**Becky Koch – 2021 ACE Fellow**

First, a big thank you to ACE for this incredible honor. After looking through the list of past recipients and reviewing the remarks shared by recent recipients, I’m especially humbled and appreciative. Thank you to the ACE board and my NDSU colleagues for this honor.

After 29½ years, I semi-retired from North Dakota State University last November. After growing up in Kansas and attending K-State then 30 Fargo winters, my husband and I went to the other extreme and now live in the Tucson, Arizona, area.

With semi-retirement, however, I’ve been amazed with how many of my professional practices continue to be part of my daily routine. Plus, one of the things I enjoyed the most was teaching staff, so rather than sharing some philosophical words of wisdom, let me share some of my typical teachings that I think apply to our personal and professional lives.

At NDSU we developed a Communications Camp where topic teams came together to truly develop a multimedia program. And we developed Virtual Communications Camp in 2016 – long before COVID required nearly everything to go virtual.

In Communications Camp we start with four big questions, and in meetings and discussions, colleagues probably got tired of me asking these questions. I realize these ideas aren’t new to professional communicators, but sometimes we need reminders of the basics.

1. What is the goal? Not our goal is to develop a video or to publicize a meeting, but what’s the ultimate goal for the target audience? What change of behavior should a multi-pronged communications plan lead to? Like Stephen Covey’s “begin with the end in mind.”
2. Who is that target audience? And, no, the general public is not a target audience. Even North Dakota farmers isn’t specific enough. Reaching a dryland wheat farmer in the west is a lot different than reaching an irrigated potato producer in the east. And reaching a single mom with a toddler is much different than reaching a retired couple, though both need nutrition information.
3. What are your key messages? Our universities are famous for information overload. We need to pick out the three or four high points that we truly want our target audience to remember and apply.
4. What are some user scenarios? Brainstorm some ways to reach the target audience where they already are.

I try to follow these same steps in my personal semi-retired life today, and I encourage you to apply this quick thought process every day.

1. What is my goal? What do I want to accomplish today? This week? This month? I recently found two Sheryl Sandberg quotes I wish I’d had earlier to share:
   * Ruthlessly prioritize – None of us has time to do everything we’d like, so we must ruthlessly prioritize – both at work and in life.
   * Done is better than perfect – Whether it’s a media plan, a brochure, an online program, a video or any other communications piece -- or organizing the office things that moved from North Dakota to Arizona (but maybe shouldn’t have), done is better than perfect. Don’t suffer from paralysis by analysis.
2. Who is my target audience? Granted, this one’s usually easier since my husband and I are still coming out of covid quarantine and haven’t met many fellow Tucsonans yet. But I plan communications differently if I’m talking to my mother vs. our son vs. our 8-month-old great niece.
3. What are my key messages? Whether I’m videoing with a friend, calling a family member or simply carrying on a conversation, what are the priorities I want to share? I compare it to Sunday’s sermon. The pastor may speak for 20 minutes or so, but she’s done her job if I pull out one major nugget to apply to my life.
4. What are some user scenarios? Probably like many of you who are parents, I learned that a great scenario for a conversation with our son when he was a teenager was in the car when we didn’t have to make eye contact.

So, whether you’re dealing with an ag communications issue or a family or personal matter, I encourage you to quickly ask yourself:

* What is my ultimate goal?
* Who am I trying to reach?
* What are my key messages? And
* What are a couple scenarios?

Two other questions that I often use to test both professional and personal communications:

Who cares? And So what?

Think about those two blunt questions. How often do we scroll through Facebook and wonder why in the world someone posted something. Really, who cares? And if the content does pass the “who cares?” test, then “so what?” Provide some context of what this means or should mean to people. Share impact, not just activity.

That’s one reason I’ve loved my career. We communicators answer the “so what?” “Here’s what this research means for you.” Face it, we professional communicators are probably more important now with Google than even before. We provide that unbiased, research-based information. However, we’re especially challenged to get others to find, respect and use it.

