

## Paper

# Helping people to 'make things happen': A framework for proactivity at work

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*Proactivity, which involves self-initiated change in oneself or change in the environment to bring about a better future, is an increasingly important behaviour at workplace. This paper summarises a model of proactivity at work. We first discuss the importance of proactivity, presenting empirical evidence about its benefits for individual and organisational performance. We then discuss current perspectives on proactivity, explaining it as a goal-directed process that involves, first, the setting of a proactive goal (proactive goal generation), and second, striving to achieve that proactive goal (proactive goal striving). We then present three motivational pathways of proactivity and the related 'can do,' 'reason to,' and 'energised to' motivational states that prompt proactive goal generation and goal striving. Next we present distal antecedents of proactivity that influence the proactive motivational states and thereby lead to proactive behaviours, including contextual variations in work design, leadership, and group climate, as well as individual characteristics such as personality and learning styles. We consider the potential dark side of proactivity and propose the expanded concept of wise proactivity to articulate the type of proactivity that is likely to be truly desirable within the workplace. We conclude the paper by discussing the applications of proactivity in the coaching context.*

**Keywords:** *proactive; goal-directed; motivation; wise proactivity; work behaviour.*

**T**HE WORLD OF WORK has changed. While in the past it was sufficient for individuals to merely focus on completing their core tasks as assigned by the organisation, in an uncertain and fast-changing environment this compliance-oriented approach is no longer enough. Employees are increasingly required to deal with complex and unexpected issues that are often not prescribed in job descriptions. A positive type of work behaviour – proactivity – is important given this change. Proactivity involves actively taking control of oneself and one's environment to 'make things happen'. It involves aspiring and striving to bring about positive change to achieve a different and more desirable future.

Much evidence shows that proactivity matters for individuals, organisations, and even societies. For instance, Deluga (1998) conducted research on 39 past US presidents from Washington to Reagan. By analysing

their proactivity profile as rated by subject matter experts, and examining their proactivity against a large number of historians' rating of presidential performance, Deluga found that presidents who were more proactive were perceived as greater leaders for the country; they were also more likely to make great decisions and to avoid war. These results were held after controlling for presidents' cognitive ability and various personality attributes. Proactivity also has important implications for individuals' work performance and career success (for a meta-analysis see Fuller & Marler, 2009; for a review see Bindl & Parker, 2010). A study of real estate agents suggested that proactive agents sold more properties, generated more listings, and obtained higher commission income. This effect was potent even after controlled for a number of other individual characteristics including personality (Crant, 1995). Proactivity contributes not only to individuals' work performance but also to their

career outcomes. In a longitudinal study, proactive people were found to take more initiative with their careers, have more ideas, and develop better knowledge about organisational politics, all of which accordingly lead to better salary progression and more promotions within a two-year time period. These proactive employees also enjoyed greater career satisfaction (Seibert, Kraimer & Crant, 2001). When placed in a job-searching context, proactive individuals tend to obtain employment more successfully than those less proactive (Kanfer, Wanberg & Kantrowitz, 2001).

Proactive also matters for change-related outcomes such as innovation, entrepreneurship, and intrapreneurship (the type of entrepreneurship that is within firms). First, leaders' proactivity is important. For instance, small business owners' proactivity predicted developing new and improved products for the market, using new methods to improve organisational systems, and integrating new finance and IT methods into organisations (Kickul & Gundry, 2002). Small company presidents who had higher proactivity were also found to be more entrepreneurial, starting more businesses, taking more ownership of the businesses and being more heavily involved in day-to-day business decisions (Bercherer & Maurer, 1999). But it is not just leaders' proactivity that matters. Employees who are more proactive at work tend to demonstrate more innovation behaviours such as generating creative ideas and promoting ideas to others (Parker & Collins, 2010) as well as engaging in intrapreneurship (Boon & Van der Klink (2013). Such proactivity from individual employees has the potential to engender broader organisational and societal impact. In the words of Helen Keller: *'The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoved of its heroes but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.'*

Given evidence that proactivity matters, it is important to understand in more depth what this behaviour is, and how it might be fostered in the workplace. In this paper, we

first discuss the importance of proactivity and how it has been conceptualised theoretically. We then present a model articulating how proactivity can be enabled by different types of motivation. After that, we discuss how proactivity can be shaped by work context as well as individual characteristics. Towards the end, we consider the question 'whether proactivity is always good' and discuss what type of proactivity is truly desirable. We conclude the paper with implications of applying proactivity principles in coaching practices.

