

A Manager's Perspective

Just Beneath the Surface

Peter R. Kovacek, PT, MSA

Winter in Southeastern Michigan can be a wonderful time. Although many people don't think of Detroit as a winter wonderland, this is one of my favorite times of year. Lately we've been getting a light dusting (1-3 inches) of snow just about every night. Each morning everything is so clean and white and beautiful, it seems like a new and fresh start every time I go out for my morning run. Mentally, it seems to rejuvenate, recharge and invigorate me. I just love this time of year in Detroit.

Yesterday morning was typical – we had an overnight snowfall of 2-3 inches – the light and fluffy type – and since I had to drop our 15 year old off for his morning rowing team workout at 5 am, I slipped into my running clothes and went for a run while he worked out. The temperature was wonderful and the wind was very still. It was a perfect morning for running and for thinking. In these kinds of conditions, I am strong. I have endurance. I am one with my running. I love the snow. I love the winter.

As I ran on the still unplowed streets, I noticed how my mood improved the further I ran. I delighted at the thought of mine being the only footprints on the perfect blanket of snow.

I also realized how slippery the roadway had become just beneath the surface of the new snow. Previous snows had been plowed away, darkened by traffic and road dirt and a thin layer of ice covered the roadway, just beneath the sparkling new covering of snow whose beauty had caught my eye and thoughts that morning.

Since it is so early when I run, I often will see no other people during my workout. Frequently, I cross the path of dogs, mice, rabbits, and possum. Sometimes I even get to see a pair of little red foxes and I often run through small herds of deer if I run on a nearby island. Yesterday morning, there were no people, no critters, nothing but calm beauty and quiet reflection. It was the perfect morning - at least for a while.

When I run, I think. It is my time to clear my mind, to ponder my existence, to envision the possible and sometimes the impossible. I have had some of my most creative ideas when I was running. I have also had some of the silliest and most impractical thoughts imaginable. Whether creative or impractical, I value my thinking time. It keeps me grounded and prevents me from getting stale.

Apparently, thinking sometimes precludes me from paying attention to my environment. As I continued to run yesterday morning, I began to notice the slippery coating just beneath the surface of the snow. I started to feel the co-contractions of my legs as they tried to stabilize my gait while my feet slipped with every stride. As I focused my attention on the treacherous footing, I began to notice how complicated and tedious my previously carefree and unconscious running had become. Soon I viewed the dusting of snow as just a sinister plot to conceal the horrible footing and icy conditions just beneath the surface. The snow was the perfect perpetrator – its beauty and splendor diverts your attention away from the danger that it hides just beneath the surface.

I never did lose my footing completely. I did not fall and injure myself. But I came to some interesting thoughts as I conquered that oppressive track. As I struggled to keep my footing, I also struggled to maintain my positive attitude. Like the icy covering, my thoughts began to focus just beneath the surface.

As usual, I looked for the metaphor with rehabilitation. It was right there in front of me – just beneath the surface.

We have had some significant "victories" lately in the legislative and regulatory arenas. We've spent the past several months patting ourselves on the back because we really have done some amazing things. We have confronted several significant challenges to our profession and to the well being of our patients and we have held our own, stood our ground, fought the good

fight, and many other worn out clichés related to war and battle. But I think we will understand better if we try to look just beneath the surface.

It is always easy to see the beautiful covering of sparkling white snow. It makes us feel good and sometimes we all need help feeling good. But underneath the cover of our recent “victories” lies a more significant truth. Just beneath the surface of our victories are several realities that we need to recognize. Just beneath the surface, these realities are just as slippery and treacherous as any icy road. Looking just beneath the surface leads us to several important conclusions:

- ?? Many important decision makers, including payers, legislators and many patients simply think we cost too much. We have not articulated the value of our services as well as is needed.
- ?? Many of our recent “victories” are merely reversals of previous defeats. Rather than true advances, they are merely successful efforts to return to previous baseline levels. We have not always been honest with ourselves about our ability to influence health policy at any level of our organizations and governmental agencies.
- ?? There are many among us who just don’t see things the way we would like. Although we may view physical therapy as a career and a profession, some of us would rather just have a job, a meal ticket or a pleasant distraction. Although we may prefer that physical therapists actively engage the dialogue on the critical issues of the day – licensure, direct access, physician status for the profession, reimbursement, and evidence to support our practice and our patients and many others – some clinicians merely prefer to “treat patients” and not be “bothered” by these issues.
- ?? Although we have seen some recent success in influencing national and state health policy decisions, this is not the time to take a breather. While communication within the profession is always critical, this is a time for action – not just a time for communication. To quote a famous GI Joe commercial “Knowing is half the battle” – but the other half is action. We have become too cerebral and not kinetic enough.

Let’s get our facts straight and then use them for the greater good – to influence decision making within our organizations, our state government and our federal government and regulatory agencies.

When we look beneath the surface, what we see is not always as pretty a view as what we would like to see. It is, however, a necessary view. When we look just beneath the surface, we can see more than just the frosting – we see the whole cake. Whatever the condition of that cake, we can handle it - but only if we chose to look just beneath the surface.

I look forward to hearing your thought on these issues. What do you think?

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