

Ingredients of Professionalism

A Panel Discussion

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MODERATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The concept of Professionalism is not easy to define. In medieval times there were only three "Professions," the Church, the Law, and Medicine. Now many occupations are vying for the distinction. In the case of Engineering these include many sub-specializations, for instance trash collectors, some of whom consider themselves "Sanitary Engineers." O.K. so where would we be without them (neck-deep in garbage), but are they professionals? That depends on how many of the "ingredients of professionalism" are practiced in their daily work. But what are these "ingredients"? That is the crux of the matter, and the subject which this panel is to discuss.

It has been suggested that the following are some aspects of professionalism which should be discussed:

Responsibility

Special Training	Competence
Altruism	Ethical Conduct
Effective Communication	Respect for Self and Others

SOME PANELISTS' PRELIMINARY POSITIONS

Ingredients of Professionalism

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This panel has the mandate of exploring questions, such as: What is professionalism? Who is a professional? What constitutes a profession? Webster places the professional between "profanum vulgus" (the common herd) and "professor" (the uncommon/weird individual). Interestingly, this is also the placement of the professional in the eyes of the general public and in the eyes of the professionals themselves. I think we can all agree that the professional is, thankfully, somewhat more than a profanum vulgus in capability and, thankfully again, somewhat less removed from the real world than the academic.

I will try to identify the ingredients of professionalism, focussing on those ingredients which are fundamental to the issue. I claim no special expertise or right to discuss such issues other than the fact that I have been and remain a professional, I am a professor by profession, and I spend most of my time being a profanum vulgus.

I will dispense with a large part of professionalism by dividing it into two parts:

1. The Physical Part;
2. The Mental Part.

The physical part consists of:

- a. The professional person;
- b. The tools used;
- c. The product;
- d. The general public;
- e. The professional society.

These are the physical things of the environment. They are needed to make professionalism, but they are of no immediate use in defining professionalism.

The mental part is more interesting and fruitful for my purposes. It consists of:

- a. The expertise (knowledge/know-how/facts/reasoning/logic);
- b. That other stuff (a sense of harmony/quality/ethics/style/trustworthiness/respect/responsibility/the pursuit of excellence).

The common use of the word professional is invariably of one of these two categories. Examples:

He is a professional student.
Computer Science is my profession.
The work was professionally done.
He is very professional about the way he digs ditches.

Our expectations of professionals are thus twofold. We expect the professional not only to do specialized and skillful work, but to take pride in the work, to be internally driven to do a good job, technically and socially. We expect the professional to consider all aspects of the issue as a package, so that appropriate actions are taken. We expect the professional to hold himself accountable for his actions.

Presumably, the motivation here for inquiring into the ingredients of professionalism is to understand it and enhance or promote professionalism. So, what must we do?

Well, we have systems in place for promoting the physical part and the expertise type of the mental part. Those systems can always be made better. But by far the weakest part, and thus the part that deserves our attention, is that other stuff which is so hard to define and deal with (primarily because it is largely undefinable and obtuse).

Being professionals in technical areas means that we are singularly ill-prepared to enter this netherworld of the mind, emotions, motivations, values, etc. But enter we must. After you . . . ?

