

# Mastering Communication Skills for Success in Business

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Patrick Lageraaen:

Welcome to another episode of the UB School of Management podcast. My name is Patrick Lageraaen and I'm your host along with Eric Raine. Today's guest is Professor Mary Ann Rogers. She's a clinical associate professor at the School of Management teaching the first year MBA class management communication. We talk about her class and the art and importance of professional communication. Professor Rogers, thanks for being here.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Thank you for inviting me.

Patrick Lageraaen:

I've been really looking forward to this conversation. We mentioned on the podcast before with Tim Maynes that one of the things that managers are lacking are the soft skills, and that's the thing that the MBA program teaches that a lot of other graduate level degrees may not teach. And communications is a skill, it's one of those soft skills and it's a hallmark of the MBA degree. And I really feel like communications is just one of the most fun parts about business because it's an art. And so I'm really looking forward to getting your perspective on a lot of these things. Can we please start by briefly introducing yourself and your background?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yes. I have been involved with the university for many years. I got my undergraduate degree in communication from the College of Arts and Sciences, and I also have an MBA here from UB. I got into this role in a very funny way and a very lucky way. I was in a PhD program that I got to the N2, but I never finished it unfortunately. But I was in the PhD program in communication when Jerry Newman, who was in organizational behavior in the School of Management, found this blockbuster business book on his hands that he had written. And he was invited to crisscross the country on a national book tour to promote this breakout book. And he was about to launch six sections of the communication course for the first time ever in the MBA program. And I had known him for a long time. I pretty much grew up in the School of Management as an undergrad. I worked there and I'd known most of the people.

And he got in touch with me and he said, "Do you feel like you could teach? Do you feel like you could put a course together? I just need someone to fill in for me for this one semester." And I really had no idea what teaching entailed, what that course would look like. But I said, yes. It was an incredible opportunity. I was going to do it one time. He comes back from the tour, I'll give the class back and I'll just be on my way. And it turned out he got back from the book tour. He took a look and he said, "That seemed like it went pretty well. Why don't you just take it from here on in?"

And that was the bizarre, strange, fortunate history of the comm course. I never forget how lucky I feel. I love the MBA program so much. I loved being in it. I love teaching in it. I love our students. It's a very strange feeling when my course ends seven weeks into the first semester, I have feelings of sadness where people kind of laugh at me because to me it's almost emotional to look at the students for the last day and it's like, oh shoot, I'm done with this now. I have to go on to other parts of the school, but I can't really emphasize enough just how much this class means and how much the program means.

Patrick Lageraen:

Especially when they're only just starting their MBA journey. You've just shepherded them in and then you have to say goodbye.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yes.

Eric Raine:

And those seven weeks go by so fast too. There's a lot in that course, which we'll get into, but I think it's actually great that it's right at the beginning of the start of a full-time program in the MBA for sure.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Thanks for saying that. It used to be at the very end of the first year, the last seven weeks, and it just didn't work. The things that you as students need are really critical at the beginning of the program, so we made that switch pretty early on.

Patrick Lageraen:

Because this stuff is so important and practicing it non-stop for two years is extremely helpful. What is your role at UB?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I have a couple of different roles. I'm on the faculty, naturally. I also oversee our undergraduate communication program, which in our school it's communication literacy two, and it takes the form of MGG 303. Some of your listeners might've already been through it. There's 22 sections of it offered every semester. I oversee three full-time clinical faculty who do a great job, very passionate, all three of them and a handful of adjuncts that rotate in and out as the years go on. And I also serve as our school's assistant dean for diversity and inclusion, which I feel is one of the most important roles I've ever had in my life. There's so much to learn. Our school is embracing diversity and inclusion. We still have a long way to go. And so that's pretty much it. Those three things.

Patrick Lageraen:

Are you working on anything outside of your classes or just the two classes and your role as assistant dean?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I also teach undergrads in the spring, so I teach in that communication course that I just described. And I have a special project this year. I'm what's known as an EDJI fellow, E-D-J-I, and so that's equity, diversity, justice and inclusion. It's a UB fellowship that they have me on and I get to spend time figuring out a program... Just figuring out how we're going to really handle Ed and I in the classroom. I talk to students all the time. They know when they see it, they know when it's missing. And the challenge in our school is that we have a lot of quantitative areas.

How do you get this material into management science and systems or how do you get it into operations or how do you get it into accounting? And we're finding ways of doing that. I'm sitting down with everyone one by one and just seeing what the opportunities might be and where some room could be made to get some of these elements, and especially the inclusion part because our student body is so diverse, they're from all over the world, and the more we can make them feel welcome and included and give them a sense of belonging, we know that'll make the program even that much stronger.

Eric Raine:

I think that's a great point, and the fact that the university's focusing on that, especially given the international student population that we're fortunate enough to have here at the university. I think if I'm remembering back correctly to the start of MBA Advantage, when we actually were just even before

starting the full-time MBA program, one of the things that jumped out to me was there was some data given to us as far as the applicant pool and then who's here in the room with us today, and this is the first time we're meeting people. And I think they said it was seven or eight countries we're represented amongst our cohort of around 90 or so students for our cohort. And I was just floored. I was like, this is incredible. And I knew there was international students that were part of the program, but that's just the MBA program. Then you start to think about all of the School of Management and the things you're mentioning, so it's great to know that there are initiatives in place and that your leadership inside of that is making an impact and that it's an ongoing process.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Most definitely. It's very important to the dean, our program, and it's the best part of being at UB, I think is the diversity. You just inherently pick up so much information from your fellow students.

