

# THE IMPACT PLAYERS OF THE WORKPLACE

*Liz Wiseman & Lauren Hancock*






Chances are that you've dealt with one or more of these situations, perhaps even in the last week: a problem everyone can see but no one owns; a meeting with countless participants but no clear leaders; a new endeavor with never-before-seen obstacles; a project with a constantly changing goal; a continually increasing workload.

These situations are challenging, but nearly universal: you'll find them in almost any organization. They are perennial realities of the modern workplace, and employers and employees deal with them in organizations of all sizes, ages, and types. Their ubiquity makes them inescapable; even if someone leaves their company to avoid them, they'll likely encounter the same challenges in the next workplace. Yet, though mundane and often frustrating, these everyday challenges provide a valuable framework for understanding the minds and behavior of top contributors, as shown in Figure 1.

## The Differentiating Effect of Everyday Challenges

These challenges and individuals' reactions to them have profound implications for talent acquisition and management. Why? Because the top contributors and value-creators inside organizations tend to handle these situations fundamentally different than other professionals.

These challenges don't typically amount to major crises, but they are all situations fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty, scenarios where people can easily feel out of control. While we often think of crisis as the crucible that separates typical contributors from top contributors, the reality is that how people think about and respond to these high-frequency micro-challenges is at the heart of what makes some people extraordinarily valuable—and impactful—inside organizations.

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 |  MESSY PROBLEMS       | Complex, interdisciplinary issues or opportunities that don't fall within any one person's job |
| 2 |  UNCLEAR ROLES        | Lack of clarity on 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  |

**FIGURE 1. THE EVERYDAY CHALLENGES FRAMEWORK**

In every organization, there are Impact Players – those indispensable colleagues who can be counted on in critical situations and who consistently receive high-profile assignments and new opportunities. It's Joya, the retail executive who was called up at a moment's notice to host a store visit with the CEO. It's Jethro, the middle school principal who saw his school's failing status as an opportunity for a complete reinvention. It's Parth, the software engineer who not only fixed an issue blocking a major code release, but went further, identifying the root cause and making sure it was permanently resolved. Joya, Jethro, Parth, and others like them are players who make a significant contribution individually but who also have an enormously positive effect on the entire team. Whether they work on the center stage or behind the scenes, managers know who these top players are, understand their worth, and want more of them. While their impact is obvious, it has not always been clear what actually makes these professionals different from their peers.

To find out why some people get stuck going through the motions and other people break through and make a major impact, particularly in the face of constant challenge, our research team talked to 170 leaders from respected companies: Adobe, Google, LinkedIn, NASA, Salesforce, SAP, Splunk, Stanford Health, and Target. We asked each manager to identify someone on

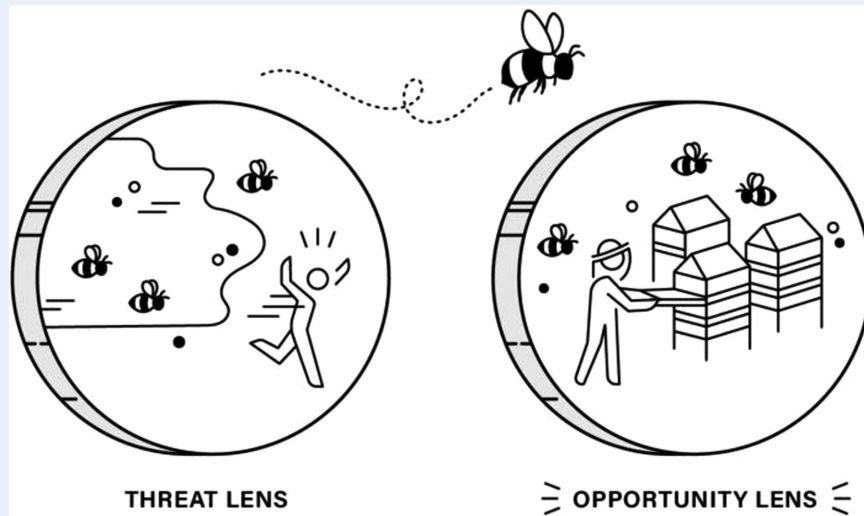
their team who was doing work of extraordinary value, someone who was contributing at a typical level, and someone who was contributing below their capability level—all smart, capable individuals, but with different levels of impact in their contributions. We asked them to describe each of these contributors' behaviors and mindsets: How do they approach their work? How do they think about their role? What do they do? What do they not do? Why is their work so valuable? Considered in the aggregate, this data gave us a detailed picture of what actually differentiates the most effective contributors from everyone else and which mindsets prevent smart, capable people from contributing to their full potential.

