

What Does 'Professionalism' Mean for HR Professionals?

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The desire for HR professionals to be accorded the respect and status of being true professionals is a theme that goes back many decades; and there is no evidence to suggest that this desire has waned over the years. In 2013, the Human Resources Professionals Association asked the following question on its annual member survey: *“Do you agree that the professionalization of HR is, or should be, an important issue for the profession?”* —89.4% of respondents agreed with the statement. This represents as much agreement as one is ever likely to find on any question. (Human Resources Professionals Association, 2013).

But there is an interesting contradiction here. The contradiction lies in that for something that is seemingly so important to HR professionals; the topic of “professionalism” rarely appears in HR publications or HR conferences. When the topic of professionalism comes up in HR circles, there are two responses which are often heard. The first is a response that goes something like *“I always behave in a professional manner, and my clients and colleagues think of me as such.”* The other response goes something like *“I am always professional in what I do, but there are others in our profession that give the rest of us a bad reputation.”* And yet, in a 2011 survey conducted by the Queen’s University Industrial Relations Center on the State of HR in Canada (Juniper & Hill, 2011), the authors noted that those HR professionals who reported that they are “pessimistic” or “not sure” about the future of HR were, in general, concerned about the lack of professionalism in the profession and the credentials that are required in order to obtain the CHRP designation.

By way of contrast, some of the established professions do not seem to take “professionalism” for granted and certainly do not think that the topic is an “undiscussable.” A bit more than a decade ago, in response to concerns that had been expressed about a decline in professionalism among lawyers, the Chief Justice of Ontario struck an Advisory Committee on Professionalism. The document [Elements of Professionalism](#) was authored by the Committee’s Working Group on the Definition of Professionalism. (2001)

Although, this definition of professionalism was developed by lawyers for lawyers, the premise here is that the construct of professionalism, at its core, is valid across all professions. Therefore, although the starting point is a definition of professionalism developed by and for lawyers, in the end it should tell us a lot about what professionalism means for HR professionals.

HR professionals are for the most part what would be deemed “embedded professionals” — that is, professionals who exercise their profession as employees of an organization. This is not unusual as many accountants (especially management accountants), actuaries, most teachers and nurses, and many professional engineers are embedded professionals. Relevant to the present discussion is that many lawyers are also embedded professionals acting as counsels for their employers. The definition of professionalism developed by the Chief Justice of Ontario

Advisory Committee on Professionalism would apply to lawyers practicing as embedded professionals as well as those working as part of firms or in independent practice.

Elements of professionalism

The Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism defined professionalism as “as an attitude and approach to an occupation that is commonly characterized by intelligence, integrity, maturity, and thoughtfulness” and identified ten elements or “building blocks” of professionalism for lawyers:

1. Scholarship
2. Integrity
3. Honour
4. Leadership
5. Independence
6. Pride
7. Spirit and enthusiasm
8. Civility and collegiality
9. Service to the public good
10. Balanced commercialism

It should be noted at the outset that these ten elements are not discrete but rather overlapping and intertwined. Let’s see how each of these elements could apply to HR professionals—what may emerge in the end is a definition of professionalism that may be as applicable to HR professionals as it is to lawyers.

1. Scholarship

By scholarship, the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism meant what HR professionals would more commonly refer to as “competence.” Now it is not only professionals who believe in being competent; what distinguishes professionals, however, is (1) a sense of obligation or duty to maintain competence in their field, and (2) that professionals don’t entirely decide for themselves what they need to keep up with.

Maintaining professional competence requires some discipline and effort—it doesn’t just happen and it is not always fun; nonetheless, it is an important aspect of professionalism. Professionals feel a responsibility to the profession for keeping up with all relevant aspects of the profession, not only those aspects that are of personal interest.

It may appear paradoxical that lawyers and some of the other established professions were among the last to establish continuing professional development requirements. For the

established professions, the difficulty or uneasiness was with the idea of requiring something that all professionals should have already been doing as professionals.

HR professionals should feel a sense of obligation or duty to maintain competence in their field and do so in a disciplined way.

2. Integrity

As noted by the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism, integrity is one of the cornerstones of professionalism and goes beyond the obligation to observe ethical standards established by the professional governing body.

The idea is that professionals can be counted on to act according to their espoused values (see “honour” below) despite opportunities to do otherwise. Because of the autonomy accorded to professionals, it is important to know that professionals will do the right thing even when no one is looking.

Professionals are expected to have maturity of character and self-control. Professionals are expected to give their best effort regardless of their personal feelings towards those they serve. Professionals may have all sorts of things going on in their private life but they do not allow these to intrude on their performance as a professional. Professionals are expected to set aside self-interest and do what is best for clients, employers, and society. Professionals are “disciplined” in the exercise of their profession.

There is no reason why integrity should be any less important for HR professionals than it is for lawyers or any other profession for that matter.

