

Communicating at all Levels in our Organization Part 2

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Initiative versus Reactive and Responsive

Initiative differs from **Reactive and Responsive** mainly because it's not easy to **initiate**. Reacting, remember, is the easiest way to communicate: simply let our feelings and emotions guide what we say and do. Responding, the second easiest, requires us to pause and think before choosing what we say and do. Being responsive, means we focus our responses on our organization's mission and on our desire to succeed. We become responsible adults, taking and showing responsibility in our jobs. We no longer simply react to the things around us.

Both reactive and responsive imply the involvement of a third party: a something or someone to which we react or respond.

Initiative is hard. There is no third party urging or demanding us to do something, to speak, flinch, duck, or hold silence. Initiative is the ability to think and act without being urged. It is "sense," another sense that tells us we must do this thing, because, based on our knowledge and training, we know what needs to be done. Even if we have doubts, we do it anyway.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Select Bipartisan Committee reported to the U.S. House of Representatives all that happened before and after the hurricane hit Louisiana. Why was Katrina, a predicted disaster, so disastrous, the House wanted to know? They titled the report *A Failure to Initiate*. One example: The report revealed that few administrators of nursing homes evacuated their residents before Katrina hit. Other administrators, gambling that the storm would pass, stayed and lives were lost. Even with preparedness plans in place, some people ignored what was required of them. Here the Committee compares the Katrina disaster to 9/11:

*We reflect on the 9/11 Commission's finding that "the most important failure was one of imagination." The Select Committee believes Katrina was primarily a failure of initiative. But there is, of course, a nexus between the two. Both imagination and initiative - in other words, **leadership** - require good information. And a coordinated process for sharing it. And a willingness to use information - however imperfect or incomplete - to fuel action.¹*

A willingness to use information (what you already know) to fuel action is a good description of **Initiative**.

I've had to stop and reflect on what went on inside the heads of those administrators who decided to stay put. I remember hearing media reports, at the time, saying nursing staff were worried about the risks involved in transporting frail elders. In my heart, I wondered if they were more worried about the physical work required of them to move the elders. Was it a hard decision to make or was it a lack of willingness to use information (preparedness procedures and hurricane warnings) to fuel action?

Initiative and its Repercussions

How do we live with wrong decisions? How do we live with our mistakes? These are good questions, because they are the basis for our unwillingness to initiate, to act. We prefer someone else make the decisions so that if all turns to crap, we aren't to blame.

Living with our decisions becomes a matter of fact when we use (1)good information, (2)our imagination, and (3)when we trust what we've learned from our training and experiences. You will have thought seriously about the **information** provided to you, such as weather reports, preparedness training, to use the Katrina example. You will have reflected on your **training and experiences**: how to evacuate, past fire drills, problems you have encountered, and how they were resolved. You will have used your **imagination**: imagined various scenarios, tried on different outcomes, and picked the best imaginable outcome. You base your initiative on those three thought processes. You then have good reason to do what you decide to do.

So if the time comes when your choice of action turns out badly and the boss yells, "Why the heck did you do that?" you will have good sound reasons for your decisions, and will not hesitate to offer them to the boss. You won't need to react. You won't react defensively or feel indignation. You'll simply state the reasons for your decision or actions with the confidence of an initiator, knowing that things don't always work as planned.

Later, you may reflect on what you could have done differently to change the outcome. But knowing that you had used sound reasoning (the three thought processes) you'll be able to sleep at night no matter what the outcome.

Back to the Katrina example, maybe some of the frail elders would have died from the stress of transporting them to safer ground; maybe some would suffer bone fractures from the jostling. Those possibilities would have gone into your contemplation, as should have the possibility of everyone dying if you left them to drown in flood waters. Visualize those two possibilities. Which do you suppose the nursing home residences would have chosen?

Recap: Initiative is the ability to think and act without being urged. It is "sense," another sense that tells us we must do this thing, because, based on our knowledge and training, we know what needs to be done. Even if we have doubts, we do it anyway.

Showing initiative requires you to contemplate on:

1. The **informative** available to you
2. Your prior **experiences and training**
3. Your **imagination**—visualizing possible outcomes

By showing initiative, you will demonstrate leadership abilities and secure a valued position within NESS. Our collective **Initiative** will ensure the success of our mission and our organization.

¹ <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/katrinareport/mainreport.pdf>