

Professionalism

What does it mean to be professional? Is it the way you act? Is it the way you look? Is it your attitude? Actually, it is all of these and more.

As a leader, whether you like it or not, you are in the spotlight. People are observing what you are doing, in and out of your leadership role. Therefore, how you present yourself is almost always under scrutiny. You can still be yourself; however, your actions or appearance should never be questionable.

Appearance

Having a professional appearance does not mean having to spend a large sum of money on designer clothes and accessories to impress others. It does mean taking what you have and making it work for you. In simple terms, a professional appearance means looking "put together." A professional appearance gives you more confidence and adds to your credibility. The following are some items to consider regarding your appearance.

- Cleanliness Counts – No matter what you wear, make sure it is clean and pressed. If you travel frequently, invest in a small travel iron as your clothes will wrinkle easily when packed in a suitcase. In addition to your clothes being clean, you should also be clean. Your hair should be combed and styled, your body free of offensive odors, and your nails clean and trimmed. Our appearance is the first impression others make of us. If your appearance is sloppy that is how others may perceive your work.
- Coordinate – The easiest way to coordinate your appearance is to invest in a few basic clothing items. These basic items will allow you to mix and match and have the appropriate wardrobe for almost any occasion where you are expected to dress professionally. Examples of basic items for males and females are below.

Men	Women
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• White collared dress shirt• Blue collared dress shirt• Tan dress pants• Gray dress pants• Black socks• Blue socks• Dress shoes and matching belt• DECA blazer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• White blouse• Blue blouse• Tan skirt or slacks• Gray skirt or slacks• Hosiery (color to skin tone)• Dress shoes/pumps• DECA blazer

Although these lists may seem rather drab and boring, you can bring life to your appearance by accessorizing. Scarves, ties, and jewelry allow you to individualize your wardrobe. The rule of accessorizing is that less is more. Do not wear every piece of jewelry you have ever purchased; one or two rings is sufficient, as is one pair of earrings. Accessories are meant to compliment your wardrobe not overpower it.

Dress For the Occasion

How do you know what to wear and when? What does casual actually mean? These are questions that are very typical. Sometimes you just don't know what is appropriate to wear for the occasion. When in doubt, ask! In a professional situation, casual generally does not mean wearing your grubby jeans and favorite rock concert T-shirt. When in doubt err on the conservative side. The above "basic" wardrobe can be made casual or dressy. For example, men can simply remove their blazer and necktie and be ready for an afternoon social. Most official events will have a clearly posted dress code that should always be followed to maintain a professional appearance.

Behavior

Although your appearance will create the first impression, your behavior will make a lasting impression. We have all been in situations where someone else's behavior has been called into question. Do you want to be that person whose behavior is being questioned? Hopefully you answered with a resounding NO!

Here are some things to consider regarding your behavior:

- In or out of uniform, you are a representative of your organization. As a leader, your behavior is under scrutiny. Think of well-known leaders, such as the President of the United States, and how everything he has done, past and present, becomes a topic of discussion. Even though you may think you are not in your leadership role, others may always perceive you in that role. Therefore your actions will always be interpreted as appropriate or inappropriate for you as a leader.
- Think of the consequences of what you are doing. If you have to question whether your actions are right or wrong, in most cases, they are wrong. Many of us get that "feeling" when we are doing something that may be considered poor behavior. You should be asking yourself, "What will be the outcome of what I am doing?" If you are unsure whether your behavior is appropriate, think of your parents or an advisor being present. Would they approve of what you are doing?

Other tips on professional behavior...

- Be careful of what you say and how you say it.
- Be prompt in handling correspondence.
- Avoid sarcasm and outright criticism of people or projects.
- Compliment others on their work.
- Make an effort to be helpful and courteous.
- Understand other viewpoints.
- Make a point to be interested and friendly, and to smile.
- Try to be highly informed about your organization and the activities of similar organizations.

Dining Etiquette

People love to eat! Meal times have long been a time for socialization and networking, so it is important that you be able to navigate dining functions with professionalism. On a simple level, your goal should be to avoid making a mess and making a scene. Beyond that, there are many guidelines of dining etiquette to learn. You should do more research, but here are a few important items:

Place Setting Rules

As soon as you take your seat, place your napkin on your lap. Your place setting will include a knife and spoon on the right of the plate, and a fork for each course on the left of the plate. Your glassware is found on the right of your place settings, and a bread plate will be found to the left.

Do not place used silverware back on the table. It should rest on your plate in between bites, and when you are done with the course, place your knife and fork parallel to each other on the plate face down. Never place your napkin on a used plate to signal the end of the meal!

Interaction Rules

Meal functions are meant to be social times, so you want to strike a balance between talking and eating. Not at the same time! Be conversational, and take your bites while others are responding to questions or sharing stories.

Most important of all, enjoy yourself! Nobody likes a dull, silent, or grouchy dinner companion. You are allowed to have fun while being professional, so laugh, smile, and chat it up!

Professional Introductions

As a professional, you will spend a lot of your time networking. When you meet someone for the first time is it important to present yourself in a positive light, especially in a professional setting. Here are the basic steps of a proper professional introduction:

The Approach

As you approach the person whom you are about to meet, you want to project an air of confidence and a friendly demeanor. You can do this by making confident eye contact and smiling as you walk towards them. Many studies have shown that these two factors are more likely to make a stranger perceive you as trustworthy, friendly, and attractive. Not bad for first impression!

The Handshake

Once you are face to face with this new person, you know what comes next: time to shake hands. This simple act can have a powerful impact on this person's perception of you, so always check for the three most common problems found in poor handshakes:

- **Moisture Check** – If you tend to have sweaty palms, have just handled food, etc. be sure your hands are clean and dry before they make contact. Try to be discrete, and consider carrying a handkerchief in your pocket for this purpose.
- **Pressure Check** – A handshake is intended to create a positive first impression, not to intimidate. So, don't attempt to dominate the person whose hand you are shaking by crushing them. On the other hand, a "limp fish" handshake can show a lack of confidence. Your handshake should be firm but gentle.
- **Duration Check** – Professional handshakes should last approximately 3-5 seconds. Too short, and the person may feel slighted by you pulling away, but too long can become awkward quickly. We do NOT recommend counting out loud!

The Name

While you are shaking hands and maintaining your confident eye contact, you will want to share your full name and title with this new contact. Be sure to listen carefully when they share their name with you. Try to use their name in the first sentence of your conversation, to confirm the pronunciation and help you to remember later.