### **What is proactivity?**

Historically, within the fields of organisational behaviour and work psychology, employees tended to be considered as passive, reactive respondents to their work context. Much scholarly attention was given to how employees achieve the goals allocated to them as desired by their organisations. However, it was increasingly noted that, rather than simply accepting goals from organisations, employees can actively shape their jobs and their work environment. For instance, they can negotiate and redefine assigned goals, and they can come up with more challenging goals for themselves. Recognition of these 'active' work behaviours saw the emergence of various proactive concepts, such as *personal initiative*, *taking charge behaviour*, and *change-oriented citizenship*. At the same time, *proactive personality*, a trait that captures individuals' stable tendencies to enact changes in the environment (Bateman & Crant, 1993) was introduced and became popular.

### ***Proactivity as a way of behaving***

Our approach has been to move away from a personality-based approach and to consider proactivity as a way of behaving which can vary according to the situation. An implication of conceptualising proactivity in this way is that it recognises that, rather than being a fixed individual attribute, organisations, leaders and coaches are able to facilitate and shape individuals' proactivity within a partic-

ular situation. Specifically, we define proactivity as self-directed and future-focused behaviour in which an individual aims to bring about change, including change to the situation and/or change within oneself (Bindl & Parker, 2010; Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010). This definition highlights three defining elements of proactivity: it is self-starting, change-oriented and future-focused. Self-starting means that the action is self-initiated as opposed to required, coerced or enforced by management. Proactivity is also aimed at enacting and driving change rather than adapting to a situation. Finally proactivity is future-focused: it involves anticipating and thinking ahead, rather than merely reacting.

#### *Proactivity as a goal-driven process*

A further refinement to the idea that proactivity is a way of behaving is to recognise that it is a goal-directed way of behaving or a process (Bindl et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2010). From this perspective, proactivity involves two broad elements: *proactive goal generation* and *proactive goal striving*. The proactive goal generation stage involves setting, under one's own direction, a change goal. Researchers have suggested that there are at least two processes underpinning the proactive goal generation stage: envisioning and planning (Bindl et al., 2012). *Envisioning* is about perceiving and identifying a current or future problem or opportunity, and picturing a different future that can be achieved if the problem is resolved or the opportunity capitalised. Then, the next process, *planning*, is about working out actions plans in order to achieve this desired future state. The action plans for change can be targeted either at oneself, such as developing one's skills and building social networks; or targeted at the situation, such as influencing one's boss to negotiate roles and responsibilities. Either way, the changes need to be self-initiated such that individuals envision and plan the changes out of their own will rather than being directed by someone else. However, it should be pointed

out that the degree of self-initiation will vary. Some proactive goals can be completely self-driven (e.g. coming up with a new goal for one's work) while in some other contexts, the goal may not be entirely self-driven yet the way it is enacted may contain proactivity (e.g. introducing a new product as requested by the boss but envisioning and planning it in a way that is proactive).

Proactive goal striving is the stage where the proactive goal is implemented. The goal striving stage is critical as it enables real change to be achieved. Researchers have suggested that this stage is also underpinned by at least two important processes, enacting and reflecting (Bindl et al., 2012). *Enacting* concerns the overt action individuals engage in achieving their proactive goal. For instance, an employee wishing to introduce a new work method will likely engage in gathering information that demonstrates the inefficiency of the current method and the advantage of the new method, and also persuading and influencing colleagues so that they are on board with this change. In the enacting process, individuals' self regulation is critical as it would allow individuals to stay focused on tasks, manage potential negative emotions from self and others, and remain resilient and flexible to accommodate unexpected setbacks and challenges. *Reflecting* concerns investing the time and effort to reflect what has happened so far, identifying the successes, failures, and consequences of one's proactive behaviour. Given proactivity involves creating something new that can be uncertain and ambiguous, reflection is an important step in helping individuals decide if they should sustain or modify the proactive goals that have been set, or the approach that have been adopted in achieving those proactive goals.

