We’re talking about professional self-regulation here, not employment or workplace regulation. Also, this commentary is more about asking the question than the answer.

What triggered asking the question was a comment made to me some time ago by William Lahey, Law professor at Dalhousie University, and now President and Vice-Chancellor University of King’s College. Lahey said: “Indeed, many professional groups don’t fully appreciate the responsibility that comes with regulatory responsibility until they have it.” (Just to be clear, these comments by William Lahey were not made with specific reference to Human Resources. In fact, no specific professional group was referenced in making this comment.)

The expression ‘fully appreciate’ implies levels of appreciation—that there is a surface level of appreciation or understanding that is incomplete at best or inaccurate at worst and a full or deeper appreciation that is more correct or accurate. The expression ‘getting it’ would refer to this full or deeper appreciation.

Such questions, or more often such statements, are usually made by individuals who think they get it, and is made about others who they think do not get it.
Of course, nobody likes to be told that they do not get it. This is where many Organizational Development (OD) practitioners would put up a slide about the ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ quadrant in hopes of getting the audience to at least consider the idea that they may not ‘get it.’

There are individual differences at play here. Some are simply more confident that they ‘get it’ and that they understand everything that is worth understanding about ‘it.’ Others are more open to the idea that there may be more to know about it than they do. And then there are the combative ones—‘who is to say that you get it and I don’t?’

It is also the case that, like most OD practitioners will tell you, just telling someone that they don’t know what they don’t know doesn’t usually work.

But the question remains ‘does HR get self-regulation?’

Let’s assume for now that Lahey’s statement might apply to HR, and that there is a possibility that we ‘don’t fully appreciate the responsibility that comes with regulatory responsibility.’ How would we find out what it is that we don’t appreciate?

Perhaps one place to start would be to develop ‘indicators’ with the help of external experts. For instance, in making this statement it would seem that experts see something that we might not. It would be interesting to ask what such experts notice that lead them to make such statements. Unfortunately, that is not the kind of answer that is readily found with a simple internet search. But then again one must trust the external expert. It is always possible to dismiss external experts by saying something like ‘they don’t quite understand us.’

Then again, there is another way of looking at Lahey’s statement—focusing on the ‘until they have it’ part. This implies that having regulatory responsibility causes the professional group to develop a deeper appreciation of the responsibilities that come with professional regulation.

This leads to other interesting questions such as ‘is this fuller appreciation inevitable?’ and ‘how long does achieving this fuller appreciation take?’ We have seen cases like the now defunct Real Estate Council of British Columbia (RECBC) where this full appreciation just didn’t happen (or they simply ran out of time to make it happen).

This is not the time or place to tackle to tackle those questions, but the point is to keep asking ourselves these important questions and to be open to the possibility that we might not yet fully get what it means to be regulated.