Introduction

Following is an excerpt from an article that appeared in the 3rd Quarter 2002 issue of Focus Europe, a supplement to Velocity, the magazine of the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA).

The differences between American notions of appropriate business behavior on the one hand, and that of the culture you come from on the other hand, are often nuanced and subtle. Nevertheless, they often determine whether you will be regarded as a “professional” by others and can greatly impact your ability to progress farther along the way and accomplish the goals you came here to pursue.

The following can assist you in understanding the meaning of “professional” behavior in the context of U.S. work environment.

One of Two Meanings

The word “professional” as used among U.S. businesspeople has two meanings:

- Professional refers to types of work that, to be performed well, require a high degree of knowledge, skill, sound judgment, and constant practice. For example, physicians, lawyers and scientists do professional work.

- Professional also refers to a set of qualities of one's personal behavior in work-related situations. This meaning of professional, particularly in the U.S., is what we address in this section.

Let's begin with the very short definition in the Merriam Webster College Dictionary for this second use of professional: exhibiting a courteous, conscientious, and generally businesslike manner in the workplace.

That definition is very basic. Acting professionally is quite complex. Acting professionally in the United States requires a balancing act between contrasting sets of American cultural values, both of which are respected by Americans but each of which tends to lead down a different behavioral path. Following are contrasting sets of cultural values that define what businesspeople in the U.S. mean when they speak of someone's acting (or failing to act) professionally. Each contrasting set is expressed in the form of "A yet B." By this we suggest that admirably professional behavior occurs when someone's behavior balances in just the right way between contrasting U.S. cultural values "A" and "B."

In work-related situations in the United States, professional behavior is...

1) INDIVIDUALISTIC YET RESTRAINED

The U.S. has an individualistic culture in which personal objectives and independence ("freedom") are emphasized. For example, managers in the U.S. have an expectation that their direct reports will get things done more or less independently, that is, without constant direction from above. Employees who are "initiative-takers" (i.e. address a problem before being asked to) and "self-starters" (i.e. go “above and beyond” what is asked of them) are valued. But individualism is not license to behave in
an unrestrained manner. In fact, initiative is properly directed if it is in support of the boss's objectives, not one's own unique ideas.

**Undesirable:** An individual is an avid fan of a certain soccer team. In work-related settings, he proclaims loudly the superiority of this team and often discusses details of the team's games, players, and operations. His behavior is considered to be unprofessional. The reason: his topics is not business-related, and even more so because he is monopolizing office conversations in order to endlessly draw attention to his personal interest.

**Desirable:** An individual is charged with helping her firm expand operations in a particular line of business. While contacting others during her exploration of opportunities, she realizes that there may be an expansion opportunity in a related line of business. She writes a report introducing this possible opportunity and suggesting next steps. Managers will admire her for both taking initiative and remaining subject to direction.

2) **EGALITARIAN YET RESPECTFUL**

The U.S. is well known for its egalitarian culture. People up and down the scale of relative power interact with one another in ways that appear strikingly similar, that lack in most instances the overt recognition of power and status found in many other cultures. But this does not mean that people in the U.S. are not conscious of hierarchy. Americans respect and defer to roles and responsibilities at different hierarchical levels. The people who fulfill those roles and responsibilities are nevertheless "just people like you and me." Americans demonstrate their common humanity with others by being overtly friendly and informal with all others. At the same time, they are alert and ready to comply when someone with power acts "in role."

**Undesirable:** An individual is a junior researcher in a lab. She is friendly towards others above her in the hierarchy. She tries to engage them in conversation about key issues facing the lab and offers advice about how management should handle certain matters. Her behavior is unprofessional. It's acceptable for her act informally towards her superiors but not for her to freely contribute her recommendations to them.

**Desirable:** An individual is a senior researcher in a lab. He has great responsibility and authority there, including the power to hire and fire numerous employees. In his daily interactions with employees, he acts in an informal manner, occasionally asks about their individual interests and family members, and listens if anyone wants to share a concern. Though aware of his high status, he behaves in some ways as an equal.

3) **ASSERTIVE YET SENSITIVE**

In U.S. culture, self-reliance is admired. Individuals are able to be self-reliant, in part, by obtaining what they want through acting assertively towards others. For example, people are expected to talk about their accomplishments with their supervisor during a performance review or when asking for an increase in salary. Personal assertiveness, or "directness," is expected and admired, but too much is quickly felt to be aggressive and abrasive. The difference between enough and too much is determined by the actor's sensitivity to others. Similarly, self-assurance or self-confidence is admired, but up to a point. When it shades over into arrogance – a demonstration of one's certainty that his own view is infallible – others quickly react negatively. It is never complimentary when someone is viewed by others as opinionated, dogmatic, or arrogant.
**Undesirable:** An individual is acting as an assistant trainer. The training topic is something about which he has personal experience. He speaks frequently, sometimes interrupting others, and tells extended stories about his experiences. His behavior is unprofessional. Although he does have relevant experience to share, he is being too assertive; he is not being sensitive to others’ need to know more than just his perspective.

