Contacts and Personal Networking Techniques

Public diplomacy practitioners regard direct, face-to-face oral communication as one of the most powerful techniques for communication across cultural borders. Edward R. Murrow, who was President Kennedy’s USIA director, famously said, “It has always seemed to me the real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face to face conversation.”¹ He meant that face-to-face engagement with the audience is a very effective public diplomacy tool that can facilitate almost everything the public affairs section wants to accomplish. Experienced practitioners agree, and they often cite Murrow’s “last three feet” rule.² A veteran PD officer and scholar, with tongue in cheek, calls face-to-face communication a “Killer App.” He says: “Far more effectively than Twitter, Facebook, or other social media, it brings people together, leading to significant exchanges of ideas and in-depth relationships.”³ Although Murrow made his career in broadcasting, he knew that the best way to conduct public diplomacy was in face-to-face encounters. The reason is that in such encounters, the American diplomat can engage in an interactive dialogue, during which he or she can develop a nuanced understanding of the perceptions and concerns of the target individual, and speak directly to those concerns in trying to dispel misconceptions and achieve better understanding.

In addition, a major task of the public diplomacy professional is to build a picture of local thinking on issues of relevance to the United States, and a good way to do that is through a conversation with local individuals who are representatives of segments of the population.
Especially in countries where the media are not entirely free, talking to people one-on-one reveals attitudes that are not publicly expressed but are important. This contributes to the embassy’s overall understanding of how the bilateral relationship is going. Moreover, such conversations help the public diplomacy professionals think about programs that might be useful in that country.

Direct communication for public diplomacy purposes takes place when an American official meets with one or more foreign nationals. It also occurs however when American private citizens are sent abroad by the State Department to lecture on their specialties, or when foreign nationals visit the United States in the educational exchange program. Also useful, but less so, are the long-distance interactive discussions by videoconference, webcasts, or remote podcasts between American officials in the United States and individuals abroad. All of these encounters can serve public diplomacy purposes because they allow listening, response and dialogue in direct encounters allowing give and take.

**Basic Approaches**

**Contacts and Networking**

Successful face-to-face encounters depend on, and in turn reinforce, the careful development of personal contacts. Personal contacts are created by repeated office calls, and in social functions. American diplomats usually find that they must not only put a full eight-hour work day (which they must do by law) or longer, but they also have many social obligations in the evening and on weekends, including receptions, national days and dinners. These are all regarded as working functions, whose primary purpose is not frivolous, but is intended, rather, to develop and deepen personal contacts in a purposeful way.

An ongoing effort must be made to expand the list of contacts through networking. Ideally, American diplomats who are newly arrived at post should be introduced by their predecessors to their most important contacts and they should find files with details about past embassy associations with target audience members, but this does not always happen. However, once established at post, they should always be looking for opportunities to expand the reach of the embassy to new people who are important to US interests, rather than depending on old invitation lists.

One rule of thumb for an effective public diplomacy officer is to get out of the office as much as possible every day, relegating paperwork,