

USING MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES TO BETTER ACCULTURATE STUDENTS TO CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR: A PROFESSIONALISM STATEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In an era of increasingly diverse student populations, multi-format MBA programs, and seemingly unrestrained social media discourse, institutions need to establish a code of behavior or expectations for students in the classroom. A professionalism statement is needed, both for inclusion in course syllabi as well as reinforced verbally at the first-class meeting (as well as potentially periodically throughout the program) as a way of acculturating students newly returning to a classroom at the graduate level. In addition to helping insure that all concerned have an environment where they can contribute to case and other topical discussions it sets the behavioral and attitudinal expectations of the faculty, so all can get the most out of the educational experience. The current paper presents such a drafted, faculty discussed and approved statement.

The content of the professionalism statement is deconstructed and discussed by linking it to management best practices. Lastly, the statement is evaluated through role theory to indicate how the change of roles between students and instructors occurs in a graduate program. Not meant to represent or replace separate and perhaps more significant organizational policies on bullying, sexual harassment, or even microaggressions, the professionalism statement attempts to strike a balance on the issues and topics that are appropriate for detailed delivery in the MBA level syllabus.

INTRODUCTION

Attempts to establish behavioral and procedural norms in classrooms is nothing new. Often it is one of the first topics addressed at the beginning of the school year (Nasreen, 2012). Many examples are readily accessible from kindergarten through middle and high school in the internet (for examples see Figure 1.)

The differences of what form those norms should take between kindergarten, grade school, middle school, high school, and college is more about degree and degree of specificity than coming up with entirely new approaches. If we add graduate school to the mix however, we may add the likely new element of the passage of time. More specifically, a key element in most MBA programs is that entering students have been in the workforce for some time and are returning to a classroom environment. At most business schools entry into the MBA program occurs at several points throughout the year. Additionally, these same institutions typically offer a choice of formats for students. Whether full-time or part-time programs or those that meet during the day, in the evenings or on weekends, each format poses challenges to acculturate an increasingly diverse student population to one with a shared environment that both respects and encourages interaction and consideration for others. One only has to look as far as the current political, television, and social media environments to acknowledge that some form of a professionalism statement would benefit classroom discussions for those returning to an educational environment (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.
CLASSROOM ACCULTURATION EXAMPLES



Figure 2
Professionalism Statement

A positive and participative learning environment is crucial to your educational experience. The goals of Bellarmine's MBA program include developing your willingness and ability to contribute to discussions by expressing and defending your position on a variety of topics. This may involve overcoming a sense of shyness. It may involve your willingness to take risks and leave your "comfort zone." While there are many informal situations in which people have neither the desire nor the right to prescribe how others ought to behave, the classroom is unique, and requires the establishment of a culture that respects the learning process and every individual in it.

Professionalism is a significant component part in determining your overall grade in every course. The evaluation of professionalism starts with the proposition that if you attend all scheduled sessions, come to class prepared, participate actively and frequently, make meaningful comments that contributes to your classmates' education, interact professionally with faculty and classmates, hand in all required work on time, participate in the teaching evaluation process at the end of the course, and observe class guidelines established by the instructor, your score will be assessed as "average" or at a numerical level of roughly 85% (a "B"). Adjustments either up or down from this starting point are at the discretion of the instructor – to recognize superior effort and performance or to acknowledge deficiencies in your approach to your responsibilities.

Given the hours you spend preparing for class discussions, reading articles and text material, analyzing case studies, and working on individual and group projects, as well as the significant financial commitment you (and/or your organization) are making to undertake graduate study, you are responsible for creating and maintaining this professional environment. For these reasons, the following guidelines/expectations are provided:

Your physical presence in the classroom is a prerequisite for active participation. If you come late or are not prepared to begin when class starts this can disrupt the class. Please make every effort to arrange your schedule so that you arrive early enough to take care of any personal or non-class related activities and are ready when class begins.

While we expect your attendance at each class session, we understand that it may not always be possible. If you are unable to attend a session you should handle the issue professionally. Contact the instructor ahead of time – as soon as you are aware that you will be unable to attend. Absences that cannot be discussed beforehand due to emergencies must be cleared up at the earliest possible opportunity. Each instructor sets their own policy on how to address student absences. That policy will be listed in the course syllabus and/or discussed at the first class session.

