primarily on the distinction between the first two categories in order to explore the subtle, often counterintuitive differences in mindset that become big differentiators in impact. Throughout the book, I'll refer to the two groups as Impact Players and Contributors. You can find a full account of the research process at ImpactPlayersBook.com, including

our interviews with 170 managers from nine companies who worked in nine countries, surveys of 350 managers from broader industries, and in-depth interviews with 25 high-impact contributors.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT PLAYER

So what did we find? For starters, we found Impact Players across a wide variety of job types, at all levels, and in every industry we encountered. Some of them serve in highly visible roles, such as Monica Padman, or receive public praise, such as Dr. Beth Ripley, a medical researcher who was awarded a 2020 Service to America Medal by the Partnership for Public Service for her pioneering work in 3D printing.[3]

Others, such as Arnold "Jojo" Mirador, a scrub tech at the Santa Clara Valley Medical Center, work in less visible roles. The surgeons he works with agree: when you step into Jojo's operating room, the procedure will go well. When Jojo prepares for surgery, he doesn't just lay out all the right instruments; he lays them out in the order in which they will be used. When a surgical resident asks for an instrument, Jojo doesn't just hand over the one the surgeons-in-training requested; he provides the instrument that they should have asked for, the one Jojo knows they actually need, and offers a gentle suggestion.

Something else was very clear: those considered typical contributors were no slouches. They were capable, diligent, hardworking professionals. They did their jobs well, followed direction, took ownership, stayed focused, and carried their weight. In many ways they were the type of employees any manager would want on their team.

However, in analyzing the differences between high-impact players and other hard-working contributors, I discovered four key differences in how they think and work. We'll begin with the fundamental difference in how they see everyday challenges.

Impact Players Wear Opportunity Goggles

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 situations they cannot control. The typical contributors excelled in ordinary situations, but they were more easily flummoxed by uncertainty and got stuck amid ambiguity. When others may have freaked out or checked out, Impact Players dove 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.

  Virtually all professionals deal with waves of ambiguity, regardless of where they work. These challenges are problems everyone can see but no one owns, meetings with many participants but no clear leaders, new terrain with never-before-seen obstacles, goals that morph as they get closer, and work demands that increase faster than one's capability grows. These challenges, once considered extraordinary, have become the everyday, perennial realities of the modern workplace, and the way Impact Players view and respond to these external factors is at the heart of what make them extraordinarily valuable.

EVERYDAY CHALLENGES

Impact Players respond differently to these perennial forces and frustrations at work

1		MESSY PROBLEMS	Complex, interdisciplinary issues that don't fall within defined job boundaries
2		UNCLEAR ROLES	Lack of clarity surrounding who is in charge
3		UNFORESEEN OBSTACLES	Unprecedented challenges and unforeseeable problems
4		MOVING TARGETS	Changing needs or circumstances that render current practices ineffective or inadequate
5		UNRELENTING DEMANDS	Work demands that increase faster than capacity

A Problem to Avoid

If you work in a complex organization or a dynamic environment, you know that challenges are unavoidable. Still, many of us do our best to avoid them. But what happens when we try to sidestep these problems? Former NFL wide receiver Eric Boles recounted a moment of weakness in his rookie year with the New York Giants. As a wide receiver, his role was to run, catch passes, and keep running. So his mentality as a player was to avoid getting hit. But in addition to playing wide receiver, he played on special teams as a flyer. During the kickoff, his job was to sprint down the field toward the opposing players and break up their offensive formation called "the wedge"—a human wall of massive blockers who run in front of their kickoff returner to prevent the receiver from being tackled. In one of his first season games, as he came face-to-face with this enormous obstacle intent on destroying anything in its way, his instinct to avoid getting hit kicked into effect. Instead of hitting the wedge head-on, he cut to the left and ran around it. He then successfully made the tackle from behind, but on the 45-yard line rather than the 20. That 25-yard advancement ultimately cost the Giants the game and a chance to advance to the playoffs later in the season. As Boles put it, "Fear is expensive." [4]

Our study showed that typical professionals approach these difficult situations as if the challenge is a nuisance, lowering their productivity and making it difficult for them to do their job. They see them as problems to run around and avoid rather than tackle directly. What's more, under-contributors see them as not just threats to productivity but personal threats that could jeopardize their position or organizational status. Where others may spot a single bee but fear an entire swarm, the Impact Player is figuring out how to build a hive and harvest the honey.

An Opportunity to Add Value

The Impact Players in our study see everyday challenges as opportunities. To Impact Players, unclear direction and changing priorities are chances to add value. They are energized by the messy problems that would enervate or foil others. Lack of clarity doesn't paralyze them;

THREAT LENS VS. OPPORTUNITY LENS

Impact Players tend to see opportunity where others see threat

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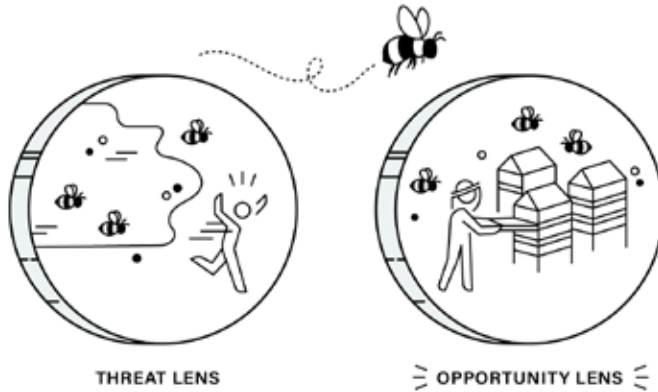
it provokes them. Invitations to make changes are intriguing, not intimidating. Perhaps most fundamentally, they don't see problems as distractions from their job; rather, they *are* the job—not just their job, but everyone's job.

