



How to Nurture Professionalism in 3 Steps

By THE GOALS INSTITUTE

An accounting firm hired me to provide an after-dinner keynote for a group of seniors and emerging managers.

Just a few moments into my talk, a group of young people at a second row table began having distracting side conversations. They talked with each other and occasionally leaned over to comment to someone at a nearby table. They laughed, snickered and giggled. Several individuals pulled out their cell phones and called friends. One individual held his cell phone up, pointed it at me and took my picture. Another individual got up, walked over to the bar and brought back several clinking bottles of beer.

Many people looked over at the individuals at the noisy table and frowned. A few people whispered “shhhh” and put a finger to their lips.

After my presentation, several people apologized for the behavior of the individuals. A week after the event, two of the main disruptors at the table sent me letters apologizing for their behavior. I later discovered that a senior partner who heard about the disruption had a special meeting with the individuals the next day to express his disappointment with their behavior. Imagine that conversation!

Lessons to Be Learned

I look at that situation as a teaching experience and learning opportunity for everyone.

First, it was a learning experience for the individuals at the table, particularly the two individuals who wrote letters to me. I doubt they will ever forget writing those letters.

Second, it was a learning experience for the people who were in leadership roles in the room that evening. My guess is the next time they encounter a situation like that, they will take action instead of standing by observing the disruption.

Third, it was a good lesson for me. I should not accept speaking engagements where I am supposed to provide a content-filled program right after an open bar when people are in a celebratory mood.

Fourth, this story offers insight, advice and instruction for anyone and everyone who reads, hears or shares it. This story is a teaching story. Teaching stories are one of the primary tools we use to communicate. Teaching stories are one of the oldest and best ways we learn and teach what we need to learn and share.

The New News about Professionalism

One of the lessons the teaching story above points out is what I call the “new news about professionalism.”

One new news headline is “Professional Behavior Will Not Just Happen.”

We cannot just talk about professionalism and hope for the best. If we want to create, nurture and maintain professionalism and professional behavior in our organizations, we must act —like the partner did in the above example.

We cannot be passive. If we do not take steps to proactively and continuously instill and nurture professionalism in each other and ourselves, then our principles of professionalism that inspire professional quality, values, behaviors and skills will deteriorate over time.

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor, said this nearly 2,000 years ago (paraphrased). “How can our better principles die? They will die unless the impressions which support them are kept alive and they are fed. It is in your power to fan these principles into a blazing bonfire.”

The concept of professionalism goes beyond ethics; it encompasses image, manners, respect, appearance, excellence, quality, expertise and other factors. Unfortunately, many of the principles of professionalism are not being fanned into a blazing bonfire in many organizations. Sometimes there is barely a flicker.

The Big Black Hole of Mediocrity

A second new news headline is “Tolerance and Permissiveness Are Digging Us into a Big Black Hole of Mediocrity.”

Where unprofessional behavior exists, it rarely is because of demographic or economic drivers. More commonly, unprofessional behavior exists when leaders inadvertently allow it to exist by failing to proactively establish, communicate and enforce a code of conduct and standards of excellence.

In other words, we unknowingly do it to ourselves. We reinforce unprofessional behavior when we are permissive and look the other way. We sabotage professionalism and our own standards of conduct when we do not provide for and enforce consequences for noncompliance. We invite and perpetuate unacceptable performance and behavior when we accept mediocrity.

When we tolerate unacceptable behavior and do not say or do anything to correct it, we inadvertently establish a new, lower standard of acceptability. Imagine how the rowdy individuals at the table and others present in the room would have interpreted a message of no action after the event. Then imagine how they interpreted and responded to the message the partner sent by meeting with the individuals and asking them to send me letters of apology. How many people do you think heard about the meeting the partner had with the individuals the day after my presentation?

Professionalism goes far beyond the personal behavior attributes in the story above. It extends to every aspect of our work and lives. When we accept mediocre or sub-standard work or results and do not require that they be brought up to acceptable levels, we inadvertently lower our standards of acceptable quality and performance. Because we took no action, it must be acceptable, right?

Over a period of continued tolerance and permissiveness, we dig ourselves deeper and deeper into a big black hole of mediocrity that is harder and harder to escape.

An appropriate expression here is, "We get what we expect." If we do not tell people what we expect of them, it is not reasonable to assume that we will get it. In addition, if we tolerate unprofessional behavior or if we ignore and do not provide consequences for any behavior we do not want to happen, there is no reason for it to stop.

Professionalism is for Everyone

At The Goals Institute, we saw the trends in unprofessional behavior, tolerance, permissiveness and widespread acceptance of mediocrity brewing several years ago.

Many organizations are experiencing declining levels of employee diligence, responsibility, accountability and pride in both appearance and work results.

Leaders and managers are encountering employee dissatisfaction and disengagement, the disappearance of loyalty, deteriorating client or customer service and the evaporation of a solid work ethic.

Some organizations are facing alarming trends in arrogance and disrespect that are showing up as "attitude" or "tone" problems in spoken communication and e-mail. There also are trends suggesting an outright disregard and indifference to policies, procedures, rules and authority.

Many of these challenges stem from the absence of professionalism at school, home and in the workplace. This lack of professionalism challenges business leaders and managers in the form of lying, dishonesty, mediocrity, rudeness, incompetence, indifference and other unprofessional behaviors that cut across all levels of an organization.

