Key Elements for Effective and Successful Public Diplomacy Efforts

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As a career diplomat and public diplomacy specialist with nearly a decade of experience overseas and in Washington, I have thought deeply about the most effective ways to practice public diplomacy, and how to ensure policy making and public diplomacy are joined at the hip. In recent years, academia, the news media, and the blogosphere have been filled with analytical treatises on how best to “inform, engage, and influence foreign audiences,” and many of these academic pieces are timely and useful. Yet most contemporary analyses of public diplomacy view this important foreign policy tool in two dimensions, excluding a complex set of variables that comprise the third dimension: individual country context, an increasingly austere fiscal climate with shrinking resources for engagement, and the challenges of ensuring public diplomacy is considered during the formation of American foreign policy.

Over the course of this year as a Council of American Ambassadors Kathryn W. Davis Public Diplomacy Fellow, I have had the privilege of speaking to, interacting with, and questioning academics, public diplomacy experts (both new and those hailing from the United States Information Agency era), nongovernment public diplomacy specialists, and other mid-career peers and have found the following lessons resonate with me the most.

**Listen**

For too long we have been telling audiences what we think they should hear. Instead, we should listen to them directly and craft programming and outreach initiatives that couple US foreign policy objectives with the issues most relevant to target audiences. I believe the United States has lost credibility in this regard because we do not listen (or at a minimum give the appearance of listening), which alienates us from the audiences and communities we most want to engage. To ascertain “true” public opinion, it is imperative not only to engage people but actively seek opportunities to interact with audiences and listen to them.

**Know Your Audience (and How to Reach Them)**

In addition to traditional audiences, US public diplomacy currently seeks to engage groups that historically have been underrepresented in terms of US public diplomacy outreach. These groups include women, youth, small-and-medium enterprises and entrepreneurs, and think tanks. In order to effectively engage any group, but especially groups where the relationship is new or in previously uncharted territory, it is critical to do due diligence before engaging with them. Implementing this practice enables us to become fully aware of these groups’ positions on US foreign policy and the United States generally, what they are thinking about in terms of policies both foreign and domestic in
the local context, what they care about and what bothers them. The more time we take to understand our audience, the better prepared we will be to engage them, which increases the likelihood of establishing a real connection. This will lead to a more constructive, meaningful relationship based upon mutual understanding and respect.

An essential element of knowing an audience is to understand how best to reach them. More and more programming is done via social media. With youth populations becoming the majority in most of the developing world, the need to embrace, master, and stay at the forefront of emerging technologies will become essential. That said, there is no substitute for face-to-face or in-person interaction. An ideal menu of engagement would include a variety of on-line, in-person, and in-print platforms to reach the widest cross section of individuals and groups in a society.

Be Candid

The “do as I say not as I do model”—such as the United States calling on countries to accede to UN conventions to which it is not itself a party—no longer works. In addition, there are a lot more “players” in the field, which means target audiences have more options, and it may be harder to make ourselves heard in the cacophony of voices attempting to engage target groups. If we can be more candid—that is honest—about who we are, where we stand on policy issues and why, embracing our missteps as well as our triumphs, I am convinced our credibility will rise once again in the eyes of those with whom we most want to connect.

On a practical level, this can be achieved by walking the fine line between “towing the party line” and just being ourselves. An audience wants to know that public diplomacy officials are real people and not simply parrots spouting the latest ambiguous talking points, or merely cogs in the bureaucratic machine regurgitating what the President or Secretary just stated in a more local context. Candor, frankness, and honesty endear us to our audience and help them connect with us on a person-to-person level. Person-to-person connection is the surest path toward discovering common ground upon which to build the foundation of a meaningful and lasting relationship. To do this we must use who we are, what we know, and our personal experiences and those of people we know to convey our points. We should use language relatable to all, avoiding the amorphous alphabet acronym soup of “government speak,” jargon, and quoting verbatim from policy briefs and talking points. Of course, the key is to avoid over sharing and strike a balance between maintaining a professional distance from the audience while still achieving a meaningful connection to them—easier said than done.

Agree to Disagree

We must be able to debate intelligently the issues by knowing the facts; we must do our homework. Part of establishing (or re-establishing) ourselves as credible actors, resources and allies is to demonstrate our knowledge and mastery of the subject matter. I believe we have become afraid of confrontation and are too worried about saying what we think the other party wants to hear, instead of saying what we mean (good, bad, or ugly).
We do not have to avoid confrontation for the sake of goodwill. In fact, I think it instills more goodwill to show enough respect to our audience by participating in thoughtful, reasoned discussion. Avoiding questions or certain topics could be perceived as: (1) we are not listening closely to our audience, or (2) we do not know enough about the content to engage in healthy debate about a subject. Unfortunately, both of those outcomes negate the intention of our engagement. To avoid these outcomes, it is important to accept at the outset the fact that it may not be possible to “win over” an audience or convince them of our point-of-view (and conversely we may not be convinced of theirs); however, the magic is in the dialogue itself. While we may not successfully change the audience’s mind, there is a very strong possibility that at least we will get them thinking somewhat differently about their own perspective and/or begin to question the merits of their perspective. At a very minimum we are conveying respect for them by entering into a healthy debate on a topic that matters to them, which more clearly supports the intention of the engagement.

There is no primer or master guide that can be used to create a one-size-fits-all model for successful public diplomacy in the field, and I realize that nothing I have said here is “ground breaking” or even “new” in the grand scheme of public diplomacy discourse. However, my goal is simply to convey (without going into painful detail by providing specific examples), the lessons that stuck with me (because they work), and to express thanks for the privilege I have had to explore public diplomacy more fully over the course of this fellowship year. The lessons outlined above are free to adopt, which is good news given the current budget environment, can be applied to varied cultural contexts, and only require a little bit of creativity, nerve/willingness to put ourselves out there, and a sincere desire to connect with, “inform, influence, and engage” the audience.