

## PROFESSIONALISING THE PROJECT MANAGER – PART 1

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The idea of professionalising the project manager is not without contradiction or controversy. At the biennial gathering of project managers in Johannesburg during September 2010, Dr Paul Giammalvo of the ASEAN Project Manager's Centre of Excellence in Indonesia expressed the view that project management is not a profession, nor that it is likely to be recognised as one in the foreseeable future. His view is based on the research of Bill Zwerman and Janice Thomas of Athabasca University in Canada whose findings establish this fact. The research from his own PhD into the same matter corroborates this conclusion. Dr Ivor Blumenthal, CEO of the Services SETA in South Africa, however, holds a contrary view. He is emphatic that project management is mature enough to demand professional recognition in South Africa.

A review of the transcription of the debate between these two learned personalities would seem to indicate that there are valid arguments on both sides. Dr. Ivor Blumenthal's view will of course prevail, not so much on the merits of his argument but in terms of the provisions of the National Qualifications Framework Act (No. 67 of 2008) which requires the professionalization of all occupations in the service industry of South Africa. The Act was promulgated in January 2010.

At the debate, Dr. Blumenthal stated emphatically, that "...decentralised and unregulated trust in the individual is not the practice that has been chosen in this country. South Africa has elected and applies the principle of accountability." He continues: *"Our stance is this: Unless a body of practitioners is accountable either to an organisation or a network of organisations, regardless of whether it is PMSA, IPMA, APM or any other body, and unless the practitioners are accountable to these associations, we are not in a position to hold them morally accountable and more importantly accountable for their behaviour, not just their performance."*

So, here we are in the middle, practitioners caught between a rock and hard place! On the one side, we must contend with the views of learned academics who deny that the characteristics qualifying project management as a profession exist and, on the other side, we have a representative of a statutory body pressing forward with the requirement to regulate and license project managers. Whereas I do not believe it would be useful to fuel the

argument any further at this stage (this can be done in a later article), I do think that the topic presents a timeous opportunity to outline what it means to be a 'licensed' professional. On the basis of what I hope to say below, practitioners should decide whether they are ready to meet the requirements for professional status that are likely to be imposed on them in terms of the Act, and whether they would be willing to satisfy the obligations required of a professional designation.

Articles on whether project management is a profession appeared in the December 2009 edition of this magazine under the title "Are we for real" and in the March 2010 edition as a rejoinder under the same title. The first article was written by Taryn van Olden, CEO of Project Management South Africa and the second article was a collaborative effort between Dr Paul Giammalvo and Danelle Jones of the University of Melbourne in Australia. The matter was again the subject of a panel discussion in Stellenbosch on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2011; that is on the day before the commencement of GAPPS Working Session 21 hosted by the University of Stellenbosch Business School. The debate was not taken any further by the panel other than to agree that the National Qualifications Framework Act would make a positive contribution to the establishment of structures and mechanisms necessary for career path development within project management.

### **Professions, professionalism and the social contract**

Where should we start our inquiry? I think we should commence by stating that professions represent the highest level of competence in society. Entrance is usually preceded by a long period of education and training, and is often followed by a formal period of indenture. As such, professions are a career. They require a life-plan. The aim of the career is to attain experience, acquire proficiency and to gain personal recognition. Professions, therefore, must be pursued single-mindedly within the framework of stable institutions.

For professions to exist, however, there needs to be a social contract. The contract is adopted at the instance of society based on its long-standing history to use professions to deliver many of the complex services it requires. This route has been followed throughout the ages and is based on the understanding that the expertise necessary to practice certain vocations is not easily available, or even fully comprehensible, to the average citizen. The final contract with society, however, should remain flexible. This is necessary to permit its revision from time to time in a manner that recognizes material changes to the needs of society, the profession and the industry served.

