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Wise proactivity: How to be proactive and wise in building your career



Sharon K. Parker, Jenny Liao

John is a financial consultant working for a large company. He has been working with the company for ten years and has had one promotion in that time. John is frustrated with his company. His friends who work for other companies have been promoted at least twice in the same period. John spends a lot of time ruminating about whether he should move to another company that will better recognize and reward his talents. Invariably though, John decides that it is better to just stay put and drop hints during his annual performance appraisal that he would like to be promoted.

Laura is a lawyer for a small private firm. She has a manager who gives her opportunities to directly supervise and help manage more junior lawyers in the firm. Laura is seeking to move up in the firm. Her manager tells her that part of her promotion evaluation will be to demonstrate that she can successfully lead junior colleagues and win cases. She decides to start putting the pressure on her junior colleagues to deliver work that will make them win. When they don't meet her expectations, Laura takes over and does the work herself to the standard she thinks is required for her promotion, rather than spending the time to provide feedback and mentor them along the way. She ends up feeling overwhelmed and isolated, and her junior colleagues are also frustrated with her leadership.

Freda is a police superintendent for one of the largest police services in the country. Freda has the sense she might have reached the glass ceiling. She has been a superintendent for several years, and is regarded positively by her colleagues and superiors. Recently, the perfect promotion opportunity arose. Freda applied for the post, but her male colleague got the appointment. No feedback was given to Freda, and everyone seemed happy

to just carry on as usual, but Freda feels it is important to act. She really loves her work and believes she can make a valuable high-level contribution—maybe she can even become the Police Chief one day. She wants to understand why she did not get the post. Freda schedules an appointment with senior colleagues involved in the selection process, advising them that the purpose of the meeting is to gain some feedback about how she can better position herself for future roles similar to the one she missed out on.

What do you notice about these three different scenarios? How proactive do you think John, Laura, and Freda were? Does being proactive help or harm your career? If you are going to be proactive, how should you approach it? In this article, we address these questions and argue for the importance of being proactive, rather than passive (like John). It is also important to think about how to manage the risks of being proactive. We advocate being proactive in a wise way (like Freda), rather than being proactive in an unwise way (like Laura). We introduce the idea of *wise proactivity* and argue that it will enable and support career success. Like others before us, we consider career success as an *unfolding process* and a *cumulative outcome* in which work behaviors over long periods of time aggregate and combine together to define a person's career. Thus, our focus on proactivity and wise proactivity in building a successful career is both in relation to the short-term and the long-term achievement of a fulfilling and accomplished career.

We start by first taking a look at why it is tempting sometimes to be like John and to just let your career unfold without much self-initiation and input from you. We provide strategies to overcome these psychological obstacles. We then discuss how being proactive is important for building a successful career, and the three motivations underpinning proactivity. Importantly, because there are risks involved in

proactivity, we introduce the idea that to ensure your proactivity is *wise* (and leads to successful outcomes), it is important to consider the context, others, and your own strengths, limitations, values and priorities.

STUCK IN A RUT?

Are you in job that is not meaningful, not a good fit with your skills, that diminishes your family life, or that is exhausting, overwhelming, uninteresting, toxic, isolating, or just plain boring? Or maybe it is a pretty good job, one that you're quite happy with in general, and yet you've always wondered about some other occupation or career that you have put aside to pursue this one? Or maybe you have a fantastic job, at least in the eyes of others, that is well-paid and high status with lots of perks and plenty of challenge, yet you just can't escape the nagging feeling that there's a job that is "more you" out there and that you could really make a difference? All of the above are perfectly normal and common experiences. We enter into our jobs for all sorts of reasons—sometimes family pressure, sometimes the result of a childhood passion, and sometimes without much thought at all; with the net consequence that our career may be less than rewarding. Sometimes as we age, our values and priorities shift, so that what we once thought was rewarding and meaningful is no longer the case.

If this is how you feel, the question is, *what are you doing about it?* Are you actively trying to transition or make a change, or are you stuck in a passivity trap? There are many reasons why we let our careers just 'happen' (even if we are unhappy) instead of taking control and crafting our career. In the example with John, he gave up pursuing a promotion because being proactive about his goals seemed too difficult. If you are stuck in a rut, what mindset or thinking is holding you back? What can you do to get out of these mindset traps? Table 1 describes ten common passivity mindset traps that we can easily fall into, and the proactive response solutions for getting out of these traps. Some of the passivity mindsets represent a lack of self-efficacy about being proactive, or a lack of what we call *can do* motivation. Some of the passivity mindsets arise because an individual doesn't have a strong internal drive to be proactive, which is a lack of *reason to* motivation. Some of the other passive ways of thinking arise because the individual isn't feeling positive and activated—that is, there is a lack of *energized to* motivation.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE PASSIVITY TRAP: BEING PROACTIVE

George Bernard Shaw once noted that: "*There are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch what happens, and those who wonder what happened.*" Making things happen is what we mean by proactivity. We prefer, however, to think of proactivity not as a personality trait or as a particular "kind" of person (although other scholars have adopted this perspective). Rather, we consider proactivity as a way of behaving that can be learnt and/or modified, such as by changing one's motivation. This means everyone can be proactive – if they choose.

