Maintaining Professionalism in a Social Media Era

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"In today's cyber-networked world, access to and participation in social media sites has become immensely popular" (Bezboruah & Dryburg, 2012, p. 469). Humans use social media for all aspects of life including entertainment, sharing, educating, promoting and gathering information to name a few. What exactly is meant by the term "Social Media?" It is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (as cited in Jacobson & Howle Tufts, p. 86, 2012). Social Media sites include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogging, YouTube, and Wiki have led to a strong social media era (Dubose, 2011). This extensive network of social media has grown exponentially in the last 10 years.

With the rapid growth and significant following that social media has gained from the public world-wide, it is easy to understand how this new digital technology would offer many great opportunities for professionals. Social media can have a place in every person's life both professionally and privately, yet it is imperative to understand the responsibilities that go with the use of these platforms of communication and that not all social media environments are safe (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

For a professional in any field, social media can offer many advantages in the form of communication and feedback gathering. Social media simplifies reaching out to large numbers of individuals at the mere click of a button. For professionals on the go, social media offers a method of sharing information and updates while away from the workplace. In a world that has embraced and evolved with the social media frenzy, it important for professionals from all walks of life to also evolve with this era and use its benefits in an ethical manner to help develop, promote and establish themselves with the times. Many corporations, businesses, schools, elected officials and leaders around the world use social media. This platform of communication

has vastly changed the way information is sent and delivered as a simplified technological wonder with countless benefits.

Now that it has been established that social media is a grand and wondrous format of communication that is utilized by millions of individuals every day, what about the responsibilities of the use of said media? Although there exist many benefits of social media there are also responsibilities that also go with the use of such a platform of communication. In the evolving realm of social media, it has been proven that irresponsibility can negatively affect leadership at all levels. Social media is a great tool that carries with it an unwritten code of conduct for professionals. Increased use of this technology, coupled with the simplicity of finding information online can blur personal and work identities, therefore, developing new requirements for professionalism in the social media era (Mostaghimi & Crotty, 2011). Humans enjoy interacting with one another and professionals depend on networking to aid in developing and expanding professional goals. Social media provides an easy way to accomplish both.

A leader who fails to communicate effectively with others will fail indefinitely, as the lines of communication should be open. Yet a good leader has an ethical responsibility to clients, employees, and/or friends. As a professional, it is important to understand the fine line between private and public posts and to consider the potential impact of their online content on their subordinates or the public (Greysen, Kind & Chretien, 2010). The similar way that professionals can use social media to gain support on an idea or policy is the same way a disgruntled employee or customer can rant or express disappointment. For a school administrator, this could mean negative feedback from a parent, student or the community.

A professional must also concede that what you post on social media supports any ideas or policies that you deem significant, especially since anyone can see them and determine if you really stand by your professional decisions and concepts. It would not be wise to post information that exhibits any behavior that could be misconstrued as counterproductive or against company policy. Furthermore, leaders must not post to social media what may damage the reputation of himself or herself or the agency. Like a mirror, social media can reflect the best and worst aspects of the content placed in cyberspace for all to see (Bagley, DiGiancinto, & Hargraves, 2014). This is an area that presents challenges in the naturally free-flowing world of social media (Elefant, 2011).

In recent years, the world has witnessed the rising number of employee terminations or suspensions that stem from social media posts. Employees who post negative comments about a company or a supervisor may find themselves dismissed from their responsibilities. Furthermore, things that are discussed at a workplace or professional setting must not be entertained on social media without company consent. As a professional, leaders are expected to convey themselves in a manner conducive to high moral and ethical standards. This means both within the walls of the workplace and the private home setting. While social media can offer a portal to valuable and entertaining information, leaders and professionals must use it responsibly, as they are held to a higher standard. The best professionals are those who make good decisions about how to utilize social media. It must be used as a tool rather than a platform for freedom of speech. A primary example of a professional utilizing social media as a platform for freedom of speech was the Wisconsin middle school teacher that placed a picture of herself with a firearm on her Facebook page. She was ultimately placed on administrative leave for this post when her administrators discovered the post (Papandrea, 2012).

