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# Characteristics Of A Professional —

## *Are You Serious About Your Job?*

by DAVE KAHLE

“I wish my people were more professional,” executives and managers often commiserate to me. Even with those who don’t voice it, that unspoken yearning often hovers just under the surface of their conversation.

Ah, if only the people around us were more professional. Our lives would be easier, our businesses would grow effortlessly, we’d find our jobs more fulfilling — the list of dramatic benefits can go on and on. But what does it mean to be more professional? More importantly, what can we do to make sure that we, and our associates, are becoming ever more professional?

According to *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, a professional is a person who is “worthy of the high standards of a profession.” And a profession is “a vocation or occupation requiring advanced training... and usually involving mental rather than manual work.”

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### High Standards

There are some key words here. Let’s focus on these: high standards.

The word “standards” implies that there are discernable ways that people consistently behave that set us apart as members of our profession. And the word “high” implies that we do these things better than the average.

To consistently behave in ways that are better than the average, i.e., to achieve high standards, is not easy. In our rapidly changing, ever-more-complex economy, achieving high standards is not an event which we mark, rather it is a continuous process which calls on us to persistently and positively change and grow. That’s a major challenge. And that chal-

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allenge calls for us to develop one of the foundational characteristics of true professionals: We must be serious about our occupations.

In other words, we must understand that our occupations are challenging, with high expectations of discernable standards, and we must consistently want to do better — we must be dedicated to succeeding.

There are those of your associates who make light of this foundational requirement. “The job is only a job,” they may say. “A means to an end. Just do the basics in order to keep your boss off your back. Real life is lived outside the confines of your occupation.”

I can certainly understand these sentiments. And if you share them, that's fine. You're just not a professional.

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### Quality of Work

Understand that I'm not suggesting that you work excessive hours to the detriment of your family. It's not about the quantity; it's about the quality. A professional understands that we work 40-55 hours a week, and that we spend more time on the job than in almost any other endeavor. Our occupations, just in terms of hours, truly fill one of the biggest pieces of our lives. To be serious about our occupations doesn't require us to invest more time. Rather, it does require us to use that time more effectively. If we're going to live life fully, we need to be serious about that big chunk of time.

To allow it to pass us by untouched is to waste much of our lives. To coast through, oblivious to the daily challenges to become more of what we can become, is to squander rich opportunities for personal growth. To be anything less than serious about our occupations is, frankly, a shame.

If we are serious about our occupations, we'll see ourselves acting that out in a number of ways. In other

words, our underlying attitude of seriousness will show itself in the way that we behave. Consistently, over time, we'll act in ways that show the people around us our commitment. Here are two indications of the degree to which we are serious about our occupations:

1. We'll want to do better in everything we do. Better? Better than what?

Better than we did before. We'll exhibit a never-ending quest to improve our performance in every variable, every project, every transaction, every relationship, and every detail. I call this the characteristic of “personal discontent.” Our personal status quo is never acceptable.

That's not to say that we can't celebrate and enjoy our success. We certainly should. But after we've congratulated ourselves for our excellent performance, we then need to take a deep breath and recommit to doing it better next time.

Here's an example. I've been a fan of the Detroit Pistons professional basketball team for decades. For several years Isiah Thomas was the leader of the “Bad Boys,” as the team was known. The team was world champion, and Isiah was recognized as the Most Valuable Player. It doesn't get any better than that. Most Valuable Player on the world champion team.

But Isiah was a “true professional.” In an interview with a news reporter, he revealed that he often had insomnia, and would get up in the middle of the night and practice shooting free throws in the gymnasium he had built in his home — practicing one of the most basic skills in order to improve in it.

Even at the peak of his career, he wasn't satisfied with his performance. While he enjoyed his success, he knew he could do better. Isiah was a career 80 percent free throw shooter — not a 100 percent shooter. He exhibited the quality of every professional — personal discontent.

That applies to managers, executives and leaders of organizations in the same way. I'm often asked if there are any attributes that identify a potential client for my company's services. What does a good

***What does a good prospect look like?  
I've found one necessary trait: an executive or executive team that is ambitious for the growth of their company.***

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prospect look like? I've found one necessary trait: an executive or executive team that is ambitious for the growth of their company.

In other words, a leader who is discontent. Regardless of the degree of current success, discontent in the executive office is the surest indicator of a company on the move.

It's true for every individual and every organization at every stage of an organization. A professional executive is discontent with his organization's performance. A professional manager is discontent with his team's results. A professional of any kind is continually discontent with his/her performance.

At every level, in every occupation, the professionals are always striving to do it better the next time.

2. We'll seek opportunities and relationships that will challenge us to grow.

James Allen said, "Men are often interested in improving their circumstances, but are unwilling to improve themselves. They, therefore, remain bound."

That is decidedly not true of a professional. What is an observation of the mass of people does not apply to professionals. As a professional, we distinguish ourselves by our dedication to personal growth. It's the natural and logical progression from the state of continuous discontent.

It's one thing to be discontent; it's another to do something about it. And, while it is possible to be discontent about our circumstances, a professional realizes that it is his skills, attitudes, and behaviors that shape his circumstances. So, the solution to changing your circumstances is, ultimately, to change yourself. A professional understands this, and seeks continually for opportunities and relationships that will stimulate him to grow.

Again, this shows itself in a number of ways. Professionals take guidance and direction from their managers. Professionals work to implement the ideas and skills they gain from training programs and seminars. Professionals are always reading something that prompts them to grow and develop. Professionals aren't afraid to try something different, to stretch out of their comfort zones, understanding that the stretch, while it might be uncomfortable, will cause them to build additional capabilities. Professionals seek cohorts that stimulate them to think by joining small groups and Internet communities.

Add these two characteristics together, and you begin to gain a portrait of a true professional: Professionals are serious about their occupation. □

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