



Your Passport to Professionalism: Module 8

Taking Initiative

Steps in this module:

1. **Learn: Read the following document.**
2. **Follow the link at the end of this document and complete the learning activity.**

Step 1—Learn

Introduction – A story of Initiative

You arrive at work at your scheduled time sharply at 7:30 am at the campus Bistro Coffee House. Although you didn't hear from her, on Monday morning at 7:45 the manager had an emergency which kept her from coming in to start baking the pastries for a dean's 8:00 am meeting. Upon arrival you realized that the manager's work had not started and it's too late to bake the pastries. So you walk over to the campus cafeteria and buy some bagels and donuts from your own money for the dean's meeting. Everything goes off without a hitch. When your manager finally arrives, she is impressed and grateful for your initiative (and pays you back).



Do you take initiative like this on the job?

Initiative has become increasingly important in today's workplace. Employers in every area of business say they want to hire people who look for solutions without waiting to be told. In short, it can set you up for future success in the workforce.

But what is initiative? And how can you develop it?

What's initiative?

Taking initiative is not about merely meeting your job requirements. It's not about looking busy when work is slow. It's also not about wasting time on busywork that isn't productive.

Initiative is about taking responsibility for your part of the workgroup and making it **your** business to make it excellent. . . and it's about going the extra mile. You show initiative when you act without being told what to do, persist in the face of inertia and difficulty, and see your idea through to a successful conclusion. Instead of being about "What am I *required* to do at work?" it is an attitude that says, "How can I best help my coworkers, my supervisor, this unit, and this organization and department be the best it can be?"

By nature, **initiative is:**

- **Self-starting and proactive:** which means that you don't wait to be told what to do. You don't wait for problems to arise, you try to **prevent** problems from happening in the first place. If you know something needs to be done at work, do it if you are able. Be sensitive and aware when you're on the job.

You see a paper cup in the hallway outside the department's entrance. It's not your job to clean the hallway. Do you just walk past and leave it? Or do you pick it up?

- **Persistent:** which means you don't give up when you encounter obstacles to completing your work.

At the front desk, student customers kept asking you the same questions. So you create a Frequently Asked Questions sign. But it didn't stop the repeat questions. Do you try something else, or just forget about it?

- **Curious:** How does your unit and the rest of the organization work? Asking questions is a great way to show that you truly want to understand your job. If you don't know something or understand how some aspect of your unit functions, ask about it.

Just make sure you remember the answers. Have a pad of paper or file and jot down notes to yourself when you get the answers you need so you can remember it later on.

- **Imaginative:** Pretend that you are the owner/manager of your work unit. What would make this operation better? How can **you** make it better? Is your idea a temporary fix, or will its impact be lasting? Especially if you are serving other students, always offer suggestions for improvement from your point of view.

"I think students might like to be able to get this information on the web."

"I created this PDF document that answers a common question we get. Is this helpful?"

To identify where your initiative is needed, focus on what's important:

- How can you and your unit provide better customer experience?

Put yourself in your customer's shoes and think about what changes your customers would want. Who else could you be serving? In what other ways?

- How can you support your team members and your supervisor more effectively?

Look for problems to solve in terms of workplace procedures and policies. Think about what is getting in the way of your unit's productivity. What aspects of your work are frustrating or annoying? What small problems you have now could turn into bigger problems in the future? Start with small ideas that are easy to implement so that you can increase your confidence in your ideas and so that your coworkers will learn to trust your judgment.



You may have witnessed this yourself when a coworker (maybe you) identified a flawed process and proposed a fix.

Proceed with Caution

Initiative is about **proposing change**, and that's not easy - especially if you are low in the power structure. People who show initiative often encounter resistance and setbacks, so tune in to what is going on around your efforts. It's particularly helpful to know how to read other people's emotions. You may need to slow down and give your co-workers a chance to buy into your ideas. One of the best approaches to change is to **ask for advice**.



For instance, you might say, "I notice that sometimes we can't answer the phone in 3 rings. I made a quick call to our Cisco IP Phone system staff and they think the new call-waiting feature might help us with that. Would you like me to check it out further?"

Your idea might involve you taking on someone else's role. If so, consider how your supervisor and coworkers will view your doing things that are not part of your job description.

If your initiative will threaten someone else's job, don't do it.

When taking initiative to solve a particular problem at work, be sure to ask yourself, **"Why is it like this now?"** Why hasn't someone already fixed the problem? One obvious answer is that

no one has come up with a solution to the problem. Another is that your coworkers are not aware of how much the problem impacts the success of your unit. Your workgroup's resources may be needed to address other issues.

But there may be less rational reasons for inaction. This may not be a problem that people want to fix. There may be a **political reason** that people stay away from it. For example, a long-time employee set up the current practice, and he's so valuable that people don't want to upset him. The reasons for leaving things as they may not always good, but they may be more important than you think.

"I suggested a solution to my boss on how to rearrange our workspace for better flow. He thought about it and commended my effort; then he told me I shouldn't bother about it anymore. He said, 'We have other plans for that space in the future.' I got the message and never brought it up again, but I scored points for taking initiative."

Check your ideas for viability. Brainstorm your ideas of improvements with coworkers to get their take on it. If need be, do some research to find out if other have tried your idea. Consider the costs and risks associated with the idea. If the costs and risks are small, you might want to take action on your own; however, if the costs and risks might be high, prepare a plan to present to your supervisor and get approval before proceeding. You can develop a reputation both for initiative and for good judgment - an invaluable combination!

Conclusion

When you face challenges in your personal life you take initiative. When you take initiative to be helpful in the workplace the rewards are great:

1. Job satisfaction
2. Increase in pay or responsibility
3. Promotion/ Recognition
6. Job security



You can develop your ability to take initiative in your role as a student worker or intern. Where can you practice right now?

A recent poll of executives asked,

" What do you feel is the single best way for employees to earn a promotion and/or raise?" Topping the list for 82% of the respondents was " Ask for more work and responsibility."

NEVER play video games, Facebook, or do homework in the office. ALWAYS find something to do that might add value to the job. They tell the boss that you don't have enough to do and you don't care enough about the business to find a way to contribute.

Optional: Want to learn more? Check out these online resources:

1. Read Bill Nelson's short [article from INC. magazine](#) on taking initiative.
2. Read this short blog post by Joey Berrios about [why people fail to take initiative](#). His message: "Success comes to those who are extraordinary."

Step 2 Learning Activity – think about it

From the top of your head, what are the most important functions/services of your organization? List 5

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Of the list above, what is done best? Pick at least 2 and explain why.

Of the list above, what are the most difficult or problematic? Pick at least 2 and explain why?