

The Seven Balancing Acts of Professional Behavior in the U.S.A.: A Cultural Values Perspective

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When a professional derails in a business setting in the United States, it's sometimes due to a lack of technical expertise or clumsiness in execution. But just as often, the reason for the derailment is an inability or unwillingness to act in a way regarded as "professional" by one's colleagues and counterparts.

Another reason why behavior deemed unacceptable occurs is because people who were not raised and socialized in the U.S. are increasingly present in American offices and plants. Immigrants, expatriates, and employees from abroad on developmental assignments all usually act in the best way they know how, yet their culturally conditioned behavior may not be regarded as fully professional by American businesspeople. The differences between American notions of good business behavior on the one hand, and European, Latin, or Asian notions of good business behavior on the other hand, are often nuanced and subtle.

Our responsibilities require the two of us to be conscious in a general way of appropriate business behavior in various cultures. Recently, we were presented with a focused opportunity to address the issue of professional behavior in the United States. A client had a newly hired employee born and raised in another country, and now in the U.S.A., who was perceived to be representing the firm in a way that did not do it credit. Those who witnessed her behavior described it as "not professional." What could we do to help?

It soon became apparent to us that very little precision and clarity exists about the meaning of professional behavior in the U.S. Before we could assist the new employee (who, fortunately, proved eager to learn), we needed to be clear in our own minds what *professional* means in the context of U.S. business. One of us is an interculturalist, the other is an anthropologist, so we are accustomed to bringing the perspective of *cultural values* to bear on the understanding of behavior patterns. In the following pages, we share with you what our "cultural values perspective" reveals about the meaning of professional.

One of Two Meanings: The word "professional" as used among U.S. businesspeople has two meanings:

- Professional refers to types of work that, to be performed well, require a high degree of knowledge, skill, sound judgment, and constant practice. For example, physicians and lawyers do professional work.
- Professional also refers to a set of qualities of one's personal behavior in work-related situations. *This meaning of professional, particularly in the U.S., is what we explored on behalf of the new employee.*

Let's begin with the very short definition in the *Merriam Webster College Dictionary* for this second use of professional: *exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace.*¹

That definition is very basic, whereas acting professionally is quite complex. We believe that acting professionally in the United States requires a balancing act between contrasting sets of American cultural values, both of which are respected by Americans but each of which tends to lead down a different behavioral path.

¹ To our astonishment, we found that many American dictionaries, even ones claiming to be unabridged, completely ignore this second meaning of "professional." We do not understand why this is the case.

In this discussion we specify seven contrasting sets of cultural values that define what businesspeople in the U.S. mean when they speak of someone's acting (or failing to act) professionally. Each contrasting set is expressed in the form of "A yet B." By this we suggest that admirably professional behavior occurs when someone's behavior balances in just the right way between contrasting U.S. cultural values "A" and "B."

In work-related situations in the United States, professional behavior is. . .

1. Individualistic yet restrained. The U.S. has an individualistic culture in which personal objectives and independence ("freedom") are emphasized. But individualism is not license to behave in an unrestrained manner. Good professional behavior is guided by the social and business-related expectations of others. The balancing act is this: One must demonstrate one's individualism and independence on the one hand; one must also observe prevailing social norms and the expectations of business associates on the other.

For example, managers in the U.S. have an expectation that their direct reports will get things done more or less independently, that is, without constant direction from above. Employees who are "initiative-takers" and "self-starters" are valued. . . up to a point. The balancing act for employees is to take initiative that is bounded and guided by the strategies of their supervisors and the overall mission of their firm.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means two things with respect to this first balancing act. First, it means demonstrating individualism in ways that are subtle, that observe locally prevailing norms of behavior, and that do not annoy or unduly distract the others with whom one is interacting. It means *not* demonstrating one's individualism in ways that strongly call attention to oneself. Second, acting professionally means taking initiative on behalf of the firm in ways that support the strategies of one's superiors. Initiative is properly directed in support of the boss's objectives, not one's own unique ideas.

Undesirable: An individual is an avid fan of a certain baseball team. In work-related settings, he proclaims loudly the superiority of this team and often discusses details of the team's games, players, and operations. His behavior is unprofessional. This is because his topic is not business-related, and even more so because he is monopolizing office conversations in order to endlessly draw attention to his personal interest.

