

Le Scienze dell'Educazione - Towards a theory of professionalism

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LE SCIENZE DELL'EDUCAZIONE

In questo numero pubblichiamo la versione in inglese dell'articolo del prof. Corrado Ziglio "Verso una teoria della professionalit  " uscito nel numero precedente.

Towards a theory of professionalism

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The presumption to formulate a theory

To formulate a theory is a very risky enterprise. In the first place because it raises a chorus of reactions, of the kind: "But who does he think he is?... Here's another blockhead who wants to speak out his mind..." and so on. From the books of history and epistemology of science I learned about the indignant reactions of scientific circles to the theories formulated by Darwin, Freud and Einstein "to give widely known examples" respectively in the field of biology, psychoanalysis and physics. And in the second place because the person who formulates a theory lays oneself open to ruthless criticism.

That is why I will start declaring that I am just a scholar who has been spending his life for years to explore professional worlds and who is just ready to submit himself to ruthless criticism.

What brought me to formulate a "Theory of professionalism" is the fact that from the analyses of professional cultures some constants and frequencies emerge and that the characteristics of all professions can be ascribed to those very frequencies and constants, such as for Darwin and Einstein any phenomenon of biology or physics could be explained through the new visions they found. Where to begin?

To explain physical phenomena Einstein used the famous equation $E=mc^2$ (energy equals mass times the velocity of light squared). On the other hand, Darwin did not use a mathematical formula, but an evolutionary chart of living things. Me too I will use a chart in the shape of a butterfly both as an explanation and a symbol: every wing of the butterfly stands for a precise professional dimension and "to fly professionally" means to be able to exploit the power of the four wings, and not just of one or two. Unfortunately "just to anticipate the point" in Italy at least, we have a professional development practice which aims to develop just one wing, leaving to the professional himself/ herself to get along on the

three wings left.

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The butterfly of professionalism

First I present the chart and its key for the reader to visually fix the elements that make up the dimensions of professionalism, in my opinion.

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Key

- P. S. = Professional skills
- C. S. = Communicative skills
- A. R. = Awareness of the role
- P. C. = Personal Character

The first wing: Professional skills

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This is the dimension we all know. We could prepare an endless list of all the existing professions and their respective technical knowledge. I can just offer some examples to clarify this statement: for an engineer it is the knowledge of the construction sciences; for a physician the knowledge of diagnostic and curative methodology; for an entrepreneur the knowledge of business management, for a plumber or an electrician the knowledge of the operative skills of hydraulics or electricity respectively; for a teacher of mathematics it is the knowledge of this subject and so on.

The examples, however, make us understand that there are specialisations within each profession: a naval engineer possesses different knowledge from an architectural engineer or an aeronautic one; a heart surgeon has different competence from the nutritionist or the paediatrician, and as for the entrepreneur, does he/she run a coffee bar or an overseas export business? In the same way the teacher of biology has different knowledge from his/her colleague who teaches Greek or Physical education; a policeman needs different knowledge according to the field he operates in- traffic police, mail police, sea police, judicial police, scientific police, Flying squad, minors office or immigration; and so on.

Nowadays professional specialisation is expanding exponentially with one major effect: cognitive psychology explains that our studies and life experiences structure our mind; so, for example it is not rare to observe that the behaviour of a doctor who works in a children's ward can be more "attentive" to his/her patients than a doctor in charge of a different ward of patients; or that a policeman who is concerned with minors' problems every day develops a greater "professional sensitiveness" than a policeman who deals with drug smugglers. So it is not rare to observe the development of different sensitiveness, just due to the specialisation inside the same profession.

In my opinion professional development on this first "wing" has been doing an excellent work. There is an interest towards this aspect from Public Administrations, Institutions, Organizations, Enterprises and so on. An evidence lies in the universe of professional development courses present in every field.

But can we fly with just one wing?

The second wing: Communicative skills

Communication as "business"

For twenty years, or more, the necessity to equip professionals with communicative skills has been expanding, because it is shared knowledge that the ability to communicate often determines the result of professional services. Public administrations invest money and resources in this aspect. Big enterprises understood that long ago, as a wrong advertisement means unsold products: it is "the way" you communicate, the messages which are launched, the words which are used that make the difference and advertisers have become better and better at this. New university departments were created and nowadays you can get a diploma in communication sciences. New jobs were born: it is enough to think of the innumerable business consultants, of public or private agencies so concerned with the effectiveness of internal or external communicative processes that they set up communication courses along with those in more structured areas, such as management and budget.