Scholars typically identify three features of proactivity that make this behavior somewhat different to more passive forms of work behavior. First, being proactive is *future-focused*. It

involves anticipating and thinking ahead. A knee-jerk reaction to a problem or crisis is typically not proactive because the action is triggered by an immediate need. However, if you respond to a problem with a more future-focused response, such as trying to solve the root cause of the problem so it does not re-occur, then this would be proactive because it involves thinking about the future. In a career situation, rather than waiting for your boss to identify your training needs, you might anticipate that you are going to need particular skills given an impending restructure of your organization.

Second, proactivity involves *change*. It isn't enough to anticipate the need for new skills in the future. Being proactive means acting on this forecast. In the case where you have identified new skills that you might need in the future, being proactive means making a change by working to acquire those skills. You might identify an appropriate training course in which you can learn the skills and seek to get the funds to attend, or you might ask your boss for an opportunity to work on a new project that will help you develop the skills. Importantly, being proactive means that something is changing: either making changes to the situation (e.g., introducing new work methods) or making changes to yourself (e.g., developing new skills).

Third, proactivity is *self-initiated*. If your boss tells you to acquire some specific skills for an impending restructure, then you are doing what your boss has asked, but you are not being proactive. Proactivity comes from within—it is not something that is coerced or required. It is action you take because you believe it is important or interesting, and because it will achieve a future outcome you consider as worthwhile.

Many forms of proactivity have been identified across many different domains. Scholars have categorized all these different forms of proactive behavior into three broad categories: *proactive work behavior*, *proactive strategic behavior*, and *proactive person-environment fit behavior*. We use this framework to explain a number of ways that proactivity can build successful careers.

PROACTIVE WORK BEHAVIORS

Proactive work behaviors include forms of proactivity aimed at improving the internal work environment, such as improving the way one approaches tasks, how the team works, or organizational practices. An individual might, for example, observe that customers make the same complaint over and over again, so she might take action to identify and address the root cause of the complaint, such as an inefficient process for handling returned goods. Another individual might spot an opportunity to improve an organizational system for supporting staff travel and take charge of implementing this system improvement in the organization. Proactive work behavior includes the notion of "voice" (or speaking out with a suggestion for change), but it often involves going further than just speaking out to achieve the change. Being proactive is essential for innovation. Sometimes we have a lot of people in organizations coming up with a lot of ideas, but who is going to make them happen? A person who is proactive!

Proactive work behavior can help contribute to your career success because, most of the time, this behavior is appraised positively by your boss and peers. These positive evaluations

Table 1 Ten classic passivity mindset traps and proactive responses.

Passivity mindset traps	Proactive responses for getting out of the trap
Lacking self-efficacy beliefs about your ability to take hold of your career (i.e., low <i>can do</i> motivation)	
1. Beliefs that you could fail/make mistakes <i>"I don't want to make a mistake by leaving this job"</i> <i>"I don't know if I have what it takes to make a successful transition"</i>	<p>Yes, it can feel scary trying something new, especially if it means taking a lower level job or having a pay cut. Fears of the unknown, including potential failures and unemployment, could also stop you from making any moves. These fears only reinforce those feelings of being stuck. Carving a career is not something that happens overnight. There will be moments when you will feel that you can't make it, or that things are too difficult to keep moving forward with the change.</p> <p>Proactive response: It is important to remember that your fears (whilst valid and something that most people experience), should not stop you from making changes. Think about the worst that can happen—do you think you would be able to survive that? What are the things you will need to put in place to overcome the worst case scenario? Is this worse than being stuck in a job you don't like forever? Sometimes putting your fears in perspective and finding practical solutions to these fears will help you move forward. You can also divide tasks into smaller more manageable tasks, and keep a close emotional network or find a mentor to help you in the transition. Also remember that feeling you are 'out of your depth' is quite common when you go through change: these feelings are not a reason to give up. Instead, focus on your vision, and keep persisting to achieve your goals. Even seemingly small steps can make a difference in the end.</p>
2. Beliefs that it's too risky <i>"I don't want to risk my status"</i> <i>"It could end up being worse if I change"</i> <i>"It's not worth the upheaval"</i>	<p>In these cases, you worry about diving into the unknown, where you might encounter the worst case scenario or, at the very least, go through a tough time in the job transition. So, because you are not sure how it will all unfold and how you will have to deal with the situation, it's easy to dismiss the option of making a change—but what is worse, some temporary anxiety or a long life of non-fulfilment?</p> <p>Proactive response: You might have to sacrifice a few things in order to make the change, such as taking the time to learn a new skill, relocating, or having a pay cut, but it can payoff in the long-run, especially if it means that you end up doing the job you want to do. Again, remind yourself what is important to you and what you value, and align your career moves with your most cherished career values.</p>
3. Beliefs that you won't catch up/succeed <i>"It's too late to start something new"</i> <i>"But I'm too old to think of changing only now!"</i>	<p>Sometimes we can feel a bit <i>behind</i> when we change courses and start a new career, especially compared with others who have kept to the one career path and progressed so far forwards. In fact, it can sometimes feel like you will never be able to catch up!</p> <p>Proactive response: The old saying <i>better late than never</i> is apt here. Continuing on the wrong path is not better than starting a new path, and whilst it may seem overwhelming to "start all over again," the truth is that people frequently find that many of the skills they acquired in their previous jobs are transferable and valuable to their new career. In truth, if you apply yourself, the catch-up game is often not that hard. It's never too late to change. Maybe you can find a way to start exploring something new and interesting whilst keeping your "day job?"</p>
4. Beliefs that you won't be as accomplished in other fields <i>"But I'm good at what I currently do..."</i> <i>"I might not be as good as what I am doing now"</i> <i>"But I'm only trained in doing this"</i>	<p>If you are good at what you do, and you also love what you do, then that is great! But if not, then staying in a job only because you are trained in that area and are good at it – but that you do not enjoy or find meaningful – is compromising the quality of your career. Ask yourself if fear of not being competent is holding you back.</p> <p>Proactive response: Just because you are good at it, doesn't mean you have to do it! Go out and experiment and you might find that you are good at something else that you find more meaningful. Remember, competence can be developed!</p>
Lacking reasons for why you should take charge of your career (i.e., low <i>reason to</i> motivation)	
5. Not knowing the alternative viable options <i>"I don't know what else to do other than what I am doing now"</i>	<p>It's okay not to have all the answers, or know exactly what you are meant to do and where you are meant to be headed – in fact, people may have more than one <i>calling</i>.</p> <p>Proactive response: Do some experiments and see how it feels. Just do something. You may want to start off by pursuing hobbies that you enjoy and think about ways that you can integrate those interests into your career. See Hermina Ibarra's excellent book called "Working Identity" on this topic.</p>