Patrick Lageraen:

Coming back to your class, management communication in the MBA program, could you just tell us a little bit about it? What's covered in it?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Well, it's interesting. Communication is such a broad topic. It means so many different things to so many people. When I first designed the course, I just took a good look and I thought, what really should be in here? And there's probably many other things that should still be included. The course was just expanded from one and a half credits to two, so I had a little bit more room to pack more things in it, but it's essentially broken down into three areas. And the first is organizational communication, so figuring out how to work up, down and across an organization, what the barriers are, how to open doors, the communication snafus that occur just by the way an organization is structured is very interesting. And I think students really have to know how to navigate those things. There's a fair amount of experience in the room.

Students have been through internships or they're working. They're able to contribute where some of these problems appear, the things that they've seen in real life. I think that that's really relevant just in terms of discussion and in terms of preparing our students for what's ahead of them. The second area we look at persuasion through the lens of a couple of different models, and I always start by saying everything is persuasion, all communication is persuasion. Even if you're just giving a business

presentation on a budget, you have to get the room to agree with you. There's a lot of work there. We cover the work of Robert Cialdini and a couple of other models. And then the third area is broken down into skills, so some business writing, understanding genres and business protocols and what's expected in the workplace. And then what seems to be the most popular part of the course is presentation skills. And every student is expected to go through their own presentation for at least seven minutes, you probably recall.

Patrick Lageraen:

Of course, absolutely.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Hopefully we're not scaring anyone off. The goal of the course is to give everyone the support that they need, even if they're terrified and many students are terrified. The first day when they hear about that requirement, I can see that there's some nerves already kicking in. But the whole point is to give everyone a place to practice, a place to make mistakes, a place to recognize those mistakes and then get better as they go through the rest of the program.

Patrick Lageraen:

I'm glad you brought up the presentation because when I heard about it, as you can imagine, I wasn't too excited about having to public speak, but I'm so glad I did it and then you recorded it so we could watch it after. When I watched the recording, I'm like, wow, I don't look too nervous up there. I actually did a decent job. And that really kind of boosted my confidence for all of the subsequent presentations throughout the MBA program.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's terrific. That's the objective. It's not easy for most people. It's hard for me the first day of class, I've got butterflies and we acknowledge that and we make it more of a human experience, and the room I feel is a very safe place to practice. Students really hold each other up and support each other through that particular exercise, and it just always seems to work out pretty well.

Patrick Lageraen:

Definitely an important part of the course. You mentioned business writing skills. Is that just official reports or is it emails? What goes into that?

Mary Ann Rogers:

We look at format. What is the proper format, what's expected? There should be a salutation in an email, there should be a closing, there should be contact information. And then we move into... What it is, it's emails, it's letters, it's memoranda, which are still very relevant. It's report writing. There is a report required by the end of the term, and it also focuses on patterns. How can you write in a more persuasive fashion and what you do when you have to deliver really negative news. There's a way that you can pretty much stylize or there's choices you could make to help ensure that that message is received clearly, but yet with some compassion, word choice, tone, things of that nature.

Patrick Lageraen:

And one example of that is we also talk about where to place the critical point of your message in a block of speech or a block of text. If you hide it in the middle, it's probably not going to be retained. Does that sound about right?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yeah. Excellent. I'm so happy you remembered that. That's really important.

Eric Raine:

Or even when it's negative news or something needs to be communicated and it's critical, it may be not received well, just given the nature of it, even if it's delivered in a good format. But knowing the nuance around how it might be received and understanding then the position it puts you in as the writer or the leader or whatever position you're in sending that communication is at least giving it its best chance of being communicated and accepted in a way that's most effective. And I think that's something that is a great takeaway from your course because that's a very challenging component of business communication. And I think that knowing that students can come into that course if they're feeling as though that's something they either haven't focused on before or it's something that they know they need assistance with, it provides that framework.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yep. No, thank you. That's precisely right. There's a lot of technique and skill that goes into this. If someone takes it really seriously, I think that even just in that very short time, they can come out better than they came into the course.

Patrick Lageraen:

Wasn't the takeaway for giving negative news to put it right at the beginning? Because if you put it a paragraph down, it's like they just skip right to it anyway.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Well, it's actually the pattern is buffer, explanation, bad news, closing. Closing in a positive fashion, and you hope that the reader will keep an open mind and absorb the material. We have an open discussion about that. I'll be honest, there's some MBA students that really don't like writing like that. They'll say, just don't sugarcoat it, just give it to me. But we find in real life when that pattern isn't obeyed, people tend to get really mad. We use the example of a rejection letter in class, and I have a story of a student who was rejected from a really... It was an Ivy League school, and the message just said, you have not been accepted into this class, and it was pretty brutal. You want to maybe just lend a little bit of compassion again and give the reader something that we know this is hurtful and we're explaining why, and hopefully make that dynamic a little bit better for the reader.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thanks for reminding me on that.

Mary Ann Rogers:

No, that's okay.

Eric Raine:

Getting back to what you mentioned about presentation skills, and I know Patrick, you mentioned watching the recording, which I also found to be very impactful, especially because that presentation is towards the end of that seven week sequence. And we do have multiple opportunities. It might not necessarily be like a presentation per se, but we will be in front of the class on our own speaking under certain conditions or circumstances, not to give away anything for the class, but just there are repeat opportunities to present in one way or another. And the great thing about that is you're getting feedback along those first weeks as you lead through it that by the time you get to the presentation skills, it is a real chance to take the things you've already learned in the handful of weeks leading into it. And I think that makes a really big difference on the way that you can condense now even two credits into seven weeks.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's just really getting over that hump. I find on the first day people will come up and they'll just simply say that they can't do it, they can't give presentations, they can't do it, and it's such an obstacle. And by the time they're in the midterm, they find out that they can do it, and that's just a massive hump to get over. And then I feel they're really on their way.

