

Professionalism in the Workplace:
What does it take to be
a “Warrior at Work”?

SHRM 2007

Carol M. Merchasin, Esq.
Training Design Studio

I have been thinking for a while that the term “professional” is really a very interesting word in the world of work. There are a variety of ways in which we use it – most commonly as a noun referring to particular kinds of people, such as doctors, lawyers, architects, and others who have undergone a certain amount – usually a considerable amount – of very specialized education and/or training. That “professional” is then thought to have attained, through study and also through practice, a mastery of the specialized knowledge and skills which gives his vocation the status of a “profession.” In addition, in this usage of the word, there are often certain ethical standards that are either legally or traditionally associated with the work of the professional, as well as requirements of licenses, certifications, education, and continuing education to maintain “professional” status.

But this doesn’t really tell the whole story. For example, I went to law school when I was well into my forties. I wanted to go for a variety of reasons, but one was that I aspired to be a professional (whatever that meant). However, upon entering law practice in a large firm, I found that there were wide variations in the levels of “professionalism” of my lawyer colleagues. Some of them behaved in a deplorable fashion, despite their education and their expensive suits (both male and female), while many staff people maintained high

standards of what I consider to be professional behavior, despite sometimes rather onerous and even unpleasant working conditions. So, who, then, were the professionals?

It became clear to me early on in my career as a lawyer that “professionalism” was something personal, apart from any specialized education or training I had received. What I observed was that one’s professional demeanor came from something internal, some set of personal standards that display themselves in an attitude toward ourselves, our work and our colleagues. With this use of the word, we are in much more subjective territory – not the licensing, certification and ethical requirement of the noun “professional.” Once we start talking about this aspect of professionalism, we are talking about all of us; everyone who works, no matter what her education or position –from the mail room to the board room; from managers to executives, to human resource people – all of us.

Let’s talk, then, about professionalism as something that comes to us not from the “outside in” (training, education, certification), but rather from the “inside out” (attitudes, beliefs, values). It then becomes more about *who we are* than about our title or position. A cursory internet search turns up a lot of guidance for how to *seem* like a professional person – guidance that operates from the premise of appearances rather than the premise of *being*: how to dress, how to shake hands and look the other guy in the eye, how to negotiate firmly, and so on. And, yes, we do want to look like professionals, we want to shake hands like professionals and appear professional. But that’s only where the discussion begins. We have to **be** professionals to get the title.

Let's go back to the root of the words "professions" and "professionalism" - i.e. to profess, or to commit. I think that true professionals have committed to a variety of mindsets and skill sets that set them apart from others. They are true "warriors at work." Not warriors based on weapons or power, but warriors based on their willingness to commit and hang tough, to be in the battle for themselves and for others. Here is what I think are those commitments that make warriors at work:

1. A commitment to work for yourself
2. A commitment to the good of the organization
3. A commitment to having the right attitude
4. A commitment to being competent
5. A commitment to being courageous

Let's be clear about a few things upfront: these commitments are not easy. In addition, what I have put forward here are my own thoughts on the values and attributes of professionals. Certainly, you will find omissions (for example, I have not included honesty and ethical behavior because to me they are so self-evident), and some unusual suggestions, just to provoke us into thinking more creatively. Further, I think it is important that being more professional at work is not some vague and amorphous idea, but something specific to which we can actually commit. Finally, I am going to focus more attention in this article on Commitment #1 and provide more in-depth thoughts on the other 4 commitments in subsequent articles. So, with that said, let's jump in and take on the first commitment.

Commitment #1: Commit to Work for Yourself

"Hard work spotlights the character of some people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don't turn up at all." Sam Ewing

I have put this commitment first because to me, it is where we have to start – with working for ourselves, even when we are working for, and getting paid by, someone else. Why is this important? Because at the end of the day, every experience you have stays with you. It enriches you. It makes you better. It causes you to grow. When you bring that perspective to work, everything you do has meaning.

Are you a "Dynamo, Cruiser, or Loser?"

In his book, "True Professionalism", David Maister asserts that our workplaces are made up of Dynamos, Cruisers, and Losers. Amazingly, "Dynamos" only make up 10-20% of the workplace. You know who these people are and hopefully you count yourself among them. How are "Dynamos" different? They don't say "This is not in my job description." Why? Because they know, consciously or unconsciously, that they work for themselves, even within an organization.

