



Today, We Are the Diplomats *By Lanie Denslow*

Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ambassadors and Consuls General generally speak for our countries. We identify them as the diplomats, the people who inform the world what we stand for as a nation, setting policies and enlisting support for national positions. We do not often recognize as diplomats the people who represent their country out of the eye of the camera quietly, daily, around the world. These are professionals, the non-governmental diplomats, the business people whose activities and actions tell the story of their country.

Business is no longer simply a profit making activity. Today it is also diplomacy and from this view, diplomacy is not negotiating treaties or issuing policy statements but building a dialogue, sharing information about ones country within the context of business. Not surprisingly, business diplomacy is often conducted by people who don't consciously see themselves in the role of diplomats, people who would be startled by the very suggestion.

The soccer star playing for Barca, the young designer building an international client base, the pharmaceutical executive traveling the globe, doesn't consider his or her activities diplomacy. But they are. Their regular actions communicate about their country, their place, their home as clearly as about their product, design or athletic skills.

In a global economy where companies move daily to find the lowest cost of production, the fastest method of delivery, the newest niche market, a nation needs to distinguish itself. Establishing that its population has mindset that understands business has experience with commerce can be to its competitive advantage. In this regard Catalonia has a powerful story to tell.

Although often known simply as a region of Spain it is the fifth major industrial regions in all of Europe¹. Its economic experience dating back the late 18th century provides hundreds of years of business, industry and diplomacy to draw upon, creating an environment where business is understood, respected and valued.

The business diplomat even without special training can communicate this reality. No classes in protocol, no need to know the rules of how a flag is displayed. What is essential is the same information used to conduct business in a complex, global economy. One must know markets, statistics, legal and financial regulations. Additionally, of equal or greater importance, is understanding the people who do the business.

¹ www.catalonia.cat

Simply traveling between Barcelona and Berlin alerts us that differences exist in styles of conducting business. The broader the scope of our business activities the more variations we encounter. Two significant areas of difference are how people communicate and view time.

For example, an American's communication style direct, questioning may be surprising to the Catalonian technology executive exploring a joint venture in California's silicon valley. What an American sees as practical information gathering, asking for facts and figures in order to create a transaction can seem abrupt and rude. Knowing in advance what to expect, allows you to respond in a way to be sure your meaning is understood, the benefits of your product or service recognized is critical.

Attitudes about and view of time lie at the heart of many business and diplomatic difficulties. Is time a scarce commodity to be used carefully or something that is on going and endless? If the answer is scarce, a meeting must start on time, agenda be followed, deadlines honored precisely. On going and endless? There is greater flexibility response time, allowance for interruptions, and relaxed conversational patterns.

Not all the keys to diplomatic or business success rest within the understanding of values, attitudes about time, views about risk, achievement and formality. Some are as simple as knowing what time is dinner served. In Beijing dinner may be at 6:00 pm, but at 8:30 New York and in Mexico City 11:00 pm. When can you eat and when should you offer dinner to your guest? What appears as a kindness to one is a bother to someone else. If your visitor is coming from Korea it polite to meet them at the airport while your American colleague is happy to be directed to the hotel independently. Different patterns and preferences influenced by place and personality.

Learning these differences requires observation, sharing experiences, and often advice of a knowledgeable consultant. For those developing business outside of Catalonia one way to obtain assistance is through the Consortium for Commercial Promotion of Catalonia (COPCA). The mission of this agency is to promote internationalization of local companies. Their 38 offices in 31 countries are in places as diverse as Beijing and Miami, Johannesburg, South Africa and Sydney, Australia. They can provide insight to the style of business, the approach best suited to the environment along with detailed market data and legal advice.

Neither business nor diplomacy demand that one takes on another identity, shifting away from ones definitions of appropriate business protocol, personal style. Rather, both require understanding of the variations; to be prepared, to know how to adapt, to build effective connections. Both roles require knowledge of ones business environment, nation, local challenges and opportunities, and a willingness to share these insights with those from other countries. The people of Catalonia whose daily commercial activity shaped its past and are designing its future know all of this and more. They can be, and they are, diplomats, every day.

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