Patrick Lageraen:

How about just as an example of something we learned that goes into that presentation, making a PowerPoint properly. You teach us how to properly structure PowerPoint slides, where to place the pictures, how big the text should be, what colors. It may seem trivial, but that was really helpful. Those are the questions that people are afraid to ask and afraid to look up. But now we all have perfectly formatted slides.

Eric Raine:

Even just knowing spacing and font style, how it'll be looked at on the receiving end and knowing your audience and delivering information in a way that there's less distraction from just the way it's laid out. These are things that I think a lot of MBA students coming into the program... Speaking for myself, I thought, okay, I think I know the generalities around, don't put too many words on a slide, don't have these pictures in a certain way. But once we actually understood the more formalized approach to the things that you're teaching us, it really combines maybe prior experiences or thoughts around how to lay out a slide deck and actually make that something that isn't a distractor and that you can focus on delivering the verbal component of a presentation.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's the key. Beautiful slides are one thing, and I think everyone really appreciates that, but the goal here is naturalness in delivery, so not walking up to the front of the room, turning around and reading from the slide, because I think everyone listening has probably experienced that. And it gets tedious very quickly, and it's very easy to lose the audience's interest because we know what's coming. We can read just as well as the presenter, so there's really no point in doing that.

Eric Raine:



Or even the use of space. That was something that was very new to me in the context of the course that you were teaching to us. As far as, you may find yourself in a conference room, a boardroom, in the front of a lecture hall, you really... In the future, you don't necessarily know the context of where you might be, but understanding even how the audience is set up, who you're talking to in the audience sometimes changes. And then challenging us to actually move around and utilize the actual open space for presenting-

Patrick Lageraen:

That was a good point.

Eric Raine:

... I think makes a very big difference in the way that... Because you can get the slide deck right. You could maybe not be reading off the slides and you could be doing a lot of those other things right, but if you're standing in the wrong place, or you're just-

Patrick Lageraen:

Or holding onto the podium for dear life.

Eric Raine:

Or just finding different things that try to... You're trying to comfort yourself, maybe even subconsciously to the gravity of a presentation. But being able to force ourselves to learn to do that, I think makes a very big difference in something that I take away from those first seven weeks.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Oh, good. Yeah, I think so too. We want our students to shine and just using some techniques like that really builds their presence. They're able to look at the audience members and hold eye contact and really make an impact through their presentation posture. And that's just something that I can't really teach. Everyone just has to practice that and go through the hard work of getting through that discomfort, getting out from behind the desk and really working that room. You'll notice Professor Lindsay is a master at that just naturally. He doesn't think about it. He just loves using that presentation space.

Patrick Lageraen:

He'll walk up to the back of the room and he's still talking.

Eric Raine:

Or jump on a desk. You never know.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's the best.

Patrick Lageraen:

He's good.

Mary Ann Rogers:

He just does that organically. But for the rest of us, we have to practice that and figure that out.

Patrick Lageraen:

One of the main differentiators of the UB MBA program is Corporate Champions, which takes place during the first fall semester. It encompasses multiple courses, so that's communications, organizational behavior and statistics. One of these courses is yours, so what skills are you looking for in this presentation? How does communication tie into this larger project?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I grade the paper, the other... Professor Maynes looks and reads the paper, gives me some comments that grade, but the presentation carries a lot of it. And we just want to see everything executed that we've been talking about for almost a month and a half. I look for great slides. I really don't want to see note cards in anyone's hands. We've gotten beyond that hopefully by that point, so readiness. A rehearsed product, cohesiveness, we can see if one group member carried most of the work and the others are a little shaky. You can see a good team project that's integrated where everyone's engaged and they're executing really nicely. What we really look for is a simplicity and story. Those are huge concepts. It's natural... The presentation is 20 minutes long and there's a lot of information to get through. And the inclination for most students is to just pack it with as much as they possibly can to get through as much information as they possibly can.

The first iteration, which is looked at by second year students, it's always the same. It's graph, graph, graph, graph, graph, data, data, data. And it's very hard for an audience member to digest that because it's so dense and there's so much, and it's just not streamlined in any way. It's no one's fault. It's a human nature to do that. And what we want to see, we want to see the presentation breathe a bit. What did you find in the data? Can you tell us a story? Where did this data lead you to? To what conclusion? There's a cliché, less is more. In a way, we want to see that less is more, and what was the main takeaway from all that works? Rather than just hammering us with data skills and so forth, we want to see some emotion. We want to see some stories, something that really connected that we can absorb and understand pretty quickly. Because we watch 14, 16 of these in a row, so what makes one stand out? There's certain inclusions that really make a difference.

Eric Raine:

I think that the cliché you mentioned is really powerful in the context of this type of project. And the idea of less is more, it could almost be said as you're looking for more from less in a way.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's a great one.

Patrick Lageraen:

Good way to say it.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's it. I'm going to put that in my notes.

Patrick Lageraen:

But it's almost like directly at odds with the other thing you said, which is that we're constantly trying to sell people and get people on board. The immediate inclination is to prove to them that we know what we're talking about because look at all these graphs we have, look at all this data we have.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's a credibility standpoint, and that's certainly valid. I just trained a bunch of university PhD students. They have a three-minute talk. It's a competition. Four years of their research, one slide, three minutes.