For example, when Jethro Jones interviewed for the job of principal at Tanana Middle School in Fairbanks, Alaska, he learned that the school was being considered for closure due to declining enrollment. The school would continue operations for the next year or two, but without a major turnaround and increased enrollment, it would be shuttered. Unsurprisingly, the staff felt hopeless and were fairly pessimistic about the school's future.

But Jethro accepted the job, sensing an opportunity to innovate on behalf of the students. In his first staff meeting, he acknowledged the challenges, but told the staff, "We're in a great position. Everyone predicts that this school will be closed. We have nothing to lose, which gives us a unique opportunity to take risks and do things differently."[5] Willing to give the new principal a chance, the staff began thinking of ways they could personalize the learning experience for each student, which Jethro supported with staff training and other resources. Instead of feeling threatened by the possibility of the school's closing, the staff became energized and got students involved, too. In collab-

oration with the teachers, the students built hockey rinks, repaired furniture, and made escape rooms. They started programs and clubs; soon they had a dance team, a service organization, and programs to teach sign language, raise awareness about suicide, and prevent bullying.

By treating this threat as an opportunity for reinvention, the team at Tanana Middle School changed the school's trajectory. Unbeknownst to them, in the process they built a model for personalized learning that was then replicated across the district. Tanana Middle School is still open today and thriving under new leadership. Though the threat of school closure has evaporated, the mindset of opportunity has persisted. Jethro's successor said, "When COVID-19 hit, our teachers didn't skip a beat. The groundwork had already been laid, and they had developed new mindsets. COVID-19 and virtual learning were just the new obstacles for us to tackle."

In short, 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.

Impact Players React Differently to Uncertainty

Because Impact Players see uncertainty and ambiguity as an opportunity to add value, they react fundamentally differently as well. While others are freezing, Impact Players are getting their arms around the chaos. Their outlook becomes a dividing line that functions much like the Americas' Continental Divide, the line of high mountain peaks along the main ranges of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes that separates the watershed systems of two continents. On the west of the divide, water flows to the Pacific Ocean; on the east, it flows to the Atlantic Ocean. Similarly, on one side of the outlook divide, behavior flows toward ordinary contribution; on the other side, it flows toward extraordinary contribution and high impact.

The following practices were the five key differentiators we found between Impact Players and their colleagues. Each is a set of behaviors

that flow from the belief that opportunity can be found amid ambiguity and challenge.

1. **Do the Job That's Needed.** When dealing with messy problems, Impact Players address the needs of the organization; they venture beyond their assigned job to tackle the real job that needs to be done. Impact Players aim to serve; this orientation prompts them to empathize with their stakeholders, look for unmet needs, and focus where they are most useful. As they do, they increase organizational responsiveness, create a culture of agility and service, and build a reputation as flexible utility players who can be valuable in a variety of roles. In contrast, more typical players operate with a duty-oriented mindset, taking a narrow view of their role and playing their position. *While others do their job, Impact Players do the job that needs to be done.*

2. **Step Up, Step Back.** When it's clear that something needs to be done but it's unclear who's in charge, Impact Players step up and lead. They don't wait to be asked; they get things started and involve others, even when they're not officially in charge. They practice a fluid model of leadership—leading on demand rather than by command. They take their cues from the situation, stepping up when needed, but when their stewardship is fulfilled, they step back and follow others with equal ease. Their willingness to both lead and follow creates a culture of courage, initiative, and agility inside their organization. In contrast, when roles are unclear, most players act as bystanders. They assume that other people are in charge and will tell them when they are needed and what to do. *While others wait for direction, Impact Players step up and lead.*

3. **Finish Stronger.** Impact Players tend to be completion freaks; they stick with things and get the entire job done, even when the job becomes hard and plagued with unforeseen obstacles. They work with a heightened sense of agency and an assumption of personal strength, which prompts them to take ownership, solve problems, and finish jobs without constant supervision. But they don't just

