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# 5-Step Process to Improve Executive Professionalism™

By Kelly Watkins

Executive Professionalism™ is ...  
the ability to communicate & perform like a credible, effective leader

## Step 1 - Evaluate



How do we identify ourselves and each other? In the animal world, each zebra has unique stripes. Young zebras use these distinct stripes to find their mothers and to identify other members of the herd. The same is true for giraffes - except, of course, their unique patterns are shaped more like spots than stripes. During a safari to Kenya, I had the opportunity to observe both zebras and giraffes in the wild. It was a magnificent adventure (... at least for me. I'm not sure how the animals felt about it!)

As humans, we use other methods to identify ourselves. One of these is behavior style assessments. There are several types of profiles available. Since I'm a Wiley Authorized Partner for the DiSC© Behavior Profile, that's the assessment I use.

Beyond knowing who we are, it's important to understand how others perceive us. That's why the evaluation process is necessary. If you're working with an Executive Coach, the evaluation might include 360° assessments, behavior profiles, and surveys. The Coach might also conduct interviews with your peers, boss, and staff.

For my clients, I create a customized Pre-Assessment Package that is tailored to their needs. Sometimes these are quite in-depth. Other times, they are basic. (If you'd like to **know more about using an Executive Coach**, visit: [www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com).)

If you are working without a coach, then you will need to evaluate yourself. You can implement this on a small scale by thinking about what you need to improve. Try simply sitting quietly at your desk, without distractions, and make a list.

If you would like to evaluate yourself on a larger scale, then you can use an approach similar to the Coach's. First, determine who your stakeholders are. These can be your boss, coworkers, staff, or even your customers. Then, interview them.

Let's keep this simple. Don't over-think it. When you interview your stakeholders, ask them this one question. "What is one thing I can improve to be a more effective leader?" We will talk about your responses to their comments a little later.

## Step 2 - Select

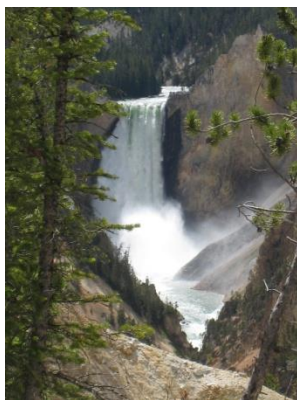
If you're working with an Executive Coach, he/she will help you select priorities. For example, my clients and I review the results of their Pre-Assessment and then determine together where the priorities are.

If you aren't working with a Coach, you will need to ask yourself, "What do I need to work on the most?" Review all of the responses you received when you interviewed your stakeholders or made your list.

Select one item. What is one behavior you will commit to changing or one skill you will commit to learning?

This is your "One Thing." You will focus on this One Thing.

## Step 3 – Create Action Plan



Now it's time to determine how you will achieve your goals. You need a plan. Why? Think about it. How often do we want something, yet fail to create a plan to achieve it? Then, we wonder why we didn't succeed! (If we want to go down the river safely, we'd better have a plan for dealing with the waterfall. By the way, I took this picture of this particular waterfall in Yellowstone.)

How will you improve your One Thing? By developing an Action Plan.

At this point, it's time to return to your stakeholders and solicit their feedback. Ask them for suggestions on how you can improve your One Thing. This step is very important for two reasons.

One, you will receive good suggestions from those who have identified your challenge areas.

Two, your stakeholders will know what you are working on. This is vital. I cannot state enough the importance of credibility and perception. This concept is something I discuss in all my seminars and training sessions. (After all, credibility is the foundation of Executive Professionalism™!)

*“People don't believe you have **ability** ...  
until they believe you have **credibility**.”*  
--Kelly Watkins

You are trying to change perceptions about how other people view you. In order for them to believe you have changed, they must be aware you are attempting the change. By asking for their feedback, you are letting them know you are making an effort.

Yes, asking for suggestions is difficult ... very difficult. It requires you to make yourself vulnerable. Try to view this as a positive situation.

**Global culture note:** While Executive Coaching is popular and even prestigious in the USA, the concept is still viewed differently in some countries / cultures. When I work with my international clients, I adapt the exercises to fit their situation. Since typically these clients are working in global companies with a Western business environment, I still encourage them to step outside their comfort zone.