Patrick Lageraen:

Oh, that's hard.

Mary Ann Rogers:

And the same thing with them. They just wanted to pack everything into the slide, but first of all, it's really not visible and it can't be comprehended. To somehow get them... And then another cliché, explain this like you're explaining your work to a five-year-old. You really can't underestimate that technique. It's in simple terms, it's hitting all of us for the first time. How can we really understand what it is you're doing and the impact that you're trying to make?

Eric Raine:

That distillation process is very challenging.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yes, it is.

Eric Raine:

It makes me think of the Panache Tech. I participated in it with another student in the MBA program, and I remember when we met with our mentor that we had the opportunity to work with in that process, we were heading into the semifinal portion of that competition. And I remember the feedback was directly what you're talking about, and he basically said, you need to cut this time in half and you need to cut your slides by like 50 to 60%. And we were sitting there going, well, this version of it is already the cut down version.

And so that process, I can't imagine doing three to four minutes on one slide. We ended up getting it down to six minutes on 10 slides, and that already felt impossible in a way. But really in the end, it makes for a better product and the audience is able to actually get... Because the whole goal is to communicate something to that audience. And if you're able to do it with less, that should be easier in a way, even though it's kind of paradoxical, because you're actually... It's a lot more challenging than it seems. But the fact that that's something you focus on in the course I think is vital.

Mary Ann Rogers:

I think we all agree when we see really strong clear presentations, that means the presenter put a lot of work into it. It's easy just to have a data dump and say, here's everything. But to really go through and do the hard work of paring that down and pulling out what's most important is something that's valued by anyone watching.

Patrick Lageraen:

And understanding what's important to the audience and not what's important to you, because there's a big difference there.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Absolutely. And I'm glad you brought that up because in business writing or in presenting, our goal is always to be audience centered. It's not about us. It's always about what's best for that audience. And even just realizing that I think is a big step forward for a lot of people, that you really do have to care and figure that audience out and really bring your best in terms of connecting with them.

Patrick Lageraen:

Stepping out of the academic side of things, we discuss what we learned in the course and in the MBA program in general coming into the world of work. Why is a proper approach to communication important when you finally graduate and get a job? Why is this valuable?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Great question, Patrick. Again, communication means so much to people, and we are training managers and leaders, and it would be very easy for anyone's career to derail if they didn't have an understanding or if they didn't practice these things. It's vitally important for leadership, the clarity of the message and the ability to have compassion for people and empathy and be able to lead them along in a good way. It's critical for collaboration. The MBA program is very team-based because the world is team-based and we're preparing you for that aspect of work life. Being able to draw people together, get people to get along and collaborate and communicate team issues is a must. There's conflict resolution. I have a unit on conflict that your year didn't get because the course was a little shorter, but it's not acceptable to run away from conflict, which is what most all of us want to do, including me.

And I've been doing a lot of reading about this. Conflict is a life skill and communication is its very foundation. Being able to understand using emotional intelligence, all those things to be able to work

through really tough problems with people. And then I'll say relationships. Professor Maynes and I talk about this often, really the way to best advance through any organization is to develop really good relationships, co-workers and bosses, support staff, everyone. It just seems when we look back on our lives, any perhaps doors that opened or lucky breaks always seem to go back to relationships. And so that's a big part of the program, especially if a student goes into Leader Core, there's room to practice those kinds of things there. But communication and relationships is, I don't know, the most important element.

Patrick Lageraen:

Do you think technically competent employees ever get passed over for management positions because of poor communication?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I'm afraid so. I'm afraid so. It's the reason why the course was created in 2008 because we were hearing from employers that this was beginning to be a problem. Some students didn't really launch or perhaps they got into a role and they couldn't really succeed, and we were implored to do something. And so that's what we did because we knew that that was a reality and it broke our hearts. There are brilliant, brilliant people in our program, and we want everyone to really be able to realize their potential regardless of what their field is. And so any way that we can give our students a leg up in this area, we will.

Eric Raine:

I think that pairs very well with the episode that we had a discussion with Tim Maynes. Going back to how Patrick introduced the start of the podcast today is the idea of the soft skill side versus the technicality of the things that you learn more of the hard skills through an MBA program. And I think even maybe if... I'm going to try to put this in a way where it's not a generalized assumption, but these people that have really technical skills and are very competent at something that they're doing in the workplace in a given company or whatever role they're in, they may even find early success with getting into a mid-level management position.

And that's when the pressure's really applied to switch from more of the technical skills into the communication component of the things that we're discussing here today. And that's maybe the career limiting component. And so although it's just as crucial on the front end of starting at a new company

and establishing relationships and moving up, sometimes that can actually be, I think, buffered a little bit by technical skills and competence in certain areas. And then you think you're doing things the right way from a communication perspective because you're seeing early success, hey, I just got this promotion, this is great, but then it plateaus. And I think maybe that's where some of these things really start to shine through.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's a great observation. I have a couple of charts for my organizational behavior class. Your first entry level position is probably going to be about 25% communication skills is where that's going to come in. By the time you get to senior levels, it's about 75%. And so it's the currency to be able to move through an organization that way.

Eric Raine:

That's a great way to put it.

