

By Jordan Johnson



There is an expectation and a necessity that an employee will take initiative. This is especially critical in a smaller company and start up.

In my time of studying management and leadership and applying it, there are several reasons for not taking initiative.

One is taking initiative means taking risk. Taking risks means you MUST assume responsibility for failure. This is impacted and dictated by several factors with the greatest being the employees' level of focus---

focus on the short and end game. Employees must know the WHY to stay focused and motivated. The WHY can and is often very simple. It could be to make more sales or make more money or be more productive or have fewer errors. - Healthcare plug- less readmissions or better managed length of stay.

There must be a level of comfort in the company. Comfort to speak up and comfort to speak up, not comfort to just "ride the wave". Comfort can also end up being the problem that leads to employee complacency. Though an employee should feel and be comfortable, they also need to take the initiative to step outside of their comfort zone every now and then. Complacency and comfort aren't the same thing. Complacency leads to decreased performance and will drag a team dynamic and morale down.

Failure and fear of failure can be another downfall. All employees must realize failure is not an option, it is certainty. It is going to happen. It is how you respond and react to that failure that determines the type of employee. Does the person take ownership or place blame? Do they have a redirect or another plan? In startups and smaller businesses this is crucial. This is often what causes the team dynamic and eventually the company to fail for many.

Be on the constant lookout for value adders. Employers often make the mistake of trying to keep a person who has added value, long after their value is gone. Some employees, managers, directors and VPs are short term not long term. There is nothing wrong with this.



Employees must take initiative, be a go getter. Can the team see your efforts? Even failed attempts and failed efforts are better than nothing. This is far more evident in smaller businesses and startups. Again, this ties back to initiative.

Coat tail riders, we all know them. They may be good at something or a few things, but they seem to wait on others to deliver to them, they just don't have the initiative. There is nothing wrong with this. These people may fit in the category of a directed employee, but they should be compensated as such. It is like the old assembly line there was someone that put the window in the car. The window was needed and that is what they did. Most businesses especially smaller ones and startups can't function this way anymore. Well function vs. successfully function.

In the end, you as an employee have the ability and responsibility to position yourself for security, stability and advancement. We all know there is someone willing to do our jobs, not a threat just a reality.

One trend that we see is that top performers are leaving jobs more and faster than ever before for a variety of reasons. These initiative takers aren't waiting around for false promises and "one day" talk.

They generally aren't leaving for \$\$\$\$ they are quitting a culture that has promoted mediocrity. We talked about initiative above. Accountability is another reason that employees often don't take initiative. There

numerous instances especially in startups and smaller businesses where low value adders and low performers are paid well. These employees know it and “ride the system”, you the employer don’t hold them accountable, so they collect a check and have low output. This is toxic to the team and what drives the higher value adders and performers to leave or decrease quality and dedication to their work. As an employer---- WHAT YOU PERMIT, YOU PROMOTE. Permit I long enough and your best will be exiting. Managers, Directors and the “leaders” have become great in the art of tolerance and kicking the can down the road. You know there is BS ahead when you hear them say “it is all about timing”. There is never a good time, just pull the trigger. Your MBA class didn’t teach this.

Ask yourself as an employer, company and employee:

- Do I have a vision, or do I know the vision?
- Do I have confidence- Confidence in my decision making, skill and ability ask questions?
- Am I connected to the bigger picture?
- Are you a loyal employee? Are you a loyal employer? Data shows employers often fail miserably at this.
- Are you motivated, what is your motivation?
- Is there a future? Is this just a means to an end?
- FUN. Is it fun or do you or they put the “FU” in fun?

Let me touch on one more thing- “Coach up or Coach out”. Yes, I am a fan of this. The biggest question is how much time and effort do you spend coaching? This is depending on the time you have and the value they have as well as the potential. The bottom line you have 20% low performers, 60% mid, and 20% high performers---- remember the 60% are often swayed by the 20% low performers. This is just a fact and something employees and employers must accept. Employers keep rewarding the lower 20% and watch the performance of your other 80% decrease and the exit occur. SIDE NOTE- Please stop giving across the board raises, this leads to the above.

The Cop Out- The one that has some definite value but is often used as the excuse. Expectations weren’t clearly defined. Many take this to mean “what is the minimum I have to do, to collect a check. This ties back to the top in taking initiative. In smaller companies and startups there are many more “undefined” expectations that initiative will often take care of. Part of setting expectations is feedback. In today’s PC culture feedback has become difficult because everyone is “awesome” and “everyone gets a trophy.” Listen sometimes we just don’t cut it, or we are slacking, or we are not hitting our targets. There is no need to go off the deep end, it is constructive criticism. It must be communicated the right way no doubt, but the ability to accept and redirect sets the level of employee you are and your value to the company. Every single thing does not have to be spelled out----unless you are putting the window in the car. This is part of knowing your value as an employee and the employer knowing your value. Compensation, recognition, responsibility and advancement are all adjusted accordingly to this.

Side Note on expectations- As an employee you also hold ownership in seeking out what your expectations are. Often this is used as a tactic. If things are good and you are reaping the benefit, no problem, but when accountability starts---the expectation cop out often begins.

Some of this is hard to swallow, but necessary to understand. Many will say it is not that simple. It actually is. The ones that have figured it out, are reaping the benefits of the greater number of those doing nothing about it. They should send out thank you cards as they are recruiting the best because you can’t keep the best.---- Time doesn’t make it better.