Regardless of your home country or culture, we are all human beings. And, as such, we don't like to be “wrong.” We don't like to hear about our failures or our weaknesses.



This means the biggest challenge when asking for feedback is ... to listen to the answer. By not listening, we create our own roadblocks (just like this mama rhino and her baby blocked our road in the Masai Mara for about 30 minutes).

Because we don't want to admit our faults, we argue and make excuses when people tell us how to improve. This is hard for me, too! I admit it. Don't argue and don't use the dreaded “But ...” (I even offer a Seminar titled, **“The Power of Positive, Professional Language.”** [www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com).)

Also, avoid excuses, such as, “I don’t have time to implement that suggestion.” Or, “Well, I tried that last year, and it didn’t work.”

Instead of arguing, simply say Thank You and leave. Be warned. This will be difficult the first few times. It will become easier. Note: I didn’t say “easy.” I said “easier.” (Smile!)

Now that you have your suggestions, create an action plan. What are the specific steps you will take to achieve your goal?

## Step 4 – Implement



Don’t just sit there. (Your goal may feel as formidable as this mountain I photographed in Antarctica. But, you can achieve the goal, if you simply start moving – yourself, not the mountain.)

In this step, you implement the action plan you created. Start working on the area you selected.

Even though you may be focusing on changing a behavior, this will often involve learning new skills. In my 20+ years of experience, I have discovered that most behavior goals involve improving some aspect of **communication skills**. This means you need to find the resources to learn and develop the skills you need to improve your behavior.

Here is one resource. I have created a **Professional Development Academy**. This is a 3-month, online program that offers 12 one-hour Modules. The focus is on communication and professional skills. The Academy is highly interactive. You attend the courses at your convenience. ([www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com))

There are many other resources available. Find something that works for you ... and start learning!

If you look around your company and realize there are several employees with similar learning needs, then the most cost-effective solution is to hire an expert to custom-design a program for that group / team. This can vary from a two-hour seminar to a year-long training program. (Personally, my favorite type of program to design is long-term, because it provides people the time they need to learn skills and change behavior.) To learn more about the customized solutions provided by Expressive Concepts, visit: [www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com).

## ☑ Step 5 – Maintain



In this step, you continue the cycle. As you work on your One Thing, check in regularly with your stakeholders. Ask for additional suggestions. Ask for their feedback on your progress.

This step is critical because this is how the stakeholders know you are advancing. In other words, they won't know you are improving unless you tell them! This is where you "move the gauge on the meter" of their perception of you. Then, when they are open to a new mindset, they will see your actual progress.

Speaking of perception, this picture is the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the world's tallest building. Because of the lights, the picture looks different from usual photos. Dubai is such a great case study for business and management - I even wrote a book about it. Dubai maintains their cutting edge by constantly improving. Are you?

While you are improving behavior, are you also enhancing your skill set? Be sure to invest effort to learn the skills you identified earlier that are in need of development.

Have you achieved your goal? Have you improved your One Thing? If so, it is time to start the process over again. Select the Next Thing you will improve. And, don't forget to keep working on the first One Thing, as you add new goals to the Action Plan.

## ⊗ Notes

- Some concepts adapted from Marshall Goldsmith's teachings (with permission).
- All photos were taken by Kelly Watkins during her travels to all 7 continents and all 50 US states. Read the adventures & see photos: [www.GlobetrottingWithKelly.com](http://www.GlobetrottingWithKelly.com)

## ⊗ Resources

- **Need an Executive Coach?** Kelly Watkins is a Marshall Goldsmith-certified Executive Coach. [www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com)
- **Need to train your staff or department?** We offer highly-customized training designed to provide you solutions. [www.executiveprofessionalism.com](http://www.executiveprofessionalism.com)
- **DiSC® Behavior Profiles** – Receive a 23-page individualized report - all about you! Available from Kelly (a Wiley Authorized Partner). To order - [Kelly@KeepCustomers.com](mailto:Kelly@KeepCustomers.com)
- **"What Got You Here Won't Get You There"** - Book by Marshall Goldsmith.
- **"Dubai ... and the People Side of Global Business"**- Book by Kelly Watkins. To order [Kelly@KeepCustomers.com](mailto:Kelly@KeepCustomers.com)
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