push through roadblocks—they improvise and give themselves permission to do things differently and find better ways of working. And, as they deliver results despite setbacks, they reinforce a culture of accountability and build a reputation as clutch players capable of coming from behind. In contrast, more typical players operate with an avoidance mindset. They take responsible action, but when things get tough they escalate issues up the management chain rather than taking ownership; at worst, they get distracted or discouraged and stall out completely. *While others escalate problems, Impact Players move things across the finish line and build strength along the way.*
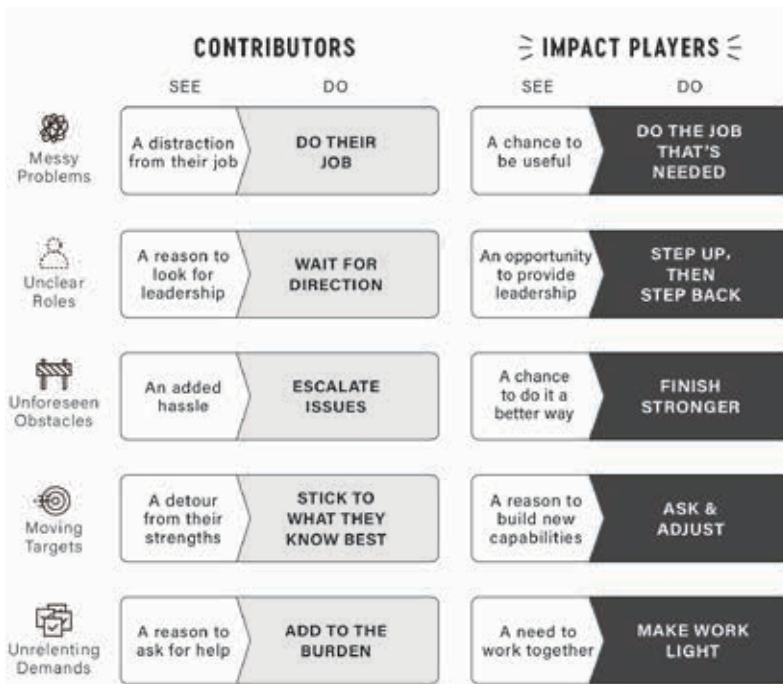
4. **Ask and Adjust.** Impact Players tend to adapt to changing conditions faster than their peers because they interpret new rules and new targets as opportunities for learning and growth. They certainly appreciate affirmation and positive feedback, yet they actively seek corrective feedback and contrary views and use this information to recalibrate and refocus their efforts. In the process, they strengthen a culture of learning and innovation, help the organization stay relevant, and build personal reputations as coachable players who up-level their own game and raise the bar for everyone on the team. In contrast, most professionals interpret change as annoying, unfair, or threatening to the stability of their work environment. In volatile conditions, they tend to stick to what they know best and keep playing the game by the rules that validate their current expertise. *While others attempt to manage and minimize change, Impact Players are learning and adapting to change.*

5. **Make Work Light.** When a team is weighed down by increased pressure and unrelenting demands, Impact Players make hard work easier. They provide lift, not by taking on other people's work but by being easy to work with. They bring a sense of buoyancy and equanimity that reduces drama, politics, and stress and increases the joy of work. By creating a positive and productive work environment for everyone, they reinforce a culture of collaboration and inclusion and develop a reputation as high-performing, low-

maintenance players—the type everyone wants to work with. In contrast, when the pressure is on and workloads are at a peak, more typical players tend to seek help rather than offer to help. As this becomes their default response, they add to the burden of already overtaxed teams during difficult times and can become a burden to their leaders and colleagues. *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.

THE FIVE PRACTICES OF IMPACT PLAYERS

The beliefs and behavior that differentiate impact play from contributorship

	CONTRIBUTORS		IMPACT PLAYERS	
	SEE	DO	SEE	DO
Messy Problems	A distraction from their job	DO THEIR JOB	A chance to be useful	DO THE JOB THAT'S NEEDED
Unclear Roles	A reason to look for leadership	WAIT FOR DIRECTION	An opportunity to provide leadership	STEP UP, THEN STEP BACK
Unforeseen Obstacles	An added hassle	ESCALATE ISSUES	A chance to do it a better way	FINISH STRONGER
Moving Targets	A detour from their strengths	STICK TO WHAT THEY KNOW BEST	A reason to build new capabilities	ASK & ADJUST
Unrelenting Demands	A reason to ask for help	ADD TO THE BURDEN	A need to work together	MAKE WORK LIGHT

Consider how Maninder Sawhney, the director of data analytics and insights at Adobe, dealt with several of the "everyday challenges" that differentiate the Impact Players.

It's a problem familiar to virtually every large organization: islands of data—independent information systems that don't talk to one another. Adobe was grappling with this problem, trying to build a comprehensive view of how customers engage with Adobe through various marketing and product experiences. There had been numerous efforts to solve the problem, but none of the measures was truly moving the company's goals forward. Meanwhile, Adobe's CEO, Shantanu Narayen, continued to stress the need for a streamlined way to get an accurate view of business performance across the end-to-end customer journey. Twenty-five people, mostly senior executives, gathered in the corporate boardroom for an all-day quarterly business review.

Among those in the meeting was Maninder Sawhney, who was to give two presentations: one outlining an approach to managing customer attrition, the other describing a unified view of sales, marketing, product, finance, and other data sets. Maninder, a self-described "data guy," was the most junior person in the room. But he had always taken a broad view of the business. He was known for his ability to decompose big, hairy problems into something easy to understand, often jumping up to the whiteboard to capture the essence of a problem that a group had been wrestling with for hours.

The assembled group had been discussing numerous approaches to improve customer retention and lifetime value. Some advocated for more dashboards to view the business's multiple components; others offered fixes that might generate immediate improvements. No one could agree on a solution to this opportunity; actually, they weren't even in agreement as to what the problem was. But one thing that everyone understood was that a solution was needed immediately.

It was now time for Maninder to give his first presentation. The topic was measurement of customer attrition. He presented the current data structures and then outlined a very different approach he felt the company should take to measure and analyze customer attrition.

