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On Becoming a Professional

By Susan Manch

All too often, highly gifted individuals (not unlike many of the lawyers in your organization) believe they are professionals upon graduation from law school. By virtue of their ink's-still-wet diploma, they believe the mantle of professionalism has been bestowed. For this reason, as they go about learning their craft and integrating into a law firm or legal department, professionalism is not high on the list of areas for developmental attention because—you guessed it—they believe they already possess that attribute.

Focusing on the Concrete at the Expense of the Intangible

The evaluation practices of many legal employers reinforce this mindset by not focusing attention on personal qualities or behaviors in the performance assessment phase of the process. They measure progress or deficiencies in writing, analysis, and communication skills, but generally fail to assess (or assess, but fail to communicate evaluative feedback on) attributes like adaptability or drive. Even when the forms list criteria pertaining to professional behaviors such as initiative or maturity, most reviewers skip over them or dismiss them as too difficult to measure. Worse, some reviewers assign a numerical ranking to an attorney's performance in this area, but fail to elaborate in commentary why he/she gets a "one" for Ability to Inspire Confidence vs. a "four." For many attorneys, the first time they hear about *professionalism* as a clear and separate performance standard is as a part of a conversation about partnership or promotion. And if this conversation takes place, it probably means the person is being told that he/she has not actually achieved the expected level of professionalism in the eyes of the senior attorneys in the organization.

It has been tested and proven that achievement-oriented individuals will work diligently to attain and exceed performance standards that are clearly articulated. Yet many of us shrink at the idea of trying to measure an individual's attainment of the state of professionalism. Perhaps it is because being a professional means something unique to each person and each organization. Or maybe it makes us feel uncomfortable to address seemingly personal or even "unchangeable" aspects of another. In the end, developing attorneys can benefit from clarity and guidance on the subject of professionalism and the formal evaluation process can provide the perfect vehicle for communicating expectations and standards of performance.

Measuring Professional Behaviors

Firms need not shy away from drawing attention to the behaviors and personal qualities necessary to be viewed as a “professional” in the organization and in the field as a whole. Evaluation processes that describe these criteria may have both immediate and long-term positive impact. By articulating specific attributes and actions considered appropriate, developing attorneys are put on notice that this is what the firm values and rewards. By measuring progress and providing feedback on the satisfactory development of these attributes on a regular basis, he or she can adjust or improve over time. Professionalism may mean different things to different people, but the following are terms that fit most organizations’ purposes in communicating what professionalism is all about:

- Ability to inspire confidence
- Adaptability
- Commitment to the greater good of the organization
- Drive
- Stability
- Initiative
- Maturity
- Personal comportment
- Respect for self and others

There may be others that fit your culture or expectations, but these provide a starting place. *“Great. I agree, but how do I measure any of these things? Aren’t they too subjective or even intrusive?”* They are indeed tough to measure and subject to the influences of personality and individual taste, but they do not have to be either intrusive or unfairly applied. There are tangible ways of assessing these attributes. See the following for some creative ways to focus your evaluative thinking:

Ability to Inspire Confidence

You know *you* have confidence in an individual when you delegate more and more responsibility, when you ask him to call the client directly, when you have her supervise others, and when you can be sure the work product will be what you asked for. You know clients or others in your organization have confidence in the attorney when you get positive comments on their work, when the client asks to have her on the next project, and when other supervisors try to get him to take their assignments.

Adaptability

An individual’s ability to “go with the flow” and do the best work under a variety of circumstances is adaptable. Adaptability is in evidence when someone works 36 hours straight without complaint because that is how long it takes to get the deal done. It is there when he can take depositions one day, then fill in on the document production side if needed in a pinch.

Commitment to the Greater Good of the Organization

There is concrete evidence of this trait when she goes on five campuses to recruit, even though her big case is heating up. You recognize commitment when he agonizes over

losses or deals that went sour—not because he hates losing, but because he hates disappointing the client.

