

3 Steps for Inspiring Professionalism in Your Organization

Jim Ball, President, The Goals Institute

Every week managers call asking what they can do to get their people to be more professional.

These calls are from administrators in hospitals, school superintendents, managers in government agencies, business executives, human resource leaders, small business owners, and others.

Each of these individuals is facing their version of the same challenge. The facts, circumstances, environments, and people are different, but the underlying issues, obstacles, and principles involved are always the same.

The Common Challenge



The common challenge these individuals face is the people in their organizations are not thinking and behaving the way they want them to think and behave.

There is a gap between desired behaviors and actual behaviors. The people who call us have identified this “gap” as a lack of professionalism.

Here are three examples:

1. A superintendent of schools complained that many teachers do not teach bell-to-bell. “They arrive five or ten minutes late for their classes and they often cut out ten to fifteen minutes early, especially on end-of-day classes and Fridays. That’s not professional.”
2. The administrator of ancillary patient services for a hospital said, “It drives me crazy that technicians in the clinics do not put their equipment away and clean up the little messes they make during the day. That’s not professional.”
3. The managing partner of an accounting firm said, “We had one of our accountants show up the other day in flip-flops. How unprofessional can you get? I was so taken aback I did not know that to say, so I did not say anything.”

If you read between the lines, you will see that the challenge facing these individuals is twofold.

The obvious challenge is that people who are supposed to be professionals are not behaving the way professionals should be behaving.

- Teachers should teach bell-to-bell.
- Clinical technicians should put their equipment away and clean up after themselves.
- The accountant should not have shown up in flip-flops.

The other not so obvious challenge, which actually may be the bigger challenge, is that the people responsible for leading and managing the people who are not acting in a professional manner are letting them get away with it.

- The superintendent of schools should not tolerate tardiness and cutting classes short.
- The administrator of patient services should insist that the technicians put their equipment away and clean up their messes.
- The managing partner of the accounting firm should have told the accountant that her flip-flops were not appropriate for the firm’s business environment.



The Root Cause of Unprofessional Behavior



Where unprofessional behavior exists, it rarely is because of demographic or economic drivers. More commonly, unprofessional behavior exists when leaders allow it to exist by failing to proactively establish and clarify codes of conduct and principles of professional excellence and then communicate and enforce those standards.

In other words, we unknowingly do it to ourselves.

We invite and perpetuate unacceptable performance and behavior when we accept mediocrity.

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.

An appropriate principle 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.

Another, even more important principle is, “we get what we accept.” 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.

Many individuals do not perform or behave in a professional manner. What many leaders may be overlooking is the domino effect of this and the magnitude of the costs.

When one individual does not perform in a professional manner, this negatively affects the behavior of others.

If one person starts coming in late and no one says anything about it, others will think being late is acceptable. Soon, another person will come in late. Then another.

How to Address this Challenge



The interesting thing is you cannot resolve the lack of professional behavior just by taking action to focus on the people who are behaving inappropriately. You must address the environment in which those people work. You also must address the approaches, tools, and actions that their leaders apply to establish and guide their behaviors in the first place.

This is like having a thinning weed-filled lawn that you want to bring back to its lush vibrant green stage. You cannot just pull out the tops of the weeds; you must get to their roots. Next, you must nourish and cultivate the lawn by reseeding, fertilizing, and watering. Then you must apply treatments to prevent new weeds from taking root. Even more important than these steps, you must first have someone who wants a vibrant green lawn and who is willing to take action to do what is required to get it and maintain it.

Three Steps for Inspiring and Guiding Professional Behavior



While there are many strategies and tactics an organization can consider, we recommend that every organization take three steps to inspire and guide professional behavior.

Step 1: Establish the “Rules”

Step 2: Teach the Rules

Step 3: Reinforce and Enforce the Rules



Step 1: Establish the “Rules”



The first step is to establish the “rules” of professional behavior that everyone is to follow.

This means adopting written policies, procedures, and codes of conduct that establish values, standards, and principles of behavior in tangible form.

