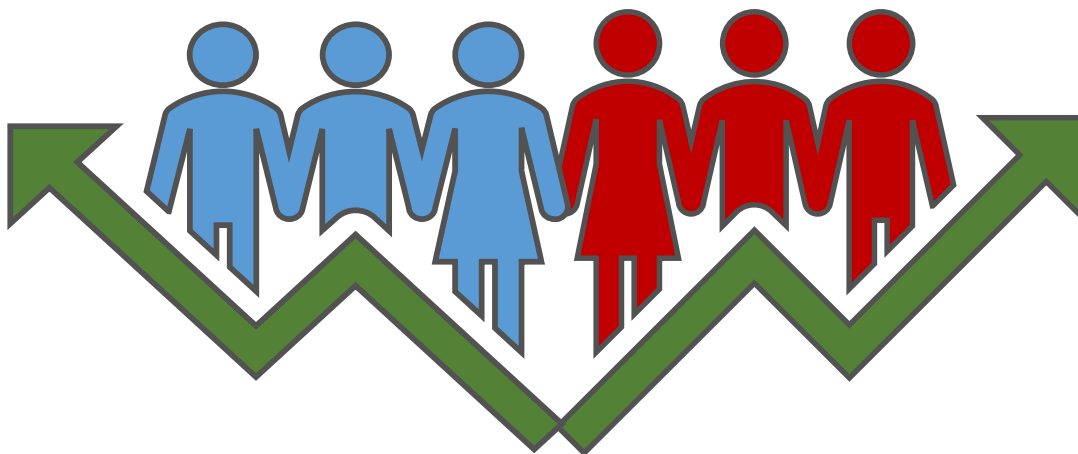


L–3: Professional Excellence



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Lesson – 3

Professional Excellence

Learning Outcome: At the end of this lesson, you will be able to plan to attain to excel in the five essential characteristics, which is the hallmark of professional.

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Lesson – 3

Professional Excellence

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Donald Schon, the MIT professor, in his pioneering book, '*Reflective Practitioner*' states that a '**professional is one who is able to excel in his/her profession**'. In lesson-1 titled 'Profession and Professionalism', you have already seen that teachers in higher education are professionals and the five cardinal characteristics of professionals (reiterated below) which make them distinctly different from the other occupations:

- i. Professionals deal with vast and complex knowledge.
- ii. Professionals continue to create new knowledge in their profession
- iii. Professionals deal with high stake activities
- iv. Professionals work based on trust with clients.
- v. Professionals are self-regulating.

If professionals want to excel in their field of work, they have to work for improving their capabilities to strengthen all these five characteristics. For a professional to follow universal moral values and engage in ethical practice, requires that s/he should possess strength in all of these characteristics. Excelling becomes difficult if a professional lacks even one of these five, then it becomes difficult for him/her to perform ethically and that will lead to his/her downfall and moral degradation. If professionals want to excel, it is very important for them to realise this fact.

An illustration of the human body will throw more light of this cardinal feature. In a human body, malfunctioning of any one of the internal organs, say the lungs or the kidney, affects the functioning of other organs too. If the lungs are not able to supply enough oxygen through the blood, then the heart will need to circulate more blood and this will load the heart and affect its functioning in the long run. Similarly, the malfunctioning of the heart i.e. imbalance in blood pressure will affect the functioning of the kidneys. Similarly, for overall professional excellence it is essential to excel in all the above five professional characteristics. If you look around, you will see many cases where upcoming and promising professionals could not excel, as they lacked one or more of these five characteristics. In this backdrop, the ***need to professionally excel*** in ***each*** of these ***five cardinal characteristics*** are discussed at length.

2.0 EXCEL IN DOMAIN SPECIFIC COMPLEX KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned in Lesson 1 that professionals need to master a *vast and complex body of knowledge* related to their chosen field for which they have studied for a long period after grade/class X or XII. This period of higher studies ranges from 6-10 years for different

professions. For academics or professors, it is at least 7-8 years, if they are postgraduates. It will be 10 to 11 years of study, if they have acquired Ph.D.

