



## Are We Witnessing the Death of Professionalism?

*...and if so, should we care?*

A couple weeks ago I had an experience that I'd not had in more than a decade as a corporate trainer. I was teaching a leadership class for a group of Millennials thought to be future potential leaders of a well known Fortune 500 company. I'd taught this specific group a different topic months earlier and found them to be uncharacteristically unruly. Over the years, I'd noticed general changes in classroom decorum – attendees openly texting on Blackberries, surfing on iPhones even pounding away on a laptop occasionally. I'd seen dress become more casual and groups become somewhat more informal, but I'd never had a group like this. It felt like a cross between the Twilight Zone and a trip to the zoo to be quite honest. At class start time (9:00) fewer than half of the attendees had arrived; others trickled in between 9 and 10 (most offering no acknowledgement of tardiness). During group activities, some clearly opted to feverishly email/text instead of contributing to their groups. After lunch one person tossed a stress toy across the room so hard that it spilled a tumbler of water on another participant. I had to ask one participant to please stop trying to draw on another's ear and when I reviewed the evaluations, I noticed that one person completed the formal Scantron like evaluation in red flip chart marker. Although I'm glad to report that this particular experience/group was an extreme anomaly, the behavior is somewhat indicative of a trend that I've noticed in the workplace in the past few years – the *death* in some ways of professionalism as we once knew it. If I'm being completely honest, in my personal experience I've noticed this moreso with Millennials (workers in their 20s), but I've also noticed these trends among the general population likely exacerbated if not precipitated by mind blowing advances in technology and general cultural shifts away from formality.

I can certainly tell that I'm aging as I find myself giving (solicited) advice fairly frequently oftentimes to young professionals and entrepreneurs trying to find the keys to success. Over and over I seem to be uttering the same mantra that actually led to the naming of my company a decade ago, "*Don't forget that professionalism matters*". My point is that although each of us has a particular area of expertise and we should strive to hone those skills certainly, never underestimate the importance of pure, old fashioned professionalism in the workplace. Ironically, the less pervasive professionalism becomes, the more important it can become as it distinguishes those who exude it in the most positive way. Let's face it – in today's world of automated belated Happy Birthday ecards riddled with typos, receiving a hand signed birthday card by "snail mail" is nothing short of mind blowing ☺. That sender stands out for sure!

Unfortunately, what I've experienced with an uncomfortable regularity in recent months are glaring examples of what I call, "*the death of professionalism*" as I once knew it. Here are a few real life examples:

### **Flexible grammar**

I'm sure that by now we've all received an email on our PDA with a disclaimer at the bottom stating something like "*please disregard any typos in this email because it was sent from a Blackberry device*". When I first saw



that, I thought “*Huh? You can do that? I should have just put that at the bottom of all my term papers in college!*”. I vividly remember in my 20s having a grammar book on my desk so that I could periodically consult it when writing memos – yes, I’m dating myself admittedly. Years later, the grammar book was replaced by online spell-check/grammar check, but I still felt the need to send grammatically correct messages. When I first started seeing these disclaimers, I honestly thought, “*Wow, that’s lazy. We’re not even attempting to correct spelling/grammar anymore?*” The honest truth is that 7 out of 10 recipients may not really care if they receive your email with typos, but those other 3 really might and is it really worth diminishing your credibility with those 30% every time you hit Return?

### **Professionalism Tips for Today’s Lifestyle**

- Develop two distinct sets of standard/rules for personal and professional communications – typos may be perfectly fine when emailing your girlfriend, but not so much when communicating with a client or even a peer in the workplace.
- Avoid sending work emails by PDA if possible. I know that it’s super tempting to send that quick email response via Blackberry, but reviewing and sending emails on PDAs can be an accident waiting to happen. First, typos are just much more likely on such a small keyboard. Beyond that, you often can’t easily make out relevant content in the original email like tables/graphics, attachments, and distribution lists so you’re much more prone to make a content mistake as well. If you can’t resist not emailing from your PDA, type your response and save it as draft so that you can review it at a computer before hitting send.

