

# Does your boss find you proactive... or pushy?

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Those wishing to prove themselves as "doers" must not only be hands-on and demonstrate proactive behavior but also have social acumen and a feel for favorable opportunities. Those who rely on personal initiative alone will quickly be standing there as an isolated troublemaker. This is what psychologists from the University of Bonn and their colleagues from Florida State University (USA) have discovered through surveying a variety of occupational categories. The results have been published online in the renowned *Journal of Management*. The printed version will be published soon.

Quickly write up the summary for the new project, solicit agreement from the business partners and then submit a proposed solution to the boss for the complicated financing for the project - anyone who wants to be a "doer" has to demonstrate personal initiative above all. "This also becomes clear in job advertisements, because 87 percent of employers demand these proactive skills from their applicants," say Dr. Andreas Wihler and Prof. Gerhard Blickle from the Institute of Psychology at the University of Bonn. But personal initiative by itself is of no benefit - it has to be combined with social acumen in order to bring about success. Both Bonn researchers and their colleagues from Florida State University (USA) who conducted a survey amongst [employees](#), colleagues and their supervisors come to this conclusion.

While personal initiative is an absolute requirement for a professional career for self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, employees are not always met with approval from the boss if they take the reins on their

own. "Anyone taking personal initiative should first make certain that one's own activities are also actually desired," says Prof. Blickle.

"Anyone who doesn't do this is frequently considered to be a troublemaker." But how will employees know whether their proactive behavior is welcome? And how can one influence whether one's own actions will be received positively by the supervisor?

## **Three studies on personal initiative**

The international team of researchers focused on these questions in a total of three studies. The first study involved 146 employees with their supervisors from a wide variety of fields. Standardized tests were used to survey the extent to which the employees themselves took the initiative for action and had social acumen: How well are colleagues' emotions and plans perceived and classified? Is communication efficient? The questions also focused on the ability to react appropriately to the respective situation. Together, the employee and supervisor estimate how receptive the respective company is to proactive behavior. Result: "An atmosphere conducive to personal initiative led to additional positive economic results only if the person has a marked degree of social acumen," reports Dr. Wihler.

In the second study, a questionnaire was used to ask 143 employed participants about their skill in utilizing favorable opportunities for changes through carefully selected behaviors. In addition, personal initiative was assessed in turn and the employee's performance was evaluated by the supervisor. Result: The personal initiative demonstrated led to better performance appraisals if the skill regarding correct behaviors was pronounced.

In the third iteration, the interaction of social acumen and a feel for the appropriate moment was recorded jointly by 219 employees. As before, the researchers again asked about the company's receptiveness to

proactive behavior and evaluated the personal initiative demonstrated in the test. Along with employees and supervisors, colleagues were also included in the survey this time. The result confirms the previous findings: A positive atmosphere for proactive behavior only leads to good performance appraisals if the participants demonstrated a high degree of personal initiative as well as social acumen and sensitivity to the right opportunity.

"This consequently means that appropriate identification of favorable opportunities and the ability to adapt to the respective situation are important preconditions for skillfully putting personal initiative behaviors into place," says Prof. Blickle. Many companies wished for employees with personal initiative, for good reason. But this skill by itself has no impact. Organizations could strengthen their position by improving their employees' social acumen through training measures and promoting an atmosphere of personal initiative.

**More information:** Wihler, A., Blickle, G., Ellen, B. P., Hochwarter, W., & Ferris, G. (in press). Personal initiative and job performance evaluations: Role of political skill in opportunity recognition and capitalization. *Journal of Management*. [DOI: 10.1177/0149206314552451](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314552451)

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