

Nov 04, 2016 by **R.S. Zaharna**

Culture Posts: Developing Cultural In-Awareness in Public Diplomacy ^[1]

One of the goals of this blog series is to develop greater awareness and knowledge of how culture intervenes in public diplomacy. In public diplomacy, culture's web of influence spans across policy, practice, and research, and encompasses both sponsor and intended public.

The problem is that much of culture's influence lays "out-of-awareness" for both the sponsor and the intended public in public diplomacy. As further irony, the sponsor and the public may have some awareness of the other's cultural features, but are often unable to see culture's influence on themselves. These hidden aspects tend to be the source of cultural misunderstandings and tensions.

One of the keys to effective public diplomacy is developing an "in-awareness" cultural approach to public diplomacy.

Origins of Intercultural Communication in Traditional Diplomacy

The idea of "in-awareness" comes from American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall. Some may recognize Hall as one of the founders of the field of intercultural communication. However, Hall's work began not in communication, but in diplomacy at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. State Department.



Following World War II, the State Department found that the effectiveness of its diplomats was hampered by lack of language and cultural knowledge. In 1949, the U.S. FSI was established

to better train diplomats. Hall was one of several anthropologists and linguists who joined the FSI.

Originally, Hall and the other anthropologists lectured on the broad, macro-level aspects of culture such as politics, economy, or religion. The diplomats, however, were concerned about what happens when two people from different cultures interact.

Hall shifted his focus to applied culture. He developed experiential techniques such as role-playing and situational exercises for the diplomats.

After writing a few popular pieces, Hall published *The Silent Language* (1959). The book was the first in a series that shared his ideas about culture and communication. His book enjoyed wide popularity selling over 500,000 copies in the early 1960s.



The Silent Language

In *The Silent Language*, Hall showed how we can communicate volumes without saying a word. The problem is that most of what and how we communicate escapes our awareness, or is “out-of-awareness.”

Not only do we learn most of our behaviors “out-of-awareness,” but we tend to perform them “out-of-awareness” as well.

One of the great “out-of-awareness” examples is the subtle “dance” between two diplomats conversing at a reception.

One diplomat is comfortable standing and conversing with others at a distance of about three feet. Her conversation partner, however, prefers a closer distance of about two feet. So as one diplomat steps closer to narrow the space between them, the other diplomat steps back to increase the distance. He steps forward, she steps back. And, thus they dance as they converse. In the end, she walks away thinking of her counterpart as 'pushy and somewhat aggressive.' Little does she realize that he thinks she is 'distant and aloof.'

Bringing communication and culture “in-awareness” does not only apply to how one views others from different cultures. Gaining self-awareness about culture’s influence on one’s own behavior can often be as insightful and constructive as learning about others.

Without a conscious awareness of how another culture differs from one's own, there is a tendency to see the differences of another through the prism of one's culture. Ethnocentricity occurs when one uses their own cultural standards as a yardstick for measuring other cultures; inevitably the other culture comes up lacking.

Culture hides more than it reveals, and
strangely enough, what it hides, it
hides most effectively from its own
participants

- Edward T. Hall

Often, awareness and knowledge go hand-in-hand. Greater cultural awareness is key to building and refining one’s trove of cultural knowledge. And, with greater knowledge comes an awareness of the nuances that expose cultural variations.

Awareness is also critical when one considers the dynamic nature of culture. Culture is a human-created and human-perpetuated organic phenomenon. In future “Culture Posts”, I hope to talk about the provocative idea of “culture as a verb.”

Public Diplomacy Cultural In-Awareness

Hall’s work on cultural in-awareness for traditional diplomacy helps provide inspiration for the work that lies ahead for public diplomacy. Traditional diplomacy may often enjoy the luxury of private settings. Public diplomacy often does not.

Hall focused primarily on nonverbal behaviors and communication between individuals. In public diplomacy, practitioners are challenged to consider how their actions and communication may be perceived. Their actions may be magnified under public scrutiny and then amplified by media exposure.

The example of the dance of misunderstanding between two diplomats involved behavioral differences in perceptions of space. The list of potential cultural variations between a public diplomat and the publics she seeks to communicate is long.

As we begin this trek of cultural in-awareness, we may begin by looking our environment and actions anew, and asking: What areas and aspects might we be taking for granted or holding out-of-awareness in how we practice and assess public diplomacy? What can we shine a spotlight on and bring it in-awareness for public diplomacy?
