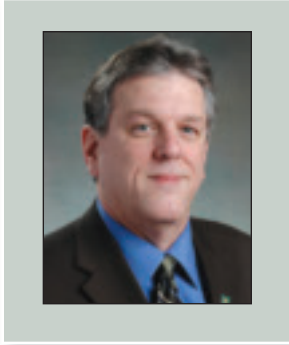


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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What Is Professionalism?

As we begin another new year, I thought it appropriate to take a look at ourselves as individuals and think through how we think of ourselves and our chosen careers. The crux of the issue is, do we go to work each day feeling like professional environmental health practitioners, or are we just showing up for a “job?” It’s an important question, and one that the present economic recession complicates. Many of us in the public sector of employment have been working under stressful conditions. Layoffs, pay cuts, furlough days, and picking up the slack for vacant positions purposely left unfilled have had a devastating effect on employees’ feelings of engagement in their organizations. During these tough times, managers and supervisors have needed to acknowledge performance challenges that may be an outcome of “recession blues.” It’s usually not just about the money. It’s wondering if we’re ever going to get back to “normal” again or if we will face a new “normal” that is not to our liking.

In any case, the values we carry on throughout our careers as environmental health practitioners must weather the current situation for the very survival of our profession. Professionalism is, at least in my humble opinion as it applies to the field of environmental health, being a member of a chosen vocation founded upon specialized educational training. Recall that Edwin Chadwick, the English father of environmental health, made that very argument in the mid-19th century. It follows, then, that the word “professional” means a person who has obtained a degree in

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a professional field. The term “professional” is used more generally to denote a white-collar, highly educated, salaried, working person who enjoys considerable autonomy in a professional work environment. This is someone who is often engaged in creative and intellectually challenging work, be it public, private, or academia.

The reason I wanted to write about this particular issue is that it has been weighing heavily on my mind in recent weeks. It came to a head for me late last summer when the leadership of our affiliate here in Ohio was struggling with whether to cancel their April meeting and combine with the NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in June or go their own way, given that both conferences would basically draw from the same attendee pool in the state. The

statewide membership was polled via Survey Monkey and it was pretty evenly split on what to do. In the end, the OEHA leadership decided to go ahead with their statewide event two months before the NEHA AEC & Exhibition. The deciding factor seemed to be that the NEHA conference was being held over a weekend—Father’s Day weekend at that—and it was argued some Ohio environmental health practitioners would choose not to attend if NEHA’s main conference days were over a weekend.

What’s more, it was noted that sanitarians are unionized in quite a few jurisdictions in Ohio, and for them to attend on a Saturday under the terms of their collective bargaining agreements their employers would be required to pay them time-and-a-half. Sunday attendance would cause them to be paid double-time for the day. This would be on top of the employer paying for the registration, travel, and lodging. I couldn’t believe my ears; to me, that took the cake! I have always viewed my involvement in both state and national professional organizations to be a privilege and a way to enhance my career, by being exposed to great presentations on the emerging issues in our profession and by being able to meet and network with like-minded colleagues in environmental health from across the nation. If I had the opportunity to attend a national conference, particularly one in which my employer was paying for my expenses, I wouldn’t even consider asking for overtime! But hey, that’s me, and I’m on the downward side of my career timeline—a baby boomer.

In Executive Director Nelson Fabian's October *JEH* column, he discussed his view of the members of Gen Y and how they look at work in general. The main theme was "Gen Yers" believe a definite separation exists between "work life" and "personal life." He also talked about how Diane Evans, NEHA and International Federation of Environmental Health (IFEH) past president, a baby boomer herself, discussed in her remarks at the IFEH Congress in Vancouver how her work connections had led her to new friends and generally enriched her life. After reading his column and doing some further research on my own, I came to the conclusion that there are multiple variables in how environmental health practitioners define professionalism; union membership and assigned generation are just two mentioned here. I would suggest a third: one's perspective of the environmental health field before they enter it, and in most cases that means their perspective as an undergraduate.

