

Business Basics: The Difference Between Taking Orders and Taking Ownership

A lot of people hear the phrase “**take initiative**” and immediately think it means doing extra unpaid work, staying late, or letting a company squeeze more out of them for the same pay.

That is not really what good managers mean.

In most cases, initiative is much simpler than that.

“Initiative is understanding the outcome, communicating progress, and taking reasonable next steps without needing to be told every single one.”

That is the difference between someone who just completes assigned tasks and someone who becomes trusted, valued, and hard to replace. **This matters more than people think.**

Taking Initiative Does Not Mean Working for Free

Let's clear this up first.

Taking initiative does **not** mean:

- Working nights and weekends for no extra pay
- Saying yes to every request
- Doing your boss's job for them
- Becoming the company hero every single day

It means something much more practical.

It means recognizing that when someone gives you a task, they are usually not just asking you to complete a step. They are trying to reach a result. If you only focus on the instruction and ignore the result, you can still technically “do what you were told” while failing the bigger objective.

That is where people get into trouble.

The Real Difference Between Compliance and Ownership

There is a big difference between these two approaches.

Taking orders sounds like this:

- “I sent the email like you asked.”
- “I followed up because you told me to.”
- “I called, but they were out of office, so now I’m not sure what else to do.”

Taking ownership sounds like this:

- “I reached out, followed up, and let you know where things stand.”
- “If I don’t hear back by this afternoon, I’m going to contact the company directly and find another path.”
- “I got the documents. Let me know if there’s anything else needed before the meeting.”

See the difference?

- The first person is waiting to be managed.
- The second person is helping move the work forward.

That second person is usually the one managers trust first, rely on more, and think of when opportunities come up.

FOLLOWING ORDERS

VS.

TAKING INITIATIVE



FOLLOWING ORDERS

I did what I was told



Waiting for instructions



Only reported issues



Needed constant reminders



TAKING INITIATIVE

I focused on the goal

Proactively problem-solving

Provided status updates

Kept things moving forward

FROM JUST TASKS

TO TRUE OWNERSHIP

Understand the Goal • Communicate Progress • Take Smart Steps

A Simple Workplace Example

Here's a very real example – taken from this viral video on TikTok.

Your boss asks you on Monday morning to contact someone at another company and get a set of documents needed for a big meeting the following week.

You send the email. Good start.

Then a day passes. No response.

At this point, one employee waits. Another one starts thinking.

The employee who is only taking orders says, “Well, I sent the email.” They sit back and wait until the boss checks in. When asked for an update, they say they still have not heard back. They follow up only when told to. They call only when told to. They report the obstacle, but they do not really work the problem.

The employee who takes ownership handles it differently. They follow up sooner. They send a quick status update before the boss has to ask. They think ahead. If this contact is unavailable, is there someone else at the company who can help? Is there another number to call? Is there a receptionist, assistant, or alternate contact who can point them in the right direction?

They are not doing magic. They are not working overtime. They are just thinking about the goal, not only the task.

That is initiative.

Why the Second Employee Stands Out

The second employee did not necessarily work harder in terms of hours. They worked better in terms of judgment.

They stood out because they did a few important things:

1. They understood the outcome

The assignment was not “send an email.” The assignment was “get the documents before the meeting.”

That is a huge difference.

2. They communicated before being chased

Managers hate having to wonder. A simple update goes a long way.

Even a short note like this helps:

"I reached out and sent a follow-up. If I don't hear back by this afternoon, I'm going to call the office and find another contact."

That tells your manager:

- You are on it
- You understand urgency
- You are thinking ahead

3. They solved problems instead of only reporting them

A problem at work is not always fully solved by announcing that it exists.

Sometimes you do need to escalate. Sometimes you need help. But people who stand out usually try a couple of smart next steps first.

4. They made life easier for their manager

This matters more than many employees realize.

Managers notice the people who reduce friction. The people who keep things moving. The people who require less follow-up. That creates trust fast.

