

Beneath the Surface

Responding too quickly can lead to dangerous habits.



BY DOROTHY M. PRITCHETT

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Look only at the surface of a body of water and you will miss the complex activity beneath. The seagulls and sailboats may be appealing, but what about the spectacular schools of colorful fish cavorting among the coral reefs? A glimpse underwater adds a new dimension to a day at the beach.

The same principle holds true in the world of business. In a fast-paced world, it has become too easy to take things at face value. We scan e-mail, drive through traffic while returning phone calls, dash off faxes and rush to meet deadlines. In an effort to respond quickly, something valuable is lost. We often act without thinking. As paralegals, this is a dangerous habit. It affects our work, relationships and careers.

I encourage you to approach challenges from a different perspective. When problems arise or your instincts suggest circumstances are off-kilter, examine the situation on a deeper level. What is the benefit? You can improve your attitude and performance, as well as perceptions others have about you.

Take a Deeper Look

Imagine, for example, you receive more work and a colleague receives less. Over time, it's obvious the workload is unbalanced. On the surface, you think

you are being treated unfairly and become resentful. You may regard the colleague with disdain or make unfavorable comments about him or her. Yet, if you thoroughly examine the situation, you may discover a completely different picture.

In another scenario, shortly after a paralegal changed law firms, she expressed frustration due to lack of clerical support. She liked the challenges of her position but resented having to do certain administrative tasks. As she

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thought about how to resolve her dilemma, she realized the reason she had more administrative tasks was because she had developed new procedures. The additional clerical work ensured the success of her innovative ideas. Suddenly, her attitude completely changed and her enthusiasm about the firm was renewed. She appreciated the positive assistance from the support staff members for most of her paralegal

duties and recognized their support made it possible for her to spend time on additional projects. She recognized that her employer encouraged creativity and appreciated her efforts.

Postpone Immediate Reactions

During a performance evaluation you receive a satisfactory rather than an outstanding rating on the accuracy of your work. The rest of your scores better represent your own assessment of your performance. Your first reaction is anger. After all, you think, you have taken on extra assignments and have one of the highest billable rates in the firm. Is this the thanks you get? You are tempted to have it out with your supervisor. That would be a surface reaction.

If you consider the facts, you may arrive at a different conclusion. Is it possible your approach was not as disciplined as it had been previously? After all, when overwhelmed with work, despite good intentions, accuracy is often sacrificed. Perhaps you need to examine your feelings about perfection. Overall, you attained an outstanding evaluation. Do you set unreasonable goals for yourself?

Then again, maybe the evaluation points to the first signs of job burnout. It might be time to assess whether the environment is right for you or determine how to make it more appealing.

Consider Other Alternatives

One paralegal at a large firm was disappointed after receiving a less-than-stellar review of her accuracy.

She worked at the firm for four years and was one of the highest billers in her department. Her supervising attorney suggested she consider changing from litigation to another department or perhaps change careers. One of her peers laughed at the suggestions and told her if the firm was not pleased with her work, it would not have kept her that long. The paralegal appreciated the colleague's support but told me in her "heart of hearts" she knew the attorney was right. She had considered pursuing other employment options even before the review. Looking beneath the surface helped her to examine her career objectives and explore new directions.

In many situations, it's beneficial to change your perspective. Fear of the unknown can be a major obstacle. Just

as a swimmer may feel squeamish about what lurks beneath the ocean's surface, it can be difficult to examine beneath our own surfaces, as well as others' behavior and motivations. In the long run, though, when you take time to examine your work habits and methods, you gain insight that will help you become a better employee and make more effective decisions. People with perceptive personalities excel at this skill. Some secrets to their success are: 1 **Trust Your Instincts.** Inside each of us resides an internal monitor. We may describe it in different ways: "a gut reaction," "our heart of hearts," "following our bliss," "our instincts" or "it just feels right." If we tune in, it alerts us when there is more to a situation than meets the eye. Instincts play a huge role in helping perceptive people gain insight into matters other people may overlook.

1 **Observe.** Pay attention to what's happening around you. Are people holding meetings behind closed doors? Has a person's behavior changed overnight or over a long period of time? Is the attorney you work with receiving more personal calls from home? Do alliances appear to be building between office factions? While none of these factors are cause for alarm, they do provide clues that may prove significant when integrated into the big picture.

1 **Listen.** Often, we don't listen to what others say. Or, if we do listen, we consider the ramifications of their words only from a selfish standpoint: How am I affected? If you put yourself in the speaker's shoes, you can gain amazing insight. Ask yourself, "Why is this person sharing this information with me? What do they expect me to do? Do they need action or empathy?" Respond in a way that lets the person know you have listened. Ask questions or paraphrase back important information.

1 **Talk to Objective Friends Outside the Office.** While gossip isn't acceptable, it's often helpful to talk to a mentor, confidante or friend who can provide objective advice. Choose only people you trust who have no connection to your workplace. If necessary, protect confidentiality by changing names or circumstances. Ask for honest

feedback - and be prepared to consider their opinions.

► **Ask the Right Questions.** If circumstances change and you don't understand what is happening, ask questions. Consider how you frame your queries. They should be asked in a manner that suggests you need information to perform your job effectively. Don't use accusatory tones or pose questions that elicit a defensive response. For instance, if workload is unbalanced between you and a colleague, you might mention you have been working late for the last month, increasing your billable time to 50 hours each week. Then ask how much longer your supervisor anticipates the extra load to last. In contrast, you would not want to say, "I've been working around the clock and Jane gets in at 9 a.m. and leaves at 4:30 p.m. What is going on?"

1 Make Noncritical Observations.

If a situation appears painfully obvious to you but nobody is commenting, it could be time to state the obvious. For example, a paralegal has been frequently absent and seems despondent and unfocused. You might say, "I'm concerned about Joe. Is there anything I can do to help?" Sometimes, once someone summons the courage to speak the truth, everyone experiences enormous relief. Or you may need to buy some time for further reflection. If your evaluation appears unfair, for instance, instead of lashing out you could state, "Your observations about my performance differ from my own. I would like some time to think about your input before we complete our discussion."

Think - Don't React

Looking beneath the surface can sometimes become a waiting game. Through observation, listening and other skills, bits and pieces begin to come together and develop into a more cohesive picture. Patience is a virtue.

Remember that a body of water is always changing. While outside forces, such as currents, weather and erosion create subtle changes not readily apparent, the plants and living organisms are inextricably affected. In your paralegal career, make sure you are connected to your environment. Take a moment to look beneath the surface.