

Nov 04, 2016 by [Richard Farson](#)

Paradoxes in Making Friends of Enemies ^[1]

With attitudes toward America in practically every part of the world already ranging from distrust to violent hatred, and seeming to worsen by the day, it may seem naive to think that public diplomacy can rescue us. But because the only sure way to protect us from terrorist attacks is to become less a target of their hostility, it is worth trying a different strategy than is now being practiced in our public diplomacy.

Transforming strongly held attitudes, getting those who hate us come to like and respect us, may not be as impossible as it seems. Attitude shifts are not always gradual, but can move from one pole to the opposite -- as we often witness in politics and among reformed individuals from all walks of life. Enemies can quickly become friends, and vice versa. For example, think what could happen almost overnight should we bring about a peaceful settlement of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

In the pursuit of those hearts and minds, now locked in fundamentalist religions and passionate nationalism, conventional public relations, what makes sense on Madison Avenue, may not work to meet this new challenge. To sell the American brand of values to our potential enemies we cannot rely only on the kinds of commercially successful techniques that might be used to sell soap. To create positive bonds between them and us it may be wise to embrace a few paradoxes.

The fundamental shift in thinking required for this task is to realize that direct efforts to make them feel positively about us are of limited value. Paradoxically, the task is not to get them to respect us, but to get us to respect them. If we can accomplish that, then the natural reciprocity of human relations will ultimately bring about a similar response in the other.

We frequently see this phenomenon in management. Bosses who try to get their people to like them are less effective than those who operate so that they will like their people. It is hard for employees not to come to like a boss who likes and respects them. On the other hand, no technique can hide the truth if bosses really don't like their subordinates.

That is perhaps the main reason why we are hated. We simply don't respect these Middle Eastern people who seem so different, and so remote, from us. This means, of course, that much of our efforts must be directed at us, to provide the kind of information to our leaders and our citizens that could increase our understanding and consequently our respect, and yes, even perhaps our affection and compassion, for these angry masses. Like the effective manager, we need to both talk straight and offer friendly engagement.

Unfortunately, warfare is always conducted by painting the face of the enemy not just as hostile, but as evil, even subhuman. Public diplomacy is running up against a powerful undermining force in the propaganda that accompanies war fighting. The psychology employed to motivate soldiers to fight the enemy, and the public to support a war, is obviously

very different from the psychology involved in creating bonds of understanding. But that is the fundamental nature of a paradoxical strategy -- the ability to go in opposite directions at the same time. We saw this strategy exercised in the war in Afghanistan where we dropped bombs and food at the same time.

We might keep in mind some other paradoxes as well. People tend to like those whom they help, not those who help them. The positive effects of humanitarian aid on increasing their affection for us are minor compared to how these people would feel about us if they could help us. They will change their attitudes toward us when they can have an impact on us, get us to understand something about them, educate us, change us in some way. That is why the Peace Corps works so well. The volunteers return changed, and consequently those they left behind in those countries are changed also.

Another paradox: We tend to lose respect for those whom we can deceive. When we are successful in deceiving others we tend not to see the best in them. Indeed, we lose respect not only for the fooled individuals, but also for people in general. Deception ultimately damages the deceiver more than the deceived. Disinformation backfires.

Finally, we might consider that the more important a relationship, the less skills and techniques matter. Efforts to build bonds between people that are not grounded in genuine attitudes are not likely to succeed. When one desires a lasting relationship it must be built on authentic feelings. In that effort we may often not know exactly what to do, and feel vulnerable because of it. But that is all right too. We felt vulnerable on 9/11 and even countries with which we had been at odds liked us better at that moment. It is not always a measure of strength to feel that you must know what to do. For example, not knowing how to have a romance is what makes it a romance in the first place. If you always know what to do, it's not a romance, it's a seduction.

Our relationships with these Middle Eastern peoples are the most important we now have. Our lives depend on them. We cannot risk a seduction.
