

On becoming a seasoned professional – thoughts and reflections

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When one becomes a new professional one is often faced with a myriad of questions and self-doubts. Do I know enough to be able to function in this new environment? Will I be able to help my clients so that they can function in their environment? Will the other professionals I work with respect me because after all I am the “new kid”? These questions as well as many more haunt all new professionals. After all you have survived graduate school, you passed the Praxis examination and you are either in the process of completing your PEY/CFY or you have your certification and licensure, but is that enough? How can you transform yourself from student mode to professional mode? What are the traits, qualities, core concepts that define the seasoned professional? I would like, in the next few paragraphs, to share what I have learned about that transformation.

There is a sense of accomplishment when you received that degree, when you obtain your licensure and certification numbers. It means that you have made it; you have the documents that prove you can be a practicing professional at least in terms of knowledge about communication disorders. There is much more that needs to be taken into consideration. You must develop the frame of mind that whatever you do now, you are doing it as a professional not as a student, anything you do you must do it as a professional to professional standards. The development of that frame of mind can be scary and fearful. Fear, however, is just an illusion, it doesn't exist- you created it. View this new framework as an opportunity instead of an obstacle. While it is natural to start any new opportunity with high hopes and expectations having too high hopes and unrealistic expectations can make you overconfident and lead to disappointment when things do not occur the way you had planned. You can make a plan but it is often impossible to plan the end. The key components to remember during this transformation are experience, professionalism, humanness and humor.

Experience is an excellent teacher, with experience comes knowledge. Piaget's theory of cognitive development proposes that we, as humans, cannot immediately process new information. Instead we must construct our knowledge based on our experiences and with those experiences, through making errors and developing solutions we can develop knowledge that will assist us in the process of becoming a seasoned professional. Dr. Sanjay Gupta in his novel *Monday Mornings* talks about a doctors' meeting each Monday morning where the group discuss and analyze doctors' errors. Dr. Gupta states that this novel is based on his experiences sitting and listening to seasoned physicians discuss their errors. This discussion is the foundation for doctors learning from mistakes, and then making sure they never recur. It is important, I believe, that this learning should be real, whole and authentic. We learn how to become better professionals through our interaction with our clients and with other professionals not just through the knowledge we obtain from books. As a new professional, you are no longer being tested on an isolated skill as you were in your graduate program. You are expected to synthesize the didactic information with actual practice as you are now engaged in activities that are meaningful to you because of your chosen profession. Often we are reluctant to admit those mistakes because after all we

are the professional. We must as a new professional give up the need to always be right. You needed to be right in order to get the A on the test or the paper but when dealing with our clients and other professionals it is not worth the stress and pain of proving your “rightness” over someone else’s perceived “wrongness”. We must go beyond our need to “jump in” and fix everything and go beyond our role of being the expert. We are in fact sojourners into the lives of our clients and other professionals. A sojourner is someone who enters a new environment with knowledge that others in that environment may need but are not necessarily happy to receive. As a new professional you cannot start out expecting to make an immediate impact. It is important that when going into a new situation it is best to listen more than you talk. When you do not have all the answers it not only sharpens your sense of learning, it helps you see more possibilities, to create mental schemas that enhance your learning on your way to becoming a seasoned professional.

A seasoned professional gives the appearance of being focused and clear-headed a quality of professionalism. One can become focused and clear-headed by giving up the need for control and by giving up self-defeating self-talk and limiting beliefs. One must be willing to give up on the need to control everything that happens to you and around you. The communication problem of the individual belongs in fact to three people in this order: the person with the communication disorder, the person with lives with the person with the communication disorder and lastly the practitioner. (Holland, 2007) A parent once told me that “life happens” when I am not there and I have taken that simple statement to heart. As a new professional I thought that I had all the answers that my client needed after all I had just graduated so of course I had all the answers. I quickly learned that I cannot control others I can only control me and by letting it go it all gets done. I learned to be open to criticism, to admit mistakes and to take steps to correct them. It is important to remain focused by not dwelling on the negative things that have happened or errors that you may have made. You are not expected to nor will you ever know everything. The key is to know where to get the information that is needed. It is important to find a mentor or a peer-group that can help you in finding the information. We are used to independent learning, going after the information on our own. As a new professional it is important to retrain our brain to become a more dependent learner. Self-defeating talk can lead to limiting beliefs about what you can and cannot do, what is possible or impossible. The seasoned professional remains level-headed and optimistic by remembering that a belief is not an idea held by the mind, it is an idea that holds the mind – Elly Roselle.

Humanness simply stated is the golden rule, never do to others what you would not like them to do to you. A seasoned professional makes decisions from the head and heart, demonstrating humanness. Benevolence is one of the key components in the ASHA code of ethics, it is our ethical responsibility. In order to develop our humanness, however, one has to find personal meaning and value as well as to respect the meaning and value of others. Confucius says “Learn as if you were following someone whom you could not catch up, as though it were someone you were frightened of losing”. It is important to give up your need to impress others. A seasoned professional has learned that you enter a situation with an open-mind and the belief that “we can do this working together”. The heart of humanness involves giving up of self in order to inspire, influence others with a can-do attitude. It is that combination of benevolence, consciousness, responsibility and human heartedness that make us

more human. Humanness means that as a professional one carefully discovers what is needed and wanted, an amateur assumes what others need and want.

A seasoned professional recognizes that humor, a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement can foster good relationships. A seasoned professional uses higher emotional tones: enthusiasm, cheerfulness, interest, contentment in order to achieve results. It is difficult I admit when you are running from meeting to meeting, when your client is not making progress, when your company is making demands, to find and keep a sense of humor. Humor and creativity go hand in hand, finding and sharing a laugh from time to time improves communication and morale. It is important to remember that by not giving up your life to other people's expectations you will find the humor. Nobody can make you unhappy or depressed. No one situation can make you sad or miserable unless you allow it to. It is not the situation or the person that triggers those feelings in you, but how you choose to look at it. Never underestimate the power of positive thinking in making you a better professional.

It is important for you as a new professional to be present in everything you do and enjoy your professional life. Remember that this professional life is a journey not a destination. Completing your graduate program, passing the Praxis examination, completing your PEY and CFY was only the beginning of the journey. Active reflection on your own professionalism, humanness and humor will allow you to have a clear vision for your future. Continuing your commitment to learning through continuing education and seeking advice from others will be beneficial as you continue this journey. The first step, however, to making yourself a professional is to decide that you ARE a professional.

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