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**Abstract:** Discusses research on measuring proactive behavior. Characteristics of proactive managers; Challenges for most companies regarding the proactive behavior; When proaction is counterproductive.

## **PROACTIVE BEHAVIOR: MEANING, IMPACT, RECOMMENDATIONS**

The world has three kinds of people, said George Bernard Shaw: those who make things happen, those who watch what happens, and those who wonder what happened. Strategy gurus Hamel and Prahalad (1994) make the same point--about companies, not people--with their own metaphor: On the road to the future, there are drivers, there are passengers, and there is road kill.

The key differentiator among these distinctions is the extent to which behavior--of people and firms--is proactive. This word has entered the management lexicon in a big way. Managers everywhere are exhorted to "be proactive," and companies are urged to create their futures proactively. Most recently, Robert Kelley (1998) highlights initiative and other proactive behaviors as the keys that distinguish star performers from average performers.

Is the word just another management cliché? Or is it a high-leverage concept? Like many fads, the word is used loosely, subject to different meanings and interpretations. But if proactive behavior is clearly understood and implemented, it is now, more than ever, an essential practice.

We have conducted several empirical investigations measuring proactive behavior and relating it to various measures of achievement, leadership, performance, and career outcomes. Our samples have been diverse, including bankers, professional salespeople, and MBA students. And we have interviewed entrepreneurs, company founders, and company presidents in a variety of countries and industries. Our results point to the potential of proactive behavior to have demonstrably positive consequences for people and organizations alike.

### **The Meaning**

Two people in the same position may tackle the job in very different ways. One takes charge, launches new initiatives, generates constructive change, and leads in a proactive fashion. The other tries to maintain, get along, conform, keep his head above water, and be a good custodian of the status quo. The first tackles issues head-on and works for constructive reform. The second "goes with the flow" and passively conducts business as usual.

The first person is proactive; the second is not. To be proactive is to change things, in an intended direction, for the better. Proactive behavior distinguishes individuals from the pack, and organizations from the rest of the marketplace.

Proaction involves creating change, not merely anticipating it. It does not just involve the important attributes of flexibility and adaptability toward an uncertain future. To be proactive is to take the initiative in improving business. At the other extreme, behavior that is not proactive includes sitting back, letting others try to make things happen, and passively hoping that externally imposed change "works out okay."

People engage in many actions that can bring about change. But not all of them are truly proactive. First, change can be evoked unintentionally, for a negative as well as a positive outcome. This is not proactive behavior. Second, people can engage in cognitive restructuring by psychologically reframing or reinterpreting situations. This can be useful and beneficial, as when a threat is reconstrued as an opportunity, or a situation of high stress is viewed as controllable. It can also be detrimental, as when managers deny the existence of real problems, or convince themselves of the viability of an untenable strategy. This, too, is not proactive behavior, because it changes perceptions without changing reality.

Third, people can make conscious decisions to leave and enter situations, as when they take a new job, make acquisition or divestment decisions, or enter new markets. This is a form of proactive behavior; it places people and firms in different environments. Fourth--and most important here--people can intentionally and directly change things through the creation of new circumstances, or the active alteration of current ones. This is what is meant by true proactive behavior.

To explore these behaviors further, we interviewed a sample of proactive businesspeople operating as entrepreneurs and company presidents in North America, Central Europe, and Southeast Asia. We found that they, like other proactive individuals, engage in the following behaviors:

1. Scan for change opportunities. "You just keep your antennae out for opportunities," one entrepreneur told us. "We're constantly looking for new ways to grow," said one company president. Antennae provide a useful metaphor, and constant searching is key.
2. Set effective, change-oriented goals. Proactive behavior is focused on accomplishment, but particularly on accomplishment with real impact. "I will raise the standard" was a common declaration among company founders we interviewed in Thailand. Similarly, an entrepreneur in the U.S. told us, "I want to set the vision above what anyone else has. It's almost like something new that hasn't been discovered." An independent consultant explained his goal of having a major impact on other people, saying, "I'm not crazy about selling service. I'm more concerned about empowering my clients to manage their businesses for themselves."
3. Anticipate and prevent problems. "I roll on the floor," said the owner and manager of a child care center, describing how she tries to see her operation from the eyes of the children so she can spot potential dangers in the environment and fix them before problems arise. The owner of a

small office supply store in Hungary told us, "I am afraid of Office Depot....I am setting up new stores in better locations." In this case, David is not surrendering to Goliath, or passively hoping for the best. Instead, he is taking proactive steps.

