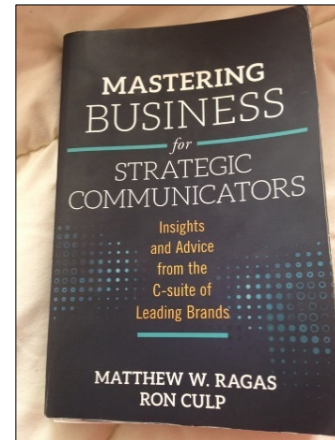


Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp (Eds.), **Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands**, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2018, 288 pp., \$41.99 (paperback), \$99.99 (hardcover).

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To be an effective strategic communicator, one who is truly respected by the leaders of an organization, you need to understand the business of business and to interact with the members of the C-suite of any company speaking their language fluently and confidently.

That is the basic premise of the book **Mastering Business for Strategic Communicators: Insights and Advice from the C-suite of Leading Brands**, edited by Matthew W. Ragas and Ron Culp, both professors of strategic communications at DePaul University, Chicago.



The book is targeted at students and professionals in the field of strategic communications and related areas (i.e., public relations, advertising, marketing, media analytics), and it makes the argument that besides the core skills a strategic communicator should master (writing, editing, story-telling, strategic planning, data analysis, social-media skills, etc.), this type of professional also needs to understand how the company for which she or he works makes money, creates value, and benefits the different stakeholders with whom it interacts.

The manuscript is an edited volume where 46 professionals contribute short essays or responses to those essays. They offer personal narratives of how they succeeded in their fields, in their interactions with the C-suite at their respective companies, and in specific situations where they had to work in collaboration with other areas of the company such as human resources, finance, marketing, legal, and corporate strategy.

The line-up of contributors is pretty impressive, with chief communication officers or vice-presidents of communications of companies and organizations such as Starbucks, General Motors, MillerCoors, Arrow Electronics, Vodafone Group, Southwest Airlines, SAP, Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, and the Arthur W. Page Society, to name a few. I imagine that contacting and persuading these professionals to collaborate in the book, and then chasing them down (so to speak) to receive their contributions on time was the biggest challenge of putting this book together.

The editors wrote the introduction and conclusion sections of the book, where they make the case for strategic communicators to focus on acquiring business acumen and where they summarize the main lessons and insights offered by the 46 collaborators in the book. The rest of the manuscript is divided into seven other parts, each one with two to four chapters: "Communications, Business Acumen, and the C-suite," "Finance and Investor Relations," "Human Resources and Employee Engagement," "Corporate

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Strategy, Innovation, and Legal," "Marketing, Brand, and Data Analytics," "Social Responsibility and Transparency," and "Communication and Corporate Transformations." In total, the book is 288 pages long (215 for the main content, plus a List of Contributors, a preface, a foreword, an About the Authors section, resources on business acumen, a business glossary, and an index).

This book is interesting and easy to read (given the short length of each chapter). The contents are neither dense nor deep: They are basic tips about the kind of knowledge one needs to acquire about the business world; anecdotes from the authors about how they faced industry challenges in their careers (when dealing with human resources, investor relations, the legal department, marketing, and external and internal publics of the companies where they work or worked recently); and some advice about work ethics, networking, and relationship-building.

For example, Clarkson Hine, senior vice president of corporate communications and public affairs at Beam Suntory, in chapter 11 explains:

When it comes to a major strategic move, it is imperative for the chief communications officer to work collaboratively across multiple key functions, including with strategy, legal, HR, finance, and the CEO. The seat at the table helps ensure that the reputational implications and potential risks of a strategic move across stakeholder groups are evaluated early in the process. For example, a deal's cost synergies, such as layoffs or facilities consolidation, will be perceived very differently on Wall Street than by employees. Collaboration at the front end also helps ensure appropriate advance planning of any major announcement. (p. 102)

There are also broad suggestions about what to do for strategic communicators to acquire those needed business skills: from formal mechanisms (such as pursuing an MBA) to daily activities that can help us improve in this matter (such as reading specialized books and publications, having close mentors with that knowledge, interacting frequently with peers from other departments or areas, reviewing presentations from investor conferences—for your own company and your competitors—and watching TV shows in networks such as CNBC, among others).

If you think this is a book where you are going to actually learn those business skills or significantly strengthen your business acumen, that is not the case (although there is a useful glossary with important business terms to understand at the end of the book). Perhaps, the previous book by Ragas and Culp, titled *Business Essentials for Strategic Communicators* (2014), is where you find basic definitions, business explanations and such. In this second manuscript, the editors successfully make the case for the need for business proficiency among strategic communicators (chapter 1: "Advising 'the Room Where It Happens': The Business Case for Business Acumen") and summarize the main lessons learned from each chapter (chapter 23: "Observations and Conclusions from 'Masters of Business'"). In other words, this is neither an introduction to business administration trade book nor a college textbook.

Instead, this book is a good collection of personal narratives from strategic communicators who have succeeded in their fields, who have business acumen, and who share with us their main insights and

advice. There are also short responses from their CEOs reflecting about the importance of the communications function in an organization, and about how strategic communicators also need to be sharp business people.

My only criticism of the book deals with the characteristics of the contributors: Out of 46 contributors, only 13 are women (28%), for a book produced in the United States, where 51% of the population comprises women, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018), and where the majority of strategic communicators are women, too. Checking the contributors' names and pictures, it seems that there are only two people of color among the 46 authors (although this might not be 100% accurate, given that names and pictures do not necessarily indicate, with certainty, people's races or ethnicities). Even if I am slightly wrong, this is only about 4% of the book's contributors, while in the United States about 38% of the population are people of color, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018). In other words, this book is unrealistically white (and please do not argue that you cannot easily find highly successful strategic communicators of diverse origin in the business world). The PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) Foundation's book *Diverse Voices* (2018) is just one example that there are plenty.

This critique is not just a call for more diversity for the sake of diversity. This really matters. For example, the experience of women in general, and of people of color in particular, are not the same than the experience that white people have, in particular white males, especially in the corporate world, and especially among C-suites. Many friendships, professional connections, and business relationships are formed in spaces that tend to include few minorities, traditionally, although not formally (for instance, golf courses, fraternities, fishing trips, and sporting events or teams, to name a few). As a woman, as a Latina, and as a first-generation immigrant in the United States myself, for whom English is my second language, I have experienced firsthand some of these contexts.

It would have been very valuable, for me and I am sure for many others, to read and learn about how minorities, particularly women of color, have navigated the corporate world, especially at those high levels. The same can be said about the experience, in general, of African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinx people in the U.S. corporate world. Somebody like John Onoda, senior consultant at Fleishman Hillard, who is cited by Ragas and Culp in chapter 1, can genuinely say the following: "When I think about my relationship with the different CEOs and chairmen I've worked with, it was probably my business acumen more than my communication skills that most strengthened the bond between us" (p. 7). What he is not mentioning (and perhaps not even realizing), is that being a male of a certain age also helped in that rapport-building process. The same goes for Chuck Greener, senior vice president of global corporate affairs and communications at Walgreens Boots Alliance. He gives the following advice in chapter 12: "Do all you can to excel at the position you have and don't worry about next steps—opportunities will come" (p. 113). While that advice is mostly true when you are white and male, many women and most people of color are constantly overlooked for promotions and leadership positions, even when their work is flawless. Having identity-based advantages is perhaps unavoidable at this point (and this is not a blame-game of any type), but this reality is precisely why we need to learn more about how other communities navigate these corporate spaces where access has been much more limited until today.

Beyond that, the book is worth reading. I enjoyed it and plan to revisit it frequently.

### References

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