



**In my opinion...**

**DEAN SAYS:**

## *The Marks of Professionalism, Part VI—*

### *Attention to Details*

When you say, "She's a professional." Or, "He conducts himself as a true professional." What do you mean? Exactly what are those qualities that clearly make one individual appear professional when compared to his or her peers? So far in this series, I've suggested that compassion, justice, common sense, and a wholehearted determination to always tell the truth are marks of a professional. This time I add to the list a *careful attention to details*.

A close friend of mine oversees the Fine Arts department of a medium-sized private liberal arts college. His role of department chairman is more often taken up with supervisory matters than it is with pedagogical concerns. Almost every phone conversation we have is punctuated by tales of the latest foibles and fancies of the professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, technicians and secretaries who report to my friend. The contrasts are startling.

Three of his people are extremely creative, not at all surprising for musicians and artists. But, their creativity is consuming. Each one is constantly

coming up with innovative ideas for teaching, controversial concepts for performance or exhibition, dynamic ways of fundraising, and clever schemes to draw more of the student body into a relationship with the Fine Arts department.

Four of his staff are what would be considered kindly as "plodders." These folks know their stuff, but their artistic expression is commonplace. It may well be that they have never had an original idea between them. Their approach to each new day is to move forward at the same speed they moved through yesterday. If they've been able to procrastinate in completing a particular assignment, they will continue to do so until they are practically forced at gunpoint to finish the job.

The creative trio are constantly completing a significant volume of work: position papers, memoranda, analyses, manuscripts, overhead transparencies, handouts, scores, and a host of output from the visual arts. There is only one problem. Without fail, every document, visual, handout, etc. is riddled with tiny errors. Errors in spelling, improper numbering of captions or illustrations, incorrect dates, blurred visuals, hastily photocopied sections that aren't quite straight. This list of miniscule mistakes is almost endless. Perhaps the creative process is so consuming that they just can't bring themselves to make sure the quality of the output matches the quality of the creativity. Whatever the reason, it

drives my friend, the department chairman, absolutely stark, raving crazy.

Perhaps the most ironic part of the whole "soap opera" is that the tiny mistakes of the highly creative professors is fodder for the plodding four. The ones who never create on their own delight in finding the errors of their peers. They constantly barrage my friend with reports of the latest mistake they found in some document, visual or other output. "Those that can, do. Those that can't find the mistakes of those that can." Or so it seems.

There is always a happy side to my friend's phone reports. It comes from a husband and wife team who each consistently function at a high level of energy and creativity, and whose work together is DY-NO-MITE.

All material this pair creates is flawless. Pour over their stuff—and the plodders do—but no errors are ever found. Why? Because "He" and "She" possess the quality of a careful attention to details.

You already know which category into which *you* fall. The good news is that by applying just a few organizational techniques, you can begin to develop the habit of attending to the details that surround your fire alarm or burglary protective signaling business.

Start by keeping a daily pocket diary or calendar. Note all meetings and appointments and refer to your notes frequently. Jot down phone calls you must make, and then write a few summary words to help you recall the substance of the conversation later.

Put carelessness aside. If you have trouble picking up the mistakes in your written work, enlist the aid of others to check it. Another major point of sloppiness is not using the right terminology. Find out what the correct and standardized terminology is and use it consistently.

Even if you're the CEO of your company, approach each task as if your continued employment depends on the care you give in completing it. Create a mental posture that attends to details.

It's that kind of mental attitude that will set the signaling system professional apart from his or her peers. □

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