The Fears of Being a New Professional

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The power of words never ceases to amaze me. Simply changing the words in a job title can create a shockwave turning anxiety into elation, or pure joy into utter fear. When the wording of my title changed from 'Graduate Assistant' to 'Coordinator,' I experienced the latter. Although I was beginning my professional journey at an institution I had already called home, I recognized a full-time salary meant full-time expectations and greater responsibility for student experiences in our fraternity/sorority community. In just under a year in this role, I have learned how to dismiss the fear coming with this new professional territory by finding my voice amongst my peers, focusing on students' needs, and accepting that mistakes will inevitably happen.

One of the scariest situations for a new professional is being in that first team meeting. Do you say something? How should you say it? Will you seem unqualified if you don't speak? Will you seem too sure of yourself if you *do* speak? If you find your voice, you can overcome this fear of not knowing what to say, when to say it, and how to say it. Finding your voice, however, can be very tricky. The reality is, it takes time to figure out what works with your team. Be patient and let go of the pressure to say the right thing at the right moment. With time, those words begin to flow naturally as you learn more about yourself, your peers, and how you mesh as a team. The confident presence of my peers allowed me to find the space I needed to speak freely.

Another important consideration is recognizing the impact personal identities have on your voice. Finding your voice becomes even more daunting when you insert a particular identity. Beyond deciphering what to say, when to say it, and/or how to say it, you must also be mindful of *who* is speaking and who is receiving the message. For myself, I have to navigate my voice and identity as a Black male, a member of a historically Black fraternity, an Ohio State alumnus, an advocate for students, or some combination of these. I am no longer afraid of inserting my identities into the collective voice of our team because I recognize those identities shape my unique perspective, and the intermingling of diverse thoughts enhances our team's ability to make sound decisions. I have acknowledged one must have a certain level of comfort with themselves for their voice to flourish.

Finding comfort with who I am was also integral in moving past a desire for students to like and accept me as their advisor. My fear was if my students disliked me, it might threaten my job security. It's easy to lose sight of what truly matters in this field when the focus is on being amicable. This approach can lead to a lack of authenticity, which students tend to pick up on. Also, being viewed as the 'cool' advisor on staff only happens naturally. What I didn't realize was my students would like me if I was open, vulnerable, relatable, and understood their needs. While my students needed reassurance that I knew what I was doing, I learned they also needed to see I was humble enough to own that I did not know everything. This realization relieved a tremendous amount of pressure I had placed on myself and made it easier to find comfort in my role.

As clichéd as it may sound, we've all made mistakes in the workplace and fear being reprimanded when they occur. In our line of work, we handle student development while also managing university protocols, so there is even more pressure to do good work. The good thing is, we can take ourselves less seriously once we accept mistakes will happen. We can then move forward quickly as long as these mistakes are correctible and communicated immediately. Give yourself the space necessary to have a misstep and recover from it. Some of the best learning in our young careers will be unearthed in the moments where things did not go as expected. Embrace those mistakes, and let them guide you as you progress professionally.

It is normal to experience fear as a new professional. There are many uncertainties ahead as you begin to work with diverse populations of students and are surrounded by a new group of peers. I found solace in knowing that finding my voice, keeping students' needs first, and embracing mistakes would allow me to work through my fears as I became comfortable in my new role. In the end, you were offered the job because a university believed in you. Know that above all things, that is enough.