4. Do different things, or do things differently. A successful entrepreneur told us, "I detest a me-too kind of concept." Another said, "Let's change the model" and do business in a different fashion. Similarly, a company founder explained, "What I always wanted to do was find a better way of doing something. I don't want to do it in the traditional way."

5. Take action. Much has been written about the need for an action orientation, including Peters and Waterman's "bias for action" (1982). In our proactive studies, participants made comments like, "We learned by doing, just jumped in," "We were the first..." and "We're pioneers..." They were not passive, did not stop at the idea stage, and did not hesitate to take the lead. They took the plunge despite the uncertainties.

6. Persevere. Proactive people persist in their efforts. They don't back off from the obstacles, they don't take no for an answer, they don't settle for less, and they aren't satisfied with being able to say after a defeat, "Well, at least I tried." This is reflected in attitude ("I'm bulletproof, I can do anything" said one entrepreneur) and in behavior. Said a Thai entrepreneur, "If you stop, you are not just stopping, you are also going down. You must keep going." An entrepreneur in the U.S. described the long-term requirement of perseverance in building a successful firm, saying, "Successes to me are those little challenges you have to get over, daily, weekly, monthly, whatever, just to exist and survive and be part of the economic landscape." Perseverance refers to effort, not necessarily to continuing the same strategies and tactics. It means taking new directions when others dead-end. "Just keep trying different ways" and "We're going to make it happen one way or the other" were exemplary quotes from the individuals we interviewed.

7. Achieve results. Implicit in the comments above is a clear results orientation. Change must not merely be thought about or attempted, but achieved. A typical quote was, "Accomplishment is the main thing. You need to have tangible results." And the results are not just "making the numbers," but having a change-based impact on organizations, people, or situations. In one of our studies, proactive people revealed qualitatively different "greatest personal achievements." Those with lower scores on a questionnaire measuring proactive behavior were more likely to report such achievements as meeting a challenging deadline, bringing a project in under budget, or winning a competition at work or in sports--commendable, but not change-related accomplishments. In contrast, those scoring higher on the questionnaire were more apt to have founded companies, been successful change agents, or engaged in entrepreneurial activities inside larger corporations. And they were involved in more and different civic and community activities aimed at improving the lives of other people.

## **The Impact**

In an era in which firms that are change makers will win far more often than the change watchers, and individuals survive and advance by expanding their contributions and making a demonstrable difference, proactive behavior has a variety of payoffs. For one thing, our data show that proaction enhances job performance among sales professionals.

Studying U.S.-based real estate agents over a nine-month period, we found that those who scored higher on the questionnaire measure of proactive behavior sold more houses, earned higher commissions, and generated more listing agreements than those with lower scores. This was true even after measuring and controlling for other important factors. Specifically, people with high general intelligence and years of experience tend to be successful sales agents. So we measured these and other dimensions of personality related to sales success: conscientiousness (hardworking, focused, dependable) and extraversion (outgoing, gregarious). Scores on the proactive measure predicted sales success even above and beyond these other variables.

As expected, the intelligent, experienced, conscientious, extraverted sales agents were successful on the job. However, none of these things is the same as being proactive--and proactive behavior predicted success even more highly. Clearly, this is a unique and desirable quality in professional salespeople.

Proactive behavior generally has a positive influence on how people are perceived by others. In one of our studies, MBA students scoring high on the measure of proactive behavior were viewed by their peers as more likely to be transformational leaders of the future. Transformational leaders are defined as those who have a special gift of seeing what is really important; they have a sense of mission, inspire their followers, change entire organizational or societal perspectives, and have the self-determination to see their vision through no matter how difficult the obstacles.

In another study involving a bank and a marketing services firm, proactive managers were described by others as having greater charisma, more leadership qualities, and a penchant for being stronger contributors and all-around better "citizens" of their firms. Whereas in the MBA study students were evaluated by peers, in this study the "others" providing the descriptions were their bosses. If proactive behavior creates such positive impressions, especially "from above," it may result in a variety of positive consequences, including better work relationships and rewards.

Some organizations value and reward proactive behavior, whereas others might not. The study described above was done in just two organizations. But additional new data from Seibert, *Crant*, and Kraimer (in press) show the positive impact of proaction across a diverse set of firms and occupations. Again, controlling for a variety of other relevant factors, proactive behavior predicted career success. Specifically, as measured by both self-reports and others' observations, it predicted career outcomes, including salary, promotions, and satisfaction.

