



Fostering Initiative in Your Team Moving From Reactive to Proactive

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Are your team members less proactive than you want them to be? Are you frustrated by their lack of creativity? Or do they feel constrained by rules and conventions? If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, it might be time to encourage your people to show some initiative.

Individuals who lack initiative aren't fulfilling their potential. They clock in at 9 a.m., go through the motions, and leave at 5 p.m. They might not care about their work, or they could be frustrated because they're not "allowed" to think for themselves. Either way, it's a lose-lose situation.

Encouraging initiative in your team might seem difficult, but making some changes to your workplace culture can have positive effects that extend far beyond individuals. When people think and act for themselves, it can help teams and organizations to rediscover their spark.

In this article, we'll explore the importance of fostering initiative in your team, and we'll look at how you can achieve it.

The Importance of Initiative

Michael Frese from the University of Amsterdam, and Wolfgang Kring, Andrea Soose, and Jeannette Zempel from the University of Giessen, define personal initiative as "taking an active and self-starting approach to work, and going beyond what is formally required in a given job."

As the **real-time revolution**, where people react instantly to changes, gathers pace, service sectors keep growing, managers delegate more work, and people seek greater personal fulfilment. As a result, the ability to show initiative is becoming increasingly important. Managers are abandoning hands-on leadership styles to encourage their team members to "**think on their feet**," to be more agile and responsive, and to show more initiative, even if that means not working strictly "by the book."

When Initiative Isn't a Good Thing

Initiative isn't appropriate for all roles, however. In some cases, it can be damaging, even when it's used with the best of intentions. For instance, it can distance team members from their responsibilities and decision makers from the problems that they need to address. People may also use their initiative for selfish reasons, such as for personal gain or glory. Or they can make poor decisions because they lack key information.

When success depends on someone being in a specific place at a set time, or completing defined tasks in a precise sequence, using initiative can cause huge problems. Imagine a bank employee who relaxes the rules to loan money to a desperate young couple, for example. Sometimes, following the rules to the letter is necessary.

The Benefits of Fostering Initiative

Initiative can be the spark that you need to transform a sluggish, process-focused, disengaged team. A culture that promotes initiative-taking can turn people into proactive, engaged, committed drivers of business performance, and can help to attract and retain the best employees.

People empowered to **use their initiative** are usually more agile, responsive and resilient. They are able to act quickly, flexibly and intelligently when life "throws them a curveball." For example, when hardware breaks down or **customers** change their minds, a flash of initiative can rescue the situation.

People who think and act **independently** can also stimulate change and contribute to continuous improvement. Managers often base initiatives on a limited number of current strategies, whereas team members generate them by drawing on their wider experience. This can lead to **leaner, more efficient workplaces**, and it can take businesses in new, exciting directions.

Initiative-takers can also free you up to focus on high-value tasks. However, delegating and decentralizing responsibility blurs the traditional lines between managers and team members, and not all managers feel comfortable with this. Embrace it, though, and you'll spend less time supervising others and more on your own work. You'll also enjoy **higher-quality working relationships** with your people, because they feel more empowered and trusted.

How to Foster Initiative in Other People

Use these four strategies to encourage your people to show initiative at work, and to create a more dynamic team:

1. Decide What's Important Before You Begin

Before you start to encourage initiative in your team, it's important to understand your goals and what you want to achieve.

- **Define end goals**. When people have clear and concise goals to work toward, they can take ownership and responsibility for achieving them. (Asking your team members to help you draft your mission statement can help here.)
- **Prioritize goals over processes**. Encourage people to prioritize personal, team and organizational goals, and emphasize that processes need to be flexible and open to change.
- **Analyze risks**. By analyzing and communicating risks in common situations, you encourage people to take informed initiative when it's appropriate.
- **Establish quality checks and performance standards**. As a manager, you need to ensure that your team members are performing effectively and producing high-quality work. Fostering initiative doesn't mean relinquishing your responsibilities; it means fulfilling them in a more participative way. Think about how you can **support and monitor** your team members from a distance.
- **Define "fixed areas" and core values**. It's important to identify and communicate your organization's **core values**, so that people know when they should stick to the rule book.