Next, according to Maister, "Cruisers" make up 65% - 75% of our workplaces. "Cruisers" come to work today and they do their job. Tomorrow they come to work and they do their job. The next day they come to work and they do their job. But they're not really going anywhere because they don't invest themselves in their work. They come to work thinking that they are working for the organization; consequently, when they go home at the end of the day, they are often unhappy and unsatisfied, maybe even resentful. The organization is not meeting their needs – how could it?

Finally, we have “Losers.” “Losers make up another 5-15% of the work population and as you might expect, “Losers” do not meet even the minimum standard of quality, quantity, attitude expected in our workplaces today. This talk is too short to cover the long journey those people still have to make.

The question is: Do you want to be a Dynamo? I suspect you do. Dynamos are happier and more satisfied; they feel more in control because they have more of a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. In addition, of course, they often reap the benefits of upward career movement. So, we should be asking ourselves, what does it take to be a “Dynamo” or in other words a professional?

Qualities of Entrepreneurs

Since entrepreneurs are people who actually **do** work for themselves in the usual sense, let’s examine some of their common characteristics to see how we can apply them, even if we work for an organization.

- Good health: Entrepreneurs generally have good health. It may be because no one is giving them sick days, or it may be because they’re happy, engaged and they just get sick less.
- Need to control and direct: Entrepreneurs do not leave control to others, they see what needs to be done and they follow through.
- Low need for status: Entrepreneurs get their status from their work, because they own it. They do not waste time focusing on who’s above,

and who’s below on the ladder. They get satisfaction from their progress rather than their status.

- Sense of urgency: Entrepreneurs understand the value of the things they are doing. The work is not just something to grind through. Each task is important in and of itself because it is a part of the total situation, not just a random item on a “to-do” list.
- Attraction to challenges: Entrepreneurs are energized by challenge. They assess risks and are willing to take them.

How Do We Get There?

Take on absolutely every experience that you can. While I was a partner in a nationwide law firm, we won a contract for a huge project to do training for a Fortune Five company. We were scrambling for a few more of the firm’s internal lawyers to deliver the training, so I asked one of the newer partners if she would like to work on the project. Surprisingly (at least to me), she said, “Well, how will I be compensated?” Now, I probably don’t need to tell you that partners in large law firms are pretty well compensated, so I don’t think that she really needed the money. And despite being a partner, who is supposed to be an owner, she declined the opportunity saying, “There is not enough in it for me.” As it turned out (and it often does turn out this way), the lawyers who worked on this project got a great deal of experience in doing the kind of things that trial lawyers do – standing up in front of people, talking and persuading. They improved their skills – and regardless of what direction their careers later took, they owned that valuable experience. Later, this woman told me that when she saw what a positive experience it

had been for others, she felt she had made a mistake. I thought so too. Professionals take on every experience they can. The value of your experience (good and bad) will belong to you, not your employer.

Be an owner. You have probably had colleagues who, regardless of their position, act like owners. If you are like most people, when you encounter someone who is an “owner” psychologically, even if not legally, you take notice. My husband and I were once in a restaurant in Mexico, when an elderly Mexican woman came by our table. She chatted about the restaurant, how long it had been there, and what its “signature dishes” were. We were delighted with the information and her attention, thinking we were chatting with the owner. When we learned that the woman had worked in the kitchen for 40+ years, we were very surprised! Because of her attitude, she “owned” the entire restaurant, not just her small corner of the kitchen.

Think about the people you have known who are “owners,” whether they are in the mailroom or the boardroom. They make a difference, not because of WHERE they are in the organization but because of HOW they are in the organization. They are successful based not on their position but on their view. Ownership is a form of personal pride. You aren’t hiding. Your work is important because – whether you realize it or not – you are putting your life into it.

Practice good habits. *“Instead of happiness heaven gives us habit.”* Eugene Onegin.