Thus, proaction benefits individuals. Organizations can benefit as well from the proactive behavior of their members. At the strategic level, it can be seen in the number and frequency of introductions of new products, services, and processes; the amount of resources devoted to innovation; and how often the firm is a first or second mover. A firm's level of proactive behavior is reflected in how bold versus cautious the company is, the extent to which it shapes the competitive landscape or merely reacts to the moves of others, how actively it creates demand and drives markets, and whether it is an industry leader or follower.

To consider further the impact of proactive behavior, or the lack thereof, contemplate the kinds of questions asked by Hamel and Prahalad in *Competing for the Future*: Your firm may be a good benchmarker, but is it also a pathbreaker? Does the company seem to look to the past, or live for the future? Does it take the path of greatest familiarity, or the path of greatest opportunity? Do managers wait for opportunities to fall into their laps, or do they actively create entirely new possibilities?

Insufficient proactive behavior manifests itself in complacency. Kotter's (1996) symptoms of complacency include too much happy talk, denial of problems, low or mediocre performance standards, and performance measures that focus on narrow, short-term, functional goals. Moreover, complacency can be engendered by a lack of tough feedback from outside sources and by a long run of good performance without serious setbacks. Such factors may not constitute direct evidence of too little proactive behavior, but they hardly encourage it, and in fact tend to discourage it.

In contrast, high levels of proactive behavior are revealed in a strong drive for progress. Collins and Porras (1997) recently studied great companies--consistently admired industry leaders--in an attempt to identify the essential characteristics of corporate cultures that perpetuate greatness over long periods of time. The major message was that great companies have both strong core ideologies (purpose and values) and a relentless drive for progress that impels constant, positive change. Proactive behavior drives the second half of this recipe.

### **The Challenges**

How widespread is real, constructive, proactive behavior? Take a moment and estimate the percentage of people who might be described as custodial, maintenance managers who are married to the status quo, as opposed to proactive change agents who really make things happen. And how about organizations? How many really do "create the future," and how many are me-too followers? Today's firms are overpopulated by people who are often passive and not adequately proactive. As a successful U.S. entrepreneur told us, "A reactive person waits for someone to call and say, 'I have a problem, can you help me with it?' Most workers are trained to be reactive."

Thus, the first challenge for most companies is to generate high levels of proaction. However, not all such behaviors are created equal. Some are better and more desirable than others. Too much, or misguided, proaction can be dysfunctional.

The second challenge, then, is to manage the risks--to balance and optimize. Proactivity cannot be allowed to run amok. There cannot be such a strong bias for action and change that adequate forethought and good execution fall by the wayside. And there cannot be too many unintegrated activities. Such behavior is counterproductive. Rather, there should be an appropriate balance of high levels of proaction and broad-based control. Here are some recommendations for generating proactive behavior, followed by suggestions for reducing the potential risks.

### **Generating Proactive Behavior**

Proaction is like most other work behavior: It is a function of both individual dispositions and the work environment. Thus, it can be harvested, grown, and sustained via appropriate approaches to selecting, training, liberating, and inspiring.

**Selecting and Training.** Individuals with a proclivity to engage in proactive behavior may be identifiable among job applicants and current employees. Proaction can be assessed via a validated self-report measure, analysis of past achievements, and appropriate interview questions. Behavior questions--those that require applicants to describe actual experiences--may be especially useful. Applicants might be asked, "Tell me about a time you had an idea about how to improve things at work. What was the idea and what changes resulted?" Or, "Tell me about a time you encountered resistance to one of your ideas. What did you do?"

Next, training and development can enhance proaction. People can be asked to assess the extent of their proactive behavior, and to think about and identify opportunities to be that way. Training can emphasize each of the elements of such behavior, as well as planning and commitment to proactive goals and activities. Also essential is the development of skills that both increase the probability of success in proactive initiatives and increase people's confidence, or self-efficacy, in this domain. The skills would include problem finding, creativity, innovation, championing change, and breakthrough thinking.

**Liberating.** Proactive behavior can arise naturally, of course, among individuals who are so inclined. Often, though, it is quashed. Actions that are inconsistent with corporate goals may be inappropriate, but it is striking how often potentially constructive behavior is squandered. Companies and managers can benefit simply from allowing more proactive behavior to flourish.

To do this requires relaxing the overcontrolling tendencies of many company policies and structures. With the clear caveat that people throughout the firm should focus their energies on broad organizational goals, they can often be allowed more freedom to pursue those goals in fruitful, creative, innovative ways. The standard litany of bureaucratic constraints--rigid hierarchy, functional silos, centralized control, narrow job descriptions, cumbersome approval processes, tight-fisted resource allocation--have their purposes. But when they are too rigid, they constrain rather than liberate, and their disadvantages become serious.