Your mental presence as well as physical presence is necessary for everyone to get the most out of the classroom experience. Our MBA classes are interactive forums. Your activities, both positive and negative, have an effect on the class. Please focus your attention and energies on our class exclusively when the class is in session.

Your overall demeanor as you interact with other students, guest speakers, faculty, and staff, whether face-to-face or with e-mail or other technology is also a reflection of your professionalism.

Observing these guidelines is the minimum expectation of the faculty. While the specific audience for this message constitutes a small percentage of all students, everyone benefits from a clear statement of expectations.

Practicing professionalism will make you more productive and will lead to the achievement of your individual and group goals. You will also find that the attitude of professionalism you develop here will benefit your larger life at work and your personal life.

Welcome to the course!

Serving to solve both potential teaching and management issues this professionalism statement's various parts were carefully crafted to generate buy-in from students. At the same time the statement needed to be sufficiently structured to be useable in all MBA courses and syllabi, while also satisfying faculty desires to be flexible. This statement was developed by the business school's graduate curriculum committee of a small private university in Kentucky and was approved by the business school faculty. To examine the statement more closely each section of the statement is presented and then explored as to how its content is related to management and leadership principles.

DECONSTRUCTION

Paragraph One

A positive and participative learning environment is crucial to your educational experience. The goals of Bellarmine's MBA program include developing your willingness and ability to contribute to discussions by expressing and defending your position on a variety of topics. This may involve overcoming a sense of shyness. It may involve your willingness to take risks and leave your "comfort zone." While there are many informal situations in which people have neither the desire nor the right to prescribe how others ought to behave, the classroom is unique, and requires the establishment of a culture that respects the learning process and every individual in it.

The first sentence frames the statement as making the classroom and more general educational culture one of positive change through the participation of both the students and the instructors. This statement sets the tone for the culture that is expected to develop in the program.

Because students enter the MBA program from diverse work backgrounds they are often at different places in their careers and have varied experiences. Within their respective organizations and roles they understand how their interactions should occur with others however, they may have forgotten how interactions differ in a classroom environment. As a result it is necessary for students to relearn the appropriate roles within the academic environment. This is made more complex because in graduate level programs, the roles are different than those encountered in undergraduate classes.

Role theory is based on a theatrical production, where everyone must learn to play an assigned role (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985). This new role governs the interactions of the players based on the social cues prevalent in the situation. The Professionalism statement helps to establish the basic roles that are to be played in the classroom setting. Particularly, the idea that all comments and experience may be seen as equally valid under differing circumstances. While many of the students may be new to managerial positions or taking the class in hopes of becoming managers, others may be at mid- to upper-levels of management and may revert to those roles if their viewpoints are challenged (Solomon et al., 1985).

The professionalism statement is intended to be positive in terms of motivating and leading students. The use of positive psychology has been a key area of research not only in the field of psychology but also in the field of organizational behavior. The primary aspect of this positive behavior is to grow and maintain a positive culture and framework for the students that will lead to enhanced learning (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

This area also belongs to what might be called soft or “people” skills and are part of what Goleman calls social intelligence (Goleman, 2006) which deals with interpersonal relationships and emotional competencies that may be a key to both management and leadership.

In learning to deal with new people and ambiguous instructions, students learn to build on their competencies and stretch their knowledge to include new ways of doing things and seeing beyond their own mental boundaries (Boyatzis & Saatchioglu, 2008). As they note, “one of the primary objectives of training and graduate management education is to prepare people to be outstanding managers, leaders and professionals (Boyatzis & Saatchioglu, 2008).”

The other aspect that is part of this statement is that as managers and leaders, there must be a form of control that is exercised in the organization. Henri Fayol, one of the historic figures in the field of management, developed a list of fourteen points (Rodrigues, 2001) that cover what he believed were necessary skills for management. One of these points, included the need for formal and informal authority, another the establishment of clear rules, and a third the need for a single plan and authority. While Fayol’s points are still in existence today, they have morphed into a newer format that address the changes that have occurred in both society and in the competence of the employees. This is especially true given the rise of social media such as Twitter, Instagram and other services that allow individuals to push their issues out to others who may be like minded. This change has resulted in decisions being pushed downward in the organization and empowerment of the individual employee or employee groups to create and maintain their own discipline as needed. This is the system that is being created in the MBA program though the first paragraph of the professionalism statement.

