# Productive Laziness And The Open Door Policy

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## The importance of being accessible but in a controlled way

I'm all for being there for people, honest I am. It's just that people take advantage of it if I am.

So for the 'productive lazy' project manager I would suggest that it is perfectly acceptable for the lights to be on and for no one to be at home; not all of the time obviously, and at critical times access and visibility are all too important. But for the rest of the time, why not let the whole of the team work a few things out for themselves, take some degree of responsibility and decision-making, and generally get on with the tasks at hand.

Being there when you are really needed and being there all the time are very different things indeed.

Being reachable in a controlled manner, and within an acceptable timeframe, to answer appropriate questions (and not stupid ones) is equally important. The last thing you want is a long line of people queuing up at your desk waiting to ask advice, and you phone flashing with an ever increasing number of messages, all the time whilst you inbox is reaching capacity with incoming demands for your attention.

This can lead to the 'lights on all the time' syndrome, a very dangerous condition:

'What should I do now?'

'Breathe' you might reply.

'In or out?'

You have so many other more useful things that you could be doing, like reading a good book in the comfy chair for example.

## Applying the 'Productive Lazy' approach

### Avoid the swamp

This is linked in so many ways to the communication topic already covered. If you create a communication plan that guarantees to swamp you from day one, what is the benefit; to you or to the project?

None!

The plan should ensure you are not seen as the oracle for all matters, nor that you are the bottleneck for a constructive information flow within the project team. Most projects develop communication plans in a certain way; that is as a plan that is the documented strategy for getting the right information to the right people at the right time. We all know that each stakeholder has different requirements for information and so the plan defines what, how and how often communications should be made. What project managers rarely do is consider and map all communication flows, official, unofficial, developmental or complete, and do a load analysis across the project structure of these communication flows. Of they did they would spot bottlenecks much earlier on that they normally do, usually this is only identified when one part of the communication chain starts complaining about their workload.

### Consider the open door policy

The 'open door' policy has become a real management cliché.

‘Of course’ managers pronounce in a firm voice’ my door is always open to you all, day or night; I’m really there for you’.

Empowerment in this way has become more an entitlement for the project team than a project manager’s choice; they just expect you to be there when they want you to be (and not even when they need you to be there either). An ‘open door’ policy can easily transform a project manager’s role from that of an authority, and managing, figure to that of a subservient accommodator with little chance for exercising control on those that demand access to them.

**Be a good manager**

The best manager is the probably the one who reads the paper or MSN every morning, has time enough to say ‘hi’ at the coffee machine, is isn’t always running flat out because they are ‘late for an important meeting’. By that I mean that a good (an obviously ‘productively lazy’) manager has everything running smoothly enough that they have time to read the paper or MSN and so on. This is a manager who has to be confident in their position and capabilities.

A good manager will have time for their project team, and being one who has everything running smoothly, will allow that to happen.

A good manager does not to be on hand twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They do not have to have the answer to every question nor do they have to be the conduit to the answer to every question. There is a whole project team out there – go talk to some of them – they probably will have a much better answer to hand anyway.

**Think about number one**

You honestly want the best for yourself as well as for the project; I understand that, so give yourself that chance. Have you ever met a project manager who has put themselves down as a project risk? ‘Yeah, well I am just too nice a guy, can’t say no, can’t turn someone away, love to chat’ – likelihood 80%, impact 100%, mitigate now!

But hopefully by now you also want to apply the productive lazy approach so consider this; let the team deal with 80% of the communication, 80% of the questions, 80% of the issues, and let the 20% come through you for consideration and guidance. You don’t even have to ‘solve’ that 20%, I would further suggest that only 20% of this 20% are likely to be answered by yourself in an adequate manner, there are always others that can better advice.

**Think about the rest**

OK, you have dealt with the ‘thinking about number one’ thing, now what about your team? Well by dealing with ‘number one’ you will have already done the team a huge favour. You will be accessible when you need to be accessible. The lights will go on as and when they are really needed – it is a kind of ‘green’ project management policy.

The worse thing that can happen is that just at the moment when there is a ‘clear and present’ need for someone to speak to you, whether that be on a project or on a personal matter, you are just too tied up with a whole pile of nothing to even give them the time of day. Remember the whole ‘respect’ and ‘reputation for team support’ team thing we spoke about earlier, well this is a major contributor to that.