The executives around the table dug deeper into his ideas, seeking to understand his rationale and strategy and the potential outcomes. It was a challenge Maninder met calmly as he explained that dashboards alone wouldn't solve the problem and why drawing conclusions from isolated data could lead to poor decisions. By the afternoon break, Maninder had a bigger job: at the behest of the CEO, he was now managing more than customer data—he was leading the customer retention strategy.

Following the break, Maninder began his second presentation to outline the full set of data structures for marketing and sales. Just a few minutes into his presentation, he realized the information he was providing was off target. Being invited to the meeting had given him a clearer view of the CEO's vision of an operating model. Maninder was giving the presentation he'd been asked to give—a technical briefing on a specific process—but it wasn't what the CEO needed in that moment. Maninder stopped presenting and asked if he could come back in two weeks with a plan that would address the problems the CEO wanted to solve.

It was a bold move—abandoning his presentation and stepping up to tackle a much bigger problem. The senior leaders in the room who were responsible for pieces of the solution could have challenged Maninder's boldness, but he had the trust of his colleagues and ultimately was the type of leader people like to get behind. According to his colleagues, he works without ego and never engages in politics or holds grudges. In fact, he has a T-shirt that sums up his mentality: LET SOMEONE ELSE CLIMB THE CORPORATE LADDER.

Two weeks later, Maninder presented a new framework that incorporated input from various stakeholders across the company. When one executive asked who should lead the massive endeavor, it was clear to Shantanu and the others. Maninder was commissioned to lead a cross-functional effort to build a data-driven operating model for the digital business.

Within six months, the system was operational and fundamentally changed the way Adobe ran its business. The new way of operating,

which was made possible by the combined contributions of multiple groups across Adobe, is credited with adding hundreds of millions of dollars to the company's revenue. After leading the system's development, Maninder was put in charge of running the digital media business for the Americas (one of Adobe's largest businesses, which delivers billions of dollars of revenue each year) and is now responsible for driving long-term customer success.

What enabled Maninder to progress from running reports to running Adobe's biggest business?

He saw the real job that needed to be done, and he was willing to step forward and lead. He saw a complex problem as an opportunity. For Impact Players, problems become opportunities to serve, to find solutions, and make an impact.

Impact Players Tap into Unwritten Rules

One of the primary insights that emerged from the research was that Impact Players seem to understand the rules of the workplace better than others. They figure out the unwritten rule book—the standards of behavior that one should follow in a particular job or organization. They tune in to the needs of the organization and determine what's important to their immediate colleagues; they figure out what needs to get done and ascertain the *right* way to get it done.

This rule book is unwritten not because managers are secretive or no one has bothered to publish it but because the rules are also tacit for most managers, held at a level below conscious awareness. Many of the managers we interviewed commented on how much *they* had learned during our interview. Answering our questions helped them articulate for the first time the subtle differences between Impact Players and others on their team as well as behaviors that create value versus behaviors that create friction. Many managers realized they had never shared this vital information with their team, and many vowed to remedy that. The point is, the rules are tacit for everyone—except those who make an effort to discover them and share them.

So, what do organizational leaders value most? Managers want their staff to make their jobs easier—to help them lead their teams and be self-managing wherever possible. They need people who can think for themselves and step up to a challenge. They value compliance less than the success literature would have you believe and collaboration more than might be indicated in official corporate value statements. In reality, managers want people to help them find solutions and foster teamwork.

When Impact Players figure out these invisible rules and understand what their stakeholders value, they build credibility. Their leaders are delighted and eager to support them, and they expand their impact potential. Consider how each of these managers describes one of their Impact Players.

- LinkedIn sales leader Scott Faraci talked about account executive Amanda Rost, who had just handled an important sales meeting with ease and brilliance: "I was literally jumping around with excitement. I thought, 'This is crazy. Who is this superstar I just hired?' If I could have built a statue of her and put it in the center of our sales floor as a shining beacon of how to be a sales executive, I would have."
- Roberto Kuplich, a development manager at SAP Brazil, spoke about Paulo Büttenbender, a highly respected software architect on his team: "You can lay me off, but don't lay off Paulo."
- Julia Anas, a senior HR executive, described HR business partner Jonathon Modica as "the first person to raise his hand for the hard, hairy problems" and said, "I look forward to our one-on-ones because I get energy from him." This sentiment is a sharp contrast to how a manager at a different company reacts when he realizes he has a meeting with someone on his team who "just doesn't get it": "I feel like the gritting teeth emoji."

The insights we gained into what leaders value are peppered through the book (but you can also take a sneak peek at the full list

in appendix A, "Building Upward Credibility"). Use these insights to help you build trust and alignment with your stakeholders—because once you know what's valued within your organization and what the leaders around you most appreciate, you have a playbook for success. Furthermore, when managers share their rule book, everyone on the team can play at a higher level.

Though it wasn't surprising that the most impactful professionals figured out the invisible rules, it was alarming to learn how many capable people were consistently missing the mark. These were smart, talented, and hardworking individuals, but they seemed to misunderstand what their leaders considered valuable and miss the subtext in the workplace norms. The typical contributors were often delivering a solid performance, but it would go unnoticed or fall flat as if they hadn't read the grading rubric before submitting an assignment or consulted the judging criteria before choreographing a routine.