Table 1 (Continued)

Passivity mindset traps	Proactive responses for getting out of the trap
<p>6. Having no external reasons to change <i>“I’m not getting paid enough to take on more”</i> <i>“I’m too busy already, I don’t have time to be thinking about the future”</i></p>	<p>Sometimes it feels as if there is no real incentive to make the change – you’re not given extra resources to do it, and you’re not paid either. However, if an extrinsic focus on what benefits you get from thinking about your career means you don’t try new things or stretch yourself at work, aren’t you ultimately hurting yourself? Proactive response: If you are actively trying to change the future state, schedule some time in your diary to think about the future. Try to align the main things that drive and motivate you to excel and why you would take on more career opportunities. Think about what motivates you at work (Is it your quality of work? Is it positive feedback? Is it producing meaningful outcomes? Is it money and scoring wins? Is it power and influence? Is it stability and security?) Think about ways that you can integrate what motivates you into how you shape your career so that you are fulfilling your own needs.</p>
<p>7. Thinking it’s not your responsibility <i>“I don’t think it’s my job – it’s the organization’s job”</i></p>	<p>Some people have the (now) old-fashioned idea that their organization will look after them and will work out their development needs; a “that’s not my job” mentality when it comes to their career. Proactive response: Yes, your organization ideally will care about your development and will help support your aspirations. Ultimately, though, your career is your responsibility. You need to start taking ownership of where you are heading and pave the way for yourself!</p>
<p>8. Having negative self-talk about reasons to change <i>“It’s selfish”</i> <i>“I’m introverted”</i></p>	<p>These are examples of negative self-talk that stop people from changing. If you’re in a job that ‘needs’ you, it’s tempting to say that leaving the organization would be selfish. If you’re introverted, it’s tempting to use that as an excuse for not networking or any other proactive social behaviors, such as having a mentor. Proactive response: There’s nothing selfish about trying to have a fulfilling and meaningful career, and because it is such a small world, you might end up coming back to this organization but with different skill sets and wearing a different professional hat. By changing your perspective, you can start to see the positives for being proactive about your career! Also, people can learn to act in ways required by their careers that differ from their natural tendencies. By adopting this perspective and pushing yourself a little (without being someone who you are not), you can learn to be an introvert who is also an excellent networker!</p>
<p>Lacking the enthusiasm to make the change (i.e., low energized to motivation)</p>	
<p>9. Being uncertain about making a change now <i>“Maybe one day when I feel more certain about it...”</i> <i>“Not until I figure out what I ‘really’ want to do...”</i></p>	<p>Some of us are waiting for the perfect success to exit on or to use as a negotiating tool, such as: “I’ll just secure that client, and <i>then</i> I’ll talk to my boss about a more interesting project”. Or, sometimes we feel our job is temporary until we work out what is our purpose in life. The problem from these examples of waiting for things to fall into place is that before we know it, ten years have gone by, and we have been in the same job and there have been no changes at all. Proactive response: If you want to make a change, you should not always wait for the ‘perfect opportunity.’ Making small steps toward a bigger goal will get you one step closer to where you want to be, even if it means finding out what you don’t want to do from experimenting with options.</p>
<p>10. Being disengaged from your work <i>“It is just a job”</i> <i>“I’m not a big career person, so it doesn’t matter if I am unhappy”</i></p>	<p>Maybe your work is ‘just a job’ and you have many interests outside of work. Keep in mind, however, that the average adult will spend 40 hours a week at work. Over the lifespan, this equates to approximately 90,000 hours! Far too long to waste being unfulfilled or unhappy! Proactive response: Evaluate how happy or satisfied you are in your job, and if you are not happy, think about why this is the case. Maybe it is time to find ways to align your interests and passions with your work self-think about what skills and knowledge you would like to develop and use regularly, or the kinds of impacts you would like to make in the world. Remember, your work self forms a big part of you, so it is worth carving out a fulfilling career that you are passionate about.</p>

can directly contribute to effective performance on the job (below we will discuss times when being proactive does not affect you positively). For example, evidence shows that when real estate agents are proactive, they sell more houses and

earn more commission. There is even evidence that the more that a US president was proactive, the more historical experts judged the presidents as being an effective leader who makes great decisions (and, intriguingly, the more likely s/he was to

avoid war). In many jobs, being proactive is going to mean better overall job performance. In the longer-term, of course good job performance tends to enhance career success.