Really, there is no better place to find mayhem and tragedy than in an opera. While you are there appreciating the music and the drama, you can thank your lucky stars that you are not dying of tuberculosis while lying on the floor singing for an hour

and a half! The opera “*Eugene Onegin*,” is an archetypal story - a dashing, selfish hero has the love and affection of a wonderful woman. But, he is looking for greater happiness and he believes he can find it by filling his life with more excitement and more glamour, (a bigger car, a better house, you get the picture - have you seen this way of thinking?). So our hero gets rid of her and goes his merry way looking for the “happiness” that he has planned for himself. Years later, he finds that happiness has eluded him, while our heroine has found it in, of all things, the solid day to day habits of her daily life: the ordinary magic of life (She sings, “Instead of happiness, heaven gives us habit.”) Garrison Keillor, the great imaginer of the magic of ordinary life, wrote it like this, “You wake up every morning and pull on your jeans and make coffee and look at the newspaper and pour bran flakes and milk in the bowl, and as time goes by you realize that this is preferable to what you once imagined would make you happy.”

What are the good habits we are looking for in a professional, a warrior in the workplace? Reliability, discipline, clear thinking are great places to begin.

Reliability

I went to do a marketing pitch with a colleague in a small town and when we arrived on a Sunday night, there was a message from the client asking us to be sure to have an extra ten copies of the proposal at the meeting. We asked for a name brand copy shop. “No,” said the hotel clerk, “we don’t have one of those, but we have Dave.” I called Dave at 7:00 p.m. on Sunday night – no answer, but I left him a message on his cell phone. Just as I was thinking “what are the odds that I will ever hear back from this guy?” Dave called back. I told him that I needed ten additional copies of a proposal

that was two inches thick with tabs, and he said, “No problem.” “Shall I bring it to you?” I asked. “No,” said Dave, “go to dinner. I’ll pick it up at the hotel and bring it back when I’m done.” We went to dinner, and when we got back, the material was there – all ready. All ready! And perfect. I have used Dave again and again because Dave is one of the most reliable owners of any business I have ever met. And here is the point: I do not even know if Dave is the “real” owner. But I don’t care, because, to me, Dave owns everything that I am interested in: getting work done reliably and consistently, even when it is hard to do that: even when it is inconvenient, even when it is Sunday night.

Discipline

It often seems like we don’t want to discipline ourselves – like Eugene Onegin, we only want to be happy. We want to be free! But discipline is the road that delivers us to our goals and dreams.

I know a young musician, Jessica, who only ever wanted one job – she wanted to play the clarinet for the Metropolitan Opera. Needless to say, when you only want one job in the world, you are setting yourself up for a big heartbreak. When Jessica graduated from college, she had an opportunity to be a substitute clarinetist with the Met, so she got some experience. Then someone quit so the position became available, and an audition date was set for the end of the season, nine months away. Jessica had played for many years, and had become very accomplished – but she was not good at auditions. She would get very nervous. Think about having only a few minutes in which to perform at your best! That’s a lot of pressure on each second of those few minutes. In order to prepare, Jessica used the secret-weapon of all

warriors - self-discipline. She took a calendar and counted backwards from the audition date and she asked herself, “What do I need to do, month by month, week by week, day by day to win this audition?”

First, she began to run; the clarinet is, after all, a wind instrument and you need to have adequate wind to play well. Then, she listened to all the recordings the Met had done so she could learn their style. She got all of the principals in the orchestra to listen to her so she could get their suggestions. She worked with a performance coach so that she could overcome her audition anxiety. Every day for nine months she followed through on that plan. You probably guessed that she won the job (of course – why else would I be relating this story?). And while I would like to tell you that it was because she was always a musical prodigy (in the interest of full disclosure, I *am* her mother) the reality is, she won it because of her discipline. Every day she did something that moved her forward.

A professional needs that – a warrior needs that. Every day, we need the self-discipline to move forward.

Quiet Time

We don’t get much “quiet time”. Blackberries follow us everywhere along with cell phones. Our families need us, our jobs need us, and diversion always beckons. What part of “quiet” could we possibly have? I spent the last three years of my career building businesses within a law firm. It was such an overwhelming job that I had to begin getting up each day an hour earlier for quiet time just to think about what I needed to do that day to move my business forward.

In reality, we all need that time. We do not take enough time to think about what we have to do – and to think about what we *are* doing.