3. Honour

The word “professional” derives from the verb “to profess.” Members of the professions took an oath, or made some kind of public commitment, to serving some purpose above self-interest. The idea of “noble purpose” may be a troubling one for some. In HR, as in other professions, the fundamental question is whether we are there simply to forward the commercial interests of clients and employers or whether there is a more noble purpose to the profession?

For instance, Friedson (2001) noted this sense of higher purpose as one of his five defining characteristic of professions: “an ideology that asserts greater commitment to doing good work than to economic gain and to the quality rather than the economic efficiency of work.”

No doubt many discussions of professionalism focus on the specialized skills that professionals bring to the table, but being competent and being professional are not the same. It is that sense of “higher purpose” or serving some broader societal good beyond the immediate interests of

clients and employers that distinguishes professionals from competent non-professionals. Now it is not that the immediate interests of clients and employers will usually conflict with the broader good or higher purpose, but when they do, it becomes a real test of professionalism.

Pohler & Willness (2014), for instance, note that HR professionals have a role as moral and ethical stewards in balancing the pluralistic and sometimes competing interests of parties in the employment relationship.

I would suspect, however, that many HR professionals would be somewhat uneasy with the idea that HR needs to be “safeguarding some higher societal value.” HR professionals are certainly not strangers to the notion that they are often the ones to protect the interests of employees. But, HR professionals are also aware that there is often a price to pay for doing so.

It is inherent in the idea of higher purpose that, at least sometimes, there will be a clash between the values of the professionals and the values of employers and clients. This means that being a professional will entail, at least sometimes, being in conflict with employers and clients. It means, at least sometimes, pushing back and being willing to take a stand. It also means, at least sometimes, paying the price for pushing back and being willing to take a stand. It is this latter aspect which makes some uncomfortable with the whole idea of “higher purpose.” Especially since human resources management is a profession that operates in the world of business.

But we are not alone as a profession that struggles with these issues. Accountants, for instance, are in the same situation. Consider the following statement by R. H. Montgomery (cited in Cheffers & Pakaluk, 2011), an influential accountant and educator, and one of the founders of PricewaterhouseCoopers:

“Accountants and the accountancy profession exist as a means of public service; the distinction which separates a profession from a mere means of livelihood is that the profession is accountable to standards of the public interest, and beyond the compensation paid by clients.”

The higher purpose of accounting usually refers to accurate and unbiased representation of financial situations. As with HR, accountants, at least sometimes, find themselves in a situation where their higher purpose requires them to push back against the wants of their employers and clients.

The key issue for HR professionals appears to be vulnerability—that insisting on “doing the right thing” might come at a personal cost because there is very little support for HR professionals in these situations. Some HR professionals would like to see greater governmental recognition of HR as a profession (i.e., licensing) because such recognition would

be helpful in bolstering the ability of HR professionals to push back when employers and clients cross the line. The unstated implication of the above is that, until this governmental recognition happens we really shouldn't be surprised when HR professionals fail to push back when employers and clients cross the line. This creates a Catch 22 for the HR profession. On the one hand, to be considered as a true profession it is important for HR to be seen as safeguarding a higher societal value. On the other side of the Catch 22, until HR is widely seen to be a true profession, many HR professionals will consider it risky to do so.

All in all, it could be argued that until HR finds its "higher purpose" it will fall short on one important aspect of professionalism.

4. Leadership

The meaning of leadership in the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism document is in the sense of professional leadership rather than organizational leadership. Here, leadership means taking a forward and proactive role on matters relating to the profession and its impact on society not only within the profession but in society at large. This may include speaking out to address a systemic injustice. Sometimes, the "higher purpose" of professionals will require HR professionals to "stand up and be counted."

Indeed, there is no reason why HR professionals, as individual professionals, should not take a leadership role in bringing about change.

5. Independence

Professional autonomy is another area that is challenging for HR professionals. Professionals claim independence in regards to the application of professional judgment. There are two kinds of thing we could be talking about in regards to independence, however. The first is the power to say "no" which we referred to above. The other is a more subtle aspect which has more to do with maintaining independence in attitude, a matter of professional objectivity or detachment.

The phenomenon of "client capture" has been documented in regards to lawyers. (Gunz & Gunz, 2008) Client capture refers to the situation where a professional begins to identify more with their client or employer and less with the profession to the extent that the professional begins to lose his or her independence and his or her professional judgment becomes clouded. The process of client capture is insidious in the sense that the professional may not always be aware of the extent to which his or her professional objectivity has been compromised.

There is no reason to believe that client capture is any less of an issue for HR professionals than it is for lawyers.

6. Pride

Articles appear regularly in the popular press and in various online discussions which purport to tell us what's wrong with HR. Likely, the most famous article of this kind was the "Why I hate HR" article which appeared in *Fast Company* in August 2005. Now HR is not the only profession that has been the subject of unflattering criticisms. Indeed, in fall 2013, the Ontario Bar Association launched its "why I went to law school" initiative to counteract the perception that individuals pursue careers in law for the money or the status.

