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Five Ways to Sharpen the Effectiveness of Canada's Diplomatic Corps [1]

The Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers (PAFSO)—which represents more than 1500 active and retired Canadian foreign service officers—held its first professional conference last week in Ottawa on the “foreign service officer of the future.”

While the discussion at the conference was under Chatham House Rule, as a former diplomat and five-term elected member of PAFSO’s executive committee, I was delighted to know that PAFSO is thinking about the future of foreign service. Such an exercise is both timely and relevant, given that in the face of the new threat set facing humanity (climate, biodiversity, global commons, pandemic disease, alternative energy, and food and water security, to name a few), diplomacy is our best bet.

There are no military solutions—these issues are immune to the application of armed force.

That said, when it comes to diplomatic practice and institutions, there is much work to be

done. Time to raise the bar and up the game. And while diplomats are certainly already working to improve the foreign service—*OpenCanada* recently reported on the efforts to make the service gender balanced, for instance—I have additional advice for diplomats currently working in the field. Here are five steps each can take to improve the quality of our foreign service immediately.

1. Modernize professional development training.

Learn the essential tradecraft, which turns on both art and science in roughly equal measure. Explore vital distinctions: diplomacy vs. journalism; policy vs. intelligence; political/economic reporting and analysis vs. the news; the role and place of international science and technology; the importance of acquiring a fundamental understanding of history, culture, people and place. While there are many courses available on the curriculum of the Canadian Foreign Service Institute—on protocol, trade promotion, intercultural effectiveness, foreign languages and so forth—how can it be that Canada's diplomatic academy still offers no actual training in diplomacy?

Time to hit the reset button and get back to basics in training and professional development.

2. Remain grounded.

Be true to yourself. Don't drink the Kool-Aid. Stand by your values and ethics and have the courage of your convictions. Do not go gently. Offer fearless advice and speak truth to power rather than worry about its accommodation or comfort.

Beware the paradox of connectivity—you may feel more networked than ever and rejoice in your vast number of e-contacts, but in key matters of statecraft nothing compares to direct human exchange founded in confidence, trust and respect. In a pinch, act. Instructions have their place, but in our increasingly fast-paced world remember that it is always easier to ask forgiveness than to beg permission.

3. Avoid the hierarchy trap.

Praise the Lord (Lord Acton, that is). "There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it," English intellectual John Dalberg-Acton once wrote.

Absolute power may corrupt, but bureaucratic ambition, particularly in a hierarchic, authoritarian setting such as a foreign ministry, transforms personalities and corrodes interpersonal relations. The Jekyll and Hyde syndrome is a classic here. So don't specialize in pleasing the boss, or fall into the kiss-up/kick-down model of career advancement. And always judge ideas by their quality, not their provenance.

When the adulation of seniority is substituted for genuine dialogue and functions as the primary organizational ethos, the work environment tends rapidly to become septic, if not

toxic. Weed out the upper echelons, and make way for new blood by making successful performance outside of the foreign ministry—through mandatory secondments and exchanges with a wide variety of partners—a pre-condition to promotion into the executive cadre or assignment abroad as head of mission.

Bring back the PEG (the PAFSO Evaluation Guide), a bottom-up, membership-driven damage control scheme designed to identify, assess and isolate chronic underperformers and corporate ogres.

4. Embrace risk.

Risk is to be managed, not averted. When in doubt, resist. Dissent constructively and avoid self-censorship and the production of lowest common denominator mush. Pablum won't save the planet. Hone critical consciousness and think freely. If you want to be heard, don't run with the herd. Canada's foreign affairs department was the ancestral home of Lester Pearson, Charles Ritchie, George Ignatieff and John Halstead—not to mention whistleblowers Joanna Gualtieri and Richard Colvin. None were obsequious toadies or grasping acolytes.

To be sure, the department that brought the world peacekeeping, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, the Rio Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), victory through public diplomacy in the "Fish War" with Spain, and the human security agenda, is no more. Worse yet, the Conservative government's decade of darkness (2006-2015)—with its disastrous engagement in Afghanistan, muzzling of diplomats and scientists, privileging of ideology over evidence, assault on democracy and de-resourcing of international policy institutions—has taken a profound toll on the capacity and willingness of Global Affairs Canada employees to initiate. What are we doing with the G7 presidency? Our United Nations Security Council candidacy? Achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals? Not much, and certainly not enough.

5. Finally, always strive to innovate.

Respect the Vienna and Geneva Conventions, but dare to be unconventional. Understand the importance of the personal and situational. Chance, luck and timing often trump factors associated with terms masquerading under the banner of objectivity, merit and performance management in conditioning—if not determining—workplace outcomes.

Be strategic where possible, but improvise where necessary. Innovate relentlessly. The foreign ministry is not a cathedral. The foreign service is not a priesthood. Diplomacy is not liturgy. The diplomatic ecosystem is in crisis and this profession is in desperate need of a leadership transfusion, radical reform and reconstruction from the ground up. *Carpe diem*.

The norms of Canadian public service have been decades in the making. To find a better way ahead, begin by looking back. Don't forget: the path of least resistance is often a dead end. Push back. Build back. Take back.

A diplomat is much more than a glorified international policy bureaucrat. That distinction is

crucial but seems to have been lost on the bland, ashen-faced apparatchiks, timid time-servers and clever careerists who prospered during the Harper years and now dominate the senior ranks. That must change, and there is a better way forward. But none of this will happen by itself. A foreign service wake-up call is long overdue.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece originally appeared in OpenCanada and has been adapted for the CPD Blog.*