Competency Background

Twenty-first century trends are driving organizations to rely more and more on the resourcefulness of individual employees. With layers of hierarchy squeezed out, and managers less likely to stay at one company for life, the challenge of finding solutions falls increasingly to teams and individuals. Research on proactive behavior suggests this shift has positive effects for individuals as well as organizations. Where ratings for employee initiative are high, organizations achieve higher performance numbers and profits, while proactive individuals enjoy higher levels in salary, promotions, job satisfaction, and well-being (Belschak et al., 2010).

However, initiative can at times lead to negative results. When a self-motivated employee acts on wrong assumptions, the project may disrupt others’ work, run counter to strategy at the organizational level, or produce a result that has to be undone. Displays of initiative can be a source of conflict, both with peers and with managers, who may see initiative as a distraction from meeting production targets (Grant et al., 2009). There is reason to believe that individuals who have to use initiative continually may suffer excessive job stress and erosion of home life (Bolino et al., 2010).

In sum, personal initiative has value when applied in the right situations. Success depends on gaining needed support and information, while considering costs against expected outcomes. To improve in this competency, individuals can begin by examining the psychological and behavioral characteristics of a self-starter.
Individual Contributors

Three basic ingredients of proactivity are: desire, openness to opportunity, and persistence (Thomas et al., 2010). Desire is the spark, while openness and persistence are like the fuel and air that sustain combustion.

Desire shows itself in goal setting. In an organizational context, goals may relate to career development, performance, or strategic vision (Belshak et al., 2010). By turning desire into specific goals, proactive individuals create a set of favorable working conditions for themselves. First, striving toward a self-defined goal promotes maximum effort, which in turn improves the odds for success. By achieving goals that are self-defined, proactive individuals gain a re-motivating combination of psychological rewards: feelings of being capable, independent, and valued as a member of the team (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2010).

Openness to opportunity, the second ingredient, sounds like a passive state but can be an active search. People with initiative go where they can hear about emerging trends and technologies. A study of innovators found four key activities increase exposure to new ideas (Dyer et al., 2009):

1. **Networking**: In a methodical way, seek a variety of discussions – with problem solvers, visionaries, specialists in and outside the industry, at trade shows, online forums, affinity groups, etc.

2. **Observing**: Look for patterns in the habits of customers, their challenges, and their changing needs.

3. **Questioning**: Ask why, why not, and what if. Existing procedures (and their costs) are often based on historical conditions that no longer apply.

4. **Experimenting**: Try out different ideas on a small scale, thereby validating assumptions for larger-scale proposals.

These activities facilitate a process called association, which means recognizing a connection between seemingly unrelated facts. By habitually looking for opportunity, proactive people sharpen their ability to recognize innovative solutions.

Persistence, the third ingredient, separates initiative from wishful thinking. Being well organized and thorough are key traits, supporting follow-through on innovative ideas. In psychological assessments, proactive people score high in conscientiousness (Thomas et al., 2010). To develop the mindset and skills of persistence, individuals can get on the right track at the goal-setting stage:

- Set goals that are specific and achievable.
- Set timelines and milestones to mark progress.
- Celebrate milestones with a reward.

Clearly defined steps show the way to success, and celebrations reinforce the desire to succeed.

Managers

Being the nearest source of authority, immediate supervisors are the first to resist employee initiative – sometimes with good reason, sometimes not. For managers who are focused on near-term objectives, suggestions for change may represent a drain on resources or a threat to managerial control. Perceived motives are key, as proactive individuals who are viewed as negative or selfish receive less favorable reviews than those viewed as positive and group-oriented (Grant et al., 2009). In departments where employees identify with the manager, team members may suppress creative suggestions to avoid discomforting the manager (Den Hartog et al., 2007).

An affirmative strategy for managers is to encourage individuals who show initiative and channel their energy into activities that align with priorities. In coaching individuals, managers can:
• Acknowledge the employee’s desire to create positive change.
• Share the “big picture” of organizational goals and needs.
• Offer “how to” guidelines for organizational change, such as:
  o articulating a value proposition
  o gathering support
  o proving the concept
• Provide clear guidelines for use of time on independent projects.
• Offer one-to-one help in developing plans.

To encourage personal initiative by all team members, managers can:
• Reserve time in regular meetings for new ideas.
• Create a formal system to reward initiative.
• Ask employees to set a self-motivated goal as part of their review.
• Establish working groups to update processes.
• Invite input from outside sources.