Patrick Lageraen:

All that being said, with poor communication skills almost being a disqualifier for a lot of higher positions, let's say you had the opportunity to make one 90-minute lecture for up-and-coming managers, people looking to move into those roles or about to, what topics would you include in it? What do they need to know right now?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I try to bring in listening because everyone thinks that they're a better listener than they actually are. And I actually do this on an occasional basis. They're a leadership center. I bring the presentation skills unit because it's not just about the slides in the presentations, it's about making choices to be audience-centered. And I know 90 minutes isn't really a lot of time, but I know that by the end of it, everybody's coming out with a lot more insight and they're going to be making different choices. I bring in a model, it's called Made to Stick. It's a persuasion model based on a book that came out by the same name. And it really involves looking at your message. You can use Made to Stick in writing too, and I make a point of that, but Made To Stick is a framework about when you're figuring out how to fashion your content, there's six elements.

There's simplicity, there's unexpectedness to bring in an element of surprise, there's credibility, there's concreteness, there's emotion and story. And the thinking is, and I've seen this many, many times because I see hundreds of presentations every year. The more of those six that are used, the more persuasive the messages and the more memorable it is. And especially when it comes to emotion and story. If you think back to a favorite commercial that might be on TV that you remember, perhaps during the Super Bowl or some sort of event, there was a commercial. And when I'm in a session like that, I'll ask and people remember, and it's because those commercials were really sticky. There was something about them that was so unusual or just surprising that they stay with people. This is very a short description that's obviously a lot more involved than that, but it's easy in a 90-minute session to just have people get better at that particular aspect of communication.

Eric Raine:

One of the things that I remember from... And it may have been in the context of you were grading us or evaluating our level of quote unquote "stickiness" at the end of a presentation, like how much on a one to 10 scale did this actually stick? Will I remember this a week from now? Will I remember it an hour from now or a month from now? Or whatever the case may be. And I do remember one of the things that I thought of that I wasn't doing before was this call to action at the end of a persuasive type of presentation where not only are you trying to find a way to target your audience in a way that they'll take something away or maybe change some minds or convince someone of something, whatever the context might be in a professional capacity.

But then pairing it with something that requires the audience to do something, even if it's as simple as asking them to say, who's ready to commit to this and getting buy-in. And then because people have that call to action, they almost feel compelled in a subconscious capacity to actually do that thing or think in that way or take into account the things you're saying. I don't know if maybe you want to expand on that component of it a little bit.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Well, there's a real moment of power there that oftentimes gets wasted, and it has to do with closing the presentation with a call to action and getting that commitment. And it's especially powerful when people write something down that yes, they will do it, they will follow through. Or especially if they raise their hand in front of others because they're essentially on the record. If you ask a question, how many will fill out this kidney donation form? Say for example, when people are raising their hands, they're



much more likely to do it because they said that they would. And we saw your hand go up than there's an accountability there. In a business meeting, it would be putting down whoever is volunteering to do something in the business minutes, write that up, circulate that, Eric, you said that you would do this and it's here, right here in the minutes. And that's how you get people to really follow through on things.

Patrick Lageraen:

While we're talking about presentations, what's your thoughts on an agenda? Should the presentation have an agenda?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I'm a huge agenda fan girl. I think that it helps so much. There's two schools of thinking on this, so I'll just give you my point of view, but an agenda very much helps the audience. It shows them where we are, what will be covered, and then if there's time to go back to the agenda, we can see how far along this presentation is. For framing and for keeping the audience engaged, I think it's very, very useful.

Eric Raine:

I agree. I think it's interesting though, even the question that you posed, it brings in this sort of idea of there's a school of thought that says, no, throw it out, it's verbose or it's just not needed. But then at the same time, it does provide a framework or accountability or you're hitting your points and you're showing the audience where you're going, where you are. I could see where there's different contexts probably where it makes sense to have it or maybe not. I don't know. What do you think Patrick? Where do you fall on that?

Patrick Lageraen:

I don't know. That's why I asked. There's definitely times to have an agenda, especially when it's quantitative heavy and you got to know where we are. But when it's a shorter, almost persuasive presentation, I feel like it shouldn't be there.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Do you feel like it's getting in the way?

Patrick Lageraen:

It's like breaking the fourth wall.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Oh, okay. Well, everything in my course, and I know people get tired of hearing it because I say it at ad nauseum, but everything goes back to objective. And what you were just laying out there, Patrick, is that you have a different objective. And so it really just depends on what's best in that communication scenario. And that's always the answer. That answer always overrides any rule or any approach. What is best for the audience and how can I best give them what they need?

Patrick Lageraen:

The reason I was so excited to have this podcast today was I'm really interested in the high level communication skills. Those little nuances that set you apart or make you go or puts you a step above everybody else, so let's talk about those a little bit. Is there anything that you and any tips that you have to set your communication skills apart?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I think what the main driver there is valuing people. Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence Others* is a classic. And that theme runs so strongly through there. If someone does something for you, use the principle of reciprocity and thank them or do something in return or even start that particular, kick that principle in motion. Do something nice for others without expecting anything. People know when they're taken seriously, when the help that they've given or whatever it is that they've done for anyone to be thanked for that is very powerful. And it's something that many, many people overlook or it doesn't dawn on them.

I don't think anyone intentionally means to be cold or not appreciative, but that to me seems to be a step that gets skipped quite a bit. And we were talking a little bit earlier about thank you notes. The power of a thank you note, it's astonishing to me. I never expect them. Everyone's busy. I'm always happy to help students. Always when a thank you note comes in, it's just shocking is probably a little too strong of a word, but it's just so delightful. It's just like this thoughtful little gift really. And it's amazing how much mileage a person can get out of that. That sounds like someone's being manipulative, but to sincerely thank someone is one of the best things anyone can do in the workplace.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thank you for outlining the importance of thank you notes in your class. I have the experience of being a kid, getting birthday gifts, and then my mom would make me write thank you notes.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Great.