At the beginning psychologists were the only ones concerned with communication. Nowadays there are engineers who are communication consultants; in fact, one speaks of communication engineering. It is exactly here, however, that problems start: someone thinks of communication as a set of "techniques", others believe techniques are just shortcuts and prefer to speak of a "communication culture". I side with this group. Having been working for a decade with hundreds of policemen/policewomen and police officers acting in different parts of Italy and so in different cultural milieux, with different communicative codes, deeply rooted in the population, I have come to understand that to limit oneself to applying techniques means to "be beaten" everywhere: to be a police member in Bolzano or Bologna (cities in northern Italy) is not the same as in Siracusa or Naples (cities in southern Italy).

Communicative structures have anthropological roots and a simple word or a simple gesture or a similar behaviour may

have a different, even opposite meanings in different contexts.

In time, communication expertise has become a business. In Italy this happened mainly due to the influence of the "Bocconi" University School, as many people in charge of the professional development of important Health Agencies told me during my research. The operation was to standardise a set of communicative techniques, making them just an addition to the technical- professional knowledge.

Not true. Communicative skills constitute the second wing of professionalism, and I will try to demonstrate why they cannot just become a "technical" addition of something else.

Communicative Codes and Grammars

To explore communicative codes is one of the most fascinating adventures, as it is through what we say and how we behave that we can establish a relation-- a positive or negative one-- with any other person.

Unfortunately in the mechanical standardisation of professional training-- which is often just limited to theoretical aspects-- we have learned about the existence of a "verbal" code and a "non-verbal" one, in a kind of stereotyped a conceptual synthesis which should change our life; on the contrary it has no meaning for us. Nothing is worse than to learn something without really understanding it. So let us try to understand it, starting from some life examples to get to professional aspects.

Let us consider sexuality. I chose this example as it is one of the most ancestral dimensions, biologically programmed in the brain to guarantee the survival of the human species. From my experience as a pedagogical consultant in a group of clinical sexologists, I learned that sexuality is the kingdom of the most subtle and refined communicative codes and grammars: words and gestures become powerful elements of attraction; glances and voices become powerful appealing elements; silences and attitudes reveal our feelings. That is why one of the greatest scholar of human communication, Paul Watzlawick-- and after him the Palo Alto School, in California-- declares that "it is impossible not to communicate." We always communicate, in any circumstance, even when we are not aware of it. Why so? Because each code has its own grammar. To make love with closed eyes is a grammar of the non-verbal code and to whisper words in the ear of the loved one is a grammar of the verbal code. And the examples are just a crumb of what happens in an intimate relation.

I could go on and on about that but I prefer to get immediately to the point of professional settings.

How many times I heard police members say: "only he/she had asked me differently...", speaking of a colleague or an officer. But a similar sentence can be heard in schools, hospitals, companies, drugstores, universities, building yards, emergency wards, post offices and any other working place. Let us try to understand what lies behind that sentence and to identify the underlying grammars. Maybe the persons who asked for support used the wrong lexicon, that is the wrong words. Or the words were correct, but they used the wrong tone of voice. Or the tone of voice was correct, but their behaviour was irritating. Or the behaviour was correct but their gestures were contrary to all the rest. What counts is that the person who asked for something lost somebody's support for the use of a wrong grammar. And I have just told a crumb of daily life.

Our professional daily life is made up of a number of relations with different people: colleagues, officers, executives. And every relation, even superficial ones, possesses as many codes and as many grammars. Always. Every day. For an entire life.

Question: Can one face his/her professional life being literate in professional tasks but illiterate in the management of those tasks?

In her graduate thesis a female student of mine quoted a survey on the training schools of the French police, dating back to the eighties. What came out about the initial professional training can be synthesised in an emblematic reasoning which can unfortunately be ascribed to a multitude of professional training courses.

In fact, in the survey it was claimed that "The various training systems do nothing but increase the belief that experience is what counts. Police members convince themselves and are convinced that the real training starts when they enter service and that is the only way to acquire professionalism: you learn your job through experience only."