**Analyse and reduce**

And this is not a one off action; you need to keep on top of this as well. Projects change, communications develop, and roles flux. Do a quick analysis of what information and queries flow through you, and how and regularly re-assess. Can others deal with some of this? What are the important components that you should be involved in? Are there too many questions and communication from certain sources? And so on.

Make sure that everyone knows that the lights will go on and when and how they can turn that light on fast if they really need to.

## A project manager's tale about the importance of position

This one is not my tale; it is the story of a friend of mine, a friend who is, of course, a project manager. A project manager who I know to be very good at team building, a real 'people' person.

Picture a new project with a new project office. Apparently the company my friend was working for had reserved some brand new office space in a building that they were going to move other departments in to in the coming months. In the meantime the project team could take over one floor.

Now, I have been in many project offices over the years ranging from a single desk to a temporary office unit (grey boxes that get lifted in to place by a crane and officially described as 'relocatable and modular accommodation' apparently). But, by all accounts, this new building that my friend moved in to with his project team was superb.

He chose a nice new desk by a window and with a view facing the doors so that he could see all that went on, people coming and going, working (or not working I guess), and so on.
And so life was good and thus did the project move forwards in a pleasing way.

The only feature that was lacking was a decent coffee machine. They had a temporary one to begin with but the team waited with baited breath for the new, top of the range, super-dooper, hot beverage dispenser.

It arrived one week day morning, wheeled in on a trolley barrow. My friend was elsewhere at the time on important project business. When he arrived back in the project office he was somewhat surprised to see that his desk now had a new neighbour. A coffee machine.

'Hey, grab a coffee, it's great' was the general cry from the project team. I am sure that that is what he did, before walking the two feet back to his desk.
The project office was full now and so it was too late to move desk. Oh well, a great project office with a great coffee machine was not something to make too much fuss about.

And then things went downhill:

Day 1 – People started saying 'hello' each time they lined up for a coffee at the machine by his desk.
Day 2 – People started conversations as they waited for their freshly simulated brewed cup of java by his desk.
Day 3 – People started sitting on his desk, whilst they waited for coffee, said 'hello', engaged in conversation and were generally sociable.
Day 4 – People asked him where the spare coffee cups were and what 'error 54g' was.
Day 5 – People asked him what the telephone number for the coffee repairman was so that they could report 'error 54g' and get the coffee machine fixed.
Day 10 – People started using the phone on his desk whilst waiting for a coffee etc.
Day 15 - The project manager left the building.

In actual fact, he did move desks; he managed to secure a small space across the landing from the main project office. It wasn't ideal as he was now removed from the project team but, on balance, it was better than the alternative.

It doesn't matter that you want to run an 'open door' policy in order to be as accessible to everyone, if your want to get on with your job you do need some 'space'. To be right at the centre of everything all of the time is not conducive to being a good project manager.

It was the coffee machine or the project manager, and the team made it clear that the coffee machine won hands down!

## A final comment

So for the 'productive lazy' project manager it is perfectly acceptable for the lights to be on and for no one to be at home; not all of the time obviously, and at critical times access and visibility are all too important. But for the rest of the time, why not let your project team work a few things out for themselves, take some degree of responsibility and decision-making, and generally get on with the tasks at hand.

Being there when you are really needed and being there all the time are very different things indeed.

*'You never know till you try to reach them how accessible men are; but you must approach each man by the right door'.* --Henry Ward Beecher

## About the Author

Despite his title of 'The Lazy Project Manager', Peter Taylor is in fact a dynamic and commercially astute professional who has achieved notable success in project management, program management and the professional development of project managers: Currently as Director of a PMO at Siemens PLM Software, a global supplier of product lifecycle management solutions. He is an accomplished communicator and leader; always adopting a proactive and business-focused approach, and he is a professional speaker with City Speakers International.

He is also the author of 'The Lazy Project Manager' book (Infinite Ideas 2009) – for more information - www.thelazyprojectmanager.com. You can subscribe to a series of free podcasts on iTunes (The Lazy Project Manager).