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Principle 6: Create Personal Initiative

Putting Personal Initiative to Work

One of the biggest benefits from going the extra mile is the emphasis it requires you to place on personal initiative. This chapter will round out your understanding of personal initiative, and through example it will show you how to multiply that quality in yourself. Andrew Carnegie once told me, “There are two types of people who never amount to anything. There are those who never do anything except what they are told to do. And there are those who cannot even do what they are told to do. The people who get ahead do the things that should be done without being told. And they don’t stop there. They go the extra mile and do much more than is expected of them.” Personal initiative is absolutely necessary if you are going to realize your goal. It will bring you advancement, attention, and opportunity.

The Major Attributes of Personal Initiative

In the years I spent formulating these principles of success, I observed many extraordinary people. What follows is a list of qualities that constantly appeared in my observations. Some of them will be things that have already been covered in this book; others come later. The important thing for you to do here is to identify these characteristics in yourself as you are now and to think about how you can increase and strengthen them.

- The adoption of a definite major purpose
- The motivation to act continuously in pursuit of that purpose
- A mastermind alliance to acquire the power to attain that purpose
- Self-reliance
- Self-discipline
- Persistence, based upon the will to win
- Well-developed imagination, controlled and directed
- The habit of prompt, definite decision making
- The habit of basing opinions on known facts, not guesswork
- The habit of going the extra mile
- The capacity to generate enthusiasm at will and control it
- A well-developed sense of details
- The capacity to listen to criticism without resentment
- Familiarity with the ten basic human motives
- The capacity to concentrate attention on one task at a time
- Assuming full responsibility for one’s own actions
- Willingness to accept full responsibility for the mistakes of subordinates
- Patience with subordinates and associates
- Recognizing the merits and abilities of others
- A positive mental attitude at all times
- The capacity for applied faith
- The habit of following through
- The habit of emphasizing thoroughness instead of speed
- Dependability

No doubt many of these qualities are already familiar to you. You may think, "I've already got that." But it is the nature of the Seventeen Principles of Success that each depends upon the others, and you can't develop one without relying upon and developing others at the same time. How can you develop faith without applying it through personal initiative? And how can you have personal initiative without a definite purpose to carry out? You can't.

Personal Initiative Is Contagious

During the Second World War Henry Kaiser astounded the world by the speed and efficiency of his shipbuilding. What made his achievement so remarkable is that he hadn't been a shipbuilder before he responded to the needs of the war. The quality that made this possible was his personal initiative, and the most obvious manifestation of this quality was his habit of following through.

When Kaiser ordered a trainload of steel to be delivered at his shipyards on a given date, he made sure that the railroad was alerted, that his own workers were prepared to accept the shipment, and, first of all, that the steel was being produced on schedule. He sent an expeditor to the steel mill to keep him informed of progress and then to travel with the shipment to see that it wasn't sidetracked or delayed. Because Kaiser was so attentive to the details of his operation, everyone who worked for him knew that the same quality was expected of themselves. If something went wrong along the way, the expeditor was expected to do whatever was necessary to correct the problem and make up for lost time. And he seldom failed! Kaiser's persistent personal initiative was an example to thousands of people on a daily basis.

Personal Initiative Succeeds Where Others Fail

Not long after I married, I paid my first visit to my wife's family. The train took me close to her hometown but stopped two miles away. Since I arrived in a downpour, by the time I reached my in-laws' house, I was not an impressive sight. I was also in something of a bad temper, and I exclaimed, "Why don't you have the railroad build a line into town?" My brothers-in-law laughed and told me that they had been trying for ten years but that the railroad was unwilling to take on the expense of building a bridge across the local river. "Ten years!" I said arrogantly. "Why, I could do that job in three months." Well, I had really put my foot in it, for a boast like that in front of my new family was a challenge to them. I knew I had to act. My brothers-in-law and I waited for the rain to stop, then headed down to the river.

There we saw a creaky old wooden bridge, across which ran the county road. A freight railroad terminated at the far side of the river, its tracks crossing the road. As the freight trains came and went, they halted traffic on the road, slowing travel for all the local people. And there was my idea. "Look," I said. "It's simple. The passenger railroad pays for a third of the cost of a bridge so that it can offer better service to the town. The county pays for a third of the bridge because it will need to replace that wooden one soon anyway. And the freight railroad pays the final third so it gets the traffic off its tracks and prevents the inevitable accident from having all those people lined up waiting to cross."

