Professionalism

Everyone wants to become a "professional" these days or to work in a professionally managed organization. While being professional may be a virtue, what exactly is implied by being a professional is often found lacking in individuals and companies. In fact, some family owned companies have higher professional standards than our so-called professionally managed companies. Many people still think that one can become a professional simply by acquiring a degree and many companies have the mistaken belief that they can claim to be professional by hiring a certain number of MBAs and CAs.

Among the meanings of the word 'professional' in the dictionary, there are two which are connected with the way we work. One is something that is related to a job or profession. The other means well-trained, or a person who is good at one's work. To be a professional, therefore, implies that a person is good in his job and can be depended upon. Clearly, it easy to be a professional in the first sense. If we do anything over and over again in our lives, we become professionals of some sort. The second implication, however, is more difficult. If is easy to do a job, but to do it well as if our heart was in it ah, there lies the catch. Most of us are content in 'making do', or finishing the task at hand with the least amount of effort. We are not interested in putting our best effort because we think that the job is too small or too meaningless or that nobody is going to appreciate it.

Yet, it is easy to make out a job that is done with love than one which is done without it. If you are typing a letter and make a mistake, do you scratch out the word and type another one on it or do you make an effort to retype the letter? In a hotel, if you ask a receptionist some directions, does she ask you to wait or does she get up and solve your problem with a smiling face? In a company, is your complaint attended to without delay or are you asked to write an application after which nothing happens?

These are simple instances of professional and non-professional behavior.

Simply doing a job over and over again does not make us a professional. In the public sector or in the government we find people who have been working at a job for years without contributing a thing to the nation. They certainly cannot be called professionals, no matter what their qualifications are. Take the example of Sachin Tendulkar. There are so many cricketers but when we think of a professional cricketer, this is the name that comes to our mind. Can we become a Sachin Tendulkar in our chosen field? Or are we content in just finishing what is at hand?

Pitfalls in Professionalism

Being a professional means more than simply acquiring a degree. It means being true to your chosen profession and trying to excel in any job assigned to you. Sometimes it means simply doing what is right. Take the example of hiring someone for a job. The principles of efficient working require that we choose a person who is qualified for the job and not go by other considerations. Yet, how many meritorious candidates get selected? Going by the number of cases that are filed regarding selections for jobs it seems that people are hired for belonging to certain castes or communities, or those who know someone in management, or those who may have bribed their way through. That certainly is neither right nor is it professional.

The other common mistake that we make is to follow the national malaise called the chalta Hai attitude. Almost everything can be reduced by taking the easy way out. Look at the electricity wires that are hanging from poles: someone left them because he thought that hanging wires are not a problem. Often, we have to pay for this unprofessional behavior in terms of short circuits and fires. If only we put our foot down and say that this behavior will not go on, people will be forced to do their job as they should be doing. After all, tying up the wires takes a little more effort byt can make the difference between life and death.

How to be Professional?

How does one become professional? If we break up our tasks no matter what our area of work, we can probably come to the following sub-tasks:

Planning

Whether some one is a doctor or a project executed or an engineer, professional behavior demands a certain amount of planning in his job, so that overruns are avoided and the work proceeds smoothly. How many of us make plans in our everyday lives? How many companies take planning seriously? Does our government take the Planning Commission seriously? If we answer these questions, we may discover that many of us are not professional at all, even while claiming to be so.

Decision-Making

The way we make our decisions also shows how professional we are. Usually, we go by our whims and intuition and fail to analyse the situation. When we look around ourselves, we find the consequences of such decisions. Companies which had diversified without taking into account ground realities have come to grief: a

pharmaceutical company which entered the cosmetics industry, an engineering company which diversified into shipping, and so on. Multinational companies too made this mistake and entered the country thinking that they could sell overpriced products to our huge middle class, but only to come to grief. There were few buyers for their products showing that their decisions had been made out of wishful thinking rather than scientific principles.

Communication

How we communicate also shows how professional we are. Do we take care to explain something to our customers, subordinates or superiors? A doctor who explains a point to a worried patient is much better than one who simply writes out a prescription. The end result of both doctors is the same, but one reduces worry while the other causes unnecessary tension. To a sick person, that makes a lot of difference.

Doing our Job

Finally, our attitude gets reflected in the job that we do. Does it reflect our care and ability? Or are we content in doing a half-baked job hoping that someone else will correct our mistakes? It also means keeping an eye for details, however minute they may be.

Doing What is Right

A company which does not treat its workers well can hardly be called professional, no matter how many professionally qualified people it employs. Similarly, companies which do not pay taxes or fail to take note of their social responsibility are unprofessional. Unfortunately, most of us want to be 'yes-men', accepting orders from above which may or may not be right. The moment we do something which we believe is wrong, we are not professional, no matter how many degrees we may have.

These are some of the things that we can follow for achieving the elusive professionalism in our life. Professionalism is an attitude towards our work rather than anything else and it has to be acquired over a period of time. It is also the only way to survive in today's world.