#### *Different forms of proactivity*

People at work can be proactive to achieve different ends, resulting in different forms of proactivity. Over the past few decades, much research focused on one or a few specific types of proactivity such as taking charge,

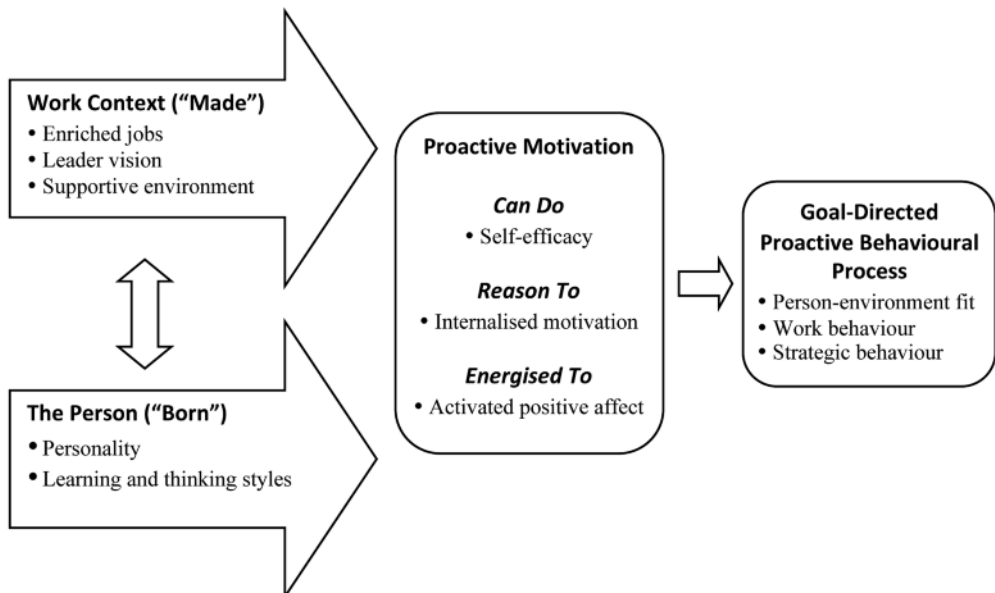
innovation, job crafting, voicing, among others. Parker and Collins (2010) integrated the different forms of proactive behaviours that have been investigated in literature and argued that these behaviours can be subsumed under three broad categories including: proactive person-environment fit behaviour, proactive work behaviour and proactive strategic behaviour. *Proactive person-environment fit behaviour* includes those behaviours that are aimed at achieving a better fit between one's own attributes and those of one's work environment. For instance, an employee may negotiate and craft his/her job so that it fits better with his/her knowledge, skills or interests. *Proactive work behaviour* refers to setting proactive goals and taking actions to improve organisations' internal environment. For instance, an employee may find ways to improve the efficiency of his/her work by adopting a new technology. *Proactive strategic behaviour* involves taking charge and bringing changes to improve organisations' strategy so that it fits with the external environment. For example, a manager may

notice an important issue that affects the positioning of the organisation in the market and actively sell it to the key decision makers. Empirical evidence supports the distinction of these three broad categories of proactive behaviour (Parker & Collins, 2010).

### What motivates proactivity?

Having discussed the conceptualisation of proactivity, it is useful to understand what makes an individual proactive and taking the risks of implementing something new. In other words, what is the motivational process that leads to a proactive behaviour? We present a model of proactivity, developed by Parker et al. (2010), to delineate how proactive behaviours are shaped by proximal motivational states, which are in turn influenced by more distal attributes such as individual differences, work context and the interaction of these two (Figure 1). We discuss the proximal motivational states in this section. Parker et al. (2010) proposed three important motivational pathways that lead to proactivity and each of these pathways are supported by a unique type of moti-

Figure 1: Model of Proactive Motivation Process and Antecedents (adapted from Parker et al., 2010).



vational state: 'can do' motivation (*Can I do this?*), 'reason to' motivation (*Why should I do this?*) and 'energised to' motivation (*Am I energised by this?*). We elaborate each of these paths next.

#### **'Can Do' motivation**

A critical part of the 'can do' motivation state is the belief in oneself that one can be proactive, such as represented by self-efficacy perceptions. Being proactive is potentially uncertain and risky. For instance, proposing new organisational structure may be subject to resistance and scepticism from others; voicing one's opinions against an existing work procedure might hurt the feelings of those who implemented that procedure; and actively seeking for feedback from others risks one's ego and self-image. Therefore, individuals need to have the self-confidence to initiate proactive goals and deal with potential negative consequences induced by such proactivity. Indeed, many studies have supported the importance of self-efficacy for proactivity. Individuals' self-efficacy was found to be positively related to commonly measured proactive behaviours such as taking charge (Morrison & Phelps, 1999) and personal initiative (Frese, Garst & Fay, 2007). Furthermore, in a meta-analysis conducted by Kanfer et al. (2001), individuals' self-efficacy was found to positively relate to proactive job search behaviours, which subsequently led to better employment outcomes such as getting employment sooner and receiving more job offers.

