#53 Spearheading professionalization: In Stage 5 professional regulatory bodies must take a leadership role

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Stage 5 refers to the last stage in the professionalization process according to Wilensky’s model. Stage 5 is all about the profession establishing a professional governing body that will manage the profession in such a way as to earn the trust and confidence of the public. It is proposed here that, in this last step in the professionalization process, the professional regulatory body must take on a leadership role and spearhead this last step in the professionalization process. In a voluntary profession, the professional regulatory body’s leadership role reaches beyond its members to all those in the profession whether registered with the professional regulatory body. To be clear, in Stage 5 for voluntary professions, the authority of the professional regulatory body extends only to its members, but its role and influence and role as leader reaches beyond its members.

Professional regulatory bodies are always in a position of leadership, but in Stage 5 of the professionalization process, the leadership imperative is key.

So what do we mean by leadership in the context of professional regulatory bodies?

Leadership is not about the exercise of authority, it is about enlisting commitment to a vision. In Stage 5, the professional regulatory body must develop and communicate a compelling vision of what it will look like when the profession makes it through Stage 5. The professional regulatory body must also communicate what its role is in spearheading the transformation that the profession must go through in order to make it through Stage 5 and fully professionalize.
Professions and their regulatory bodies are not the same entity, but they are inextricably linked. What we have is a vision within a vision. The vision of the profession is to fully professionalize. The vision of the professional regulatory body is to fulfil its mission and mandate ('its objects'). The mission and mandate of the professional regulatory body, which is to manage the profession in the public interest, is exactly what the profession needs to complete its professionalization process. That is why the professional regulatory body becomes the natural leader for the profession in this final stage of the professionalization process. To fulfil its mission and mandate, the professional regulatory body must take on a leadership role in relation to its members and the profession.

As part of this leadership role, the professional regulatory body must develop and articulate a vision for the profession as a whole. This vision for the profession must be compelling to both current and potential members of the profession. This is bigger than just regulation, it is about enlisting commitment to a vision of what the profession could become. The vision of the professional regulatory body is not about providing member services to members but about what the profession will be like when it reaches its potential. It is about leading a movement or a cause—the cause of professionalism.

After it is all said and done, it is the professionalism of the members of the profession that will define the success of the professional regulatory body. Regulating the practice of members is part of this, but more important than this is getting members of the professional regulatory body and other practitioners who may not members of the professional regulatory body to buy into the ideal of professionalism. Establishing and enforcing rules goes only so far, it is important for members of the profession to internalize professional values and mindset. This is not as easy as it would appear because pushing for true professionalism often requires professional regulatory bodies to challenge members to reconsider what their attitudes and behaviours. As with individual leaders, this means having difficult conversations members of the profession. Simply attracting members who are not committed to true professionalism just to increase numbers is counterproductive in the end.

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Having articulated a vision for the profession, the professional regulatory body must help its members to achieve this shared vision. Setting standards of qualification, standards of practice, standards of professional ethics, and standards of knowledge, skill and proficiency is part of it but it is not enough. Rules are necessary, but they are not enough. The professional regulatory body must aim for an internalization of the professional ethos. It is important for professional regulatory bodies to rise above the fray of commercialism and self-interest and to live professional values. But these are abstract ideas, the professional regulatory body must find a way to make these ideals concrete and tangible.

As with any leader, the professional regulatory body must embody the values and behaviours that it expects its members to demonstrate. Leaders must lead by example. The values shared by all the professions are integrity, trustworthiness, service to others, and a concern for the public good. The professional regulatory body must exude these same values of integrity, trustworthiness, service to others, and a concern for the public good. These are also the same values that are necessary for the professional regulatory bodies to fulfil their statutory objects.
Professional regulatory bodies embody the noble aspirations of their professions, not the parochial self-interests of the members of their professions. This is why it is so corrosive when professional regulatory bodies are seen to act in the parochial self-interests of their members. Again, this is not always easy to put into practice.

Leadership is not easy at the individual level; it is not easy at the organizational level either. Nonetheless, that is the role and challenge of professional regulatory bodies—especially at Stage 5 of the professionalization process.