

Of Professionalism: What Is It? Who Is A Professional?

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Abstract

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Address

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Fred I. Jones

Through the years I have had the privilege of being personally acquainted with many of the early ag college editors and USDA information staffers. And I can claim friendship with at least 20 of the previous recipients of this award. But Mr. Brigham was a little before my time.

It is something of a coincidence, though, that as a lifelong Midwesterner I should now be living and working in Baltimore, Maryland, just a few miles from Reuben Brigham's old stomping grounds at College Park.

Your awards committee chairman, Harold Bryson, asked me to be prepared "with an address of 15 or 20 minutes." He was reasonably certain he would not be here to suffer through it. "Address" sounds so formal. In fact, that's exactly how Webster's Dictionary defines it—"formal . . . especially, a prepared speech, delivered to a special audience or on a special occasion." I can't argue about that. You are a special audience and this is certainly a special occasion for me.

But what should I talk about—besides 15 minutes? Of course, I could reminisce about the good old days at Purdue or Ohio State. Or about previous AAACE meetings from Rutgers to Honolulu and in between. But that would only appeal—if that's the right word—to a small number of you.

Jones delivered this address at Mackinac Island, Mich., July 14, 1981, when he received the Reuben Brigham Award from ACE. Jones is Vice President, RM&D Associates, Baltimore, Maryland.

The special occasion calls for something more serious. Therefore, I took my cue from Lorraine Kingdon's "President's Corner" in the March 1981, ACE Newsletter. She commented about a letter she had received concerning the purpose of ACE. It raised the question: What should a professional organization mean to its members? And it exposed that raw nerve we can't seem to avoid touching now and then—whether or not we are considered professionals.

Yes, Lorraine, undoubtedly you have been lucky in choosing the right boss for dean, or dean for boss. But even more pertinent, I liked your assertion: "Once I was convinced I deserved being called a professional, I had no trouble convincing my boss—and his boss."

Which brings me to my subject: What is professionalism? And, who is a professional?

First, we have to sort out the difference between an amateur and a professional. We're all in this communication business for money, for financial return, no matter how inadequate it may seem at times. That takes care of one definition.

But, do we belong to a learned profession—"a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation"? Yes and no. Most of us are not educated as doctors, dentists, lawyers, or engineers. But many of us are teachers, whether we hold education degrees or not. And we do have a principal calling, vocation, or employment, another Webster requirement. Most of us try to conform to the technical or ethical standards of a profession.

The real rub comes when we examine how we are treated by our associates, superiors and subordinates. That's when we begin to worry about being errand boys or girls.

Lorraine is absolutely right about our own attitudes. If we don't consider ourselves professionals, no one else will. But at the same time, that in itself doesn't make it true. We must think and act as professionals.

Take a look at the accepted professionals—the medical doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, and yes, teachers. What do they all have in common, beside that long and arduous academic training and those framed certificates on the wall?

I suggest that it is a sincere dedication to serve their fellow men and women. Of course, they expect financial return. But, essentially, doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, and teachers are in the service business. They

possess specialized skills which they offer to other people.

Four hundred years ago Francis Bacon put it this way: "I hold every man a debtor to his profession; from the which as men of course do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavor themselves by way of amends to be a help and ornament thereunto." (*Maxims of the Law. Preface.*)

Which also means involvement in professional organizations such as ACE.

A century ago Tolstoi said simply: "The vocation of every man and woman is to serve other people." (*What Is to Be Done?*)

The best professionals frequently put in long hours. They often must subjugate their personal lives to the service to which they are committed. They are called upon to perform menial tasks at times. They may not be errand boys or girls, but they do find themselves treating cranky, unreasonable patients, alleviating toothaches, arbitrating husband and wife disputes, slopping around in the mud at construction sites, and babysitting unruly 8-year-olds or surly teenagers.

What's so different about their working conditions and yours? Doctors get called out in the middle of the night to handle physical or emotional emergencies. You usually have to cope with the dean's crash program in the daytime, although there can be night hours, too.

For a professional, service is a name of the game. You're a professional communicator because you decided to be one. And you took time and effort to prepare yourself, and are still preparing yourself at meetings such as this, to become a more effective communicator.

Whether you admit it or not, the fact is that you are committed to service. Your job, and mine, is to communicate personally, and to help others communicate, useful information. So long as you are doing that—to the best of your ability—you are thinking and behaving as a professional.

You can be just as professional as you want to be. It's as simple as that.

Thank you again, good friends, for this professional award.