It was that simple. In a week my brothers-in-law and I had all three parties agreed to the plan, and in three months the new bridge was up and the town had passenger rail service. Now, I hope that your personal initiative won't have to get you out of the kind of trap I set for myself. But if you apply it at every opportunity--especially after you have made a foolish mistake--then it will benefit both you and your community.

Personal Initiative Creates Work

I once knew a rather plain fellow who didn't seem suited for much. He had been apprenticed to a plumber, but because he showed no real aptitude for plumbing, his boss tried him out as a sales rep. He didn't show an aptitude there either.

Since his handwriting was neat, the boss made him a bookkeeper next. Again, the results were discouraging. But the bookkeeping experience taught him something: the importance of accurate inventory. So he sat down to take an inventory of himself. He decided he had these positive qualities:

1. The habit of saving money
2. The ability to figure accurately the costs of a plumbing job
3. The ability to recognize superior skills in others that he lacked himself
4. Persistence
5. The ability to induce others to work in harmony

What could he do with these skills? The answer was obvious. He set out to open his own plumbing business. He found a location, sought out the best workers he could find, and began to pursue contracts. Within a year his schedule was filled, and because he was able to bring his work in at the projected costs and to do it with quality labor, he quickly gained a reputation as the best plumber for the job—even though he was a poor plumber himself! It was only by acting on personal initiative that this man was able to make anything of his life. Starting with a definite major purpose, step by step he built a mastermind alliance of skilled employees, delivered extra service, and attained success. If he hadn't struck out on his own, his former boss would have soon thrown up his hands and fired him. This fellow created a job for himself!

Personal Initiative Creates Opportunity

Neil Balter was a carpenter's apprentice making just four hundred dollars a week when he was hired to build some shelves in a closet. By the time he was finished and saw how grateful his client was to have better use of his space and how happy he was with the quality of his work, Balter had an idea. With money from that first satisfied customer, Balter started the California Closet Company.

The incredible transformation of a crowded closet into efficient space was such a popular idea that within twelve years Balter had more than a hundred franchises around the country. Other entrepreneurs were so impressed with his idea that copycat companies sprang up across the nation. And in 1989 Balter sold his company for twelve million dollars to Williams-Sonoma.

Neil Balter could have been content just learning to be a carpenter. But he identified his skills, set himself a definite goal, and succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of any apprentice.

Personal Initiative Creates the Future

Herbert Bass and Alex Geisler were doing production work at a Philadelphia television station in the 1960s. They saw that videotape had much more flexibility for the television market than film did. Even though they were not considered top production experts, they decided to strike out on their own. They created Unitel Video. Because they couldn't offer production expertise that would stand out in the market, they chose to provide something else just as valuable: They offered the best in equipment and space to other production companies. Even though they were getting in on the business early, they still faced competition; to build their share of the market, they took on clients who couldn't work anywhere else because nobody thought they could pay their bills.

Bass and Geisler also knew the importance of going the extra mile. They knew that their clients had their own clients to keep happy. By offering the latest technology, they offered their clients an advantage. As Geisler told Success magazine, "We show our client techniques he wouldn't have thought of. He gets the credit. We get paid." Besides doing production work for shows like The Simpsons and Star Trek: The Next Generation, Unitel now provides training seminars for video technicians around the country. It also offers corporate communications services for companies like IBM and Citibank, putting together video conferences that can link people in New York, Los Angeles, San Antonio, and Minneapolis just as if they were in the same room. Bass and Geisler weren't the first to see that video had a place in the future. But because they had the initiative to go after what they saw, to make a plan, to take risks, to offer things that no one else was offering, their company is now first in its field.

Personal Initiative Creates Advancement

Your definite goal may someday include being your own boss, but if it doesn't, or even if that step is still some ways off, personal initiative can still pay off for you. Amy Hilliard-Jones was a marketing strategist at Gillette. She saw an opportunity in a product Gillette had dropped as unsuccessful: White Rain shampoo. White Rain was an

inexpensive, no-frills shampoo. It didn't offer anything fancy, but it should have an appeal for cost-conscious consumers. She developed a campaign to re-launch White Rain, presented it to executives, and persuaded them of its value. They went for it, and White Rain became one of Gillette's top-selling shampoos.