On the other side of the relationship, individuals can encourage managerial openness by demonstrating good intentions and motives:
• Show awareness of manager priorities.
• Establish credibility as a team-oriented contributor.
• Consult with a manager during idea development.
• Encourage a coaching relationship.

Mutually beneficial relationships support positive outcomes for managers and self-motivated employees.

**Executives**

Leaner organizations and pursuit of innovation are two trends driving greater reliance on individual initiative. Theorists have begun to ask whether emphasis on unique efforts by individuals comes at a cost to corporate capabilities (Bolino et al., 2010). When senior managers leave – as happens more often today – do they create a gap that is more difficult to fill than in the past? The continuity of organizational culture, and capabilities that go with it, may be at risk.

**Socialization:** Celebrating the star performer, as opposed to the “company man” of yesteryear, undermines the organization’s ability to indoctrinate new employees. A strength of traditional corporate culture is its power to mobilize diverse talents of employees who all have certain organizational views and experiences in common.

**Knowledge sharing:** Reliance on uniquely capable individuals encourages reduced investment in training and information exchange. Given that knowledge is power, individuals have an incentive to maintain influence and employability by keeping at least some information to themselves.

**Development of leaders:** In a traditional corporate structure, leaders move up the ladder to senior management. In today’s less vertical organizations, a vacancy is not as likely to have a designated successor. As organizations look outside to fill key positions, the continuity of organizational culture erodes.

Research has yet to show whether these possible effects occur in real organizations. To be on the safe side, organizations should consider their investment in organizational institutions. The ability to socialize employees into a common culture and develop leaders in-house is strategic in any business environment. The next section describes a technique for dissemination of organizational culture.

**Techniques for Development**

A coaching program developed for Agilent Technologies offers a double benefit: developing individual initiative in young employees while standardizing a coaching process for senior employees. Coaches...
receive training in a three-step iterative process, assuring a consistent experience for pupils. Pupils gain understanding and confidence through feedback that is attuned to individual needs (Bourg et al., 2010). The program reinforces organizational culture for two generations at once.

The coach and pupil relationship begins with a contract, based on a company-provided template, with specific commitments as to frequency of meetings, confidentiality, etc. In the Agilent setting, pupils are recent graduates of Six Sigma training (green belt) and working on a follow-up project, so pupils and coaches have specifics to talk about. In each meeting, the coach leads the pupil through a cycle of Assess, Align, Raise.

Assess: After an update by the pupil, the coach asks questions and forms an assessment of progress, considering both the level of understanding and the pupil’s feelings (is the pupil engaged or detached, focused or distracted, confident or intimidated?).

Align: The coach and pupil discuss strengths and challenges and agree on readiness for next steps.

Raise: The coach and pupil define next steps, seeking progress in both cognitive and affective development.

In guiding pupils to the next level, coaches refer to defined paths for cognitive and affective development. The stages in the cognitive path include: comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. For affect (feelings), the stages are: follow/agree, put into practice, believe in, integrate, and internalize. Coaches do not supervise or give instructions. At every stage, coaches help pupils visualize a positive outcome ahead. Pupils take the initiative to make it happen.

Case Study
Proactive Employees Become the Norm

Businesses needing to differentiate themselves from lookalike competitors now ask employees to deliver higher levels of service, responsive to the individual customer (Bolino et al., 2010). One example is DHL Express, hoping to catch up with UPS and FedEx by enlisting the personal initiative of front-line employees through a program called “I’m On It.”

At first glance, “I’m On It” looks like an ordinary corporate recognition program, applauding cases of exceptional service. The difference is in how thoroughly the theme is embedded in internal communications. Strategically, the goal is to encourage employees to think of themselves as self-directed individuals, using personal initiative to deliver service that is better than the competition. Employees who are “eager and resourceful” fulfill the DHL brand promise (Palmer, 2008).

DHL worked with an agency to develop the “I’m On It” program, which includes training for managers on how to provide meaningful recognition. Sending a congratulatory e-mail is not enough. Training emphasizes the importance of knowing the employee as a person and considering the type of recognition they would find most motivating. The program also includes merchandise and travel awards. Any employee can nominate a co-worker for “I’m On It” recognition.

A goal for the program is to bring proactive service and nominations to a level where half of employees have won recognition. DHL tracks nomination data by department and type of award. The company uses the annual employee survey as a second source of metrics on attitudes toward the program and its underlying values. Employee efforts have made an impression on customers: In 2010, Technicolor Cinema Distribution named DHL as a Vendor of the Year.

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References


