10 things that define a true professional

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The term *professional* is thrown around quite a bit these days, perhaps too much. I do it myself. But what exactly does it mean to be a professional? As you read through the items below, consider how you compare with each trait.

1: Put customer satisfaction first

Understanding and satisfying your customer's needs are the cornerstones of a successful business. Do what is necessary to meet those needs. After all, without the customer, there is no professional.

You may not view those you work with as your customers, but in many cases, they are. I remember when one of my managers perceived that I was overly stressed. He pulled me aside and sat me down in his office where he told me stories and jokes for the better part of half an hour. He recognized my needs and acted accordingly.

Professionals identify and satisfy their customer's needs.

2: Make expertise your specialty

The very word *professional* implies that you are an expert. Technical competence is essential in IT.

- Become an expert in the skills and tools necessary to do your job.
- Always perform to the best of your abilities.
- Keep your knowledge up to date.

Professionals know their trade.

3: Do more than expected

Professionals aren't bound by a time clock. They are given wide latitude in their daily self-management. They are expected to manage their time and work habits. Don't abuse the privilege. If you take an hour for personal needs, give back two hours.

The reality is that professionals are expected to exceed the standard 40-hour workweek. There are times when you may be asked to work weekends. You may have to forego a vacation or work 12-hour days to complete an important project. All are part of the job description of most professional positions.

Professionals are expected to produce results. Strive to complete deliverables before their due dates and under budget.

Professionals meet or exceed expectations whenever possible.
4: Do what you say and say what you can do

This is one of my favorite sayings especially in view of the fact that talking the talk is so prevalent and walking the walk so rare in this age of sound bites. You should "engage brain" before speaking -- can you really do what you are about to say? If you can't, the wizard behind the curtain will eventually be revealed and hard-earned trust can be lost.

Professionals deliver on promises made.

5: Communicate effectively

I go out of my way to patronize a dentist who has excellent communication skills. He takes the time to explain the available options, make recommendations, state the total costs, and promise a date when the work can be completed. I then feel empowered to make the right decisions.

I recently ordered Internet and phone service from the cable company. I told the salesman that the existing cable had been ripped out during a landscaping project. Perhaps I wasn't clear or perhaps the salesman wasn't listening -- it doesn't really matter. The message didn't get through and the wrong person was sent to do the installation. As a result, Qwest, not the cable company, got my business. Not only did the commissioned salesman lose his sale, he and his company both looked unprofessional in my eyes.

Resist the urge to blame the customer when communication goes awry. Effective communication is ultimately your responsibility -- not your customer's.

Whether verbal or written, professionals communicate clearly, concisely, thoroughly, and accurately.

6: Follow exceptional guiding principles

Appreciate and support those you work with. Practice good manners and proper etiquette. Have high ethical and moral standards. Be honest and fair in all of your dealings with others. Obey the law. These may sound like the attributes of a Boy Scout, but they are basic values that all professionals should follow. Many companies have a document that outlines their operating principles. Have you read yours?

Professionals adhere to high values and principles.

7: Praise your peers not yourself

Respect and acknowledge the talents of your peers. There is nothing more unprofessional and self-serving than telling others how wonderful you are.

Professionals are humble and generous in their praise of others.

8: Share your knowledge

When I was hired at Hughes Aircraft, a second person with similar skills was hired with me. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that one of us wasn't going to survive. The competitive nature of the situation was palpable. I am no stranger to the belief that it is not in your best interest to share your knowledge with your associates, AKA the competition. It is easy to find yourself in that comfortable place with "unique" knowledge. If you are a hoarder of information and are of the opinion that all of the nuts you have squirreled away grant you immutable job security, think again. The harsh reality is that nobody is irreplaceable.
Information isn't a limited resource. Contrary to what some might think, your mind won't be emptied by giving away kernels of wisdom or experience. Think of knowledge as an ocean of facts and not a stream of data. It is possible to share what you know and still keep one step ahead of the competition -- simply apply yourself and learn something new daily.

Professionals help their peers and are respected for doing so.

9: Say thank you

I always tried to find a way to thank others for their help. When their help was above and beyond the call of duty, I would buy them a Coke – a testament to the marketing power of Madison Avenue and Mean Joe Greene.

The items I value the most in my personnel file from Hughes Aircraft are two AVOs (avoid verbal orders memos) to my manager from frontline employees. The AVOs thanked me for the support I provided that helped them do their job better.

Silly me -- what was I thinking? I was sharing a Coke when I should have been sharing my thanks in a printed internal document to the employee's manager.

Professionals thank others in a meaningful way that most benefits the recipient.

10: Keep a smile on your face and the right attitude in your heart

This has been the hardest item for me to do consistently over my working years. I believed I was lying to myself and the world by smiling when I was miserable or unhappy with an ongoing issue at work.

I now realize it's not dishonest to be pleasant when you are having one of those lousy days. It is in fact thoughtful to care about how your attitude affects those you interact with. Share your unhappiness with your manager only. "Share the misery" is not the mark of a professional.

Professionals are pleasant even during trying times.

The final word

Working with professionals is a pleasure, and I have been fortunate to work with some truly exemplary ones. There have been a few who liked to be treated as professionals without having to work and act like one.

You don’t have to look any further than the medical profession to see examples of true professionals. Think back upon those doctors you've liked the most and model your professionalism after theirs.

So, how do you measure up? Don't feel bad if you need some work in one or more areas. Demeanor that is less than professional can lead to an image problem for you and your company. Negative images are hard to shake. Recognize any shortcomings you might have and begin working on your professional image today.