



Leadership Essentials

Taking Initiative

Leaders demonstrate ownership by identifying and taking opportunities



Taking initiative was defined by Frese and Fay (2001) as: “Work behaviour characterized by its self-starting nature, its proactive approach, and by being persistent in overcoming difficulties that arise in pursuit of a goal.”

By taking initiative, successful leaders:

- Do not wait for someone to tell them what to do
- Think on their feet and take appropriate action
- Are proactive rather than reactive
- Appear flexible, confident and courageous
- Help their teams and organizations to innovate, progress & to overcome competition
- Spot and take advantage of opportunities that others pass by.

Why does taking initiative mean being proactive and not reactive?

If you are:

Proactive	Reactive
<p>You do things without being told. You anticipate the future. You change the work environment.</p>	<p>You wait to be told what to do. You react to the past. You address issues as they arise.</p>

Typical examples of taking initiative:

- An administrator had several complicated processes to do on a regular basis. Without being asked they decided to document each process and create a shared directory where other members of the team could access the information.
- A library receptionist was on duty when all the region’s public printers were down. Being confronted by a stressed and anxious member of the public who urgently needed a document, they printed it off on their office machine to satisfy the person, who was very appreciative.
- A nurse in a care home noticed that care staff were stressed and very busy. Although it was not their job, they took the initiative to shower and dress some residents.

How can you take initiative in your workplace?

Taking initiative means that, without being told, you:

- Ask yourself what is likely to happen, and react to it before it happens.
- Anticipate future demands and prepare for them, or prevent problems from occurring.
- Find out for yourself what you need to know.
- Strive to overcome barriers.
- Persevere even when things get difficult, because you believe in the idea.
- Act as a role model for team members who, in turn, need to take initiative in their workplace.

For example you might have an idea for an improvement in your workplace, or a new process, or a procedure. Because your idea has not been tried before, you may face some difficulties. For example the new process may not be carried out correctly, or your supervisor may not realise the benefit of your idea, or colleagues may disagree with you. So you may need to persevere.

It may seem that taking initiative can imply a rebellious attitude. However, all initiatives need to be in line with the organisation and its goals. They may result in incremental improvements, or major changes to the way your organisation works. (Grant & Ashford, 2008)

What might stop you from taking initiative?

People may at first be unsure about taking initiative. They may fear that, if their idea goes wrong:

- colleagues will not like, or will disagree with, their suggestion;
- they may be blamed for the failure;
- team members will not like them for speaking up.

Or, they may believe it is only their manager's responsibility to identify new ways of working.

However, because you are closest to your own work tasks you have a unique understanding of what needs to be done to improve for the future.

When may it be inappropriate to take initiative?

You need to be realistic and think wisely about how you take initiative. It might be inappropriate in certain situations. For example:

- You may annoy others if you create lots of extra work at difficult times.
- You may appear aggressive if you are overly persistent in pursuing your ideas.
- It may be important to follow certain rules or procedures (such as Health and Safety, medical, or emergency procedures).

Taking initiative effectively requires:

Confidence

Confidence is the trust that you have in yourself and your abilities. It allows you to have a positive yet realistic view of yourself and the situations in which you are involved. To take initiative, you need to have confidence in your own ideas and abilities so that you can persistently yet sensitively propose improvement and change, accept challenge, stand up for what you believe, have the courage to admit your limitations, and learn from your mistakes. Having an accurate sense of confidence also means you avoid being reckless.

Most of us have aspects of our lives where we feel capable, but also realise there are areas where we do not feel at all confident. Sometimes lack of confidence can make people afraid to take risks or feel paralysed by fear and anxiety when faced with things they want or need to do. Imposter syndrome is where a person finds it difficult to accept their accomplishments, being convinced they do not deserve the success they have achieved. They feel like a fraud, despite evidence of their competence, and they explain their achievements as luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking them more capable than they believe themselves to be. Low confidence is not necessarily related to lack of ability, and is often the result of unrealistic expectations or standards of others.

Three things you can do to build your confidence:

- Focus on your strengths
- Forgive yourself for past mistakes
- Stop judging yourself for what happens in your life
- Conduct a personal SWOT analysis of your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to help you achieve your goals

Recognising opportunities

By recognising opportunities as they arise in your complex work environment, and learning to overcome the hurdles, you will be able to take initiative more often, and develop as an effective leader. Understanding all aspects of your job, your team, and your organisation's purpose, mission and vision can really help. Being curious about how things work, asking good questions, and being open-minded to new ways of working will also help you to spot improvement opportunities.

Approaches

Being aware of available approaches can help you to recognise, prioritise, plan for, propose and implement your ideas despite any barriers, hurdles or disappointment that may come along. For example you could check the relevance of your ideas by brainstorming with team members to get their view on possible improvements, or to find out their opinions about what might get in the way or go wrong. Perhaps you could do some research to find out if anyone else has tried your idea. You need to think about the associated costs and risks. If they are small, you might be able to take action on your own; if they are high, you need to plan how to put your idea into practice and then decide how best to present it to your manager for approval.

Remember that taking initiative results in a change. People may react unexpectedly to your proposal.

References

Frese, M. and Fay, D. (2001). **Personal Initiative: An Active Performance Concept for Work in the 21st Century** Research in Organization Behavior, Vol. 23

Grant, A.M. & Ashford, S.J. (2008.) **The dynamics of proactivity at work** Research in Organizational Behavior, 28, 3–34.



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