

**20 WAYS**

**to Be**

**MORE**

**(Young)**

**PROFESSIONAL**

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# 20 Ways to Be More (Young) Professional

Have you ever heard young professionals criticized for their lack of professionalism? Maybe you've been on the receiving end of a professionalism lecture a time or two. Why is professionalism so important? Easy. It's hard to stand out (in a positive way) if your professionalism is in question.

Professionalism means many different things to different people. We usually think of dressing appropriately and behaving in group settings. That's probably a good place to start. But there's more to it than that, especially for young professionals.

In my book [\*Stand Out! Become a Young Professional Who Wins at Work and Life\*](#), I mention that you're never too young to set a good example. These twenty professionalism tips are excerpted from the book. Master them and no one will have reason to doubt your credibility. In fact, you'll stand out – for all the right reasons!

On the other hand, if you're a leader of young professionals, these twenty tips may be just what you need to encourage your team.

## 1. Focus on What You Can Do

The more green you are, the less you're capable of delivering. But that shouldn't stop you from providing great service to those you work with. Instead of focusing on what you *can't* do (due to lack of skill or team capacity), redirect the focus to what you *can* do. In other words, be known for saying, "yes" to what you can confidently and competently deliver, even if it takes some creativity to get there.

## 2. Be an Early Bird, Late Owl

One of the greatest laments about young professionals in the workplace is their lack of reliability for when they show up for work. This means if all you do is arrive and leave on time, you'll stand out from the pack in a positive way! Take it a step further by arriving early and leaving late. You don't need to put in extra hours. Even giving five minutes on either end – with the ability to flex extra when needed – further enhances your reliability.

## 3. Dress to Impress

In many consulting companies, the dress code is to meet or exceed the standards of the clients they serve. The reason is simple: it's hard to take people seriously when they are underdressed. You can certainly maintain your own sense of style, but don't hurt your credibility by looking like a ragamuffin. If in doubt, it always pays to ask a colleague or supervisor for their opinion. They will appreciate your inquiry. If you ever receive negative feedback on the professionalism of your outfit, make it a goal to never let it happen again.

## 4. Get Mini-Mentors

Anyone who knows more than you about a certain subject has the potential to serve as a mentor. All you need to do is ask. But instead of asking for an ambiguous, long-term commitment to your success, ask for 30 minutes to pose a few specific questions. Then find another mini-mentor on another subject. If you don't ask, the answer is always no. And always, *always* say thank you!

## 5. Grow and Support Your Network

There's a saying about networking that "it's not who you know, but who who you know knows" that has the ability to open the right door. It's hard to understate the value of a quality network. Always take the initiative to build and collect new relationships. You don't need to establish deep connections with each new person you meet and you don't need to have a specific request when you do. In fact, it's more important to offer to be a resource for them and add value to their efforts. Take pride in connecting the people you meet with others who can solve their problems or meet their needs.

## 6. Use, "Yes, And"

"No" is no fun. Yes is not always possible. And nothing good comes after using, "but." So how do you disagree agreeably? When see things differently, resist the urge to say, "no." Even better, resist saying, "yes, *but...*" Instead, use, "yes... *and...*" to allow both yourself and the others the opportunity to consider a different perspective.

## 7. Drop the Gossip

You don't need to become a robotic "yes man" for the team or organization you work with. Contributing your own point-of-view and attempting to analyze decisions made by others is one of the best ways to challenge your own perspective and deepen your understanding. But starting or passing along information that paints others in a negative light can cause irreversible damage, especially if you're only working from hearsay or your own assumptions. One of the quickest ways to make enemies is to speak poorly of others when they aren't around. If in doubt, keep your thoughts about other people to yourself. Better yet, commit to never speaking ill of others in the first place!

## 8. Be a People Person

[Jack Welch](#) said, "If you don't like people, leadership stinks!" I think that includes many aspects of being a professional as well. One unfortunate trend among young professionals today is a preference for interacting via technology instead of face-to-face. It's up to you to learn to make a human connection – even if you need to force yourself at times. The American marketplace rewards extroversion. Even if you are shy, make

the decision to become genuinely interested in others. Then act on that initiative. Say hello to someone new and find out what is important to them. Go to someone's desk to interact in-person once in a while. Pick up the phone instead of hiding behind email when you need information. When people know who you are, they are more likely to appreciate you and want to work together.