One of the reasons that proactive work behavior increases job performance is that many work environments these days are dynamic, changing, and unpredictable. It used to be possible in some jobs to pre-specify in a tight job description “here are all the things you need to do to perform well.” High levels of standardization and bureaucracy meant doing your core prescribed tasks was sufficient for doing your job well. However, dynamics such as increasingly fast-paced technological change, customers who expect personalized service, working for several bosses, and being self-employed with multiple clients, give rise to uncertainty, unpredictability, and variability in the complexity of work and also the workload. People need to use their initiative and think for themselves, not just do what they are told to do. They need to be willing to identify promising opportunities and make things happen to bring about productive changes, rather than expecting such action to be only the province of their bosses.

PROACTIVE STRATEGIC BEHAVIORS

Proactive strategic behaviors include forms of proactivity aimed at improving the fit between the organization and its external environment. Two important forms of proactive strategic behavior include strategic scanning and issue selling. *Strategic scanning* means taking a bigger picture perspective by identifying and raising awareness of future opportunities and threats to the organization. An example might be identifying that newcomers take a long time to settle into the organization, and proposing a formal induction or buddy program to help newcomers transition smoothly into the organization. *Issue selling* involves bringing to senior managers’ attention an important strategic issue, and persuading senior people to do something about this issue. An example might be persuading partners in a law firm to care about the low representation of women amongst senior lawyers and partners. Another example might be persuading the CEO of a manufacturing company to pay better wages to production workers. Both these examples of proactivity are strategic: They have potential implications for the larger business unit or organization that you are operating within. Research shows that for small business, proactivity is a critical driver of organizational innovation, such as developing new and improved products for the market or starting new business ventures.

Although there is no research evidence yet that strategic forms of proactivity directly enhance career success, proactive strategic behavior is likely to get the attention of senior leaders in the organization. You are likely to be seen as a leader and someone who is influential. Thus, if you can get it right, your reputation as an influencer and leader is enhanced—ultimately benefiting your career.

PROACTIVE PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT BEHAVIOR

Proactive person-environment fit behavior includes forms of proactivity intended to help you “fit” better within your work environment, such as engaging in networking so that

you better understand the organizational politics; actively seeking feedback, such as by asking your boss what you need to do to improve your work performance; or inviting a senior staff member to informally mentor you. This category also includes proactive behaviors that try to change “the situation” (e.g., your work role) so that it fits you better. An example might be negotiating with your boss to increase some tasks in your work role so that your job better fits your interests and expertise. Another example is building new relationships in your job so that you gradually “craft” your job so you spend more time engaged with the types of people that you find fulfilling and prepare yourself to work in the roles and arenas that most interest you.

Sometimes we have a tendency to wait for the organization to pour training and development into us, like we are an empty shipping container waiting to be filled up with cargo. A better alternative is to proactively take charge of your own development and career needs! You don’t need to wait for the once-a-year performance appraisal to discuss how you are improving. Imagine you have just finished a big project. This could be an excellent time to proactively seek feedback. Ask the people you worked with/for questions such as:

- *What do you think I did well?*
- *What could I have done better?*
- *What could I focus on next time to prepare myself for the kinds of roles I would most enjoy?*

Imagine you have just started your job. Why don’t you schedule a meeting with your new boss after a couple of weeks in the job to get feedback on how you are doing? Instead of sitting back and complaining that the organization does not have a mentoring scheme, why don’t you ask someone to be your mentor, or perhaps go to your HR department and persuade them of the need for such a scheme. Research evidence shows if you take charge of your career in these sorts of ways, you will be promoted more often, receive a better salary, and be more satisfied with your career. You will also probably have more adventures and fun along the way!

In sum, there are many ways you can be proactive at work, and very often, such proactivity will be helpful for your career success, both how you feel about your career and for your objective career outcomes, such as pay and promotions.

GETTING MOTIVATED

Here is the rub. Being proactive can be quite challenging. It is not that easy, and here is why.

First, proactivity by definition involves challenging the status quo and bringing about change that may be seen as “rocking the boat.” For instance, proposing an organizational restructure may be subject to massive resistance or cynicism from others; voicing one’s opinions against an existing work procedure may hurt the feelings of those who created and implemented that procedure; and actively seeking feedback from others may risk your ego and self-image.

Second, proactivity involves an element of uncertainty, as the outcome is often unclear (as compared to sticking with

the status quo where outcomes are more predictable). When trying something new, or putting oneself 'out there,' the end result is uncertain.

Related to this, proactivity is also self-initiated. Thus, if it goes wrong and doesn't work out, there is likely just one person to be held responsible, and that person is you! As John F. Kennedy noted, "*victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan*". The risk of being responsible for a proactivity that goes wrong, and the fear of being punished for doing so, means that people often lack the self-efficacy (or *can do* motivation) to behave proactively at work.

Finally, leaders do not always welcome their subordinates speaking out, especially when they are challenging the status quo. Indeed, some leaders will feel that their leadership is threatened by their employees' proactivity. Efforts to be proactive can backfire if the proactivity does not seem to fit with the organizational goals and the agenda of those in charge. More generally, the 'initiative paradox' occurs because managers want people to be proactive, but they also want them to be proactive in the same way that they themselves would be proactive!

