

# The Role of Permission in the Employee Proactivity Process

How does the perception of permission influence employee proactivity, and what organizational and individual factors shape an employee's belief that they are "allowed" to take initiative in the workplace?

Proactive employees take initiative to improve their work, benefiting both organizations and individuals. However, not all employees feel equally permitted to act proactively. In this study, Vogel and Akben (Fox PhD, 2023) introduce the concept of proactivity permission, a psychological perception of whether employees believe they are "allowed" to take initiative. Unlike previous research, which focuses on motivation and personality as key drivers of proactivity, this study emphasizes how workplace hierarchy and status, relationships with supervisors, and organizational rules influence employees' engagement in proactive behavior.

Drawing on dominance theory, the authors identify three levels of factors that shape proactivity permission: individual (status, psychological entitlement), relational (quality of relationship with supervisor), and group-level (organizational rule consistency, normative tightness). Employees with higher workplace status or stronger relationships with supervisors are more likely to feel permitted to take initiative. Conversely, rigid rules or strict group norms reduce perceptions of permission, thereby reducing proactivity.

With a study of 388 employees and 110 supervisors across 35 organizations, they demonstrate that proactivity permission predicts proactive work behavior beyond motivation-based theories. Employees who feel they have permission to act are more likely to engage in workplace improvements.

The findings suggest that organizations should foster workplace environments that explicitly allow for proactivity, ensuring that leadership, policies, and group dynamics do not inadvertently suppress initiative. By understanding and shaping proactivity permission, managers can unlock greater innovation and efficiency within their teams.

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## MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Employees take more initiative when they perceive they are allowed to act, independent of motivation or personality.
- Strong relationships with supervisors increase an employee's sense of permission to take initiative at work.
- Rigid rules and strict norms discourage employees from feeling empowered to engage in proactive work behavior.

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## WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- HR Professionals
- Organizational Psychologists
- Business Leaders

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- The Role of Permission in the Employee Proactivity Process
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