

How to be proactive at work

With their joint presentation just hours away, Laura wondered why she had not yet heard from Marilyn. While they each had their own section to explain to the client, Laura suggested they meet beforehand to work on cohesiveness. Marilyn agreed to the idea but never answered Laura's emails that asked for a good time to get together.

Laura pondered what to do. She debated just dropping the matter and hoping for the best. After all, Marilyn's part was not her responsibility. But this notion bothered Laura. She had worked hard and wanted things to go well. Besides, pleasing this client would go a long way toward helping her build momentum for that promotion she coveted.

Laura decided to drop by Marilyn's office. Marilyn apologized that she did not answer and told Laura that she had last-minute data to find among the piles of printouts on her desk. Marilyn shrugged her shoulders and said she would just have to make up something on the spot if the client noticed the lack of those figures.

Though outraged, Laura kept her cool. She asked Marilyn for more specifics. Once grasping the situation, Laura knew how to recreate those numbers. She quickly printed them out. The two of them still had a bit of time left to hone their presentation. The extra attention paid off as they wowed the client and received great feedback from their boss.

Situations like this come up quite often in the workplace. And whether to be a proactive employee like Laura or a reactive one like Marilyn can have a large impact on the company — and your own career success.

What does being proactive mean?

Proactive people take action in anticipation of the future. They look at what they can control and do what is in their power to produce desirable outcomes. Someone who is proactive does not wait around for things to happen. Rather, individuals possessing a proactive mindset take an active role in shaping what goes on and how it plays out. They stay aware of their environment and adapt to changes in order to achieve good results.

By contrast, reactive people wait for things to happen. They let circumstances dictate their actions. Instead of instituting preventative measures or putting forth effort to rectify small issues before they become big ones, they choose to deal with the consequences of a situation in the aftermath of it. A reactive person may justify inaction as eliminating needless worry. When negative things happen, though, reactive people often place the blame on other people or on their darned luck rather than evaluating how their own inattention influenced the outcome.

In the opening example, Laura exhibits several proactive measures. She takes the initiative to contact her colleague to discuss their project and follows up when Marilyn fails to answer. Laura also has a clear idea of how she would like her career to progress and knows the steps she needs to take to get there.

Marilyn, on the other hand, takes a reactive approach. Instead of seeking help when in a jam, she is content to let matters play out and deal with the problem head-on only if someone else notices.

The benefits of being proactive



When you take charge of circumstances rather than allowing yourself to fall prey to whatever comes your way, good things can happen. While the world will still throw occasional curveballs into your work environment and personal life, proactivity generally can assist with the following:

Engagement

Going through the workday just waiting for things to happen gets old fast. Proactive employees don't get bored so quickly. They are too busy observing their surroundings, generating ideas, making plans, and accomplishing objectives.

Trust

Managers like employees who think ahead. They know they can count on these people to assess situations, take preventative steps, brainstorm solutions, and speak up for the good of the organization.

Reputation

The time-management, organizational, and problem-solving skills proactive workers typically display enhance their professional standing. Being known as someone who takes charge and works to make the organization better is a good image to hold as leaders ponder things such as who to invest in for development or who to keep when layoffs loom.

Goal attainment

Unlike those folks who construct New Year's resolutions but have no clue how to actually keep them, proactive people do not make lofty promises to themselves or others. They do research, construct plans, break down objectives into manageable pieces, seek support from experts, and stay aware of obstacles.

Reduction of burnout

Proactive people take measures that lower stress. They look at the big picture and break it down to progress step by step. They devote appropriate time to getting things done correctly rather than find themselves

scrambling at the last minute or fanning flames because unanticipated disaster strikes. Their actions are comparable to a person trying to avoid a heart attack by maintaining good health through daily exercise and proper nutrition rather than first suffering cardiac arrest and then attending to the problem.

Why employers value proactive workers

Ask leaders what they think about proactivity, and by and large, you'll hear positive things.

"Proactive employees are valuable because they take the initiative to identify and solve problems before they become critical issues," says Rebecca Leppard, founder of the female career-development company [Upgrading Women](#). "They don't wait for someone to tell them what to do or how to do it, but instead, they actively seek out opportunities to contribute and improve their work. They are also more likely to be self-motivated, which can lead to increased productivity and a more positive work environment."

