

# PROFESSIONAL WORK ETHICS FOR PLANETARIANS

**Mike Murray  
Clark Planetarium  
Salt Lake City, Utah**

The planetarium business has become increasingly complex in recent years, not only due to technical sophistication but also because of a widening portfolio of programs and heightened expectations to provide quality presentations with minimal resources. As a result, it becomes more crucial than ever to sharpen our skills in production and presentation in order to operate more efficiently and provide a better product for our audiences. Simply stated from the public's viewpoint:

FOR A PRODUCT TO BE POPULAR, IT HAS TO BE GOOD.  
FOR A PRODUCT TO STAY POPULAR, IT HAS TO GET BETTER.

What this really relates to is **people**; we are the ones that have to constantly improve, change, and evolve. To do so keeps things modern, fresh, exciting, and interesting to our audiences and even to ourselves. Of course this is easier said than done – it's human nature to stick with what we know and with what's "comfortable," but this is also the reason for stagnation and mediocrity.

## **General Work Practices**

Many of us know the basics. Unfortunately, it's when we're under pressure and need them the most that they usually get flouted. So here they are:

1. Do things right the first time. The amount of time it takes to rush something together, then go back and fix it almost always totals more time than it would have taken to just do it right in the first place. Not enough time you say? Then...
2. Make the most efficient use of time by planning a *balanced* work schedule. As things get complex, you can't just "take things as they come up" for everything. Devise a schedule with specific milestones and deadlines. Make lists and update them at least once a week. If you pace yourself, plan ahead often, and prioritize appropriately, then you will be able to stay on track with practice and production schedules.
3. Keep things organized and put them where they belong for quick and easy access (see how this relates to the above?).
4. Communicate often. Coordinate with other staff, supervisors, and volunteers on projects, meetings, and rehearsals. Never assume it's just going to happen on

its own. Any problems that arise should be promptly taken directly to the person(s) involved. Don't hesitate to ask for help when needed and discuss potential solutions at team meetings.

5. Stay current on the profession. One of the best ways to improve your techniques and broaden your creative approaches is by reading the professional literature, and discussing ideas with fellow staff. Whenever possible, attend conferences, workshops, and study trips to other planetariums. Study the methods of visual storyboarding and production. Become aware of the services of regional and national planetarium organizations.

6. Keep up on current events. Most planetariums maintain a library with a good cross section of popular works in astronomy, space, and related sciences. For example: observational astronomy, star atlases, history of astronomy and space exploration, biographies of famous scientists, star lore, mythology, philosophy of science, topics in research astronomy, textbooks, activity guides, resource and reference books, amateur astronomy techniques, and so on. Most also have subscriptions to magazines like *Sky & Telescope*, *Astronomy*, *Mercury*, *Science News*, *The Skeptical Enquirer*, *Scientific American* – make sure you read them regularly! As a planetarian YOU are the person that audiences will ask for the latest information, so a basic requirement means staying up to speed with “what’s up”!

7. Be professional and respectful in your dealings with the public and your fellow employees. With the public, no matter what their viewpoint, always be patient and courteous in responding to inquiries, suggestions, or complaints. It is not appropriate to inject personal beliefs or become argumentative with patrons. With fellow staff, everyone should be expected to know the difference between constructive suggestions and destructive whining. In other words, problems get solved by careful thinking and proposing positive solutions, not by making personal criticisms.

8. Commitment to integrity. “No excuses, just results,” one of my teachers used to say. Professionalism in public programming means always being dependable, reliable, and respectful in communications with staff and the public. The credibility of the entire institution is at stake with every interaction a presenter makes.

9. Never be so presumptuous to assume that your viewpoint is always the best way to do things. To be effective at planetarium presentation means keeping an open mind, maintaining some perspective on the “big picture,” putting your audience’s needs before your own, getting advice from other professionals in related (or even non-related) fields, and a willingness to experiment with new ideas and techniques. Good producers and presenters are always learning and looking for ways to expand their horizons!