One form of self-efficacy, 'role-breadth self-efficacy' which addresses one's perceived capability of carrying out a broader and more proactive role beyond prescribed technical requirements (Parker, 1998), appears to be particularly important for proactivity. For instance, role-breadth self-efficacy was positively related to proactive problem solving and proactive idea implementation (Parker, Williams & Turner, 2006). Ohly and Fritz (2007) further found that when general job self-efficacy and role-breadth self-efficacy were both considered, it was the latter that

showed a unique effect in predicting proactive behaviour.

In addition to self-efficacy perceptions, 'can do' motivation also includes the belief that one can control the situation and will produce desired outcomes (control appraisals), as well as perceptions about the negative aspects of engaging in a task, such as fear of failure and worry about lacking the required resources (perceived cost of action).

#### **'Reason To' motivation**

If people feel confident about their ability to generate and implement something new (having 'can do' motivation), yet there is no compelling reason for them to do so (lacking a 'reason to' motivation), it is unlikely they will engage in proactivity. The second important motivational state that instigates proactive behaviours is the 'reason to' motivation. Unlike prescribed tasks where a reason is already given as part of one's job, proactive activities are self-initiated and thus the reason to engage in these activities cannot be assumed. Considering also the risk and uncertainty associated with proactivity, there needs to be a strong rationale that drives an individual to make new things happen.

A useful theory to help understand one's reason to motivation to proactivity is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The self-determination theory posits that one's reason to engage in certain behaviours stands on continuum of controlled versus autonomous motivation. On the autonomous end of the continuum, the individual is driven by intrinsic interest and values that originate from oneself. On the controlled end of the continuum, the individual is driven by external contingencies outside of the person, such as rewards. Proactive behaviours should most often be autonomous as they originate from the individuals themselves (self-initiated). Drawing on the self-determination theory, Parker et al. (2010) proposed that there are three different forms of autonomous motivations that can potentially drive proactivity.

First, individuals can engage in proactive activities because they find such tasks interesting and enjoyable. For instance, an IT specialist may voluntarily invest in extra time and efforts to develop open-source software because he/she finds it intellectually stimulating. This *intrinsic* motivation is the most autonomous form of motivation. Second, individuals can engage in proactivity activities as they feel being proactive will help fulfil their life goals or express values that are central to them. For instance, individuals who integrate work as part of who they will be (e.g. their future work self-identity) tend to engage in more proactive career behaviours such as networking, career planning and career consultations (Strauss, Griffin & Parker, 2012). This is the *integrated* form of motivation. Third, individuals can engage in proactive behaviours because they feel the proactive goal they set is important and they assume a personal responsibility for achieving it. For instance, a university faculty might initiate a new course because he/she sees this new course as important in providing students necessary knowledge and skills. Research has indicated that those employees who feel stronger personal obligations to make positive changes are more likely to engage in proactive voice behaviours that are aimed at improving current work practices to benefit the organisation (Liang, Farh & Farh, 2012). This is the *identified* form of motivation where one consciously values a goal, accepting and owning it as one's own responsibility.

The three forms of autonomous motivation, including intrinsic, integrated, and identified motivations, provide a strong reason for individuals to be proactive. As to which motivational form is most powerful, Koestner and Losier (2002) suggested that when tasks are interesting, intrinsic motivation resulted in better performance; when tasks are not so interesting but important, the other two forms of motivations yielded better performance. In fact, it might be the case that multiple forms of motivations function together to stimulate proactive goals

and sustain an individual's efforts in seeing things through.

### **'Energised To' motivation**

A third motivational state for proactivity is affect-related. How people feel can provide an 'energising' fuel that motivates individuals to engage in proactive behaviour. Compared to the other two 'cold' motivations that are cognitively bound, this emotion-laden motivation is more of a 'hot' psychological force for proactivity.