On the contrary, in my opinion the real training lies in equipping the minds of each professional with the capacity of "grammatically" reading the events; otherwise one runs the risks of not being able to "read" what is happening around everything becomes heavier and heavier every day. Even unbearable.

The communicative register as a synthesis of codes and grammars

Some time ago, I was asked by the police superintendent of Bolzano to write a training project for constables in charge of "private quarrels". Before sending him my project, I visited the police superintendent of Ravenna (with whom I have been collaborating for a long time) and asked him if I could work with his people to understand the problems of the "private

quarrels office. I discovered an incredible world: family quarrels, condo quarrels, legal actions and complaints for threats, offences, intimidations, blackmails, and so on. In short, a world of social contentiousness.

In Ravenna I mostly worked with a deputy superintendent. I was fascinated by his way of acting with the people he had summoned to the police headquarters. I was however unable to conceptualise his brilliant way of handling these meetings: he passed from an attitude of great severity towards arrogant people to a paternal but professional attitude towards people who admitted their uncivil behaviour in the circumstance reported in the complaint papers. He could pass from one communicative grammar to the other, alternating sternness and conciliation in his tones, timbres of voice, face expressions, gestures, exactly as a great musician can read a score he has never seen before.

After a while, a thought flashed into my mind. Here it was! He could "read" the people. The analogy with music- an old passion of mine- had helped me discover the critical concept: the register. When I played the Schubert Hail Mary, I just "chose" the delicate registers of the recorder or the oboe; on the contrary, when I played the Back D minor scale toccata and fugue, I "chose" all the registers of the maximum sonority. I could read the scores. While that deputy superintendent could read the people like an artist.

And yet, I had seen many police members and officers with the same talent: able to read the situations in operations of Public Order; to read the people; to decode their behaviour; able to read even the emotions of the people and to change register according to the circumstances. As officers, able to read the characters of their collaborators so to get them to operate in the best way.

It is what Goleman calls "emotional intelligence;" in reference to the world of work I will call it "professional intelligence"

Undervalued Talents

One thing has always puzzled me. Every time I came in touch with and I asked about those professional skills, I have always been answered back about "obviousness." For those police members it was normal to behave like that. Nothing extraordinary. Normal? So why for all the rest of the people it was a titanic enterprise? In time I discovered that the obviousness depended on the fact that if you ignore that behind what you can intuitively do there is scientific knowledge, you cannot even understand the value of your actions. And when everything becomes obvious, everything becomes banal.

When I give training courses for police members, I make them work on their work experiences. This allows me to discover all the various communicative grammars underlying their professional performances. The results are exciting: not only are these people living archives of professional cases, but while enjoying themselves, they internalize a basic concept of their professionalism which makes them improve their work dramatically.

The added value of those training experiences is the possibility to overcome the tendency to take everything for granted, i.e. to overcome obviousness: they discover that in their daily actions they are using - even only intuitively - extremely powerful scientific knowledge. And that immediately increases their self-esteem.

Many times, during the coffee breaks, they come to me and tell their discoveries:

"But then I am not a dupe; I am worth something."

"I have always applied those things, but nobody has ever recognised my merit."

"My colleagues have always regarded me as a bit crazy, as I knew how to deal with crazy people."

"They told me I was behaving as a social worker (an insult in the police force!); I was applying solid scientific knowledge instead!"

I remember the words of a Chief Patrol of a Flying Squad, who had been concerned with cases of family quarrels for a long time. He was attending one of my courses about the management of people's emotions by police members. I was especially dealing with a particular practice, Validation, a process of grammar reading of the behaviour of aggressive people.

"But why are we not taught those things in initial professional training? We do not get any training, apart from the knowledge of procedures and how to fill in a form; especially nothing like this "Validation" which could help us a lot, if only we knew it. Every time we have to invent our action, without knowing that we could apply knowledge researched at a scientific level.

And we come back to office thinking we were lucky as we narrowly escaped being beaten as well. And so you pass from one quarrel to another with a feeling like "Shit, how lucky! It ended well" or "Shit, another quarrel!"

If someone could teach us, we'll feel more real professionals, and less mere executors of procedures on how to calm down furious people. To have in your mind such a tool "as Validation" would mean to act intelligently, trying to understand the state of mind of the people involved and act consistently.

