THE SUBTLETIES OF PROFESSIONALISM AND ITS CONTEXTUAL NATURE

Preamble:

Being unprofessional can be something quite subtle like checking your watch repeatedly in a one-on-one meeting with no explanation. It doesn't have to be something obvious and outlandish, such as getting drunk in front of a client.

Often this is particular to the workplace context; something that is considered unprofessional in one organisation might be perfectly acceptable in another. You need to be observant when you first enter the workplace and take cues from the people around you.

In the activity below, we have made a list of common workplace behaviours. Without knowing about the organisational context, indicate how 'bad' you think the behaviour is in relation to what's professionally acceptable.

There is no right or wrong answer as it is all about what you think about professionalism and its associated behaviours. The activity can be a starting point for further discussion (debate?) of people’s perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not.

Activity 1

Activity instructions:

Scale: totally unacceptable, unprofessional but forgivable (but please don’t do it again), acceptable in certain situations, perfectly acceptable.

Activity suggestions:

1. Place students in groups and have them discuss each behaviour and decide on a group answer, then share their answers with the class, including justifying why they have chosen a particular item on the scale
2. Allocate particular places in the room to each item on the scale and have students stand in the place that represents their answer, with follow-up discussion
3. Set up each scenario as a poll using polling software and discuss results

There are follow-up activities below which focus on the contextual nature of professionalism which may be incorporated into this activity, given that many of the responses from students will highlight the importance of context.

What is acceptable?

1. Turning up to work 5 minutes late every now and then.
2. Using emojis in emails with clients with whom you’ve established a relationship
3. Regularly taking too long for lunch (unapproved)
4. Over-sharing personal information in an open plan office
5. Purple hair dye in a corporate law firm
6. Snapping at someone in a meeting
7. Checking social media on your phone in meetings
8. Forgetting to put your phone on silent during a meeting and receiving a text message notification
9. Talking about your colleagues in a common area
10. Taking a personal phone call in an open plan office
11. Signing off “cheers” with a smiley face in an email to someone you don’t know well
12. Using texting language with colleagues
13. Arriving at meetings just in time but appearing flustered and disorganised
14. Wearing your uniform unironed
15. Texting your supervisor that you won’t be coming in for your shift
16. Interrupting people when they are speaking in meetings
17. Writing abrupt emails with no salutations
18. Long delays in responding to emails
19. Having visible tattoos in a conservative workplace
20. Bursting into tears in a meeting

**Activity 2**

**Preamble**

Every employer will expect certain behaviours from you. However, these may be slightly different depending on the industry, organisation or role.

There may be specific expectations in your field which are part of professional standards of the occupation or the culture of the organisation.

There are professional standards for many occupations. For example, there are Australian Professional Standards for Teachers which outline expected behaviours and practice for all teachers, and people have certain expectations of particular industries. For example, in the health field, cleanliness is vital as it is associated with hygiene and efficiency, therefore if you work in this environment you need to reflect this image.
In advertising, clients expect creativity and innovation so it is perfectly acceptable for you to show some flair in the way you present yourself and your ideas.

Activity 3

Discussion activity

Think about how professionalism is demonstrated in different fields and in different work environments. Would your answers to the questions in the main activity change, given a particular context, e.g. job, industry or organisation?

Activity 4

Multiple choice questions: Contextual nature of professionalism

Select the job where the following elements of professionalism are of critical importance:

1. Wearing appropriate workplace attire:
   a) software programmer
   b) historian
   c) accountant
   d) lab technician

FEEDBACK:
Correct answer is (d).

While it is important to wear appropriate attire in all jobs, a lab technician will need to abide by workplace health and safety regulations, e.g. close-toed shoes, safety goggles, hair net and so on. In the other jobs, it is still important to be dressed professionally but there are no health and safety regulations determining exactly what you need to wear.

2. Turning up to work on time everyday:
   a) teacher
   b) HR Consultant
   c) engineer
   d) architect

FEEDBACK:
Correct answer is (a).
While it is expected that you turn up for work on time in all jobs, teachers supervise children so it is vital that they are in the classroom on time for lessons. If a teacher is going to be late, another colleague will need to supervise the children until the teacher arrives. In the other job choices, turning up to work on time is still important but unless you will be late to a meeting or event by arriving late, it is not critical.

3. Using informal language with clients

   a) project manager
   b) youth worker
   c) lawyer
   d) vet

FEEDBACK:

Correct answer is (b).

It is expected that you tailor your communication to the client and in most cases, this means using formal language. Youth workers aim to establish rapport with their clients and this might mean being more informal than usual and using language that young people use and understand. A lawyer would not usually use informal language with clients at all but a vet or project manager might, depending on the circumstances.