## The Impact Player

Our research made it clear that the approach taken by the Impact Players isn't just marginally different than that of other contributors, it is radically different—and it's rooted in how these professionals deal with ambiguity and situations they cannot control.

## The Opportunity Lens

Typical professionals approach these everyday challenges as nuisances that jeopardize their productivity and make it difficult to do their job. They see problems to run around and avoid rather than



**FIGURE 2.** THREAT LENS VS. OPPORTUNITY LENS

tackle directly. Furthermore, under-contributors see these forces not only as productivity threats, but as personal threats—dynamics that could jeopardize their position or organizational status.

The Impact Players in our study, however, see everyday challenges as opportunities. To them, unclear direction and changing priorities look like a chance to add value. They are energized by the messy problems that would enervate or deter others. Lack of clarity doesn't paralyze them; it provokes them. Invitations to make changes are intriguing, not intimidating. Perhaps most fundamentally, through this lens, they don't see these dynamics as distractions from their job. Rather, it *is* the job—not just their job, but everyone's job.

In short, Impact Players see these everyday challenges through an opportunity lens while others are looking at the same challenges through a threat lens, as shown in Figure 2. 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. This fundamental difference in outlook separates Impact Players from others.

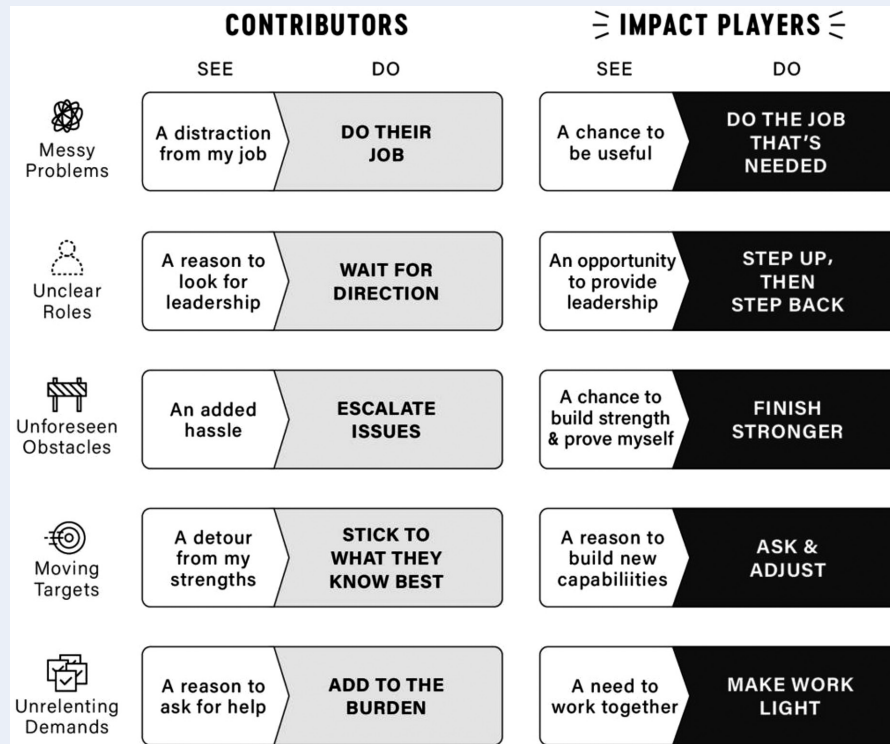
### The Five Practices of Impact Players

Impact Players see uncertainty and ambiguity as an opportunity to add value, and this outlook translates to actions and behaviors that further differentiate

them from their colleagues. The lens through which contributors see their work becomes a dividing line that functions much like the Continental Divide of the Americas, the line of high mountain peaks along the Andes and Rocky Mountain ranges that separates the watershed systems for two continents. West of the divide, all water flows to the Pacific Ocean; east of it, all water flows to the Atlantic Ocean. Similarly, on one side of the outlook divide, behavior flows toward ordinary contribution; on the other side, behavior flows toward extraordinary contribution and high impact.