Patrick Lageraen:

I never really understood the purpose or why it's so valuable, but now I do. And I write them pretty often.

Eric Raine:

Actually, one of the things if we're adding in personal experience or stories in the context of the thank you notes specifically, is I had talked to a family member of mine who over the course of her career progression is now in a higher level, maybe closer to executive level, VP level job. Years prior had sent a handwritten thank you note to someone that she then years later was in their office having a meeting and she happened to notice behind them on the desk was the thank you note that she had written to that person years prior. And I can't recall from that conversation whether or not it became an explicit point of the conversation that they talked about the thank you note, but the fact that that note wasn't just written, read, appreciated, and thrown away, but that it was actually impacting the person that she was speaking with years later. And thinking, oh my gosh, what if I didn't actually write that in that note, how much of an impact did that note actually have on this relationship?

Or maybe today's meeting or I'm coming in here to have a conversation and maybe I preloaded this with planting a seed from years earlier. Just showing that little bit of appreciation and going out of your way to actually put a pen to paper and put a stamp on something and send it and to then see it in the room with you years later, I think is just an excellent example of this, the legs that it has. It's hard to really know what it might do, and that's not why you're doing it per se. You're not sending the note to be like, oh, I hope this has an impact and can help me out five years from now. But it's just the level of impact that it actually has on the person you're sending it to and understanding those cases I think makes a difference in the way that we go around, the way that we express appreciation and gratitude to others.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That is an outstanding story. That's what it's all about. Great example.

Patrick Lageraen:

That's a good point about the motive there because if you just go around writing thank you notes to everybody it loses its power, doesn't it?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yeah.

Patrick Lageraaen:

You got to be genuine behind it and use them very selectively.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's got to be sincere for sure.

Patrick Lageraaen:

What do you think about some other tips? I had on here handwriting letters. That comes into the thank you note piece, scheduling emails for professionalism. What do you think about that?

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's communicating respect for people's time. Scheduling an email that won't hit at 10:00 at night when someone just might be powering down or stick... I think we learned a lot about this during the pandemic when boundaries just got to be so important because people were just getting so worn out. I think anything that communicates effort or thoughtfulness is always a winning strategy because that's really what's underneath it. There's some kindness there on a human level to appreciate the other and to really respect the other, what they might be dealing with. They might be home with the family now is not the time for this. There's a lot of written... There's a lot of thought about this text messaging employees off work hours is understood to be really a boundary problem that it shouldn't be done just for the reason that you're explaining.

Patrick Lageraaen:

Is that a one-off text message just checking on something, or is that a pattern that becomes a problem?

Mary Ann Rogers:

More of the expectation that people are going to be available everywhere all the time.

Eric Raine:

And the lack of ability to disconnect maybe from the workplace too?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yeah.

Eric Raine:

One of the things that I was thinking of since Patrick, you brought up this idea of scheduling emails, which I think is really interesting, especially to get your perspective on it, because I also look at it from the soft skill component of understanding the respect for the person you're sending it to and understanding context. But sometimes I'll even think about if I'm writing a late email rather than sending it the next day, I might even think about, okay, where does this person work? When do they come into the office? Will they have a pile of other emails that they're going to get through? And you can actually maybe slot that email into a spot where they'll catch it. It'll be the email that showed up five minutes before they opened up their laptop for that day or two minutes after. They might show up and start working that day.

Patrick Lageraen:

Or 10 minutes after they've theoretically cleared their nighttime emails.

Eric Raine:

Because sometimes it's time-sensitive, and sometimes you need someone to give a thought at a certain point, and I'm just picking the start of the day as just one point. Obviously there's a lot of different contexts the way that you could send an email, but I think doing that can be a really powerful tool. I've even sent emails where it's early in the morning and I'm asleep and that email went out and it looks like I was up just replying to that email at 6:30 in the morning or something. And that person's up early. And I might not be up until a little bit later than that. But I think the fact that that is something that we can do is something... We were just curious to see what your thoughts were on that. And maybe it's something that isn't necessarily noticed because who knows when the emails are being sent versus when they're being scheduled, but it can change the impact of the way that it's received.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It can. A couple of things. There's a saying that we always use. You can't not communicate. Everything communicates, body language and the choices that we make. Email is asynchronous. When I was growing up in my career, it just didn't matter because you can get up at 9:00 AM and read it and no one's... A text is a lot more intrusive I feel. But an email is just sitting there waiting to be read. I can tell another story that there was an unfortunate boomerang. There was a leader that I worked for a long time ago that was a night owl, so the emails would be coming through at 3:30, 4:00, 5:00 in the morning, and Unintentionally, it was giving the impression that that was our culture.

That's the way we're working, it's so fast-paced and we better get up and keep up because that's the expectation here or this email is never going to stop. And it really had a distressing effect on the workplace that was actually brought forward as not a complaint, but something that was really impacting the employee base negatively and the leader adjusted. This is probably even before you could schedule emails, but everything communicates something.

Patrick Lageraen:

Did they have a real expectation there? Were they waiting for you to respond at 3:00 in the morning?

Mary Ann Rogers:

Not really, but get on it pretty quickly.

Eric Raine:

It just has that pressure.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It does. Like the answer is needed, and it was on a daily basis. It wasn't during a stressful time when it was all hands on deck. It was just that was the pace of that particular leader.

