

PROFESSIONALISM IN TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

*professional trappings
can be obstacles to
development of the field*

*a reaction from
the Miami conference*

The continuing campaign for professionalism, destined to improve the nature of the training director's function, as well as his status, has been explored once again during the recent ASTD conference. Proposals generally ranged from those calling for definitive types of preparatory education for budding training directors, to changes in the name of the position (from, for example, Training Director to Developer of Human Resources).

All of this agitation is undoubtedly useful. It may lead to self-examination on the part of some practitioners and thus to self-development and ultimately, to improvement in job performance. In our society the nature of professionalism, per se, demands careful analysis, especially for personnel engaged in activities involving training and development. The reasons for this will be discussed later on, within this article.

First of all, let us consider what makes an occupational group "professional." Certainly, calling one's group "professional" does not make it so. Some people may, unwittingly, accept the self-appointed appellation on its face simply because nearly everyone else in America considers himself to be a professional: baseball players, policemen, TV repairmen and real estate salesmen.

Everyone, obviously, is *not* part of a profession and saying so does not, by itself, make it a fact.

What, therefore, is a profession? Are there distinctive criteria which can be listed and analyzed in terms of our own occupational endeavors?

Several years ago I was called upon to develop a training activity for an occupational group (which I was informed beforehand was "terribly concerned about its professional development"). In preparing for this assignment I researched the subject and am passing along my findings to the readers of the *Journal*.

Here are, as I found them to be, the principal hallmarks of a professional. These identifiable features are not, of

course, mutually exclusive. Nor do these features prove the existence of a profession by showing that more than 50% has been achieved by a particular occupational group. In my estimation, it is somewhat more elusive than that — although if some of the following critical features are *not* included, then professionalism is really not present. This is not to say that it may not continue to exist within the mind of the self-beholder — and this can lead to much confusion and conflict within organizations.

IDENTIFIABLE FEATURES OF A PROFESSION

1. **Well-Defined Occupational Discipline.** We can agree that one of the requirements of a profession is that it encompass a specialized, fairly well defined occupational discipline — a unique area of human activity. The U.S. Employment Service's Dictionary of Occupational Titles provides clues as to what titles may be classified as "professional." However, the DOT should be viewed only as a guide and *not* as an authoritative source in this particular area. This is because coding systems used in constructing the DOT were primarily arranged for the purposes of placement, related manpower controls and the maintenance of statistical data by the Bureau of Employment Security.
2. **Formal Educational Processes.** A profession normally demands a formal educational process for entrants. Part of the process of becoming a "professional" means that one normally has to undergo lengthy, systemized education and training. Within our society this process is now directed through college or university-level programs. Individuals cannot walk in off the street and claim, based on verified experience alone, that they are equipped to handle the wherewithal of the profession. Nor can they gain professional competence through on-the-job training. There are, admittedly, a few exceptions to this

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rule: clerkships in law before taking state bar exams — without college — are still in existence in some states. However, these practices are generally on the way out.

3. **Established Educational Standards.** The education or training standards are set by the professional body and are subject to its control, its surveillance, and its continuing evaluation. This means that the lengthy educational processes, noted above, are not delegated to outside bodies; these are maintained under the direction of the professional group itself. Such direction is not static, but is subject to constant change and review to meet the needs of the group within society, as viewed by the group. This is, in my estimation, one of the key identifiable features of a profession. A professional group which does not control its own educational process is not a master in its own discipline.

Of course, at present the occupational area of training does not control the education of its practitioners. Ironically, members of *other* occupations — some of which may qualify as professions — perform in the general area of training; for example: psychologists or educators engaged in organizational development, instructor training or management by objectives. Such practitioners — as members of established professions — are unlikely to seek *permanent* identification with a new discipline which has not been accorded acceptance as a separate and discrete profession.

4. **Supportive Ingroup Feelings.** A strong ingroup feeling of support among the practitioners of the discipline is also crucial. Criticism is acceptable from other professionals but not from members of the outside community. The group maintains, supports and strengthens itself constantly. It has notched out for itself an occupational territory

which it defends against the inroads of outsiders who have not been accepted within the fraternity. Physicians may criticize other physicians, but when a non-physician criticizes a particular medical practice, physicians will quickly come to the support of those being attacked.