Individuals' core affects are usually considered to be represented by an integral blend of two primary dimensions: pleasure – whether an affect is positive/pleasant or negative/unpleasant in its affective valence, and arousal – whether an affect is highly activated or lowly activated (Russell, 2003) in its arousal. It has been suggested that positive affect is important for proactivity as it acts as a resource to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires (e.g. exploring, learning, creating) while negative affect would narrow the repertoires by urging people to behave defensively (Fredrickson, 2001). Accordingly, under the influence of positive affect people are more likely to reach out and set proactive goals, as well as remain open-minded and flexible when pursuing their proactive goals. This argument has received empirical support. In a diary study, Fritz and Sonnentag (2009) revealed that positive affect promotes taking charge behaviours on the same day; positive affect also produced a positive spill-over effect on taking charge behaviours on the following day.

Warr et al. (2014; see also Bindl et al., 2012) further discovered that it is the high activated positive affect (e.g. feeling enthusiastic, inspired) rather than the low activated positive affect (e.g. feeling calm, content) that stimulates proactive behaviour. This is because highly activated positive affect has more energising potential to facilitate approach-oriented behaviours such as proactivity, while lowly activated positive emotions such as feeling content may suggest a lack of

impetus for action, and is thus more inductive to reflective behaviours rather than proactive behaviours.

Thus far, we have articulated the three motivation states that enable proactivity. Although the three motivations affect proactive behaviour, to what extent they will directly activate proactivity to happen will depend on organisational context. For instance, Parker et al. (2010) have argued that an organisational context that provides employees higher levels of job control and perceived justice is more likely to facilitate the translation of proactive motivation into proactive behaviours.

### **Is proactivity born or made?**

Now that we have discussed the proximal factors that motivate people to be proactive, it is useful to understand the distal antecedents of proactivity, for instance, whether proactivity comes from an innate set of characteristic that some people but not others are born with, or is instead something that can be shaped over time through deliberate interventions or changing of the situation. We propose that like all other work behaviours, proactivity is both born and made, that is, it is both determined by who we are (e.g. our personality, values, knowledge, skills, abilities, among others) and by our work context (e.g. job design, leadership, organisational culture, among others). Next we discuss several ways that the work context can shape proactivity, as these are the areas that organisations can focus its attention on to shape and enhance employees' proactivity. We will then unpack the personal attributes of those more proactive individuals.

#### ***Proactivity is made: Work context as distal antecedents***

Some work contexts are more conducive to proactivity than others. Here we focus on how organisations can shape employees' proactivity by designing enriched jobs, developing managers' transformational leadership capability, and creating a supportive work environment.

#### ***Work design***

First, proactivity can be promoted by effective design of employees' jobs. The most important aspect of work design that enables proactivity is *job enrichment*, which focuses on increasing the autonomy and complexity of the job. Job enrichment can facilitate proactivity through all three motivational pathways, namely, the 'can do', 'reason to' and 'energised to' motivations. First, job enrichment provides employees the opportunity to acquire new skills and master new responsibilities; furthermore, the autonomy aspect of job enrichment can increase employees' perception of controllability over their work. Both the enhanced mastery and improved controllability would raise employees' self-efficacy ('can do' motivation), and subsequently leading to proactive behaviours such as generating new ideas and proactively solving problems (Parker et al., 2006). Second, job enrichment is likely to facilitate employees' 'reason to' motivation. With enriched jobs, employees may feel more challenged and experience more enjoyment, and are thus intrinsically motivated to be proactive. Enriched jobs can also allow employees to see the broader picture and understand the meaningfulness of their job, thereby creating integrated and identified motivations to be proactive. Third, job enrichment can also create 'energised to' motivation among employees. It was found that having more enriched jobs (e.g. job control, job variety) can lead to positive, energetic and inspired feelings, which subsequently generate proactive behaviours (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008).

Other aspects of work design can also affect employees' proactivity. *Job stressors* such as time pressure and situational constraints can potentially promote, rather than inhibit proactivity, as such constraints represent challenge stressors that motivate employees to find new ways to complete work on time. For instance, it has been found that when employees are under time pressure, they are more likely to innovate; this is especially true for those with high need for cognition, who

may feel stimulated by the challenge (Wu, Parker & de Jong, 2014).