### **Responsiveness/Timeliness**

When I recently conducted interviews for an assistant, I was amazed at the number of candidates who arrived just a few minutes late. They all started their interview with a polite apology about horrible traffic or confused directions, but they didn’t seem to consider the slight tardiness a significant “error” in the interview process. In my mind, those candidates lost the job before they opened their mouths. Likewise, I worked recently with a temporary assistant who supported me in a variety of ways. As an assistant, I obviously relied on her to follow up on a wide range of tasks including communicating on my behalf to clients and other important professional contacts. During the first few weeks, I noticed that she was very erratic and inconsistent in her follow up not just with them but with ME! I couldn’t help but wonder, if I’m having to remind my assistant to follow up, who is really the assistant? Frustrated, I decided to document a list of “ground rules” that outlined basic expectations like responding to client emails within 24 hours, sending me a meeting agenda and status report at least 24 hours before our meetings, copy me on all client communications and respect deadlines (but proactively renegotiate if needed). I have absolutely seen first hand in corporate America as well as in my own small business that being responsive/timely is SUCH an underrated, overlooked “skill”. Those who master this stand out so starkly and tend to be the ones that everyone desperately wants to work with (even if they don’t know exactly why).



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### Professionalism Tips for Today's Lifestyle

- Strive to arrive 15-20 minutes early for virtually all appointments. With the amazing prevalence of unexpected hiccups like bad traffic, unexpected cell phone calls, incorrect directions, long elevator waits, and other last minute interruptions, you will likely arrive just a few minutes early (if that). Keep a folder of items to read/review on hand so that if you do arrive more than a few minutes early, you can utilize that time wisely.
- For important meetings, strive to arrive at least 20-30 minutes early and ensure that you know *exactly* where you're going. If the meeting requires travel, drive to the location the day prior if possible. If you can't drive to the location in advance, ask your contact for the best directions or ask if the online navigation site directions are reliable – don't just rely on your car's GPS.
- Don't try to remember ANYTHING; instead, write EVERYTHING down. Develop whatever system works best for you (e.g. online task list, reminder app, small notebook), but have one place where you keep a running list of tasks. If you want to extract a daily to do post it, that's fine, but try to keep a master running list in one place and use that system religiously.

### Dress

I recently worked with someone whom I'd hired to help me with documentation on a new project. When she met me at the client location, I couldn't help but think that she'd mistaken our client meeting for a tennis match. She donned a spandex, strapless top with shorts/tennis skort and athletic shoes. I couldn't believe that she would wear that to meet me much less meet with my client! Needless to say, I took the meeting without her.

### Professionalism Tips for Today's Lifestyle

- Always dress ½ step above the client. You don't want to be too formal, but you certainly don't want to be too informal and you certainly want to scale your dress to fit the organization's culture, industry, and type of work.
- If you check the mirror before leaving and have a nagging question about fit or style of your outfit, just change.
- Make sure you have 3-5 "go to" outfits that you know fit you well, look great, and you feel confident in. Consider using a personal shopper at a respected retailer like Nordstrom if you need help.
- Ask your friends if your closet needs an update – they'll typically tell you the truth ☺

### Work Ethic

I can't believe how often I'm amazed at new entrepreneurs who can't understand why they're not making \$6-\$10K per month working 20 hours/week having just started their business. When I tell them that I SLAVED for about 2 years teaching for anyone who would have me before my business was profitable enough to sustain itself consistently and I didn't dare have thoughts of working part time until years after that, it doesn't seem to compute. More and more I'm floored by people who seem to expect the world while trying to figure out how



they can do the least amount of work required to do it. I once heard that the world is made up of “givers” and “takers” – the “takers” seem to be taking over.

### **Professionalism Tips for Today’s Lifestyle**

- Don’t be afraid of hard work! Come early, stay late – don’t over strategize early in your career. Yes, strategy is critical as part of the success formula, but early on – focus primarily on getting lots of great experience without worrying who gets the credit.
- Overprepare for presentations and important meetings. There is NO substitute for preparation. I conducted “dry runs” for important training events, and they were invaluable.
- Don’t procrastinate. One of the keys to my academic success was that I always pretended the my exams or major projects were due a couple days earlier than they actually were so that I completed my preparation early and had a day or two to just review the material. I received degrees in math, engineering, and business – all with honors, and I’m proud to say that I only pulled an all nighter once.

Yes, we certainly live in a different world, but we can’t just toss out all the “old rules”. In many ways, we need to revisit the “classics” – like please and thank you – and amend them for our current lifestyle. When I redecorated my house a few years ago, my decorator concentrated on certain rooms changing furniture, paint colors, etc. For other rooms she recommended a “fluff” – keeping most of the basics but simply rearranging furniture and adding in a few accessories to “make it work” with the new overall look. Some of us need to remodel our day to day work habits and professionalism standards, and the rest of us can probably use a “fluff”. Either way, bumping up your professionalism while standards are on the decline only make you stand out from the crowd in the best way!

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