I guess there is a balance to be struck. On the one hand, HR professionals cannot neglect or dismiss the criticisms of the HR profession. To the extent that those criticisms are valid, the profession should address them. Nonetheless, it is important that such criticism not get in the way of pride in the profession and what it has contributed to society.

7. Spirit and enthusiasm

It may appear odd that the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism would have "spirit and enthusiasm" as one of the building blocks of professionalism. Nonetheless, being a professional requires energy, drive, initiative, commitment, involvement, and enthusiasm. This too appears to be valid for HR professionals.

8. Civility and collegiality

This may indeed be an area that is more of concern to lawyers than HR professionals because of the adversarial nature of many legal processes. Nonetheless, HR being a voluntary profession introduces other issues. All practicing lawyers must be members of their professional regulatory body; but in HR some professionals will be members of the professional regulatory body whereas others will not be. And yet, HR professionals (whether members of the professional regulatory body or not) cannot stand apart from the profession. For better or for worse, individual HR professionals cannot divorce themselves from the rest of the profession. Whenever an HR professional behaves in a way that falls below the expected level of professionalism, it reflects poorly on all HR professionals.

There is another sense in which collegiality is important to professionals. The whole idea behind self-regulation is that professionals set their own norms and expectations as to what is acceptable conduct and behaviour. Indeed, through their regulatory body, professionals are accountable to other members of the profession for their conduct and behaviour.

One of the characteristics said to distinguish semiprofessions from true professions is "a tendency for the individual to identify with the employment institution more and with the profession less." (Howsam, Corrigan, Denmark, & Nash, 1976) Flipping this around, one

would have as a characteristic of true professions, a tendency for the individual to identify with the profession more and with the employer less.

9. Service to the public good

The Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism noted the struggle between the duty to serve the client and the equally important obligation to serve the public good. This is an area where HR professionals and lawyers share some issues although they manifest themselves somewhat differently.

The Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism quoted a previous paper which stated that “lawyers are influenced by the prevailing business ethic, which does not include a significant moral or public service element unless a significant moral or public service element helps to maximize profits.” The point made by that quotation is that business ethics and professional ethics are not the same. It does present some challenges when professionals who are guided by a commitment to serve the public good are embedded within an organization that may only be interested in maximizing profits. This is a challenge that all embedded professionals share. Like other embedded professionals, HR professionals need to work out how to make public service coexist with the profit motive.

10. Balanced commercialism

The Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism noted that there is nothing wrong with income and status—it is just that income and status cannot become the primary goals of professional life—the primary goal of professional life should be service to others. This again follows from a number of the elements discussed above, and could be applied to HR professionals as well.

A definition of professionalism for HR professionals

As noted at the outset, the definition of professionalism from the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism was developed by lawyers and for lawyers; nonetheless, the definition would appear to work well for HR professionals in the sense that each element seems to apply equally well to HR professionals. In time, the HR profession will likely develop its own definition of professionalism, but for now, this definition provides a good starting point.

Professionalism and the professionalization of HR

Elsewhere, I have defined the professionalization of Human Resources as “the process by which human resource professionals collectively strive to achieve the recognition and status that is

accorded to the established professions by emulating or adopting the defining characteristics of the established professions.” (Balthazard, 2014). The process of professionalization could be understood as having multiple intersecting threads or strands. One of these strands would be the evolution of the attitude and approach to an occupation that members of that profession have towards their profession. Professionalism is one strand in the process of professionalization.

The process by which professionals adopt a professional attitude and approach is likely complicated, but socialization arguably plays a big part. The socialization of HR professionals is a topic that has not received much attention in the past but it is an issue that we need to come to grips with if we are to push forward with the professionalization agenda.

Although the process of socialization into a profession is an on-going one, it is especially important in the formative stages of professionals’ careers. To the extent that HR exists as a group or community, socialization does occur; but this process of socialization has never been intentional or focused. Given that the socialization process into the HR profession is somewhat haphazard, it is not necessarily the case that the knowledge, language, social skills, and values that are being socialized into new entrants to the profession, are those that are needed to move forward with the professionalization of HR. Other professions have been more focused and deliberate in socializing their new professionals into their professions.

Indeed, in many other professions there are internships, articling, supervised practice stages, and professional education programs. These are not just “experience” requirements, and they are not so much about the acquisition of knowledge and skills: these are systematic and deliberate programs designed to inculcate professional values, ethics and attitudes. For many professions, the early career phase is considered of crucial importance and the inculcation of the attitudes and values of professionalism is the most important aspect of this phase.

The socialization of new entrants into the profession is something we need to do better. We need to think about it more, and be more focused and deliberate in carrying this out. There are a number of different models out there that may be worth considering. The professional education programs which are the cornerstone of the accounting certification programs are interesting models. In order to do this, however, we need to begin a dialogue on the professional values, ethics and attitudes of the HR profession. This could well be seen as the next stage or phase in the professionalization of HR.

About the Author



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