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MAKING PROACTIVITY WORK WISELY

NEW RESEARCH SHOWS HOW MANAGERS CAN ENSURE THAT INNOVATION WORKS FOR THE ORGANISATION, NOT AGAINST IT.

Much has been written about the positive aspects of proactive employees – those highly productive people with a drive for innovation, a capacity for independent action, and a willingness to foster change. However, new research from a trio of Australian academics shows that proactivity is not always beneficial to the organisation.

The research, conducted by Professor Sharon Parker (Curtin University), Dr Lena Wang (RMIT University) and Dr Jenny Liao (University of Western Australia), reviewed 95 leading papers on the subject and found a potential risk of proactive employees initiating the wrong types of change,

moving the organisation not forwards but backwards.

One of the key problems identified is the introduction of change at the operational level that does not fit the broader direction of the organisation as whole. The proactive person might believe that the change will be beneficial, but they might not see the bigger picture. In other cases, they might simply be overly self-centred.

"A common example we see in organisations is that some people want to create new processes just to make themselves look good," Wang says. "They want to claim credit for innovation, but they can end up costing the organisation money by, for example, investing in a wrong system."

In some cases connected to workload issues, the research found instances of proactive staff negotiating a better deal for themselves, only to offload tasks onto their peers. Sometimes, proactive staff would take on too many new projects, consequently burning out and leaving the team with further problems.

Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo, a specialist leadership and HR development organisation, agrees that blindly pushing ahead with ideas that are unsupported by colleagues is likely to be counter-productive. She sees a capacity for active listening as essential to anyone's ability to make the right kind of contribution. A reluctance to engage in robust debate is a warning sign.

"Often, proactive employees are praised by managers for their 'go-getter' attitude, hard work and determination," she notes. "Their colleagues, however, might see them as pushy, self-absorbed, and far from a team player."

LOOKING FOR WISDOM

Wang and her co-authors put forward the idea of "wise" proactivity. This happens when, first, there is a clear connection between the proposed change and the corporate strategy, a connection that can be articulated to managers and peers. The benefits, relative to the status quo, have to be clearly spelled out before the change program begins, whether it is at the business unit level or team level.

Second, there has to be a consideration of the social and relational dynamics. The research found that many proactive staff do not always consider how their proactivity affects others. The input of experienced people can be valuable in revealing whether change is needed and how it might be implemented. If the change program ultimately moves ahead, the chances of success are much higher if those affected know that their views have been sought, considered and incorporated.

Connected to this is a third factor, a need for self-reflection on the part of the proactive person. They should ask themselves – and in some cases their manager should strongly encourage them to ask themselves – whether the problem is really theirs to solve, and whether the benefits are greater than the resources required. They should also assess the consequences if the innovation fails.



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STAYING ON COURSE

For managers, proactive employees can be an important source for productivity and innovation, yet they can also raise crucial challenges. Their energy and creativity are valued, but they need to be kept on course through active coaching and relevant training.

Gately takes the view that proactive employees need special attention in the recruitment process. "You can ask candidates to provide examples of when they have made a significant contribution to the success of a team," she advises. "Listen for the extent to which they are aware of the contribution others made, share credit, and focus on collaboration. Look for signs of arrogance and

over-confidence. These are the people most likely to proactively drive the wrong outcomes."

Wang believes that the best thing managers can do is ask questions to satisfy themselves that the proactive individual has thought an idea through.

"The person must be able to show they have addressed the three areas our research identified: context, others, and self. Managers can also offer insights into the strategic picture, things the proactive person might not be able to see," she says.

"A good manager can also act as a role model, by themselves showing the capability to consider others and reflect on their own actions. In short, they can demonstrate wisdom." ■

WISE UP

CRUCIAL QUESTIONS TO ENSURE "WISE" PROACTIVITY

01

Is your change proposal in keeping with the organisation's strategic objectives?

02

Is it your area of responsibility?

03

Have you discussed this with people who would be affected?

04

Can you explain the specific benefits?

05

What might be the consequences of failure?