First, let's look at the generational viewpoint. The baby boom generation is the generation that was born following World War II, from about 1946 up to approximately 1964, a time that was marked by an increase in birth rate due to veterans returning from war and starting families. The baby boom has been described as "the pig in the python" by the sheer force of its numbers as it passed through the time line. In the end, the baby boomer generation has been associated with the continuity of values from older generations.

In between the baby boomers and Gen Y we have Generation X, a smaller generation with birthdays falling between 1964 and 1981. Their work ethic has been described as different from their predecessors primarily in that they possess diminished loyalty to an employer per se, but strong loyalty to the work group and direct supervisor. Instead of complaining about management like a baby boomer, a "Gen Xer" will just send out résumés and move on. Work life is still very important to this group and they take great pride in their work.

That brings me to Generation Y, also known as the millennial generation, and we track them from 1982 to 2001. The "Gen Yers" are young and smart—and they'll tell you so. They have been around computers since before they could walk and have been so challenged with various activities while

growing up that they're high maintenance and high performers. They like work as long as they can dress casually but the difference is, as Nelson pointed out, they don't want work to be their life. We have a workforce like never before, encompassing all three generations, with Generation Z waiting to make an appearance. Common ground needs to be found among these generations so that professionalism means the same to the greatest extent possible, even if the work ethic is different from age group to age group.

Second, we have the presence of unions. Throughout my career I have never been a union member. While working as a field sanitarian, my agency was not unionized. My current place of employment has a union shop and has had one for decades. My adjustment as a manager was considerable. As I researched this topic, one web page led to another, and it soon dawned on me that the environmental health profession is certainly not the only one grappling with the issue. For example, engineers, pharmacists, and social workers in both private and public sectors have been wrestling with "professionalism vs. unionism" for years. What's more, national union membership, once huge only in the industrial workforce, has made steady gains in the governmental sector over the last several decades.

Understandably, a huge amount of material on the subject is available. Basically it boils down to major differences between the goals and purposes of unions and those of professional organizations. Not that they are at cross-purposes or adversarial; they are just different. Collective bargaining is mostly an economic endeavor and professionalism is more about the promotion of a vocation and maintaining its standards. Of course the nuts and bolts of the issue are far too complex to delve into here. Going back to my discussion about the OEHA conference, my point is that I was shocked that anyone would expect an employer to foot conference expenses and pay an employee overtime to attend a conference that benefits that employee's professional development. It's clear to me after pondering this issue for some time that those of us in environmental health management need to do more to help bridge that gap between environmental health practitioners who are unionized and NEHA, our national professional organiza-

tion. I believe that can start in the workplace by encouraging union members on our staffs to help them advance their feeling of belonging and commitment to the profession. An explanation of the purpose of unions and professional organizations and their separate tracks for achieving their goals is paramount to that understanding. There is no need for any polarization between the two and I do believe a professional environmental health practitioner can embrace his or her profession and collective bargaining concurrently.

Finally, the third variable that I think contributes in no small way to how we view our own profession is where we were when we first became aware of environmental health. An undergraduate in an accredited environmental health program is naturally going to be exposed to far more elements of the profession than someone who comes into the profession from another discipline. As the EH undergraduate incrementally experiences the aforementioned "specialized educational training," the student takes in the feeling of belonging to our profession readily. Those coming into our profession from other educational routes certainly will embrace the profession as well, but it might take a bit of time. Beginning with their orientation, those new environmental health practitioners who come from other educational backgrounds should be exposed to the universe of the environmental health profession. They should gain an understanding about just how diverse our field is and how many different areas are included in environmental health. An understanding of our history and how environmental health evolved into a profession is also important to that feeling of belonging.

I believe all three elements factor into how we feel about the profession we have chosen to be our life's work. Once we come to terms with those elements and identify how one, a combination of two, or all three may affect our outlook on what we do every day, it becomes easier to understand why we may feel the way we do. In any case, I'm glad I wake up in the morning, get ready, put on a tie, eat a little breakfast, and commute to work, where I serve, along with my colleagues, as an environmental health professional! 🐼