What Managers Are Usually Looking For

Most managers are not expecting perfection.

They are usually asking themselves a few simple questions about the people on their team:

- Can I trust this person to keep work moving?
- Will they tell me early if something is off track?
- Do they understand the real priority?
- Do I have to remind them of every next step?

When the answer is yes, that employee becomes easier to rely on.

And once someone becomes easy to rely on, good things tend to happen:

- More trust
- More responsibility
- Better opportunities
- Stronger references
- A better shot at raises or promotions

Not because they became a workaholic. Because they became dependable.

What Initiative Looks Like in Real Life

Sometimes people hear this concept and still are not totally sure what it looks like day to day.

Here are some normal examples.

Initiative looks like:

- following up before a deadline becomes urgent
- sending a quick update before your boss asks for one
- asking clarifying questions at the beginning instead of making bad assumptions
- offering two possible solutions instead of only presenting the problem
- noticing a likely delay and raising it early
- finding the next reasonable step without waiting for permission on every detail

None of that is dramatic. It is just good work.

What Initiative Does Not Look Like

This is important too, because a lot of people are understandably skeptical when employers talk about initiative.

Initiative does not mean:

- accepting unfair workloads without speaking up
- staying available 24/7
- doing unpaid overtime as the default
- tolerating disorganization forever
- being expected to fix broken leadership

A healthy workplace still needs clear expectations, fair pay, and reasonable support.

But even in a healthy workplace, employees who only complete tasks at the surface level usually do not stand out in a good way.

How to Build This Skill (Initiative)

The good news is that initiative is not some rare personality trait. It is a skill, and it can be developed. **A few habits help a lot.**

1. Ask what success looks like

Do not just ask what to do. Ask what matters.

For example:

“Just so I’m clear, is the main priority getting these docs by Friday, or is it enough that we know where they stand?”

That question helps you understand the real objective.

2. Pay attention to deadlines that actually matter

Some tasks are flexible. Others affect meetings, sales, launches, or customers.

When a task is connected to something time-sensitive, your follow-up should reflect that.

3. Update people early

A short proactive update builds trust fast.

Even one sentence can be enough:

“Quick update: I have reached out twice and will call this afternoon if I still do not hear back.”

4. Think one step ahead

Ask yourself:

“If this doesn’t work, what is the next reasonable move?”

That one question can change how people see you at work.

5. Don’t confuse silence with progress

Just because a task is sitting in your inbox does not mean it is moving.

Ownership means keeping momentum.

Why This Matters More Than Ever

A lot of people today are smart, capable, and technically qualified. That is not enough by itself.

What often separates people at work is not raw talent. It is whether others can trust them to move work forward without constant prompting.

That applies whether you work in an office, remotely, in customer service, in sales, in operations, or on a creative team.

People who understand outcomes, communicate clearly, and take reasonable next steps make themselves more valuable almost anywhere.

Final Thought

At work, there is a huge difference between saying, “I did what you asked,” and saying, “I understood what needed to happen, and I kept it moving.”

That is the difference between taking orders and taking ownership.

And no, that does not mean sacrificing your boundaries or working for free.

It means understanding the goal, communicating progress, and taking the next smart step without needing someone to hold your hand through every part of the process.

That is initiative. That is what builds trust.

And in most workplaces, trust is what opens the door to everything else. I'd rather have an employee I trust than one who is fast. I hate when things fall through the cracks. If I give someone an assignment, it's theirs. I shouldn't have to remind them. I expect updates until the deadline. A promised deadline should not come and go – never.

And, this isn't difficult, really.

Think about when you're the boss. Yes, you are the boss when you order food at a restaurant. Is it nice to get updates on when the food will be ready? For sure. Do you want to know if there's a problem? Of course. All of that, right? That is how your boss feels, so take initiative, understand the task, give updates, be proactive.

If you do all that, you'll go far. Trust me.

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