

Professionalism and Empathy: They Can Coexist

By Clare Henry, Northern Arizona University '21

I arrived at the legislature, the virtual legislature, with many questions and doubts. Like other interns, I wondered if I could achieve in a professional setting. I didn't know if I could feel like I had a place here. Entering any new environment can feel overwhelming and working with elected officials only makes it more intimidating.

One of the worst parts about starting something new, is wondering if you can be yourself. I remember preparing for the first week and thinking that I would need to bring my professional act. I wanted to build meaningful connections with others, but I worried that needing to be professional would mean having to be cold. It was an inner turmoil of wanting to be vulnerable and open but knowing that I also had a professional role to fill and expectations to meet.

Early in the session, I scheduled a meeting with folks from the Washington Recovery Alliance. More than any other meeting I had hosted before, I was nervous about this one. This past year I sought treatment for addiction, and I knew the content of this meeting would feel incredibly personal. I didn't want my connection to the material to impede my ability to be professional, but I also knew I would have a unique opportunity to relate to someone in this meeting and help them feel empathized with.

With sweat dripping down my arms, I clicked to join the Teams meeting, took some deep breaths, and waited for the participants to join. Once they joined, I did my regular introduction and passed the mic to them to hear what they wanted to share. They shared what bills they wanted support on and overall goals for their organization. And then one person shared her experience with addiction. She spoke about her son and his journey of recovery. She opened up about the difficulties of accessing care and the misconceptions others had about her son.

The feeling was heavy, and I wanted to honor that the best I could. Without overthinking, I shared that I was also in recovery. I shared that one reason I am proud to work for Senator Keiser is because she has championed health care issues, including behavioral health and mental health. I thanked them for sharing their story and for being vulnerable. I thanked them for being an advocate for their son.

I could see them become less anxious. They thanked me for sharing back with them. I left the meeting feeling overwhelmed. I knew I had been professional, respectful, and vulnerable. I had been able to show empathy, but also maintained boundaries regarding my role in the legislature. It was this moment and other tiny moments, that I realized I can find a place here and in other professional settings. I belong here because public service is best when you bring your whole self, even when you aren't sure what that looks like and even when it's your first-time building connections sober. Public service is best done from a place of empathy and a place of connection with others.

From then on, I noticed again and again when work was being done empathetically. Representatives and Senators shared their own experiences on the floor and their reasons for being passionate about an issue. People showed up to testify about bills and told their own story. Elected officials that spoke to the intern's cohort were honest about their paths to get where they are today. It was all these moments, the moments we share with constituents, coworkers, and advocates where we have a unique ability to show empathy and still provide a professional atmosphere.

Being professional can still include being empathetic. And in public service, like in the legislature, public service is often best done with empathy.