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The Elements of Professionalism

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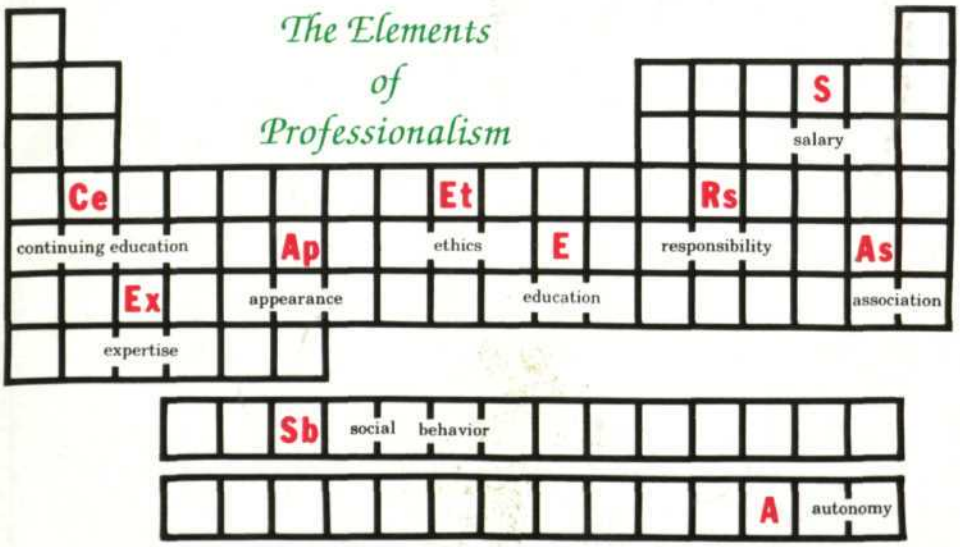
Think back to your high school chemistry class. I recall a giant poster of the periodic table of chemical elements located at the front of the classroom. The textbook had the table printed on the inside of the front cover. The table contained 107 elements, each with its own symbol, atomic number and atomic weight. The atoms of these elements are the most fundamental units we know of. Indeed, all matter known can be dismantled into fewer than 107 building blocks. Each is identified by its specific properties. The elements are dynamically interrelated, joining with each other to form molecules that take on new properties. They are the starting point for understanding and a source of disagreement and controversy among scientists. The point is that this is the same line of thinking we need to apply to our analogy, the elements of professionalism.

Defining the elements of professionalism is difficult. The specific criteria needed to determine who is and who is not professional are vague and elusive. The purpose is not to set a tone of snobbery, but to improve and uphold the value of the professional title. To accomplish this, we begin with problems associated with definition. Next is a discussion of the 10 elements followed by the values of professionalism. Last is the topic of professionalization; the process of becoming professional or a profession.

This article approaches professionalism in a universal sense. This is because all professions have the same standards of professionalism. Reference to the golf course management profession is limited to avoid the implication of a double standard.



The Problem of Definition

Why is it important to define professionalism? It seems the prestige associated with being professional has been diluted. Definition helps restore prestige and credibility to the title. The word is used too often in a casual sense. Advertising frequently uses the professional claim to complete the sale. It's hoped that consumers will feel secure and satisfied that they are receiving the highest level of service available. Too often this is not the case. If you "let your fingers do the walking," wear hip boots; the Yellow Pages are flooded with advertisers using the professional claim.

There is another reason for definition. It provides a reference for individuals and occupations in the process of professionalization. It will help them to set objectives and monitor progress over time. It is clear there is a need for definition, but what is it?

To write a concise definition of professionalism is a struggle. In theory, the ideal definition would expose the amateur who is disguised as a professional. The definition would include a list of specific elements that could be independently judged in a quantitative fashion. If you did not "rank" in each element, you could not claim professional status. This approach, however, is oversimplified and therefore unrealistic and meaningless. The context of any single element is intensely dynamic. Each element consists of sub-elements and each sub-element can be divided many times thereafter. Judging

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