Professionals such as educators have embraced the use of Internet as an alternative to traditional classroom instruction (Oblinger, 2004). Therefore, educators are taking greater risks in the area of online liability in an effort to evolve with the way that students share and receive information. Educators must be cognizant of the risks of using social media in the classroom and workplace (Dubose, 2011). Educators are almost always held to a higher standard of ethics because they work with children. The way students view teachers is quite different from the way that they interact with anyone else. Teachers are expected to be prime examples of morally and ethically disciplined individuals. Teachers and professionals need to ensure that their participation in social media does not run afoul of affiliate codes of conduct or other compliance issues (Elefant, 2011). Therefore, social media has brought about new potential hazards for professionals (Greysen et al., 2010). Similarly to other professionals, educators have also been terminated for negative or inappropriate posts to social media. Professionals must become familiar with company policies or regulations regarding expectations and use of social media within the work place and at home.

Another issue that presents possible pitfalls of using social media is personal accounts being hacked. Erroneous information can be added to a personal account and thereby misrepresenting the actual truth. These kinds of scenarios lead to embarrassing and often lengthy investigations, which can take up a lot of time and money. In order to avoid such instances, professionals must adhere to good leadership traits, expectations and judgment.

With all of the different areas of social media, it is easy to comprehend why so many professionals are a part of some sort of social media. Social media is everywhere and it is especially easy to engage in an ongoing discussion or to comment on an individual's post. This

makes it easy to like or comment on a status that could immediately tie an individual to

unrelenting and unwelcomed ridicule.

While many argue that personal opinions that are posted on social media are a form of

freedom of speech and protected by law, it is also argued that such laws are broad and outdated

and that the laws need to be adapted to a changing technology and culture (Fulmer, 2010). Many

companies have now implemented social media into their employee handbooks and have put into

writing the policies, expectations, and consequences of using this platform of communication.

These guidelines provide employers with the right to legally terminate employees for

inappropriate online behavior. What employers seek to achieve with this is nothing more than

protecting the reputation and the image of the company, agency, or school district.

Other potential hazardous posts include inappropriate pictures or inappropriate comments

or online relationships with other employees or underage individuals. The Internet is a

notoriously dangerous place to land in big trouble. It is difficult to verify all the information on

individuals and therefore it is quite normal to find underage kids posing as adults and vice-versa.

This can lead to a career changing experience including potential jail time. Furthermore, because

everyone can see what you post it is easy for a late night picture post to be construed as

inappropriate. As a professional it is imperative that you be aware of your surrounding and

backgrounds when taking and posting pictures. The newspapers and television newscasts have

been witness to employees and leaders from various walks of life landing in turmoil due to a

posting a picture at the wrong time or with the wrong person.

When you consider the risks, one might question if social media is worth the risk. The

reality is that social media is essential for a number of reasons. Social media gives an individual

an opportunity to develop his/her brand both inside and outside a company. Executives use social media as a means to engage employees and investors (Dutta, 2010). People like to be reminded that their superiors are also normal human beings and they feel a sense of respect for someone who offers a glimpse of their personal life, especially when that glimpse reaffirms the values and principles that the individual emulates in the workplace. This is what great leadership exemplifies.

What other potential leaders may not know is that many companies are now using social media background checks to aid in recruiting better employees and to avoid negligent hiring. This demonstrates the importance of responsible social media ethics. While employers can be scrutinized over this type of behavior as overstepping their boundaries with invading a potential employee's privacy, laws have been established that allow companies to perform this practice in a legal manner. Although a person may set their account to private, the employer can often times see general information about the individual that will provide valuable information for the employer. This general information may include things such as gender, age, religion, race, hobbies and education. Professionals need to remember that social media leaves "footprints" that may have unintended negative consequences (Greysen, et al., 2010). What is important is for leaders to be aware of their privacy settings and to ensure strong passwords and log in security.

The reality is that sitting in front of a computer or smart phone while on a social media site is like sitting on a podium in front of the entire world. Everything that is posted can be read and shared at the click of a button. Professionals need to demonstrate good moral judgment and be able to make smart decisions even in times of strife. It would not be advisable to post anything on the Internet when an individual is upset or angry. It would be best to avoid the Internet all together until the emotions have passed. Unlike traditional media, social media is a

two-way communication and therefore employers need to monitor what employees and clients are discussing. As a professional, it is important to comprehend that the internet quickly allows for any posts to be re-shared online and end up going "viral." The social media revolution allows people to interact with one another in a number of formats, this also poses dangers for professionals, as it may be difficult to determine if a person's presence online is real or "virtual."