Establish guidelines on what team members should do in common situations, and highlight fixed responsibilities and processes. Avoid setting too many parameters, though, or you could hinder their initiative.

2. Build Competence

People must be competent and empowered within their role, so that they can think and act for themselves, and perform professionally.

- **Provide training.** Training your team members appropriately allows them to show initiative and come up with innovative solutions. Focus your training on initiative-taking by helping them to identify their own skill and knowledge gaps, and include **critical thinking, cross-training, decision making**, risk management, and general skills development, so that they can evaluate situations and take competent action.
- **Give people access to information.** Provide your team members with resources and **knowledge**, so that they can make informed decisions and turn good ideas into successful actions.
- **Assign authority levels.** Make sure that your team members have the appropriate authority to carry out their role. For example, they may need discretionary powers, such as invoice sign-off or vendor management rights, if there's a financial or people-management element to their roles.
- **Encourage initiative.** Encourage people to think for themselves and show initiative in the way that they work. This is where the phrase "Don't come to me with problems, come to me with solutions" is so important!

3. Build Confidence

Competence alone isn't enough for people to take the initiative successfully – they also need to feel **confident**.

- **Remove fear from the equation.** When people experience fear at work, they're unlikely to leave the rule book behind and think independently. Reassure them that you support them, and give them the security they need to excel.
- **Put contingency plans in place.** People will likely feel more confident when there's a good "plan B." When your team members know what to do when things go wrong, they are able to recover quickly from setbacks and make good **decisions under pressure**.
- **Build two-way trusting relationships.** Fostering mutual, trusting relationships is important, particularly in more flexible workplaces where monitoring team members' performance against key criteria isn't easy. People need to feel confident that they have an **effective, secure relationship** with you.
- **Help people to feel that they're a vital contributor to the organization's mission.** Encourage your team members to feel that they contribute to the organization's mission by

providing constructive **feedback**, and by engaging them in **decision making**. When people are invested in their **company and team missions**, they'll go the "extra mile."

- **Encourage creativity.** You can do this by asking people to **speak up**, debate and **brainstorm**. This helps them to take the initiative by **creatively finding ways** to improve existing set-ups and contribute new ideas.
- **Institutionalize initiative.** Make taking the initiative a part of how your organization works. Encourage teams and departments to adopt the **Kaizen** philosophy, and focus on **continuous improvement**.

4. Consider What Else You Can Do

Everyone is different and, while some people may seize the opportunity to take an active and self-starting approach, others may need more encouragement. Here are some additional tips for fostering initiative in others.

- **Offer motivational incentives.** These motivational incentives could be financial, but others – from simple **praise** to awards – can be easier to implement and just as effective.
- **Modify your leadership style.** Making small changes to your leadership style can have a big effect on your team members. Remember that allowing people to show initiative isn't a sign of **managerial weakness**. In fact, it can be quite the opposite. Shed your fear of losing the initiative, and share it with your team instead.
- **Build initiative into your team culture.** Fostering a culture of initiative in your team can encourage people to take a self-starting approach. Initiative might begin with the individual but it often relies on others' support to turn it into a successful outcome.
- **Build a diverse team.** A varied, diverse team with a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge is often more effective when initiative is required. Teams that take the initiative demonstrate better creativity, communication, decision making, trust and respect, and productivity.

Key Points

Encouraging people to show initiative has its risks, but an "active and self-starting approach" is becoming increasingly essential in many workplaces. Having the freedom to show initiative can transform detached, underperforming and process-focused individuals into energized, enthusiastic and committed team players who boost business performance.

At first, you may not feel comfortable delegating responsibility. However, you'll soon start to reap the rewards of transforming how your people work, and discover the benefits of freeing up your time.

To foster initiative in others, make a priority of establishing ground rules. Then, work towards building competency and confidence.

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