That made Hilliard-Jones an obvious candidate for revitalizing the Lustrasilk Corporation, a newly acquired Gillette subsidiary targeting the ethnic hair care market. She created a whole new product line, Moisture Max, which was phenomenally successful. Today Hilliard-Jones is executive vice-president of the Burrell Communications Group, which specializes in marketing services directed at African Americans for Fortune 500 companies. She got where she is because she consistently used her personal initiative to bring bigger and better things to the companies that employed her. Those companies recognized her dedication to offering service above and beyond what was expected. So did the Harvard Business School, which gave her the Max and Cohen Award for Excellence in Retailing, and Dollars & Sense magazine, which named her one of the "Top 100 Business and Professional Women." Personal initiative paid off for Amy Hilliard-Jones in recognition, advancement, and the opportunity to do exactly what she wanted.

Putting Personal Initiative to Work

The time to begin exercising your personal initiative is the moment you decide upon your major purpose. Begin creating your plan of action; start assembling your mastermind alliance. You may find that your purpose changes as a result of things you learn in accomplishing these tasks, but the important thing is to begin work immediately. It is better to act on a plan that is still weak than to delay acting at all. Procrastination is the archenemy of personal initiative, and if you let it become a habit this early in the game, it will plague your every move.

Do the best job you can putting your plan into action, and learn from your mistakes. Ignore the doomsayers who tell you that you are heading for disaster. When Andrew Carnegie went into the steel business with the goal of dropping the price of steel from a ton to \$20 a ton, there were plenty who scoffed. None of those people made a penny when Carnegie achieved his goal. If you need advice, seek out skilled experts, and pay them for their counsel. The "free advice" you will get on every hand from colleagues and "friends" will be worth exactly what it costs you: nothing.

Never wait for some outside force to trigger your actions. Of course, you will have to respond to surprises and your competition, but you must be moving forward according to your own plan on a daily basis. Feed your burning desire with images of your successful self. Stoke its flames so high that they burn your seat, so that you won't be able to sit back in your chair and take it easy when you ought to be following up on your work of the day before. When a task is completed, examine it. Is it the best job you could have done? What might have made it better? Why don't you take that step right now? Personal initiative depends on your being alert to every opportunity and acting on that opportunity as soon as you discover it.

Clearly, personal initiative is a demanding quality, and its practice requires a good deal of mental resources. When your initiative is flagging, you can turn to the principle which breathes life into and restores every one of the others: positive mental attitude.

Good Managers Are Self-Starters

If something needs to be done, good managers-at whatever level-don't wait to be told to do it. If it's in their bailiwick, and they have the authority, they simply go ahead and do it.

If there's any doubt whether they have the authority to act, they point out the problem, suggest action, and ask for approval. If it's completely out of their area, they tactfully recommend action to those who do have the authority. The point is, if something needs to be done, people with initiative feel a personal responsibility to do what they can to get it started. Others may be just as willing to work hard, just as able, but they don't have the spark to start action on their own.

Why do some people hesitate to take the responsibility for changing anything, for starting in new directions? There are many, reasons, one of which is the fear of being blamed if the project fails. Another reason -- and perhaps the most unfortunate one -- is that they simply don't visualize it as a key part of their job.

This attitude can be clearly seen in the actions of many newly promoted managers. New managers -- who are suddenly thrust into the position of giving people directions, whereas before they had merely followed someone else's -- may see themselves as just communication links between their superiors and subordinates. The boss tells them what to do, and they in turn tell their associates.

As a starting point, that may be all to the good. But managers who never go beyond this level aren't doing the job that's expected of them.

Good managers have to be self-starters. They anticipate the needs of their jobs and don't expect their superiors to do their thinking for them. They accept responsibility for developing new ideas and methods-within the limits of their authority without waiting to be prodded.

In short, managers are paid to think and to start things in their particular area. That's what leadership is all about. It's what companies, managers, their associates, and everyone else looks to them for. If they don't do it, they aren't doing their jobs.

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