

Speedbump #27: Failure to Take Initiative

For decades—in article after article, book after book—business and motivational writers have urged you to take more initiative in your work. They tell you it's the only real way to become 100% committed to your organization and “own” your job.

Worker initiative forms the basis of the two E's: empowerment and engagement. When workers feel not only allowed but encouraged to own their jobs, they take their work to heart and care more about not just their own control, but also about the entire organization and their place in it. More importantly, they care about how their efforts move the team and organization forward toward their respective goals.

A client forwarded me an email from a team member and asked if she could excerpt some of my work with permission for an upcoming team meeting. What struck me was what her team member said in the email! It read, “It would be beneficial for team to discuss and agree on some guidelines around email as Laura suggests in this article. We all receive too many emails—more than we can handle.” I was impressed this person would take the time to email with an idea about how the team could save time. But she went on, “By sharing Laura's tips, I'm sure we could increase our efficiency. I would like to gather the information, create a PowerPoint presentation, and lead the team in an interactive discussion during our meeting next week, where we can all share our opinions and create our own rules.” Do you think she was given 30 minutes on the agenda to raise the topic with the team? Absolutely! This is a fantastic example of taking initiative to help the team go FAST!

Any leader worth his or her salt would jump at an opportunity presented by a team member to increase productivity. Rather than just complaining about a time-wasting problem, this person did something about it. She identified the problem, offered a solution, and volunteered to handle it herself. She didn't create any additional work for the leader in the process and helped the entire team. It's no wonder this person was tapped for the next managerial position. You see, it's not always accomplishment that will get you that next promotion—it's potential. It's easy to see the leadership potential in this person; even though she hadn't been a manager before, my client had confidence in her ability to figure it out.

What is the difference between an employee who shows initiative and one who doesn't? One says, “Here's what I can do about it.” The other says, “What can you do about it?”

Higher engagement contributes to higher productivity. I think most people genuinely believe this. But we must be doing something wrong, because time and time again, pollsters point out that fewer than 35% of employees are fully engaged, with another 50% not engaged and 17-19% actively *disengaged*. Those last few may not hate their jobs, but they certainly don't like them enough to care about doing them well.

The Bitter Truth

In 2014,ⁱ the engagement figures stood at 31.5% engaged, 51% not engaged, and 17.5% actively disengaged. While the numbers have improved in recent years – engagement jumped two percentage points just since 2013 – something obviously remains broken here. Experts have cited numerous possible reasons for low engagement levels, from task overload to limited thinking, and most of the explanations seem reasonable.ⁱⁱ But rarely do they actually ask the workers why they rein in their initiative, so the experts miss two important reasons. First, most people work *because they have to*, not because they love their jobs. Second, many workers refuse to take initiative because when they've done so in the past, they've been slapped down. It only takes one harsh lesson for a worker to stop trying.

This holds true even in knowledge work, where leaders supposedly prize initiative. While things continue to improve, it hasn't been that long since the Great Recession and the prior "Autocrat Era," as I think of it, when managers seemed to view a job as a privilege. To some extent that's still true, with "at-will" employment remaining common in North America.

Furthermore, it's easy to make mistakes when taking initiative, even where leaders truly value resourcefulness. Micromanagers still haunt the workplace, and workers still get chastised for taking even minor initiative.ⁱⁱⁱ In some cases, an error in judgement can cost you a dream job. Is it any wonder many workers don't want to chance taking initiative, even when they can and should? Where's the dividing line between acceptable initiative and censure?

Categorically speaking, there are three main levels of initiative you can take: Your Manager, Your Team, and Yourself:

- 1. Consult Your Manager.** If initiated without the proper permissions or consideration, some changes may upset an apple cart someone else already has in motion, cause the company harm, or step on the toes of another person higher in the hierarchy who's sensitive about their project. Or, it may just make someone look bad if it's something they should and could have easily done already (politics matter, like it or not). If your idea crosses a department boundary, check with your manager first. Approach those on other teams it might affect, too.
- 2. Check with Your Team.** The same things apply here as in the preceding category, though on a smaller scale. Someone may already be working on a fix to your problem, or may plan to. Another person may already be involved on a certain aspect of a new project. Someone else on the team may feel they own the issue, and you shouldn't take action without their input. Other team members may simply

believe the change isn't necessary or is counterproductive. Before moving unilaterally to make a change, contact your team for input, asking them to let you know right away if there's a reason you shouldn't move forward.

3. **Just Do It.** Nike's three little words include anything left after you apply the first two categories. If the issue applies only to you, just do it. If someone on the team needs to take up the task or challenge (e.g., five people are emailed, hoping someone will do it) but no one has, just do it. If you're up against a time crunch or there's a crisis, *just do it* and explain later.

When team members are overwhelmed, offer specifically what you will do to help. If something else will be more helpful, you'll hear it. Can I run that errand for you? I'll cover your phone while you take your daughter to the doctor. I'll attend that meeting and take notes for you. I'm headed out to the post office; would you like me to drop that off for you? Observe, offer, help. Time is money, so be generous and willing to share. What goes around will come around for you, too.

ⁱ Adkins, "Majority of U.S. Employees Not Engaged."

ⁱⁱ "Why Don't People Take Initiative?" Retrieved from DialogWORKS website http://www.dialogueworks.com/pages/blogs.php?blog_id=55%20-%20.VaxdYvIVikp#.WJ0zuW8rKM8 on February 9, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Ask a Manager": "I Got Chastised for Taking Initiative," Ask a Manager website, retrieved from <http://www.askamanager.org/2015/05/i-got-chastised-for-taking-initiative-coworker-secretly-plans-to-quit-after-maternity-leave-and-more.html> on February 9, 2017.