In every professional action we would feel tested in our professional intelligence and we would so internalize a feeling of professional self appraisal instead of the feeling of just collecting failures.

These are statements collected in the field; however when I run a training course for the police, they are always able to find their own expansions and translations of the instrument of "Validation" in their daily activities, i.e. the managing of personnel and consumers and the development of professional relations. The outcome is invariably constant: the possibility of getting aware of their own professionalism is well received, as it allows them to give a meaning to their own professional activities. That develops a process of revitalisation and self appraisal. And self appraisal produces an attitude of professional motivation.

I gave examples from the professional contexts of State Police, but the knowledge and awareness of communicative codes grammars and registers are important in any profession. If you add that all of this takes place in a multitude of cultural contexts - especially in Italy, a country so variegated from an anthropological point of view - can you think it

possible to simply reduce communication issues to a technical appendix of professional knowledge? I do not think so.

There is much work to do on this second "wing" as regard training: on the development of this dimension it depends any professional performance and intelligent professional relation. It should be a training able to raise the awareness of the power of communicative skills not only in those who lack this talent but also in those who already possess it; both could get out of an obvious and banal attitude to their own professionalism.

A voyage through the disease of a doctor

I had a dearest friend: a doctor, the Head of the Heart Ward in a public hospital. I used to tell him: "You are not just a doctor, but every inch a doctor" for the consciousness and devotion he worked with. An athletic figure, never a health problem, at sixty he found out he had a brain cancer. He was told he had 6 month life left. "A bolt from the blue" - as he said - "has hit me." He had to retire: he could no longer take decisions on the lives of other people.

He started chemotherapy, to slow down the devastating effects of the disease. But as a doctor he was deeply aware of what was happening to him. And sufferance started as well: sleepless nights, loss of appetite, pains.

I urged him to write down what he was living through. He did and told me that while writing, his nights passed away more smoothly. He lived two more years, alternating periods in hospital and at home.

Of things he did write many and I suggested that his work was worth publishing. "Find it a title," I told him. At the start he thought I was kidding, but then he was persuaded by my reasoning: it was important that such a person as he was, estimated by his colleagues and the many people he had met and cured, should leave such an extraordinary and professional message.

Not only did he find a title but a publisher as well. He insisted to have an introduction by me in his 125 page book, "Nemesis, A voyage through the disease of a doctor." "Nemesis," he explained, "is the goddess who represents vengeance of the gods."

The text perfectly describes what he defines as "a journey in the disease", but there is a page towards the end of the book which I find extremely touching.

This 360 degree overturning of my role--from a doctor to a patient-- has been incredible. Equally incredible is the different perception of people if you change your point of view and aspect. Now it "me" who needs other people; it "me" who is in a waiting state, of almost complete dependence and permanent subjection.

I am reserved by nature, and now my body is exposed, naked as well, to the view of strangers. I do understand that some prudery is completely useless, in front of the need of those who are acting to help you, but everything is not so immediate and simple.

Now I fully understand the value of a smile, even if just a faint one, the value of an act of kindness able to anticipate my wish, of a soothing word, and why not, of a witty remark which can help see things less dreadfully.

On the contrary people in my condition suffer from superficial attitudes: bored, haughty, careless, arrogant, hasty, indifferent ones. And there are many of these attitudes. They harshly strike feeble people, already suffering from pain and misfortune. They are dirty cowardly actions. I wonder how many times before I did act like that. At least unintentionally, I hope.

And the text ends with the wish that in the Departments of Medical Sciences communication sciences will be included, allowing the doctors-to "be to become real professionals."

Communication and the chemistry of the brain

For many years in the Medical field they have been doing researches on how the attention for and dialogue with their patients that physicians can develop is a fundamental part of any therapy. The treatment of these scientific discoveries would take a huge space as we should enter upon bioenergetics. It is not the right place to discuss it here and I will just limit myself to expound some elements to clarify the scenarios in front of us.

Nowadays from the interwoven studies of biologists, neuroscientists, psychobiologists, etc. we understand that our brain is a very complex machine able to react to any environmental stimulus and that behind every reaction it is possible to identify a chemical substance. Through the use of over refined technologies we are able to detect which area of the brain is activated by the words we say, the feelings we live or the emotional situations we go through. We know that all the brain system which controls our emotions produces chemical substances named beta endorphins.