Desirable: An individual is charged with helping her firm expand operations in a particular line of business. While contacting others during her exploration of opportunities, she realizes that there may be an expansion opportunity in a related line of business. She writes a report introducing this possible opportunity and suggesting next steps. Managers will admire her for both taking initiative and remaining subject to direction.

2. Egalitarian yet respectful. The U.S. is well known for its egalitarian culture. People up and down the scale of relative power interact with one another in ways that appear strikingly similar, that *lack* in most instances the *overt* recognition of power and status found in many other cultures. But it's a mistake to imagine that people, and especially businesspeople, in the U.S. are not conscious of hierarchy.

Here's the key: American businesspeople respect and defer to *roles and responsibilities* at different levels. The people who fulfill those roles and responsibilities are nevertheless "just people like you and me." Americans demonstrate their common humanity with others by being overtly friendly and informal with all others. At the same time, they are alert and ready to comply when someone with power acts "in role."

Acting professionally in the U.S. means being respectful of power – roles and responsibilities at different hierarchical levels – and of the rights and privileges that belong to those levels. But powerful people are *human beings*, no more and no less, and one therefore is expected to be more or less informal with them.

Undesirable: An individual is a junior manager at a firm. She is friendly towards others above her in the hierarchy. She tries to engage them in conversation about key issues facing the firm and offers advice about how management should handle certain matters. Her behavior is unprofessional. It's acceptable for her act informally towards her superiors but *not* for her to freely contribute her recommendations to them.

Desirable: An individual is a senior manager at a firm. He has great responsibility and authority there, including the power to hire and fire numerous employees. In his daily interactions with employees, he acts in an informal manner, occasionally asks about their individual interests and family members, and listens if anyone wants to share a concern. Though aware of his high status, he behaves in some ways as an equal.

3. Assertive yet sensitive. In U.S. culture, self-reliance is admired. Individuals are able to be self-reliant, in part, by obtaining what they want through acting assertively towards others. Personal assertiveness, or "directness," is expected and admired, but too much is quickly felt to be aggressive and abrasive. The difference between enough and too much is determined by the actor's sensitivity to others.

Similarly, self-assurance or self-confidence is admired. . . up to a point. When it shades over into arrogance – a demonstration of one's certainty that his own view is infallible – others quickly react negatively. It is never complimentary when someone is viewed by others as opinionated, dogmatic, or arrogant.

It's often said in the U.S., regarding certain direct and self-assured behaviors, that when used by a man these are "assertive" (admired) whereas when used by a woman these are "aggressive" (abrasive). While this may be an accurate observation, *some* men nevertheless *are* perceived as aggressive and arrogant.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means putting a boundary on one's assertiveness and self-assurance, a boundary that varies across times, situations, and people. This shifting boundary is governed by one's awareness of the likely effect on others of varying levels of assertiveness. The professional constantly endeavors to be sensitive to others, thereby learning how to temper and modulate his or her behavior.

Undesirable: An individual is acting as an assistant trainer. The training topic is something about which he has personal experience. He speaks frequently, sometimes interrupting others, and tells extended stories about his experiences. His behavior is unprofessional. Although he *does* have relevant experience to share, he is being too assertive; he is not being sensitive to others' need to know more than just *his* perspective.

Desirable: Among the members of a team of six consultants is an older woman who is much more highly trained and experienced than any of the others, but who is not their supervisor. In dealing with the others, this woman is careful to avoid the impression of excessive self-assurance. She listens with interest to their ideas about how to proceed with clients, and always explains her own point of view fully and patiently.

4. Accurate yet tactful. Accuracy is valued in U.S. culture. To be accurate means that, in verbal and written communication, one discusses people, events, things, and one's own internal states in a manner congruent with reality. Americans pepper their speech with phrases such as "honestly" and "to tell you the truth" as a way of emphasizing their accuracy. But whenever a discussion touches on the shortcomings of someone present or on an embarrassing situation, accuracy encounters another valued quality — tact.

The desire for harmony in communication and relationships is valued *less* in U.S. culture than in many others (e.g., in Asian cultures). But the importance of tact in the U.S. should never be underestimated. The person who publicly says or writes something that, while accurate, is harsh, embarrassing, or causes loss of "face," will be noted and criticized behind his back — and sometimes to his face! — in strongly negative terms.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means overtly striving to be accurate in communication, yet striving as well to be sensitive to the feelings and reputations of others. In the U.S., the high value on accuracy must always be tempered by tact, even to the point of occasionally stopping short of being 100% accurate. When shortcomings *must* be fully revealed, the bad news should be restricted to those who are directly involved.

