PROFESSIONALISM

THE DECLINE OF A CRITICAL SET OF BEHAVIORS

Analysis of Published Data and Recommendations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Professionalism is critical both to the effective functioning of any business and to the success of any individual, but professionalism in the workforce is declining. Indeed, there is reason to believe that this decline will continue and that it may accelerate.

In order to reverse this decline, changes must be made in the way that we educate our workforce, both in the classroom and the workplace because the evidence suggests that people do not acquire professionalism simply by working in a professional environment.

The traditional academically-oriented, four-year colleges are not well suited to the teaching of professionalism skills. The critical classrooms are those found in market-facing institutions like community colleges and vocational and technical colleges. These schools, far more than their four-year counterparts, are committed to preparing their students for career success. However, they have traditionally focused on teaching skill sets and not professionalism. As an increasing number of newly-graduated students fail to meet employer expectations with regard to professionalism, colleges must add programs and prepare their students more comprehensively for the workplace.

Furthermore, since most new entrants into the job market are not graduates of community, vocational, or technical colleges, these institutions cannot solve the problem on their own. Businesses, themselves, will have to contribute the greater proportion of the solution. Making professionalism an explicit part of the orientation and training of all new hires is a step that most businesses have failed to take. That failure must be remedied.

A BRIEF DEFINITION

Like most social principles, professionalism is defined in the doing. Although such definitions are rarely precise, professionalism can accurately be described as the set of behaviors that you would hope to find in a co-worker; for example a good work ethic, appropriate attire and physical appearance, effective communication, courtesy, and good interpersonal skills. Professionals are punctual, meet agreed-upon deadlines, dress appropriately for the work environment, acknowledge and learn from mistakes, are courteous and well mannered, exercise control over their emotions and the language they use, act as team players, treat everyone with respect, and consistently perform at “the top of their game.”

Of course, the definition can be elaborated - at great length - by listing additional behaviors, but the definition provided above provides an adequate illustration and is easily understandable.
A CRITICAL SET OF BEHAVIORS

Perhaps the most striking thing about professionalism is that people need a definition to recognize it but don’t need anything at all to recognize its absence. We usually assume that the people around us will be professional in their dealings with us and, as a result, we rarely take specific notice when that expectation is fulfilled. However, when that expectation is not fulfilled - when someone is rude or lacks good manners, when someone comes to work habitually late, when someone tries to avoid responsibility for something wrong that he has done - we not only notice but usually react quite strongly.

However, the fact that people take professionalism for granted does not mean that it is only a minor virtue. In fact, it is usually regarded as critical to the success of an individual or an organization. In a recent survey of journalism professionals, the Arkansas Press Association found that professionalism was considered the single most important attribute that a new journalism graduate could possess, surpassing basic interviewing skills, news writing skills, and even practical experience.1 Similarly, in a survey of medical students, residents, and attending physicians, professionalism was rated as important or very important by all three groups.2

Not only is professionalism highly valued, it can actually predict success. In a study of the relationship between the ranking assigned by interviewers to candidates for admission to medical residency programs and an array of potential predictors, including professionalism, medical school ranking, research experience, medical experience, academic awards, and professional memberships, Brandt, Forde, and Chasen found that professionalism and medical school ranking correlated highly while other variables did not.3 According to the authors, “Our data suggests [sic] that professionalism is considered highly when evaluating prospective residents.”

Just as professionalism is seen as critical to success, a lack of professionalism is strongly associated with failure. In a major study undertaken by the Center for Professional Excellence at York College of Pennsylvania, hundreds of managers and human resource personnel participated in an extensive professionalism survey.4 Figure 1 shows the impact of a lack of professionalism on the likelihood of being hired or promoted.
Another study, by Bekhor, Bekhor, and Gandrabur, found similar results when they surveyed employers across a broad range of industries to determine the impact of a perceived lack of professionalism – the wearing of visible tattoos – on the likelihood of being offered a job.\(^5\) They found that over 70% of employers in the office, retail, beauty, and hospitality sectors would not employ a person with visible tattoos.

PROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR IN DECLINE

In spite of its importance, we rarely ask ourselves how professionalism develops. We don’t ask how people become professional. We simply take it for granted that almost everyone does, in fact, become professional. We seem to assume that professionalism is somehow inculcated in each of us as an integral part of our upbringing. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

In the York College study, fully 33% of the human resources personnel and 21% of the managers reported feeling that professionalism is declining.\(^6\) It should be noted here that the observed difference between the people in human resources and the managers is probably a function of the success of the human resources personnel in filtering out unprofessional candidates. Consequently, the experience of the HR respondents is probably a more accurate barometer of changes in the general population.

Even more alarming, the decline is largely attributed to a decline in professionalism among younger workers. This suggests that the decline reported by respondents in the York College study will not only continue but may accelerate as younger workers become an ever-larger fraction of the overall workforce.