**Desirable:** Among the members of a team of six consultants is an older woman who is much more highly trained and experienced than any of the others, but who is not their supervisor. In dealing with the others, this woman is careful to avoid the impression of excessive self-assurance. She listens with interest to their ideas about how to proceed with clients, and always explains her own point of view fully and patiently.

4) **ACCURATE YET TACTFUL**

Accuracy is valued in U.S. culture. To be accurate means that, in verbal and written communication, one discusses people, events, things, and one’s own internal states in a manner congruent with reality *(by accumulating objective facts)*. Americans use phrases such as "honestly" and "to tell you the truth" as a way of emphasizing their accuracy. But whenever a discussion touches on the shortcomings of someone present or on an embarrassing situation, accuracy encounters another valued quality — tact.

The desire for harmony in communication and relationships is valued less in U.S. culture than in many others. But the importance of tact in the U.S. should never be underestimated. The person who publicly says or writes something that, while accurate, is harsh, embarrassing, or causes loss of "face," will be noted and criticized behind his back — and sometimes to his face! — in strongly negative terms.

Americans strive to be accurate in communication, yet strive as well to be sensitive to the feelings and reputations of others. In the U.S., the high value on accuracy must always be tempered by tact, even to the point of occasionally stopping short of being 100% accurate. When shortcomings must be fully revealed, the bad news should be restricted to those who are directly involved.

**Undesirable:** A manager becomes aware that the output of one of her project groups is not up to expected quality standards. During a meeting attended by all of her direct reports, she describes in exquisite detail the flaws in the output of the errant group. Her behavior is unprofessional. She may have been accurate, but because she spoke publicly she was tactless. She should have dealt with group members in private.

**Desirable:** A middle manager strongly suspects that his firm is engaging in unethical accounting practices, and because he deals with the firm’s accounts he’s in a position to know. He *arranges to speak in complete privacy with the CEO*, and he brings with him detailed exhibits of the matters that concern him. His action is admirable because it *demonstrates concern for the firm's long-term reputation as well as his own*.

5) **PUNCTUAL YET PATIENT**

The U.S. has a culture in which people are highly conscious of time’s passage, even minute-by-minute. They schedule activities well in advance, then follow these schedules as much as humanly possible. *Activities are expected to not only begin on time, but also to end on time*. Being punctual is about being sensitive to the needs of others, who are also following preplanned schedules.
Another characteristic of U.S. business culture is that people have many responsibilities and tasks to attend to daily (being able to “multitask” is a highly respected skill). A particular responsibility or task, therefore, may take more time to accomplish than might seem reasonable; the reason is that one has many, many other things to do to as well. So along with punctuality, one needs patience. Being patient is about being sensitive to others' workloads and priorities.

Two related points need to be made. First, deadlines are taken seriously among U.S. businesspeople. When a task is clearly high-priority and/or its completion is critical to the work of others, the deadline should be met. It's not good to miss a deadline. Rather, one should agree in advance only to a "realistic" deadline.

Second, for some – but not all – U.S. businesspeople, family responsibilities take precedence over business responsibilities. In many business settings, a person's explanation for lateness or a missed deadline will be more readily accepted if a family emergency is the reason. Note, however, that this is not uniformly true! Americans are acutely conscious of others' constraints with respect to time's passage. One respects others' carefully planned schedules by arriving on-time and by meeting deadlines that are viewed as critical. But one also respects others' huge load of responsibilities by not constantly prodding them about the completion of tasks...other than, of course, the tasks that are most critical.

Undesirable: An individual arranges to meet a colleague at 9:00am. He doesn't take into account, however, the possibility that rush-hour traffic could be slowed by an accident. So he arrives 25 minutes late. His behavior is unprofessional. He should have planned for possible traffic problems by allowing extra driving time. And he should have phoned as soon as it became clear that he'd be more than five minutes late.

Desirable: An instructor is asked by a professor to submit a proposal for a new training program, and does so. When she makes her first follow-up, the professor states his interest in the proposal, but also says he's overwhelmed with higher priority matters. Time passes. The instructor follows-up about six weeks later, but the situation hasn't changed. She asks when in the future she could follow-up again.

6) WARM YET “COOL”

The U.S. has a business culture in which a friendly demeanor is valued, even towards mere acquaintances. Both nonverbal and verbal behaviors commonly convey interpersonal warmth. Such behavior is routine, expected, and usually superficial. Equally valued by U.S. businesspeople is behavior that is rational, objective, impersonal, and free of emotional highs and lows...in a word, "cool."

"Cool" includes the tendency of Americans to "agree to disagree." Although two people know they are on different sides of an issue, they usually avoid focusing on these differences and continue to cooperate towards common goals. They try to separate the controversy (or the issue) from the person. For example, one might think that "even though I think Bob is totally wrong about the budget allocation, I still like Bob personally." That Americans try to do this may help to explain their readiness to openly discuss differences of opinion.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means maintaining the appearance of positive regard towards others while avoiding any energetic, agitated display of deep feelings, especially anger. It's not a contradiction to say that U.S. businesspeople need to be both "warm" in the sense of not being emotionally flat or uncaring towards others, yet "cool" in the sense of reacting rationally and neutrally.
to unusual events and behavior, including emotionally upsetting situations and even well-intentioned criticism of oneself (see also next item).

