The telltale signs of a consummate lab professional

By Marti K. Bailey, MT(ASCP)

Professionalism has an elusive nature. If someone were to ask for a definition, a good bet is that (1) defining behaviors that are not professional rather than behaviors that are professional and (2) thinking of people who exhibit professionalism rather than the characteristics of professionalism would be easier.

Why is it hard to define the qualities of such a desirable behavior, and why is it simpler to characterize professionalism negatively rather than positively? One reason might be that professionalism is such an all-inclusive behavior. Being somewhat or usually professional does not count. Thus, the expression consummate professional seems particularly apt, since perfect or flawless are probably the most accurate definitions of consummate in this context.

And therein lies the difficulty. The challenge for management — as well as for employees — in getting to the heart of professionalism is trying to identify perfect behavior, only to be followed by the even greater challenge of developing this behavior in the workplace. Four broad categories embrace the attitudes and behaviors that form the foundation for building professionalism in the laboratory:

- Respect
- Service
- Support
- Growth

Respect

Appearance is an indication of a person’s respect for others. Even though working in a laboratory all day may require a lab coat or jacket and may mean little contact with employees outside the lab, adhering to an institutional dress code and being presentable in the event of unexpected encounters with professionals from other departments — doctors, nurses, patients — is one way to show consideration for everyone, all the time, and in every way. A disregard for personal grooming, along with pushing the limits of the dress code, signals lack of respect for people and policies.

Confidentiality, relating not only to patients but also to coworkers, is a vital element of respect. Employees often work closely enough to overhear personal conversations. Passing along personal information about another employee is only permissible when the information could be stated in front of that subject if he were present.

Tolerance as an element of respect cannot be overemphasized. Many institutions make substantial efforts to promote diversity, citing the positive effect created by employing workers from different cultures, genders, religions, and so forth. The diversity of different values, however, is not promoted typically. For example, some workers are neat to a fault while others are comfortable with a little clutter. Some employees believe only family emergencies qualify for unplanned time off, while others believe taking a pet to the vet qualifies. Some workers are not perturbed by minor tardiness, while others think such an infraction deserves termination. Obviously, not everyone has the same values, but that does not make one person wrong and another one right.

Tips from the Trenches: Managers who recognize that they hold the key to inspiring professionalism in the workplace are more likely to inspire professionalism on many levels.*

Courtesy is a key component of respect and covers a wide territory. Courtesy always goes farther than insult, so why not opt for the winning behavior? Courtesy includes the language and tone used and leaves no room for offensive or off-color language or discussions. Courtesy applies not only to thought and word but also to actions. It is respectful to value another person’s time, for example, by letting him know promptly if an appointment must be delayed or cancelled. Responding promptly to e-mails, voicemails, and other types of requests for information or assistance is another mark of professionalism. Ignoring appointments and communications is rude, indefensible, and irresponsible.

Service

Professionalism is incompatible with the “me-me-me syndrome” and with the attitude of an employee who perceives himself as a perpetual victim of overwork, insufficient pay, lack of appreciation, and gross inequities. A job is more than
an entitlement to a paycheck. Employers hire employees to provide services. To meet this commitment, an employee should switch his focus from himself to others. Shifting his focus to others will fill his time with productive thoughts and activities rather than nonproductive ones.

One of the greatest workplace barriers to the service component of professionalism is the common employee performance evaluation that relegates supervisors and employees to a parent-child relationship. Relying on one person’s judgment of another — usually based on anecdotal information at best — or failing to hold employees accountable is not a means of promoting professionalism. Treating employees like children may very well backfire by encouraging them to act like children.

Standards must be established to distinguish between those employees with professional attitudes and behaviors and those without, and a process must be implemented to appropriately recognize the former while notifying the latter that improvement is needed. Differences in expected performance versus demonstrated performance need to be resolved, not left to languish until the offender resigns or retires.

Support

True professionals respect their employers’ property, business, rules, and policies. All employees — not just the housekeeping and building maintenance staffs — share responsibility for keeping the workplace clean, safe, and in good repair. Actions as minor as picking up a paper clip or cleaning up a coffee spill from the floor show evidence of accepting this responsibility. Keeping thermostats set at reasonable temperatures, reporting damage that needs to be repaired, and returning utensils and trays to the cafeteria demonstrate an employee’s respect for others and the responsibility he feels for his workplace.

Protecting business is not solely the responsibility of management. Typically, front-line employees, not managers, interact with patients on a daily basis. If these interactions were not at the heart of sustaining business, patient-satisfaction surveys would not exist. Every employee has a responsibility to treat patient customers with dignity.

Employee compliance with all institutional policies shows support of both the employer and the supervisor. Employees often deride certain employer policies regardless of whether they are personally affected by them. An employee may feel that his “First Amendment” rights are being restricted by workplace policies. Ignoring policies simply because he disagrees with them, however, is inappropriate. If an employee has valid issues with any policy, he should bring them to the attention of the appropriate institutional representatives for resolution.