For becoming a good citizen and live life with dignity by wage employment or self-employment, the education up to class/grade ten is sufficient. However, for becoming a good professional around 10 more years of proper and rigorous education is required. However, present education and examination system in India is such that in most universities, learning different courses related to the chosen discipline for graduating UG and PG programmes with high grades/marks is easy. However, developing mastery and depth in the subject matter related to your domain area is relatively difficult.

Of late, after completion of formal education in engineering/architecture/pharmacy many of the young graduates rather than going in for technical jobs, they opt for generic jobs, such as general banking, software development administration, management and the like. For such jobs, only logical thinking is required, as they are not related to the courses of their UG and PG programmes and do not require an in-depth knowledge of the technology/professional courses. Therefore, they somehow scrape through the days, weeks, months and years of professional education, without making efforts to develop an in-depth knowledge of the professional courses.

If any graduate of a UG or PG professional, wants to work as scientist, pharmacist, engineer, architect or professor, then s/he must develop an in-depth knowledge of the various chosen professional courses without which s/he will not possess enough and pertinent knowledge required to do justice to his/her professional practice. As mentioned earlier, professionals work in such a complex and specialized field, that even if they provide services of inferior quality, the people taking services from them i.e. the clients/students will not be able to detect their inferior quality services. The following two examples further illustrate this issue.

Example 1

A graduate civil engineer, who does not have enough knowledge about structural design, will use more steel in the structure, although the actual steel requirement may be much less. The client will never come to know in his lifetime, that s/he has spent more money due to excess use of steel. Thus, the engineer did not act ethically, because of incomplete or insufficient knowledge and such engineers would continue such unethical practices throughout their career, affecting many clients and in turn harming ecology and economy of the country due to inefficient or excess use of materials and other resources.

Example 2

A teacher in higher education employed in an engineering education institute who has not mastered some difficult concepts and principles during his/her UG/PG studies will avoid teaching such courses, as s/he is weak and not thorough with such courses. Further, if such a

teacher happens to be part of autonomous education institute where the same teacher who teaches the course designs the question paper, then s/he will also not formulate questions from that portion of the course, which s/he has not taught. Therefore, the students of this teacher may pass the engineering examinations, but end up without learning the critical or important portions of that course or programme. When such teachers avoid teaching difficult and complex portions of the courses, then it is an **unethical** practice to the '*complex and vast body of knowledge*'. In other words, **incompetence** and **unethical** practice of a **teacher will result in incompetent engineers**.

Hence, if anyone decides to join the profession of teaching, s/he should again study in depth the courses, which s/he has to teach, even if s/he may not have been taught that well by his/her teachers. Therefore, it is an **ethical duty** of all teachers to master the knowledge of all the topics (**not just few**) and sub-topics of the courses of the curricula, which they are called upon to teach.

Further, it is the **ethical duty** of all professionals to also **correct the mistakes** if any, of their **predecessors**. When professionals during their practice, apply the knowledge learnt from books related to the profession into real life situations, they come across many doubts. To clear these doubts they need to re-visit/review the books, journals, work manuals, internet, or learn from some experienced senior teachers. Thus, mastery in the related field requires lifelong learning of not only new knowledge, but also developing in-depth understanding of the basics of the facts/concepts/principles/procedures and applications thereof.

ACTIVITY1

As a sincere professional, make a list of the areas where you need to undertake mastery-learning, actions you will take and in how much time to achieve the mastery and post it in the E-portfolio.

3.0 EXCEL IN CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE

Some professionals who have completed their formal education sincerely and scored good marks in UG and PG programmes may think that they know everything well. Based on this assumption they neither read any journal, nor engage in research, with the result that their knowledge becomes obsolete within a few years. In this era of knowledge explosion, new knowledge is being created very fast in most of the disciplines and professionals who do not continuously update their knowledge may soon find their knowledge is becoming obsolete/outdated and they themselves are becoming unfit to remain in the profession. It will be unethical for them to continue to work in the system, because they may take some wrong decisions, which may be harmful for their clients.

