

10 Habits of Effective Diplomats

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In this EDA Reflection, Baroness Cathy Ashton, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, discusses the ten habits of effective diplomats, from seeking knowledge and pursuing collaboration to showing good judgment and being humble.

Diplomacy is most often described as an art rather than a science. The main reason for this is that there is no sure and certain path to success for a diplomat. Issues vary from country to country and will often change dramatically. During my time as a diplomat, leading European efforts to engage and to resolve issues, there were some common elements that improved the chance of a successful outcome. Here are ten that I think matter most.

1. Seek Knowledge

The best diplomats get to know the countries where they are posted really well. That means they spend time away from the capital cities and explore how communities outside relate to each other. Differences, for example between urban and rural communities, matter when key decisions or changes are taking place and understanding history and geography will help to gauge reactions to events.

For example, any diplomat simply taking views in London during the referendum on Brexit would most likely have assumed that the outcome would have been for the UK to remain in the EU. Those diplomats who travelled around the country came to a different view. The same is true for any form of engagement in negotiation or mediation. Being better informed leads to a better chance of success.

2. Manage Communication

At the EDA a lot of emphasis is rightly put on the importance

of communication, both for diplomats reporting back to their capital but also for diplomats communicating in the country or organisation in which they are working. The challenges of 24-hour media and the nature of social media means it is more and more important to be able to work out how best to get the message across.

There is a danger in uncontrolled communications where the media drives the agenda so diplomats need to learn how to use it, and how to challenge the expectations from the media to always be willing to give them information. For every issue a media plan is vital, especially in negotiation or mediation where it may be necessary to keep the discussions confidential for quite long periods of time. Communicating that fact to the media—explaining that they will not be told anything for now – can be of itself beneficial, providing a breathing space to get on with the work of getting an agreement.

3. Pursue Collaboration

Collaboration is a core part of diplomatic activity. This is often done through the creation of organisations such as the UN, the EU and the GCC, allowing collective resources to be used in support of common interests. Increasingly diplomatic collaboration is being done in “informal groups”. These informal groups provide an opportunity to focus on one issue and are given names that reflect that, such as “friends of”.

These arrangements allow for a changing membership where countries that work together on one issue may be on different sides on another. During the Iran negotiations the Russians worked effectively with the USA and the EU as part of the P5+1. At the same time there was a major dispute between Russia and the USA and the EU over Ukraine. Compartmentalisation of issues can have its benefits. However, this informal or one-off arrangement is not a substitute for the long term, deep relations created by more formal organisations.

4. Prioritise Prevention

There is a saying that “prevention is better than cure”. This is especially true in diplomatic life. Analysing and engaging with problems before they become crises is an important part of diplomatic activity. This is true in bilateral relations where misunderstanding or misinformation not corrected can

lead to problems, or where a major crisis can occur if efforts are not made to intervene early. In recent times there have been a number of efforts to either prevent a problem arising or prevent it becoming a crisis. A good example is the push to use the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to sort out disputes in the South China Sea.

5. Show Stamina

Problems worth solving require engagement that can last a long time, and often seem to be failing before they are eventually successful. Colombia engaged with the FARC for over 20 years before finally reaching an agreement. Efforts to resolve the conflict in Syria have been going on for several years already. Commitment from governments needs to match the scale of the task and the length of time it might take. Diplomats need to factor into their thinking and their work that some efforts will be longer term.

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This affects resources, not least time, and needs determination and patience. Sometimes in diplomatic circles the phrase ‘strategic patience’ is used to describe this idea. There is no guarantee that success will follow long negotiations and of course some issues need quick solutions. However, being prepared and committed to see it through can make the difference.

6. Maintain Engagement

In dealing with any other nation there is a spectrum of engagement from full diplomatic relations and strong trade ties to isolation and sanctions. Relations will move along the spectrum depending on events. Diplomacy is about working within that spectrum and trying to find ways to improve the situation, such that relations can move to a more positive place.

An example is Myanmar which a few years ago was under sanctions and isolated. Changes in Government leading to the release of political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi led to swift changes in political relations across the world. In other words, Myanmar moved along the spectrum. Perhaps the most important point about engagement is that it is generally a much better option than the alternatives, but is not always possible or practical. However efforts to try and engage should be part of the day-to-day activity of diplomats.

7. Show Good Judgement

In any situation that arises quickly and in many that arise slowly, decisions have to be made with incomplete information. Whether this is because of the “fog of war” or

the uncertainty surrounding an event, diplomats will need to advise their capitals or make decisions themselves without the benefit of deep analysis and time to consider it.

They will need to use judgment, which is a combination of many things including commonsense, intelligence and awareness. Knowing which sources of advice to go to is important. Recognising the value of key people that are trusted and whose knowledge can add value is an important part of good judgment.

8. Identify Connections

At the EU much work went into what was called ‘economics meets politics’, which was a way of describing the connection between economic uncertainty and political problems. In any area of public life there are connections between problems but also solutions. For example, getting inward investment into a country is less likely if there is political upheaval; when dealing with piracy off the coast of Somalia, the connection between piracy and the needs of young men for work and education were important to solving the problem. Identifying the connecting elements of a problem and solution and addressing each of them is more likely to lead to success and longer term stability.

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9. Define Success

“How will you know when you have succeeded?” This is a question that should be asked at the beginning of any diplomatic activity, especially one that engages a number of different partners. Defining and sticking to the criteria you identify will be important. There will be a need to review success and perhaps to alter the criteria on the way, but in general it is important to engage everyone in deciding what success will be right from the start.

It is worth remembering that success in solving one problem does not mean that all problems go away. Often the route to success is in stages, so knowing where you are at any given time on the journey matters.

10. Be Humble

There is a well-established saying: “You can achieve much more if you are prepared NOT to take the credit”. In any agreement there will be those who have to take the responsibility for the outcome and to implement it. They need to get the credit if the agreement is going to work. Others need to show their engagement and take credit for what they have done. Diplomacy is often the quiet partner in any negotiation and diplomats need to be prepared to stand back. In the end, everyone knows what he or she has achieved and can be proud of it.