This concern has recently been echoed by Anthony DePalma, a journalism professor at Seton Hall University. Commenting on his students’ reaction to a deception practiced by a public figure that resulted in a public apology by a major news organization, DePalma noted that they appear to accept “the idea that there might be different versions of the truth – a larger truth or an emotional truth.”\(^7\) DePalma went on to say that “They assume that [the public figure] was being an advocate for his beliefs, and if he had to break a few rules, so be it.” This attitude is fundamentally incompatible with the ethical demands of professionalism.

Edward L. Queen II, of the Emory University Center for Ethics, has framed the dilemma even more starkly; “The problem is today’s social norms are basically the social norms of adolescent males, not of adult human beings.”\(^8\)
THE CHALLENGE

Professionalism is far too important for us to ignore its troubles. However, the solution to these troubles is not obvious.

The evidence suggests that people do not acquire professionalism simply by working in a professional environment. A study of professionalism in teachers examined several factors that might affect professionalism and concluded that “academic qualifications and teaching experience did not affect professionalism…”

This difficulty is compounded by the fact that business is not prepared to engage the issue. The York College study revealed that fewer than half of all businesses have programs that specifically address professionalism for new employees. In fact, businesses would far rather not have to address the problem at all. Figure 2 shows the percentage of human resource professionals and managers who believe that colleges, not businesses, should be responsible for the development of professionalism. This finding is further supported by research done by Iowa State University that showed that employers of their horticulture graduates wanted to see a heavier focus by the school on professionalism.
In spite of the fact that people in the business environment want colleges to solve the problem of declining professionalism, they have very little idea exactly how colleges should go about it. When asked for suggestions, most respondents had none. Figure 3 shows the most common recommendations and the percentage of respondents who made them. If those most affected by the decline in professionalism are unable to offer solutions, it seems unfair to expect the colleges to find them.

The search for solutions to declining professionalism is exacerbated by the fact that, even though businesses desperately want the colleges to solve the problem, academically-oriented four-year colleges are not designed to do so. Training undergraduates in professionalism fits neither the colleges’ process nor their revenue models. As the Iowa State University research notes, “Some of the skills most desired, such as good work ethic and initiative, are also some of the most difficult to teach at the collegiate level.” More fundamentally, teaching professionalism is not consonant with their perceived mission.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

The research into the determinants of professionalism in teachers provided an insight critical to the understanding of the solution to the professionalism problem. While noting that work experience did not affect professionalism, they observed that professionalism training did. If we cannot look to traditional four-year colleges to provide that training, where then can we look?

Part of the answer to this question does indeed involve colleges, but of a different kind. Vocational, technical, and community colleges are ideally structured to meet this critical need. Students at these colleges routinely look to their alma matres to prepare them to secure and succeed at a job. Further, especially for vocational and technical colleges, their ability to recruit future students is determined in large part by their ability to produce and place well-prepared workers. As a result, professionalism is aligned with both their market-facing curricula and their economic models.

The hurdle that must be overcome, however, is that, with some notable exceptions, these institutions have not stepped forward to address this issue. Traditionally, of course, the set of behaviors that comprise professionalism were learned in the process of growing up. By the time that students reached the college level, the basics of professionalism were already in place and there was little need for additional formal training. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

Now the problem is becoming acute. The businesses that hire the graduates of the vocational and technical colleges that do not include professionalism in their curricula are dissatisfied with the level of professionalism exhibited by those graduates and are looking to the colleges to remedy the situation. By adding a course in professionalism and requiring that all prospective graduates complete it, these institutions could make a significant contribution to resolving the crisis.
However, vocation, technical, and community colleges produce too small a fraction of the overall workforce to resolve the problem completely. Much of the solution, therefore, must come from the businesses themselves.

All businesses provide some form of orientation and training to new employees. New hires must become familiar with company policies and procedures and learn specific skills that are required to perform their jobs effectively. Now, companies must add formal training in professionalism to their existing training regimen. Such training is comparatively straightforward and simple to incorporate into employee orientation. Although many businesses lack the internal expertise to develop such programs, there are institutes that have significant experience and substantial expertise in this area. These institutes have already invested heavily in the development of professionalism training programs and materials, including facilitation guides for use by an organization’s own in-house staff.

CONCLUSIONS

Professionalism in America has begun to decline. Because professional behavior is a fundamental attribute of successful people and successful businesses, the decline represents a substantial economic threat. This threat is made worse by the likelihood that the decline in professionalism is accelerating since it is most pronounced among younger workers.

There are two parts to the solution to this crisis:

1. America’s community, vocational, and technical colleges must incorporate the teaching of professionalism into their curricula. Forward-thinking institutions have already taken this step, but it must become much more widespread.

2. Because most new entrants into the workforce do not come through the community, vocational or technical college systems, businesses must add professionalism training to their new hire orientation and training programs.

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