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2003

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Meet the Competition

How to win without losing.

By Dorothy M. Pritchett

September

Competition is the American way. And frankly, those who excel get ahead. But there are differences in competing. Do paralegals in your office strive to produce the highest quality work, or do they play dirty? Does a clear line separate healthy competition from stabbing colleagues in the back? A difference exists. All may be fair in love and war, but the same can't be said for the workplace.

Outside Influences

Before evaluating individual actions, it's important to consider the bigger picture. What's happening in the marketplace heavily influences what occurs behind the doors of a firm or corporation. While there are challenges and opportunities for growth abound, there is intense competition between law firms and legal business. Work cultures have changed as a result. There's a focus on improved technology and more specialized legal services. To keep pace with corporate environments and retain their edge, business attire is no longer required in many offices. Business casual is no longer relegated to the weekend.

American companies now compete on a global scale. Likewise, large law firms are opening offices throughout the continental United States to provide services to clients. Corporations are downsizing to become more efficient and nimble. Today, businesses are often expected to do more with less. Law firms face increased pressure because clients put the same pressures on legal counsel. Clients, therefore, challenge legal firms to increase the speed in the delivery of legal services.

We work in a high-speed world that demands instant access to information and rapid responses. The workplace is paced, chaotic and stressful. Competition has never been more aggressive. When employees feel that their employers are using aggressive and sometimes questionable tactics to get ahead, they may feel a lack of permission to operate in the same manner. It doesn't.

Genuine success for an individual requires different rules. First, you're interested in long-term success, not short-term triumphs. Second, you're involved in relationships with people, not battles over business. Finally, the individuals you may view as "competitors" are perceived by management as your competitors. Whether you realize it or not, your mutual success benefits the entire office.

Setting the Stage for Paralegal Competition

If the world was a perfect place, you could simply perform your job to the best of your abilities and your supervisor would recognize your contribution and you would excel. But it doesn't operate that way. Paralegals have two distinct challenges that set the stage for competition. Time constraints of attorneys affect performance. Attorneys may frequently inquire about the progress of a project or demand that you complete it in an unreasonable timeframe. In your desire to appease, you may make mistakes — overlook important data or neglecting to carefully proofread documents. You become vulnerable to "attack" from your competitors.

Another dilemma legal assistants face is the constant struggle related to billable hours. Those consistently high numbers are held in high regard, yet paralegals don't control the reporting process. It's unusual for attorneys to reduce time billed to an amount they feel they can personally justify. In addition, since the billing rate for associates is higher than the rate for paralegals, work traditionally done by paralegals at times may be shifted upwards to pump up the coffers. This could become a critical issue if there's not much work coming through the door, again, creating an exploitable "weakness."

Anatomy of a Backstabber

Healthy competition is good. Motivated achievers who work hard and perform well set high standards in the workplace. They may elicit jealousy — or sometimes be regarded as brown-nosers — but it's with the excellent results they produce. It's actually quite easy, however, to determine when someone crosses the line into unhealthy behavior — it occurs when they begin to shine by making their colleagues look poor in comparison. Even when it's unintentional, there's a subversive taint to such achievements. Signals include:

- ⚡ Gossiping about colleagues' mistakes or weaknesses
- ⚡ Pointing out others' mistakes in group settings or to superiors
- ⚡ Lying
- ⚡ Taking credit for work completed by a group or another individual
- ⚡ Blaming others for mistakes they created instead of taking responsibility
- ⚡ Consistently showcasing their own work in way that makes others' performance look poor
- ⚡ Constantly singling out the poor performance of one person
- ⚡ Undermining a colleague's performance by causing others to doubt their abilities.

Avoid Becoming the Target of a Backstabber

Interestingly, the same rules that guide fair play in the workplace also will protect you from backstabbers and their colleagues. Frankly, it has a lot to do with building personal credibility. These are the guidelines I recommend:

1. Take Responsibility when You Make a Mistake.

We all make mistakes. Own up when it's your fault, even if it's painful. Once you admit a failure, a corrective process can begin and you can help develop a remedy. In addition, if you've established a reputation for accepting blame for your mistakes, you're less likely to be blamed for the mistakes of other people.

2. Give Credit Where Credit is Due.

Call attention to the contributions and accomplishments of others. If a colleague helped you complete a task, let your attorney — and his or her supervising attorney — know. Teamwork is appreciated and you should acknowledge the valuable contributions of your colleagues. Justified praise will enhance your relationships with your workers and they will be more likely to acknowledge your talents and protect you from unfair criticism.

3. Build Trust.

Create a strong sense of trust so that people in your office believe what you say. Be accountable for your actions, accept responsibility and deliver on your promises. Don't repeat gossip and always report information told to you in confidence. If someone makes a mistake, approach that individual to discuss the problem; don't talk to their colleagues or superiors about it unless absolutely necessary.

4. Keep Records.

Record your accomplishments. Weekly activity reports, billing memos and meeting notes can be useful long after an assignment is complete and it's time for your performance review. Detailed notes are especially useful if a sticky situation arises questioning your role or contribution to an assignment.

5. Be Proactive When You Feel Vulnerable.

If you sense you're vulnerable — either because you've made a mistake or you sense you've become a target of a backstabber — issue a pre-emptive strike. For example, if your computer skills need improvement and you've unsuccessfully solicited assistance from colleagues, enroll in a class. Inform your co-workers about your initiative. You could be direct, "I've enrolled in a computer class to improve my skills." or drop it into conversation, "Let me show you what I just learned in the computer class I'm taking." If someone has made snide remarks about the time you devote to your family and you had to leave work to pick up a sick child, let it be known that you met your deadline by finishing your work at home. Don't become a martyr; you should simply know your vulnerable areas and respond accordingly. Anticipate the reactions of your critics, you protect yourself.

6. Respond Enthusiastically to a Colleague's Success.

When peers accomplish a difficult task or solve a challenging problem, let them know you recognize their talents, and congratulate them on their success. This may be particularly helpful when an attorney acknowledges the achievement or complains about some aspect of the project.

7. Create a Positive Work Environment.

The new workplace is more team-oriented than in the past. Learn the value of collaboration and team building. The person you perceive as your competitor may become an ally when you have a chance. Listen to what's going on around you; get a true picture of what's happening. Having a positive attitude about your own creativity.

Some years ago, the slogan "Random Acts of Kindness" popped up, appearing on bumper stickers and in various publications. The idea of performing thoughtful acts for people without expecting recognition is a way toward generating an atmosphere of goodwill.

If you devote your energy to creating a positive work environment, your colleagues are likely to respond. A passage from the April/May 2000 issue of the publication "The InnerEdge," captured this sentiment: "Environments that motivate through fear literally shut down the potential for growth. Those that inspire through vision, open us up to express unforeseen possibilities."

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