

## Some Thoughts about Professionalism...

By Gaylord "Z" Thomas

So often (too often?) you hear people commenting about how "unprofessional" someone was acting...frequently, they really mean the person was simply rude or discourteous. It's such a common complaint that I wonder if we've lost sight of what it means to *BE* a professional and what "professionalism" actually entails and means. Sure, most codes of ethics can surely account for certain behaviors...but what about commitment?

When I was a kid, I wanted to grow up to be a professional baseball player... a pro. What that meant, to me, was that I would be the "best" baseball player, ever! I had a passion for the game and wanted to be able to field the simple grounder or pop fly just as routinely as I was able to dig out the tough line drive or save the one that was in reach but going over the fence. I wanted to be able to stand in at the plate and have pitchers fear me because they knew I could hit every pitch in their arsenal equally well – their fast ball, change-up, curve, screwball, slider, splitter...you name it. They didn't know if I would line a base hit, drop a perfect drag bunt or smash even their best pitch right out of the park. I wanted to be the BEST both defensively and offensively...equally able to help my team stop the opposing team from scoring as I was able to help my team score. I had a passion to be the best and I understood that this *attitude* was at the heart of the difference between a professional and an amateur.

To get "that" good at something requires *practice*. I spent hours practicing even beyond the required practices. I hit small plastic golf balls with a broomstick to work on my hand-eye coordination; I went in before school in the mornings (6 am) to lift weights, run laps and to get extra swings in the batting cage – and not "just" swings. I was practicing to hit the curve ball and the Coach had the pitching machine set to throw a pretty mean curve...even to where I may not be taking swings but perfecting my drag bunt against any pitch, to include that curve. Teenagers don't get up early to go lift weights (and run!) if there's not some sort of "passion" there for what they're doing!

In long term care, we talk about this thing called "passion" frequently because we understand what we're talking about when we say that... we're talking about that internal motivation and drive to do what we do. Some may even say it's a *calling* because it's clearly not for everybody. It's not that far removed from the kind of passion I've described having as a teenager, working to improve my skills as a baseball player. The same kind of passion a young lady may have had to become a professional dancer or figure skater, perhaps.

Yet, there is a palpable difference between someone who has the kind of passion that means they enjoy the game and someone who has the kind of passion that drives them to continually get better at it. Even those who've "arrived" (the pro's) have to KEEP working at it to keep their skills sharp. In the short term, you may not be able to tell the difference, but down the stretch, in a pinch, the one who has spent hours hitting little golf balls with a broomstick to hone his skill at hitting a bigger ball more squarely and actually hit it in a certain direction, or who has focused on hitting that nasty curve will come through more consistently. Where one may get lucky and come through, you know you would feel more comfortable if you had to place a bet on the "driven" one who has spent extra time practicing and is still focused on improving himself.

Flash way ahead...you're a resident now in a nursing facility. What kind of passion do you want the administrator of that facility you reside in to have? One who simply enjoys it and might get lucky from time to time when a "curve" comes his way in the way of a regulation

change or some sort of unexpected event? Or one who not only enjoys it but also WORKS at it to improve and looks for ways to improve and is looking, proactively, for those changes before they arrive...the one who actually and actively listens during the CEU sessions (and picked that particular CEU opportunity because it was something he felt he (or she) needed to improve personally (and professionally) in or saw as a future “curve” coming) or the one who is attending because his company paid for it (or it’s a state sponsored “freebie”) and he needs to finish his annual requirement anyway (and is busy texting, talking or reading the newspaper throughout the presentation)? The answer is relatively clear (or you’re not being honest with yourself).

Both kinds of administrators currently exist and I’m betting that’s no surprise to anyone.

There are those who are driven to improve and continue to look for ways to improve their knowledge and skills; and there are those who are employed as an administrator and are going through the motions and “react” when something new comes up.

We consider a long term care administrator to be a professional position, of that there is no doubt... But, does all of this equate to all licensed long term care administrators being professionals? Not at all, quite clearly (for me). For me, merely holding a position (or a license or certification) does not make you a professional. What makes you a professional is defined by who you *are*, inside, your passion and your attitude; it’s defined by what you *do* and how you act, as well as how others view you...the image you project. Who you are and what you do is reflected much better to the rest of the world than we may realize.