5. **Standards of Conduct.** A profession normally includes standards of conduct, expressed in terms of what is “ethical.” Such standards are frequently established by a professional standards committee within the group. Members failing to conform to these “ethical standards” may be subject to a variety of penalties. To illustrate: fly-by-night trainers with little experience — let alone formal education in the field — may set up shop in motels and hawk their wares. The ethics of such practices may be decried, but just how are penalties to be enforced? Here is a problem, perhaps, for local ASTD chapters to struggle with.
6. **Licensing and Accreditation.** Professional groups often succeed in developing licensing and accreditation systems. Such licensing and accreditation systems covering practice within the profession are constructed by members of the profession, but enforced through the vehicle of government. “Advisory committees” of professional members help enforce these licensing systems. It will be noted that this particular feature is closely related to 3, above. The distinction is that here we see the professional group using the police power of government to regulate its own standards for entrance into the group.
7. **Acceptance by Other Groups and Public.** Acceptance of the group, as a profession, by *other* significant groups, and particularly the general public is almost a *sine qua non*. There is no question that the public considers physicians and attorneys

to be professionals. Also accepted are architects, and many other occupational disciplines with which we are all familiar. Teachers, on the other hand, have had difficulty gaining acceptance as a professional group because the public has not always viewed them as belonging to a separate and distinct profession. Parenthetically, one must concede that the field of education, generally, is one where many lay persons consider themselves “experts” and consequently do not acknowledge the opinions of the “self-proclaimed professionals.” This factor may be crucial for personnel in the business of training and development.

In a sense, our position is somewhat analogous to that of the teachers: convincing the boss (the public) that we *are* the experts; that *our* programs are being developed and implemented as we deem these to be necessary; and that we are not merely fulfillers of orders handed to us by higher headquarters. Put another way, the patient does not tell the surgeon how to proceed with the operation. He puts himself, with varying degrees of trust, into the hands of the surgeon and awaits the outcome.

8. **Dissemination of R and D Information.** A professional group must include a vehicle or vehicles for the dissemination of the professional “party line.” In this sense ASTD serves as the vehicle for the dissemination of the latest ideas and research findings in the area of training and development. The *Training and Development Journal* serves as one key publication for the dissemination of “learned” articles. There may, perhaps, be a ratio between the number of publications and the professional status of the discipline.
9. **Control Over Entering Personnel.** A profession often exercises control over the kinds of people entering the profession, in contradistinction

to the education that these people must achieve. Control is accomplished through the establishment of standards of demonstrated potential on the part of neophytes. This can be done in a variety of ways: *Before* the formal educational process begins; *after* the educational process is completed; acceptance into an internship; or, entrance into professional associations of various sorts. Another facet relates to the *number* of individuals permitted to enter the profession each year. All personnel-type controls, ultimately, are dovetailed with other controls over education, educational standards, and licensing and accreditation systems.

10. **Hierarchical System Within Discipline.** Finally, a profession frequently includes a hierarchical system *within the profession* for the recognition of special achievement, unusual training and education or outstanding accomplishments. Again we should look to the old, established professions for illustrations: the recognized specializations in medicine, or engineering or law. Systems of hierarchy within the profession are often observable within large organizations. In a mental health institution, the psychiatrist who holds the M.D. degree may outrank an "ordinary" M.D. who is a specialist in pediatrics.

We might ask — if training and development *were* indeed a separate

and distinct profession — where would its members "fit" in a large organization? This is, of course, the perplexity plaguing many trainers — as well as personnel directors. Struggles for role and status when a new group seeks to professionalize means, almost inevitable, (1) threatening the authority and responsibility of one group, while (2) increasing and expanding such power into uncharted organizational areas on behalf of the new professionalization-seekers.

BALANCE SHEET FOR T & D

Powerful trends towards professionalism are inherent within the total society and, personnel in the training and development discipline are, almost inexorably, caught up with this movement. To stop this, if such intent were possible of achievement, would be akin to King Canute's confrontation with the sea.

Realistically, we should actively seek continuing professionalism, but such professionalism must be productive and reasonable in terms of total organizational relationships. Professionalism can lead to inbreeding, the exclusion of new ideas, intellectual snobbishness and serious jurisdictional conflicts with other professions.

Perhaps the most serious indictment of professionalism relates to the problems of communication among the professions. Consider the word *program*. We convert this word into *programming* for data processing activities, which is part

of a discipline rapidly becoming professionalized. *Programmed* learning relates, of course, to the field of public education as well as training and development. *Program* planning and budgeting systems relate to the fiscal process in the field of accounting and budgeting which is another professional discipline. The word *program* is also used by many trainers as synonymous with the printed listing of presenters which appear in a formal training activity. In any event, we observe within this single illustration, the barriers to lucid communications inherent in professionalization. Each profession invents its peculiar jargon which is often comprehensible only to the members of the discipline. Ironically, it is a sad commentary on the lack of imagination employed within professions on the language selected with unique meanings.

What I am trying to say, in summary, is that the training and development people must not become so enamored with the professional trappings of their discipline that they become entangled in the inter-professional conflicts and misunderstandings which so frequently occur. We must be aware that the training and development function is unique among both established professions and among those seeking establishment. Training and development must not only be concerned with, and committed to, the professionalization of its own in-group members but it must also insure the continued growth and development of other professions within the organizational framework in which it operates.

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