

The Role of Permission in the Employee Proactivity Process

How does the perception of permission influence employees' proactive behavior at work beyond motivation and personality factors?

This study by Ryan Vogel and Mustafa Akben (Elon University, Temple University Fox School of Business PhD '22) introduces the concept of proactivity permission, which they define as an employee's implicit belief about whether they are allowed to take initiative and act proactively at work. Traditionally, research on proactive behavior has focused mainly on motivation and personality traits as the key drivers. However, this article argues that feeling permitted to act is a crucial and unique factor influencing whether employees decide to behave proactively.

Drawing on principles of dominance theory, the study identifies several important influences on proactivity permission. At the individual level, an employee's social status and psychological entitlement shape their sense of permission. At the relational level, the quality of the relationship with their supervisor plays a key role. At the group or organizational level, factors such as how consistent formal rules are and the tightness of informal group norms affect employees' perceptions of permission.

The authors collected survey data from 388 employees and 110 supervisors working in 35 organizations. They found that employees who perceived greater permission were significantly more likely to engage in proactive behaviors, controlling for many factors that have shown to increase proactivity. In contrast, consistent organizational rules and tight group norms reduced permission perceptions, thereby reducing employees' willingness to take initiative.

These findings show that permission perceptions are distinct from motivation and personality and add important understanding to what drives proactivity. Managers should be aware of the power of permission signals and explicitly communicate support for proactive actions while considering how rules and norms impact employee initiative.

MAJOR TAKEAWAYS:

- Employees' perceptions of permission to act proactively strongly influences their engagement in proactive behavior.
- Social status, entitlement, and strong supervisor relationships increase perceived permission.
- Consistent organizational rules and tight group norms reduce permission perceptions and limit proactivity.

WHO NEEDS TO KNOW:

- Managers
- Organizational Psychologists
- Human Resource Professionals

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