What does it mean? As our existence is a sequence of episodes, it means that our brain reacts to any of them with adrenal discharges, hormonal variations, chemical secretions, which are all cerebral responses.

I have been sustaining for a long time that we always impact emotionally with any situation; it is what I systematically find in my researches. Let us try to give some examples from a working day: the teacher who enters a class and finds his/her students more and more fidgety; the nurse who starts his/her shift and finds out that the colleague has not finished his/her work; the family doctor who finds fifty people in the waiting room; the entrepreneur who entering his/ her firm finds the employees on strike; the constable dealing with child abuse; constable dealing with lazy colleagues; the engineer who finds out that the material used by the building society is not the right one to realise his/her project; and so on. Ah! I was forgetting an important aspect: systematically any professional is always behind schedule and always short of time. This is one of the most common anxious factors which makes our brain produce an over production of chemical substances. And prolonged overdoses of those may cause a heart attack.

Anyway it is important to understand that in the brains of all those professionals I have listed "and the ones not listed above as well" there are adrenal discharges and chemical secretions. It is not possible to classify these reactions in a

standardised way, as someone explodes verbally, some others curse to themselves, some others smile ironically or bitterly; anyway all these different reactions make the system of beta endorphins react with different behaviours -verbal or non-verbal - which cause chain reactions in their interlocutors - students, employees, consumers, workers, delinquents, and so on.

Luckily the beta endorphins are not only activated by the aspects which chemically cause feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment and so forth, but by the feelings of gratification, satisfaction, enthusiasm, love as well.

I want just to underline that during the course of any professional activity we live a set of emotions and develop a series of feelings, which are biologically based and that our brain manages "chemically". And this is true both for the professionals and their specific consumers.

How may such a complex universe and scenario be reduced to few stupid communication techniques, created by some cunning "humbbug"? This is just the second "wing" of professionalism. The disconcerting aspect is that not only training in this area is neglected, if not in the form of some trivial standardisation, but also that more than often it is considered optional.

Of course it is true that the world goes on even without this specific set of knowledge. But then stop lamenting that this is not right, that does not work, that other aspect is junk, so transforming working places in communicative and relational jungles.

As there is the possibility of using refined knowledge, it is hard to understand why most people prefer to manage professionalism by rule of thumb, by guess work, so using for most of their time just the "rhinencephalon," that is the most primordial part of our brain.

The third wing: Awareness of the role

This dimension opens wide scenarios, difficult to explore because it is like eating cherries, as we say in Italian: once you have started you just go on. In my opinion, however, it can be interesting to start from the following point: professional pathologies.

Degenerative processes of professions

The cases of professional pathology "as I like to name them" are those which end up in the press: the forester who sets fire to woods, the nurse who kills her/ his patients, the teacher who bites a young student's ear, the manager of the Environment Ministry involved in an illegal traffic in toxic waste, luggage security controllers at Malpensa Airport caught stealing from the luggage they should check, mail employees who instead of taking care of the valuables in their offices pilfer them, the manager of the Ministry of Environment involved in an illegal traffic of toxic waste disposal, groups of police members transferred for illegal activities, "carabinieri" charged of fraud, customs officers who are found out to be bribers and extortionists. And we could add physicians, judges, university professors and the likes of them who now and then appear in the newspapers....In my opinion the "Uno Bianca" case where the killers were a gang of policemen can be considered the most striking example of professional pathology. For sure the most curious one can be considered the case of that "superintendent for legality" charged for corruption.

Why do I name them pathological situations? Simply because one would expect to be a pyromaniac to set fire to woods and not a forester whose role is to defend that environmental property; one would expect stealers to steal valuables from the luggage at an airport and not the people whose job is to protect those goods. And so on.

But can we think that a person becomes a physician with the purpose to fraud the National Health Service? Or that another becomes a judge to violate the code of behaviour of his/ her profession? And so forth and so on. I do not really think so. I think that to get to those illegal outcomes it needs time, as it is a long process made up of various phases, one of which can be identified as pre- pathology. Now how many cases of pre- pathology can we find in any work setting?