Patrick Lageraen:

I wonder if they just didn't even realize.

Mary Ann Rogers:

No, did not realize. But this is what we're talking about in the MBA program, we work so much on self-awareness, don't you think?

Patrick Lageraaen:

Yeah.

Mary Ann Rogers:

And just even thinking, like having conversations like this and thinking about the impact of some of our decisions, we've just never heard this before, and how can you know unless you experience it and go through making some of these mistakes and reflecting on how different communication tactics work on you?

Patrick Lageraaen:

I think we've shared a lot of great tips today. I'd like to shift it to a little bit on the negative side. What do you think are some big communication mistakes that either professionals or students make?

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's a couple of really broad things. The lack of awareness, and no one can be blamed for not having awareness, but it is something that takes a lot of work, wouldn't you say, now that you're about to graduate-

Patrick Lageraaen:

Absolutely.

Mary Ann Rogers:

... and you reflect on what you've been through? Take personality tests, get some insight into how you deal with others, so that can be gained. That's really, I think the best part of the MBA program is that there's so much opportunity to grow in that area, but not understanding the audience from a communication instructor, that's huge. Just going and blazing and not giving any consideration to whether it's really matching what the audience needs. And I would say listening. Listening is so difficult for everyone. I've been working on listening for a long time, and I still have my blind spots, and there's still times when I hear myself interrupting.

But if anyone really wants to be, I think a very great leader, they have to be able to put their biases aside and really listen to what their employees are telling them. And we have an understanding, the faculty have an understanding that feedback is a gift. If someone is giving you their information, especially if it's

critical, to listen to that and to find the nugget really, really matters. And it's how we grow and get better, but it's very hard to do. Let's admit that that's unpleasant and no one likes that. And it's easy to get defensive, and then you get an escalation in the conflict, and then that becomes a different problem. But these are the things that I really do think matter the most that are a lifelong process and that everyone can get better at.

Patrick Lageraen:

I like your example of being defensive when it comes to negative news because even if you're good at communicating and you consider yourself good at it, if you're not prepared, someone could just catch you in a bad mood or catch you off guard, and then you just snap back to, what do you mean? And get defensive immediately, and then you got to stop yourself.

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's difficult. And we all want to be heard. And Professor Maynes, I will point out, is extraordinarily good at this. And I notice whenever he's going into a difficult conversation, he's got a pad with him with a pen, and he is listening and writing. And I've actually learned a lot from watching him do that because I've seen him handle some pretty tough conflicts. And he's just patient, he's calm, he's writing it down, and maybe at the least he'll say, I'll get back to you if he feels like his emotion is starting to build. Thank you. I'll get back to you. And it's just a great way to really manage things like that.

Patrick Lageraen:

And that goes back to your point of you're always communicating, so his writing is proving that he's listening.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yeah, it is. It's right in front of people.

Eric Raine:

I think another thing that sticks out in the context of this part of the conversation specifically to me is that the upside or versus the downside risk of when you accidentally communicate in the wrong way or you don't take that chance to listen, is that they're not equally weighted. There's a ratio that has to be had between the number of times that you are doing things and communicating in a way that is well received, it seems, because I could have a relationship with you, I could have communicated with you



five times over the last month, let's say, and they were positive experiences. You did find me to be listening. I was giving you what you needed. I was paying attention to you as an audience of the communication. And then in a momentary lapse of judgment or under certain stresses or whatever it may be, I could, like Patrick mentioned, become defensive, or I might not listen to what you're telling me and I'm jumping to the thing that I need to talk to you about.

And not prioritizing the focus on the audience in a situation like that could undermine all of these other good things that have been taking place over the time leading into that. And understanding the fact that that ratio exists to some extent, I think highlights the importance of making sure, to your point, even talking about Tim Maynes, if you feel that sense of, I am moving too quickly, or blazing was a word you used before where you're just running through information you're trying to get through, or you're not paying attention to the needs of the other person, you're going to lose that and that's going to undermine a relationship. And you even talked earlier about how important relationships are.

Mary Ann Rogers:

No, well said. Most definitely. And on the same hand, if you've built up that emotional bank account with people, there's a history. You could perhaps ask for some grace in a moment like that, but then that's a lot of work getting back and getting it back on track again. It's a great point that you made. Emotional regulation is huge. It's something that we try to stress in different parts of the program. We try to stress it in a little bit of my class, but just being able to keep that sense of, I don't know, calmness and patience and openness.

Patrick Lageraen:

I'd like to take just the next few minutes before we wrap up to talk about communication pet peeves. I'd like to hear what you have to say, but I'll give you an example of one that I have. If you're sending out an informational email with 150 people on it, maybe telling them about an event, listing those people as CCs instead of BCCs, I don't need to see the other 149 people who got this email.

Mary Ann Rogers:

That's a mistake because I think what really irks people is they don't want their email address exposed.

Patrick Lageraen:

That too.

Mary Ann Rogers:

And then a spammer can just come in and get, I don't know, 50 addresses at once.

Patrick Lageraen:

And copy paste.

Eric Raine:

Or the reply all, all of a sudden the chain starts building and you're like, I don't need all of this extra information.

Mary Ann Rogers:

And you will remember in my class, we talked about the paralyzing nature of information overload and how awful it can be for employees or students just to get so much email that they just don't need. It's a creativity killer. It's a productivity killer. That's just an easy decision to make. But again, that's a good example of, Patrick, of someone not being thoughtful and just doing what's best for them in the moment, not realizing the consequences of doing something like that.

