THE WHITEBOARD

What a Friday night reveals about flow, variability, and the cost of changing everything at once

CLASSIFICATION	Flow Under Variability
HABITAT	Main Street Restaurant
PRIMARY SIGNAL	Priorities Change Faster Than Work Finishes

Why can a fully staffed business remain busy all night while completed work slows, waits grow, and customers leave unhappy?

Why This Matters

Variability is normal in a small business. A person calls out. Demand arrives unevenly. A customer changes an order. Equipment slows down. The danger is not variability by itself. It is the operating response: start more work, move more people, change more priorities, and expedite whatever is loudest.

That response can keep everyone busy while making the whole system slower.

Theo, his restaurant, and the events below are a fictional composite built from recurring small-business operating patterns. The characters are fictional; the flow problem is real.

I. The Symptom

By 4:30 on Friday, Theo already knew the schedule would not survive the night.

Two servers had called out. A party of eighteen had moved its reservation forward by half an hour. The produce delivery was late, which meant prep had started late. Theo erased three names from the whiteboard, moved four others, and wrote a new section assignment in the corner.

At 5:40, the dining room looked controlled. Every employee was moving.

At 6:20, the ticket rail over the kitchen window was full.

The grill cook had twelve entrees in progress. The fryer had started sides for tickets whose entrees had not reached the grill. Servers were asking which table should come first. Theo answered each question as it arrived.

"Push table twelve. Hold sixteen. Start the remake for seven. Get appetizers moving for eighteen."

Each instruction made sense on its own.

Together they changed the order of work faster than the kitchen could finish it.

By 7:05, everybody was busy and almost nothing was leaving the window as a complete table. Fries cooled while steaks finished. A steak waited while a replacement side was started. Two servers carried partial orders because they were afraid the food already in the window would die.

Customers did not experience a busy kitchen. They experienced waiting.

Theo experienced a staffing crisis.

II. The Outside Observer

Marcus arrived before the next Friday rush with a notebook and asked for two numbers.

"How many tickets did you start between six and seven last week?"

Theo did not know.

"How many complete tables left the window?"

Theo did not know that either.

He knew labor hours, sales, covers, voids, and the number of people scheduled. He did not know how much work the kitchen had started compared with how much it had completed.

Marcus stood where he could see the ticket rail without entering the kitchen. For one hour he made a mark whenever a new table entered the system, another when its first item was started, and a third when the complete table left the window.

He also marked every time Theo changed a priority.

There were twenty-one priority changes in sixty minutes.

Recognition Checkpoint

The restaurant has demand. Most stations have people. Everyone appears fully utilized. Yet complete tables leave slowly while partially finished food accumulates.

What is the system producing too much of, and which resource determines how fast a complete table can leave?

Do not diagnose the loudest symptom. Use the waits and unfinished work as evidence.

III. The Tempting Fix

Theo's first proposal was another scheduling tool.

"If the call-outs were handled sooner, I would not have to move everybody around at the last minute."

"That might improve tomorrow's schedule," Marcus said. "Would it change how many entrees the grill can finish at once tonight?"

Theo looked toward the line.

The grill was the narrowest part of the dinner system. Nearly every table required it, its work took longer than the other stations, and several dishes could not be completed until it finished.

The missing servers made the evening harder. They did not explain why the kitchen kept starting sides, appetizers, and remakes that could not become complete tables.

Theo's second proposal was to keep every station moving.

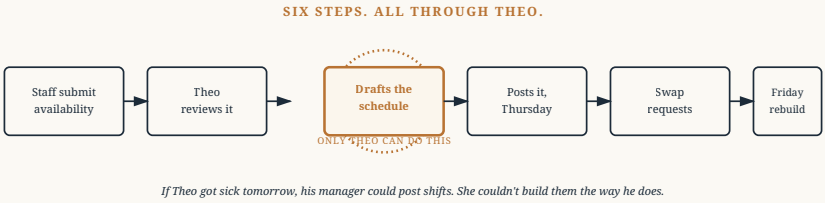
"I cannot have the fryer standing around just because the grill is behind."

