

Cultivating trust

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Rev Dr Carlo Calleja



If you were to be asked what matters most to you when seeking service from a professional, what

would you reply? Expertise? Integrity? Value for money? All are important, but even fundamental I argue, would be trustworthiness. Trust is the principle most sought, but perhaps also the scarcest.

A recent study commissioned by the Malta Federation of Professional Associations and carried out by Esprimi highlights some opportunities and threats to the value of trust in professionals nowadays.



The study indicates, for instance, that when asked to list which services they would associate with professionals, most respondents named health workers, legal services and services given by persons with a high level of education, in that order.

Interestingly, these are the same three categories of services that have traditionally been associated with the term “profession”. The late medical doctor and bioethicist Edmund Pellegrino notes that in the services traditionally associated with professions, the common denominator for all is trust. For Pellegrino: “Having credentials is incidental to being a professional. To be a professional is to make a promise to help, to keep that promise and to do so in the best interest of the [client].”

In her 2002 BBC Reith Lectures *A Question of Trust*, philosopher Onora O’Neill calls out the “deepening crisis” of this virtue, not least in the professional world. She challenges the common idea that trust boils down simply to a culture of accountability and of demanding the government, institutions and professionals of what is expected of them. Instead she argues for professionals and those who make use of their services to be aware of both their rights and their responsibilities to each other. Failing to do so would result in a passive kind of relationship which demands rights but which neglects duties that are due to one another. In retrieving the essential element of duties that must always accompany rights, O’Neill empowers those on the receiving and giving ends in the essential role that they too must play in building a culture of trustworthiness.

respondents were asked to classify occupations on the basis of how much professionals adhere to a code of ethics. Furthermore, when asked whether they believe that professionals receive training in ethics to remain up to date in this matter, almost half (48%) replied in the negative.

Of course, having a code of ethics alone is no guarantee of professional conduct in and of itself. Rather, codes of ethics are more likely to be useful in providing the vision and fundamental values by which the members of the profession are to abide. In so doing, codes of ethics cultivate the character of the professional and shape the culture of that particular guild.

When seen only as a list of do's and don'ts a code of ethics serves as little more than a "compliance manual". No matter how often it is revised, it can never be exhaustive since it can never cover all situations and grey areas. Moreover, in our litigious and pragmatic culture, such codes tend to be considered more as lists of possible loopholes out of which one can find a legal way out in cases of misconduct. This defeats the whole purpose of having a code of ethics in the first place.

Instead, a code of ethics ought to be regarded as a guide to excellence, a term which is central to ethics itself and which is sometimes used synonymously with the term professional.

Several steps can be taken to cultivate trustworthiness on the part of the professional and of those seeking their services. Despite trustworthiness being a personal trait, it needs to be supported by external structures. These might include, for instance, mechanisms that protect whistle-blowers, continuous professional development initiatives within professions to discuss ethical dilemmas, open communication channels and adequately functioning regulatory bodies, among others.

The Malta Federation of Professional Associations held a half day seminar for its members titled 'The Value of the Professional in Today's Society' on 17 March.

Rev Dr Carlo Calleja lectures in ethics at the Faculty of Theology in the University of Malta. The Faculty of Theology in association with other Faculties at the University of Malta has a Professional Ethics Platform which offers an MA in Bioethics and in Business Ethics and will be launching an MA in Environmental Ethics in the coming academic year