## 9. Smile

How much is a smile worth? Charles Schwab estimated that his was worth \$1 million. Yours is worth a lot too. That's because of everything a smile communicates. [A smile says many things](#), including, "I'm a positive person," "I'm happy with who I am," "I care about you more than my own problems," "I have your best interest in mind," and "Let's work together."

## 10. Ask for Feedback

Feedback is a wonderful tool, no matter your level of experience and [there are many ways to maximize the quality of the feedback you receive](#). But for young professionals, feedback provides a key additional benefit – it demonstrates humility and a willingness to learn from others. Don't be shy about asking for feedback, even (and especially) from those further along than you. Just make sure it is specific. Simply asking, "Do you mind if I get your input about something?" is a great way to begin.

## 11. Learn to Ask Great Questions

Many young professionals are intimidated about looking foolish and are anxious to prove they know at least some of the answers. Those opportunities will come with experience. But in the meantime, gain a reputation for asking great questions. In my book [Ignite Your Leadership Expertise](#), I share how great questions develop strong listening and critical thinking skills and lead to great discoveries. Questions help put process between opportunity and decision. You don't need to know all the answers to make a meaningful contribution. So collect and ask great questions.

## 12. Follow Up When You Don't Know

"I don't know the answer right now but I'll find it and get back with you." As a young professional, there will be plenty of times when you won't know the answer. There's no shame in that. In fact, in the knowledge age, being able to find an answer is actually more valuable than knowing the answer. But not knowing doesn't let you off the hook from providing a high quality service experience. Provide follow-up promptly and accurately.

### **13. Develop Business Acumen**

Are you a generalist or a specialist? There's no one right answer – the workforce needs both. But whatever you are, it's important to gain exposure to other areas of the organization, and especially the business fundamentals. Everyone ought to learn the basics of financial management, customer service, employee engagement, data analytics and the core services your organization provides. Go out of your way to build your business acumen – otherwise you may need to wait longer than you want for a promotion opportunity.

### **14. Focus on the Result**

Peter Drucker famously observed, “Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.” Activity doesn't equal accomplishment. There are many ways you could be spending your time at work. The less experience you have, the more you must rely on the direction someone else sets for you. But as you develop your expertise, pay special attention to the intended outcome of your work. If you're not sure your activity is achieving the desired result, don't be afraid to raise your hand and ask.

### **15. Put the Customer First**

Do you serve your organization's customers directly? Or do you work in a support role? Who are your team's biggest stakeholders? Just as it's important to focus on the result, it's important to filter your efforts through the lens of what is most important to the customer. For every task you complete, you should be able to articulate why it matters to the customer. If not, it's your responsibility to ask.

### **16. Take Work Off Your Boss's Plate**

One of your main goals in any job should be to make your boss successful. Not all bosses are great at communicating how they spend their time to their staff. But it's safe to assume they have more plates to spin than you do. One of the best ways to stand out is to stand up – and offer to take on more work. If you're good at identifying efficiency opportunities, you'll be able to make the time.

### **17. Provide a Recommendation**

Many a frustrated supervisor has implored their staff, “Don't come to me with a problem unless you also bring a solution.” There's actually an even better approach you can take. Put on your consultant's hat and come with a few options to solve the problem as well as a recommendation. There's no better way to develop your critical thinking skills and demonstrate initiative. Even if your supervisor doesn't take your recommendation, he or she will appreciate your initiative – and you'll always learn more in the process.

## 18. Grow Your Empathy

Did you know you can demonstrate empathy even if you don't have a naturally empathetic personality? It's one of the most important skills you can develop. At its most basic level, empathy is the ability to relate to the feelings and experiences of others. One of the best ways to demonstrate empathy is to thank your customers and coworkers for sharing both their positive and negative experiences and acknowledge briefly *how that must have felt* before providing a response.

