



# **‘Unprofessional Professionals’: Is it Just an Oxymoron or a Fact in the Sri Lankan Context?**

**By Shashithanganee Weerawansa**

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**T**he Merriam-Webster dictionary defines professionalism as "the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterise or mark a profession or a professional person"; and it defines a profession as "a calling requiring specialised knowledge, and often long and intensive academic preparation." These definitions imply that professionalism encompasses several different attributes, and, together, these attributes identify and define a professional. These attributes mainly include specialised knowledge, competency, honesty and integrity, respect, accountability, self-regulation, and image, together with some personality traits such as being kind and polite to others, being punctual, and dressing appropriately. It is highly inappropriate to call someone a "professional" only depending on a degree certificate or any other paper qualification if the person doesn't show any professionalism in his/her conduct. Sri Lanka today suffers from a serious and severe issue of 'unprofessional professionals.' The term is an oxymoron that may even look controversial, yet it is a salient fact in the Sri Lankan society. 'Unprofessional professionals', as someone can call them, are everywhere in Sri Lanka.

### **Professionalism and Sri Lanka's Professional Landscape**

Sri Lankans, unfortunately, are reminded of this oxymoron on a daily basis when they encounter doctors, nurses, engineers, architects, lawyers, bankers, journalists, teachers/professors, actors, bureaucrats, law enforcement officers, politicians, parliamentarians, and a long list of other people all the way from custodians and garbage collectors to CEOs of big corporations. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the lack of professionalism is amply visible in the entire professional landscape of Sri Lanka.

There are literally thousands of scholarly articles written and webinars and training workshops conducted on professionalism all over the world. It has also been a widely discussed topic among 'professionals', scholars, academics, industry experts and management consultants over the years. Even though we cherish the word professionalism and passionately use it to call ourselves professionals, how many of us actually live up to the meaning of professionalism in the real world? The trigger to write on this topic is purely based on my personal experience through 'close encounters of professional kind' with people in

different types of professions who do not live up to the expectations of the definition of the word 'professional'.

### **Professionalism - What the Cambridge Dictionary Says**

Professionalism is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as "The combination of all the qualities that are connected with trained and skilled people" or "All the qualities that are connected with professionals". One can even refine this definition to say "All the field-specific qualities that are connected with professionals in a particular field". Professionalism has to do with the way a person conducts himself or herself in the workplace. Literature indicates that professionalism is the total package encompassing how you think, look, and act on the job. Out of all the attributes one should master to be a professional, soft skills take precedence for many occupations. Personality traits, personal qualities, and love for humanity would lead to better interactions where you automatically develop soft skills. However, these skills cannot be quantified, but a lack of such skills could lead to confusion, chaos, and commotion in standard operations.

## Misfits in the Public Sector

Sri Lankans have been making allegations of a lack of professionalism in the government sector employees, mainly due to the recruitment of unqualified, unfitting, incompetent, incompatible, or unsuitable personnel for certain positions in the public sector, mainly since independence. These positions are not confined to higher levels but at lower tiers as well, as a result of unholy manipulations. It is unnecessary to elaborate on the hardships the public has to go through when getting any work done through some of the government institutions, and agencies. Some old-timers even say that it would have been better if the British people governed the country since the state sector was functioning properly according to the rule of law. A lack of professionalism leads to low productivity and accountability for the work they perform. The media has been reporting the negative consequences of the unprofessional public sector highlighting many aspects of probable causes, such as recruitment, selection, training, motivation, performance appraisal, unionisation, health and safety, customer care etc. The effects of such an unprofessional state sector have a huge toll on the general public, having to face enormous amount of frustration and losses since it is not just the services, they need to have access to in their daily struggles but also in the process of policy making and implementing.

## Unprofessionalism in the Private Sector

Even though people are quite accustomed to the inefficiencies and unprofessionalism in the public sector, the private sector in Sri Lanka is no exception. Unprofessionalism and unethical practises have skyrocketed in the private sector also in the recent past, and such acts need to be rectified imme-

diately since the private sector is considered as the engine of the country's economic growth.

People have high expectations for the private sector in how they carry themselves, their attitudes, and the way they communicate with others. Being professional can ensure a positive first impression, successful interpersonal relationships, and a lasting reputation within the organisation and industry. More than any of these factors, professionals are expected to maintain honesty and integrity of the highest order.

We seek the professional services of doctors, architects, engineers, lecturers, lawyers, etc., with the sincerest belief that they would do justice to the service provided by them, especially with the competency they have acquired through learning and training they have gone through while preparing for the profession. Yet, many wonder if they receive the services they expect and value for the money they pay to have access to such services, especially when it comes to being provided with correct information and being treated with respect and showing a genuine commitment.

Some of these 'professionals' may give the impression of having the said qualities before the agreement is made, even though in the actual process of working with them, customers are treated as specks of dust. This can be exemplified by not being punctual and not valuing the customers' time, not returning the calls, not responding to emails, not clarifying the doubts and concerns of customers, etc.

