

PROFESSIONALISM
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It strikes me every time I hear someone talk about professionalism, how many people seem to understand the concept, but fail to execute the behaviors.

For example, a businessman I know says he takes great pride in his professionalism, yet finds it impossible to get to meetings on time, fails to make notes on important issues, talks for extended periods of time without having an apparent purpose for his discourse, and makes decisions on the spot, frequently without having much background information. I wonder where his pride is placed?

Many business people work hard, travel fast, and keep an extraordinary number of balls in the air. We consider those who do this gracefully to be highly professional. But what's involved? And when we speak of professionalism, what do we mean?

My friend, the businessman, holds a powerful position and commands an audience whenever he wishes to do so. He speaks comfortably on a number of subjects about which he is quite knowledgeable. He is well-groomed, amiable, and flexible. His opinion is frequently in demand because he controls significant resources. His expertise has been developed over years of active participation in his industry.

If our standards of professionalism include access to and wielding of power, public speaking capabilities, an attractive image, and industry expertise, we would have to say he is highly professional.

But people are not always sure where he's coming from with his decision-making. He jumps from one issue to another with such rapidity that many wonder how he keeps things straight. When he arrives late for meetings and listens only briefly before giving his views and urging a course of action, folks feel uncomfortable. When he overturns a decision that had previously been made with thoughtfulness and care, people begin to get nervous. Is this professional behavior?

If we wish to include attributes like discipline, focus, and purpose to our standards of professionalism, our friend's stature begins to fade a bit. If we are to include "understandability" or predictability, his image fades a bit more. If we add cooperation or collaboration to the mix of qualities we view as professional, our assessment of him changes quite dramatically.

While the pace of change and the speed of technology demand that we move faster and deal with an ever-expanding volume of work, some attributes of professionalism are timeless. A clear sense of purpose, a semblance of organization, a cool head under stress, demonstrated knowledge, and the ability to communicate clearly and concisely are among these things. So are attentiveness, respect, and cooperation. There's an old-fashioned word that used to be synonymous with professionalism: class.

People with a professional attitude help us understand what they're doing or talking about. They do not shroud themselves in mystery. They speak plainly and answer our questions openly and directly. They may move quickly, but their actions are neither sporadic nor unpredictable. They know where things are when they need them. They jot notes about important conversations to be sure they understand varying viewpoints as they relate to a situation. They pay attention to people. They take time to think.

When they are puzzled or uncertain about something, they say so. Comfortable with the understanding that they cannot (and need not) know everything, they take time to fill in gaps as necessary. They choose their actions rather than being swept along on a path designed by circumstance. They keep their wits about them as they move steadfastly toward their goals.

When we deal with professionals we feel comfortable that things are under control. Even in crisis situations, we trust that things will be handled properly and that decisions made will be appropriate. When mistakes occur, we trust that they will be corrected and any ill effects rectified. People who exhibit professionalism anticipate mistakes; they prepare for them and become proficient at handling them.

On the flip side, a lack of professionalism is reflected in the details of our actions. As shown in the earlier example, little things add up. When we pick up the telephone without knowing what we want to accomplish in the conversation, we contribute to the chaos. When we call meetings without written agendas or specified goals, we waste people's time. When we write a memo or letter without a specific purpose, we waste our time and confuse the recipient.

When we shoot from the hip, we risk poor decisions and wasted resources. When we speak before we think, chances are good that we will experience regret a little later on. When we pay scant attention to discussions that have importance to our work and our decisions, we risk faulty judgments.

From time to time, we all stumble. But when we make these errors routinely and excuse them by pleading too much work or too fast a pace, we declare ourselves to be unprofessional.

Professionalism in the early 21st century means the same thing it always has: Demonstrating a mastery of one's business, respect for one's associates, and self-confidence in getting things done.

If you're looking for a short course on improving your own level of professionalism, here are six suggestions.

(1) Pay attention. Whether you're in a meeting, engaged in a telephone conversation, or reading a report, pay attention to the information and how it's delivered. Ask yourself: Why is this important?

(2) Extend respect to everyone, whether they deserve it or not.

(3) Take notes; your memory will fool you at the worst possible time.

(4) Think.

(5) Speak only after you've figured out what you want to say and why. Ask yourself: What's my point?

(6) Discipline yourself to do these things routinely. I guarantee that professionalism will result.