The following five practices, as shown in Figure 3, represent the key differentiators between Impact Players and their colleagues. Each is a set of behaviors unearthed by our research, and all the behaviors 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 real 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



**FIGURE 3. THE FIVE PRACTICES OF IMPACT PLAYERS**

as a flexible utility player 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 are doing the job that needs to be done.*

- 2. Step Up, then 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 also step back and follow others with equal ease. Their willingness to step up and know when to take the lead creates a culture of courage, initiative, and agility inside their organization. In contrast, when roles are unclear, most players act as bystanders, assuming others in charge will tell them 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 prompt them to take ownership, improvise, solve problems, push through roadblocks, and finish jobs without constant supervision. As they deliver results despite setbacks, they reinforce a culture of accountability and build a reputation as a clutch player who can save a flailing project. In contrast, more typical players operate with an avoidance mindset. They take responsible action, but when things get tough they escalate issues rather than take ownership; at worst, they get distracted or discouraged and stall out completely. *While others escalate problems up the management chain, 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. While they

appreciate affirmation and positive feedback, they actively seek corrective feedback and contrary views and use it to recalibrate and refocus their efforts. In the process, they strengthen a culture of learning and innovation, help the organization stay relevant, and build a personal reputation 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 offering to help. As this becomes the default response, these contributors add to the burden of already over-taxed teams during difficult times and become a burden to their leaders and colleagues. *While others add to the load, the Impact Players make heavy demands feel lighter.*

These five practices and the outlooks that drive them constitute the Impact Player Mindset, a framework for high-value contribution.

When we asked managers to consider the value of the Impact Player's contribution relative to that of 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. Additionally, they indicated that the value contributed

by the Impact Player was almost 10 times that of an under-contributor (those smart, talented colleagues who were contributing below their capability). We were 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 20–30 times greater."

The fact that Impact Players are perceived to be more than three times more valuable as regular contributors means everything in terms of access to rewards, both intrinsic (such as great projects) and extrinsic (such as promotions and compensation). And, when it comes to the development of talent, these players receive extra helpings 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.

## Increasing Your Impact

As we interviewed both managers and Impact Players, it became clear that one's impact level is not necessarily static throughout their career: growth is possible. When you understand the small adjustments in outlook and actions that make an enormous difference, you too can access this high-contribution, high-reward way of working.

### Wear Opportunity Goggles

If you aspire to have greater influence, start by thinking like an Impact Player. Strive to "see change as a challenge, not as a threat," as Frances Hesselbein instructed. Instead of backing away from ambiguity and uncertainty, look at your situation through opportunity goggles.

---

*Look at your situation  
through opportunity goggles.*

---

---

## Identify what is most important to your stakeholders.

---

Psychological techniques like cognitive reframing can help you see opportunity in otherwise threatening situations. Changing deeply engrained beliefs, especially when fear is involved, may require deep work and the help of a coach or therapist. However, with practice, reframing situations can become as simple as changing filters on a photo taken on a smartphone. Use these four steps to help you reframe threats as opportunities:

1. *Recognize Ambiguous Situations.* Watch for the everyday challenges (messy problems, unclear roles, unforeseen obstacles, moving targets, and unrelenting burdens). Recognizing these situations can help you to pause and evaluate your mindset and behavior.
2. *Check Your Lens.* Pay attention to your thoughts and reactions, and check for signs that you are looking at the situation through a threat lens.
  - Are you primarily concerned with the downside risks (rather than upside possibilities)?
  - Are you pulling inward (rather than looking outward)?
  - Do you believe you lack ability, power or resources (rather than seeing sufficient levels of capability and resource)?
3. *Reframe the Situation.* Consider what the situation would look like through an opportunity lens. Identify a situation that currently feels threatening to you and ask:
  - How would an Impact Player see this as an opportunity to add value?