#### *Leadership*

The second area that organisations can shape proactivity is through effective leadership. *Transformational leadership*, the leadership style that effects effective change through creating vision as well as supporting, stimulating and inspiring subordinates, can lead to subordinates' proactive behaviours such as innovation (Rank et al., 2010) and taking initiative to help the organisation (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012). This is because transformational leadership can enable both the 'can do', 'reason to' and 'energised to' motivations among subordinates. First, transformational leaders solicit subordinates' ideas, stimulate their innovation, and support them to be self-directed. These behaviours can foster subordinates' self-efficacy, such as their role-breadth self-efficacy ('can do' motivation), which subsequently leads to proactive behaviours towards team effectiveness (Strauss, Griffin & Rafferty, 2009). Second, transformational leaders link group mission to collective values and enhance subordinates' identification with the organisation. Therefore, they can enable subordinates' commitment to their organisation ('reason to' motivation), which subsequently leads to more proactive behaviours towards the improvement of the organisation (ditto). Third, transformational leadership has an intense emotional component and transformational leaders usually use positive emotions to convey their vision and influence subordinates. Such positive emotions are contagious in the workgroup, leading to positive affect being aroused among subordinates ('energised to' motivation); this could potentially generate positive work behaviours such as proactivity (Bono & Ilies, 2006).

A specific aspect of transformational leadership, *leader vision*, has been found especially important in enhancing employees' proactivity over time. A longitudinal study suggested that leaders' vision

predicted the increase of proactive behaviours among employees in 12 months' time, although this effect was only present for employees that have higher role-breadth self-efficacy (Griffin, Parker & Mason, 2010). In other words, when shaping and developing employees' proactivity, both leadership styles and individual differences need to be taken into account. The interaction between contextual and individual antecedents will be briefly discussed later.

#### *Group climate*

The third area of contextual factors can shape proactivity is group culture and climate, especially at the local team level. Because proactivity is a risky behaviour, one needs to feel psychologically safe in their immediate work environment in order to initiate and implement something new. For this reason, a *supportive work environment* is critical for proactive behaviours to emerge, especially through the 'reason to' motivational pathway. Parker et al. (2006) found that trust in co-workers affects proactivity as this trust enables employees to feel more ownership of their job ('flexible role orientation'), thus providing enhanced integrated motivation – a reason for them to be proactive. The positive effect of supportive environment is also confirmed in other studies. For instance, initiating changes to improve team effectiveness is more likely to happen when in supportive teams where the team's work processes are openly discussed and reviewed (Griffin, Neal & Parker, 2007); and voice behaviours tend to be present in workgroups that have more positive relationships among the members (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998).

#### ***Proactivity is born: Individual characteristics as distal antecedents***

Proactivity is also determined by who we are. Individual characteristics such as personality, values, thinking styles, among others, can influence one's level of proactivity. Due to space limit here we choose to focus on a few selected individual attributes; interested



readers are recommended to refer to Parker et al. (2010) for a more comprehensive review.

### *Personality*

Personality has perhaps been the most frequently investigated aspect of individual characteristics in relation to proactivity. In particular, *proactive personality*, which depicts an individual's tendency to take control of the situation and to effect change, is most often studied due to its conceptual linkage with proactive behaviours. Numerous studies have demonstrated that proactive personality predicts both proactive person-environment fit behaviours such as building network, taking career initiatives, proactive socialisation, as well as proactive work behaviours such as taking charge, voicing one's opinions, preventing problems, among others (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Parker & Collins, 2010). Additionally, it has been confirmed that proactive personality can exert its effect on proactive behaviours via proactive motivational states, for instance, via the 'can do' motivation (e.g. role-breadth self-efficacy, Parker et al., 2006), as well as the 'reason to' motivation (e.g. motivation to learn, Major, Turner & Fletcher, 2006).

In addition to proactive personality, other personality traits may also have an important and unique contribution to proactive behaviours. For instance, *conscientiousness*, one of the Big Five personality dimensions, was found to predict proactive feedback-seeking, one form of proactive person-environment fit behaviour, over and above proactive personality (Parker & Collins, 2010). This may be because conscientious individuals are more driven to perform their jobs well by obtaining performance feedback, and to achieve a good fit with their organisation.

### *Learning and thinking styles*

Goal orientation depicts whether an individual is inclined to have a learning mindset and is willing to take risks and learn from mistakes, or whether he/she is more

concerned about own performance and competence (Dweck, 1986). Given proactivity is a risky and uncertain behaviour, individuals with a high *learning goal orientation* are more willing to reach out of their comfort zones and try something new as a way to learn and improve. Indeed, such individuals were found to engage in more proactive behaviours, such as taking charge, innovating, and seeking for feedback (Parker & Collins, 2010).