To make an analogy with biology, we know that a cancerous cell undergoes a degenerative process: first, the cell is healthy, then it accumulates too many toxic substances and not only does it stop functioning as before but instead it itself starts producing toxicity for the body. To translate: every professional is a cell within a work structure, which in time can accumulate toxic substances, such as frustration, loss of motivation, uneasiness, intolerance, etc. In some professionals an overdose of those processes can produce phases of indifference, slyness, careless attitude, perfunctoriness; all negative behaviours which are both toxic for the whole work setting and degenerative for the professional's role.

Bion and the escape routes from professionalism

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Bion was a psychiatrist who did not deal with emotional or cognitive disorders, but studied "professional uneasiness," work stress and its consequences on professionals. In the early 60's he published a paper which would become a reference

point for all those interested in professional contexts at an international level.

My effort was to translate his conceptual co-ordinates within some of the professional settings I was studying, using an ethnographic/ anthropological methodology, which considers professional contexts as "cultures." In this way I think I might add new elements and new characteristics to his studies on professional uneasiness.

Bion starts from the presumption that every work setting produces various kinds of toxic substances: some are determined by the organisation of the work, some are relative to personal dynamics (the characters of people), others to interpersonal ones (the relations among colleagues and among hierarchical levels.)

Let us try to name some of these toxic substances we can find in work settings: besides professional envies and jealousies, we find hypocrisies, shabbiness, piques, careerism, rivalries, competitions....And the people who have this kind of behaviours are labelled flatterers, opportunists, and in more derogative terms in the various professional jargons.

An impertinent question: Is it so difficult to realise that these toxic substances poison professional climates and that training should therefore take them into account too?

Now, exactly as it happens in a living organism, where the accumulation of toxic substances causes a temperature, the same happens in a professional context: toxins produce an alteration of the temperature. But while the individual tries remedial measures and takes some kind of medicine to come back to normality"and if the temperature does not go down, he / she is worried and goes to a specialist" in professional contexts people feign fever does not exist and let it go up and nobody worries about it. And so the temperature goes up and up till it reaches the level of complaint.

The culture of complaint

When we feel really bad we use to utter expressions of complaint, even unintentionally. The same is true in a work setting: when one complains about everything and all, it means that his/her temperature is getting high. One, however, continues to act as if nothing bad is going on.

In my opinion it is important to distinguish between "dissatisfaction" and "complaint": the former is a wholesome feeling, is dissatisfaction which made human beings progress in every field; the latter is a different matter, as it is a destructive feeling.

On these premises Bion observes that as most people are not masochists--i.e. they do not like to hurt themselves-- they devise strategies to survive feverish states. How? Finding some exit strategies. It is easy to understand that at this point these people cease consciously living their profession, they try to survive it, with dangerous consequences on their professional performances.

But which exit strategies? Bion identifies four of them, but in every work setting more typical ones can be identified.

I think that a visual image can help focus on the issue: the square represents the professional setting, the little figures are the professionals, the arrows identifies the exit strategies.

DEPENDENCE

EXPECTATION OF THE MESSIAH

SCAPEGOAT

PAIR/CLEAN

Let us try to fill the four exit strategies—or pits, as I prefer to call them-- by using the remarks which I, as an ethnographer of professional settings, have kept hearing over and over again. It is evident that these considerations cannot be gathered through questionnaires and interviews, but only by living in close touch with the professionals, as anthropologists would do.

In the “dependence” corner, expressions of the following kind are often heard: “I do my work, but do not ask me that; let the boss worry about that, it’s his/her business, moreover he/she is better paid than me; if I am not asked to , can you believe that I myself go looking for trouble? Who cares? It’s the boss’s problem.” And so

Some people internalise this attitude and let it permeate all their professional performances.

Some others, instead, start identifying a “scapegoat”, to heap all their frustrations upon him /her: it is always the fault of somebody or something else. Some times it is “the Administration”, some times it is the need to find the “blockhead” moment: in short someone on whom to heap the entire blame.

In the third exit strategy-- pair/ clanâ€™Iâ€™TMll put those who think they themselves are the only skilful ones; all the others canâ€™ even lace their shoes.â€• â€œWe know how to make a good job, who cares about the rest of the people?â€•. It is the logic of the pairâ€•, but in the same pit we can find the logic of the clanâ€• too. Itâ€™s something Bion does not mention, but that comes out in the course of time. It is the small group who becomes a kind of blockhouseâ€• within the group: When someone new arrives in that work setting and is willing to change the work style to ameliorate the service, he / she is usually warned: â€œOh, calm down. Mind you donâ€™t change anything; here things have always gone on like that. So stops breaking our balls

The last exit strategy Bion identifies has really a curious definition: â€œthe expectation of the messiahâ€•. And in any work setting it is easy to find people who belong there.