At the end of the day, people often do not behave proactively because it is uncertain and often risky behavior. We outlined in Table 1 some of the passivity mindset traps, such as excuses and negative self-talk that can drive someone toward being passive. This raises the question: "*What sorts of motivation (beliefs, mindsets, types of self-talk) are going to prompt and sustain proactivity?*" As depicted in Fig. 1, research suggests that people are motivated to be proactive when they experience three internal motivational states: *can do* motivation, *reason to* motivation or *energized to* motivation. When people experience *can do*, *reason to*, and *energized to* motivation, this gives often them the courage and persistence to take the risk associated with being proactive. Next, we discuss how to tap into these motivational states for being proactive.

Can do Motivation

This refers to the belief that you "can" be proactive, including a sense of self-efficacy (i.e., confidence) that you can take the necessary steps to achieve your proactive goals, and the belief that if you are proactive it will make a difference. For example, when implementing a new work method, you have to believe that you have the necessary knowledge and skills to do this effectively, as well as the confidence that you can bring about successful change, including dealing with any resistance. If you lack this self-efficacy, one way to build it is to observe others similar to you being proactive successfully. Another way is to take small steps; for example, maybe you lack the self-confidence to ask a very senior person to be your mentor, but perhaps you could start by asking someone who is just a little more senior than you. A third way to build your self-efficacy is to mentally prepare and also rehearse with a trusted friend how you will ask a targeted individual to be your mentor. Finally, you may wish to accumulate new skills or improve on existing skills that will enable you to make the change. For example, if you require upper management support for your proactivity, you may seek to build your *can do* motivation by learning how best to effectively communicate, engage, and sell your ideas to senior managers.

Reason to Motivation

Most of the time, the most powerful reason to be proactive comes from 'within', or what is referred to as internalized motivation. For instance, an IT specialist may voluntarily invest in extra time and efforts to develop open-source software because s/he finds it intellectually stimulating, and a university faculty member might initiate a new academic course because s/he sees this new course as important to provide students with necessary knowledge and skills. In a

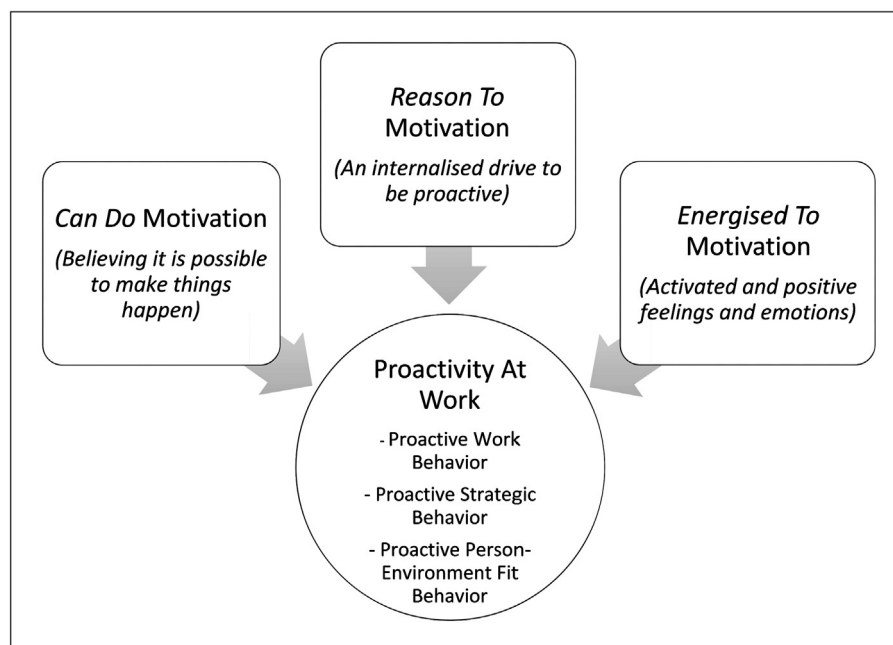


Figure 1 Motivations driving proactivity at work.

Table 2 Future Work Self activity to guide your career proactivity (based on Strauss et al., 2012¹).**The activity**

This activity asks you to engage in some mental time travel. Think ahead to a time in your future (choose any time you like, say 5 years from now, or even a time toward the end of your career). Imagine that everything in your career has gone as you had wished, and you have achieved everything you wanted to by this point. You have arrived at your ideal “future work self” for that time zone. Now, imagine going into work one day in this ideal future.

Where would you be working?

What sorts of things would you be doing?

What sorts of things would you not be doing?

How would you feel?

Who would you be working with?

What would your goals be?

Write down this day in the life of your future work self. You might even choose to compose a collage or construct a lego model (sometimes it’s easier to depict your future self in this more creative visual way). Be as detailed as you can in depicting your future work self.

Now, having depicted your future work self, reflect on whether your current trajectory is on track to get you there. Take some time to identify the steps and actions you might need to take now to get to this future work self. Set some specific and challenging goals to help take you to your ideal future.

Post-activity discussion:

A salient and clear sense of where you are heading acts as a motivational resource for taking actions that might otherwise not be very comfortable in the short-term, but are necessary in the long-term (e.g., an introvert might willingly network if he identifies a rich network as part of his future work self). In essence, a future work self-promotes a *reason to be proactive*.

When you engaged in the Future Work Self activity, how easy was it for you to generate a future work self?

If it was very difficult, perhaps your future work self is not very salient in your mind.

In addition to having a clear future work self, it is equally important to have an elaborate or multi-faceted future work self. Having multiple future work selves ensures that you do not become too rigid and fixated on one element of your career alone and, therefore, be blind to possibilities that might arise due to a narrow vision for your career trajectory, the skills that are important to acquire, or the kinds of work or projects you pursue.

