

## Professionalism & Workplace Savvy

by James B. Stenson

*Note: The items below are the sort of idealistic and practical work-related lessons that effective parents teach their adolescent children to prepare them for entering the world of work.*

### **Professionalism**



(1) Professionalism isn't just a set of appearances -- neatness, good grooming, "shop talk" and the like. Nor is it just technical skill; many technically skilled people are not really professional. Professionalism is, rather, a set of internalized character strengths and values directed toward high quality service to others through one's work. In their daily work, whatever it may be, real professionals show these inner strengths and attitudes -- sound judgment, know-how, business savvy, mature responsibility, problem-solving perseverance and ingenuity, along with what people call "class." This is as true for hair-dressers, carpenters, machinists, police officers, and barbers as it is for lawyers, physicians, and engineers. Any honest work can be done professionally.

(2) Professionals show self-respect in their work. They're conscious that their work reflects their inner character. Their work is, among other things, a statement of their personal commitment to excellence of performance. They don't see work as just a job to be done or merely a source of "spending money."

(3) They see work as service to others. They labor toward the betterment of other people, directly or indirectly: clients, customers, employers, colleagues. Thus they're both *task-oriented* and *people-oriented*.

(4) Professionals have respect for experience. They have an ongoing need to learn and improve, to master traditional approaches and *then* try to improve on them. Among professionals there's a teaching tradition; people teach and learn by word and example. Professionals also respect the experience of others; they have high regard for professionalism in other lines of work. Moreover, they know how to use the powers of other professionals (lawyers, accountants, consultants) to strengthen their own performance. They seek out sound advice and generally follow it.

(5) They tend to see problems as challenges and opportunities, not burdensome "hassles" to be avoided. They have a long-term habit of approaching problems confidently and optimistically. They don't let indecision or fear of failure lead to paralysis. They do the best

they can with what they have.

(6) They have a high level of personal responsibility and respect for others' rights. They have a clear sense of the *limits* to their authority and rights of operation. They don't meddle in others' affairs or criticize in areas where they have neither rights nor expertise. So, professionals are unafraid to say, "That's none of my business" or "I don't know anything about that...." They tend to have an intense dislike for gossip or otherwise uninformed criticism.

(7) They make efficient use of resources, especially time. They know how to concentrate mind and will on the tasks before them. They work quickly but not hurriedly. They're careful but not slow.

(8) They compartmentalize work responsibilities from leisure and personal interests. Work hours are devoted exclusively to job performance; leisure and personal affairs wait until the job is done. Responsibilities to clients and employers come ahead of self-interested concerns and pleasures. They know that leisure is most enjoyable when it's been earned through hard work. They can do their best work no matter how poorly they feel at the moment.

(9) Even off the job, professionals demonstrate admirable character: good judgment, good taste, good manners, a respect for quality in general. Their personality shows tasteful self-restraint combined with concern for others and love of life -- in a word, "class."

(10) The character and values of professionalism are built up first in childhood and then strengthened in adulthood through study, training, and work experience. This means that young people, even teenagers, can mark themselves as professionals -- earn the respect of all who work with them -- during the first few weeks of their first job.

### **Workplace Savvy**

(1) There's such a thing as a professional vocation. It's some passionate love that directs your powers to the welfare of others and earns you a living. While growing up, you should search long and wide to find some line of work that appeals to your heart -- some labor that gives you the joy you knew in childhood, when work and play were one. Few pleasures in life are more delightful than a job we really enjoy.

(2) One word of caution, though. You may love music or drama or sports so much that you think of these fields as potential careers. Fine, but anchor yourself in reality. The worlds of

entertainment and sports bring delight to millions, so a few hundred-thousand youngsters aspire to work in them -- and everyone in this vast throng is competing against you. To succeed, you need to be exceptionally talented, extremely hard-working, single-mindedly ambitious, well connected with influential people, and (to be frank about it) very, very lucky. No matter how you look at it, the odds are hugely against you. Remember, no matter what you later do for a living, you can always enjoy these pursuits as recreational pastimes.

(3) When leaning toward a career, ask yourself: "What can I be an expert in?" Then work to become that expert.

(4) Rely on family and friends to tell you what you're really good at. When we're good at something, we're usually among the last to know it. Others notice our talent before we do, because to us the gift seems natural, easy, almost effortless. So pay attention when people close to you all say the same thing: You have some talent that you should develop.