## 19. Let Things Go

If anyone told you work would be all fun and games, you were sorely misled. You'll collect some painful experiences as you go, simply because people are human. We all make mistakes and let each other down from time to time. There are many ways to respond. One is to have a meltdown in the moment. Another is to hold a grudge over time. A positive response to occasional painful experiences is to expect them, accept them and continue on. The quicker you can let go, the quicker you can return your focus to your next meaningful endeavor.

## 20. Say "Thank You"

Elton John sang, "Sorry seems to be the hardest word." But the workplace reality is that the words "thank you" appear to be just as difficult. Employees of all generations remain unengaged, feel undervalued and leave for outside opportunities simply because they feel unappreciated. Saying "thank you" ought to become second nature to the point that it flies off your tongue. Thank your mentors, bosses, colleagues and anyone who contributes to your success. Be specific. But most of all, be redundant. If there's one thing to be obnoxious about, it's showing honest, sincere appreciation.

*This resource is an excerpt from the Nathan's book [Stand Out! Become a Young Professional Who Wins at Work and Life](#). The book and several additional young professionals resources are available at [www.nathanmagnuson.com/resources](http://www.nathanmagnuson.com/resources).*



# Stand Out! Become a Young Professional Who Wins at Work and Life

How will I find my sense of purpose? What does success in my job look like? Is it possible to find work I love? Will my organization help me reach my goals – and my dreams?

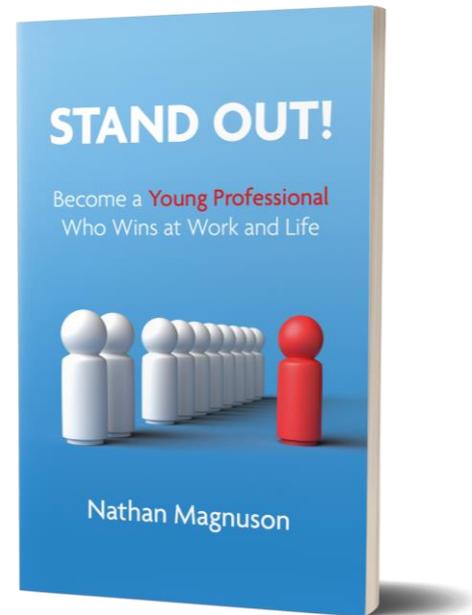
If you've asked any of these questions, you've come to the right place. Not only is it possible to succeed – it's well within your reach. *Stand Out!* is the blueprint for leadership, career and personal development for young professionals.

On the other hand, if you're a senior leader wondering how to engage, develop and retain your young professionals, *Stand Out!* will give you the language you need to get started.

Drawing on over a decade of leadership and consulting experiences with executive teams and young professionals groups, Nathan Magnuson's book *Stand Out!* shows young professionals how to:

- Take ultimate ownership for your career success
- Develop an infectious winning attitude that is impossible to ignore
- Identify and achieve the kind of work you'll love
- Grow your work capabilities, people skills and career savvy
- Engage yourself with your work, colleagues and organization
- Lead with confidence and clarity

It's never been more critical for young professional employees to *Stand Out!* Will you accept the challenge?



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## About Nathan



Nathan Magnuson is a leadership and young professional expert and serves as a consultant, coach and speaker for corporate audiences. He's worked in a staff or consulting role with many Fortune 500 companies and large public service organizations, including Accenture, MASCO, FBI and Defense Intelligence Agency, among others. Nathan is also a military veteran, having served with the Army Special Operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In addition to corporate work, Nathan is the author of the books [\*Stand Out!\*](#) and [\*Ignite Your Leadership Expertise\*](#). His articles and resources are posted on his website [NathanMagnuson.com](http://NathanMagnuson.com) and in various leadership publications.

You can follow Nathan on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) or on [his website](#). To inquire about speaking, consulting or coaching for young professional initiatives, contact [nathan@nathanmagnuson.com](mailto:nathan@nathanmagnuson.com).