

# RQ Dimension – Proactive

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## About this Dimension

What is *Proactive* as a component of resilience?

For an individual, being Proactive means taking charge of his or her own life vs. taking a back-seat to other people is actions and decisions and circumstances that are outside of his or her control. Resilient people, rather than simply reacting to their circumstances, actively engage their situation. They tend to have an internal locus of control where they believe that they have the capacity and the *responsibility* to determine their own destiny vs. feeling powerless in a given situation. Resilient people, as a result, focus on *expanding* their influence over their world through assertive behaviors and actions. This proactivity enables them to preserve their self-efficacy in the face of any change – even a traumatic one.

Being Proactive, involves being “clear-eyed” about the situation a person finds him or herself in and then identifying constructive actions that he or she can take to best protect his or her interests (and, perhaps, the interests of others) while moving toward realistic goals, given the circumstances.

Being Proactive does *not* mean that an individual will always be successful in his or her pursuits. People who assume a proactive stance will still experience setbacks and frustrations. But it does mean that the person will have tried to exert his or her influence over these external forces—or at least how he or she *responds* to these forces—such that he or she is able to hold his or her head high, knowing that he or she did the right thing when faced with difficult circumstances.

## Why is this Dimension Important to Resilience?

Being Proactive is important to resilience because it is the strength of our proactive mindset that enables us to find our own way forward when faced with, at times, daunting odds. Proactive people take responsibility for their own actions rather than blaming other people for their circumstances. If a proactive person is unhappy with his or her job, relationships, choices, and so forth, then he or she will identify what *he or she* can do to exert influence on these circumstances to turn them more to the person’s liking. While the proactive person may not be successful at everything he or she attempts, simply by making the attempt itself, by attempting to engage others or the circumstances directly, the person actually expands his or her sphere of influence in this situation.

Victor Frankl, the famous Austrian psychiatrist and survivor of the Holocaust demonstrated that, although the Nazis could take away his family, his earthly possessions, his health, his life’s work (his unpublished manuscript was destroyed soon after his arrival at Auschwitz), and his freedoms, they could never take away his free will – his ability to choose how to respond to his abusers. By continuing to assert his free will while interred in the camps, he was able to give purpose and meaning to his life.

More recently, Nelson Mandela, the first democratically elected President of post-Apartheid South Africa, negotiated *from his prison cell* with South Africa’s government the peaceful transition to democracy. Despite serving a life-sentence in prison for resisting the State, despite losing his freedoms, Mandela continued to focus on what *he* could do given his

circumstances to *improve* his circumstances—and the circumstances of all black South Africans.

Without proactivity, a person becomes a victim of other's actions—powerless to change or influence his or her situation. By focusing upon what others are doing to you vs. what you can do about your circumstances, you make your happiness entirely dependent upon the good (or bad) intentions of others. Being proactive enables people to create their own happiness wherever they are and whatever their circumstances.

## Proactive Quotes

*People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in the world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and if they can't find them, make them.*

- George Bernard Shaw, Irish playwright  
(b. 1856, d. 1950)

*We who lived in the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.*

*They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

- Victor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*  
(b. 1905, d. 1997)

*Be courteous to all, but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence. True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.*

- George Washington, First President of the USA  
(b. 1732, d. 1799)

*We must be the change we wish to see in the world.*

- Mahatma Gandhi, Indian nationalist, political and spiritual leader (b. 1869, d. 1948)

*Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.*

- Mahatma Gandhi, Indian nationalist, political and spiritual leader (b. 1869, d. 1948)

*Somebody has to do something . . . and it's just incredibly pathetic that it has to be us.*

- Jerry Garcia, American rock musician  
(b. 1942, d. 1995)

*If you're not at the table . . . you're on the menu!*

- Anonymous

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.*

- Helen Keller, American author, activist, lecturer (b. 1880, d. 1968)

*Control your destiny . . . or somebody else will!*

- Jack Welch, American businessman, former CEO of General Electric (b. 1935)

*Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice: It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.*

- William Jennings Bryan, American statesman and politician (b. 1860, d. 1925)

*You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.*

- Eleanor Roosevelt, American political leader and human rights activist (b. 1884, d. 1962)

*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*

- Soren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher (b. 1813, d. 1855)

*You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do.*

- Henry Ford, American industrialist (b. 1863, d. 1947)

*Hope has never trickled down. It has always sprung up. That's what Jessie de la Cruz meant when she said, "I feel there's gonna be a change, but we're the ones gonna do it, not the government. With us, there's a saying, 'La esperanza muere última. Hope dies last.'" You can't lose hope. If you lose hope, you lose everything.*

- Studs Terkel, American author, historian, and broadcaster (b. 1912, d. 2008)

## Strategies for Developing the Proactive Dimension

Becoming more proactive involves someone assuming a new mindset vs. learning a new set of behaviors. This new mindset involves a person understanding that, in any circumstance and in response to any situation, he or she *always* has a choice in how to respond. Developing this mindset begins with strengthening a person's conviction that he or she always has a choice in how to respond to any situation and then gaining self-confidence in taking action. While a workshop leader or executive coach isn't able to actually strengthen someone's proactivity, such learning facilitators or coaches can guide individuals in understanding the importance of being proactive and exploring their options and strategies for taking action in challenging situations.

Some ideas to encourage people to strengthen their Proactive dimension include:

On a personal, one-on-one basis . . .

- Ask the person to describe a difficult situation or challenge that he or she is facing. Then invite the person to identify three actions that he or she could take to increase

his or her influence in this situation. Discuss these and other actions that the person could take and then guide the individual in identifying some next steps he or she could take for increasing his or her influence.

- Tell the stories of Nelson Mandela, Harriet Tubman, or Victor Frankl (or cite another example of those who remained proactive despite facing daunting odds) and ask the person to identify the lessons from such stories. Reinforce any comments related to people taking action, focusing on the things that they can change rather than on what others may be doing or not doing.
- Invite the person to identify the single greatest obstacle that he or she sees to taking proactive action in the face of some challenge or difficulty. Ask him or her to identify the steps that he or she could take to directly reduce or eliminate this barrier to taking personal action.
- If an individual is facing a significant challenge or crisis, guide him or her in developing a personal plan for becoming more proactive in this situation that involves first identifying (a) *what* is the challenge or situation the person is facing, (b) what is his or her personal objective in this situation: *What do you want to accomplish in tackling this situation? What personal outcome do you hope for for yourself?* (c) identify the array of actions/choices that he or she might take to move toward achieving his or her objective, and (d) select the most promising/reasonable course of action from among the array of actions/choices.

Either on a one-on-one basis or when facilitating a group discussion . . .

- Use any of the activities from the one-on-one list above, inviting individuals to first work by themselves and then to partner with another person in the workshop and to share and gather feedback on their ideas.
- If the group has identified a set of problems or challenges facing the team or organization, organize the larger group into small discussion groups to discuss the range of proactive steps that the group could take to “own” a more positive response to this situation. Encourage the group to clarify their goals or desired outcomes before developing their list of possible steps.
- Guide workshop participants in developing a *Personal Action Plan* for becoming more proactive when facing a specific challenge or difficulty. This Action Plan should identify the challenge that he or she or the team/work group is facing, the individual’s or group’s personal objective in facing this challenge, and the specific steps the person or team will take that are likely to move the person or team toward the goal. Invite participants to partner up with another person in the room with whom to share, discuss, and revise his or her action plan. Following the workshop, the facilitator may want to check in with participants (via e-mail, phone call, or face-to-face interaction) to inquire as to the progress the person is making toward demonstrating his or her proactivity and moving toward his or her or the team’s goals.