

What Is Professionalism?

Like many others, I was appalled to learn of the behaviour of so many, including senior officials, in and around No.10 during the Covid crisis. What happened to the professionalism of which the Civil Service was once so proud? But I struggled to articulate my concern without sounding ... over-censorious? pompous?

I am therefore very grateful to [Debrett's](#) and to Liz Wyse, its author, for allowing me to republish this recent Debrett's Newsletter which very nicely summarises how I believe professionals should behave.

I have highlighted a couple of particularly powerful points.

[Martin Stanley](#)

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The revelations that are being unearthed by the Covid enquiry are causing shock and consternation, and many people have been appalled by the sheer obscenity and outrageous rudeness of messages sent between colleagues. We all have notions about how the people who govern our country should behave and earn our respect. They are in positions of power and authority and as a result we feel that they should adhere to a high standard of behaviour, demonstrating their leadership in the way they conduct themselves and showing calm, civility and decorum in all their dealings with colleagues, advisers and members of the public. Above all, we have been disconcerted by their lack of professionalism.

The Collins dictionary defines professionalism as “a combination of skill and high standards.” The latter quality should govern how individuals conduct themselves in the workplace: they should be able to understand what is appropriate and adhere to their own high standards; they should also be courteous in all their professional dealings.

The general assumption is that workplace communications should be polite and temperate. Undoubtedly some workplaces may foster a robust and challenging environment, where ideas are freely discussed and interrogated, and employees in these environments may feel that their ability to withstand this sort of assault is a prerequisite. Even so, a knockabout atmosphere is generally verbal, and it would be an egregious error, in most workplaces, to translate that sort of discourse into written communications.

It is a mistake to be bamboozled by the ease and convenience of WhatsApp and email, and to slip into an extremely casual, and even grossly insulting, style of communication. Obscenity-laden messages are scarcely representative of the calm, unruffled demeanour that we seek in people who are tasked with challenging jobs, especially in times of crisis. Abbreviated text language, littered with slang and grammatical errors, carries very little authority. Most importantly of all, written communications are retrievable, and – as witnesses in the Covid enquiry can confirm – casual chats on, for example, WhatsApp can be disinterred and pored over in minute, and excruciatingly forensic, detail by judges, lawyers, chairmen of internal enquiries, human resources managers and so on.

Whatever happened to professionalism? This is the notion that **we have an “off-duty” persona and a professional persona.** At work, no matter how friendly, congenial and

convivial the office may be, we are in professional mode. That means being circumspect and self-aware. You must ensure that you present a polished façade to the world and be very careful not to show any chinks in your armour. If you are beset by domestic problems, the expectation is that you will conceal your difficulties, and if that proves impossible, you should speak about them, in confidence, to your manager or the human resources department.

Be cautious about confiding in colleagues and don't let your guard down and reveal your darkest secrets (a real risk at office parties, where drink can unleash some febrile emotions). This does not mean that you should be cool, or unfriendly, or resistant to social advances. **You should be as friendly and accommodating as possible, but always be aware that you are operating in a professional sphere, and that your actions may have consequences. If you aspire to do a job as well as you possibly can, are eager to take responsibility for all your actions and learn from your mistakes, display a strong work ethic and are respectful to managers and colleagues, you are achieving a high level of professionalism.**

Individual workplaces will have different levels of formality and rigidity about codes of conduct, and it is important that you do your best to acknowledge the prevailing culture and fit in with it as far as possible. But **you should also adhere to your own notions of what is right and appropriate:** if you work in an office where the atmosphere is rowdy and boisterous, there is a boozy drinking culture, and insulting and obscene language is the order of the day, think carefully before you throw caution to the winds and join in. Of course, you do not want to feel like a disapproving party pooper, but there is every chance that the Rabelaisian scenes that you witness daily are not going to last forever: generally once office culture goes down this path, the chaotic antics escalate, failures and faults multiply, relationships break down and eventually, the whole shambles is called to order (which frequently involves inquiries, redundancies, restructuring and so on).

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If you find yourself at the receiving end of unprofessional behaviour, in particular offensive, belittling, or crude written communications (which are tangible and irrefutable evidence), don't suffer in silence. Speak to a human resources manager; you may well find that have been subjected to bullying and harassment, which is unlawful under the Equality Act of 2010.

A poisonous workplace culture will become absolutely entrenched unless individuals are prepared to call it out.

Take some pride in your professional demeanour: try to be calm and collected at all times, resist flying off the handle and displaying strong emotions, which make you look as if you've lost control, moderate your language, and think carefully about the content and tone of your written communications. If you undertake the job in hand, whatever it may be, with all these traits uppermost, you will earn the respect and admiration of your colleagues.