Undesirable: An individual, with a colleague, is making a professional visit to a potential collaborator at a different University. His colleague is prone to interrupt others. When she interrupts him during his formal presentation (to make a clarifying comment), he cuts her off with a momentary flash of anger. This behavior is unprofessional. He should have "maintained his cool" somehow, regardless of how vehemently he reacted internally to her interruption.

Desirable: An individual is involved in important but difficult negotiations with representatives of another department. She believes that her counterparts are using questionable tactics in an attempt to gain an unfair advantage. She feels like banging the table, shouting, and stalking out of the room. Instead, she asks for a 15-minute recess, during which time she regains her composure and returns with a "cool" demeanor.

7) OPTIMAL YET "PRACTICAL"

U.S. culture values progress in society; similarly, it values self-improvement in individuals. It is thought good if a person takes steps on a regular basis to insure that his work and his competencies are becoming ever more nearly optimal. Complete excellence is the goal. On the other hand, Americans also are very practical people who like to get things done, to actually finish tasks. When someone is called a "perfectionist," it may be a compliment but often it's a criticism. A perfectionist is someone who's not satisfied until whatever he's working on is perfect: 100% optimal. In a culture that values excellence, how could this bring criticism? Criticism begins when striving for perfection uses up so much time and other resources that it's impractical – tasks cannot be finished on time and on budget.

Let's consider "feedback." Feedback occurs when others with whom you are working tell you directly what they like and don't like about your performance. Americans say they value feedback, which is said to be desirable if it is "constructive" (enabling the individual to engage in self-improvement) or "for the good of the cause" (enabling the group to be more efficient, productive, or creative). The key is that feedback needs to be practical, that is, focused on making it increasingly possible to get things done well and on deadline.

Acting professionally in the U.S. means valuing excellence, with the outcome that one attempts to improve knowledge, skills, speed, and quality of output in oneself and one's coworkers. But in most situations, this quest for optimal results needs to be balanced by practical considerations. Deadlines and budgets are important, too. What use is a totally perfect product if it's never sent to the customers?

Undesirable: A manager has a strong desire to attain perfection in each new product that exits his unit. As deadlines loom, he continues to think of small ways in which improvements and innovations could be added, obliging his staff to work at breakneck speed and, often, late into the night. Though "unprofessional" might not be the word used, many others will think of him as having carried his quest for excellence too far.

Desirable: An individual in a high-tech lab is assigned the task of designing an exceptionally complex part for a new electronic device. In the course of this work, she realizes that she's discovered the principle behind an innovative switch. But transforming this principle into a marketable product will
require extensive testing. She designs a less innovative part to complete her assignment, and the project makes its deadline.

**Additional Components of “Professional” Behavior**

Following are four additional components of what many Americans consider to be “professional” behavior:

- **Presentable**: Presentable means showing up for work groomed and dressed in a way that is attractive without being distracting. In face-to-face situations, one's physical appearance is almost always the first indication of "professionalism" that others judge. As an American old saying points out: "First impressions are lasting."

- **Reliable**: Reliable means consistently performing one's work, and delivering results, in an effective manner. A reliable person also is accurate about how much work he or she can actually accomplish in the projected timeframe so that unrealistic promises about quantity and quality of output are not made.

- **Conscientious**: Conscientious means doing high quality work in order to satisfy an internalized value that one's work ought to be done with attention to excellence. A conscientious professional takes pride in all of his or her jobs, not merely those that will receive the most notice or the highest remuneration.

- **Nonjudgmental**: Nonjudgmental means that one is not prone to arrive at conclusions so swiftly that relevant information is not considered, or that possible misunderstandings are never probed. In this era when people from many countries, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic groups are working together, and often at a distance from each other (as virtual teams), being nonjudgmental is more important than ever.

**Dress for Success!**

Appropriate dress and appearance standards will vary for different UMN departments and positions within departments. Professional attire for men generally requires dress slacks, shirt and tie, or a suit. For women it may require a suit (with slacks or skirt), dress, or skirt and blouse. Casual attire emphasizes comfort and personal expression over presentation and uniformity. For men, it includes a combination of collared shirt (such as dress shirt or polo shirt), cotton trousers (such as khakis) with or without a belt, and dress shoes with socks. For women, casual attire refers to a reasonable length skirt (not mini-skirt) or full-length trousers combined with a top (such as a dress shirt, polo, or sweater set). An informal dress with appropriate skirt length is also acceptable. In some departments, sweatshirts, t-shirts and jeans are also acceptable for both men and women. It may be helpful to inquire what the appropriate attire is in a specific department by asking your supervisor or by being observant of what others are wearing.

To learn more about Dress Codes visit [http://www.dresscodeguide.com/](http://www.dresscodeguide.com/)

You may also want to check these videos about dressing:

**MEN**: What is Business Casual? & What to Wear to a Job Interview

**WOMEN**: Business Casual Wardrobe for Women & How to Dress Business Casual During the Summer