There are so many other work and personal habits that we could talk about. I encourage you to look at yours: are your work and personal habits aligned enough for you to be a professional? A warrior? Do you get enough sleep? Do you have a life plan? What do you need to do today to “own” your work experience? You will be amazed at the difference in your level of happiness, and in how much you can learn and lead, when you are “working for yourself.”

Commitment #2: Commit to the Good of the Organization

Why does the organization come second? I think it is like the conventional wisdom of a marriage or a personal relationship of any kind: first you get to know who you are, and then you can commit to the other person. In this case, first you commit to yourself, and then you commit to your organization.

What exactly is this commitment? You are committed to doing *whatever* is in the best interest of the organization. When it overlaps with what is good for you – well, then, so much the better. But the first question is: what is in the best interest of the organization? I see examples of this repeatedly in HR people. Many of you have been faced with a decision to downsize, for example, knowing that you might be among those who will have to go. That’s a particularly tough one – but that’s really working in the best interest of the organization. That’s what it takes – a duty of loyalty. So in everything you’re doing you can ask yourself: “What is good for the

organization, what is the right thing?” That’s the professional view – it can’t just be, “What’s good for me?”

How do we get there?

Have a close personal relationship with failure: “*We don’t like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.*” A Decca Records executive in 1962, rejecting a contract with the Beatles.

I love this quote. Here is someone who had to learn to live with failure! Accepting failure may seem counter-intuitive: who volunteers to have *any* relationship with failure? Most of us have internalized the message that failure is not an option. We learn to try to avoid failure at all costs, and this is particularly true in some very risk-averse organizations. Well, it is certainly true that if you take some risks for the good of your organization, you will probably get up to your eyeballs in some messy stuff and some of that messy stuff will involve failure.

My daughter, the musician, played the clarinet in a youth orchestra in high school. The orchestra went on tour to Buenos Aires, and a documentary film crew went with them. When we saw the film, there was my daughter, after a concert, sitting in the back of the room crying: she had played a wrong note. The next scene showed the conductor, Ben Zander, a great musician, conductor and coach, who said: “These kids are terrific musicians, they have discipline, they have a lot of things going for them - the only thing they don’t understand is that they must have a close personal relationship with failure.” What a lesson!

Lest you are still not persuaded, here’s a surprising perspective from the great basketball coach Phil Jackson, a guy

who knows about winning: *“I used to think that the day I could accept defeat is the day I would have to give up my job. But losing is as integral part of the dance as winning. Only by acknowledging the possibility of defeat can you fully enjoy the possibilities of competition. Our culture would have us believe that being able to accept loss is tantamount to setting yourself up to lose. But not everyone can win all the time. Obsessing about winning adds an unnecessary layer of pressure that constricts our bodies and our spirits and ultimately robs you of the freedom to do your best.”*

We are going to fail, unless we stay home in bed all day (which is its own type of failure). So, it makes a lot of sense to learn – and learn again - how to fall down and how to get up. It’s the failing, the falling, and the getting up again that tempers us, and makes us warriors. That’s part of what it takes to be professional.

Tame blame. *“It is amazing what you can accomplish when you do not care who gets the credit.”* Harry Truman

You may have to roll the rock uphill on this, because many people work in organizations or departments where people thrive on getting credit, but avoid blame like a virus. The message here is not easy: you need a strategy of “no blame” if you are going to be a professional and create a team of professionals. To do it, you must set the example.

There are several things that make this point important. One is that so much time is wasted in assigning and avoiding blame. The “blame” becomes the prominent topic and the focus of attention. Hours are wasted either by the “water cooler,” gossiping on the phone, or by email, while everyone tries to avoid the discomfort

produced by the blame process. The underlying problems and solution become insignificant by comparison. Blaming interferes with solving – and solutions are what we need.

Also, when blame is used as a weapon, someone has to lose, and when people feel like losers, at home or at work, they “drop out” or pull back. A professional team can’t afford to lose anyone. As to the people who “won”, who avoided the blame, a destructive habit is established: the killing of team effort and team spirit. Finally, when blame is used as a weapon, most people shy away from risking and/or from making that extra effort that is so essential to a successful team. This is an insidious process.