Drive

Drive is often mistakenly attributed to those who bill unreasonably high numbers of hours, but billings alone are not enough to signify the presence of real drive. You know someone is driven when she offers to shadow you in a trial without billing the time because she wants to learn. You see it in the guy who takes five hours to walk a junior attorney through edits because he wants her to learn how it should be done.

Ability to Work under Pressure/Stress

This is getting too personal, you say. But actually, assessing an employee's ability to successfully adjust to the demands of the job is as appropriate as measuring the quality of his or her writing. Is the attorney interested in the substance of the work and engaged in the day-to-day practice, or does she express dissatisfaction and show a lack of intellectual curiosity? Is he weighed down by the responsibility of the job or energized and excited by its prospects? Asking questions such as these will help you to assess the match between a developing attorney's response to pressure or stress and the conditions under which he or she will be required to work over time.

Initiative

This is one aspect of professionalism that does often appear on formal evaluation forms. To gather the best information on this attribute, firms should be looking for evidence of an individual reaching out for work, asking questions, taking responsibility for his or her own career development, and staying abreast of evolving expectations as he/she grows more senior or takes on new responsibility.

Maturity

Maturity has nothing to do with age. There are immature forty-year olds and mature twenty-year olds. In an employment setting, maturity is defined by the presence of judgment, wisdom, and thoughtfulness as applied in an individual's approach to decision-making and interaction with clients and others. Signs of maturity include knowing when to speak up and when to listen, having insight into the potential consequences of one's actions, and being able to let others have or share the limelight. Maturity shows through in teaching and mentoring activities of more junior attorneys, and in the quality of relationships developed with peers. It is visible when there is an understanding that entitlement comes with significant accountability.

Personal Comportment

At the risk of sounding at least a hundred years old, dress and social behavior does have an impact on one's success in most organizations. Looking as though you belong in your surroundings, matching the attire and demeanor of the more experienced attorneys in your firm as well as the clients, and recognizing that first impressions last a lifetime are hallmarks of someone carries him or herself with professionalism. In today's boardrooms and executive offices, casual dress has gone the way of the tech stock boom.

If a senior attorney has to wonder if an individual is an associate or the courier, it is unlikely that she will assign him an important project. If a partner is embarrassed to take an associate to a client dinner because she seems unable to grasp the basic rules of etiquette, it will stifle her long-term development. If an associate addresses a partner as “dude,” the partner will have to wonder about his judgment in interactions with clients and other attorneys. Studies have shown that dressing more formally for one’s work day helps new professionals take their job responsibilities more seriously. And seriously, has anyone truly mastered the ability to make a pair of rumpled khakis and a golf shirt look professional?

Respect for Self and Others

Most firms have come to see the importance of fostering a collegial, collaborative culture as they grow and expand. Skills in supervising others, mentoring, and motivating developing attorneys are valued by most forward-looking organizations. It only makes sense to reinforce and reward those behaviors at the earliest possible stages in an attorney’s career by providing feedback on these attributes. Being respectful of staff and peers, as well as of superiors, having a humane approach to interactions with others, and feeling proud of your work and employer are all tangible signs of possessing this attribute.

After the Evaluation

Contrary to what most newly minted attorneys believe, professionalism is earned over time—and only with lots of hard work and careful introspection. For most, it starts with gaining self awareness. Developing attorneys should be asking themselves these questions:

“What do senior attorneys think of me?” Clients?”

“Do I behave in a manner shared by the most successful attorneys here?”

Those who are destined for success will use this self awareness of the way in which others perceive them to develop and hone new skills and behaviors. It is in the employer’s best interests to clarify expectations and provide counsel on the best ways to develop and exhibit these skills, behaviors, and personal attributes. There is so much more to being a successful attorney than the quality of the legal work. Professionalism can make the difference between success and failure and it is critical to direct developing attorneys’ attention to this fact early and with regularity.

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