(5) Success in one's career doesn't necessarily mean great fame and big money. Real success in work and life means several things:

- being able to support yourself and your family comfortably
- waking up in the morning and looking forward to the day's work
- earning the respect of everyone who knows you: family, friends, bosses, subordinates, clients, customers, neighbors
- seeing your powers and skills work toward the betterment of others
- enjoying leisure pursuits thoroughly because you've *earned* them.

(6) Throughout human history, finding a good job has always been a matter of whom you know. Credentials, experience, cold calls, mass mailings of résumés -- none of these things beats *connections through friends*. Your friends won't have a job for you, but *their* friends might. In other words, we get a job most quickly and effectively through the friends of our friends. For this reason alone, it pays to have many friends and acquaintances. (Related piece of advice: Maintain contact with your closest friends from high school and college. Work at making them friends for life.)

(7) In your first couple of jobs, try to work for a good boss, someone who'll challenge your powers, correct you, and help you learn from your mistakes. A good boss will teach you more in one year than you'll learn in four years of college.

(8) Notice that successful bosses have effective communication skills: they're attentive listeners and clear explainers. They learn from people, including their employees. They lead

their people to understand what's important.

(9) Arrogant, tyrannical egomaniacs sometimes make it to the top of a business, largely because of their pyrotechnic energy -- but eventually they get into trouble. Often big trouble. They blunder because of egocentric misjudgments; they cut corners with the law; they drive away good employees; their arrogance affronts clients, customers, or -- finally and fatally -- Board directors. Their spectacular sacking makes headlines. Moral: In the long run, it pays to be a considerate, responsible team leader. An effective boss *removes* obstacles from people's performance; he doesn't *create* them.

(10) Work in such a way that you make your boss look good.

(11) Generally speaking, when a company is downsizing, the first people to go are the ones who made few friends in the organization. But those people with a lot of friends tend to remain. All other things being equal, bosses prefer to retain competent people whom they also like and respect.

(12) Dress for the job you want, not the one you have. Let your dress and grooming reflect your self-respect and professionalism. Pay special attention to your shoes and shirts. Your bosses will notice.

(13) Get in good physical shape and work to stay that way. Generally speaking, conspicuously overweight people suffer a competitive disadvantage in the workplace. Unless they're exceptionally skilled in some technical area, they get passed over in favor of healthier looking competitors, especially if their jobs involve personal contact with the public. This is, of course, often unfair -- but much of life is unfair, and we have to come to terms with reality.

(14) Personal integrity is crucially important in business. Tell nothing but the truth and always keep your word. Bosses and clients can forgive isolated, well intentioned mistakes and even blunders -- but if you lie, you're through.

(15) Mind your own business. The top of someone's desk isn't a bulletin board, so don't read what's on other people's desks or computer monitors. If bosses or co-workers find you snooping, they won't trust you.

(16) Similarly, don't make critical comments about matters that lie outside your areas of responsibility. Stick to your own business. Don't get a reputation as a busybody. Every responsible professional knows that loose-talking meddlers are also either slackers or control

freaks. In either case, nobody trusts them.

(17) Don't talk negatively about people behind their backs. If you gossip, people won't confide in you. Besides, office gossip has a way, mysteriously, of making its way to the gossipee. Here, as in so many other areas, keep your mouth shut and you'll stay out of trouble.

(18) If there's a lot of badmouth gossip in your office, especially about management, then start looking for another job. Poor morale nearly always arises from crummy management, and a company rife with gossip is on the verge of business collapse.

(19) Don't whisper with people in hallways or other public places. This look sneaky and conspiratorial. Step into a room or out of people's earshot and then talk in a normal voice.

(20) Before you use anyone's name for a reference, be sure to get that person's permission. Since good professionals always check references, your failure to secure prior permission makes your reference worse than useless. Remember, all bosses detest unpleasant surprises.

(21) No matter what it takes, be on time for all business appointments. If possible, arrive a few minutes early. No matter how late you work, get to your job on time.

(22) Strive your best to keep a deadline, especially one you've promised. If you clearly cannot meet it, then apologize and ask for an extension. (People won't remember that work was a little late, but they'll remember if it was crummy.) Once you've gotten an extension, then that's it. Do whatever is necessary -- stay up late, call in outside help -- to turn in good work on time.

(23) If someone does a special favor for you (for example, gives time for a job interview), send a personal thank-you note within two days. Keep a supply of good-quality thank-you notecards or "monarch" stationery for this purpose.