The contract with society is based on a concept of professionalism. In this sense, professionalism serves as a bridge between the interests of society and the practice of the profession. It should be borne in mind that society seeks from the professional a particular outcome. The outcome, however, is often required to be achieved under very uncertain conditions. To achieve this end, therefore, society grants the profession a level of autonomy in order to permit it the right to exercise its discretion about the means, the instruments and the actions necessary to produce the result. The profession does so, although not without checks and balances, after taking into account the likely

consequences of the means, its alternatives, the costs and obvious and remote effects.

Professionalism thus is a cast of mind. It relates not only to working methods and quality standards but also to conduct and to traits of personal character. The concept is bound up in the meaning of the word 'profess'. The act of 'profession' is a public commitment to a set of values. A good example of the manner in which the word can be explained is by reference to the practice of the medical profession that requires its members to take the oath of Hippocrates. By the swearing of this oath, or its modern equivalent, medical practitioners acknowledge the importance of the knowledge and the skills that will be used to serve others and they promise to do no harm. It is on this basis that professions are frequently identified as being altruistic and value laden. Professions are unique in this way and, as such, should be immune to the infections of the need to maximise personal reward, ideology or fanaticism. Generally, they possess a dedication to truth, equity and service that cuts across political and cultural boundaries, even in times of civil unrest and war. The definition of professionalism and its associated obligations is thus explicit.

### **Entry into, and development of, the professions**

Professions must master several relevant bodies of theory. They do this as special forms of ability and judgement are required to be effective in the solution of practical problems. In this sense, professions are both a science and an art. The work they do must acquire a degree of precision and reliability so that practitioners merit the trust placed in them. Entry to the professions, therefore, needs to be controlled.

Universities and/or the professional schools, together with the assistance of leading members from the profession, determine admission requirements, design curricula, set graduation standards and monitor the progress of students. This can be done as a process of self-regulation or in terms of statute. The profession thus determines the selection criteria of the kinds of persons it will admit to its ranks and shapes them according to its purpose. It provides not only the knowledge and skills it declares to be necessary for competence but also the values and attitudes demanded by the focus of its service. The professional school is thus the primary socialising agency that initiates novices into the subculture of the profession. The negative side of the discretion that will be exercised by the professional school is that its decisions will determine who may and may not practice.

The complexity of professional knowledge, however, cannot merely be obtained during an initial period of education and training. It requires practical experience, post-secondary and, in some instances, post-baccalaureate education in colleges, institutes and universities. This additional education assists the practitioner not only to enhance his knowledge but also to make discretionary decisions in an increasingly complex and ever changing environment. To do so, often calls for the application of humane values and a cultivated sense of judgement. To sustain these qualities, the professional must live the life and mind of his profession throughout his career.

## **Regulation of the professions and fiduciary responsibility**

The responsibility for many professional activities falls on statutory bodies and professional associations. The function is regulatory in order to ensure the competence and quality of the service. The function, however, should not be seen as the goal or as the core of professionalism. It is merely a mechanism to ensure that a certain service standard is established and maintained.

A code of ethics is enforced. The code outlines an acceptable standard of conduct to which practitioners are required to adhere and its purpose is to protect society from general malpractice and faulty or negligent behaviour. In this regard, the practitioner's responsibility is fiduciary. This means that it is based on the law of trust deemed to exist between the trustee (the practitioner) and the beneficiary (society at large and/or the client). The responsibility is in the form of the practitioner's personal financial accountability for his or her actions. All failures, whether by act or omission, become the personal liability of the practitioner. The gravity of this responsibility places the practitioner's autonomy beyond the unreasonable demands of the employer.

In view of the voluntary nature of their membership, associations of professional practitioners tend to use collegiality to establish common goals and to encourage commitment to them. Statutory bodies requiring formal registration use legal sanction. Depending on the structures and mechanisms adopted, these institutions have varying obligations to discipline unprofessional and incompetent behaviour. The discipline usually follows an assessment of the infraction by peer review. These institutions serve an essential function and professionalism and public trust can only advance if they function properly; a matter which requires the support and participation of individual practitioners!

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