Although social media has some pitfalls to avoid, this is not to say that if used properly, a platform of communication of this nature can be utilized for beneficial purposes. People in leadership positions can transform this cyberspace platform into a tool of communication and sharing of information among agencies. Social media can greatly improve feedback response time and develop professional relationships when used correctly. Most dilemmas in this area stem from use by leaders in their private lives that are considered immoral, irresponsible and inappropriate. Considering that earning a leadership role is a reward of hard work, it is important to demonstrate ethical and moral behavior that will protect one's career success.

Professionals, such as educators, are held to a higher standard of morality and every educator is aware of this before choosing to pursue this career field. Teachers often accept this responsibility and recognize that the way they portray themselves inside and outside of the school walls will have great consequences on their ability to continue teaching. More often than not, the same principles exist for all professionals whether this is realized or acknowledged. Professionals who share other responsibilities within their personal lives such as a partner, husband, wife or parent also have a responsibility to serve as an example for their significant other and their children. The things that take place at home and are shared on social media will exhibit to the world the kinds of things that a professional holds to be important and of value.

These traits can lead to added respect and support from others. Whereas exhibiting

unprofessional behavior will have negative consequences on a professional's ability to lead.

"It is apparent that public servants have higher ethical expectations than private sector

employees do because they represent the people and work for their benefit" (as cited in

Bezboruah & Dryburgh, p. 470, 2012). This is akin to a teacher that is entrusted with the safety

and well-being of his/her students. Good leadership requires the ability to separate work

responsibilities from private life responsibilities.

Various courts have shown how numerous legal issues among professionals, attorneys in

particular, are driven by inappropriate electronic communication including social media, texting,

and emails. According to Lackey (2012):

> …judges could not be social media friends with attorneys who appear before them. "That
> simply because a lawyer is listed as a friend" on a social networking site or because a
> lawyer is a friend of the judge, as the term friend is used in its traditional sense, [it]
> means that this lawyer is, in fact, in a special position to influence the judge."…the real
> issue was not whether the lawyer is actually in a position to influence the judge, but
> whether the online friendship conveys the impression that the lawyer has such influence.
> (p. 170)

In essence, professionals have the responsibility to monitor and protect social media accounts the

same way they protect their text messages and emails so as not to give the appearance of any

wrong doing (real or otherwise perceived).

Social media offers good leaders the opportunity to engage and inspire others. It offers a

mass communication at a mere click of a button. The global support of the Internet and social

media has transformed today's lifestyle in a technical revolution. Today, children possess

smartphones and tablets with instant access to entertainment, games, media and information. The

influence of technology on society has never been so evident. Responsible people will benefit

greatly from the Internet and the services that it provides. Those who make poor judgments will

suffer long and unrelenting consequences.

A professional individual will understand the power of social media and its advantages

while being aware of the consequences. A responsible person will take the time to assess the

responses of others before making comments or posting online. No one should ever post

anything that they are not willing to say in front of the world, as this is basically what one is

doing when posting online – putting their thoughts out there for the whole world to see.

Social media is available to everyone and it is only going to continue to develop and

expand from person to person and from country to country. Professionals need to develop habits

that will keep them out of trouble both personally and professionally. Companies are now

including specific sections of their work policies to include Internet use policies and

expectations. Professionals are encouraged to install strong passwords and monitor their accounts

for potential hacking. Who you comment to and what you say online is going to be viewed by

everyone and other professionals will use that information to determine whether they feel your

personality and leadership is genuine. Therefore, social media comes with a great responsibility

in order to ensure a lifestyle free from legal and public ridicule. Professionalism in the social

media era is a necessity today, especially for leaders who plan to continue to motivate and lead

with integrity. The Internet is a powerful tool for professionals, yet it is also a very dangerous

place for those who lose sight of what's important. As the technological revolution continues, so

will the need for new digital laws and policies that will help protect our leaders. The ethics and

values that are expected of our leaders are still the same as they were before the Internet was

available, yet never has it been more important to uphold these values. So, before hitting that

send button, one needs to decide, "Is this what I really want to share with the world?"

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