How can you elaborate on your future work self so that it is multi-faceted and flexible?

¹ Strauss, K., Griffin, M., and Parker, S.K., “Future work selves: How salient hoped-for identities motivate proactive career behaviors”, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2012, 97, 580–598.

sense, the faculty member and the IT specialist see this proactivity as part of their job (rather than thinking “that’s not my job”; an attitude that stifles proactivity at work). The most sustainable forms of proactivity arise when you make things happen in areas that are of most interest to you, or when you find the issue meaningful and personally important. If you want to be more proactive, focus on making a change or taking charge in an area that is important and interesting to you. You could start with the Future Work Self activity (see Table 2).

Energized to Motivation

Feeling enthusiastic and engaged prompts proactivity. Research shows the active experience of positive affect (or emotions) allows people to set more challenging goals and help engage in problem-solving, as well as increases chances that people will pursue win-win outcomes because they are more innovative and open to feedback in this positive engaged state. Having a high degree of positive affect activation means you have more energy to engage in the proactivity, which means you also increase the amount of effort you put in. If you are in a job where you rarely feel the enthusiasm or stimulation for making things happen, it is unlikely that you will be proactive very often. One way to increase your enthusiasm (or *energized to motivation*) is to identify what you are passionate about, or what makes you

excited and invested, and then to initiate proactive behaviors that align with these aspects about you. For example, being excited and enthusiastic about developing your leadership skills might propel you to suggest to your supervisor that you would like to participate in training workshops aimed at developing and growing your leadership capabilities. When you start to feel energized, you not only are more likely to take action, but you also are more able to deal with any obstacles along the way.

INTRODUCING WISE PROACTIVITY

We have encouraged you to be proactive, and that is because proactivity can be associated with a range of positive outcomes for you, your career, and the organization. We have also highlighted that proactivity can be psychologically and politically risky. Given these risks, is there anything you can do to mitigate some of the risks associated with proactivity? One response you might have to reduce the risk introduced by being proactive is to give up and not be proactive. Of course, if everyone did that, we would have very few improved products, services, or modes of delivering them, as well as minimal innovations within our organizations. A different strategy is to be proactive, but to do so in a *wise* manner.

Recall in the opening vignette that Laura and Freda were both proactive (unlike John who was passive), but Laura’s *reason to be proactive* was largely self-interest while Freda’s

reason to be proactive was her desire to improve the situation for everyone. They also adopted different approaches when enacting the change. Freda got others on board to help her, whereas Laura's behavior was not compassionate toward her junior colleagues. Importantly, their proactivity had different consequences, and you can imagine that, over the long-term, Freda will enhance her social capital and her reputation as a leader, whereas Laura will not. Our research suggests that it is not enough to be proactive—but rather, for proactivity to be meaningful and sustainable (and to ensure a successful career in the long-term), a person's proactive goal needs to be generated and implemented in a wise manner in order for it to have meaningful long-lasting change that is perceived positively.

So, what does it mean to be 'wise' or 'unwise' in your proactivity? Consider the following three scenarios:

1. An engineer hopes to be promoted for introducing a change that mirrors what other competitors are doing for knowledge management, yet does little to research the suitability of implementing such an initiative within her organization.
2. A salesperson proactively approaches clients to achieve her sale targets for promotion, although ignores colleagues who struggle with their sales. This results in her team not meeting budget that month.
3. A receptionist seeks to advance his career by crafting new job responsibilities to impress his boss, although ends up feeling overwhelmed with very little time or capacity to complete his core job tasks.

In each of these scenarios, the person engages in a proactive behavior that could enhance career success, but does so in an unwise way, which is unlikely to produce good long-term outcomes. In the first scenario, the engineer engaged in

proactivity for the sake of change, rather than introducing change that is appropriate for the context. Such types of proactivity are *contextually unsound* because they are typically a band-aid solution that masks problems in the short-term and do not get to the root cause of the problem. In the second scenario, the salesperson does not seek to serve broader interests (such as other colleagues or the team), and instead, engages in a self-serving proactivity. Because the initiative is not *other-focused*, it is unlikely to positively impact others and create change for the greater good. In the third scenario, the receptionist is engaging in a *personally unsound* proactive behavior because he takes on too much, overstressing his resources and becomes overwhelmed in the process.

Wise Proactivity Unpacked: A Balanced Consideration of Context, Others, and Self

Drawing on Sternberg's definition of wisdom, wise proactivity means that proactivity is balanced in its consideration of the self, the context, and of others (see Fig. 2). A wise proactive change will reflect the interests of the broader system (contextually sound), the interests of others in the system (other-focused), and reflects one's own interests (personally sound). Put differently, a person is being wise when they generate a proactive goal by planning change that makes sense for the context, that is motivated by a desire to do good for others, and that optimizes one's personal resources. How that proactive goal is then pursued can also be more or less wise, such as by applying tacit knowledge about change management, being compassionate toward others, and being kind to oneself when experiencing setbacks. We elaborate these defining elements of wise proactivity next.