(24) When you deal with professional people socially (especially physicians, accountants, and attorneys), don't ask for professional advice or otherwise talk shop.

(25) When you attend social occasions, always carry a couple of your business cards. But don't offer one to someone until the very end of a conversation, when you're parting, and only if it's clear that the new acquaintance might like to meet with you again sometime. Passing out

cards gratuitously looks pushy and amateurish.

(26) If you're having a business lunch, don't start talking business until everyone has ordered food and drink. Make small talk until orders are taken.

(27) Generally speaking, it's better to avoid alcohol with lunch. A glass of wine is OK with the meal, but stay away from pre-lunch cocktails, especially strong ones. Have a tomato juice or similar concoction instead. Even moderate alcohol consumption, like excessive eating can take the edge off work performance in the afternoon. Things get blurry, and people notice.

(28) Don't use foul language in the workplace. If you do, people lose respect for you.

(29) Consciously or otherwise, people associate habitual foul-mouthed speech with childish self-centeredness or fundamental lack of self-control. Gratuitous vulgarity, moreover, often signals that someone is burdened with an addictive personality. That is, if you searched more closely, you'd find some other areas of life barely under control, or altogether out of control.

(30) Sexual harassment is a very real and serious problem in the workplace. Women professionals deeply resent it and rightly fight against it. Current measures to eradicate it in business organizations, including legal proceedings, are deadly serious and long overdue. *Always* treat women co-workers with respect and professional courtesy.

(31) Follow rules for telephone etiquette:

-- Speak with a normal, pleasant, courteous voice, especially when answering.

-- When calling someone you don't know, identify yourself.

-- Always ask if this is a good time to talk.

-- If you foresee that you'll have to leave a message on voice mail, have a brief, clear message rehearsed, one that doesn't sound nervously improvised.

-- Return all phone calls promptly.

-- Limit personal calls to important matters only, and be brief.

(32) Don't take things personally. If some people are ill-tempered or rub you the wrong way, that's their problem, usually something in their private lives off the job. Don't let their problem become yours. Just shrug it off and stick to your job.

- (33) Related to this, if you must correct someone, don't get personal about it. Correct the fault, not the person. Make the correction privately, never in front of others.
- (34) Give praise only when it's deserved, and make it sincere. In some ways, insincere praise is worse than none at all.
- (35) Take care of the company's resources -- money, cars, office supplies, travel accommodations, computers -- as if they were your own. That is, don't abuse them and don't pilfer anything.
- (36) Don't take problems to your boss unless you also propose some considered solutions. Bosses don't need additional problems; they have enough as it is. What they need and want are solutions.
- (37) Unless you're the boss, it's not your job to change company policies. If you find policies or ongoing practices very hard to live with, don't complain. Just look for another job and try to leave on good terms. When you get another job, don't badmouth your previous company or its management. Remember, bosses tend to sympathize with each other as a class. Your (perceived) disloyalty to former employers would leave a bad taste and arouse mistrust.
- (38) Sometimes people will pester you with complaints and perceived problems, and it's clear they just want to talk and talk. You can cut this annoyance short by asking, repeatedly if necessary, "So, how can I help you?"
- (39) A business meeting should optimally have a clear, purposeful agenda that everyone understands beforehand. Stick to the point; a meeting should improve people's performance, not get in its way. At the end of a meeting, everyone should clearly understand what needs to be done next, and by whom.
- (40) Every few months, take a couple of hours to think deeply about your career and your future. How are things going? Where am I headed? What opportunities might I be overlooking? Where do I want to be five years down the road? -- Have a file where you keep notes on accomplishments to update your résumé, and do this at least twice a year.

An updated résumé is like a first-aid kit: if you need it at all, you usually need it in a hurry.

- (41) As you move along Plan A of your career, maintain a Plan B as well -- an alternative career course to rely on if you suddenly must. If someone loses a job, he or she quickly needs

to undertake thinking, planning, networking, and action. Maintaining a Plan B means doing your thinking, planning, and networking ahead of time, long before the emergency, so you can move swiftly into action. Be prepared for anything.

(42) Conduct yourself all your life with the standards of right and wrong that your mother and father taught you since childhood. Don't do anything that would betray your parents' principles or bring them shame.

(43) Always remember that the secret of success is passion. So think big. We tend to become what we think about. If you have high ambitions of *service* to people, starting with your family, you'll be honored as an outstanding man and a great professional.

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