

IDEAL QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL DIPLOMAT

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My meetings over four decades in the Oval Office, the White House Situation Room, the State and Defence Departments and in foreign capitals have been an invitation to reflect upon the core characteristics of outstanding practitioners of diplomacy. I have had the opportunity to learn from extraordinary mentors in each of these settings. From these experiences, here are fifteen characteristics that I believe are fundamental for successful diplomats.

Possess an abiding interest in and passion for the art and craft of diplomacy and international relations. If this subject matter does not feed you, if you do not have a compelling instinct to learn about the world, pursue a different profession.

Demonstrate an analytical temperament. Our current culture encourages ideological predisposition and rigidity. We are invited to have an opinion without first having a full command of the facts. Resist the temptation to prescribe before you analyse. Dean Acheson understood how hard this is, "I was a frustrated schoolteacher, persisting against overwhelming evidence to the contrary in the belief that the human mind could be moved by facts and reason."

Write well and quickly. Nurture your ability to rapidly produce quality prose. Read and learn from great writers. Try George Orwell, E. B. White and John McPhee.

Be verbally fluent and concise. George Shultz observes that listening is an underrated way of acquiring knowledge. Pay attention, speak only when necessary and keep your comments brief. These are not qualities highly prized in academia.

Ensure meticulous attention to detail. Whether your work is going to the President or Prime Minister, to your immediate superiors or to your peers, each deserves a flawless product. Don't accept less of yourself. Jeff Bezos stresses, "If you don't understand the details of your business you are going to fail."

Be a tough and effective negotiator. Getting to yes is not the objective of a diplomat. Begin instead with what best serves your country's national interests and then seek to achieve a negotiating outcome as close to those requirements as possible. Adopt clear red lines and do not compromise beyond them. And as James Baker advises, "Never let the other fellow set the agenda."

Build long-term physical and mental stamina. With the exercise of power and responsibility comes continuous 12-16 hour days, filled with pressure and stress. Be fit.

Accept dangerous assignments. Diplomats frequently serve in menacing locales, sometimes die in the line of duty. From Libya to Iraq to Afghanistan and beyond, this is not a line of work only conducted in rarefied surroundings. Reflect on your degree of anticipated personal courage before entering this profession.

Study history. Former Harvard faculty giants Ernest May and Richard Neustadt eloquently counsel thinking in the context of time. They insist that knowledge of history does not provide exact policy prescriptions in present circumstances, but it does illuminate choices and raise central questions of policy formulation and implementation. A good start is Henry Kissinger's [A World Restored](#).

Prudently speak your opinion to power. Be ready to disagree with evolving policy when it really matters. But choose your dissenting moments wisely. Don't badger your principal. And if such policy differences become paramount, don't whine. Resign.

Be loyal and truthful to your boss. Never question outside of government a decision made further up your bureaucratic chain of command, no matter how much you disagree with it. Once such a decision is made, your professional duty is to try your best to implement it. There is nothing courageous in disavowing your Administration's decision in whispered tones in social settings. And never misrepresent or lie to your official superiors, no matter how expedient it might appear at the moment. If you do so, you should be fired.

Cultivate policy resilience. If the Duke of Wellington never lost a battle, most generals do – and so will you. Expect periodic policy defeats and energetically move on to the next challenge.

Acquire relevant work experience. Invest time, energy and effort in your own professional development. Don't thirst for too much power and responsibility too soon. In diplomacy – as in most endeavours – experience is a crucial component of success. As Renaissance painters demanded, apprenticeship is a necessary step in professional enhancement. Would you hire a plumber who was academically well versed in water distribution, but had never installed a pipe?

Know your political ideology. No matter how flattering a foreign policy job proposal may be, ask yourself whether your ideology is compatible with that of the offering institution. Not to do so is to invite endless professional pain and torment.

Take advantage of luck when you encounter it. When Napoleon was asked what kind of generals he looked for, he responded "lucky ones." Be ready when events in the world provide policy opportunities you can exploit. Getting on a personal professional wave you can ride – and that you want to ride – is also importantly a matter of good fortune. Relentless attention to the other fourteen characteristics enumerated here will put you in the best position to partially make your own luck in your career.