

True Professionalism Maister

Idea In Short

True professionalism is the pursuit of excellence through attitude, passion and principles. Hire for attitude and train for skills, enforce values strictly, give selfless advice, and build systems that cause performance rather than merely reward it where it appears.

A Foundational Voice on Professional Services

David Maister has shaped how generations of consultants think about consulting, client services and their craft. Look on the bookshelves of senior partners at law firms, accounting firms and consultancies, and you will find multiple books by him. He is widely acknowledged as the world's leading authority on the management of professional service firms, having served as a Harvard Business School professor before founding his own practice. ¹

True Professionalism, published in 1997, is an oldie-goldie worth revisiting. The book collects articles Maister published in the four years before its release, all derived from his consulting work. Without planning it, he found his chapters shared common themes of principles, values and standards. The subtitle captures the thesis: the courage to care about your people, your clients and your career. ²

Have Principles

Principles are the most effective management tools a firm can use. Successful firms are clearly differentiated by their strict adherence to values such as professionalism. Firms must be intolerant on matters of value or strategy. If they do not like your work, do not take their money.

Maister asks how long it takes for the market to recognize your trustworthiness and efficiency and then reward you with new business. The answer is quickly. Principles are not decorative, they are operational. A firm that enforces its values creates a culture where professionals know what is expected and clients know what they will receive.

Professional Means Excellence, Not Just Competence

True professionalism means the pursuit of excellence, not just competence. The opposite word from professional is not unprofessional, but technician. Professionalism is predominantly an attitude, not a set of competencies. Many professionals, Maister observed, are not having fun, which is a telling symptom of a deeper misalignment.

Firms should hire for attitude and train for skills. Skills you can teach, but attitude and character are inherent. This principle has echoes across the business world, where leaders like Herb Kelleher of Southwest Airlines built cultures on the same foundation. The professional who pursues excellence brings a disposition that no training program can manufacture. 3

Passion, Persistence and Pride

The dominant competitive advantage in professional services is passion and persistence. Professionalism equals pride in your work, commitment to quality and dedication to the interests of clients. If people are not prepared to be held accountable for what they do, it is unlikely they will achieve much. Waiting for the firm to change before you change is only to cheat yourself.

Maister delivers a memorable line: you are allowed to fail, but you are not allowed to not try. That single sentence captures the ethos of the true professional. It separates the craftsman from the cruiser and explains why some firms outperform peers with identical credentials.

Find the Challenge That Fulfills You

Success comes from doing what you enjoy. If you do not enjoy it, how can it be called success? Many professionals already have money, prestige, title and standing. What they lack is fun. Maister urges readers to play to their evil secret and not suppress it, because people are a lot less flexible than they think.

Few career choices are forever. The choice to make is not what you want to do with your entire career, but which next challenge would fulfill you. Dynamos vigorously find ways to escape the flow of repetitive work. The professional who keeps seeking the next fulfilling challenge avoids the stagnation that erodes both performance and satisfaction.

Work on Harder, More Valuable Problems

If all you work on is what you already know how to do, you will eventually be overtaken by someone younger. Cruisers do well for a time by living off their existing skills. They are not working to expand their abilities. They have a job, not a career. Cruising can produce dedicated, high-quality work for a season, but a professional cannot cruise forever.

Maister notes it is remarkable how scarce sustainable ambition can be among those who have already achieved a degree of success. What you do with your billable time determines your current income, but what you do with your non-billable time determines your future. To say you made more money by working more is not evidence of immense intellectual creativity. Maister calls it a donkey strategy.

Leaders Build Leaders

A leader does not build a business. A leader builds an organization that builds a business. Maister's bluntness shines here: be substantively helpful to me, and I will listen to you, otherwise stay out of my office. Nagging is truly effective only when it is perceived as supportive rather than negative or punitive.

If your job as a leader is to influence and motivate colleagues, then you must infect them with your personal enthusiasm. Leaders who lack enthusiasm produce teams that lack energy. The question every professional should ask is whether other people consider them professional, because reputation is the ultimate currency in a trust-based business.

The Professional Paradox and the Noble Path

The paradox about professionalism is that the noble path wins. The more you act selflessly and give clients honest advice, even when it may be counter to your own interests, the more trust you earn and the more future business you get. Without common purpose and values, a firm becomes nothing more than a convenience for practitioners wanting to share space, support services and a name.

Feedback should come as soon as you spot the need, delivered in small bites and with no financial implication. To function effectively, a firm needs professionals to share a single intensity level, whether high or low. There must be a social compact. Contributing to the

success of others should be a primary requirement of all professionals.

Run a System That Causes Performance

Many firms misunderstand their own standards and values. They are not defined by their aspirations but by what they are prepared to enforce. To create a great firm, management must run a system which causes performance to improve, not simply reward improved performance where it happens to manifest itself.

Many senior professionals believe that while they work for their firm, their firm does not work for them. Firms are very good at figuring out what they want their people to do differently. They are not so good at figuring out the management systems to get them to do it. Management's job is to stimulate experiments and encourage innovation. It must create a fund for many small-scale research and development efforts rather than pour vast funds into grand-vision schemes.

Business Development Is a Long Game

It is hard to convince a client that you care about their business when it is evident that you do not know what is going on. New business will be won only to the extent that the client believes the professional is interested, cares and is trying to help. You need to actively manage the totality of the transaction.

Maister offers a sharp test: if your clients are not actively telling their friends about you, maybe your work or service is not as great as you think it is. He also advises deciding which clients you would be willing to serve for free. You will not serve them for nothing, but thinking about it clarifies which relationships truly matter.

Do Not Wait, Start Helping Today

Do not wait until you are being paid before you are helpful. You are a professional, so prove it by being helpful from the beginning. The task of the professional is to give the client an education in available options and make a pertinent recommendation. It is not the professional's task to choose.

Clients are troubled not only by the cash they must pay but also by uncertainty, ambiguity,

control and risk. Training is the same, if you think it is expensive, try having untrained people. There should be no tolerance for under-delegation, because growth requires stretch.

Maister's leftover advice holds up too. The better you are at marketing, the better your chance to work on fun stuff and the less trapped you become in work you do not enjoy. Most firms demand that people succeed but are pathetically bad at helping them do it. The one-stop shopping supermarket approach has been discredited almost everywhere. True professionalism endures because it is built on attitude, principle and the courage to care.

- 1David Maister profile and bibliography
- 2Maister's own introduction to True Professionalism
- 3Simon Sinek on hiring for attitude and training for skill

Summary

David Maister's True Professionalism teaches that the noble path wins. Firms that enforce values, hire for attitude, develop leaders and give selfless advice earn trust and future business. Professionalism is an attitude, not a competency, and the firms that live it outperform those that merely preach it.