

What Makes a Good Diplomat?

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For centuries, diplomats have relied upon a particular skill set to deliver for their leaders. This EDA Reflection looks at what diplomats throughout history have seen as the essential elements of the craft, from patience and courage to tact and creativity. Drawing on this, the EDA will aim to develop *Capable, Influential and Ethical* diplomats, ready for the challenges of the 21st century.

The Venetians, often seen as the earliest practitioners of formal diplomacy, had no doubt what they wanted in their envoys. In 1566, Ottaviano Maggi, a humanist and diplomat, wrote a treatise on 'the perfect ambassador'. He described the ideal qualities of a diplomat in the era of the Italian city states as a 'trained theologian, familiar with Greek philosophers, expert in mathematical sciences, competent in law, music and poetry, proficient in Greek, Latin, French, German, Spanish and Turkish, of aristocratic birth, rich and handsome'. This is a daunting skill set for any of us.

The 17th century analyst of diplomacy, Rousseau de Chamoy, judged instead that ambassadors could be assessed by the magnificence of their table, the nobility of their birth and the quality of their physical appearance. These are perhaps no longer the key criteria!

The British tried in the 20th century to develop the concept. Ernest Satow, in what remains the main diplomatic textbook, described how the basic ingredients of statecraft – 'national character and human nature' – do not change. He identifies as the essential diplomatic attributes an open and serious spirit, low ego and equal humour, and the ability to remain calm under pressure. A diplomat must be discreet and patient,

neither too timid nor too excitable. He should know the customs and the history of his hosts inside out. He should be able to put himself in the place of his interlocutor.

Harold Nicolson wrote after the Second World War that the 'key qualities of the diplomat are truthfulness, precision, calmness and modesty'. Lord Gore-Booth, Head of the British Diplomatic Service, could conclude in 1974 that the ideal ambassador 'must be able to contrive anything, eat or drink anything and appear to like it, and to be surprised by nothing. And all this must be done without loss of sensitivity or courage'. Sir Christopher Meyer, a former British ambassador in Washington, lists insatiable curiosity about other countries and the ability to analyse information and report it accurately and quickly, including news your own government does not want to hear. Most of all, a diplomat needs 'a quick mind, a hard head, a strong stomach, a warm smile and a cold eye'.

Tact also matters. As Isaac Newton put it, 'tact is the knack of making a point without making an enemy'.

It was said that a diplomat should think twice before saying nothing. Or as Winston Churchill put it, 'diplomacy is the art of telling people to go to hell in such a way that they ask for directions'.

Some analysts argue for a less honourable skillset. For US academic Charlie Hill, the most successful diplomats are those prepared to break the rules, to dissemble in the service of their higher cause. Like Cavour, Cardinal Richelieu, Talleyrand and Oliver Cromwell were all amoral but effective. So was Sir Henry Wotton, a late 16th century English diplomat, right in his joking description of an ambassador as 'an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country'?

We do not believe so. Perhaps the best diplomats understand when to say nothing, or when not to say everything: no decent negotiator starts a negotiation by laying all his cards on the table. But honesty has been and remains one of the most important qualities of a diplomat. In negotiations, you live or die on your reputation, and whether you can be trusted. As a former French ambassador in Washington, Hervé Alphand, put it: 'a diplomat is a person who can tell the truth to anyone in the government to which he is accredited without

offending him, and to anyone in his own government at the risk of offending him’.

Perhaps the best advice for diplomats in any era is in a letter written in 1813 by James Harris, the first Earl of Malmesbury – a former ambassador to Russia, Prussia and France – to Lord Camden, with advice for a nephew shortly to start a diplomatic career. The book *The British Diplomatic Service, 1815–1914* by Raymond Jones includes a passage in which the Earl captures a long history of diplomatic apprenticeship in suggesting that ‘the best school will be the advantage he will derive from his own observations’. But he offers some sage words nonetheless:

‘The first and best advice I can give a young man on entering this career, is to listen, not to talk at least not more than is necessary to induce others to talk. I have in the course of my life, by endeavouring to follow this method, drawn from my opponents much information, and concealed from them my own views, much more than by the employment of spies or money...

To be very cautious in any country, or at any court, of such as, on your first arrival, appear the most eager to make your acquaintance and communicate their ideas to you. I have ever found their professions insincere, and their intelligence false. They have been the first I have wished to shake off, whenever I have been so imprudent as to give them credit for sincerity. They are either persons who are not considered or respected in their own country, or are put about you to entrap and circumvent you as newly arrived...

Never to attempt to export habits and manners, but to conform as far as possible to those of the country where you reside, to do this even in the most trivial things to learn to speak their language, and never to sneer at what may strike you as singular and absurd. Nothing goes to conciliate so much, or to amalgamate you more cordially with its inhabitants, as this very easy sacrifice of your national prejudices to theirs...

Not to be carried away by any real or supposed distinctions from the sovereign at whose Court you reside, or to imagine, because he may say a few more commonplace sentences to you than to your colleagues, that he entertains a special personal predilection for you, or is more disposed to favour the views and interests of your Court than if he did not notice you at all...

In ministerial conferences, to exert every effort of memory to carry away faithfully and correctly what you hear (what you say in them yourself you will not forget); and, in drawing your report, to be most careful it should be faithful and correct. I dwell the more on this (seemingly a useless hint) because it is a most seducing temptation, and one to which we often give way almost unconsciously, in order to give a better turn to a phrase, or to enhance our skill in negotiation; but we must remember we mislead and deceive our Government by it.’

So the most important diplomatic skills can be distilled to resilience, tact, curiosity, judgement, courage and the ability to get on with anyone.

Our aim at the EDA is to produce a generation of exceptional diplomats, able to take on the challenges facing not just the UAE but the international community. We think that our future diplomats should be *Capable, Influential* and *Ethical*.

Capable

- *Skillful*: they master traditional diplomatic skills (including languages, written and oral communications, negotiating, networking, crisis management, consular) and specific 21st century skills (including digital technology, using big data, brand management and public relations, campaigning, using social media).
- *Astute*: they show good judgment, display abundant tact and earn the trust of their seniors.
- *Knowledgeable*: they possess a robust understanding of international affairs as well as of their own country, and have an insatiable curiosity to learn more.

Influential

- *Leaders*: they can set out a vision, build and mobilise networks, relationships and coalitions to achieve specific goals, and organize and motivate staff and stakeholders to achieve them.
- *Communicators*: they are empathetic listeners, who build trust by being honest and authentic, and can write and speak persuasively using multiple media.
- *Innovators*: they are creative and outcome-focused, think critically and outside the box, and adapt flexibly to changing circumstances.

Ethical

- *Courageous*: they are resilient under pressure and willing to convey inconvenient truths.
- *Disciplined*: they are punctual, reliable, hardworking and well presented.
- *Committed*: they demonstrate great integrity, are dedicated to promoting their country’s interests and passionate about international cooperation.

We are fortunate that there are great examples and role models for students to learn from. These include not just historical figures, but also contemporary diplomats, who will share their experience and insights with the students. They can help future diplomats understand not just the theory of statecraft, but the practise of diplomacy.

If diplomacy did not exist, it would need to be invented. And it will become even more important in the 21st century. So we have a responsibility to equip future UAE diplomats with the skills they need to fight for peace, tolerance and coexistence. They must learn from history, and from previous generations of diplomats from this region and beyond. They will then be able to become the diplomats that future generations will be proud to learn from.