Another aspect of thinking styles that was found to be important for proactivity is individuals' tendency in engaging in *future-oriented thinking*. By enabling an individual to put a strong focus on the future and to consider potential consequences, this attribute is meaningful for the future-focused behaviour of proactivity. Indeed, individuals who are more future-oriented tend to perform better on proactive strategic behaviours such as scanning environment and selling strategic issues to decision makers; they are also more likely to engage in proactive behaviours that improve the fit between themselves and their environment (Parker & Collins, 2010).

Furthermore, individuals' *need for cognition*, a tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking, is likely to elicit curiosity to seek for new information and opportunities, and would produce elaborate and flexible thoughts and ideas that are important for creating something new. As a result, it was found that need for cognition positively predicts individual innovation, a form of proactive work behaviour, after controlling for personality differences (Wu et al., 2014).

### *Summary*

In sum, we have discussed the contextual and individual antecedents for proactive behaviours at work. Although presented separately, these two broad categories of antecedents do not operate in isolation but instead dynamically interact with each other in shaping proactivity. Indeed, there have been several studies that take this interactionist perspective. For instance, even if

employees may lack relevant dispositional characteristics to be proactive, this can be compensated by positive work context that is inductive to proactivity. LePine and Van Dyan (1998) showed that although individuals with low self-esteem were less likely to voice their opinions, this can be compensated by favourable situational characteristics such as high levels of group autonomy. Similarly, Wu et al. (2014) showed that employees who have less strong need for cognition are generally less likely to innovate, yet this can be compensated by increasing their job autonomy. Such dynamic interplays between individual and contextual characteristics provide important implications for organisations to design intervention strategies in shaping employees' proactivity.

### **Is proactivity always good?**

At the beginning of this paper we presented research findings in supportive of the benefits of proactivity in that it is likely to bring positive outcomes for individuals, organisations and societies. Despite this solid research evidence, one may naturally ask whether proactivity is always desirable. Could there be some types of proactive behaviours that do more harm than good to the self or to their organisations?

The answer is yes. In fact, scholars have recognised that proactivity does not always lead to positive consequences. For instance, it has been found that when employees lack the motive to benefit others or the ability to appropriately judge work situations, their proactivity does not lead to positive performance outcomes (Chan, 2006; Grant, Parker & Collins, 2009). Proactivity may also harm individuals' psychological well-being. As proactivity is a resource-consuming behaviour, proactivity may deplete individuals' psychological resources, leading to job stress, role overload, and work family conflict. Furthermore, proactivity may bring tensions between the more proactive employees and the less proactive employees, as the latter may feel threatened by proactive employees' acquisition of resources and may perceive

their proactivity as self-serving (for a comprehensive summary of such potential negative impacts of proactivity, see Bolino, Valcea & Harvey, 2010). In sum, there is evidence suggesting that proactivity is not always desirable; it is thus important to focus not just on the quantity of proactivity behaviour but also its quality.

Although it has been recognised that proactivity can vary in its quality and its effectiveness, there lacks an integrating theoretical framework to provide clearer guidance as to what forms of proactivity are truly desirable. To address this issue, Parker, Liao and Wang (2015) drew on the concept of wisdom to propose the concept of 'wise proactivity'. Wise proactivity is defined as enacting and implementing self-initiated and future-focused change that is contextually-sound, personally-sound, and other-focused. Like proactivity, wise proactivity is change-oriented, yet what makes a proactive behaviour wise depends on three elements. The first element concerns whether a proactive behaviour is appropriate for the broad context (*contextually sound*). A manager who seeks to impress the boss might introduce a new technology that is not appropriate for his/her organisation, thus this proactivity is not considered wise. The second element concerns whether a proactive behaviour is the right thing to do for the initiator and will benefit the initiator's personal growth (*personally sound*). A proactive behaviour that depletes personal resources and leads to burnout is not considered wise. The third element concerns whether a proactive behaviour will benefit others and serve others' needs (*other focused*). An employee that puts oneself forward for leading a change yet resulting in his work being allocated to already overburdened colleagues is not considered wise.

Although still at the early stage of this research, our preliminary analysis has demonstrated that wise proactivity is indeed distinct from proactivity. Wise proactivity was found to be underpinned by different individual antecedents such as social astuteness

and humility, and it predicted individuals' overall work performance over and above proactivity (Parker & Wang, 2014). More empirical studies are currently underway to further unpack the psychological process that leads to wise proactive behaviours and the implications of this behaviour on a wider range of work and career outcomes.