Adds Ivan Novikov, CEO of [Wallarm](#), "I value proactive employees because they bring a sense of ownership and responsibility to their roles. They are more likely to take initiative and go above and beyond to help the team achieve success. When employees are proactive, it also helps to create a positive work environment that encourages collaboration and innovation. Being a proactive worker is beneficial for your career because it shows that you are able to think critically and independently."

"As a hiring manager, I have always looked for prospects who have demonstrated a sense of being proactive during the interview process," says Chris Barkhurst, CEO of [BarkyAI](#). "Being proactive shows your passion, creativity, and ability to analyze a problem and determine future outcomes. To me, being proactive is more valuable than experience and helps you stand out from the competition."

How to be more proactive

Workers interested in upping their level of proactivity have plenty of possible actions, including the following:

Think ahead

Stay aware of upcoming events. How might, say, a shortened work week due to a holiday affect projects? When the boss is scheduled to be out of town for three days, what might you need to ask him before his departure? An up-to-date calendar and some forethought go a long way toward desirable outcomes.

Stay organized

Don't let responsibilities fall through the cracks or become overwhelming. Create a to-do list, and prioritize the tasks on it. Consider using a time-tracking app to get an accurate idea of how long things actually take to do. Then, budget time more effectively. Build cushions into your schedule to play catch up or deal with unexpected circumstances.

Develop a proactive mindset

Train yourself to consistently examine your work environment. Ask yourself how processes might improve or what would increase people's well-being. Act on good ideas by bringing them up at meetings, stating them on surveys, or stuffing the office suggestion box. Become better at spotting potential problems in order to fix them before they develop into something bigger.

Build a better vocabulary

Commit to proactive language that focuses on what is under your control. Demonstrate confidence with a vocabulary rich in phrases such as "I can," "I will," and "I prefer" rather than reactive language such as "I

can't," "I have to," or "If only."

Seek constructive feedback

Schedule regular one-on-one meetings with your manager to learn what you could do to be a higher performer. Knowing actions that could lead to better performance review scores or advancement within the company provides the opportunity to incorporate them into your work life now.

Listen attentively

Leaders often toss out advice or suggestions to their staff. Many workers let those words go in one ear and out the other. A proactive person picks up on them and acts accordingly. Maybe a manager says how increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives will be a priority next quarter, so start brainstorming. A reactive staff member may forget all about the issue until it resurfaces. A proactive one begins reading up on the subject and writing down ideas.

Keep others in the loop

Proactively provide others with information of use. Your boss will like that you are on top of things, and colleagues will appreciate the advanced notice. Be especially vigilant about notifying others about time-sensitive matters. For instance, reminding your manager well in advance of your upcoming scheduled vacation will help him prioritize what he most needs you to accomplish before then.

Follow up

A quick check-in now can prevent a world of problems later. Find out why you haven't heard from someone. Confirm receipt of messages. Ask a clarifying question. Double-check a questionable figure. Likewise, follow up to build connections. Ask a colleague how that presentation yesterday went, or be the one to suggest a time and restaurant to get together with a network acquaintance.

Be a life-long learner

What is happening in your industry and at your individual organization? Things employers value change over time. Anticipate future needs and act accordingly. Take initiative to learn new skills, enroll in an online course, or volunteer to represent your department at conferences.

Learn more about proactivity

Expert advice abounds on this subject. Try reading a classic such as Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. (Spoiler alert: "Be proactive" is habit number one.)

A final thought on being proactive at work

In general, being proactive definitely can help your career. Taking control of matters where you can in order to yield better outcomes is a smart approach that leads others to respect your initiative . . . unless you go too far.

Proactive people must remember that they do not operate in a vacuum. What might seem to them a totally wonderful new way to change a procedure or reorganize operations may not be met with the same enthusiasm by other team members or management. Colleagues may resent interference or see you as bossy. Leaders may feel you are overstepping bounds.

When your proactive ideas affect others, run them through the appropriate channels before instigating. Revamping how you construct your own to-do list is one thing. Single-handedly changing over the filing system

used by everyone in the office is quite another. Bring up such proposals with relevant colleagues to get their input and with leaders to receive their approval. Your desire to help others does little good if all you do is irritate or alienate in the process.