

Proactive vs. Reactive

We use a thermometer to tell us the temperature of something, be it a room or a child. Some people use a food thermometer when they cook beef, pork, or poultry to find its internal temperature. When we put a food thermometer in a turkey that we're cooking, we want to find out what the internal temperature is to know if it's done or not. We do this because we know poultry that is not fully cooked can be harmful. The thermometer, when in the turkey, has a reaction to the temperature surrounding it. It is controlled by its surrounding environment.

When we start to cook the turkey, we turn the oven on to a selected temperature. The dials on the oven are the controls for the oven's thermostat. Like the thermostat in your house, when it is too cold, you turn up the heat. When it is too hot in the house, you turn on the air conditioning. The thermostat is what you use to control the environment.

Life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it. In the example above, the thermometer is reactive and the thermostat is proactive. For some people, being reactive (controlled by their environment or what happens to them) is who they are. Others who excel are proactive; they control their environment and control how they respond. When a situation comes in which we can be an active participant, we can either be proactive (be in control over our responses) or we can be reactive (let others and the situation lead and guide our responses). That's not to say that in every situation we need to be the one in charge, but we shouldn't be reactive in every situation either.

I worked second shift for a company where my job was to transport freight from place to place. I had to go wherever the dispatcher sent me. One time I got a call from friends who invited me to join them later in the evening for an event. I was already at work and knew that the dispatcher would not let me leave early, especially since I would have wanted to leave half way through the shift. I knew that the dispatcher was highly reactive. So, after thinking about how he would react in different scenarios, I decided to start an argument with him knowing that his reaction would be to win the argument at all cost. He would take one position and all I had to do was take the other. Eventually he would get so upset that he would send me home for the rest of the shift. Sure enough that is exactly how it unfolded. After he told me to punch out and go home, I left the building and was on my way to the car. As I was walking to the car, I was thinking about what I was going to wear that evening at the event. To top it off, I didn't have to use any of my earned time, vacation time, or use a sick day. Proactive people will and do utilize the reactivity of others to achieve their goals. This is done in sales and marketing immensely. Some may view this as wrong but consider this. Proactive people have as much of a right to be proactive as reactive people have to be reactive. By him being "reactive" he handed control of the situation over to me. He could have at any point taken control of the situation by being proactive rather than reactive. In these situations, the one who is the most proactive generally comes out ahead.