Paragraph Two

Professionalism is a significant component part in determining your overall grade in every course. The evaluation of professionalism starts with the proposition that if you attend all scheduled sessions, come to class prepared, participate actively and frequently, make meaningful comments that contributes to your classmates’ education, interact professionally with faculty and classmates, hand in all required work on time, participate in the teaching evaluation process at the end of the course, and observe class guidelines established by the instructor, your score will be assessed as “average” or at a numerical level of roughly 85% (a “B”). Adjustments either up or down from this starting point are at the discretion of the instructor – to recognize superior effort and performance or to acknowledge deficiencies in your approach to your responsibilities.

The second paragraph of the statement continues to move through the issue of motivation and control, providing the students with clear information on how they can influence their own grades in terms of professionalism. This statement helps to build peer-driven controls that influence how the teams in the classes work and focuses the students on the pathway that they can follow to build on their own success. This moves the sense of empowerment from the professor to the students and indicates a commitment by the school to the students and vice versa.

It is also clearly laying the ground rules for the pedagogical structure of the class. The class is meant to question and engage in discussions while maintaining the decorum that is to be expected of professionals. Again, the main thrust is that the engagement is to be positive, building on the strengths of the students while allowing the professors to draw students into the discussion

in a positive manner while reducing the incidence of negative emotional responses (Boyatzis, 2008 and 2011).

Paragraph Three

Given the hours you spend preparing for class discussions, reading articles and text material, analyzing case studies, and working on individual and group projects, as well as the significant financial commitment you (and/or your organization) are making to undertake graduate study, you are responsible for creating and maintaining this professional environment. For these reasons, the following guidelines/expectations are provided:

This passage once again touches on the control aspect of management along with the motivation aspect of leadership. Each student is responsible to drive the work to completion as either an individual or as part of a team. This appeals to the cognitive ability of the student and indicates that the goals in the class are driven not by the professor, but by the values and philosophy of the student. It also acknowledges that the student needs to spend time and effort on the process of learning not only new knowledge, but how that knowledge might be applied to add value to their organizations. It also encourages the students to acknowledge that there is a need to spend time and effort on learning, but it does so in a positive sense of encouraging the behaviors that are being fostered in the class setting.

Paragraphs Four and Five

Your physical presence in the classroom is a prerequisite for active participation. If you come late or are not prepared to begin when class starts this can disrupt the class. Please make every effort to arrange your schedule so that you arrive early enough to take care of any personal or non-class related activities and are ready when class begins.

This passage points out that the student is responsible for scheduling and planning how to perform the work that is expected. As in most workplaces, managers and employees are frequently pulled in different directions when opportunities or problems crop up at the work place or in their personal lives. The students must learn to expect ambiguity and make use of the formal and informal structures that are in place to communicate within and between various groups.

A major point in the concept of resonant leadership is the need to reduce dissonance and the negative emotional states that often prevail in a dissonant relationship (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Boyatzis, 2013). While dissonance may create a window for change, the level of dissonance must be controlled to prevent the development of what is essentially an emotional “death spiral” leading toward negativity. It is important to maintain a positive outlook and positive emotional energy within the classroom to reduce the effect of negative moods.

While we expect your attendance at each class session, we understand that it may not always be possible. If you are unable to attend a session you should handle the issue professionally. Contact the instructor ahead of time – as soon as you are aware that you will be unable to attend. Absences that cannot be discussed

beforehand due to emergencies must be cleared up at the earliest possible opportunity. Each instructor sets their own policy on how to address student absences. That policy will be listed in the course syllabus and/or discussed at the first class session.

This paragraph details expectations of the faculty and is akin to expectations that a manager would have of their employees. In making the statement, faculty are aware that conflicts can and do occur in any class due to illness, work commitments, and other outside commitments that might result in interference in the learning environment. The need to address these in a professional manner is detailed so that students will understand that much as an absence at work can create undue tension and lead to disruption of the workplace, the same occurs in the class. Student groups may need to handle presentations with a member missing and the missing member also will have difficulty in understanding future discussions since they may miss critical data that came out during a discussion.

