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Enhancing Your Credibility as a Professional: Things to Do - Things to Avoid

Aaron W. Hughey
Western Kentucky University, aaron.hughey@wku.edu

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Credibility refers to the objective and subjective components of the believability of a source or message. Traditionally, modern, credibility has two key components: trustworthiness and expertise, which both have objective and subjective components. Trustworthiness is based more on subjective factors, but can include objective measurements such as established reliability. Expertise can be similarly subjectively perceived, but also includes relatively objective characteristics of the source or message (e.g., credentials, certification or information quality). Secondary components of credibility include source dynamism (charisma) and physical attractiveness.

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By Aaron W. Hughey, EdD

This article is based on a presentation I have made at several meetings and conferences. In every case, the material seemed to resonate with those in the audience – especially the new and soon-to-be new professionals.

One of the most important assets you have is your credibility. Whether or not you have this vital quality determines, more than any other single factor, how successful you will be in your career.

On a fundamental level, credibility is related to how well you have the following three bases covered: technical competence, human relations proficiency, and attitude; i.e., the desire to use your technical competence and human relations proficiency to affect positive change. You must have all three bases covered to be truly successful in life.

Moreover, you have to master the following three skills. First you must know yourself. Second you must understand how you come across to others. These can be two different things. Finally,

you must be able to read other people. This comes naturally to some; others have to work at it. Regardless, you credibility is innately tied to how well you can do these three things.

Professionals Who Lack Credibility

In order to understand how credibility affects your career, let's start by considering a few professionals who don't' tend to be seen as credible by their colleagues:

Professionals who don't care about students. Caring is not a professional obligation; it should be a necessary prerequisite for entry into student affairs. If you don't genuinely care about students, you need to find something else to do in life.

Professionals who are always too busy to help students. It is pretty much a given that we have a lot to do – and having a "9-to-5" job is something we have all fantasized about from time-to-time. But we should never be so preoccupied that it prevents us from being there for our students.

Professionals who criticize more than they praise. We all have room for improvement – and most of us are acutely aware of our shortcomings. The quickest way to kill morale is to be adept at pointing out deficiencies while never acknowledging strengths.

Professionals who don't understand basic budgeting. If you are really good at programming, but don't know how to manage the associated finances, you are a train wreck (or a lawsuit) waiting to happen. Learn how to deal with money.

Professionals who refer to their co-workers as "family." The people you work with are not your family members and referring to them as such only demeans the relationships you have with your real family. When was the last time you had to fire your sister for performance issues?

Professionals who confuse documentation with accomplishment. Any time I am forced to spend convincing you that I am doing great things is less time I have to actually do great things. My competence will become self-evident over time – sometimes painfully so.

Professionals who have an aversion to technology. I'm sure when the wheel was invented, there were folks who said, "I know it's easier, but we lost something when we stopped carrying these big rocks on our backs." Yes, we did. Thank Goodness.

Professionals who don't want to engage students through social media. We increasingly live in an information-saturated world; our students understand this in a way we sometimes struggle to grasp. Facebook is not a fad — learn to deal with it.

Professionals who are more concerned about standardization than customization. We live in a fairly diverse world. Our students have increasingly unique needs – needs that cannot be met by applying a 'cookie-cutter' mentality and approach to everyone.

Professionals who are enamored by their own intellect. You're smart; we get that. But could you please stop making our staff meetings insufferable by going on and on about your "perspective"?   If you like hearing the sound of your own voice that much, buy a karaoke machine.

Professionals Who Have Credibility

On the flip side, there are a few professionals who do have considerable credibility with their subordinates, peers and supervisors; these include:

Professionals who are themselves. You want to show what you have to offer, but you need to be honest, human and not just present an image. It is better to be hated for what you are than loved for what you are not.

Professionals who are true to themselves. Don't compromise your values or sell out. If you can't be yourself where you are, find someplace where you can. In the long run, no one benefits if you are just trying to please the folks you work for.

Professionals who are proactive. Don't act only after inaction is no longer an option or wait for the circumstances to evolve in your favor. The world needs movers and shakers not sitters and waiters.

Professionals who cultivate self-awareness and set goals. Know yourself intimately. Determine what is important and proceed from there. Your every action should have a sense of purpose.

Professionals who value innovation and creativity. Newsflash: This means always being open to change and alternative ways of doing things. There are a lot of people in the profession who claim to like innovation and change while simultaneously resisting any effort to move in a new direction.

Professionals who listen carefully. When you are given an assignment, make sure you understand exactly what is expected of you and how much leeway you have. It is your responsibility to seek clarification if you don't understand what you have been asked to do.

Professionals who are knowledgeable. At the heart of credibility is knowing what you're doing. Do your homework; figure it out. You must be able to do the job you have been hired to do. You can't fake it.

Professionals who network. You don't have to have all the answers – but you need to know who does. Work on creating an extensive network of contacts, both in your field and in unrelated fields. This is extremely important.

Professionals who are problem solvers. Be someone who looks at everything from multiple angles and at multiple levels. Always have a Plan B. And a Plan C. And a Plan D… Thrive on the challenge.

Professionals who keep an open mind. Narrow-mindedness will quickly cause you to lose the respect of other people. You need to keep an open mind toward everyone. You must also keep an open mind to new opportunities, skills and ways of doing things.

Professionals who communicate effectively. Work to continually improve your communication at all levels and with all individuals. If your job requires public speaking, become the best in the world at it.

Above all, keep in mind that people are more important than policies, and relationships are more important than rules, because customization is more important than conformity and individuals are more important than institutions. The private sector figured this out years ago; higher education needs to catch up.

At the beginning of each semester, I provide my students with a small poster that explains the three rules I have for my classroom: 1) Think for yourself, 2) Speak your truth, and 3) Live out loud. I truly believe that if you adhere to these rules, you will have credibility.

More important, this will not be your epithet at the end of a long and undistinguished career:

"She coulda done some really cool stuff, but her boss wouldn't let her."

Life is short. Credibility is important. Think about it.

Dr. Hughey is a professor and program coordinator for the master's degree program in student affairs in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.

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