

Initiative

in·i·ti·a·tive

1. The ability to assess and initiate things independently.
2. The power or opportunity to act or take charge before others do.

Initiative has become increasingly important in today's work world. People who take initiative in the work place are highly valued. They are the people who make things happen. They are the people who do things without being told. They are the people who find out what you need to know. Simply put, they get things done.

Mary Lee Palocsik, Senior Human Resources Representative from Bayer Corporation says, "In a fast-paced environment like Bayer Corporation, you would not survive without initiative. Initiative is a key trait we look for from the college-level through the experienced-level."¹

How then do supervisors teach students how to act and not react? How do they learn to get things done without direct supervision? How do supervisors teach students to persist in the face of inertia and difficulty, see an idea through to conclusion?

"There are three types of people in this world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened."—

Mary Kay Ash, American businesswoman

Supervisors and Initiative

Have you ever said these words as a supervisor? ***"It'll be easier if I just do it myself."*** And sometimes it truly is easier to just do it yourself. However, there are limits to just how much a supervisor can do versus how work power could be multiplied exponentially if we teach student employees to take initiative.

Allow students to take initiative. We have to learn as supervisors to trust students to take initiative. Students need to know that their supervisors trust their abilities and want their help. Supervisors have to communicate that innovation and problem-solving are welcome. We want our students to use their intelligence (after all they are the brightest and the best or they wouldn't have made it through the admissions process at Berry) and we trust them to manage. But sometimes, strict rules and micro-managing send a very different signal. Students have to learn to take initiative, and a supervisor must be willing to create a working environment where initiative is rewarded and praised.

Expect students to fail. 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."²

For students to learn to take initiative they need to know that if they fail there will not be repercussions. Supervisors should recognize them for a willingness to take charge even if it doesn't always work. Provide a positive encouraging environment and expect the best. Providing constructive feedback when failure occurs will help to build confidence and encourage a willingness to try again. No one has ever succeeded without first failing.

Reward. Part of the reward for taking initiative is having the idea or solution used. Asking a student to think through a problem or issue, create a project or take initiative and then refuse to use the ideas presented can be very demoralizing and destroy initiative. If you can't use student ideas on a project, don't ask.

¹ <http://www.benderconsult.com/articles/initiative-key-becoming-star-employee>

² <http://www.talentmgt.com/articles/six-ways-to-empower-employees-to-take-initiative>

"Initiative is doing the right thing without being told." – *Victor Hugo, French writer*

For Students

Learning to take initiative is a critical skill that is prized and desired by employers. How can you learn to take initiative?

- Look for opportunities and potential improvements.
 - Ask questions. What would those I work with and serve (internal and external) want us to improve? How can we improve the quality of what we do? Are there small problems that might grow into bigger problems? What makes our work slow or difficult? How do we fail to achieve? What is frustrating and irritating to my team members?
 - Make it a habit to look for ways to improve processes.
- Be curious about the organization and how it works.
- Keep your mind open to new ideas and possibilities.
- If you come up with new ideas make sure they make sense and are cost effective. Do your research. Test the idea on a team member. Ask for feedback from your supervisor.
- Be persistent if an idea is worthwhile, fact checked and tested. You will encounter opposition. Sometimes there is inertia in organizations as part of the culture. Be willing to present your case and make sure it is sound.
- Learn good decision making techniques. Being able to judge whether an idea is a good idea or not, is the key to developing a reputation for good judgement and initiative which are a winning, powerful combination.