Organizational formalities aside, the same point applies to overcontrolling styles in individual managers: autocratic decision making, demands for obedience and compliance, undue criticism, second guessing, punishments for mistakes, and a living-in-the-past, we've-always-done-it-this-way attitude. Perhaps most generally, heavy work loads and short-term pressures can prevent proactive behavior from ever getting started. Relaxing unnecessary constraints--again, without throwing out necessary controls--can liberate essential proactive behavior.

**Inspiring.** Managers who want to inspire proactive behavior will highlight its importance in the context of the broad organizational mission and agenda. The goal should be to have people throughout the firm committed to the strategic agenda and believing that proactive behavior is an essential ingredient of success. Managers can take action consistent with their words, granting some freedom within the broader strategic parameters, and not punishing well-intended proactive efforts that don't work out. They will be proactive themselves, modeling the way for others.

Two key issues in motivating proaction entail how managers handle people's (1) ideas and (2) mistakes. When people propose ideas of uncertain merit, managers have response options of greatly varying impact. They can squash the ideas (and the people) on the spot, or they can ask questions to explore possibilities. They can veto ideas they think will not work, or they can allow people to try. Either strategically and with forethought, or more impulsively on the spur of the moment, managers make decisions about the amount of risk and uncertainty they will allow. Some will say "Try it" where others say "Better not." Thinking about yourself, how convinced of an idea's merit do you have to be before you'll let someone try it?

Similarly, how managers respond to mistakes and failures will motivate--or fail to motivate--new initiatives. Some companies have a strong blame culture, in which finger-pointing and "cover your ass" are the norms, and even no-fault setbacks may be punished in ways subtle or unsubtle. In contrast, some managers and companies don't just give lip service to "learning from mistakes"--they actually do it, and even reward the effort, based on open discussion without stigma. The blame culture, of course, discourages proactive efforts, while the learning culture encourages them.

We stated earlier that proactive behavior stems from individual dispositions and environmental conditions. People predisposed to proactive behavior can be hired, trained in the necessary skills, and liberated to act. But even for proactive individuals, their behavior ultimately is like any other motivated behavior: If it is rewarded, it will thrive. If it is punished, it won't--with the possible exception of a few hardy souls who keep trying, and who may end up leaving the firm if their efforts are consistently thwarted. To maintain people's motivation to work in proactive mode, such behavior can be incorporated into performance review systems. Bonuses, promotions, and special awards can be based on criteria other than making the numbers--appropriate experimentation, initiative, and perhaps even the good-faith failures that inevitably come from engaging in a variety of proactive efforts.

### **Reducing the Risks**

Proactive behavior is generally needed, and offers great advantage. But it can also entail certain risks: its political costs can outweigh the benefits; it can detract from work that must get done; it can overstep the bounds of appropriateness. Thus, proaction is counterproductive when it violates important political or strategic considerations.

**Political Risks.** Effective proaction requires adequate attention to politics. Consider the political risks of any new initiative: The changes--first anticipated, then real--are likely to be resisted by someone, somewhere. If the consequences are not fully considered, new initiatives can undo the good work of others. In addition, the proactive individual, or unit, can be viewed by others as being driven by personal ambition more than by a desire to benefit the firm. Or the uniqueness and fun implied by proactive engagement rather than routine passivity could create resentment and interpersonal problems.

How should one decide whether to pursue a new initiative? Useful questions include: Will the idea make (powerful) enemies? What will be the costs of failure? Given the political landscape,

which ideas have a high (low) probability of success? Part of the reckoning here includes an assessment of people's reputation, power, and skills as they attempt to implement their ideas.

Effective proactive change requires operating with independence but also with the firm's best interests in mind. Tackle proactive initiatives that do not merely improve your own productivity in your own job, but that benefit others--the more the better. In deciding which initiatives to pursue, think from a system perspective: Which actions will provide benefits to the highest level, with the broadest leverage, and for the greatest numbers of people? Misattributions about selfish motives can still arise, of course, but when the motives are pure and benefits accrue to others, the risks are lower.

Thus, throughout the process--both choosing and executing new initiatives--politics cannot be ignored. The politics of change is complex, difficult, and worthy of in-depth study. The best advice is take into account the goals, needs, and expectations of others, coordinate as needed, and seek advice from mentors. And for those people who operate in a more passive mode than you do, avoid being overly judgmental and critical, except when really necessary.

**Strategic Boundaries.** Proactive changes pursued merely for the sake of change are more likely to be counterproductive than those that are assessed realistically against the company's mission and purpose. So a strategic perspective is essential toward maximizing productive and minimizing counterproductive activity.

