



53 County Clare Crescent, Fairport, NY 14450

cell: 585.230.6357
office: 585.377.3439
email: dcook@ebizk.com
www.ebizk.com

Take a Nap in the Afternoon

Whether we were tired or not, each afternoon in kindergarten we took a nap. It wasn't optional. It wasn't that kindergarten was physically demanding. We would have recesses that allowed us to blow off "excess energy," so the day certainly didn't wear us out. My mother used to say that if she could bottle and sell that excess energy she would be a wealthy woman. Probably true.

Naptime wasn't about recovering our strength. It was about settling our spirits. It was about coming down to a level where we could pay attention, learn, and do our best. It seemed that after naptime we would have the most creative, most imaginative times of the day.

We pulled out small mats, which we laid on the floor. They were thin and hardly longer than our bodies. We didn't have pillows. We would lie down and try to be quiet. Miss Waters would pull the shades to darken the room a bit, but there was still plenty of light. I don't remember the teacher having to "get after us" about being quiet. I don't know that any of us ever slept, but maybe some of us did. Maybe the teacher slept. The teacher wouldn't speak to us except in whispers. She was setting an example of being quiet for us. We could still hear the street noises, traffic, construction, and workers talking far off in the background.

We would rest for just a short period of time. It probably wasn't more than ten minutes, but sometimes it seemed like an eternity. Often it was hard to remain still. But after we got used to naptime (and figured out there was no escaping it), we were able to settle down quickly and really rest. Afterward, we would hear a story or do some highly creative activity.

We have lost something during the span of my working life. At one time, everyone would take a lunch hour together and have a coffee break in the morning and afternoon. It was a social time. It was a time of being together and seeing each other in a different light. We would share a laugh together and relax. We would share our lives. We certainly would talk about work issues, but frequently in a different light. Unfortunately, we did not understand the value of this time, either as companies or as individuals.

As companies, we viewed this time as optional. Breaks were an interruption to the real work activity. That's when we expected the employee to take care of his/her personal business. If they didn't have any personal business that day, well, there was always plenty of real work to be done. In today's era of massive layoffs, it is a time where we can catch up on work, where the work that hadn't been driven out of the process can be completed by the employees who hadn't been driven out yet.

For employees, it is a time we can make a small sacrifice so as not to have to make a larger sacrifice. Sacrifice a few minutes here and a few there, eat lunch at your desk, keep moving, so when 6:30 P.M. rolls along we can hustle home to spend a few minutes with the kids before bedtime. Only we are too stressed and weary to do a good job at those personal connections. Our personal lives have become as frazzled as our professional lives. We have been in a downward spiral.

As a young manager, we used to do off-site planning activities. We'd set aside a few days in the year to "retreat." We worked hard and played hard at retreats. The different setting allowed us to more fully concentrate on our future. We have forgotten the value of doing this type of activity as well. It was viewed as a luxury and an unnecessary expense. An ever-tightening belt squeezed them out.

It was where we took a fresh look at our plans and the way we operated. It was where we could challenge the paradigms that had become ruts. It was where we would make complete, cohesive, and intelligent plans. Today, our accountants would much prefer us spending an additional \$50,000 doing rework than spending \$5,000 upfront to plan it right. Oh, they never say that; they just live it. So instead of doing it the right way, we plan as we go: "Let's take that road, it seems to be going west."

Reflect on what you have done while the project is underway. In the heat of the moment, it is difficult to keep things in the right perspective. When you have a need to allocate more resources to development, for example, it is hard to determine whether those resources will ultimately improve quality or make less testing necessary. Either might be true, but don't count on either. Don't shortcut a step based on an assumption that may not prove to be correct.

Set aside thought time to consider how things are progressing. But be careful about "pulling the trigger" too early. Your job is to bring up the issues, not to solve them yourself or "micro-manage." This is a slow, steady hand on the rudder making small, smooth adjustments.

You can use a public forum such as team meetings or governance councils to raise questions such as "What have we missed here?" But do so in a non-threatening way. And come up with those pointed questions ahead of time during your naptime.

Wind your projects down. The wrap-up activities that get shortchanged are clean up of the documentation, sharing experiences and learning from final testing and training, modification of the metrics to be applied against the application, and establishing robust production support activities.

The final stages of our projects need to have as many robust "gating" activities as the early stages. The early "gating" activities are always easy. We have to make sure that all aspects of the project have been put into place before we make substantial investment. In essence, we check out the "thoughtware" before we buy the hardware. Outside of out and out fraud, all companies have checks and balances to make sure there is some accountability before making a substantial investment. Thus they "gate" their future activities. "We have to have all of these things done before we will move on to those other things."

