

# Six Ways to Empower Employees to Take Initiative

The “it’s not my job” attitude is more than just an employee career killer; it’s a symptom of a much larger organizational problem. Workers who simply do their jobs and nothing more do not contribute to company growth.

Joel Garfinkle, March 6, 2012

If they don’t take the initiative by seeking out new projects and looking for opportunities to share their ideas and suggestions, an organization can become ensnared in old ways of doing things.

But if workplace culture doesn’t encourage employees to be proactive, they likely will not have the courage to take the initiative. A proactive culture rewards employees for taking action without being asked. Employees are expected to take initiative and lead regardless of whether they are in a formal position of authority. Talent managers can foster this environment by sharing employee stories that provide tangible examples of proactive behavior.

When this proactive culture is missing, employees’ ideas and actions are often met with criticism or dismissal, and they may stop trying to come up with new and better ways to do things. They become disengaged, resolving to do only what is necessary to get by. The company will eventually lose ground to competitors that encourage and reward initiative because their employees will find ways to improve processes, cut costs and introduce innovative new products and services.

Here are six ways managers can create an environment where initiative is encouraged and appreciated by empowering employees and rewarding them for their efforts.

**1. Tell employees what they want and why.** Managers should tell their employees why it’s important for them to take initiative, and explain how being proactive will be good for the company and for them. When employees take initiative, the benefits can include improved customer satisfaction, cost savings, new product ideas and problem solving.

**2. Be a role model.** Leaders must demonstrate the calculated risk-taking behavior they want their teams to emulate and hold their fellow managers accountable. The best leaders

don't just give orders, they inspire.

**3. Authorize teams to make decisions.** Good managers give employees the authority to take the initiative on certain things without prior approval. For example, employees at the Ritz-Carlton know they can spend up to \$2,000 to ensure a guest is satisfied.

**4. Provide a positive, encouraging environment.** People are most creative when they enjoy their work. There's a reason Google allows its engineers to spend 20 percent of their time working on projects of their choosing. Many of the company's most successful products were developed during this time, including AdSense for Content and Gmail.

**5. Recognize efforts even if they fail.** As Bill Gates once said, "How a company deals with mistakes suggests how well it will wring the best ideas and talents out of its people." Employees need to know there will not be any repercussions when they screw up. Managers should recognize them for taking risks even if it didn't work out. This will give them the courage to continue trying.

**6. Reward success.** Some of the best rewards provide recognition. For example, employees who demonstrate initiative may be given the opportunity to have lunch with the CEO or other senior leaders. This can be an exciting and motivating experience. Extra vacation days, showing appreciation for a person's ideas in front of senior leadership or presenting the person with some sort of award during the weekly staff meeting are all good ways to recognize employees who take initiative.

When the work environment promotes initiative, employees feel empowered to be creative rather than rigidly adhering to guidelines that may not provide the best solution. Managers should recognize risk-takers for their ideas, and give them verbal credit when their suggestions are implemented. Seeing their ideas in practice gives employees a feeling of pride and accomplishment, and that's the best reward of all.

*Joel Garfinkle is an executive coach and the author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*. He can be reached at [editor@talentmgt.com](mailto:editor@talentmgt.com).*