This is important. It provides a reference set of benchmarks that employees and managers can use for modeling, guiding, and correcting behavior.

In our environment of diverse cultures and backgrounds, 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.

If we do not tell people exactly what we want them to know and do, they are going to guess. Oftentimes they are going to guess incorrectly.

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

A tool we offer to help organizations establish the standards of professional behavior is a little book I wrote, *Professionalism Is for Everyone*. This book presents an easy-to-understand framework for professional behavior that I call the *Five Keys to Being a True Professional*. These keys are *Character, Attitude, Excellence, Competency, and Conduct*.

Under each of the *Five Keys*, the book describes supporting principles, examples, tips, and ideas. For each supporting principle, the book offers suggested *Dos* and *Don'ts*.

Here is an example of how the book helps establish the rules:

- *Character* is the first of the *Five Keys* in the book.
- *Being Responsible and Accountable* are supporting principles covered under *Character*.
- The *Being Responsible and Accountable* page presents several concepts including “Professionals arrive on time and frequently early. They deliver their work on time and often ahead of schedule.”
- In the *Dos* and *Don'ts* section on the opposite page there are several reminders including “Do arrive on time” and “Don't arrive late.”

Customers like *Professionalism Is for Everyone* because it clarifies guidelines in print. One customer wrote us, “This little book puts everything in writing that I want my people to know, but was not written down before. Now it is.”

Step 2: Teach the Rules



The second step is to teach individuals the rules and make sure they understand them.

This means providing individuals opportunities to read and learn the organization’s guiding principles for professional behavior.

People need opportunities to ask questions and get answers. They should be able to obtain firsthand guidance for how they should apply the rules in their individual circumstances and environment.



We offer tools and resources to help organizations teach people what it means to be a professional. These resources include presentations and seminars that organizations may provide on the contents and concepts in our book *Professionalism Is for Everyone*.

Our customers have reported great success with our seminars and tools. One customer wrote us, “Thank you would not seem enough to express our gratitude here at our bank. The changes in self-accountability we have witnessed here are dramatic. Your *Stand Tall – Professionalism Is for Everyone* program took a topic that I would have thought un-trainable and put it into an understandable and enjoyable format for all in attendance.”

Step 3: Reinforce and Enforce the Rules



The third step is to reinforce and enforce the rules.

This means providing ongoing reminders and reinforcement by recognizing and rewarding the professional behaviors desired.

It also means being intolerant of behavior that is not acceptable and providing appropriate penalties and consequences for non-compliance.

Leaders and managers need to learn how to insist that professionalism standards are maintained. They also need to know how to address behavior that is not professional.

The seminar resources we offer include case studies, skits, and role-play exercises. These exercises give individuals opportunities to share their experiences and learn techniques that work for motivating and enforcing professional behavior.

Success Strategies



Our experience is that if you want to be successful in inspiring professional behavior, you cannot provide a quick fix and hope it will stick. You have to take a longer-term view and keep after it.

To implement the three steps above, we recommend an ongoing six-point program.

1. **Establish a Professionalism Goal:** Establish a goal of polishing and revitalizing professionalism and professional behavior throughout the organization.
2. **Establish a Group of Professionalism Champions:** Establish a core group of *Professionalism Champions* to pursue the goal, spearhead the effort, and keep it alive.
3. **Establish the Rules:** Establish the basic “rules” of professional behavior by adopting the concepts in *Professionalism Is for Everyone* as guiding principles. Provide a copy of the book to each employee.
4. **Train Everyone:** Provide presentations, seminars, and discussion sessions to teach everyone the principles in *Professionalism Is for Everyone*. Give them opportunities to provide input and ask questions.
5. **Provide Reminders and Reinforcement:** Create and implement a series of events, rewards, and reminders to keep the spirit of professionalism alive and top of mind. These programs should drive professionalism into the DNA of the organization.
6. **Incorporate *Professionalism Is for Everyone* into Employee Orientations:** Incorporate the *Professionalism Is for Everyone* book into ongoing orientation programs for new employees.