In place of blame, focus on problem solving – you can be hard on the problem without being hard on your people. Ask: how did the chain of responsibility fail? Substitute clarity, insight and creativity for blame. Give mutual respect some space to develop. “How can we as a team avoid this in the future?”

If you begin to think it through and try some experiments, you will be amazed at how much trouble can be avoided, and how much progress can be accomplished when blame is tamed. Examine your attitude and behavior on this point – it is worth the risk.

Think “Even better.” Have you ever noticed how often we think, “good enough,” and we congratulate ourselves on our accomplishments – perhaps too soon and perhaps without merit? We are living in a culture in which many “facts” are “true enough” and where we are encouraged to raise our self-esteem by telling ourselves what a good job we have done – often, when

we have not, or when we have not gone far enough.

You probably read in the newspapers or heard on the news, as I did, about the conditions of sub-standard care for veterans at the Walter Reade Army Hospital outpatient facility. The in-patient area of the hospital itself was apparently giving excellent care, while the outpatient center was giving appalling care. Atul Gawande, a doctor, wrote in the New York Times about why there was such a difference in the outcome of care between the two. Caring, professional caregivers ran both institutions, but the people at the hospital, unlike those at the outpatient clinic, did not say, “This is good enough.” What they said is, “This is *not* good enough; how can we do even better?”

For example, when the hospital staff found that the protocols they developed had lessened eye injuries among soldiers on the battlefield; they didn’t stop for a pat on the back. They said, “Why are there still *any* eye injuries?” By refusing to stop at “good enough” they found that the younger soldiers were not wearing the Army issue goggles, because they didn’t look cool. So they went back to the “drawing board” to design goggles that the soldiers would wear. As you can guess, eye injuries were reduced again.

On the other hand, at the outpatient clinic, “good enough” (and even “not very good at all”) was good enough. There was no culture of inquiry, no affirmative effort to do better, no push to discover failures. The head of the clinic testified before Congress, “This is not a horrific, catastrophic failure.” This must be small comfort to the soldiers who received sub-standard care there. Sometimes, people don’t think “better” because they don’t want to see failure (see

above: maybe because they do not have a “close, personal relationship with failure.”). Whatever the underlying reasons, professionals and warriors strive for “even better.”

Commitment # 3: Commitment to the Right Attitude

“I have talent and vision but I just don’t care.” Anonymous

Having understood the principles of working for oneself and being loyal to one’s organization, we have already begun to understand the principle of having the right attitude. Attitude in general might be defined as one’s overall point of view about a situation, and is made up of thinking, feeling and doing. It’s hard to change how we feel – it is much easier to begin by changing how we think and what we do. Yes: we can use our minds to change our minds, and certainly to change our behavior. Those are the things we can change, once we begin to see the logic of doing so. And yes, changing our attitude and our behavior will change how we feel.

How do we get there?

Take a bigger view. Everyone has troubling things on his or her mind. There are innumerable things going wrong and they’re all important – that’s normal. For some reason, as human beings, we seem to have a great deal of faith in our problems – we allow them much more influence than we allow the 80 or 90% of the positive things in our lives. That also seems logical – the normal stuff requires much less attention and produces much less pain. Nonetheless, we end up with an inaccurate view that is very lopsided.

What helps is an adjusted view, corrected to take a broader perspective that will shed more light on the place of problems in our lives. We need the habit of maintaining a perspective which is healthier and more accurate, and which leads to better problem-solving than either worrying or complaining.

Let's try this: Take a deep breath. Picture yourself rising up above where you are currently sitting and then further out into space. See the curve of the earth globe, the blue of the rivers and oceans, the green of the forests. Ask yourself, from this perspective, am I the most important thing in the universe? Is my problem the most important problem in the universe? No. I didn't think so. It helps to bring a bigger perspective to our own problems.

You can get a bigger view anywhere. Look around. There is always someone who is having a harder time than you are. When I was driving to the SHRM conference for my presentation, I was very nervous, as I always am. I was listening half-heartedly to NPR when I noticed that the big news story was about the performance review of the president of the University of Nevada. While some things were good, many were problems. How painful! Then the larger view suddenly came to me – sure, I was nervous, and I might not “do well,” but at least my evaluations were not going to be analyzed on National Public Radio!

