Welcome to Stage 5

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Source: Wilensky, 1964

The professionalization process has been described as a series of stages. Long ago, Harold Wilensky, then a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, developed a model which outlined what he found to be the sequence of stages followed by professions that had been successful in their professionalization process. This wouldn’t be all that interesting were it not for the fact that the evolution of the Human Resources profession in Ontario seems to fit Wilensky’s model to an uncanny degree.

With the passage of the Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013, the Human Resources profession in Ontario completed Stage 4. In Ontario, the kind of state recognition described in Stage 4 means the formation of a professional regulatory body by statute which mission and mandate are to promote and protect the public interest. So what’s next according to Wilensky?

“Eventually rules to eliminate the unqualified and unscrupulous, rules to reduce internal competition, and rules to protect clients and emphasize the service ideal will be embodied in a formal code of ethics.”

What Wilensky is describing is that the profession’s governing body, which was created in Stage 4, begins to manage the profession in the public interest by developing and enforcing various rules. In other words, the profession gets serious about regulation. Stage 5 is all about having a professional governing body that manages the profession in such a way as to earn the trust and confidence of the public.

It should be noted that Wilensky saw these stages as taking decades to accomplish. So it is not as if working through Stage 5 will happen overnight, and there is a lot that is packed into this stage.

Stage 5 begins by dealing with new-to-regulation issues. Just because the government has passed legislation to create a professional regulatory body does not mean that the profession and its members will get it overnight. Behaviours need to change, mindsets need to change, and this all takes time.

Members of newly regulated professions are not used to being regulated, and many members don’t know much about professional regulation. It is not as if professionals knew exactly what they were getting into in the push for self-regulation. William Lahey, Law professor at Dalhousie University, and now President and Vice-Chancellor University of King’s College, put it as follows:

> “Indeed, many professional groups don’t fully appreciate the responsibility that comes with regulatory responsibility until they have it.”

Other members are just not used to the idea of having a professional regulatory body and struggle with some of the duties and obligations of that come with being regulated professionals. Other members never saw the need for professional regulation, and are still opposed to it even after it has been entrenched in law. There is also a lag between when the duties and obligations of being a regulated profession begin and the benefits begin to be felt, those who might have expected quick results will be disappointed. At first, compliance with some requirements is often an issue.

Human Resources professionals in Ontario have an added challenge in that the professional organization which many thought of as serving their interests must transform itself into a professional regulatory body committed to promoting and protecting the public interest.

Again, it takes time to work through these new-to-regulation issues, this will take years. So far, the Human Resources profession in Ontario has beaten all the odds, there is no reason to believe that it won’t figure out this Stage 5 as well. But we shouldn’t take anything for granted, nonetheless.

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2 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.