



Leaders to Follow

Professionalism

By Sara Tusek



About a century ago, the term “professionalism” crept into the vocabulary of educated people. This word carries a host of implications and meanings, most of which are positive, but (oddly) many of which seem to stick in the throat like a bone. “Professionalism” as a description of work sometimes seems

to be built on a kind of cold-hearted, emotionless way of behaving, as if a human could be reduced to a rational being that acts according to unchangeable rules—in other words, a robot. Who wants to be a robot?

So what is professionalism? Is it a good thing? Why do people so often instinctively resist it?

PROFESSIONALISM DEFINED

“The skill, competence, or character expected of a member of a highly trained profession” is one definition of professionalism. This indeed covers the main aspects of the term:

Skill: a professional is assumed to possess a certain level of skill in his or her chosen profession. Licensing, degrees and certificates attest to the passing of exams that insure the minimum acceptable level of skill. Thus, basic skill is taken for granted among professionals.

Competence: even more important than skill is competence. Here the ability to effectively bring skills to bear is implied. Competence covers use of skills, pinpointing and solving problems, and getting work accomplished.

Character: now we are on shakier ground. Skills and competence come from school and books; character comes from within. Character can be modeled but not taught. A person must make an emotional and psychological, if not a spiritual, commitment to building character, a tall order—yet character is all that counts, when the professional is actually functioning in the world.

PROFESSIONALISM AND BUREAUCRACIES

The natural outgrowth of professionalism is the bureaucracy—the institutionalization of professional performance. In an ideal bureaucracy, the professional acts with complete impersonality, justice and impartiality. A bureaucracy is an institution in which the person is subsumed (completely absorbed) by the function. In other words, a good bureaucrat is not primarily a human being, with all sort of messy personal preference and prejudices—instead he or she is simply a human outworking of a position or office., carrying out his or her duties with absolutely no regard as to the personhood of the human being who is being dealt with.

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If, for example a bureaucrat encounters a person who needs a job, that bureaucrat (in order to act professionally) will make no distinction as to the client's social status, prior experience or personal connections. If that person should happen to be the bureaucrat's son or daughter, there would be no excuse for any preferential treatment. Fair is fair, if you are a true professional.

WHY SO STRICT?

An inquisitive person might wonder why the professional is so strict in his or her dealings with people. After all, everyone knows that people are different, and dealing with them as if they were all the same seems to be insulting and ineffective. The more information you have about people, the better the chance that you'll match them with circumstances (from jobs to political offices) that suit them and in which they will excel. So why pretend that people can be made to fit into some rigid set of invented "rational" characteristics and distributed into social positions accordingly?

The answer is obvious. While professionalism often falls astray when dealing with known quantities (people who are familiar to the professional), it provides a wonderful frame of reference when dealing with strangers. In a society such as the US, where immigrants, new college graduates and people moving from one part of the country to another is commonplace, professionalism become the safest (and probably the most democratic) way to deal with people who want jobs, homes or an education.

Statistical parameters, credit scores, and all kinds of numerical measurements of "who a person is" are necessary for a multicultural society to function. There's nothing to be gained by complaining about this kind of segmented way to deal with people, as it is logical and probably more fair than any other system yet devised by man.

PERSONAL TOUCH: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, BUT WHO YOU KNOW

One effective way to counteract the professional approach is by bypassing it altogether. This is the "it's who you know" approach, wherein personal relationships substitute for the professional. Using these relationships is known politely as "networking": Your dad went to school with the CEO of the company you want to work for; your mom is the sorority sister of the president of the

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university you want to attend. The list is endless, and many people go to great effort to mine a personal contact. Why? Because it works.

So why does it work, if the entire point of professionalism is to level the playing field and make it possible for someone with no connections to succeed? Isn't this the opposite of professionalism, letting personal connections stand above professional standards?

THE HUMAN TOUCH

When a governor commutes a death sentence, he is acting "non-professionally," taking into account the personal attributes of the condemned. The criminal who is freed is happy for the governor's non-professional" behavior; others may see the governor as playing politics or showing blatantly favoritism.

There seems to be a contradiction, even an antagonism, between professionalism and the human touch. This conflict means that professionalism is often under fire. Yet it can be argued that professionalism, with all its faults, represents the best, fairest way to arrange a multicultural society. In spite of the repugnance many people feel about its coldness and strictness, professionalism is the best way (so far) to build a just society.