There have been times I've missed the mark by merely doing what I was asked to do rather than thinking through what I should do. On one such occasion, a large company invited me to teach a leadership workshop to address a specific set of challenges its managers faced. My client outlined their challenges, and we held numerous discussions. I then prepared a plan that I felt would best address their issues, and we all agreed on the approach. A month later, I delivered the workshop as planned, ensuring that I hit each of the critical points in my remit. The session was solid, but I could tell it lacked impact. You see, in the month between the formulation of the plan and the delivery of the program, the COVID-19 pandemic had begun sweeping the world and disrupting nearly every aspect of work. Managers were now dealing with an entirely new set of challenges (managing uncertainty, suspending business operations, and staff working from home). I had done my job, but I failed to see that it was no longer the job that was needed.

Much like me, the professionals who miss the mark are well intentioned but misguided. They were doing what seemed valuable, either because it was important in the past or because it was widely touted

as the way of the future. But many of their work practices were counterfeits—an illusion of value lacking real substance. I call these *value decoys*—professional habits or beliefs that seem useful and appear appreciated but erode more value than they create. They are shiny objects that distract us from contributing in valuable ways.

We saw some people tripped up because they were playing by an outdated rule book. Some were doing their job so diligently that they overlooked the real work to be done—the work no one was officially assigned to do but that the organization most needed. Workplace etiquette taught people to be diligent, vigilant, and unflappable. But as the environment changes, simply staying in our lane can sideline us. Whereas those professionals were trapped by playing by the old rules, others misconstrued the new rules of a modern work culture. They saw that the game was changing and that the workplace now valued innovation, agility, engagement, and inclusion. However, they missed the subtleties and subtext in the rules; they didn't realize, for example, that "Experiment and take risks" does not include crashing a production database or that "Be your authentic self" doesn't mean burdening your colleagues with everything happening in your world. They missed important signals because they were overanxious, overteaming, and deeply engaged to the point of obnoxiousness. Essentially, they were overplaying and overcontributing.

This brings us to a central insight: *we can under-contribute by over-contributing*. We can deliver too little value while working extremely hard. Whether we are tripped up by the ambiguity of new mores or the sacrosanctity of old rules, we can end up doing great but irrelevant work. We may be expending significant force, but the vector of our effort is off target.

Impact Players more easily spot counterfeits because they don't assume that what is valuable to them is valuable to others. They look beyond themselves and define value through their stakeholders' eyes. They learn what is important to their bosses, their clients, or their collaborators, and they make it important to them. By targeting their efforts where the greatest number of people benefit, they increase their

impact and influence. While others are managing their brand, Impact Players are building a reputation as a player who is easy to work with and can be counted on to deliver when it matters most. While others may be trying to change the world, Impact Players are actually doing it. They start by changing themselves, continually seeking input and adapting to ensure they hit the mark. With the Impact Player Mindset, they escape the traps of old-school thinking and avoid new-age detours.

Impact Generates Investment

The way Impact Players think about and respond to uncertainty and ambiguity makes them especially fit for the challenges of the modern work world. They are flexible, quick, strong, agile, and collaborative—the type of people you want on your team when your world is rattled or something goes awry. Impact Players will help you find solutions while others point fingers at problems. As one manager put it, the Impact Player was "someone I would want to be trapped on a desert island with" compared to another employee, who is "someone I would have to help survive." While others might build a shelter and hunker down during a storm, the Impact Player is building a windmill to create power. In challenging environments, Impact Players are assets that appreciate over time.

When we asked managers to quantify the value of the Impact Player's contribution relative to their peers, they estimated, on average, that the Impact Players on their teams delivered more than three times the value delivered by a typical contributor. Further, they indicated that the value contributed by the Impact Player was almost ten times that of an under-contributor (a smart, talented colleague contributing below their capability). I was struck by one particular response from a senior engineering manager at NASA. When estimating the relative value of the contribution made by a former deputy division chief as compared with her peers, he said, "I would conservatively say twenty to thirty times greater."

The fact that Impact Players are perceived to be more than three times as valuable as typical contributors means everything in terms of access to rewards, both intrinsic (such as working on great projects) and extrinsic (such as promotions and compensation). And when it comes to the development of talent, these players receive an extra helping of mentoring and a double dose of challenging assignments. The tangible value they provide to others is like a deposit that prompts reciprocal investment and spawns a mutually beneficial cycle.

Value Building

Impact Players tend to be self-managing and offer their managers the assurance and peace of mind that they will complete the job, in full, without being told or reminded. They not only get the job done, they also do it the right way; they steer clear of politics and create a positive team environment. Leaders appreciate this compelling value proposition: the job is done well, and the experience is positive for the team and efficient for the team leader.

