



How to Encourage Professionalism in Your Instructors

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1.0 Introduction

Although this article is primarily focused on those working in the military fitness, fitness boot camp and outdoor fitness sectors the principles can be applied to the wider fitness community.

The requirements for working as a fitness professional varies across industries and employers. Health clubs and leisure centres usually hire certified personal trainers, but a highly fit professional with extensive experience in fitness or athletics may work for a private client without certification. Dance teachers, yoga practitioners, and martial arts instructors generally have years of experience in their respective disciplines and possess extensive knowledge of specific techniques. To work for schools and colleges, fitness instructors usually need a degree and related certification. A high quality fitness professional is generally a fit, healthy person who leads by example through exercising regularly and practicing their own methodology.

Professionalism can be hard to define and even harder to teach. This article highlights some practical tips to encourage professionalism in both new and veteran fitness professionals.

1.1 Caveat

This article has not been written as a comprehensive guide on professionalism - although the references at the end will aid this - but more as food for thought and to stimulate debate.

2.0 Defining Professionalism?

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) defined professionalism in 2005 as a set of values, behaviours, and relationships that underpins the trust the public has in doctors; fitness professionals are no different.

The Medical Protection Society (MPS, 2013) suggests that being a professional is not just about earning a living from your trade, or the amount of money earned, it is about being proficient at that trade and being recognised as being so.

Tom Nikkola (2012), Director of Nutrition & Weight Management, states “A fitness professional has evolved beyond working with clients just on their exercise.” Tom further states that clients should understand what they are looking for “so they can make the best decision with who they are going to invest in.” To aid this decision Tom has suggested six points:

1. Fitness professionals are adamant about lab testing;
2. Fitness professionals use tools and devices to enhance their programmes;
3. Fitness professionals coach on lifestyle as much as exercise;
4. Fitness professionals are sticklers about nutrition;
5. Fitness professionals set the example; and
6. Fitness professionals never stop learning.

Dr Michael Mantell (2011) echoes points 3-6 and also states “A fitness professional produces high-quality service in every area of practice. Excellence is always your goal.”

Although aimed, again, at doctors, the RCP publication (Thomson & Kelley, 2011) “*How to Guide: Professionalism*” provides some examples of concern that can be directly transposed to fitness professionals such as:

- Drug or alcohol misuse;
- Aggressive, violent or threatening behaviour;
- Persistent inappropriate attitude or behaviour;
- Cheating or plagiarising;
- Dishonesty or fraud; and/or
- Unprofessional behaviour of confidentiality of attitudes.

How many of the above points do you or your instructors display?

The concept of professionalism is now the basis of the fitness industry's contract with society. It is what society and clients expect of their fitness professionals. Professionalism is the way that fitness professionals fulfil their part of this contract and in return they are rewarded by the trust of clients.

How do you personify professionalism? Some people would see professionalism as being predominantly about observable behaviours. Others believe it is a much broader concept encompassing competences in terms of knowledge, practice and non-practice skills, which together with appropriate attitudes and values result in expected professional behaviours and relationships.

When it comes to day-to-day practice, professionalism is about adherence to a defined set of standards. You should work with your instructors' to try and incorporate these standards and codes of practice into everyday behaviour and performance, by following your own national regulator's code of conduct/ethics.

A client's trust in their fitness professional is no longer assumed; it is reached and earned through a display of appropriate professional qualities and behaviours, for example, expertise, probity and concern or caring, and these act as markers of professionalism.

Communication issues and poor instructor-client relationships can be major causes of complaints and clients leaving (Mantell, 2011). Many of these communication behaviours would be viewed as unprofessional:

- Poor communication (not being listened to, lack of empathy, lack of information);
- Disempowerment (feeling devalued, not being understood or taken seriously); and
- Desertion (feeling abandoned, family excluded [parents of child clients], staff arrogance).