Undesirable: A manager becomes aware that the output of one of her project groups is not up to expected quality standards. During a meeting attended by all of her direct reports, she describes in exquisite detail the flaws in the output of the errant group. Her behavior is unprofessional. She may have been accurate, but because she spoke publicly she was tactless. She should have dealt with group members in private.

Desirable: A middle manager strongly suspects that his firm is engaging in unethical accounting practices, and because he deals with the firm's accounts he's in a position to know. He arranges to speak in complete privacy with the CEO, and he brings with him detailed exhibits of the matters that concern him. His action is admirable because it demonstrates concern for the firm's long-term reputation as well as his own.

5. Punctual yet patient. The U.S. has a culture in which businesspeople are highly conscious of time's passage, even minute-by-minute. They schedule activities well in advance, then follow these schedules as much as humanly possible. Activities are expected to not only begin on time, but also to end on time. Being punctual is about being sensitive to the needs of others, who are also following preplanned schedules.

Another characteristic of U.S. business culture is that people have many responsibilities and tasks to attend to daily. A particular responsibility or task, therefore, may take more time to accomplish than might seem reasonable; the reason is that one has many, many other things to do to as well. So along with punctuality, one needs patience. Being patient is about being sensitive to others' workloads and priorities.

Two related points need to be made. First, deadlines are taken seriously among U.S. businesspeople. When a task is clearly high-priority and/or its completion is critical to the work of others, the deadline *should be met*. It's not good to miss a deadline. Rather, one should agree in advance only to a "realistic" deadline.

Second, for some – but not all – U.S. businesspeople, family responsibilities take precedence over business responsibilities. In many business settings, a person's explanation for lateness or a missed deadline will be more readily accepted if a family emergency is the reason. Note, however, that this is not uniformly true!

Acting professionally in the U.S. means being acutely conscious of *others' constraints* with respect to time's passage. One respects others' carefully planned schedules by arriving on-time and by meeting deadlines that are viewed as critical. But one also respects others' huge load of responsibilities by not constantly prodding them about the completion of tasks. . .other than, of course, the tasks that are *most* critical.

Undesirable: An individual arranges to meet a colleague at 9:00AM. He doesn't take into account, however, the possibility that rush-hour traffic could be slowed by an accident. So he arrives 25 minutes late. His behavior is unprofessional. He should have planned for possible traffic problems by allowing extra driving time. And he should have phoned as soon as it became clear that he'd be more than five minutes late.

Desirable: A consultant is asked by a client firm to submit a proposal for a new training program, and does so. When she makes her first follow-up call, her contact at the client firm states his interest in the proposal, but also says he's overwhelmed with higher priority matters. Time passes. The consultant calls back about six weeks later, but the situation hasn't changed. She asks when in the future she could call back again.

6. Warm yet "cool." The U.S. has a business culture in which a friendly demeanor is valued, even towards mere acquaintances. Both nonverbal and verbal behavior commonly convey interpersonal warmth. Such

behavior is routine, expected, and usually superficial. Equally valued by U.S. businesspeople is behavior that is rational, objective, impersonal, and free of emotional highs and lows. . .in a word, "cool."

"Cool" includes the tendency of Americans to "agree to disagree." Although two people know they are on different sides of an issue, they usually avoid focusing on these differences and continue to cooperate towards common goals. They try to separate the controversy from the person. For example, one might think that "even though I think Bob is totally wrong about the budget allocation, I still like Bob personally." That Americans try to do this may help to explain their readiness to openly discuss differences of opinion.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means maintaining *the appearance of* positive regard towards others while avoiding any energetic, agitated display of deep feelings, especially anger. It's not a contradiction to say that U.S. businesspeople need to be both "warm" in the sense of *not* being emotionally flat or uncaring towards others, yet "cool" in the sense of reacting rationally and neutrally to unusual events and behavior, including emotionally upsetting situations and even well-intentioned criticism of oneself (see also item 7).

Undesirable: An individual, with a colleague, is making a marketing visit to a potential client. His colleague is prone to interrupt others. When she interrupts him during his formal presentation (to make a clarifying comment), he cuts her off with a momentary flash of anger. This behavior is unprofessional. He should have "maintained his cool" somehow, regardless of how vehemently he reacted internally to her interruption.