When managers realize that they can invest an ounce of leadership and receive a ton of value in return, they continue to invest—and reinvest—in these players. They typically entrust them with increased responsibilities and additional resources. Because they are efficient, managers give Impact Players their most precious resource: the manager's time and reputation. Impact Players tend to be the beneficiaries

VALUE BUILDING

The value created by Impact Players accrues and prompts reinvestment
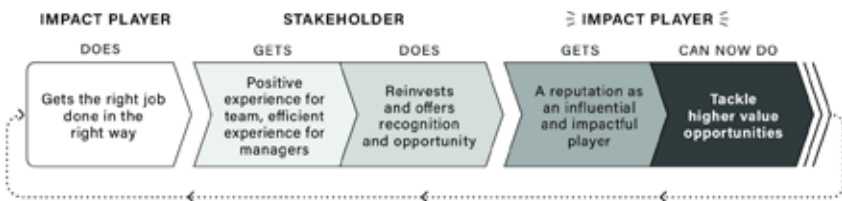
of extra mentoring and are called up often to represent the manager to the larger organization or external environment. However, the Impact Players in our study weren't blessed with trust and resources from the get-go; they earned it. The wisest of them proved early on that their colleagues could count on them 100 percent. By providing quick returns and operating with consistency and integrity, they catalyze the investment cycle.

In return, Impact Players develop a stellar reputation and earn the credibility that's needed to tackle the higher-value opportunities that begin flowing their way. They can now contribute at even higher and broader levels. Thus the cycle continues: they can do more, and their actions carry greater weight. They are seen as leaders who embody the organization's values and quickly become cultural paragons. Because they are influencers who affect prevailing attitudes and shape the workplace culture, their coworkers respect and seek to emulate them.

A Chain Reaction

As this cycle continues, the stakeholder investments increase, and the Impact Players' capability and cache grow exponentially, enabling them to contribute in increasingly extraordinary ways. But the cycle isn't an endless loop in which they repeat a winning formula; they are learning with each loop, adapting to changes in their environment, and becoming increasingly skilled at converting stakeholder resources into tangible value. This simple yet powerful cycle becomes accretive, like continuously compounding interest where small, continuous assessments and modifications result in significantly different outcomes over time.

Through our interviews, it became apparent that Impact Players were consistently progressing faster than their peers; they were being promoted more often and given more impactful opportunities. However, they weren't merely climbing a career ladder. Rather, they were increasing their currency in the organization and using it in novel ways. Some were ambitious and used their increased influence to move

quickly up the organization chart. Others were content in their roles and used their political currency to pick their projects, direct their work schedule, or simply continue to work in a job they truly enjoyed. Either way, they were driven but not full of angst. What's more, the Impact Players we met reported high levels of job satisfaction and high levels of life satisfaction as well.

The Missing Player

It's worth noting that the high-impact contributors identified in our study were evenly split across gender, generations, and race/ethnicity. However, I'm also cognizant that this pool was filled with nominations from some of the best leaders in the best places to work. These organizations tend to be front-runners in recruiting for and valuing a diverse workforce. I realize that this may not be the case in the organization you work in, and it may not reflect the reality of your specific situation, which means that making your fullest and most fulfilling contribution may come with challenges.

In trying to understand why some professionals become extraordinarily impactful in a given organization or situation, one cannot ignore the effects of unconscious bias—our tendency to hold stereotypes about a certain group of people without our conscious knowledge. Because the potential for bias is hard-wired into human cognition, "sameness" tends to have a high default value. This can shape whose contribution is perceived as valuable and deemed influential and impactful. It also means that individuals who do not fit the dominant profile may be underrepresented or, even when well represented, underutilized and underappreciated.

Even in well-managed organizations, there are hidden pools of aspiring leaders and Impact Players who are not seen or getting their turn and who are not receiving the same levels of investment and reinvestment. The work world is missing out on the influence and full contribution of too many players. It is my hope that this book offers a framework to help level this playing field and strengthen the partnership between talent and management, giving contributors tools to help

them increase their influence and providing managers with insights and practices to help them create more inclusive workplaces (see chapter 8 for specific practices for leading inclusively).

MULTIPLYING YOUR IMPACT

Studying leadership has taught me this truth about contributorship: people all around the world arrive at work wanting to contribute at their fullest. It's painful for them when they can't. They want to work in an organization where intelligence and talent are maximized and where people are deeply engaged, learning rapidly, and contributing in full measure. The underutilization of talent is avoidable—with leaders who bring out the best in others and players who bring an all-in mentality. Whereas my book *Multipliers* provides a leadership model for high engagement and utilization, this book will explore the talent side of the equation, what contributors can do to maximize their impact and what leaders can do to help all those on their team play at their full capability. The book serves as a companion to *Multipliers*, because when Contributors become Impact Players, the multiplier effect is exponential.

The Playbook

You, too, can be an Impact Player. This book will give you data-based insights and practical tools to help you take the lead, play bigger, and multiply your impact. In chapters 2 to 6 we will explore each of the five practices of Impact Players in detail. You'll learn the secrets of their success. Each chapter concludes with a playbook containing a set of Smart Plays for aspiring leaders to implement the practice wisely, create real value for others, and increase their impact. Chapter 7 provides a comprehensive training plan for those same aspiring leaders as well as for the managers who coach and mentor them. Chapter 8 is written expressly for managers and provides guidance for leaders and talent development professionals who want to build a high-impact team.

Throughout the book, we will address "the missing Impact Player" and how implicit bias and other systemic forms of discrimination create barriers that artificially limit certain people's contribution, visibility, and influence. Specifically, in chapter 7, we'll explore ways you can help others see the value of your unique contribution, and in chapter 8, we'll cover practices managers can use to ensure that all types of talent are seen and valued.

