The secret meanings in 'How was your weekend'

So there you stand in the break room, deciding blearily whether to sip some Earl Grey or Lemon Lift this morning, when a colleague walks in and says hi. You respond as we all do on a Monday: by inquiring about the weekend.

If you don’t think there’s much to these half-hearted questions about your co-workers’ Saturday and Sunday experiences, you might want to sit down. We’ve spotted four different levels of psychology going on there—all depending on how you phrase things.

“Good weekend?” says you really don’t care to hear any details; you’re just being nice by offering two words and maybe two seconds of your attention. You’re essentially dropping the mic and looking for the exit.

“Did you have a good weekend?” isn’t quite the same question. That quartet of words up front conveys more courtesy. You’re politely casting a line out there, not really caring if anything bites or not, but you’re prepared and willing to listen to a few sentences of explanation before you shuffle off to your cubicle.

“Did you do anything interesting this weekend?” crosses the line into active conversational participation. Buckle your seatbelt—you’ve technically committed to a back-and-forth. Sure, the expected response is simply “Not really” or “Just the usual” or “Oh, you know, when you own a windmill, the upkeep never ends.” But the other person will subtly sense that you’ve ventured to form a bond.

“What did you do this weekend?” is an overt request for some companionable chat and demonstrates actual, tangible interest in someone’s life. You’ve essentially demanded some sort of real response, and you don’t intend to leave the break room without it. This is how friends are made—with maybe 10 percent of colleagues thinking instead that you’re trying a wee bit too hard.

The wildcard in all these options: the position of your body. Facing someone with eye contact pushes your query dramatically up the friendliness scale, turning even the first option above into something more congenial. On the other hand, you have those people who ask the question as they literally walk out the door ...