Consider the context. Contextually-sound proactive behavior is proactive behavior that "makes sense" within

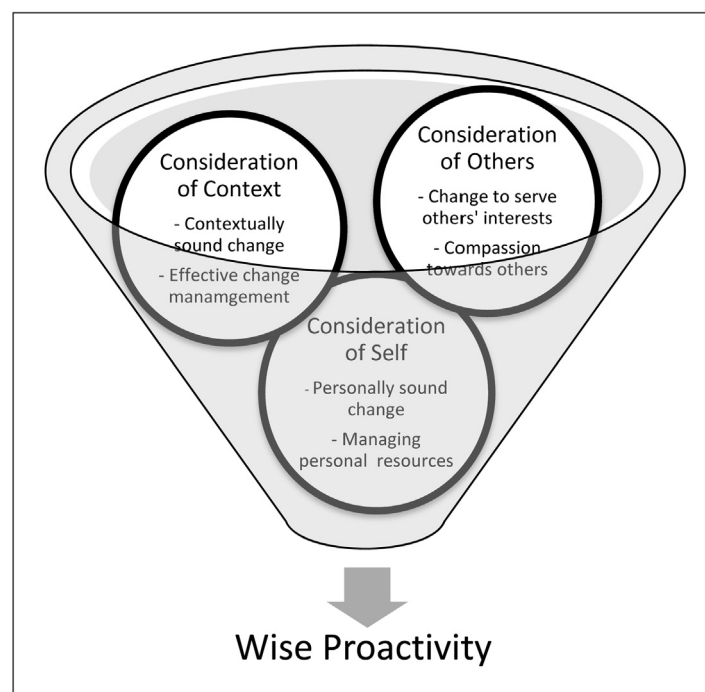


Figure 2 Elements of wise proactivity.

the situation, and is not simply ‘change for change sake’ or a short-term patch up. Let’s re-consider the engineer above who wants to introduce a change but does so without researching the initiative’s suitability for the organization. An initial challenge she will face is creating a credible and compelling reason for the change. Arguing that “others are doing it” is not a particularly strong or compelling vision for change, and is unlikely to generate the level of support and motivation from others that is required for successful change.

Even if the engineer manages to persuade people to give the change a try, there is a large risk that the initiative will not be successful because it has not been tailored to the needs of the situation. The engineer instead should ask herself whether this particular change is meaningful by doing her homework and ensuring that the change will viably address an important problem or exploit an important opportunity for the organization (in this case, manage the organisation’s knowledge resources effectively). To do this, the engineer might research other companies who have introduced the change for addressing similar problems, or talk to key stakeholders in the company to sound out the idea. The imperative will then be to build a sufficiently powerful

coalition of advocates who are willing to help sell a compelling vision of how the proposed change will benefit the organization and those responsible for implementing it. If and when the change goes ahead, she will need to engage in effective change management strategies to keep it on track, such as consulting with others and adapting to issues that arise when implementing the change.

Consider others. People who are “givers” in an organization have more successful careers down the track, because although they may initially devote more resources to helping others, they end up building a network of givers around them. Morgan McCall’s research with high-flying managers shows that insensitivity to others is consistently a prime antecedent of career derailment. The salesperson described above who was driven by her own self-interests is not going to get much help from her colleagues in the future when she is struggling and could do with some assistance. When being proactive, a wise person thinks about the change from the perspective of others. At the very least, they ensure that others are not being harmed along the way. Even better, they ensure their proactivity helps others. For example, a wise networker should not just be looking out for what s/he can gain from a connection. A wise networker is looking out for how he or

