The Monday Freakout

Mondays start on Sunday. It’s the moment you realize that the weekend is over and you begin staring at the endless list of things to do that you began to ignore early Friday as the sweet, sweet smell of the weekend filled your office.

As a rule, the earlier on Sunday that you think about Monday is an indication of how much you neglected to do on Friday. Worse, the more time you spend during your weekend fretting about your weekdays, the more pissed off you’re going to be when Monday actually arrives. The extreme case is when someone spends the entire weekend working themselves into a frustrated knot of stress regarding their work situation, and that means, when Monday arrives, they might freak out.

This Monday’s freakout was courtesy of my QA lead, Dingfelder. He was simmering in the hallway all morning. He was talking in sharp, hushed tones to anyone who would listen. I already knew about the topic, but I was surprised by his verbal intensity. Right after lunch, he struck. Hands tightly folded in front of him, Dingfelder stood in my door, lightly bouncing on the front of his feet.

“Rands, can we talk for a minute?”

Shit.

I gripped the table and braced myself.

“Dear lord,” he said. “We’re going to ship horrible product and you’re setting unrealistic deadlines and QA always gets the shaft and do we support Internet Explorer 9 and my credibility is on the line here and Jesus Christ didn’t we learn our last time please I hate HTML and this developer keeps on diddling with shit.”

Rands Rule of Software Management #27: If someone is going to freak out, it’s going to be on a Monday.
Freakouts are unique because of their intensity. The first time you're on the receiving end, you'll be unable to catch your breath because of the shock. How did this usually calm person end up yelling in my face? Let's not worry about that right now. Let's first understand how to deal with the freakout in front of you, and that means following the rules.

Don’t Participate in the Freakout

The worst type of freakout is one that is purely emotional, illogical, and based on little or no fact. It also lacks any type of solution because there really isn’t a well-defined problem except that this person really needs to freak out. The volume and intensity of this type of freakout can be negatively intoxicating and you'll be tempted to jump on the freakout bandwagon.

Don’t.

The best move here is to simply listen and maintain eye contact. Your calmness is a primal attempt to telepathically reflect the insanity back to the freak so they'll realize they've gone off the deep end. This can be rough because the freakout may be pointed directly at you, but even under attack, your job is the same: Listen. Nod. Repeat.

Give the Freak the Benefit of the Doubt

Chances are, your freak really does have something to say, but maybe they've lost perspective spending every waking moment stressing since last Friday at 5 p.m. Perhaps their freakout has nothing to do with what they're saying and has everything to do with an unrelated series of events the previous week that ended poorly and has mutated into this freakout. Maybe they drink too much coffee, but remember, they have a point.

In any freakout, there is normally a very noisy preamble which is designed to get your attention. Dingfelder’s comments above are all preamble. I know after he stops to take a breath that we're going to get to the heart of the matter. He's probably already said it, but when he says it again, “Unrealistic deadlines,” I know we have progress because we’ve hit on the foundation of the freakout and we can begin a conversation which is the first step to defusing this situation.

But, it's not always that easy . . .

Hammer the Freak with Questions

Sometimes the preamble just doesn’t end. Sure, there’s content in there somewhere, but some freaks really just like the freakout. They like that they have your attention, or maybe they just like to hear their voice, but if it's been a couple of minutes and all you’re hearing is preamble, it's time to grab the reins.