There are plenty of expressions typical of this strategy: â€œWhen the boss changes, then yes, things will change as well;â€• â€œWhen we get a raise in salary, then ...;â€• â€œWhen our profession is more considered and respected, then...â€• And so on endlessly:It is always â€œwhenâ€•... â€œwhenâ€•... and again â€œwhen.â€• In the professional setting of the State Police -- worked so long-- it is not unusual to hear police members say: â€œWhen the officer changes, then things will change...â€• Then it could happen that really there was a change in the leadership and the culture of complaint â€œ which is malignâ€™made the same people say: â€œThe previous officer, he really had balls!â€•

It is not that people who fall into those pits stay there for ever; during oneâ€™s professional life, one can find oneself first in one then in another pit, according to the various situations or circumstances. It is true, however, that in many professions where team workâ€• is the winning characteristic, going in or out of the pits does not help the effectiveness and efficacy of the services.

Moreover, if these behaviours become professional styles and consolidate in time, they run the risk to become pre - pathologies.

An exemplary case of illiteracyâ€• of awareness of the role

I have lately carried out a field research in a childrenâ€™s ward, where many children are affected by a destructive illness: a madâ€• cell in their bones compels them to undergo a chemotherapy treatment which causes vomit, loss of appetite, general weakness. On working with the nursing staff, I understood that the trust they were able to create with the children was the strategic element on which to base the therapy. We have to remember that in that ward some patients die and to see a child die is the most tragic thing one can imagine. So far for the setting.

Now, training the nurses, I understood that what they considered intolerable and therefore most toxic was to be reprimanded by the doctors in front of their little patients and the people assisting them (parents and grandparents). According to them this toxic substance frustrated that very trust so important for the success of the therapy.

The result? They admitted that systematically they felt they were hiding in some exit strategy to resist that toxin.

How is it possible that those doctors, really good as regards their know how, behaved so indifferently towards the nurses? Not only is it possible, but it appears to be a frequent behavioural routine. And it is not a matter of malevolence or an attitude of superiorityâ€™as someone affirmsâ€™but rather a loss of awareness of the role, either of their own role and of the othersâ€™TM.

Role illiteracy causes disasters, demotivation, and more toxic substances.

A folkâ€• case of lack of awareness of the role

In summer 2004 I went to visit a Police officer who was running an criminal division in Locride (one of the most Mafia place in Southern Italy). He had followed my courses when in the Police Institute for Advanced Studies and we had kept in touch also because he is a writer of crime stories and had presented one of his books in Bologna, where I live. We spent all the nights together, while during the day he was busy in working, and my companion and I went sunbathing on the enchanting Ionic beaches. He had found an accommodation for us in a farm house, a small place which hosted only five couples, so after one day we all got to know each other.

One day, I was approached by the lady at the desk; having noticed that I smoked, she asked me in a low voice if I was interested in buying cigarettes. The complicity in her tone made me easily suspect she was offering smuggled cigarettes. Embarrassed and not knowing what to answer I said "No, thank you. Marlboro are too strong for me."

The following morning, one of the other couples joined us at breakfast. The man, a professional from Naples, told us that the lady had made the same offer to him as well; his Neapolitan exuberance had brought him to react in a completely different way from my embarrassed answer. He had told her in an ironic/joking manner - something between the style of Totò and Eduardo De Filippo, two famous Neapolitan actors - that he might have been a customs officer on holiday and that to smuggle cigarettes with an officer was not really the most appropriate thing to do. The lady, probably mistaking the tone of the answer, blushed, mumbled something incomprehensible and ended up declaring that her husband was an officer of "Carabinieri." "I thought"-he continued- "that was the end of the story. Instead, the following morning his husband came up in his uniform and asked the reason of my behaviour, then started threatening to denounce me for false pretences. I couldn't believe my ears." (In conclusion the carabinieri had succeeded in embarrassing a brilliant Neapolitan man, which is really a hard job!)

