DAN QUAYLE WAS RIGHT
Too many lawyers focusing on fees, not on clients

At the 1991 ABA Convention, Dan Quayle said that America has too many lawyers. I believe that he was right.

There are too many lawyers who don’t care enough about their clients. There are too many lawyers who focus on billable hours rather than on meaningful client service. There are too many lawyers who seem to have missed the courses on professionalism and who have confused a scorched earth approach to every legal matter with the duty of zeal representation.

Lawyer “jokes” abound and unfortunately there is more than a grain of truth in their black humor. Surveys indicate that the public has a love hate outlook regarding lawyers – most are happy with their own lawyers but distrust or dislike all other lawyers.

The 1980s have been called the decade of greed. Unfortunately, lawyers were not exempt from participating in the excesses. Monetary goals and quotas for billable hours became the guiding principles for many firms whose attention was riveted on their bottom line rather than on providing service for their clients. Often, accountability to the client was replaced by accountability to the billing committee. In an atmosphere like this, it is little wonder that many have abandoned that life style in favor of solo and small firm practice.

Solo and small firm practice offers a special ambiance and opportunity to be directly involved in the affairs of our clients and to make a difference in their lives. Clients are searching desperately for personalized attention from lawyers who are concerned about them, lawyers who have good reputations and are honest who will listen to them and understand their problems, and who are reasonably competent and efficient.

No other form of practice offers lawyers the unrestricted opportunity to serve clients by understanding and meeting their needs. We are the ones who have the best chance of providing personalized services to clients. Certainly in solo practice, what you see is what you get. The lawyer who is hired is the lawyer who serves the client.

In every practice setting there is a compelling need for us to get organized and get control of our time. With proper organization, efficient administrative and substantive systems, and well-trained personnel, we discover that we have more time available. We will be successful if we use this time to focus on our clients and their needs, to counsel with them, and to provide personalized service to them. And we will find that we will have more personal satisfaction from being lawyers.

I submit that the only reason that we lawyers have licenses granting us the exclusive right to practice law is to provide us with an opportunity to serve our clients. We must never lose sight of this principle and we must always do our best to serve them for if we do not, other groups will spring up to provide services demanded by our former clients.

If, through greed or neglect or inefficiency, we fail to serve the public, we will deserve to lose our exclusive franchises to provide legal services, and we will prove that Dan Quayle was right.

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Thanks to each of you who have already written. You’ve raised some interesting questions and have given me great ideas for future columns. I want to hear from you and want to make this section the part you turn to first. Please write to me c/o ABA Journal, 750 North Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, Illinois 60611 or FAX 312/988-6014. I look forward to hearing from you.

Dos and Don’ts for Better Client Relations

- Do appreciate the honor of being chosen to serve each of your clients.
- Do whatever you can to improve your listening and other communication skills.
- Do what you can to be client-oriented even when your practice is in a technical field.
- Do remember that clients have feelings and are hungry for personal attention.
- Do your best to give your clients reassurance, encouragement and even inspiration.
- Don’t be aloof or patronizing to your clients.
- Don’t neglect your human-relations skills.
- Don’t be indifferent to the need to inform and educate your clients.
- Don’t feel insulted by questions, objections or procrastination from clients.
- Don’t think you are entitled to a successful practice just because you have a license to practice law.

—J.B.