In 2001, The Goals Institute published "Professionalism Is for Everyone." Our intent was to provide a tool organizations could use to address these issues and take concrete steps to establish and nurture a professional culture. This book presents a framework of "Five Keys to Being a True Professional: Character, Attitude, Excellence, Competency, and Conduct." These five keys focus on positive values, high standards of conduct and more. They also address accountability, responsibility, work ethic, work quality and performance.

Since we first published "Professionalism Is for Everyone," hundreds of organizations have provided our book to thousands of their associates. We have provided seminars and talks on professionalism for many organizations. We recently began offering resources that individuals in organizations may purchase and teach our programs to their associates themselves.

Missed Opportunities

Because of our experiences above, we have learned a lot about the challenges and problems organizations face in nurturing a culture of professionalism.

We all know there are many individuals who do not perform or behave in a professional manner. What we have learned is many leaders may be overlooking the magnitude of the lost opportunity cost of this.

When individuals do not perform or behave in a professional manner, those individuals and their organizations do not achieve their potential. The gap between the results that are achieved in an unprofessional environment and the results that could be achieved in a professional environment is huge.

In some cases, individuals may be underperforming so much or behaving so unprofessionally that they are jeopardizing or hampering their career possibilities and the ultimate success of their organizations.

Three Steps to a Professional Culture

The good news is professionalism, like any other life skill or value belief, can be taught and inspired. Everyone can learn how to think and act in a professional manner. Everyone can be inspired to improve his or her professional skills and behavior.

Every organization must take three fundamental steps to create and maintain a professional culture.

Step 1: Establish the Rules

The first step is to establish the rules that everyone must follow.

This means adopting a written code of conduct in some tangible form that prescribes clear policies, procedures, values and behaviors that everyone understands.

It is foolish to assume that people know right from wrong and understand what they should do or not do to think and act professionally. Experience proves if we do not tell people exactly what we want them to know and do, they are going to guess, and oftentimes they are going to guess incorrectly.

In establishing standards of conduct and the rules for guiding professional behavior, many organizations fall short of the mark either because they attempt a piecemeal approach or because they are not as explicit as they should be.

Many organizations, for example, have adopted codes of ethical behavior that spell out various legal, ethical and moral issues, rules and regulations. This is a good beginning; however, there is more to being a professional than just following legal, moral and ethical rules. Professionalism includes many other factors such as civility, personal accountability and competence.

An example of not going far enough is the organization that creates and adopts a dress code but then takes no steps to enforce the dress code or address manners, respect, loyalty and other professional attributes.

One of the reasons we published “Professionalism Is for Everyone” is to provide leaders and managers with a simple, effective and easy to use tool for establishing and nurturing professionalism in others.

Step 2: Teach Professionalism

The second step to creating and maintaining a professional culture is to teach individuals the rules and standards of behavior they should know and follow.

In other words, you have to teach the principles and techniques of professionalism and professional behavior so individuals have the opportunity to learn these concepts and obtain firsthand guidance for how they should apply them. A key time to teach the core principles of professionalism is when individuals are newly hired.

I think it is worth noting all the emphasis we have on ethics and required ethics training in the accounting profession. However, there is very little emphasis and training I am aware of on the fundamentals of what it takes to be a professional.

Suppose a new person in your organization walked up to you right now and asked you what it means to be a professional. What would you say? Do you feel your response would answer their question clearly and completely? Would you cover all the key points? Do you think your answer would provide the guidance the individual needs?

I am biased for sure on this subject. However, I think the answer to the question “What does it mean to be a professional?” deserves more thought and a more complete answer than many individuals can readily provide. I recommend everyone periodically attend a course or program that addresses and explores the principles of professionalism.

Step 3: Provide Reminders and Reinforcement

The third step is to continually reinforce and enforce the principles of professional behavior.

Once leaders establish the ground rules for professionalism, they cannot tolerate non-compliance, coasting or mediocrity.

It is important to recognize and reward the professional behaviors we want. It also is important to have consequences for noncompliance. In addition, leaders and managers cannot allow associates to cruise along just doing their jobs and meeting basic or minimum requirements. Everyone must continually press for professional excellence, growth and improvement. We all need periodic reminders about principles we already know and apply.

One approach for reinforcement is to use the words “professional” and “professionalism” in the language within our organizations. The word “professional” stands out. As an example, when Arthur Winston retired at age 100 after working at the Los Angeles Transit System for 75 years

without a single sick day, NBC's Mark Mullen reported that what set Winston apart from everyone else was his professionalism.

Another excellent technique for providing periodic reminders and reinforcement is to develop an official library of teaching stories that demonstrate professional behavior specific to your organization. These can be short snippets that describe situations and how individuals did or did not behave professionally.

A good story to get you started thinking is the one at the beginning of this article. Did you ever have an experience early in your career like the young people at the table had? I did and I learned from it. I have shared that story many times and hopefully have helped others avoid and learn from an embarrassing mistake I made earlier in my career.

That is another story.



The GOALS INSTITUTE
Hayden Corporate Center, Suite 270
8283 North Hayden Road, Scottsdale, Arizona 85258
www.GoalPower.com 480.422.1814 info@goalsinstitute.com