

# Professionalism: For You, for Me, for All of Us!

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When you hear the words “bedside manner,” do you immediately think of a physician you’ve known? Most people do. They recall a doctor who was kind, answered questions, and made them feel better just by offering a warm smile or empathy. Today, these characteristics are termed “professionalism.”

Being a “professional” does not mean just working in a traditional professional field such as law, medicine, or education. Volunteers who are members of a defined organization and carry out its mission are professionals, too. Professionalism, simply stated, is the way in which members of a particular group (teachers, lawyers, doctors) or volunteers (CEOS members, 4-H leaders) treat one another and those they encounter every day. From sharing credit or offering a helping hand, to refraining from gossiping or blaming – it’s all professionalism.

Professionalism is a critical quality for an organization that wants to be effective in attaining its short-term and long-range goals. This may include the ability to keep members and to add new ones to the roster, an essential element in the overall success of the club. The credibility of an organization is determined by the professionalism of its membership. In today’s busy world when time is a precious commodity, people who volunteer want to be certain that the organization and its members are top-notch.



Engaging in professional behaviors also promotes personal growth for individuals. Volunteers gain respect for themselves, for their local and county programs, and ultimately, for the organization that they represent. On the other hand, failure of its volunteers to exhibit professional behaviors in their

interactions with one another and with nonmembers may result in the failure of the organization to reach its goals and spread its mission. Professionalism must be viewed by group members as a vital part of the organization’s culture in all of its activities and functions. Professionalism encourages excellence and inspires pride in the organization.



## Hallmarks of Professionals and Professional Organizations

### Know and Promote Organizational Mission and Goals

The professional must be able to articulate the organization’s vision, mission, and goals to recruit new members and to inform the community about the scope of the organization’s work. Volunteers who are able to provide concise, direct, and positive information about the organization are key to the recruitment of others to assist in carrying forth the missions, goals, and specified tasks of the club.

### Communicate Effectively

The ability of volunteers to communicate effectively with one another, with potential members, with businesses, and with the community at large is not only desirable, but also a must in order for the organization to grow and to thrive. Otherwise, countless hours may be wasted on misunderstandings, conflicts, and disagreements rather than on pursuing the mission and goals of the organization. Hurt feelings, hidden agendas, loss of innovative ideas, and mistrust among members are additional problems associated with ineffective communication.

### Specific Behaviors and Essential Expectations

Volunteers manifest professionalism primarily through their behaviors and style of interaction with others. To be professional requires the exercise of discretion and judgment and the ability to set aside one’s own wishes, convenience, or comfort for the well-being of other members and the organization.

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## **Giving and Receiving Feedback**

It is important to view criticism as constructive suggestions offered to enhance or improve the organization, event, or activity. The ability to receive feedback in a positive, professional manner is an integral part of the individual and the organization. Taking feedback personally or presenting feedback in a negative manner undermines one's ability to reflect, to change, and to grow.

## **Gossip and Rumors**

It is critical to the health of the organization that members avoid engaging in these behaviors. If a member has a disagreement with another member, it is important to give the feedback directly to the person involved, rather than complain to someone else. Gossip and rumors are hurtful and inappropriate. Professional reactions to gossip and straightforward problem-solving attempts can help stop rumors before they begin.

## **Objectivity and Openness to Suggestions**

Members of a profession and, perhaps most especially, volunteers can become very attached to the traditions of the organization to the exclusion of seeking new or perhaps more effective or innovative ways of doing things. For an organization to thrive in accomplishing its goals and furthering its mission, every member must be objective, remain open to suggestions, and offer positive and creative suggestions.

## **Perseverance**

The adage "When at first you don't succeed, try, try again" applies directly to the volunteers of any organization. In many cases, volunteers have exhibited negative or unprofessional behaviors for years. We cannot expect them to change their behavior patterns dramatically in a short time.

## **Integrity and Honesty**

The word "reputation" typically carries a strong positive or negative connotation about a person, organization, or business. A person's past actions (or lack of necessary or desired actions in some instances) lead to the development of a "reputation" and characterization as being professional or unprofessional. A person's integrity and honesty are, perhaps, the greatest contributors to reputation.

## **Proactive vs. Reactive Orientation**

An effective volunteer organization is structured to operate in a proactive fashion. Planning events, activities, and meetings combined with the implementation of those plans helps to ensure positive outcomes for the members and for the organization. Reactive measures are typically less effective and not carefully thought out. Most people who volunteer their time want a plan, a structure by which to operate. This, in turn, helps them feel that their expenditure of time, talent, energy, or finances was well spent.

## **Accountability, Dependability, and Responsibility**

Dependability is a hallmark of professionalism. It is critical that volunteers recognize the limits of their time, resources, and capabilities when volunteering.

Accepting responsibility for one's actions is a fundamental professional behavior. Placing blame on others or making excuses, on the other hand, is unprofessional.

## **Self-examination**

Members of organizations need to be aware of how their behavior affects others. They should adjust their behavior to fit the situation. Perhaps most important, volunteers must be willing to change their own behavior for the good of their organization.

## **Accepting Leadership Responsibilities**

Effectively undertaking and completing tasks require productive leadership. In many cases, leaders emerge by virtue of their expertise. In some cases, leaders are appointed, or they may volunteer for an assignment. Regardless of the manner in which leaders are selected, it is important that leadership responsibilities in the organization be shared.

## **Being a Team Player**

"Two heads are better than one" is an old but very wise expression. In professional organizations, situations inevitably arise that create differences of opinions among members. The way in which differences are resolved can strengthen or damage relationships among members. Being a team player means learning to negotiate and, sometimes, relinquishing personal preferences to support the decision of the entire body.

## **Inclusive**

Professionals ensure that everyone they serve and come in contact with during daily life is treated equally without regard to any "differences." Professionals protect against stereotyping. Welcoming diversity and the involvement of those who may not have traditionally belonged to the organization provides opportunities to develop creative ideas and to expand service delivery capacities.

## **Service**

Professionals serve and operate with little or no self-interest. They step up to the plate whenever and wherever needed. Professionals are altruistic, caring, and compassionate individuals. They are *genuinely enthusiastic* about furthering the mission and goals of the organization to help others.

## **Summary**

Demonstrating professionalism increases a volunteer's ability to serve the community, to forward the goals and mission of the organization, and to grow personally. Professional behaviors facilitate the development of positive relationships and lead to the happiness of the members and success of the organization.

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