



REFLECTIONS OF THE AMBASSADOR OF A SMALL COUNTRY

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Smaller countries have fewer resources to conduct business, less qualified personnel to occupy the essential positions, and at the same time, some of our countries have the unrealistic expectation (or the arrogance) that we are bigger, more powerful or more capable of persuading the official authorities in the host country than we really are.

Scarce Resources and Personnel

A small country has scarce resources. The Embassy of a small country usually has only one or two members. In my personal case I was lucky to have with me a Minister Counselor, first, second, and third secretaries and two attaches. The two attaches did not have diplomatic responsibility – one was the code clerk and the other was the radio operator. These were named Attaches in the diplomatic list, but their position within the Embassy was to facilitate the mission's normal operations rather than to make contact with officials within the host country or practice diplomacy.

One problem with the scarcity of personnel is not only quantity, but also quality. In most countries, people assigned to missions and embassies are not selected from a qualified pool of personnel, but are sent abroad because they either know somebody in the ministry of foreign relations or, as in the case in Cuba, are a member of the Cuban Communist Party with personal connections with higher-ups in the Central Committee or the military. This means that, most likely, not everybody in the mission is going to be well qualified. It is likely that some of the personnel assigned to the mission may not know the country's language, or may not even know a language such as English or French which can help in his relations with government officers and other diplomats. In those cases, it is extremely important that those employees or officers are given the opportunity and are encouraged to learn a foreign language. In our embassy, out of seven employees, only two spoke English, and none spoke Arabic, the country's native language, although one of the diplomats had been posted to the country for over four years.

The situation is different in the Foreign Service in the United States. The entrance requirements are extremely rigorous and elaborated, and the selection of personnel is based on merit and experience. Maria Pinto Garland tells us that in a job interview for a work in the foreign services "there are really only three essential questions posed: Why are you interested in our organization? What can you offer this organization? and What type of person are you?" (Garland & Gihring, 2003, p. 8). She also advises diplomat aspirants that "you should also bring an extra copy of your transcript and writing samples, as well as a neatly typed list of references" (Garland & Gihring, 2003, p. 15). Of course, code clerks and intelligence personnel have a special status in all missions. In the United States, Joseph A. Ferrara mentions that "some

federal agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency have only excepted service positions” (Garland & Gihring, 2003, p. 47).

A small mission has the added disadvantage that of the few diplomats available; at least one, most likely, will have to take care of some administrative duties, unless this responsibility is given to local employees. However, there are many administrative issues in which a diplomat rather than a local should be used, such as welcoming a visitor from the country of origin, or to receive the diplomatic couriers, which in our case invariably arrived once every month. In those years, still they traveled all over the world chained to their pouches. This practice is no longer used. Barbara Jacquin mentions that “diplomatic couriers are no longer chained by the wrist to their pouches” (Dorman, 2003, p. 121).

One of our embassy secretaries used two hats, one of them as consul, although not many locals traveled to my country, and the consular office was inactive most of the time. The only visa processed in the mission that I can remember was not for an Egyptian wanting to travel to Cuba, but for an American journalist who wanted to travel there. This of course was some kind of special situation, and the secretary in charge of consular affairs had to request authorization from Havana. We found out that the journalist, who worked for Time magazine, had previously traveled to our country, and that his reportage was relatively unbiased and accurate. He got his visa – at no charge. Don Jacobson reminds us that free visas are very rare. He wrote that “the consular section is usually the only revenue-generating section of an embassy or consulate” (Dorman, 2003, p. 27). Maybe we could have charged a small fee, but with only one visa in two years the embassy did not lose a lot of revenues.

There were no Cuban teachers or doctors present in Egypt. This was kind of unusual, given the large numbers of educators and health practitioners deployed all over the developing world. However, Egypt was not considered a very friendly country. Brooks A. Taylor mentions that in the United States “there are about 29 regional medical officers (called RMOs) and about 54 Foreign health practitioners and physician’s assistants posted overseas” (Dorman, 2003, p. 46). The presence of those technicians could make the work of the mission much more complicated.

We also did not have any evacuation, at least while I was there. Egypt was a relatively safe country, and with the exception of an incident, which occurred when the Egyptian government raised the price of bread by one cent, the country was quiet. In this specific instance, somewhere at the end of 1976, workers and students mobilized in the capital of Cairo, and put in flames a few dozens of cars, trucks and buses, unfortunately one of them in front of our embassy. Other missions -located in more dangerous places- are not so lucky. Earle C. “Chat” Blakeman explains that “during the past 12 months family members and all non-emergency staff have been evacuated twice” (Dorman, 2003, p. 19). The fact that the government of the United States pays extra for diplomats and employees working at those places is not much consolation for diplomats of a small nation, because it is unlikely that any Third World country could pay extra moneys to compensate for the additional danger. Anne W. Patterson mentions that “Bogota is one of the few postings that comes with a “danger pay” allowance, the equivalent of U.S. military combat pay” (Dorman, 2003, p. 10).