## Clients' Reactions

Due to such behaviour, there is a good chance that the client will not return to the same person, institute, or the service provider unless it is a monop-

oly where the client has no alternative but to be satisfied with the standards dictated by the monopoly. When all the service providers behave the same way the client is forced to accept the unprofessional support available in the market as there is no difference between the services, except for the higher expenditure to gain professional services, which goes to waste. When there is no competence to perform the designated professional task, and the attitudes related to being and acting as a professional, the quality of goods and services can be at a lower level, leading to low competitiveness.

## The Need for Socially Responsible Professionalism

The lack of professionalism in organisations means a decline in professional control, discretion, and autonomy, which is perceived as resulting from managerial and bureaucratic control through rules and standards where socially responsible professionalism may be undermined by regulatory, fiscal, technological, political, and emotional incentive systems.

For example, when professionals are employed in hierarchical organisations, their responsibilities may be restricted to being loyal to the culture and other prescriptions of the workplace. In that sense, bureaucratic, organisational, and managerial control appear to be adversarial to professionalism.

## The Need of the Hour - To Create a Productive and Performing Individuals

Although Sri Lanka is in economic turmoil at this point in time, the development goals must be in the cards, and plans must go on, perhaps for an extended time frame. Therefore, the country must address this enormous

deficit in professionalism if it hopes to become a high-income country sooner or later. It is one thing to have skilled labour; it is quite another to have professional labour. Efforts must be made continuously to create productive and performing individuals as professionals both in the public and private sectors.

Professionalism should be considered as a core value of the nation's workforce, particularly in these troubled times. Professionalism is not merely a concept, idea, or skill that can only be learned in a classroom. It is a behavioural expression that is motivated by a number of deeply held convictions and in-depth knowledge, producing observable behavioural features through responsible action and successful professional outcomes.

### **The Reasons for Such a State of Affairs**

A key reason for the lack of a sense of professionalism is attributed to the educational system in Sri Lanka, where the focus is predominantly given to classroom education leading to an examination-centered culmination. Starting from kindergarten or year one until they complete university education, student focus is centred on examinations rather than skills development or personal development. Most often, students have no time to provide attention to ethics, etiquette, or other relevant soft skills. Therefore, once they enter into their professional careers, they do not realise the importance of a wholistic professional approach towards their duties. They are often conscious of only subject-related matters when providing service to the public. Without training in public relations or service excellence, these so-called professionals fail to impress those who come to receive services from them. Basically, they are ignorant of the needs of the receiver or the

discomfort they will undergo due to a lack of professionalism.

When analysing the subject, several reasons were discovered for the unethical approach of the professionals. A lack of drive is one of them. These people frequently have very little enthusiasm to complete their work. They don't approach their work with a sense of responsibility and pride or enthusiasm. They do not connect effort to accomplishment, rewards, recognition, etc. For them, working is merely a chore, a requirement, and a sort of forced-compulsion on them. The lack of emotional engagement reduces their effort to a mechanical approach.

### **Responsibility and Accountability are Not Values in Their Systems**

Also, another reason for an impulsive and improper approach to work is the absence of dedication. A direct result of that would be a lack of professionalism. This kind of worker is not devoted to the tasks assigned. They treat the task as a routine through which they earn their living. They are less likely to carry out their respective duties with the best effort, and do not believe in higher standards or quality of the tasks. They do not have any idea about the self-satisfaction that can be achieved by being a true professional. Unprofessional professionals also completely ignore responsibility and accountability. In Sri Lanka, most often, it is evident that the tasks carried out by professional staff are done in the manner that is most convenient to them.

For example, the medical officers, except for a few, visibly provide service without any true concern about their patients' fears and anxieties. Even in private hospitals, a vast majority of them habitually start consultations

much later than the times given to the patients, completely ignoring the inconveniences to patients and their families. Even after waiting for hours passing the scheduled time the doctor wouldn't take more than two minutes to listen to the patient and often the prescription is also written without even making eye contact with the patient. Such examples can be given in almost all sectors of the public service and in some of the private institutions as well.

### **Professionals should have Their Allegiance Primarily to Professionalism**

Most people today recognise the importance of professionalism, particularly in public service, and the necessity for its neutrality, impartiality, integrity, and competence with the emergence of the contemporary state. The merit principle must serve as the cornerstone for all decisions involving public relations and human resources management. The process must start from selection and recruitment and run through performance evaluations and promotions to compensation and disciplinary measures, in order to foster professionalism. Additionally, Sri Lanka must attempt to encourage cultural shifts among its public employees by moving away from the idea of being a faceless bureaucrat who merely follows orders. Professionals should be encouraged to be more proactive and service-oriented, and the people who solicit their services should learn to demand value for the money they pay to receive such services, irrespective of their race, religion, social or economic status, language they speak, political affiliations or the family background.