3.0 Professional Registration

Fitness Australia (2014), along with most European regulators, suggests that being a 'Registered' exercise professional means the instructor/trainer:

- Has completed a fitness qualification;
- Holds a current Senior First Aid and CPR certification;
- Is recognised as a 'Licence to Practice' as a professional;
- Is committed to ongoing professional development; and
- Is eligible for professional insurance cover.

Fitness Australia further states that exercise professionals should be registered at levels according to qualification and experience; in categories aligned with completed and current vocational roles.

3.1 What is Professional Registration?

Professional registration provides assurance and confidence to consumers, employers and health professionals that all registered fitness professionals are qualified and have the knowledge, skills and competence to perform specific roles.

As such, registered fitness professionals are acknowledged for their professionalism, adherence to industry standards and commitment to ongoing professional development.

3.2 UK Outdoor Fitness Organisations and Professional Registration

The Register of Exercise Professionals, the UK professional body known as REPs, does not have the legal authority to compel individuals or organisations to become members. Although many employers stipulate that employees should be a member of REPs as a condition of employment, this does not generally extend to those individuals and employers in the sectors mentioned in this article.

For example, the leading outdoor fitness company - British Military Fitness - is a member of UK Active and not REPs; although a small number of its instructors' are members of REPs. Also, a number of other smaller outdoor fitness organisations are affiliated with REPs without their instructors being members. I would argue that professional registration by some outdoor fitness organisations is just a marketing strategy and not as a tool to raise or maintain standards.

4.0 Teaching Professionalism

Business owners, trainers and regulators need to actively encourage professionalism and not just assume that new or veteran instructors will automatically acquire it, or simply wait until they transgress.

It is relatively easy to teach someone a specific skill like conducting a warm-up and assessing whether the instructor has acquired the skill. The same cannot be said for professionalism.

Teaching aspects of professionalism can be achieved through delivering a formal curriculum, teaching the knowledge and skills to develop capability, helping to establish necessary attitudes, and enabling instructors to display appropriate professional behaviour.

4.1 Knowledge

Knowing the professional standards as identified by the relevant national regulator is a good starting point. Topic discussions with instructors are a useful way of teaching them about key issues such as confidentiality, safeguarding etc. Ask them "how would you respond to a complaint about another instructor from a client?" as a way to help them apply this knowledge.

- UK Active: <http://www.ukactive.com/membership/raising-standards/ukactive-outdoor-code-of-practice>
- REPs (Register of Exercise Professionals): <http://www.exerciseregister.org/resources/code-of-conduct>
- Skills Active (owner of REPs): <http://www.skillsactive.com/skillsactive/professional-registers>

4.2 Skills Necessary to Display Professional Behaviours

In order to be able to exhibit professional behaviour, we need to ensure instructors have the necessary skills which include exercise skills, a range of communication skills and record keeping.

4.3 Attitudes and Values

Examples of attitudes and values associated with being a fitness professional include:

- Integrity;
- Being open;
- Compassion; and
- Accountability.

To assess attitudes and values, you could ask attitudinal questions, for example:

How much do you agree with the following statements (on a scale of 1-7):

“It is important to apologise to clients when mistakes have occurred.”
“It is OK to take shortcuts if pressed for time.”

4.4 Is the Behaviour Attitude Consistent?

Aligning attitudes and values with professional behaviours authenticates professionalism.

1. Attitudes and values (Humanism); and
2. Professional Behaviour (Professionalism).

What we see externally are behaviours and capability. It is what lies internally such as values, beliefs and attitudes that drive this behaviour. Professional behaviour without consistent underlying values lacks authenticity and integrity (i.e. surface compliance: instructors go through the motions but not engage with what it means for their practice) and is more likely to deteriorate when under pressure.

5.0 Informal and Hidden Curricula

Most of the teaching of professionalism is likely to occur through informal and hidden curricula (Table 1, overleaf). Role modelling can be very powerful especially if accompanied by reflection.

