



At the recently completed FOCUS conference in Nashville I had the honor of introducing the keynote speaker, Dr. Laura Gasparis Vonfrolio and our honorary guest Dr. Forrest Bird. Before I did so, I thanked everyone for coming and I talked for a few minutes about the fact that for me, at least, conferences served as "booster shots of professionalism". I went on for a few minutes as to *why* that was so and to my surprise many people came up to me later to tell me that conferences often did the same for them; that is, serving as periodic reminders for them, that they were doing something important, something not just *anyone* could do. Inevitably, this brought us to conversations pertaining to what a "professional" was and frankly, the subject has been on my mind ever since.

Without a doubt, professionalism has an elusive nature. In fact, if someone were to ask for a definition, a good bet would be that defining behaviors that are *not* professional rather than ones that *are*, would be easier.

But why is that? Why is it hard to define the qualities of such a desirable behavior? One reason might be that professionalism is an all-inclusive behavior. Being *somewhat* professional does not count. Thus, the expression *consummate professional* seems particularly apt - and therein lies the difficulty; the challenge for management - as well as for employees - getting to the heart of professionalism by trying to identify the behaviors, followed by the even greater challenge of *developing* those behaviors in the workplace. In my mind, four categories embrace the attitudes and behaviors that form the foundation for building professionalism - Respect - Service - Support and Growth

Respect

Appearance is an indication of a person's respect for others. Adhering to a dress code and being presentable to doctors, nurses and patients is one way to show consideration for everyone, all the time, and in every way. A disregard for personal grooming, along with pushing the limits of the dress code, signals *lack* of respect for people and policies. *Confidentiality*, relating not only to patients but also to co-workers, is a vital element of respect. Passing along personal information about another employee is only permissible when the information could be stated in front of the subject if he were present. *Tolerance* as an element of respect cannot be overemphasized. Many institutions make substantial efforts to promote diversity, citing the positive effect created by employing workers from different cultures, genders, religions, and so forth. The diversity of different *values*, however, is not typically promoted. For example, some workers are neat to a fault while others are comfortable with clutter. Some employees believe only family emergencies qualify for unplanned time off, while others believe taking

a pet to the vet qualifies. Some workers are not perturbed by minor tardiness, while others think such an infraction deserves termination. Obviously, not everyone has the same values, but that does not make one person wrong and another, right. *Courtesy* is a key component of respect and covers a wide territory. Courtesy includes the language and tone used and leaves no room for offensive or off-color language or discussions. Courtesy applies not only to thought and word but also to actions. It is respectful to value another person's time, for example, by letting them know promptly if an appointment must be delayed or cancelled. Responding promptly to e-mails, voicemails, phone calls and other types of requests for information or assistance is another mark of professionalism.

Service

Professionalism is incompatible with "me-me syndrome" and with the attitude of an employee who perceives himself as a perpetual victim of overwork, insufficient pay, lack of appreciation, and gross inequities. A job is more than an entitlement to a paycheck. Employers hire employees to provide services. To meet this commitment, an employee must switch his focus from himself to others.

One of the greatest workplace barriers to professionalism is the common employee performance evaluation that relegates supervisors and employees to a parent-child relationship. Relying on one person's judgment of another or failing to hold employees accountable is not a means of promoting

professionalism. Standards must be established to distinguish between those with professional behaviors and those without, and a process must be implemented to appropriately recognize the former while notifying the latter that improvement is needed. Differences in expected performance versus demonstrated performance need to be resolved, not left to languish.

Support

True professionals respect their employers' property and policies. All employees; not just the housekeeping and building maintenance staffs, share responsibility for keeping the workplace clean and safe for instance. Actions as minor as cleaning up a coffee spill from the floor show evidence of accepting this responsibility. Protecting "business" is not solely the responsibility of management. Typically, front-line employees, not managers, interact with patients on a daily basis. If these interactions were not at the heart of sustaining business, patient-satisfaction surveys would not exist. Every employee has a responsibility to treat patient "customers" with dignity. Employee compliance with all institutional policies shows support of both the employer and the supervisor. Employees often deride certain employer policies regardless of whether they are personally affected by them. An employee may feel that his "First Amendment" fights



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are being restricted by workplace policies. Ignoring policies simply because he disagrees with them, however, is inappropriate.

One of the chief ways employees can demonstrate professionalism is through support of "the boss". An employee does not have to agree with everything his supervisor says and does; if he has strong feelings about a particular action or statement, in fact, he should let his supervisor know and then respect the outcome of their conversation. A primary way to be supportive of a boss is to be a "low-maintenance" employee. An employee should handle his job according to his supervisor's goals and objectives for the department. Being a "loner" or a "manipulator" is not professional. If an employee's loyalties do not lie with his boss, then that employee should begin to search for a more palatable position.

Supportive behavior should be extended to apply to co-workers. Most employees form some sort of personal relationship with those folks with whom they work on a daily basis. Even when co-workers do not share personal interests, beliefs, or values, a professional rises above those differences and lends a hand when needed. While most employees seem to be willing to step in when emergencies occur – a serious illness, a death in the family, or damage to home or personal belongings – what about ordinary problems when a helping hand and a little thoughtfulness could go a long way?

Growth

Professionalism has another key element: growth of both self and others. Desire for growth allows people to respond positively to change, to find excitement in learning something new, solving a difficult problem and staying fresh. Without real desire, commitment either will not exist or will be short-lived which is precisely what I meant when I said that conferences serve as booster shots of professionalism for me. Of course we cannot overlook growth opportunities that are available every day. Teaching or sharing with others is a good path to growth. Asking a knowledgeable co-worker to demonstrate a puzzling procedure, volunteering to lead or work on a project, or documenting procedures that previously were shared by word of mouth are just a few examples of learning opportunities that will result in self improvement.

Moving toward a professional workplace

Obviously, professionalism entails more than just these four categories, but any attitude or behavior that aligns with these principles is sure to be an enhancement. Although identifying professional attitudes and behaviors is an important first step, the far more difficult challenge is the actual development of a staff of professionals. Without the commitment of management to serve as an example, developing professionalism in the staff is unlikely.

The first step of this commitment is for supervisors and managers to be no less than consummate professionals themselves. The next step is for supervisors and managers to develop an uncompromising process that accurately evaluates employee performance based on standards solidly grounded in the building blocks of professionalism. With management's commitment and with these building blocks, consummate professionalism can be cultivated.

We thoroughly enjoyed this last FOCUS conference in Nashville, and I wish to thank all who participated, attendees, speakers, exhibitors and the very professional group of therapists, sleep techs and nurses who give up of their own time each year in order to come together as the Focus "crew". The show would not have been the success it was without their professional attitude and efforts. Highlights of the conference begin on page 46. Hey, maybe we can share a "booster shot of professionalism" together at the next FOCUS conference.

Bob Miglino RRT BSRT MPS - Publisher

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