Therefore, it is the **ethical duty** of every professional to **continue to learn** in his/her **entire lifetime** about the developments taking place in his/her field of specialisation or domain

area not only in their country, but also, throughout the world. Hence, you need to keep your 'eyes and ears open' by regularly and periodically listening to expert talks, taking part in conferences/webinars, visiting the websites, working in that particular area and also reading reputed journals being published related to your domain area. You should not stop there. It is your ethical duty as a professional to also contribute to the **creation of new knowledge** by engaging yourself in small and big researches. The following two examples will throw more light on this.

Example 3

A professor of higher education, who is not engaged in creating and learning new knowledge, is asked to be a member of curriculum revision committee. If that professor does not know the advances that have taken place in his/her domain area, how can s/he design a state-of-the-art curriculum? More specifically, if the curriculum has been designed and developed by some eminent professors from reputed institutes, then it may contain the latest developments taking place in that branch of engineering. In such cases, the teachers who have not updated themselves will find it difficult to teach the new subject matter included in the revised curriculum, which is an **unethical practice**. This will *adversely affect the students*, as they will miss the learning of the newly introduced curricular topics/sub T topics.

Example 4

The philosophy of the curriculum provided the direction to the design of the question papers. However, if the answer sheets of the students are sent for assessment to the professors who have not yet updated themselves in that area, how can such professors assess the answer sheets and grade them correctly. In such situations, they give good grades/marks to all students, irrespective of the correct answers. In such situations, students who have learnt the new subject matter through hard work would be disadvantaged as compared to students who have not answered correctly the questions related to the new subject matter.

Therefore, ***if you do not acquire new knowledge, then it is an unethical practice***. In some good universities, teachers have to *maintain portfolios* of their work and training experiences to prove that they have continually kept abreast about the new technologies/new methods and such others as an evidence. Based on such portfolios the teachers' contracts are renewed for further terms/periods.

4.0 EXCEL IN DEALING WITH HIGH-STAKE ACTIVITIES

Since professionals deal with the high-stake activities, it is imperative for them to be successful. If they are not successful, then it may affect the life and career of many people adversely. It goes without saying, that for being successful, professionals should have the ability to understand the context of every case, diagnose the problem, identify the most

suitable solution and apply/execute it effectively and efficiently according to the context of the problem to get the desired outcome. This **ability to work successfully across a full range** and different types **of activities is professional excellence**. In other words, if professionals do not develop excellence, then they are liable to take some wrong decisions in these high stake activities with which they are associated with, which may adversely affect the society on a large scale on several counts. Therefore, **it** is not a matter of personal choice **for professionals to excel, but it is mandatory** for them to excel is **their ethical responsibility**. This issue is discussed further in lesson 5, which is related to social responsibility of the professionals.

ACTIVITY 2

As a sincere professional teacher in a higher educational system, make a list of the following and post it in the E-portfolio:

1. New knowledge that you have acquired.
2. Mode through which you have acquired above knowledge.
3. State the year(s) in which the new knowledge was acquired.
4. State the year(s) in which the new knowledge was created.

5.0 EXCEL IN BUILDING TRUST WITH CLIENTS

As mentioned in Lesson 1, the services provided by professionals are so complex and specialized that it is difficult for a common man to judge the quality of service rendered to him/her. The following example can throw further light.

Example 5

A student does not know the type of courses that should form part of a state-of-the-art curriculum and the topics and sub-topics in each course and the proper methods of teaching and assessment of the course. In this situation, students **trust** the university/institute and its teachers with the hope that they will do their best to enhance their employability. This situation puts more responsibility on the shoulders of the professional teacher to continue to update their knowledge, which means that professionals need to be experts in their work so that they provide the best services.

If the professionals do not provide the best services, then it may affect the life and the career prospects of their students (or clients). In such cases, the students (or clients) come to know about the damage to their quite late, after some years have passed. This will result in same type of anger, as when some close relative of yours whom you fully trust, has cheated you. Hence, **professional excellence is an essential condition** rather than a desired or optional condition for professionals **for maintaining the trust bestowed or reposed in them by their clients**.

Now the above-mentioned condition raises a question as to how can an individual professional always provide excellent services. The solution to this problem is that, all professionals should strive to develop excellence in all the aspects of their professions. However, if some professionals are not able to develop themselves in all the aspects of their profession, then they should be ethically ready to accept that they are not excellent enough in that particular aspect and should ask clients to take the help or services from some other professionals who are better than them in that particular aspect of consultancy.

