

The Mindful Diplomat: How Can Mindfulness Improve Diplomacy?

Written by Terhi Bunders

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Diplomats have become climate and global health experts as well as witnesses of war, economic challenges, and geopolitical tensions. We mostly read and analyse a global agenda which is characterised by so many challenges. Our job is to try to smoothen out a negative agenda and discern a compromised, positive response. Diplomats cannot control a number of events on the ground as they occur and the impact of our work naturally has its limits. Diplomacy requires not only a flexible mindset but also the ability to unwind and let go of the set of global threats on our shoulders.

Diplomats, especially in challenging locations, are stressed, constantly online and may in addition be worried about their families – who are often scattered between different countries. When we add the fast pace of information flows, as well as misinformation and disinformation, it is very difficult to see clearly. Human beings are just not built that way.

Turning off the autopilot and seeing what there really is in front of you is a crucial skill set for all diplomats. Mindfulness can improve diplomacy by keeping our focus on *the moment as it is* in tricky negotiations or tense bilateral relations, whilst equally allowing us to accept the reality of the situation and, above all, to make better decisions based on values and facts.

Lexico defines diplomacy as “the art of dealing with people in a sensitive and tactful way”. Britannica on the other hand as “the established method of influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments and peoples through dialogue, negotiation and other measures short of war or violence.” Diplomacy is inherently mindful, and we need to be aware of that.

Mindfulness is “awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally”. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was developed by Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970s at the University of Massachusetts. In some work environments, MBSR might be called strategic concentration, focus or awareness. There is a lot of research on mindfulness in the fields of neuroscience and psychology, but in governance and diplomacy, it has so far gone largely unnoticed. This is striking given that, by now, nearly everyone has heard about mindfulness and interest in it has grown rapidly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2016 and 2020, the number of people using meditation apps grew from six million to over 65 million in 190 countries worldwide.

Indeed, during the pandemic, in April 2020 alone in fact, the ten most successful mindfulness apps were downloaded ten million times – a 25% increase compared to January 2020. In the UK, the Mindfulness Initiative has been integrating mindfulness into teaching, governance and policy-making. In diplomacy, some examples do exist, but they are scarce. For instance, EU diplomats working with climate negotiations have been trained with mindfulness and concerns for mindfulness present. Thus, Mindfulness’ potential for diplomacy and diplomatic life is there. However, there is still a long way to go: we need to be more aware of the benefits of mindfulness to diplomacy.

Tense bilateral situations, peace mediations, multilateral negotiations, preventing war, saving the climate, promoting

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human rights, and negotiating trade agreements are all situations where mindfulness can improve diplomacy. If you wish to talk about human rights with a country violating them or negotiate a smaller budget share in a multilateral table, you will need to communicate it in a very tactical way. You need to consider other heated, often emotional opinions, sometimes your own hesitations, and the pressure that comes from outside; not least from social media. Yes, this is a very common setting in diplomacy. And no, we don't always use skilful words and open-minded body language. These are big themes, but a small change in being and increased creativity could make a difference. Here, practising mindfulness may help to find the right way in that specific moment (tip: reading out from a ready-made paper is not mindful).

We all do it. We want to hear those facts that we believe in and that is understandable. But both on a global and personal level, what happens in real life is not always backed by our beliefs, idealism or the potentiality of win-win situations. It is quite rare for everyone to be happy and content in diplomacy. There are lose-lose situations or situations where 'bad' wins and 'good' loses. To accept these scenarios an enormous amount of energy and working hours are spent. Judging "this is bad" and "this is good" is usually not as black and white in the real world, although it might seem so inside our bubbles. We need more facts, more time to gather data and the ability to adapt and accept the new reality – even if we don't accept what happened. With mindfulness, when we recognize our own flaws and thinking patterns, there is less need to judge what is happening: we learn to take the situation as it is. However, this does not mean giving up our values. Quite the opposite: we understand our own values better as well. This means that mindfulness *helps to formulate values-based foreign policy*. Next step: communicate in a mindful, understandable, and non-judgmental way.

The amount of information every diplomat learns and gathers throughout different postings and sectors is wide. For example, one minute I have a meeting on biodiversity (forests for instance) with my EU colleagues, and the next minute I am meeting an economist who wishes to discuss cost-of-living crises with me. After that, I might meet companies interested in health sector digitalisation. As a Finnish diplomat, I might even host a sauna evening at the Embassy where I talk about Finnish happiness and culture. We must know our own country, the country we impermanently reside in and global trends. Every time we must find ways to gently push our country's interests. We need to know what is relevant and where not to use energy – to know what to read and what to ask.

In addition to getting the facts right, both in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, the art of listening and understanding the nuances is key. There are many incredibly talented negotiators and peace mediators who understand the art of listening, even if it can be the most difficult task. Only by listening can we let go of the autopilot of our assuming what the counterpart will say. There is no diplomacy and dialogue without listening and understanding. Only a monologue without response. Moreover, the tendency is to speak for too long. As a Finn, I dare to suggest that less can be more with speaking. Less is more also in the daily work – shorter reports, shorter meetings and most importantly time for the most relevant tasks.

The very core of the diplomatic lifestyle is to keep ourselves detached and maintain an outsider identity away from our home country. At the same time, our home country changes, and we change whilst living in very different kinds of places. In general, even if diplomatic work is very social, we have to accept that it is hard to maintain real friendships whilst constant moving. It is usually even harder for the family. Practising mindfulness helps us to really be present in the country we reside in. Not the previous one, not the next one, but this one. This is surprisingly difficult for diplomats. We tend to compare our new posting with the previous one and plan "the next life" without realising that life is now – for everyone. You are wherever you are at that moment.

Our brains have on average 6 200 thoughts per day. That is what brains do. Let the brains think, but let's not get stuck on thoughts. Science backs the benefits of mindfulness to well-being, efficiency, creativity, and compassion. These are not some 'soft', nice-sounding themes but the very core of successful diplomacy.

Meditation is one efficient and formal way of practising mindfulness. Meditation is a practice where the mind focuses on something singular and specific – for example breathing. It sounds easy but can be very difficult. That is why we need to practice. Non-formal ways of practising mindfulness include everything. The next time when you are at a negotiation table, a bilateral meeting, or a cocktail reception, concentrate only on listening to whatever arises,

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recognizing and accepting thoughts and feelings as they are. You might hear what your counterpart is really saying. Next time you are explaining the current events of your country, do it like you would for the first time. You might explain your country's position in an inspiring, understandable way. Be there. That is all there is in that specific moment, anyway.

About the author:

Terhi Bunders has served the Government of Finland as a diplomat since 2004 and is currently working at the Embassy of Finland in London with economic affairs, trade and climate. She holds a master's degree in Social Sciences (Economics). She has previously served in Helsinki, Brussels, Hanoi and Vienna. She has practised mindfulness (MBSR) since 2006 and is a certified mindfulness teacher. She is interested in applying mindfulness to diplomacy for better policy-making and well-being. Opinions are her own. She can be contacted on twitter @TerhiBunders or visit www.minddip.fi.