## Learning to Navigate the Professional World: Soft Skill Teaching Scenarios for Graduate Students

### Introduction

Production of technically competent professionals is a hallmark of graduate education programs within the agricultural sciences. However, students and employers report chronic challenges developing non-technical, soft skills that are crucial for career success (Crawford and Fink, 2020; Pérez, 2005, 2018 and references therein). Recently, universities, colleges, and individual departments began directing more resources to address the graduate student soft skills readiness gap. For example, in 2020 the Environmental Horticulture Department at the University of Florida reimagined content and pedagogy for its graduate-level professional development seminar course (ALS 5934).

The fall 2021 offering of ALS 5934 utilized a flipped classroom modality and focused on increasing awareness of important soft skills via: 1) an introductory and final soft skills competency self-assessment; 2) sets of curated videos (Table 1) that students digested prior to class; 3) posting reaction videos on course content; 4) in-class discussions coupled with small group activities; and 5) augmenting the professional development section of student's individual development plans.

A top pedagogical priority for ALS 5934 was to create student-centered lessons that engaged learners with the curated soft skills content, rather than lecture to students about soft skills. The dynamic nature of in-class activities contributed to livelier and in-depth conversations about how to develop important soft skills. One significant challenge, identified by the instructor, was crafting numerous, customized activities that confront perceptions and provide opportunities to begin practicing soft skills during a student's graduate program.

The instructor, who was running out of ideas and frustrated by searching for activities (e.g., business school case studies) that did not directly apply to ALS 5934 course content or were only accessible for a fee, turned to students for their ingenuity. The instructor provided guidelines on how to create discussion scenarios (CETL, n.d.; Hart, 2019) and suggestions for in-class activities. He then challenged the class to discuss and create applicable learning scenarios to share with each other. Students created scenarios during a portion of the discussion session of two class periods. You can access the entire set of student-generated scenarios by visiting: https://go.ufl.edu/s5pk0gf. We encourage the use or adaptation of these scenarios as necessary in professional development courses.

**Student Perspectives**

- The real class activities in the form of role play or direct interaction is the excellent version of teaching and learning process. This will create the multiple ideas and concepts and could be copy and pasted in the real-life world of grad students. Further, this creates the supreme learning path and creates an interactive environment between instructor, students, and classmates.

- Creating scenarios/case studies give students a chance to not only experience real-life challenges without risks, but also share real-world experiences and get advice and feedback from classmates and instructor anonymously.

- The ideas explored in class discussions helped students think through some of the experiences and challenges that they were currently facing in their graduate program. Being able to apply the concepts discussed in the LinkedIn lectures to relevant, current situations and think of solutions was an excellent opportunity to implement professional development competencies and better prepare for their future career.

- Roleplaying activities allow students to get an idea of what to expect in a real-life situation or challenge. It also allows the opportunity for students to empathize with another's conflict resolution style or perspective. Hopefully when students are faced with these situations in the future, they will be able to draw from these experiences.

- Learning about the potential challenges one may encounter in the professional workplace, and the soft skills to successfully navigate them, is a novel and invaluable component to the graduate experience. The content discussed was relevant, thought-provoking, and productive for students, regardless of previous workplace experience.

- Discussing the scenarios and activities with classmates creates more interaction where students can have fun by getting to know one another and learn through shared experiences.

- Creating scenarios helped students to realize how the topics can be utilized in their lives by making them relatable to their own past and present circumstances.

- As graduate students we are faced with new challenges each day. Riddled by the next step, we have constructed a way for students to safely practice navigating both professional and life obstacles. Each exercise is designed to develop and enhance your soft skills. To make the best use of these new tools, try to practice what you have learned, when possible, each day to solidify your new gained knowledge. Present day application of your new soft skills will invoke self-thought and bolster your confidence.

**References**

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Table 1. List of curated soft-skills video content.

| Theme | Topics | Author(s) | Platform |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Communication* | | | |
| | Empathy | Brené Brown | YouTube |
| | Empathetic Listening Skills | Alex Lyon | YouTube |
| | Effective Listening: Improving Your Listening Skills | Tatiana Kolovou, Brenda Bailey-Hughes | LinkedIn Learning[1] |
| | Giving and Receiving Feedback | Gemma Leigh Roberts | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Giving and Receiving Feedback | Daisy Lovelace | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Asserting Yourself, An Empowered Approach | Emilie Ariens | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Learning to Say No | Todd Dewett | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Navigating the Multi-generational Workplace | Leah Georges | YouTube |
| | Managing Multiple Generations | John Tarnoff | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Empathizing Across Generations | Sophie Wade | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Communicating Across Cultures | Tatiana Kolovou | LinkedIn Learning |
| *Leadership* | | | |
| | Unconscious Bias | Stacey Gordon | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Confronting Bias: Thriving Across Our Differences | Vernā Myers | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Leading With Emotional Intelligence | Britt Andreatta | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Conflict Resolution Foundations | Lisa Gates | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Having Difficult Conversations | Marlene Chisolm | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Performing Under Pressure | Eddie Davila | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Learning From Failure | Todd Dewett | LinkedIn Learning |
| *Management* | | | |
| | Managing Ambiguity | Mike Figliuolo | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Solving Business Problems | Mike Figliuolo | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Breaking Free from Analysis Paralysis | Mike Figliuolo | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Leading Your Team Through Change | Mike Derezin | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Using Emotions to Leverage and Accelerate Change: A Guide for Leaders | Cassandra Worthy | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Strategic Planning Case Studies | Mike Figliuolo | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Setting Team and Employee Goals Using SMART Methodology | Mike Figliuolo | LinkedIn Learning |
| | How Leaders Can Motivate Others by Creating Meaning | Scott Mautz | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Acting Decisively | Dorie Clark | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Negotiating With Agility | Michael Wheeler | LinkedIn Learning |
| *Networking* | | | |
| | Being a Good Mentee | Ellen Ensher | LinkedIn Learning |
| | Professional Networking | Dorie Clark | LinkedIn Learning |

[1]Available free to students through a university wide LinkedIn Learning license.