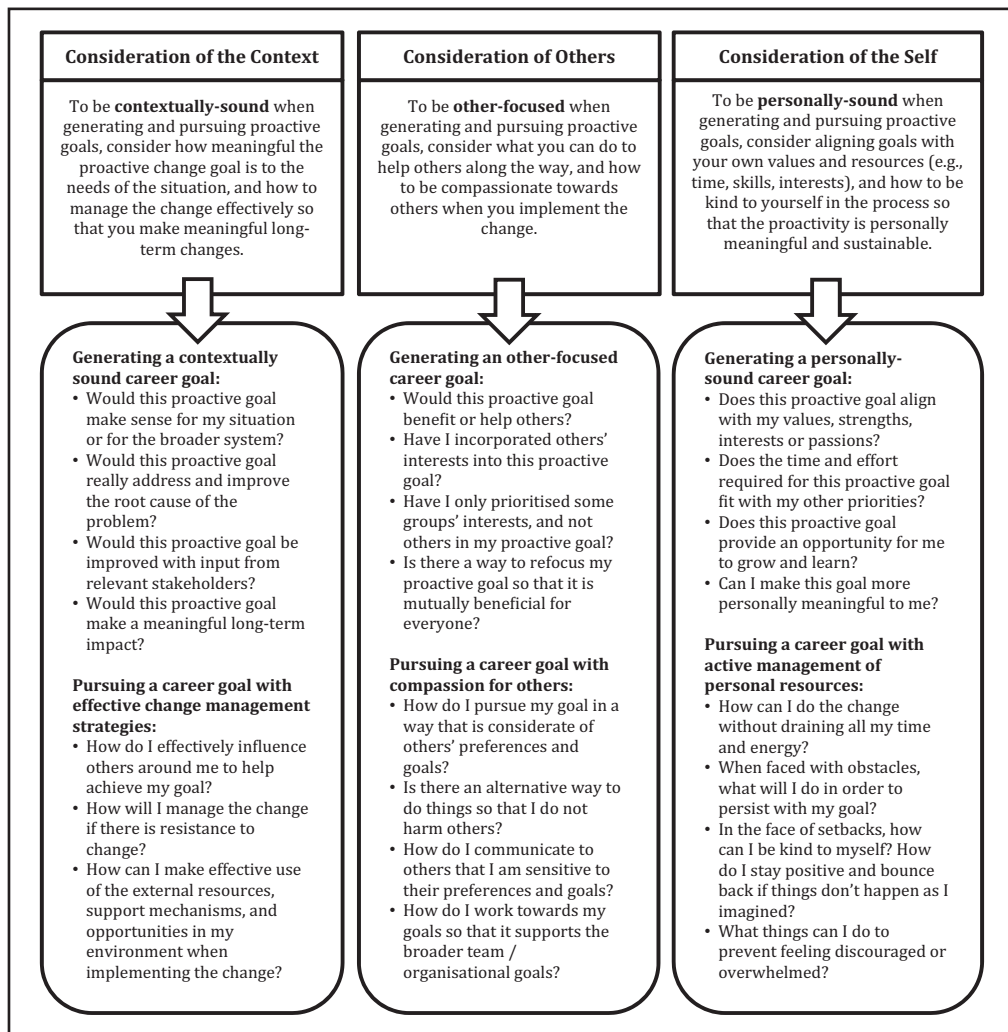


Figure 3 Coaching questions to evaluate the wisdom of a potential proactive goal.

she can help others in the network, such as by connecting people who could help each other or by providing relevant, and potentially valuable resources (e.g., articles to read) that they have readily available. This means that even if you are looking to engage in proactive behaviors around career self-management (which is by nature more oriented toward the self), you can still do so in a way that considers the context and is compassionate toward others.

Consider yourself. Some proactive goals are personally unsound because the initiator is already overwhelmed with commitments, or lacks the right skills to initiate the change, or is only introducing the change to please others rather than because one believes the change is important. Consider again the receptionist who tries to impress his boss by taking on many new responsibilities, but ends up feeling overwhelmed and failing to effectively carry out his core tasks. It would be much wiser for the receptionist to identify one specific new task or responsibility – perhaps one the receptionist is most interested in and has the best chance of doing well because of the strong match with his skills. Once he has successfully mastered this new task, then it makes sense to take on a further responsibility. It might even be necessary for the receptionist to negotiate for a reduction in some of his other tasks, or to identify ways to carry out the core tasks in a more efficient way, before expanding his job too radically.

In sum, the balanced consideration of the context, of others, and of your personal self are very important for achieving proactivity that is sustainable and makes a positive difference. Such wise proactivity is also important from a career perspective, as we illustrate further next.

Questions to Guide Your Proactive Action

As we discussed earlier, there are many things you can do to build your career and to make sure it is heading in the right direction toward your ideal future work self. For example, you can network with senior colleagues, you can craft your job to optimize your areas of learning, and you can take on board new projects to further your credentials. All these proactive career goals can be generated and pursued in a more or less wise way.

In Fig. 3, we suggest several coaching questions that can help you to identify wise ways to generate and pursue a proactive goal, or to analyze the wisdom of a proactive initiative or project you are contemplating undertaking.

You can ask these questions yourself, or you can work through them with a peer coach. These are questions that will help guide you to have wisdom in achieving meaningful and sustainable proactive changes through balancing the needs of the context, of others, and of the self. For example, an early career consultant wishing to be promoted to a senior role may ask these coaching questions to evaluate whether his plan and implementation of his change goal (e.g., seeking feedback from his boss) is wise through the consideration of the context, others, and yourself. Of course, these questions can also be applied to a range of other proactive behaviors, including expanding your network contacts, crafting your job to include more leadership responsibilities, or even how to generate and implement the goals around your future work self.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Individuals are more successful when they ‘make things happen’ in their careers. This can be in the form of proactive work behavior, proactive strategic behavior, or proactive person-environment fit behavior. All these types of proactivity can have positive outcomes for an individual’s careers. In contrast, a passive approach to one’s career can mean getting stuck in an unfulfilling or exhausting job, accepting an unsatisfactory status quo, and ultimately, not realizing your future work self.

Yet proactivity is risky! Fear and uncertainty about how proactivity will turn out, or not seeing why proactivity is needed, often holds people back from actively taking charge of one’s work life, resulting in a lack of *can do*, *reason to*, or *energized to* motivation for proactivity. We described how you can use this motivational model to identify areas where you are most likely to apply your proactivity.

You can also think about how you are going to be proactive. Setting unwise proactive goals, or pursuing proactive goals in an unwise way, is more likely to damage your reputation, result in burnout, and/or harm your career than wise approaches to proactivity. When taking charge of your career, set clear goals that reflect your priorities and take care of your time and energy, though do not lose sight of the interests of others alongside with the bigger picture for your workgroup and the organization. In sum, we have suggested the way forward lies not in passivity, nor in egocentric proactivity, but in wise proactivity.



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Sharon K. Parker is a Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Business School, University of Western Australia and an Honorary Professor at the University of Sheffield where she was previously Director at the Institute of Work Psychology. She is also a recent Australian Research Council Future Fellow and past Associate Editor of the leading organizational psychology journal, *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Her research interests are focused on proactive behavior, work design, self-efficacy, and employee perspective taking (University of Western Australia, Australia; email: parkersharonk@gmail.com).

Jenny Liao is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the Business School, University of Western Australia, and is a registered psychologist specializing in organizational psychology and behavior. Her research interests are focused on proactive behaviors at work, including cultivating wise proactivity and leader responsiveness to proactivity, as well as the role of social identities in promoting knowledge coordination in teams (University of Western Australia, Australia; email: jenny.liao@uwa.edu.au).