Once I asked a musician who was about to perform at Carnegie Hall how he kept from being nervous. He told me that he took the number of people in the world and divided that by the number of people who would see him play that night. It seems like it might have been somewhere in the neighborhood of .000000000001 percent. Therefore, how important could it be? He

also said that if that didn't help him, he just reminded himself that no one would die as a result of his playing.

Bring the authentic “you” to work.
“Achievement is not the most important thing. Authenticity is.”

You are not going to go far by just putting on the handshake, putting on a personality, putting on the suit, adopting a “you” that you think someone else needs or expects. You can't build a foundation on your dress, your suit, your shoes, your scarf or tie. They are important, but they are not the whole story - they are just the beginning of the story. Who you are is the most important thing. You have to connect with who YOU are, and bring that presence to work every day. It is perhaps trite to say that honesty is an important part of being a professional. But are you being honest about who you are?

Have a sense of humor. Humor has a big effect on us in the workplace. Humor is actually a vital life coping mechanism, allowing us to do four important things: 1) defuse stress and anxiety, 2) deal with humiliation, 3) deflate embarrassment, and 4) mentally cope with pain and suffering. (Think about it: if all that were available in a pill, we would have pharmacies at the office.)

As professionals, we need to be able to laugh at ourselves, at our circumstances, at our failings. To do otherwise is to be less than a genuine human being.

Commitment #4: Commit to Competence

“Competence, like truth, beauty and contact lenses is in the eye of the beholder.”
Lawrence Peters

Competence is often what we think of when we think of a professional. What is competence? It is knowledge, skills, and behavior. When you look at your knowledge, skills and behavior, are you able to say with assurance that you have all the competencies that you need? I wouldn't think so, because none of us can say that. At the very least we ought to feel that we are on a path to competence and that path may be – indeed, should be – a lifelong journey. Look at what is necessary to be competent as a human resource manager:

- Credible activist
- Talent manager
- Organizational designer
- Strategy architect
- Culture and change steward
- Operational executor
- Business ally

To do these jobs well you must ask yourself, “What do I need to do to increase my competence?” “What do I need to do this year?” Dissect these competencies and create a plan for yourself. Focus not only on your weaknesses, but also on your strengths. According to the SHRM article that outlined these competencies, 20% of us are highly accomplished in these competencies (these are continuous learners who will keep working); and there is another 20% of us who will never get there. If you are part of the 60% in the middle, you need to begin now to develop your competence in these and other areas. You can't be an HR professional without them.

How do we get there?

Ask “why” not “how.” Everyone needs to spend some quiet time not fighting fires. While you are quiet, it is possible to ask: “Why are we doing this?” We have a tendency to always ask, “How are we going

to get it done?” and that is an important question. But sometimes we spend a lot of time and resources doing (the wrong thing) and not thinking (about what is the right thing).

Commitment #5: Commitment to Courage

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak and courage is what it takes to sit down and listen.”

I want to return here to the idea of being a “warrior at work.” Fortunately, as I mentioned initially, warriors at work have no conventional weapons and certainly no violence. What do we have? We have the five commitments that we have been looking at today. It means having the courage to commit to failure, to ownership, to attitude, to being fearless. Once you've fallen down a few times you get used to it – you get used to the view of the ceiling from the floor. Get up again. That's what it's all about.

How do we get there?

Fearlessness. *“Once you've been in a really bad movie, there's a sort of fearlessness that develops.”* Jack Nicholson

Fearlessness does not mean we have no fear – that would be stupid. Fearlessness is being willing to ask yourself, “What am I afraid of?” Fearlessness is about facing your fears realistically, dealing with fear and managing fear.

Recognizing death. One way to feel and develop courage is to recognize that all of us will die. Steve Jobs said: *“Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to prevent yourself from thinking that you have something to lose. You are*

already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

When we are able to realize from time to time that our lives are finite resources, we are able to commit to being courageous. As my husband says, “Nobody gets out alive.”

Can you commit? Can you commit to work for yourself, to the good of the organization, to the right attitude, to competence, to courage? The bad news is that it takes hard work and conscious effort; the good news is that it is a path that leads to more happiness and success - on your own terms – as a warrior at work. Worth the effort? Yes.