We have a code of ethics, provided to us by our professional association (imagine that), the American College of Health Care Administrators, or the ACHCA and frequently called “the College.” Some states have even adopted that particular code as their own code for long term care administrators’ behavior (codified into legal rules or statute). Yet, it’s difficult to understand why more administrators aren’t members of their very own professional association and too many states don’t even have a chapter any more.

Our code of ethics has laid out certain expectations and it is with this code that we can begin to internalize what we SHOULD be doing...and what we should expect our peers to be doing as well.

We expect that “**Individuals shall hold paramount the welfare of persons for whom care is provided.**” We think we know what that means, but are we walking the talk?

Sure it means we’re going to take care of people in our facilities...operate our facility within the letter of the law and standards, protecting each resident’s rights and confidentiality, etc. But, if you’re reading the paper during a CEU class, are you really focusing on understanding what these standards are? Or, if we aren’t going to a class (because the ones we ARE going to are paid for by the owner or are provided free by the state) that addresses these kinds of things, are we sure we’re as up to date on the latest changes to the regulations as we need to be? Holding paramount the welfare of persons for whom we care... we can see that as a priority for those whose thumbs are flying in a texting flurry during the presentation.

We expect that “**Individuals shall maintain high standards of professional competence.**”

I might be starting to sound redundant...but if you’re not sharpening your skills, they’re getting dull. That’s what maintaining high standards is all about – sharpening your skills; keeping them sharp. Ask questions...participating in the ACHCA’s “Peer2Peer” email group

will certainly keep you informed somewhat by osmosis and reading what others are asking each other about. Sharpening your skills is about seeking to improve weak areas...and only you know where those are. You know what professional areas you need to bolster more than anyone else. This is where seeking the “right” CEUs also comes into play.

We expect that **“Individuals shall strive, in all matters relating to their professional functions, to maintain a professional posture that places paramount the interests of the facility and its residents.”**

A lot of times, we actually tend to “blow off” some of the types of CEUs that relate to leadership or perhaps self-improvement type topics. But these ARE important... that professional posture starts with your personal integrity. A lot of people really don’t understand the very word “integrity” and equate it with merely honesty; but it is, in fact, a whole lot more than that. It is “everything” because the word actually relates to your character (and this will also include that *passion* we always talk about). I could spend a great deal of time writing about integrity itself but will resist that temptation (because it is one of my favorite topics). The idea here is that the more you learn about these kinds of things, the more you realize you really don’t know and you get a hunger to learn more...and you should. At the same time, your character and even your leadership skills will be improving. Again, sharpening those skills as a professional administrator, learning the difference between what it means to lead people versus managing projects or things.

We expect that **“Individuals shall honor their responsibilities to the public, their profession, and their relationships with colleagues and members of related professions.”**

These things all tend to build on each other to a certain degree, in case you hadn’t noticed, even if just a little. As you become a leader, you realize that you are becoming a leader on several planes... on the job, certainly, but also in civic organizations, church, school, various associations (such as your local ACHCA chapter)... You take on a role to not only learn more but also to plant some seeds and foster that passion in the younger, up and coming professionals, even if only by your example, but quite possibly by taking a more active role.

There is quite a lot more to *being* a professional than we have probably considered... So, which kind of professional do we want to be? The kind who attends CEUs because they are convenient and/or free (and could care less what the topic is and couldn’t tell you what it was about after it was over because we were too engrossed in a Sudoku or crossword puzzle in the morning’s newspaper)? Or the kind who looks for what is needed and goes out of their way to really improve themselves as an administrator? That one single distinction will tell you so much about someone’s professionalism...their drive...the reality of that *passion* they probably think they have. Wanting that passion and having it are not one and the same.

Really, there are two questions. What kind of professional are you now? And, what kind of professional do you want to be? If you’ve read this far, I believe we both know the answer to the latter question – but if you’re not honest with yourself in the answer to the first question, you may be slow to start achieving your goal of the second question...

...and while written with long term care administrators in mind, couldn’t this apply to so many more “professions” with their own codes of ethics and expectations?

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