One of the chief ways employees can demonstrate pro-

Continues on page 32
fessionalism is through total support of “the boss.” An employee does not have to agree with everything his supervisor says and does; if he has strong feelings about a particular action or statement, however, he needs to let his supervisor know and then respect the outcome of that conversation. A primary way to be supportive of a boss is to be a “low-maintenance” employee. Basically, this means that the employee requires little time from his boss, and that time spent together is constructive for both of them.

**Tips from the Trenches:** According to a top sales manager, “Leaders can make everyone around them better through example and wisdom, or they can cultivate negativity and poor performance through their actions or inactions.”

Twenty percent of employees require 80% of the manager’s time. An employee should handle his job according to his supervisor’s goals and objectives for the department. Being a “loner” or a “manipulator” is not professional. If an employee’s loyalties do not lie with his boss, then that employee should begin to search for a more palatable position.

Supportive behavior should be extended to apply to co-workers. Most employees form some sort of personal relationship with those folks with whom they work on a daily basis. Even when co-workers do not share personal interests, beliefs, or values, a professional rises above those differences and lends a hand when needed. While most employees seem to be willing and able to step in when emergencies occur — a serious illness, a death in the family, or damage to home or personal belongings — what about ordinary problems when a helping hand and a little thoughtfulness could go a long way?

For example, the lab needs to implement coverage of a new 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. work schedule. Several workers cannot make childcare arrangements to meet this schedule and would like to be exempt from the rotation. A professional employee with no schedule-conflicting commitments would volunteer to help those co-workers who are in a bind. Suppose a worker needed to report 10 minutes late in order to get a child on the school bus. Is it not more professional for his co-workers to agree to give him the support he needs instead of complaining that the situation is unfair?

**Growth**

Professionalism has another key element: growth of both self and others. Desire for growth allows people to respond positively to change, to find excitement in learning something new or solving a difficult problem, and to stay fresh. Without real desire, commitment either will not exist or will be short-lived at best. If growth is limited to professional meetings and seminars, there may be a void in a person’s commitment. While such events are excellent educational opportunities, true professionals do not overlook those growth opportunities that are available every day at no cost.

Teaching or sharing with others is a good path to growth. Asking a knowledgeable co-worker to demonstrate a puzzling computer technique, volunteering to lead or work on a project, or documenting procedures that previously were shared by word of mouth are just a few examples of learning opportunities that will result in self-improvement.

A supervisor has a responsibility to his staff to let them see his own excitement about learning; this enthusiasm cannot help but have a positive impact. Supervisors must set yearly growth objectives and actively assist employees in achieving those objectives. Providing opportunities for staff to share what they have learned with each other can have an exponential effect. Professionals use their expertise — knowing they can make a difference — to reach out to others in the organization, either personally or through other staff, to provide learning and development.

**Moving toward a professional workplace**

Obviously, professionalism entails more than just these four categories, but any attitude or behavior that aligns with these principles is sure to be an enhancement. Although identifying professional attitudes and behaviors is an important first step, the far more difficult challenge is the actual development of a staff of professionals. Without the commitment of management to serve as an example, developing professionalism in the staff is unlikely.

The first step of this commitment is for supervisors and managers to be no less than consummate professionals themselves. The next step is for supervisors and managers to develop an uncompromising process that accurately evaluates
employee performance based on standards that are solidly grounded in the building blocks of professionalism.

Tips from the Trenches: Nurturing a culture of customer service excellence is difficult without establishing a code of conduct.*

With management’s commitment, a good understanding of the environment under creation, and tight processes to manage performance, consummate professionalism can be cultivated in any lab.

Other traits of a pro

Outward signs of professionalism

- Scrubs or lab coats are clean and without excessive wear
- Avoid wearing jeans, tank tops, or streets clothes, or dressing immodestly
- Hair is well groomed without extreme styling or unnatural coloring
- Avoid excessive jewelry, piercing, or tattoos
- Hands are clean and fingernails are trimmed short without flamboyant polish
- Name tag is neat and visible
- Make-up is applied conservatively
- Perfume or aftershave is not excessive
- Breath is not offensive
- General appearance represents physical well-being

Behaviors that project professionalism

- Knocking on inpatient doors while entering
- Asking permission before entering a closed-curtain area
- Introducing yourself and stating your purpose
- Smiling
- Making eye contact
- Speaking clearly
- Listening with compassion
- Explaining the procedure to those who require it (e.g., children)
- Investing time in calming fears
- Responding to patient requests (within the limits of facility policy)
- Discarding dropped supplies and equipment
- Respecting patient refusals with composure
- Respecting patient requests to return at a later time whenever possible
- Respecting patient privacy and confidentiality
- Resisting the temptation to tell off-color jokes, use foul language, make sexual innuendos, or to laugh with those who do

Telephone etiquette that projects professionalism

- Answer the phone within three rings
- Answer the phone with courtesy and kindness in your voice
- Identify yourself and your department whenever placing or receiving a call
- Keep callers on hold no longer than one minute
- Be ready to converse when the other party answers
- End all calls with “Thank you. Good-bye.”

*Tips from the Trenches and the above chart were adapted from Applied Phlebotomy (2005) by Dennis Ernst, MT(ASCP), director of The Center for Phlebotomy Education, Ramsey, IN, with permission from Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.