- How can this have a positive impact on my own goals?
- What capabilities and resources can I tap into to navigate the inherent ambiguity?

4. *Replace with an Opportunity Lens.* Now, consider what you would do differently if you saw this situation as an opportunity. When you look through an opportunity lens, what beliefs and behaviors naturally follow?

### Practice a High-Impact Play

In addition to thinking like an Impact Player, try adopting one of their practices:

1. *Get onto the Agenda:* Contributors often miss out on opportunities for impact because, though they are doing good work, they're not working on what is most important to their boss or their organization. Identify what is most important to your stakeholders, then make sure you are working on their priorities.
2. *Fill a Leadership Vacuum:* Look for situations that lack clear leadership. Don't wait for a formal promotion; provide leadership in everyday moments. For example, in an unclear meeting with no planned agenda, you can provide clarity by suggesting the group agree on intended outcomes for the meeting. Ask, "What is the most important thing for us to accomplish during this meeting?"
3. *Establish the Impact Player Performance Guarantee:* People who bring the power of *always*—those who do the entire job the right way every single time—enjoy increased credibility and influence. Establish this guarantee by coming out of the gate strong: on your first piece of work for a boss or client, get the job done completely, without reminder and without alienating others. As you repeat this cycle several times in rapid succession, you'll earn a reputation as someone who can be counted on to finish strong.
4. *Ask for Guidance, not Feedback.* Most people associate feedback with evaluation rather than improvement. Get better feedback (in both quantity and quality) by asking for advice or guidance instead.

Ask, “If I want to do this really well, what advice do you have for me?” or “If I did just one thing differently next time, what would you suggest?”

5. *Reduce Friction:* Impact Players steer clear of noisy, taxing and fruitless efforts like finger-pointing, complaining, showboating, or land grabbing. Instead of getting involved in politics or dramatics that foment conflict but don't produce results, take a low-friction approach to work. Reduce resistance for everyone by streamlining work, reducing conflict, and eliminating the drag that's created when we become overly attached to our ideas, our status or the status quo.

## Build a High-Impact Team

The workplace is full of people who want to contribute at their fullest and have a real impact. With wise



*Liz Wiseman is the author of Impact Players: How to Take the Lead, Play Bigger, and Multiply Your Impact as well as the New York Times bestseller Multipliers, The Multiplier Effect, and the Wall Street Journal bestseller Rookie Smarts. She is a former corporate executive who now works as a management researcher, executive advisor, and CEO of The Wiseman Group. Liz has received the top achievement award for leadership from Thinkers50 and has been consistently named one of the world's top 50 management thinkers in its bi-annual ranking.*

leadership and a little coaching, this mindset can become available to everyone who wants to step up and contribute at their highest level.

Leaders should start by cultivating a work climate that creates an equilibrium between comfort and challenge. People need to know an environment is safe—that they will be given a fair shot at contributing and be trusted enough to take risks, make mistakes, and recover. When people feel this safety, they are able to handle stretch challenges and turn uncertainty and ambiguity into opportunity. Leaders can create stretch by establishing high expectations, providing candid feedback, and holding people accountable for finishing the job.

Smart leaders will then either recruit people who already possess the mindsets of Impact Players or develop a system to teach and proliferate helpful mindsets and practices on their team, accelerating the spread of high-impact habits and quelling the proliferation of contrary behaviors. As contributors adopt and leaders value the Impact Player mindsets and practices, the result is a culture where people are deeply engaged, learning rapidly, and contributing to their fullest potential.

© 2021 The Authors. Leader to Leader published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of University of Pittsburgh.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



*Lauren Hancock is a behavioral economist and data scientist at The Wiseman Group. She studied economics and experimental design at Brigham Young University and the University of Cambridge.*