Desirable: An individual is involved in important but difficult negotiations with representatives of another firm. She believes that her counterparts are using questionable tactics in an attempt to gain an unfair advantage. She *feels like* banging the table, shouting, and stalking out of the room. Instead, she asks for a 15-minute recess, during which time she regains her composure and returns with a "cool" demeanor.

7. Optimal yet practical. U.S. culture values progress in society; similarly, it values self-improvement in individuals. It is thought good if a businessperson takes steps on a regular basis to insure that his work and his competencies are becoming ever more nearly optimal. Complete excellence is the goal. On the other hand, Americans also are very practical people who like to get things *done*, to actually *finish* tasks.

When someone is called a "perfectionist," it may be a compliment but often it's a criticism. A perfectionist is someone who's not satisfied until whatever he's working on is perfect: 100% optimal. In a culture that values excellence, how could this bring criticism? Criticism begins when striving for perfection uses up so much time and other resources that it's impractical – tasks cannot be finished on time and on budget.

Let's consider "feedback." Feedback occurs when others with whom you are working tell you directly what they like and don't like about your performance. Americans say they value feedback, which is said to be desirable if it is "constructive" (enabling the individual to engage in self-improvement) or "for the good of the cause" (enabling the group to be more efficient, productive, or creative). The key is that feedback needs to be *practical*, that is, focused on making it increasingly possible to get things done well and on deadline.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means valuing excellence, with the outcome that one attempts to improve knowledge, skills, speed, and quality of output in oneself and one's coworkers. But in most situations, this quest for optimal results needs to be balanced by practical considerations. Deadlines and budgets are important, too. What use is a totally perfect product if it's never shipped to customers?

Undesirable: A manager has a strong desire to attain perfection in each new product that exits his unit. As deadlines loom, he continues to think of small ways in which improvements and innovations could be added, obliging his staff to work at breakneck speed and, often, late into the night. Though "unprofessional" might not be the word used, many others will think of him as having carried his quest for excellence too far.

Desirable: An individual in a high-tech firm is assigned the task of designing an exceptionally complex part for a new electronic device. In the course of this work, she realizes that she's discovered the principle behind an innovative switch. But transforming this principle into a marketable product will require extensive testing. She designs a less innovative part to complete her assignment, and the project makes its deadline.

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We wish to add that these “balancing acts” that we’ve discussed above are not the complete story regarding professional behavior in the U.S.A. Following are four additional components of professional behavior:

- **Presentable:** Presentable means showing up for work groomed and dressed in a way that is attractive without being distracting. In face-to-face situations, one’s physical appearance is almost always the *first* indication of “professionalism” that others judge. As the old saw puts it: “First impressions are lasting.”
- **Reliable:** Reliable means *consistently* performing one’s work, and delivering results, in an effective manner. A reliable person also is accurate about how much work he or she can actually accomplish in the projected timeframe so that unrealistic promises about quantity and quality of output are not made.
- **Conscientious:** Conscientious means doing high quality work in order to satisfy an *internalized* value that one’s work ought to be done with attention to excellence. A conscientious professional takes pride in *all* of his or her jobs, not merely those that will receive the most notice or the highest remuneration.
- **Nonjudgmental:** Nonjudgmental means that one is *not* prone to arrive at conclusions so swiftly that relevant information is not considered, or that possible misunderstandings are never probed. In this era when people from many countries, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic groups are working together, and often at a distance from each other (as virtual teams), being nonjudgmental is more important than ever.

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Individualistic yet restrained	Punctual yet patient
Egalitarian yet respectful	Warm yet “cool”
Assertive yet sensitive	Optimal yet practical
Accurate yet tactful	

These seven features of professional behavior in the United States were the focus of this discussion because they capture some of the *contrasting* cultural values that drive the behavior of American people, particularly American businesspeople. To be seen as behaving “professionally,” a businessperson needs to enact behavior that maintains a delicate balance between two contrasting sets of values: “A yet B.”

We believe that a very important, but often overlooked, fact stands out in our analysis of professional behavior. Although American businesspeople are widely said to be individualistic, assertive, and focused on their own personal advancement, *they actually expect of each other behavior that is consistently sensitive to the needs, constraints, and feelings of others.* This is what we hope readers will take away.

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