### **Summary and implications for coaching**

Thus far, we have articulated that proactivity is important for individuals themselves, their teams, organisations and beyond, and it can lead to a wide range of positive outcomes. Proactivity should be understood as a self-initiated, future-oriented behavioural process that is aimed at bringing about future change. Furthermore, we discussed what makes individuals proactive, presenting both the proximal motivational enablers of proactivity, and distal organisational and individual factors that jointly shape proactivity. We also discussed the potential dark side of proactivity, and presented a new concept, wise proactivity, which provides a theoretical framework to conceptualise the nature of those truly desired proactive behaviours. In this concluding section, we will briefly discuss how the proactivity concept and some of the existing theories and empirical findings can inform coaching practices. In light of what has been discussed, we will focus on three implications.

First, the positive impact of proactivity suggests that it is useful to help coachees develop a proactive mindset to take charge of their life and work. Coaches can encourage coachees to actively reflect on areas where they could have more control, proactively anticipate future problems, and brainstorm for options to resolve potential issues. For example, coaches could measure coachees' proactive work behaviour, proactive strategic behaviour, and proactive career behaviour (Parker & Collins, 2010) and compare themselves against bench-

marks<sup>1</sup>. Because proactivity can be targeted both at oneself and at situations, it is also useful to facilitate coachees' reflection about when is the best time to change themselves and when is the best time to change their situation. Often, it is the strategic decision between these two options that determines whether a proactive behaviour is effective. For instance, it has been found that when there is not enough personal control at the workplace, it is more effective to engage in proactive behaviours aimed at changing oneself, such as by seeking for feedback to improve own work, rather than taking charge and changing one's environment (Tangirala et al., 2014).

Second, understanding the motivational factors that enable proactivity suggests that coaches can delve into coachees' self-evaluations, interests, values, emotions, among others, to understand whether they have the 'can do', 'reason to' and 'energised to' motivations for proactivity to occur. Our framework suggests that individuals need to first feel confident that they have the ability to make a change. Thus if a coachee feels lacking of 'can do' motivation, we can identify ways to boost their self-confidence, such as discussing a psychologically safe way where their innovative ideas can be heard by a trusted colleague, before presented to the boss. Our framework also suggests that individuals need to have a reason for them to be proactive, for instance, the change needs to be perceived as either intrinsically interesting, or part of their identity, or important for their work and their career. Therefore, by facilitating coachees' reflection on their values and interests, we can help them identify and take control of the areas that are personally meaningful to them. This is in line with what we proposed for wise proactivity, which specifically emphasises that changes need to be meaningful for the individuals and to fulfil their needs of personal growth. Furthermore, our model suggests

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<sup>1</sup> Further information on assessing proactivity can be found at: <https://sites.google.com/site/profsharonparker/proactivity-research/measuring-proactive-behaviour>

that having positive affect is an important impetus for proactivity as it broadens one's cognition. Therefore, if we encourage coachees to identify areas of changes where they find energised and inspired by, they will be more likely to engage in those proactive behaviours.

Third, by unpacking the organisational and individual factors that are inductive to proactivity, our proposed framework lends insights to both individual coachees who intend to improve their own effectiveness, and to leaders and managers who seek to enhance their employees' proactivity. For individual employees, it is useful that they understand whether their innate psychological attributes are likely to lead to proactivity, and if not, if this may be compensated by working in the right environment. For instance, an individual with less confidence in voicing one's opinions and initiating something new may still be proactive when being placed in an environment where there is high level of trust and support from team members. For managers and leaders who seek to create and sustain proactivity amongst their workforce, they can be encouraged to consider engaging in various levels of organisational interventions. They can consider designing and re-designing employees' jobs so that people have more autonomy and control over their work. They can select and develop frontline managers and supervisors so that those managers have more transformational leadership styles in stimulating, motivating and inspiring employees. They can also work on creating

an organisational climate where individuals' voices are valued and encouraged, risk-taking behaviours with the aim to improve work process and outcomes are allowed, and innovation and positive change is acknowledged and rewarded. As coaches, if we can allow executive coachees to understand the value of proactivity and use research evidence to inform their intervention strategies, we can potentially help them build more effective teams and achieve better work outcomes.

Individuals are not passive respondents to situations. Rather than just waiting to be told what to do or respond only when problems occur, they can take charge, anticipate problems and opportunities, and actively change themselves or their situation to bring about a different, more desirable future. By understanding proactivity and actively promoting this behaviour, coaches can make a positive difference not only to their coachees, but also to work places, organisations and societies as a whole.

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