Example 6

The principal of an engineering institute asks a professor of Electrical Engineering, who teaches ‘*Electric Power Generation*’ to develop a curriculum urgently for a course on ‘*Renewable Energy Power Generation*’ with greater focus on wind and solar technologies. The updated curriculum has to be submitted to the University within a week. Although the professor has an expertise in teaching ‘*Electric Power Generation*’ and done research in the area of Thermal, Nuclear and Hydro Power Plants, he does not have in-depth knowledge in wind and solar power technologies. The ethical question is what should be the stand taken by this professor. He can enrich his credentials/resume for further promotion prospects if he re-designs this curriculum for the University. If this professor accepts the above-mentioned task, then s/he may re-design the curriculum in a week’s time after undertaking some superficial study of the renewable energy sources even though s/he does not possess in-depth knowledge of all the aspects of wind and solar technologies. Undertaking such a kind of task is **unethical** as s/he will not be able to design a good curriculum. This will lead to inadequate and incomplete learning for thousands of students and affect their career and life in the years to come. Therefore, in this situation he should withdraw from this prestigious task and if possible should suggest the name of some other professor who is an expert in renewable energy.

In the long term, such a situation will result in the erosion of the ***trust bestowed by society on higher education teachers*** (who are professionals). This may be considered as an example of *unethical practice with far reaching consequences affecting the students and graduates and the development of the country at large*. Therefore, if some professionals are not having excellence in one particular area, then they should refrain from taking tasks related to that area independently, till they develop some expertise in that area by studying or working with some other experts. Nevertheless, ***professional excellence is an essential requirement*** for working *in the profession with dignity* and *lack of professional excellence may lead to breach of trust*. Hence, excellence in all aspects of the profession related to your area of expertise must be maintained at all costs.

6.0 EXCEL IN SELF-REGULATION

The professionals are generally at the top rung of their profession (seen in Lesson 1). The power relations and equations are such that their subordinates dare not point out their

mistakes. Similarly, the nature of work of professionals is so complex that, it is difficult for their clients to detect their mistakes. In this situation, it becomes imperative for the professionals to **self-regulate** themselves. In this context, the professional societies have a great role to play which is discussed in Lesson 14. However, for managing the professional societies the leaders in that profession are required to identify the mistakes committed in complex situations by their fellow professionals and give honest and constructive feedback to them. For *becoming such leaders*, **professional excellence and conduct** is essential. Therefore, professional excellence is a necessary condition also for self-regulation.

7.0 GUIDELINES TO ACHIEVE THE PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE

Donald Schon, the MIT professor suggested that normally education systems produce only competent professionals, i.e. professionals who can work only in the routine situations and can solve the known type of problems. In other words, no education system can produce expert professionals but, it is the long-term experience that can develop expert professionals. Schon (1984) continues to say that the theoretical knowledge given in the books is normally of general nature and when that knowledge is to be applied in real life complex situations, then knowledge has to be applied differently according to differences in the contexts. The expertise lies in understanding the subtle differences of the different contexts and applying the knowledge according to these subtle differences. To develop this expertise, the professionals have to ponder over their experiences reflectively and learn from that.

You call some professionals as experts in their field as they are able to solve the complex problems. The experts are able to analyse the complex problem to arrive at the basic cause of it, and then search the proper solution from the available options. Such professionals are known as experts because they are able to choose the right solution from the repertoire of the possible options available to them.

However, the key question is how can the professionals acquire such level of expertise or possess that exhaustive repertoire of solutions? The answer to this question lies in the origin of the word 'expertise'. The origin of word 'expertise' is in the word 'experience'. In other words, only experience can convert an ordinary professional into an expert. However, some professionals are not able to become expert even after 20 or even 30 years of experience. This means that experience alone is not enough for transforming an ordinary professional into an expert, but the capability to learn-to-learn from the experiences is necessary. Such learning from experiences in turn requires, continuous and reflective thinking about those experiences.