I’ve also loved my career because we truly help people improve their lives. Some of the most rewarding work was helping North Dakotans prepare for and recover from floods. I hope all of you feel satisfaction from knowing we’re helping people, whether or not we hear them directly tell us that.

But mostly I’ve loved my career because of the relationships. Some of my best life-long friends are through NDSU work – and through ACE. I hope each of you challenges yourself to truly get involved in ACE. Don’t say “I’m too busy.” To me, that’s a lame excuse. Everyone’s busy. It’s just where you place your time priorities – and I guarantee you that an investment of time in ACE leadership, even in a small way, or just through ACE connections will pay off greatly. In fact, I have a challenge for each of us as we wrap up this conference. Yet today – don’t put it off – I challenge each of us to do one of these things:

* If you’re let’s say a more senior member of ACE, drop a line or give a call to a newer member you’ve virtually met through this conference. Just say hello and you’re glad they’ve gotten involved.
* If you’re a newer ACE member, drop a line or give a call to a presenter or a leader who impacted you in some way, no matter how small.
* Or simply connect with someone you didn’t know before the conference.

We can easily do this through conference Whova app, but remember the ACE online directory to track down members, too.

Just do it – and remember, as Sheryl Sandberg said, done is better than perfect. That quick connection might build a relationship that lasts a lifetime, even into retirement.

Even if you’re more introverted, challenge yourself to reach out. As that famous philosopher Ted Lasso said, “Hey, takin’ on a challenge is a lot like ridin’ a horse. If you’re comfortable while you’re doin’ it, you’re probably doin’ it wrong.” So, get out of your comfort zone and reach out to make a new friend and colleague through ACE.

(And yes, I used “reach out” on purpose for some of us who have been around ACE for a while.)

I’m glad ACE is rejuvenating the mentorship program since it also will help develop relationships. I also applaud ACE’s diversity and inclusion efforts.

We’re heading back to Fargo in late July because our son will be in a community musical, “Rock of Ages.” Those glam rock songs of the ‘80s aren’t really the inspiration I wanted to share today, but another song from a musical is.

When I taught Intro to Ag Comm remotely last semester, I asked the students to watch “When I Grow Up” from “Matilda” then write a short paper introducing themselves to me. The song ends with:

If I think the ending is fixed already

I might as well be saying I think that it's ok -- And that's not right!

Think about those words. If we think something wrong is a done deal and we don’t speak up, that’s like saying we approve – but even the kids in the musical realized that’s not right.

I challenge each of us to say or do something when it’s not right. Rather than thinking that an inappropriate decision is final, realize it’s not right, and speak up and take action rather than just letting it slide by.

Of course, we communicators must have relationships with decision makers, colleagues and others to be at the table to be able to speak up and help take those appropriate actions.

One last musical quote also helps build professional and personal relationships. In “Hamilton,” Aaron Burr advises Alexander Hamilton to “Talk less. Smile more.” If we truly listen to understand someone else and give that friendly smile, the relationship probably will grow deeper. Even with this virtual conference, we’ve been able to smile together with trivia and PowerPoint karaoke. A huge thank you to the conference committee and board for making this virtual conference both educational and fun.

I realize I’m preaching to the choir here, but our professional and personal lives are about relationships. We can learn from each other, whether it’s how do you prioritize work requests or how are you developing online courses, both which were on the ACE forums recently. I encourage you to use our ACE online forums to ask questions, share ideas and network with ACE colleagues.

ACE relationships can even be as crazy as when my family was preparing to travel to Bonaire, and an ACE friend who retired to the Caribbean island provided great tips for our visit, plus we really enjoyed getting together there.

ACE has provided me with relationships of colleagues and friends for a lifetime – and I hope our organization does that for you, too.

Again, thank you to ACE for this tremendous honor. Keep in touch, everybody!