Professionalism

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In our previous column, we examined knowledge of the healthcare environment, a competency that helps leaders navigate the often invisible rules governing healthcare organizations. In this column, we address the competency of professionalism—a complement to the previous competency as professionalism puts the knowledge base into practice.

WHAT THIS COMPETENCY ENTAILS

According to the Healthcare Leadership Alliance (HLA),[1] the professionalism competency is "[t]he ability to align personal and organizational conduct with ethical and professional standards that include a responsibility to the patient and community, a service orientation, and a commitment to lifelong learning and improvement." HLA's research reveals 18 components that are particularly important for healthcare leaders to master. We organized these components under four headings, each of which is explained below.

Understanding Professional Roles and Norms

A central theme of professionalism involves understanding the formal and informal expectations of conduct associated with the health administration profession. This knowledge is typically developed through a healthcare leader's interactions with other professionals and involvement with one or more professional associations relevant to the leader's role. Given the constant changes affecting the profession, an ongoing relationship with the broader profession is essential to maintaining an awareness of current practices and new roles and norms. Some of the activities a leader may participate in include subscribing to and reading publications of these associations and regularly attending relevant continuing-education programs.

Working with Others

Another key element of professionalism involves cultivating and managing working relationships with others. Effectiveness in delivering and receiving constructive feedback is a hallmark of professionalism. Maintaining networks with colleagues and participating in a professional association are also highly important activities.

Managing Oneself

A third component of professionalism involves managing our own resources—our time, energy, and expertise as well as our professional standards. Skills relevant in this area include a person's ability to manage time and stress, hold to high ethical and professional standards, and cultivate a sense of personal responsibility and accountability for his or her professional work. The focus here is on participating in proactive career planning and lifelong learning.

Contributing

The final component of professionalism relates to the expectations that a leader will pursue opportunities to give back to the health management profession and to the health services field. Within the work environment, this contributing area for a leader can mean serving as a mentor, advisor, and coach to others and striving to serve as an ethical guide or model. Outside of the workplace, it can include participating in community service (including serving as an advocate for patients, families, and the community) and contributing to the field's body of knowledge (including teaching, conducting research, and writing for publications).

HOW TO BEST DEVELOP THIS COMPETENCY

How do aspiring leaders best develop professionalism? As is the case for most competencies, the best place to start is by gaining an understanding of one's current levels of mastery. Also, because standards for professionalism can vary appreciably at different managerial levels, the approaches to mastery will also differ depending on one's career stage. Table 1 provides examples of the types of development activities associated with individuals at different career levels.

For individuals at the entry or even preentry level, there are many opportunities to develop professionalism, assuming one is willing to put forth the time and initiative. For example, graduate students at the Rush University health systems management program are asked to think of each practitioner they meet as a member of their developing network of resources and as role models. They are also encouraged to take responsibility for appropriately cultivating these relationships appropriately.[2] Joining professional associations is another way to start internalizing professional norms quickly; many associations, such as the American College of Healthcare Executives, offer special opportunities for students and early careerists to jump-start their skills.

For leaders in mid-level roles, the emphasis on professionalism shifts in several important ways. While self-development remains critical at this stage, the focus should be on understanding the norms and expectations of more senior-level roles as well as cultivating and maintaining opportunities to keep in touch with the consumers the organization serves. A part of this shift also involves making more substantive contributions to others in the profession and to the greater good of the field.

TABLE 1
Professionalism and Its Development at Different Career Levels

	Entry	Middle	Senior
Definition	First position out of graduate school up to first-level of leadership	"Manager of managers" roles up to service line–level responsibilities	From vice president up
Competency Areas Understanding professional roles and norms	Joining relevant professional associations; attending events; getting involved in committees	Maintaining professional activities; seeking out opportunities to observe and model senior-level norms	Striving to be a model of professionalism within one's organization; encouraging professionalism of others
Working with others	Developing skills in giving and receiving feedback; strategically developing work relationships across the organization	Cultivating working relationships across the organization; developing relationships with others in similar positions at other organizations; actively seeking/providing feedback	Cultivating a feedback-rich environment; helping direct reports align career goals with organizational objectives; encouraging others to pursue professional development
Managing oneself	Developing balance between roles within and outside of work; actively planning and managing one's career	Maintaining an effective work-life integration; continuing to monitor and manage time and stress; planning for career and post-career life	Ensuring that roles within and outside work blend effectively; actively planning post-career transition; preparing successors
Contributing	Directly contributing one's time and resources to help others; seeking others to help develop one's expertise	Contributing expertise and resources, both within and outside the organization, through activities such as mentoring, writing/presenting, and advocacy	Role modeling and promoting the importance of contributing; developing a climate that facilitates others' contributions

At the senior level, the professionalism focus typically shifts one more time. Expectations of senior executives are set not only within the organization but also among other executives within a given community or even nationally. There are opportunities (and occasionally expectations) for a leader to use his or her position as a leverage to support the community—for example, by joining boards of other organizations or by taking leadership roles in civic organizations. Within one's organization, the focus should also shift somewhat away from modeling professionalism toward more actively facilitating an organizational climate conducive to professionalism at all levels. While this may be accomplished partly through one's public conduct, it will also be a function of how people are rewarded and promoted within the organization.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS CAN USE THIS COMPETENCY

At the organizational level, professionalism is often an appropriate component of a broader effort to send healthcare consumers a uniform message that their care is in the most capable hands. The HLA descriptions of the areas in this competency could be used as a guide for crafting a statement that professionalism is an organizational value, such that its importance can be readily communicated at all levels, promoted through reward systems, and monitored through the appraisal process.

In addition, the HLA descriptions could be used to guide how an organization's developmental resources may be most usefully and efficiently allocated. For example, in some organizations when leaders attend external conferences they are expected to share what they learned through a formal internal presentation. Alternatively, in organizations where competency development is more actively monitored, there are opportunities to identify patterns of need and to fill these needs by bringing educational opportunities into the organization rather than sending individuals out. Similarly, organizations that more actively promote mentoring may encourage individuals viewed as exemplary in professionalism to serve as mentors to junior administrators.

Notes
1. For more information on the HLA's work on competency, visit www.healthcare leadershipalliance.org/directory.cfm.
2. For a useful guide on how protégés can most effectively find and use mentoring opportunities, see Dye, C., and A. Garman. 2006. "Appendix C: Mentors: How to Identify, Approach, and Use Them for Maximum Impact." In *Exceptional Leadership: 16 Critical Competencies for Healthcare Executives.* Chicago: Health Administration Press.

For more information on the concepts in this column, please contact Andy Garman at andy_n_garman@rush.edu.