Editorial—Granting Respect: A Professional Necessity
Larry J. Grabau*

Try to remember a professional situation in which you were not treated with respect. For most of us, it would be easy to come up with such a painful memory (maybe you’ve felt that stinging blow as recently as today?). Perhaps an important scientist walked out in the middle of your seminar presentation; maybe a senior colleague decided to leave your name off of a submitted manuscript; or an important award was given to someone whose credentials seemed to be no better than your own. Those memories are painful; in fact, they could become poisonous, if we allow them to color our approach to others in our professional contexts. It is my suggestion that we do much more than simply forget, or even forgive, these insults. My suggestion is that we each work to improve our professional working environments by granting respect to our professional colleagues.

Think about the new person in each of our groups. She might be a new post-doc, a fresh graduate student, or an aspiring assistant professor. How do we respond to such an individual? Often, we expect that she must do something to earn our respect. That is, the working assumption appears to be that fresh folks have to perform to become worthy of our respect. As the proud bearers of professional pride in our units, we set the standards of excellence that new person must reach. Until they reach those standards, to our satisfaction, they remain a second-class citizen of our group, and will be subtly treated in ways that remind them of their sub-standard status.

Think about that long-time opponent you have in your working environment. He seems to be always blocking your agenda, protecting his turf, keeping you from getting valuable things done. Think about that administrator who seems to leap to decisions without careful thought, leaving you trying to figure out how to make the best of a difficult situation.

In each of these situations, respect is withheld, either because the individual has not yet had opportunity to earn our respect, or because they have done something (or many things!) we feel makes them unworthy of our respect. I am suggesting that we should rethink our approach to such working colleagues based on both their intrinsic (who they are in terms of aptitudes, abilities, qualities) and extrinsic (what they can do or have done) values as members of our working units.

First, on the intrinsic side, each person comes to us with their whole lifetime of experience, and therefore has some obvious value. For example, we go through elaborate processes to hire a new faculty member, making sure that we get the best available individual to join our groups. Unfortunately, when she arrives, many of us fail to grant her respect until she proves her value to our group. It seems a bit strange that we could tell a person: “You are the very best individual for this job,” and yet fail to grant her respect for this intrinsic value. Of course, some individuals respond to such a challenge (to earn respect) by making every sacrifice to obtain that professional goal. However, many may respond more favorably to the challenge of proving themselves worthy of the respect already granted to them.

A football analogy here—some football coaches feel that they can get the best performance out of their athletes by ridiculing their performance, thereby making them so angry that they play with extra emotion, desperately trying to prove that their coach is wrong about them. Ironically, when a coach employing this strategy wins, he (not his players) is the one who gets credit, because he is the one who made them perform at a higher level. It is perhaps self-evident that this coaching strategy has serious downsides. Other coaches have decided they should approach their players with respect, encouraging them to reach the levels they are capable of reaching, and providing them with the resources they need (conditioning, skills, creativity) to accomplish such goals. Interestingly, when such athletes perform at a high level, they are the first to receive accolades, but often quickly share the credit with their coaches. In a similar way, I’m convinced that our units will all be stronger if we recognize the intrinsic value of the individuals entering our teams and grant them respect even before they have earned it in our own work contexts.

The extrinsic value of our work opponents is often harder for us to see. Briefly, this amounts to an acknowledgment, on our part, that the opponent has value to our unit. Opening our eyes to this possibility will allow us to see the good things that the opponent brings to the table. Maybe you’ve fought curricular battles with a colleague who is convinced that a lock-step, content-based set of courses is necessary, while you feel that a more flexible course program placing more emphasis on the development of leadership skills should be arranged. The decision to grant that colleague a measure of respect may rest on the recognition that he is truly interested in the welfare of students; perhaps he is under pressure from their potential employers to make sure that they have a specific set of content firmly in hand. Of course, you will probably still feel that yours is the curricular high road; however, if you begin to think about the reasons behind this person’s approaches, it will be much easier for you to grant him respect. Often, such a step is critical to working out the sorts of compromises that ultimately allow us to build bridges between colleagues (instead of cementing our differences).

That’s my argument—we ought to grant others in our work environment respect for both their intrinsic and extrinsic values. It is my contention that we ourselves would like to be treated in this way, and further, that our work environments would be more conducive to high achievement and job satisfaction if we intentionally chose to respect others.◆

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