

5 Tips for Successful Diplomats

May 2017



Ambassador Yasser Elnaggar

In this EDA Reflection, Ambassador Yasser Elnaggar (former Deputy Minister of Investment, and former Deputy Minister of Planning and Administrative Reform of Egypt), highlights some key lessons from his experience in the diplomatic field, from taking calculated risks to staying true to yourself.

Diplomacy is an art, or so it is said. Historically, it has been viewed as an elite corps of leaders around the world who coordinate at the intersection of states and societies in pursuit of their own country's goals in a gentleman-like fashion. Great tact is required. As Winston Churchill reportedly once said, 'tact is the ability to tell someone to go to hell in such a way that they look forward to the trip.'

Yet, the reality is much more basic. While it is an honour and privilege to serve one's country and its interests, it is not a 'delicate art'. Moreover, it requires a broad range of skills to implement successfully the mission one is tasked with fulfilling. In short, as Italian diplomat Daniel Varè said, 'diplomacy is the art of letting someone have your way.'

Social skills are certainly required – attending endless receptions, trade show openings, parties, lunches, dinners – in pursuit of building relationships that help one do their job. It is not a job for a wallflower, but that is just the 'soft' side of diplomacy.

It requires strategic thinking: one must think several steps ahead like a skilled chess player to develop and implement policy, especially when working in international organisations such as the United Nations, where there are multiple players and interests at stake. Compromise is key, cooperation is essential, but one must never lose sight of the goal.

One must be comfortable with the hard side of diplomacy. It can involve a heartless pursuit of goals in which your agenda must be achieved at all costs. And the stakes can be very high, such as the outcomes of a major arms agreement or sanctioning what is viewed as a 'bad actor' and your success (or failure) might result in front page news. It might require crushing the goals of your fellow foreign diplomats to succeed in your own agenda. The challenge is how you manage this 'hard side' so as to maintain credibility and trust while being firm.

And then there is a need for patience and compassion with the sometimes thankless but essential tasks involved in managing an embassy overseas. Essentially, one acts as the mayor of a small town – developing budgets, securing housing, organising team building events or helping young diplomats adjust to a new culture. One must have the skills to ensure that an embassy and its many disparate parts function like a well-oiled machine.

While it is an honour and privilege to serve one's country and its interests, it is not a 'delicate art'.

And the results of your pursuit of diplomacy can be incredibly rewarding. There are moments of sincere fulfilment, which could stem from big events such as successfully negotiating an agreement with another country, which is signed by your president; or which could stem from small and personally meaningful achievements, such as witnessing one of your staff adjust and thrive in a new culture.

Over the course of more than twenty years as a diplomat – including serving at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cairo and in missions overseas but also in less traditional diplomatic roles such as Deputy Minister of Investment – I developed five tips for what makes one a successful diplomat.

1. Take Calculated Risks

If you look at the career path of most world leaders or ministers, it is seldom a straight line of success. Those that

rise to the highest levels of government have actively sought opportunity and advancement wherever they can find it – even if at times that they have taken what is viewed as a step backwards or sideways.

There is nothing wrong at all with taking the traditional path of rotating between embassies and your ministry as you climb the ladder and seek promotions. But for the ambitious, look for opportunity where you can find it and don't fear taking risks.

This risk should be calculated by asking yourself where you can best serve the interest of the country. Even if this would lead you to take risks such as leaving your main area of expertise and embarking on a whole new portfolio.

2. Be a Critical Thinker

Diplomacy often requires that you become the master of much, but an expert in little. Problems, crises, opportunities, will come at you from a variety of directions, and the work load can be overwhelming. You need to be able to analyse a situation and develop an appropriate response, sometimes based on a very limited set of facts that might not present the full picture. Waiting for clarity can sometimes mean that it is too late to fix the situation.

Becoming a critical thinker is not an easy task. It requires that you develop a conceptual framework to identify the core issue, examine all the related parts, the protagonists or the main stakeholders, think through the consequences of different actions and reactions while staying true to the goal and mission you have been tasked with pursuing. All while operating under time pressure and with limited facts.

It can be achieved, but it requires hard work, practice, experience and testing the type of conceptual framework that works best for you.

Success has many mothers, but failure often has few.

3. Think Outside of the Box

Being in government requires a certain amount of focus and predictability. After all, bureaucracies have rules, protocols, and regulations that must be followed in order to manage the millions of people who work in them. 'Creative' and 'Innovative' are not words usually associated with government officials, yet the most successful bureaucrats always employ those tools. They learn how far they are able to work outside the existing framework to achieve their goals.

Thinking outside of the box also requires persistence as you are choosing an unconventional path which would encounter resistance within the bureaucratic establishment. The approach and methods are new to them and do not follow the traditional protocol.

Showcasing the advantages of the new approach and never seek credit for the work that you are doing will take you a long way towards reaching your goals.

4. Credibility, Credibility, Credibility

Your reputation as a diplomat is one of your strongest and most valuable assets, so guard it well. In developing your reputation, it is essential that you stay true to your own beliefs, especially in pursuing the implementation of policy. You must follow through on your commitments, stay within your guidelines – but not be a slave to them, – and keep in mind the goals and objectives of your counterparts and if there are ways to help support them at times so that in return they are willing to support you when you need them.

When you can build credibility, people will trust what you say, be willing to follow your leadership and even take risks themselves on your behalf. Or they will back you when you take risks, and help to protect you.

Even if they know little about the issue or if they do not really comprehend what your tactic is and where it will lead, if you have credibility they will support you. And you have to be willing to own your mistakes. Success has many mothers, but failure often has few. Your reputation is tested more during moments of crisis and failure than at any other time.

5. Stay True to Yourself

As a diplomat, you are not just representing yourself but you act on behalf of your country. At times, it is possible to lose your own identity in this process. But it is important to not lose sight of your own set of beliefs and values as you rise through the system.

The more senior you are, the more demands will be placed on you, and you will also find that you have many new "friends" who are perhaps more interested in your position and how it can help them rather than in you as a person. There will be temptations and times that you need to make a judgment call, whether for your own personal ethics or in representing your views on policy.

It is important that you have a core set of beliefs to which you can stay true when facing these demands. As bureaucrats, it is our role to represent the views and policies of our government but also to stay true to ourselves when making decisions.

In conclusion, a career in diplomacy can be rewarding and fulfilling. One travels the world, has opportunities and responsibilities at a young age, and an opportunity to make a true contribution to peace and stability in the world. The challenge for all of you is to find your own path to fulfillment and to make a difference. Keep these five tips in mind, so you can become a successful diplomat and create your own positive legacies.