Experts are those individuals who have the habit of reflecting on their experiences. These professionals when they face a new type of problems and try to solve it by applying one of

the possible solutions. After the problem is solved, they ask some questions to themselves such as:

- a) Whether they could solve the problem as expected? If not,
- b) What could be possible reasons? Even if they could solve the problem
- c) Whether they could solve it in an efficient manner? If not,
- d) What other alternative solution could they have tried? and so on.

These professionals thus, should continue to learn on their own and that of others experiences, by reflecting on those experiences and make their own rules for solving different problems.

When teachers give feedback to students based on their performance, this feedback does not only depend on expected level of performance of the student, but also, on the existing knowledge level of the student. The following example illustrates this aspect still further.

Example 7

Consider a case of a student who normally gets 'C' grade in most of his/her assignments and this student once again gets 'C' in the current assignment. Now the issue is what type of feedback the teacher should give this student. Suppose, in a particular case of student assignment, the student is expected to write 10 important features of a process. Out of these, 5 features are easy to explain, and the remaining 5 features are relatively difficult. Normally and ideally, a teacher should try to bring every student to 'A' level. However, to expect a student, who has consistently scored 'C', to suddenly jump to score 'A' level would be expecting too much in one go. If the teacher informs the student how to incorporate all the 10 features into his/her assignment to make it to 'A' level, then student may get overstressed and may abandon all the efforts to improve the grades. In such cases an expert teacher will help the student to attain only the first 5 relatively easy features so that s/he can first incorporate those features into his/her assignment to make it 'B' grade level without getting over-stressed. After the student starts scoring 'B' grade in the assignments, s/he may be given feedback on the remaining 5 complex features to bring his/her assignments up to 'A' level.

Similarly, the theoretical knowledge given in books on education, suggests that, while giving feedback about shortcomings in the students' assignments, it should be given in an encouraging and positive way. However, this guideline cannot be applied in case of all the students. Some students are so insensitive or thick skinned that if feedback for improvement is given in positive and encouraging words, they may take it as appreciation and may ignore the message hidden in it for improvement. The expert teacher knows that such students need to be given feedback in clear and direct language that they are having these shortcomings and they urgently need to improve upon these shortcomings else they may suffer

drastically. Thus, an expert teacher will be able to bring the required changes in the students by teaching and dealing with different students differently according to their characteristics while inexperienced teachers will not be able to bring the desired change in the students because they will treat all the students in the same manner.

Thus, an expert professional has the capability to understand the situation and apply the solution according to the context. To develop this ability, they have to deal with different types of cases and learn to solve the cases in an efficiently and effectively. By assessing the self-performance in each case, you can find out what went well, and what did not, what could have been better, what s/he should try, even if s/he has to face a similar case in future, and so on. Thus, *reflecting on different types of professional experiences as possible and meditating on them to learn from mistakes/shortfalls is the only way upward for becoming an expert professional from a level of competent professional.*

ACTIVITY 3

Prepare a table with three columns. In the first column, list the different experiences related to the 5 characteristics of a professional. In the second column, specify the mistakes/shortfalls. In the third column mentions the ways and means to overcome the mistakes/shortfalls.

8.0 SUMMARY

From the discussions in this lesson, it is obvious that professional excellence is not an option but it is mandatory and essential for professionals to excel in their field and practice ethically. If a professional is not able to excel, then his/her performance is affected and s/he may be tempted to engage in unethical behaviour. Professional excellence requires lifelong learning, which can be formal, non-formal or informal. Professionals continue to study throughout their professional lives by updating the developments in their domain area by reading reputed journals, presenting papers in conferences, participating in webinars/face-to-face discussions, conferences or by attending some short-term training programmes related to their domain area. Professionals should also learn informally from their experiences by reflecting upon them. Only by continual learning through different means throughout his/her professional life, can a professional move towards excellence to be transformed from a 'competent' person to an 'expert'. ***Hence, to ensure ethical behaviour in professionals, there is no other alternative solution, but to excel in all the five characteristics.***

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DISCUSSION FORUM

- Start a discussion on the 'social media' on some issues involving professional excellence

ASSIGNMENT

Develop a plan to organise a one-day seminar on professional excellence.