I would like to underline the absurd aspects of the situation. A State officer who not only upbraids a citizen who playfully underlined the illegality of an act, but also defends an illegal behaviour and threatens a citizen who respects the law. A situation which evokes Kafka.

May pre-pathologies thrive in behaviours like that one? Wouldn't it have been wiser to tell his wife to be more cautious, instead of showing that he regarded his professional dimension at his own personal disposal? In that way forgetting that a profession is there to satisfy a social need.

A question: training has nothing to say on the awareness of the role? Role is not an optional something which persons can forget; if they do, they start considering their consumers a nuisance and end by considering their profession at their own advantage.

The forth wing: Personal character

To grow "professionally" means to grow "personally". Even on this point we too often forget an absolutely inextricable fact: each of us is a person who practices a profession. Someone is more extravert, someone more jesting, someone more touchy, someone more cheerful, someone more aggressive and so on and so forth, within an endless list of personal dimensions. And when we carry on any professional performance, those traits stay with us, we cannot leave them aside.

This reasoning could appear so evident to border on banality, but it should not be forgotten that it is because of personal dimensions that often work settings become wild jungles, more than because of incompetence or the lack of other dimensions skills.

Let's exercise in matching negative personalities with some professions: a sulky teacher; a touchy engineer; a bothersome physician; an aggressive entrepreneur; a careless barman; a disagreeable plumber; a disorganised bank clerk; a negligent teller; an arrogant, punitive and humiliating professor; and so on and so forth. Which kind of work climates do these people establish? How many times did I hear sentences of this kind in the work settings I have been studying so long: "He/ She knows his/ her job, but he/ she has such a bad disposition..." An exemplary sentence which I have heard being uttered in a thousand ways.

There are undertakings which run the risk to go bankrupt, not owing to incompetence, but to incompatibility of characters; there are offices, public and private administrations where the interactions between the characters of the people working there produce strong uneasiness.

Luckily all these negative cases are balanced by positive matches of personality and profession, where cheerfulness, kindness, helpfulness and a lot of more personal dimensions, create well being in the consumers they serve.

But what can training do in both cases? Here as well, as in the case of the "wing" of communicative skills, the point is to create training courses which can help understand the importance of personal dimensions in building a good or a bad professional practice.

According to our personality we are prone to internalise different beliefs. To see the events of life through rose coloured spectacles or not depends on the character of each one. It is difficult that hypochondriac people develop a cheerful behaviour and a positive vision of life: a pessimistic view will prevail in them, generating ideas and beliefs not really inclined to optimism. They will run the risk of constantly complaining about their lot. The same is true for the wrathful and the sanguine who will develop a style of aggressive manners even just to ask a waiter for a new fork.

To speak of beliefs, however, means to enter a "œmare magnum" as the roots of our beliefs, from which we develop behaviours and attitudes, concern all the spheres of life: from social, familiar, affective values to religious beliefs, to the cultural meanings we all attribute to every event of life.

We are not speaking of "œpeanuts", but of existential issues.

Now these beliefs of ours can alter our professional performances in an emotional way: in fact they make our beliefs become prevalent to the detriment of the institutional priorities a profession was created to meet.

Is it a difficult concept to understand? In my opinion a life example may help clarify the issue.

Let's take the school world, which all of us have experienced. Teachers assign priorities according to their conceptualisation of the mission of schooling: for a teacher a school is a place where to develop intelligences; for another, the priority might be socialisation; for another one, assessment; for still another one, selection. It is evident that these personal beliefs will determine professional behaviours. If a teacher thinks that selection is the mission of the school, he / she will not be prone to help a student in difficulty. Speaking of personal identity, I met teachers who gave priority to their personal values; for example, they could not stand miniskirts at schools, so they would give the girls wearing them marks inferior to their real achievement.

So, in the setting of police force, if a member believes that its mission is to repress, his /her professional behaviours will conform to that belief, even if nowadays in the official documents of State Police the institutional priority lays stress on prevention and on the task of maintaining social security.

These examples of "œbehavioural illiteracy" develop professional toxic substances and a training completely absent on these aspects will absolutely miss its target.

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Then it is obvious that the worlds of different professions can go on all the same without these "œfour wings". But then stop lamenting that this aspect is going rack, that other one is not working, that one is disgusting, thus transforming work settings in relational jungles and places of complaint.

It is neither edifying nor intelligent to waste one's life in this way.

