



Richard Hart

# Can you take a quick look at this?

**A**n innocent request heard every day in all sorts of workplaces: offices, factories, warehouses, shops and mines. It can demonstrate a healthy willingness to ask for help, seek second opinions, and collaborate and cooperate.

Yet the off-hand request for a ‘quick look’ can set the stage for workflow errors, poor production quality, damage to reputation, strains on relationships, and even physical injury or death.

Consider the following scenarios:

- *Production manager, Choi-Ping, notices the male members of the maintenance team standing around talking and laughing somewhat furtively. She also notices that the new maintenance worker, Tina, is not with the group but is instead sitting alone in the coffee area looking quite subdued. The maintenance workers quickly disperse as Choi-Ping approaches. When she enters the administration office, Choi-Ping mentions to Ralph, the maintenance supervisor, “Ralph, you might want to take a quick look around to see how Tina is getting on with the team.” Later that day, Ralph passes by Tina as she is wiping her eyes, and asks her, “How’s it going, Tina?” Ralph takes Tina’s somewhat forced smile and nod at face value. Weeks later, Tina quits, filing a harassment complaint alleging that she has been excluded by her male coworkers, and openly subjected to humiliating sexual references concerning her body. In her complaint, Tina specifically alleges that Choi-Ping and Ralph had both seen her visibly distressed over a specific incident and done nothing to enquire or investigate.*
- *While preparing for a heavy lift, new crane operator Harold is instructed by his supervisor, Alfie, to have a quick look*

*“at the front”. Harold walks to the front of the crane and does a cursory scan, noting that the target load appears to be secured by hooks rather than clamps in violation of the company’s procedures as Harold remembers them. However, Harold assumes that Alfie himself knows what he is doing; Harold further assumes that Alfie simply wants to ensure that the front of the crane is clear before executing the lift. Giving the thumbs up sign, Harold climbs into the cab and commences the lift. Part way through the lift, the load becomes unstable and spills, resulting in serious injuries to a couple of workers and substantial damage to company property. Harold is let go on the strength of Alfie’s assertions that Harold had been reckless or negligent in performing the check of the load directed by Alfie.*

These scenarios illustrate two problems with the quick look request. First, the way I make my request that you take a ‘quick look’ – and the way you respond – may create confusion as to what I really want from you, what you are agreeing to do, and whether you should be agreeing to this. Second, without a common, explicit and effective decision framework, your actual execution of the quick look may be problematic or even harmful.

## Know the origins

The potential for a lack of clarity between the people involved in a quick look request can come about in a number of different forms:

- The ‘lazy request’ – Often the person making the request for a quick look does not give serious consideration to what they actually want and why.
- The ‘timid request’ – Sometimes

the person making the request for a quick look is very clear on what he/she wants, but is unwilling to ask specifically.

- The ‘set up’ – sometimes the person making the request for a quick look may even be acting on malicious intentions to make the other look bad, by not being clear about what is needed as part of the quick look, or who will be relying on the quick look, or what will happen next.

## The important thing is to take responsibility for ... clarity

### Delve for ‘truths’

Addressing the problem is pretty straightforward: ask questions.

Here are some to consider before agreeing to take a quick look:

- How much detail do you want me to go into in responding?
- What do I need to do so that you feel like I’m giving this the attention you are looking for?
- How much time do you anticipate me spending on this?
- How do you see me as being helpful in this?
- How will my input affect what you do next or what happens next?
- What will you be doing with this after you get my response?
- Will anyone else aside from you be relying on my input?
- Who else will be looking over this aside from me?
- What will you do if I give you a reply that you don’t agree with or like?

The important thing is to take responsibility for ensuring there is sufficient clarity between you and the

person asking that you take a quick look before you agree to take on the responsibility.

### Test the look

When you've asked all the right questions and have taken on the responsibility to do a quick look, you need to do a good job. What do I mean by a 'good job'? The PEME test is a ProActive ReSolutions decision model you can use to take a quick look, which reminds us to focus on the following:

- Prohibited behaviour (breaches of laws, regulations, policies, codes of conduct, workplace rules, etc)
- Effects of problematic behaviour or situations (risk of physical injury, conflict, disengagement, high turnover, absenteeism, etc)
- Motivations/drivers of problematic behaviour (substance abuse, mental illness, personality disorders, resentment, etc)
- Escalations in problematic behaviour or risk.

In conducting your quick look at anything, if you come across any suggestion that one or more of the above *may* be present, your report back should highlight that information. For instance, if Choi-Ping had used PEME, she might have concluded on the basis of her observations that there was a suggestion of behaviour – social exclusion – prohibited by policy occurring in the workplace in relation to Tina. Similarly, even if Ralph had not heard or seen any suggestion of prohibited behaviour, he did see Tina crying, and was therefore in the position to identify that as a possible effect of problematic behaviour or a problematic situation.

The thing to remember about PEME is that it is scanning tool and only answers the question: does everything *appear* to be OK, or might further action be required? It does not tell you what further action is required beyond reporting back on the results of the quick look. Determining what to do next should only be made after a fuller picture has been obtained.

### Reject *quid pro quo*

The quick look request imposes certain obligations on both parties. These responsibilities are never 'quid pro quo' – it's not good enough to say, "I'll do my bit if you do yours." Don't let yourself fall into a vulnerable position by virtue of an apparently off-the-cuff request from someone. There is a lot at stake.

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