Finally, chapter 9 invites you to consider the possibility of playing "all in"—not a draining, all-out form of working in which people burn out but a form of working in which people do their best work *and* live their best life, in which all players are valued and can make a valuable contribution.

The Players

In the pages that follow, you'll meet a diverse mix of professionals who are delivering extraordinary value around the world. For clarity's sake, we will focus primarily on their individual contributions rather than showcase the efforts of all team members. Please know that virtually every one of the Impact Players profiled in these pages is uncomfortable with the praise they received and acknowledges colleagues who contributed to each win. They have graciously allowed me to shine the spotlight on them. They represent a variety of industries, experiences, and roles; some are individual contributors, others are executives. Most were discovered through our research. (Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from our research interviews.) Some are well known: top athletes, an Oscar-winning actor, and a few Nobel laureates. A few of the examples are moments when I was at my best and several are my former and current colleagues (or their spouses). One gem is the mother of one of the Impact Players in our study. When this Google staffer told us about his "badass mom," I had to meet her. She is an extraordinary leader in her own right, and you'll want to meet her, too. Taken together, they form a pixelated portrait of excellence worthy of emulation. My hope is that you will see yourself in them, either in reality or in potential.

We'll go inside the minds of dozens of managers, from project leaders to CEOs—the quotes from leaders (both on the dedicated pages that precede each chapter as well as those interspersed throughout the book) are all from actual managers from our interviews.[6] In addition to reading about Impact Players, you'll find a number of examples of more typical contributors (referred to in the collective as "Contributors") and a few under-contributors, all of whose names have been changed. Through their stories, we will expose and explore the traps that hold us all back and the mindsets that steer us off our path of highest contribution. These are traps I have fallen into myself. I'll share a few of my own experiences—times when my overconfidence caused me to under-contribute or when my own views blocked me from seeing what mattered most. Perhaps you too will find yourself caught at times by the illusion of value. I hope these examples will help you break through.

Out of Bounds

Before we begin, let's clarify a few of the book's vital messages—not only what it is but what it isn't.

1. **The notion of Impact Players is not limited to sports.** Though the Impact Player idea is lifted from athletics, this is not a story about high-performing athletes or coaches. I've borrowed a few terms and metaphors and included several examples from the sports world because athletics provide vivid examples of excellence and clear outcomes. However, there are Impact Players in almost any organization or community.
2. **This is not a contrast between winners and losers.** Our focus will be far more nuanced. We will explore how the *Impact Player Mindset* differs from the *Contributor Mindset* and the subtle distinctions in thinking and action that make all the difference.
3. **The distinction between the Impact Player and the Contributor is not a classification of individuals but of practices.** This book will likely be of greatest value to you as you think of Impact Player

and Contributor Mindsets as modes of thinking—orientations that we all move into and out of—and periodically ask yourself: Which mindset am I using right now?

4. **Becoming an Impact Player isn't a winner-take-all competition.** The book's mentalities and practices are, by and large, learnable and coachable, hence available to all. Impact Players are stellar but not necessarily singular—much as a town may have multiple five-star hotels or restaurants. Likewise, a leader can develop an entire team with the Impact Player Mindset.

5. **This is not a rallying cry to work harder.** The Impact Player mentality isn't about pushing oneself and leaning in when you really want to lie down; the Impact Players we studied didn't necessarily work any harder or any longer than their peers, but they did tend to work with greater intentionality and focus while they were working. They created an energy and impact that prevented exhaustion.

6. **The book is not intended as a quick fix.** The Impact Players we studied evinced these practices authentically and consistently. When the Impact Player mentality is deeply held and authentically practiced, it can work for you, too. If you are looking for career practices that will help you cut the line and get ahead quickly, this is not the book for you.

Building a High-Impact Mindset

The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson asserts, "What you know is not as important as how you think."[7] If you aspire to have greater influence, start by thinking like an Impact Player. Don't just use the playbook; adopt the Impact Player mentality as your ethos. It is a powerful way of thinking about work that will enable you to make your most valued contribution, reap the subsequent rewards, and help others do the same. Some of the practices may not work well at your workplace or for you; others may become obsolete. However, the way of thinking—the mindset—will transcend and endure.

I encourage you not only to read the book as a guide for your current reality but also to see it as a harbinger of the future of work. The

Impact Player framework was developed through a study of top contributors in leading organizations, as seen through the eyes of some of the best managers. Hence, the framework has an inherently modern orientation. These ideals may not reflect your current reality, but they can become part of your future. For some, this may necessitate finding a new organization or cause worthy of your highest contribution. For others, you might find that as the most admired companies' best practices are studied and emulated, your organization evolves to keep pace. Either way, take a page from the playbook of the great Wayne Gretzky and "skate to where the puck is going to be."

There is a prize for those who do just that. By embracing the mindset and practices of the Impact Player, you will earn recognition as one of the all-stars in the new world of work. By recognizing the pitfalls, you can avoid the fate of the under-contributor. You can also help others break free and steer clear of the traps that hold back well-meaning professionals and build the type of team that everyone wants to work on. But above all, when you bring your A-game to everything you do, you will experience the thrill of contributing at your fullest and become the person everyone wants on their team.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY: THE IMPACT PLAYERS

This chapter introduces the differences between working with the mindset of an Impact Player and working with the mindset of a Contributor.

Impact Players. Individuals at any level of an organization who are doing work of exceptional value and having a extraordinarily high impact.