Eric Raine:

One of the ones that came to mind that I wanted to ask your opinion on is, and I've seen this multiple times, and again, Patrick, you've framed the question as pet peeve, so this is sort of just personal-

Patrick Lageraen:

Of course.

Eric Raine:

But now that I'm thinking about it, it's something that comes to mind is times where I'll send an email and I understand that the person I'm sending it to is very busy. They may take a little bit to get back to me based on previous communication. I think, you know what, let's try to hit the points we need to hit while we have their attention, even if it's pretty quick. I'll send something and I'll provide maybe a follow-up to their initial communication, and then I'll ask maybe two parts. I'll ask a question about one component of the communication, and then I'll say, and also, can I get your thoughts on this other thing?

And I'll get an email back and they'll just reply to the part that they wanted to, or maybe the easier answer, and they'll just completely disregard one of the questions. And so that becomes a pet peeve to me because it's like I took the time to ask those things. They are pertinent to the discussion, but now all of a sudden I'm in a position where I didn't get an answer to one of the things I needed. Now, do I circle back and ask them to basically answer the thing they didn't? And then is that passive-aggressive in a way?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I know.

Eric Raine:

And so what's your advice on how to avoid that or even handle that?

Mary Ann Rogers:

It's the problem with communication richness. An email is such a lean channel that it's hard to read... Or it's easy to read into things that aren't there. And it just really gets back to the nature of the relationship and the power dynamic. It's an awful thing to do to someone who has less power because it really puts them in a dilemma. The dilemma that you just described. You hear it like, when do you break the chain if you're writing to someone higher up and they give you an answer? Do you bother them with a thank you or do you not say thank you? And there's always a lot of apprehension around something like that. And I think in this case, Eric, it's really what you need. Sometimes you have to write back and graciously say, I'm sorry, could I just ask you once more to finish part B to something critical for me moving along here, very uncomfortable. And that's not being an audience-oriented communicator.

Patrick Lageraen:

Speaking of emailing people higher up, I'd like to share another very quick one, and I'm not really sure if there's a solution for it. Let's say I'm emailing you and I would address it as Dear Professor Rogers, and then... I'm not saying you did this, but just as an example, and then they respond without their name or any sort of signature. I don't know what they'd like to be addressed as moving forward, so I have to keep it perfectly formal in every subsequent email.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Yep, you do. You do if it's someone in authority until they break the format, you do have to keep it. It's one of those protocols, unfortunately. But it's our hope that you have all these examples. You've experienced the frustration. The way that hopefully the school is training you, you won't be doing those things when you get out of here and you'll be setting good examples for others too that I think becomes contagious no matter if people are more senior or junior to you. Just really trying to model good communication practices. I think people notice. I hope so.

Patrick Lageraen:

I'd like to wrap up just giving you the opportunity to speak to our main audience, which is prospective students coming from someone who was in the UB MBA program and is now a faculty of the program, what would you like to say to them?

Mary Ann Rogers:

I would say if anyone is on the fence, absolutely enroll. The benefits of the program, I didn't realize truly the benefits of the program until I was out of it and looking back. First of all, it's a tremendous amount of work and there is some stress, there's some pain points. And I don't know how you both feel, but I came out with a sense of confidence that I can handle so much in a way that I never thought I could. I got everything done somehow and I gained skills, but I just gained this amazing sense of, I don't know, empowerment really. I was a communication undergrad and it was becoming very clear to me as I was working, I was going to get stopped because I just didn't have enough background and important things. I needed accounting, I needed finance, I had to learn how to use Excel the way that you know how to use it with all those add-ins and everything. And I just needed to get on a path to a different place in my career. And my group, I had a group in my program right after we graduated, all of us got promoted, we all became senior people. It seemed like overnight. I'd worked for a while before I went back, but it was just so transformative. I'm still in touch with my group and there's no question as to what the value of this program brings. You mentioned earlier, Eric, someone being highly technical, come on in and get the other side. We all need something and this program has just what everyone needs. I really can't emphasize that strongly enough.

Eric Raine:

Absolutely. From a student perspective, I can completely agree. I can't necessarily speak to what the future holds as far as how that impact will be from my MBA, but I came in as a student to a dual degree

program with the PharmD-MBA and I worked for the better part of six years before coming back to school. And even doing that, there was so much to learn and take away from this program. And so whether you're listening to this episode and you're a prospective student who's deciding to career pivot, maybe come back to school, maybe you're coming from undergrad, I think it's really for everyone because of the fact that there's so much to take out of this program that whether it's communication that we're talking about today or some of the organizational behavior skills that we talked about with Tim Maynes or any of these other episodes you might tune into.

But even still coming in with some professional experience and having had the trials that you go through with communicating and learning the hard way sometimes when you don't have that background and training, there's still so much to learn here. And so I know from a student perspective, we really appreciate this course, especially it being in the start of the program.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Oh, thank you for that. That's very kind.

Eric Raine:

Totally great.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thanks so much for coming in. It's been a topic I've really been looking forward to just because it's really an art form, the standards and norms are always changing and there's just always more to learn.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Indeed.

Patrick Lageraen:

Thanks so much.

Mary Ann Rogers:

Thank you.

Eric Raine:

Thank you.

Patrick Lageraaen:

I hope you enjoyed this episode. Again, we were talking to Professor Mary Ann Rogers, who teaches the first year MBA course, management communication amongst many other roles at the School of Management. I'm your host, Patrick Lageraaen, and thanks for listening.