In our case, our embassy had 14 local employees; some of them more qualified than some of our diplomats. One of the receptionists spoke fluently five languages, but she was never used

as a translator even with people of the host country, which now I think must have been a mistake. The rationale at the time was that we should not involve locals in the affairs of the embassy, because all that we do is secret and confidential that involving a local employee could dilute the effectiveness of our diplomatic maneuvers, whichever they were. However, at least in some social events, she could have been used successfully as a translator.

Of course all diplomats are afraid of being bugged, and Egypt was no exception. We “knew” that our phone lines were bugged, that our offices had sensitive microphones placed in mysterious places by our local employees, which, of course, worked for the local intelligence service. I remember a meeting with the Ambassador of Libya during one of the many border military skirmishes between Egypt and Libya. The Libyan Ambassador did not want to talk in my office and we conducted all our conversation in writing. At the end, in his presence, I put all the written notes in the flames for immediate destruction.

Concluding Comments

If I were asked to give some advice to a charge d'affairs or ambassador from a small country, I would probably limit my recommendation to four points which seem to be of utmost importance:

1. Keep an eye on the purse. By this I mean monitoring the mission's monthly budget and how it is being used or wasted. I have the impression that many ambassadors and higher-ups in the foreign service believe themselves to be real political gurus whose intelligence could be tarnished if they were to monitor how the budget is being spent – after all, wasn't everything of an administrative nature already been decided back in our country's capitals by people who knew more accounting and finance than we do? This thinking is wrong. In the same manner that a President holds a political position but also holds the highest administrative position, an ambassador is also the highest political representation in the country where he is sent and also its highest administrative officer. An ambassador should know where every penny is being spent and make sure that the financial affairs of the mission are in good order. The social needs of every member of the mission should be considered when planning for invitation and a reception expenses, not only for the ambassador and counselor, as unfortunately happens in many cases. There is nothing that reduces more the morale in a small embassy than the perception that all the “goodies” are being monopolized by the high bosses.

As the top general manager, the head of mission should have among his or her most important responsibilities the development and growth of the people working under him or her. A great effort should be done to make sure that diplomats and attaches have an opportunity to improve their skills. This small investment in the subordinates will pay great dividends in the form of loyalty and the quality of the mission's work.

2. Know why you are there and what is expected of you. This should be obvious, but it is not. Many ambassadors receive very poor instructions from their governments as to what they are supposed to do at their destination. Just to have a presence is not enough because it is probably a waste of resources, unless your country has political, security, or military goals, nothing to sell, nothing to purchase, and no idea about how the relations between the two countries can be improved. In many cases the activities of a small mission have more to do with the personal tastes and preferences of the ambassador than from directives coming from our

country's capital. If the ministry of foreign affairs back home does not have a clear plan as to what the mission should be doing, then the ambassador or head of mission should become creative and suggest ways in which the relationships between the two countries can be improved. Everybody in the mission, not only the ambassador, are like the eyes of the mother country in the capital where they are posted, and all of them should brainstorm as to what could be done to benefit the home country from this diplomatic presence. Obviously, whatever it is that diplomats have to do, they should be encouraged to become as active as they can – putting all their efforts in materializing the mission's goals and aspirations.

I did not have to worry about not having focused expectations or detailed guidelines. I had to defend the reputation of my country, which was tarnished all the time, even if I had to lie, although I was not conscious at the time of how much I was forced to lie. Cuba was at the receiving end of all kind of accusations mostly in the human rights arena, and sometimes I had to clarify issues or explaining my country's position to other diplomats who confronted me with what they had heard or read. Marc Grossman Dorman shared with his readers one of his experiences while working as an American diplomat in Brazil in which he had to “ask that Brazil vote for a resolution condemning Cuba's human rights record at the U.N. Human Rights Commission” (Dorman, 2003, p. 85). The great diplomatic machinery of the United States was constantly active to make my work harder.

3. My third advice is to keep your government informed. People back home have little time to get informed, and although they may read the press and watch CNN they cannot get the type of information that you as a member of the Foreign Service can get. It is not the same to read an article in Newsweek than to have a one-to-one conversation with the President of the country or a Minister and get first-hand details as to what is going on in the country, where it is moving politically, and what types of opportunities may exist in the future that your country may be able to exploit to the fullest.

4. And last, build relationships with the locals. Although relationships with members of other embassies or missions should be cultivated, the main purpose of your stay in this capital is to build relationships with this country's leaders or potential leaders. If the host country is a democratic country never forget its opposition. These people may be in power tomorrow, and establishing a relationship with them now, before they get appointed to an office, will guarantee that they will be more likely to talk to you or your diplomats when this opposition becomes part of the government. However, this, like everything in an embassy, should be done diplomatically and with tact. The government should never get the impression that you are favoring the opposition.

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