

Making Friday Afternoons More Productive

By Jeffrey P. Davidson, CMC

Late one Friday afternoon Marie Concord walked past her associates, offices and noticed that about half of them didn't seem to be working. Many were on the telephone, talking apparently to friends or spouses; others were milling about, idly chattering or absorbed in some trivial pursuit. Marie wasn't upset, for she felt that it was nearly impossible to maintain a staff of fully alert and productive employees for five full days. Moreover, she realized that it is human nature to dwell upon weekend plans as the work day or work week ends. But Marie wondered if there wasn't some way to increase productivity on Friday afternoons while not appearing authoritarian, causing resentment, and demoralizing her staff. After some thought, Marie concluded that there were ways to do this and that the best approach was a low-key, informal one.

File, file, file

First Marie individually suggested to several of the employees that they use late Friday afternoon to make sure personal and common files were in order, purged of unnecessary documents and properly catalogued or indexed. Marie's company was interested in reducing paper handling, and Friday afternoon seemed a particularly good low-pressure time to examine paper files and make judgments about what could be thrown away. Marie also suggested that time and expense logs, insurance and

medical forms, and miscellaneous correspondence could be handled on Friday afternoons. The rationale for this suggestion should be clear: Filling out forms and the like is largely routine work that does not require heavy thinking and thus is a suitable activity for that time in which employees are most distracted.

The open door

Without formally announcing it, but still making it evident, Marie made available the last two hours of every Friday to any staffers who wished to speak with her. Marie found that as the

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week drew to a close, staff members were much more likely to open up and discuss problems, or perhaps offer suggestions to improve operations. Over time, Marie found that she often was able to speak to as many as three or four of her staff, individually, late on Friday.

Marie also encouraged project managers to informally meet with team members Friday afternoons so that everyone could be off and running the next Monday morning.

Mixing tasks

Marie recognized that initiating new

tasks late in the afternoon, particularly on Friday afternoon, was bad policy. However, she did occasionally request selected staff members to undertake a small task that later would support a more important project. For example, she asked Alice Stewart to outline the steps that would be necessary to solve a productivity problem within the department.

The outline needed to be only one or two pages. Alice did a good job and the next Monday was assigned the job of writing a formal report based on the outline and heading up a team that would implement the suggestions and recommendations made. In asking Alice to prepare the outline, Marie had not set a deadline or formally assigned resolution of the problem to Alice. Marie merely was seeking some good ideas for solving the problem and had a hunch that Alice could be productively engaged on the problem, even late on a Friday afternoon.

Attitude adjustment

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Marie realized that her own attitude about productivity on Friday afternoons and the manner in which she pursued her tasks during this period heavily influenced the staff. Marie knew of other supervisors who had largely given in to the Friday afternoon syndrome as early as 3 pm. She resolved never to let down her guard and exhibit *de facto* acceptance of lower productivity toward the weekend. In this way Marie perhaps most effectively influenced her employees to maintain a solid week's work effort.

Jeff Davidson is a popular speaker and award-winning author of 18 books, including *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-up Society* (MasterMedia, \$10.95, trade paper).