

# What Does it Mean to Be a Professional?

Grades 7-12

**Objective:** To help students identify key elements of what it means to be professional

**Standards Met:** MCDM Target 3 for grades 7-8 (Career Exploration) and 9-12 (Career Preparation)

**Time Required:** 35-45 minutes

**Materials Required:** Whiteboard, pencil/paper, Professionalism Tips handout, internet connection & video/audio display if showing the YouTube clip (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3L-Nbki0Q>)

## ENGAGE

**Essential question(s):** What does it mean to be professional? What does professionalism look like in a job? What does it look like in school?

**Video:** Show the YouTube video above (4:02): Professionalism – What does it mean to you?

### ***For your students without access to technology:***

Ask 2-3 adults in your family or people you're close to explain what *professionalism* means to them. Which responses were the same? Where did they differ?

## EXPLORE

**Discussion Activity Scenario:** You own your own business. It's starting to grow and you'll need to hire 1 or 2 people to help keep up with the demands of the growth. Being that you're a small business, this person will have to do everything from customer service (phone and walk-in), marketing, sales, business development and more. You want someone who will be very professional. But what does this *mean*? Have students make a list of key characteristics and traits of a professional (ie. the type of person they'd want working for them). In what visible and invisible ways is professionalism displayed in a work setting?

## EXPLAIN

**Key points:**

- There are 4 main areas to focus on regarding professionalism:
  - Your behaviors/actions (what you do)
  - Your attitude (how you think)
  - What you say
  - How you dress
- Keep in mind that professionalism is *somewhat* subjective (people see it differently based on personal opinions/biases)
- The key is to **find the cultural norms for your environment** (what are MOST people doing) and aim for that AND HIGHER
  - If most people come to work in khaki's and a polo or button down shirt, wear the same or better (dress pants and a dress shirt). Do NOT come in with jeans or t-shirts.
- Mirror/model yourself after those at work who demonstrate the highest level of professionalism
  - There might be people at work who say inappropriate jokes, are vulgar or don't work very hard. Maybe they have a bad attitude or always talk about other people. Just because some people *do* it doesn't mean it's acceptable or professional.

- Pay attention to those around you. Whom are the ones getting recognition, awards, promotions? These are the people you should be modeling yourself after.

### Examples of Professionalism:

So, what *does* professionalism look like? Following are a few keys to being professional in the workplace:

- **Be present** – be there and be on time
- **Dress appropriately** – watch what your colleagues wear and dress *at least* as good or better
- **Be polite & respectful** – regardless of how you’re treated by customers, colleagues, etc., rise above it; “play nicely” with others; regardless of what you think, it’s not about you RECEIVING respect first; respect is *earned*, not automatically given
- **Have a good attitude** – most things you CANNOT change; but you CAN control your attitude. Non-verbals like smiling, listening and being pleasant WILL impact people’s perception of you
- **Do your best work, but don’t be a perfectionist** – a bit confusing, right? A half-hearted attempt will get you the WRONG sort of recognition. You need to work hard/well, but be as efficient as possible; trying to be perfect can prevent you from getting things done on time (which is as equally important as quality); and, yes, it’s a balancing act!
- **Go above and beyond** – this doesn’t mean you have to say yes to everyone every time; but an “it’s not in my job description” attitude will *quickly* give you a “not a team player” reputation
- **Be dependable** – people need to know they can trust you to get things done when you say you will and that you’ll be there when they need you
- **Be ethical** – show integrity and character; just because you don’t think anyone is watching, doesn’t mean they aren’t; in fact, they likely ARE watching
- **Communicate clearly** – ask for clarification when needed; when you’re having trouble with something, speak up (don’t wait until it’s too late); make sure what you say is clearly understood; make sure the things you say and what you write is professional
- **Be a work in progress** – be willing to accept feedback; you are NOT a finished product, so when your boss has things for you to work on/get better at, take it from the standpoint that they are trying to HELP you become the best employee you can be

### ELABORATE

#### Final Activity/Assessment:

For each of the following items, make a list of 5 things that would be considered professional and 5 things that would not be professional:

- Workplace dress (in an office setting)
- Things on your resume
- Interviewing for a job
- Social media/presence

### EVALUATE

**Closure/Exit Ticket):** Now that you’ve discussed several traits of professionalism, have students look at their list again and prioritize their traits. Which characteristics matter most to you? Which are critical, and which can you do without (if you had to)? Explain your choices.

**Diving Deeper/Differentiation:** For further information, have students review the following article and video:

- Professionalism in the Workplace - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0o3INMBL58w>
- What Does It Mean to Be Professional at Work?:  
<http://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/outside-voices-careers/2013/07/22/what-does-it-mean-to-be-professional-at-work> (some ideas for this lesson were taken from this article)

***For your students without access to technology:*** Consider printing off the article above to make it available as an additional resource.