Start thinking strategically about proactive behavior by envisioning a doughnut, the kind with a hole in the middle. British management scholar Charles Handy (1989) suggests that every manager should view his job as a doughnut. But consider the doughnut to be inverted, so that the "hole" is actually the cake, which is surrounded by air or empty space, which in turn is surrounded by solid matter.

Using the inverted doughnut as a metaphor for the managerial role, the cake in the middle represents the core activities essential to good performance. These activities are clearly specified, they must be done, and they must be done well. The outer solid surrounding the air space represents the out-of-bounds. Actions taken in this area are not part of the doughnut and are not permitted. To step over the outer boundary is to do something that clearly and strongly violates norms and expectations, and that must be disciplined. This includes not only illegal activities, but also unethical activities and behaviors that would harm the company's reputation, such as issues of safety or marketing tactics. It can also include violations of important company values, such as product quality or treatment of others. The out-of-bounds can also refer to certain strategic arenas; some companies, for example, explicitly communicate to their people that dealing with certain other companies, countries, products, or markets is off-limits.

The airspace surrounding the cake and lying inside the permissible boundary of activities represents anything and everything else--an infinite menu of possibilities. This area can be viewed as the "white space" in the organizational chart, currently unoccupied but which perhaps could be filled profitably. Here is where people can improve upon the core, find new ways to add value, pursue new initiatives, experiment, innovate, and tackle activities above and beyond the

normal call of duty. This is the place for departures from business-as-usual, the primary area for creating change. It is where proactive behavior takes place.

### **Proactive Imperatives**

The challenges discussed above highlight three domains of action:

- Identify your core activities. Make sure your people know and understand their core activities. Do you (they) know the core activities that must be done, ideally at a world-class level? If asked, can they articulate these essentials? Will their answers be in accord with what you want from them? Are these core activities fully communicated and rewarded?
- Know the outer boundaries. Make sure your people know the boundaries. Do you (they) know the point beyond which no one should go--not only the legal and ethical boundaries, but also cultural norms, values, and core ideologies that should not be violated? Do employees know and use the company's ethical guidelines to prevent missteps? Moreover, are the strategic boundaries clear? Are they fully communicated? Are violators disciplined appropriately? What strategies and operating tactics should be avoided?
- Work the airspace. Expand the cake. Ask the same of your people. How wide is the airspace between the core and out-of-bounds? What is the range or latitude for proactive behavior? Do your people know you value creative initiatives from them? Is experimentation with new ways requested, encouraged, rewarded?

In summary, make the core activities clear, and tell people what not to do. But after that, don't overspecify what else to do. Through attention and discussion, you can reinforce the core, prevent serious violations before they occur, and encourage people to expand the core by experimenting in a wide latitude of air space. New strategies--new recipes for the doughnut--can emerge through their ideas and actions.

Returning to the potential political pitfalls of proactive behavior, think strategically with the doughnut. Do not allow new initiatives to interfere with the core. Assess possibilities with respect to their potential for expanding the cake. And make sure they are not out-of-bounds. All this will go a long way toward ensuring that the actions are strategically appropriate, thereby reducing (though not necessarily eliminating) the political risk.

Intellectually, we all know that change is everywhere. It is constant, it is massive, and it is accelerating. We know we must adapt, be flexible, and anticipate. But in an action sense, too many individuals and organizations are not doing the right things based on that knowledge.

Most firms need more people to be proactive in order to change, differentiate, survive, and compete for the future. Within strategic boundaries, and with political savvy, being proactive helps managers distinguish themselves and add real value to their companies. Ghoshal and Sull (1997) wrote that the best managers create new value by challenging the status quo, innovating, and changing processes, goods, and services. Their concept of a manager's job is to make happen what otherwise would not, and they conclude by saying to managers, "Few professions provide

as many opportunities to change the world as does yours." Proactive individuals seize and create such opportunities for positive change.

Being proactive involves defining new problems, finding new solutions, and providing active leadership through an uncertain future. In its ultimate form, proaction involves grand ambitions, breakthrough thinking, and the wherewithal to make even the impossible happen. It overhauls the past and makes the future. It creates new industries, changes the rules of competition, or changes the world.

Sound superhuman? Proaction does not require one omnipotent individual to do all of these things, nonstop. It does, however, suggest the benefit to individuals and firms of making the personal or strategic decision to raise the level of proactive behavior while clarifying and reinforcing strategic boundaries. Initial movement in that direction, and persistent progress throughout the organization, are the beginnings of truly effective change management.

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