

‘Ambassador’s Instructions’ for newly appointed envoys

In my book *The 21st Century Ambassador* (2005), I had written:

The French have pioneered a system of ‘ambassador’s instructions’. Every envoy going out on a new assignment receives from the Secretary General of *Quai d’Orsay* a customized document that sets out the tasks he is expected to accomplish at that particular post. It is the end product of a process of collective reflection and analysis, in which other ministries and departments that have interests in that country also contribute. Within six months the ambassador presents to the Secretary General his own ‘plan of action’ for executing the instructions, plus a demand for additional resources as needed for the tasks. Thereafter, during the course of the ambassador’s term, the implementation is tracked through annual programs, calendars of activities, workplans for individuals and timelines. The method is Cartesian, and elegant. It has the merit of tying resources to objectives. Strangely, no other diplomatic system has used a comparable method, though now some other EU countries are now beginning to adapt the French system for their own use. For instance outbound new German envoys now hold a final session with the Foreign Office State Secretary, where a document that serves as his Foreign Office guideline is finalized and transmitted. But it does not as yet involve other ministries. In other countries it is tacitly assumed that the ambassador knows what his task is, but this is not spelt out. Some argue that those who have risen to an ambassadorship after many years of junior appointment apprenticeship do not need written directives on the basis of their work. And yet, if we apply a corporate analogy, it is unthinkable that a new country manager would be sent out by a multinational enterprise without an articulated, precise plan of the tasks he is expected to accomplish. Of course, the overall performance of the envoy is judged against the tasks set for him at the start of his assignment. (For a more detailed survey of performance monitoring issues, including personal experience with writing one’s own start of mission objectives, see: Rana, *Inside Diplomacy*, pp. 79-83 and Rana, *Bilateral Diplomacy*, pp. 243-5.)

In applying such a system, the key issues are:

- The instructions must be written with a clear vision of the objectives and priorities at each assignment, and not presented as a set of standardized, anodyne statements.
- They must cover the wish-list of each of the major ministries and departments that have interests in the target country, meaning that they should be written in consultation with them, representing a ‘whole of government’ perspective.
- Ideally, the language should be terse and as specific as possible, with the tasks presented perhaps in the shape of bullet-points.

- The ambassador should come back to the Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary within 6 months with his 'plan of action' for implementing the instructions given to him.
- Such instructions should serve as the platform for consequential actions, including the performance contract to be signed with the envoy.

Typically, each of these customized notes of instructions is around two to five pages in length. That is very short, and clearly the focus is on essentials. (BTW, the French are cagey about sharing such material with anyone else, outside their own circle of European allies and close friends. This is one more example of how countries are reluctant to share information on diplomatic practices.

A couple of other countries also have a method of giving instructions to their new ambassadors, including Japan and Turkey, but as I understand, these are not so specific or tailored for each country and time, as is the case with France. In recent years, Italy and Germany have emulated the French method, but with limited result; the latter confine their scope to the Foreign Office, which obviously limits its utility.

Kishan S Rana
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