

# Professionalism for Everyone

By Julie MacDonald O'Leary

When stepping onto the first rung of your professional ladder, take a look up. Appreciate the top step and what it takes to be that high, but then concentrate on the second step and make sure that each step you take is secure.

Here are a few simple points to keep in mind that can help you to climb the ladder without it shaking and (hopefully) without you slipping.

1. A job is what you make it. If you look at your function as only a job (show up, fill a desk, answer a phone, pass on a report), that's what it will be. But if you recognize the time you spend in your early, entry or junior position as a process of career building, then that's what you will have: a career.

If you handle your position as just a job (or as just a paycheck) then what you do (even if you do it well) can probably be done by a lot of other people. But if you handle it as a *position*, your value will be recognized.

You've heard the boss say, "I don't want a temp or a fill-in while Bruce or Betsy is away; they can't do the job and they don't know the business." If he is speaking about you, then you are building a career.

2. Know your company and its business, who the officers are and who the competition is.

Often, when joining a company, a junior is so eager to do well at his or her assigned tasks that little attention is paid to *how* those tasks fit in to the overall

operation and the importance they play. Recognize that even though you may not have direct client contact, your function undoubtedly has client impact. Learn to recognize what that impact is so that you will have personal awareness of the part you play in client satisfaction, a goal of all firms. Then identify how you impact all the other firm's goals.

3. Don't be intimidated by senior people. Remember, they also started somewhere, and if they are purposely intimidating you, they can't be very secure themselves.

Don't, however, confuse intimidation with respect. Even if you don't agree with a senior person, they have earned and deserve their due for what they have achieved in the organization. (And remember, there's always the chance you'll surpass them someday!)

4. Play your role with dignity, looking for ways to learn from it.

If you are typing a document, understand what it says. If you're unsure, don't be afraid to ask. If you are sitting in on a meeting (even in a note-taking or other nonspeaking role), be aware of the results of the meeting and see what requires follow-up.

You may not be asked to speak, but that doesn't mean that you can't have an opinion, which can be offered to someone more senior at the appropriate time.

Never be afraid to give an opinion or idea. Just make sure you believe in it

before you do. Conversely, don't get depressed if that opinion or idea isn't always met with applause. The fact that you are interested will be noticed.

5. Juniors probably make the most mistakes. After all, they are learning and they don't make the rules! Mistakes are really teachers—they are only a problem if they happen again. Learn from your mistakes.

6. Most important, *listen* to the assignment and carry out what has been asked. Again, remember that you are the directee, not the director, at this point in your career. You may not like the assignment, but do it with the same enthusiasm that you show for those projects you do like. Pencils must be sharpened, and everyone (even the CEO) has taken his turn.

7. If you work one on one, your goal is to be able to mirror your boss.

In time, you will know the way he or she manages, and chances are that when he or she is unavailable, people far ahead of you on the ladder will come to you for an opinion. (Really!)

Give it, but give the opinion of the office you represent, not your personal addendum to it. Save that for private input with your boss. If you don't agree with a stand your boss has taken, it is not your job to let the company know that.

Present his posture when speaking for him or on his behalf. Remember, you are not (not yet anyway) being paid to make policy; you are being paid to support and deliver someone else's. Learn to do this with firmness, dignity, strength and conviction.

8. Don't be above taking a message for anyone at any level in your firm. Take good ones. Don't just half listen when

getting a name and number to pass on. Listen to all that the caller wants to say and report it. You'll often learn a lot and you can make life a lot easier (for everyone) if you take a good message.

Good message taking shows a respect for others and for detail (all functions are at times detailed oriented) and this can be a great training ground. And if you take a good message for someone, they probably will do the same for you. It's a firm's time saver (as well)!

9. When you feel underappreciated (or undercompensated) take a deep breath. Even if you are doing better work and have more responsibility than someone earning more or being treated better, show some patience.

One's due doesn't come overnight. Think of the baseball pitcher with the best ERA: If he is in the minors, he won't see a dime to reflect his talent. What he will get is a chance to be elevated to where the real remuneration is, the *majors*. And that's where you're trying to get within your company.

The reward is there if you want to work for it. Handle your position with an attitude that will bring benefit and respect to both you and your firm, and you will get where you want to be. We all love a gift, but what's the better feeling: to be given something (because we whine for it) or to earn it?

When you *earn* your way in business, it truly is yours. Even if you leave your position, the growth you achieve and the respect you have gained can't be taken away. It goes wherever you do.

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David Maister is the author of *Managing the Professional Service Firm* (1993), *True Professionalism* (1997), *The Trusted Advisor* (2000) (coauthor), *Practice What You Preach* (2001) and *First Among Equals* (2002) (coauthor.)

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