Paragraph Six and Seven

Your mental presence as well as physical presence is necessary for everyone to get the most out of the classroom experience. Our MBA classes are interactive forums. Your activities, both positive and negative, have an effect on the class. Please focus your attention and energies on our class exclusively when the class is in session.

Your overall demeanor as you interact with other students, guest speakers, faculty, and staff, whether face-to-face or with e-mail or other technology is also a reflection of your professionalism.

These two passages represent an additional discussion of the issue addressed in paragraph five concerning missing class. The concern is that the mood of a class is reflected in the students and when students miss classes, even if only infrequently, there will be a deterioration of the class culture and a shift in the mood of the class. This can be more apparent in groups and teams, where the missing individual may be viewed as shirking their commitment to assist in the learning process of their teammates. This deterioration may grow to active dissonance in cases where an individual member is perceived as not "pulling their weight." Once a decline into dissonance begins, it is difficult to move the class back to a positive framework. This may also lead to negative discourse by students in social media concerning other students, the institution, and/or instructors who they may believe to be unwilling or unable to control situations that arise in the classroom.

Paragraph Eight and Nine

Observing these guidelines is the minimum expectation of the faculty. While the specific audience for this message constitutes a small percentage of all students, everyone benefits from a clear statement of expectations.

Practicing professionalism will make you more productive and will lead to the achievement of your individual and group goals. You will also find that the attitude

of professionalism you develop here will benefit your larger life at work and your personal life.

The rationale for the above two passages is to both reassure students that there is not a large-scale problem at the heart of the program that necessitates this statement and to provide an additional rationale, one beyond the classroom, for buying-in to the statements and its precepts. It also points to the need for people to adjust their behavior by taking on roles very different than those that they might normally be comfortable with. This same issue was noted in the information systems world as various roles between end users at different levels and providers (Galleta & Heckman Jr., 1990). Here the issue is that there is a need for students to learn the expected role of students and researchers looking into how to best make use of knowledge that they may not have known and how to integrate such knowledge into their own business cultures.

Paragraph Ten

Welcome to the course!

The final paragraph included in the professionalism statement, or more accurately, the last sentiment is one of inclusion. It is an attempt to inject a personal note of invitation and encouragement to what could otherwise be a somewhat dry statement of expectations and rules for the classroom and beyond. While the process of acculturation does require a statement of rules and expectations the lack of a personal touch to the document could actually create a barrier where none is desired.

CONCLUSION

Given the changing environment of the classroom, along with changes in society related to social media and expression in the culture in general, there is a need for continuous change in the MBA curriculum to address the requirements that are essential to complete the coursework in an orderly manner that will satisfy the need of students to learn and apply knowledge.

The use of sociological and psychological theories such as role theory are extremely useful for understanding how individuals interact and how to aid individuals in learning how to interact in an academic setting as opposed to a typical business setting. Particularly, individuals must learn to put aside the diverse backgrounds that they have become used to in their work environments and adapt to an environment that is very different than they may be used to. Role theory offers a rich literature to aid in making such changes by serving to allow the individual actors to assume a new role that addresses this different environment (Solomon et al., 1985; Galleta & Heckman Jr., 1990).

Future iterations of this professionalism statement will likely have to address online, hybrid, and flipped classrooms as they make more significant inroads into the teaching environment. While online and hybrid courses allow more flexibility for students, they are more demanding for the faculty as there is a greater amount of preparation needed to develop and implement a class. Establishing and maintaining a learning culture there will by its very nature be different. In these formats, the faculty must be able to anticipate specific issues and questions that might arise and prepare the materials to address them. Much as we see in making decisions, there are often unintended consequences that arise when an action is taken. This will doubtless occur

more frequently if the faculty attempt to anticipate questions or issues that might arise. If we consider the class as a system, we can apply a lesson from the work of Walter A. Shewhart who noted that there is common cause and special cause variation (Levine, Stephan, & Szabat, 2014). Common cause variation is caused by noise in the system and attempting to control this noise without a careful analysis of the system results in the noise increasing. In other words, when you try to control chance occurrences, it creates a chaotic system.

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