Impact Player Mindset. A mode of thinking that, when consistently adopted, leads to high-value contribution and high impact.

Contributor Mindset. A set of assumptions and practices that gets a job done and makes a contribution but falls short of full potential and high impact.

Findings

1. **Impact Players wear opportunity goggles.** Impact players see the following everyday challenges differently than others: messy problems, unclear roles, unforeseen obstacles, moving targets, and unrelenting burdens. Whereas others see these challenges as threats, Impact Players see them as opportunities to add value.

2. **Impact Players react differently to uncertainty.** They respond differently than their colleagues in these five ways:

CONTRIBUTORS	IMPACT PLAYERS
Do their job	Do the job that's needed
Wait for direction	Step up, then step back
Escalate issues	Finish stronger
Stick to what they know best	Ask and adjust
Add to the burden	Make work light

3. **Impact Players tap into the unwritten rules.** Impact Players figure out the standards of behavior that one should follow in a particular job or organization and adapt for maximum impact.

4. **Impact generates investment.** Impact Players tend to be entrusted with increased responsibilities and additional resources. Systemic bias can lead to hidden pools of talent going unnoticed or receiving lower levels of investment and reinvestment.

WANT TO TAKE THE LEAD AND MULTIPLY YOUR

IMPACT?

Start by taking the Impact Players Quiz!

≳ **ImpactPlayersQuiz.com** ≲

This quiz will help you will discover where you currently stand and pinpoint actions that can increase your influence and impact.

Find additional resources for you and your team at:

ImpactPlayersBook.com

For ongoing insights, follow Liz at:

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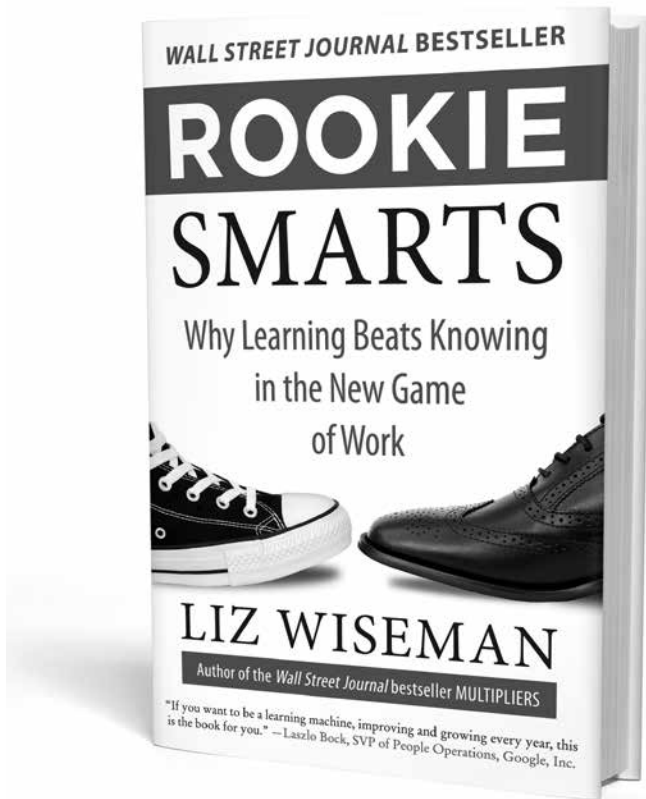
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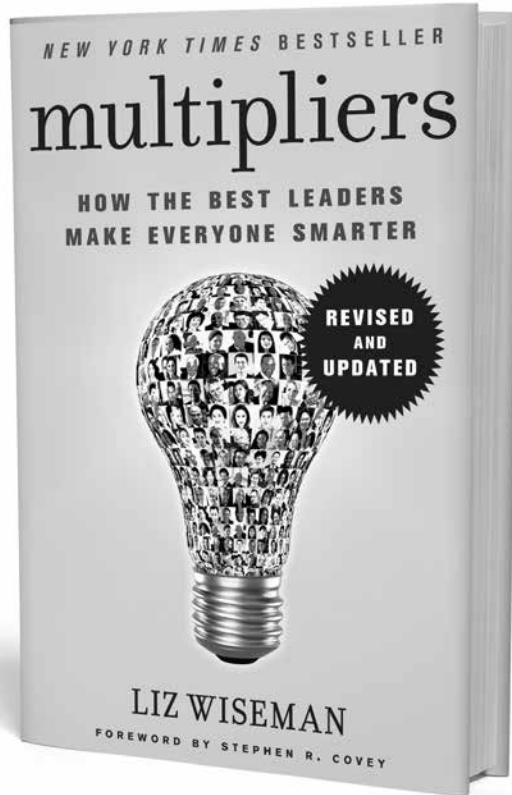
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MORE BY **LIZ WISEMAN**

In this essential guide, leadership expert Liz Wiseman explains how to reclaim and cultivate this curious, flexible, youthful mindset called Rookie Smarts. She argues that the most successful rookies are hunter-gatherers—alert and seeking, cautious but quick like firewalkers, and hungry and relentless like pioneers. Most importantly, she identifies a breed of leaders she refers to as "perpetual rookies." Despite years of experience, they retain their rookie smarts, thinking and operating with the mindsets and practices of these high-performing rookies.

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