

Doctors, nurses in COVID-19 epicenter aided by proactive personality

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Management scholars generally agree that being proactive at work yields positive outcomes. Studies show proactive—as compared to reactive—people tend to perform at higher levels.

A new study from the University of Notre Dame offers the first examination of proactive personality in times of immediate response to a crisis—the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic at a hospital in Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak. The general hospital where the study took place had been instructed by the central government to immediately transition to a COVID-19 hospital, and as the crisis unfolded the researchers were able to collect [real-time data](#) from more than 400 doctors and nurses who had to shift from their previous specialties to respiratory medicine—an area for which they were not previously trained.

"When there is a will there is a way: The role of proactive personality in combating COVID-19" is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* from Mike Crant, the Mary Jo and Richard M. Kovacevich Professor of Excellence in Leadership Instruction at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business. Crant, a longtime researcher in the area of workplace behavior, is one of the creators of the proactive personality scale, the most frequently used measure of proactivity in the organizational literature.

Relying primarily on a public health care system, China's hospitals are crowded even in normal times, especially in large and fast-growing areas of the country like Wuhan.

The hospital provided a unique window through which to learn about job performance during a time of incredible stress in the formative days of the pandemic when very little was known about the nature of COVID-19 and its treatment.

The team surveyed the doctors and nurses three times during the first four months of the transition to a COVID-19 hospital. They collected information on their proactivity, how they redesigned their jobs, and COVID-related factors like exposure to the virus and routine disruption.

They also asked about their well-being (resilience and thriving), collected performance data from supervisors and obtained performance bonus data from the human resources department.

Proactive individuals have a tendency to create change through personal initiative. They are better at scanning for and creating opportunities to make things better. People have unique characteristics and abilities that make them more engaged at work, and allow them to perform at higher levels. But not all jobs bring out these strengths. The transition to working exclusively with COVID-19 patients created an opportunity for proactive people to redesign their jobs in a way that allowed them to play from their strengths.

"We found that having a proactive personality was a tremendous benefit to doctors and nurses working to combat this new and deadly disease," Crant said. "More proactive doctors and nurses were able to redesign their jobs more effectively in a way that allowed them to capitalize on their personal strengths. That, in turn, led to higher [job performance](#) and greater well-being. These effects were magnified for doctors and nurses who experienced greater exposure to the virus, whose jobs were more upended because of the transition to COVID-19 medicine, and when they felt more support from their colleagues and hospital administration. This latter finding suggests that factors specific to COVID-19 strongly affected the doctors' and nurses' performance and well-being."

The team studied two elements of well-being—resilience and thriving. Resilience refers to how you deal with adversity or how you rebound from threatening circumstances. Thriving is having a sense of vitality and learning at work. Their data also showed the doctors and nurses who redesigned their jobs more effectively to utilize their strengths suffered less insomnia during this stressful period.

"Imagine if your job were changed to another that had nothing to do

with your previous work," Crant said. "And you were overwhelmed with more work than ever. Add to that an element of danger—you significantly increased your risk of catching a deadly disease by doing this new job. That is the situation the frontline health care professionals found themselves in. Not everyone performed at the same level, nor did they deal with the stress equally effectively."

The unique study confirmed the importance of being proactive rather than reactive in a novel setting, indicating that leaders of organizations facing crises should emphasize the importance of crafting employees' [jobs](#) to align with their strengths.

"Proactivity is a valuable resource in dealing with the stress associated with a crisis, so emphasizing that to employees at all levels is advisable," Crant said. "We also found that perceived organizational support played a crucial role in the success of the doctors and nurses. It is vital for employees on the frontlines of a crisis to feel that the organization and people who work there have their backs."

More information: Nancy Yi-Feng Chen et al, When There is a Will There is a Way: The Role of Proactive Personality in Combating COVID, *Journal of Applied Psychology*
www.dropbox.com/s/p501fdbsdcleu1v/Proactive%20Personality%20and%20COVID-19.pdf?dl=0

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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