"What does the fryer produce when it works ahead of the grill?"

Theo glanced at the window: cooling baskets waiting for entrees.

"Work we cannot sell yet," he said.

IV. The Real Constraint



If Theo got sick tomorrow, his manager could post shifts. She couldn't build them the way he does.

The grill set the pace for complete dinner tickets during the rush. That made it the active constraint for that period.

The rest of the kitchen was not supposed to produce as much unfinished work as possible. It was supposed to help complete tables at the pace the constraint could sustain.

Every time Theo expedited a different ticket, the grill cook stopped, checked the rail, changed sequence, or split attention across more partially completed orders. Each local decision attempted to save one table. The combined effect reduced flow for the room.

The whiteboard was not merely a staffing schedule. During service, it became a record of unstable priorities.

The system showed four pieces of evidence:

1. Work accumulated before and around the grill.
2. Other stations produced items that waited for grill output.
3. Priority changes increased partially completed tickets.
4. High individual utilization did not produce more complete tables.

This is a flow problem under variability. The restaurant could not eliminate call-outs, uneven arrivals, or special requests. It could

decide whether each variation was allowed to reorder the entire system.

V. The Small Experiment

Marcus proposed an experiment for the first ninety minutes of the next Friday rush.

They would not redesign the restaurant or buy software. They made four temporary rules:

1. The grill cook controlled the active sequence of dinner tickets.
2. No more than six grill-dependent tables could be actively in progress.
3. Other stations timed their work to the grill sequence instead of working ahead.
4. Only a safety, allergy, or true remake issue could interrupt the sequence without a sixty-second check at the window.

Theo predicted that servers would hate waiting to expedite their own tables and that some employees would appear less busy.

Marcus asked him to watch three measures:

- complete tables leaving the window every fifteen minutes;
- tickets older than twenty minutes;
- priority changes during the ninety-minute period.

The prediction was simple: if unstable priorities and excess work in progress were disrupting flow, then protecting the sequence should increase completions and reduce old tickets even without adding labor.

VI. The Result

The first twenty minutes felt wrong to Theo.

The fryer paused twice instead of starting sides early. A server asked to push a table and was told where it sat in the sequence. Theo nearly overrode the system when he saw an impatient customer looking toward the kitchen.

Then complete tables began leaving together.

At the end of ninety minutes, the team compared the tally with the prior Friday's same period. Priority changes had fallen from thirty-two to seven. The number of tickets older than twenty minutes fell from nine to three. The kitchen completed eleven more tables, with the same grill capacity and one fewer server than the schedule had originally planned.

One evening did not prove a universal rule. Demand mix was not identical, and the team still had a difficult late rush. But the result was strong enough to repeat the test.

More important, Theo could now distinguish two problems that had previously looked like one:

- staffing determined what capacity was available;
- operating rules determined whether that capacity produced flow.

VII. The Pattern Named

A constraint determines the pace of the whole system. Work released faster than that pace becomes work in progress: tickets started but not completed, food prepared but not saleable, questions asked but not resolved.

Variability creates pressure to change priorities. Too many changes make the system absorb the same variation repeatedly through stopping, restarting, searching, rechecking, and waiting.

The practical response is not rigid scheduling. It is a stable operating rhythm with an explicit way to handle genuine exceptions.

Observe. Count starts, completions, waits, and priority changes.

Identify. Find the resource or step setting the pace for complete work.

Limit. Keep excess work from accumulating around that constraint.

Protect. Do not interrupt its sequence for every local urgency.

Experiment. Test the rule during one recurring period and compare measures.

The goal is not to keep every person busy every minute.

The goal is to help the system finish useful work.

Explorer's Notebook

KEY OBSERVATION

A busy system can be slow when it starts more work than its constraint can finish and changes priorities faster than work can flow.

CORE QUESTION

During your busiest recurring period, which step determines how fast complete work reaches the customer?

FIELD EXERCISE

Observe one sixty- to ninety-minute period. Count work started, work completed, items still unfinished, and priority changes. During the next comparable period, cap active work and protect one sequence. Predict what will change, then compare the same four measures.