But as projects progress to their final stages of development, the desire to "get the project over with" begins to mount. We are anxious to see results. By the time we are ready for user acceptance testing, our emotional state (excitement) and mental stresses (exhaustion) are overpowering. We push and push to the goal line and to collapse.

We need to have as much rigor when the project is being completed as we had in starting the early phases. But to establish that rigor we need do two things.

First, we need to schedule adequate time at the end of projects for these activities. These cannot be shortchanged. This cannot be the place where we make-up for lost time during other phases of the project. At the start of the project, schedule adequate time for these activities. This is not “fat” in your schedule that can later be trimmed. It is adequate (not excess) time to do the job right. Then manage against that time and establish adequate measures for completion.

Second, we need to develop concrete management activities to monitor these final stages to make sure they remain on course. This is the hard work of management. The tendency is for management’s attention to go elsewhere, like on starting the next wave of activities or the next fire drill. Nothing is more important to sustained success, however, than making sure we have done a good and complete job of what we have just completed. Nothing determines the scalability of a project like the close monitoring to make sure the final steps stay on track.

The quickest way to “age” a project is to not start with correct and cleaned up documentation. Getting that documentation “back in shape” is often a laborious and tedious proposition.

To make sure the documentation, such as job aids, meets the users’ need, it is best to share experiences and learning from the final stages of a project, such as testing and training. This requires a major step back from the “hustle and bustle.” This is another form of nap in the afternoon. In as relaxed an atmosphere as you can create, give everyone involved a chance to express their views. Find out what surprised them. Find out what displeased them. Listen to what was more difficult than they had expected. Don’t be defensive about what they say. It is better to have to correct things now than after it is in the customer’s hands. You may need to do some additional VoC work, to either confirm or rule out the concerns that are expressed. You may need to beef up some of the training materials, job aids, or help screens.

You may need to modify your metrics based upon what you hear. If there are concerns that lend themselves to measurement, try to put at least temporary measures

in place. This is not the time to reduce expectations, but it is the time to refine your measurements.

Finally, you want to determine that your production support activities will be sufficiently robust. There is nothing worse than lack of support. Nothing will turn off a user base more or kill off an implementation more quickly. If a user calls the 800 number that you have given them and the person on the other end of the line “doesn’t have a clue,” it will reflect on your whole application.

But if you can anticipate those questions and document the answers (or at least identify who can answer them), you will be well on your way to robust production support. “Frequently asked questions” are not enough. That’s reactive. You need to deliver, preemptively, another type of FAQ: “Fervently anticipated quips.” These are answers to questions you think will come up or should come up—that you desperately want to answer. You are just hoping someone will ask the question so you can deliver the answer in the high way that it’s importance be seen. The advantage you have is that you know the design “cold.” You should be able to “see” what problems are likely to occur and what aspects may confuse a novice user. You can deliver the answer to those questions ahead of time—ahead of being asked.

You need to “dream” a good bit about what the user experience will be like, when the user has questions or concerns. You need to put yourself in their place: see the screens from their view and understand the thought process and information flow through which they are going.

Schedule some “down time” between your projects. We need to set aside time between projects to be introspective about what we have just completed. This is contrary to the way we normally schedule our activities. Generally, we jam one project right up against the next, even trying to get people pulled off the first project early in order to get a “jumpstart” on the next. This is foolish.

As a project leader, you may need to walk away from the project for a short time to get a real perspective of what is occurring and why. When either praise or criticism is pouring in, it is the time you are most vulnerable to bad judgment. You can overreact. It is your bad judgment that can have a major impact on your next project. It is time to rest and reflect.

It is time to settle your spirits. It is time to notch things back again.

Take pride in what you do and what you have accomplished. But also learn what you could have done better so you can apply it to what you will be doing next. This is not a good team activity. Raising questions and concerns immediately at the end of the project for many people can be counterproductive. You want to access, but not be overly critical. Ask, "What could be better next time?" as opposed to "What did we do wrong?"

It is time to "pull out the mat," reflect, and allow yourself to dream a bit.

As my mother used to say, "Sweet dreams."

"The brain is a wonderful organ; it starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office." -Robert Frost



Reprint provided courtesy of

Duane H. Cook

Copyright © 2004 Duane H. Cook and
Strategic eBusiness - Cook Consulting