Table 1: Informal and hidden curriculum

Informal Curriculum	Hidden Curriculum
Stories and anecdotes: “I had a session a few years ago where...”	Developing an appropriate practice culture regarding attitudes and behaviours.
‘Chats’ over coffee.	Raising the profile of professionalism.
Peer learning.	Role modelling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way they see you act with clients; • The way you act towards them; • The way you act to other team members; and • The attitudes and values you express.
Fitness and lay media ‘stories’.	
Scenarios/questions to help challenge attitudes.	
Reflecting on and discussing everyday situations.	
Documenting examples of professionalism to discuss.	

6.0 Feedback on Professional Behaviour

You can assess the professional behaviour of instructors by role-play, case-based discussion, rating scales and observation of a session/consultation. You can use formative assessment techniques to assess and enhance an instructor’s capability.

Feedback from a variety of sources, for example, staff, clients or colleagues, can be very useful.

We should be encouraging reflection, self-assessment and self-correction about the impact of errant professional behaviour.

7.0 Client-centred versus Instructor-centred

Being client-centred is an important part of professionalism. Sometimes we can become very ‘me’ focused and lose sight of the fact that the client is our main priority. Hearing these types of phrases may give an indication that this is happening:

- “I don’t see why I should...”
- “I had the usual time-wasters during today’s session.”
- “Clients need to realise that I can’t...”

8.0 Hot Buttons

Certain client behaviours or comments can trigger an automatic inappropriate response which could be perceived as unprofessional, before our cognitive control has had a chance to prevent it. Identifying what these hot buttons are and early recognition that they are being pressed is important. Reframing client behaviour that can stimulate these responses may help prevent automatic potentially unprofessional responses.

9.0 Summary

- Ensure instructors know and understand what acceptable professional behaviour is;
- Encourage appropriate values and attitudes to authenticate professionalism;
- Encourage client-centred sessions;
- Role modelling and facilitating reflection on observed behaviour is likely to be effective;
- Enabling insight into attitudinal or behavioural deficiencies will help many instructors improve;
- Reflective practice is vital to enable instructors to develop professionalism; and
- Reframing and managing hot buttons can be useful tools.

10.0 Conclusion

Professionalism matters. It is what society and clients expect and helps avoid complaints and clients leaving, particularly at a time when client expectations are growing. In such times your professional attributes can really come to the fore and make all the difference when under pressure.

11.0 Top Ten Tips for Professionalism

- **Probity:** Honesty and integrity are central to probity and define how any professional person should act. This is vital in the fitness industry as the instructor-client relationship is balanced on trust.
- **Expertise:** instructors are expected to have a particular set of skills in their chosen field, some at a level that can be considered expert. The validity of this expertise is maintained by ongoing training throughout the course of a fitness professional's career.
- **Respect:** You should aim to be courteous and should respect the rights, dignity and autonomy of those who consult you in a professional capacity.
- **Responsibility and Reliability:** A professional person should honour commitments and ensure that tasks and duties are completed and addressed, by taking the initiative and leading by example. In fitness, a lack of attention to your duties can be the difference between clients staying and leaving.
- **Respectability:** There are expectations that a professional will work and behave in a manner that is appropriate to the nature of their particular profession.
- **Standards:** A professional person is expected to have the ability and dedication to achieving a set of standards in their duties that their peers find acceptable.
- **Conduct:** the national regulators have clear expectations of the correct behaviour and conduct of fitness professionals. You should ensure that your actions are appropriate and proper.
- **Social Responsibility:** The nature of the profession means that a fitness professional must possess a strong sense of empathy; a desire to do good - and this can be broadly described as having a social responsibility.
- **Ethics:** Fitness professionals must adhere to a strict code of conduct/ethics. It is necessary to first separate the law on the one hand, and ethics on the other, in order to grasp the essential nature of professional ethics.
- **Openness When Things Go Wrong:** Fitness professionals have a professional and ethical obligation to be open and honest when things go wrong.

12.0 References

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