



Address

# Dilemmas of the Communication Consultant Abroad

Francis C. Byrnes

When first invited to talk here, I suggested the title: "Mom, are them green things oranges?" While neither professional nor academic, the title rather vividly describes the "Dilemmas of the Communication Consultant Abroad."

Many of the frustrations and dilemmas are associated with reconciling the incongruities encountered, as well as coping with the "look likes" that do not "work like" the same thing back home—telephone systems being the most universal example. If I ever write that book about working and living abroad, the question about oranges, heard asked by a foreign child in a Philippine market, will be a chapter title.

Since my first experience as a consultant overseas in 1955 (3 months in France and Germany), the issue of consulting in a cross-cultural context has fascinated me. Now, 25 years later, 12 of which were spent working abroad, plus numerous short-term assignments over the past 9 years, I have some perspective on the dilemmas most expatriate consultants face. One basic reason for these dilemmas is that many organizations, at home or abroad, are rather naive about how they choose and use consultants. The potential for frustration is built-in.

## Some Frequent Dilemmas . . .

Because potentially the greatest demand will be for agricultural communication specialists to work with and in

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developing country organizations, I will focus my remarks on dilemmas experienced and observed in such situations.

1. Upon arrival you are asked to do something quite different in substance or duration than what you expected to be doing.

Example: You go to a country to help plan the communication organization for the national agricultural research system and are diverted to plan, write, illustrate, and supervise the production of a glossy brochure on the system. You accomplish little else.

2. What the organization wants you to work on does not address the most serious communication problems.

Example: You are asked to help improve the flow of information from the research organization to extension and to farmers. The organization wants to produce films, do radio and television programs, and step up the production of publications. After a few days, you quickly realize that the organization's most immediate and pressing communication problems are twofold: (1) internally there is little or no communication among staff members in departments or between staff and management and (2) there are no provisions for obtaining information from or about farmers.

3. Management of the client organization holds quite unrealistic expectations about what you will be able to accomplish.

Example: Stimulated by glossy annual reports of international agricultural research centers, the director of a national agricultural research system wants you to produce a similar annual report—locally, in 2 months, without an experienced writing, editing, or photographic staff or photographic or printing facilities within the country capable of handling the production.

4. What is described as the desired end product to achieve a certain objective is, in your professional judgment, quite inappropriate.

Example: An overall agricultural research coordinating organization, preparing for a major anniversary celebration, plans to place congratulatory advertisements in local newspapers. You are asked to draft messages to be signed by various dignitaries (head of state, minister of agriculture, and the like) to serve as copy. Given the need to encourage cooperation and collaboration among the institutions that make up the total agricultural research system of the country, you list these in some of the messages in such way that they

share in the congratulations. The head of the organization rejects these messages and asks you through a subordinate to write new ones that focus on the single organization. You tell the subordinate "No," and explain why. A week later you learn that the chief, once he is given your explanation, decides to use your original copy.

5. Given approval to proceed on a project on a priority basis, you find other activities drastically interfering with getting the job done.

Examples here are legion: You are told certain specialists and scientists will work with you on a project. Later you find they never were so advised, or were already heavily involved in other work, or even would be away when you would most need their help. Or, on the other hand, a few days later, the head man asks you to handle what he perceives as an emergency communication matter. Such emergencies continue to arise all of the time you are trying to get started on the high priority project. Or, in many highly authoritarian organizations, you are advised not to proceed beyond a certain point without the O.K. of the boss man. The day before you plan to see him, he leaves on a 3-week international trip about which you had no advance warning.

6. What you expected to be an advisory or training assignment turns out to be a production job, and you are expected to do all of the producing.

Example: You expect to work with a counterpart or counterparts and, in so doing, you will provide on-the-job training in a specific information project. One of several things frequently happens: (1) the counterpart never materializes, (2) he materializes but soon disappears, or (3) he drops in now and then but so manages the situation that you are left with the burden of producing what was intended.

7. Administrators to whom you are responsible lack any training and experience in communication and do not know how to evaluate workloads or end products.

Example: Annoyed about delays in getting publications printed, the director general calls you, the information director, on the carpet and responds to your request for permission to employ at least one more editor with the remark: "It seems to me you always are wanting more editors. Why don't you get one or two good ones? After all, how many pages should you expect a good editor to handle each day?" The director general seemed not to appreciate the reply, "The number of pages is more a function of the writer than the

editor. For example, a good editor could probably edit 75 to 100 pages from Dr. Jones in the same time it would take to do 10 to 20 of Dr. Smith's."

8. The organization's expectations for its printing operation are incompatible in size, speed, and quality with what's needed for communication support.

Example: The client organization wants to be self-sufficient in its printing operations. At the same time, it expects to publish such books, bulletins, and brochures as can be produced only in sophisticated plants operating at high volume. Resolution requires study of what can be done commercially within the country or in nearby countries, and achieving client understanding and agreement on what is feasible within the organization. But the job still remains of choosing compatible equipment, particularly in size of sheet and press run, that can be accommodated: cutter, folder, binder, etc. But the pressure always will be there to expand in some way.

9. Your assistance and service will be needed in areas in which you lack competence.

Example: As a consultant, you need to respect your ignorance. Even for a veteran consultant, it is difficult, in an assignment of a few weeks or months, to get a sense of why things work the way they do. In addition, you often are asked to examine and make recommendations in areas in which you have marginal competence or experience. But as a consultant on whom a poor country is spending \$300 a day in honorarium and expenses, plus \$3,000 in air fare, you cannot refuse to look at the library operation or the production problems of the scientific journal merely because those items were not in your terms of reference, or similar jobs not listed in your resume.

10. You may have to tell a country that equipment alone will not solve the problem or achieve the desired objectives.

Example: As a consultant, you must resist the urge to recommend hardware as a way of avoiding the tougher and more vital question of how to get competent personnel into posts as quickly as possible—as well as keep them there. Lists of offset presses, microcomputers, darkroom equipment, and the like, look good in your report. But when the equipment arrives 6 months from now, who will use it? Will it lie idle, or be abused and misused? Will ill-conceived, irrelevant material be produced? Generally, without improvement in the communication personnel situation, the answer to all such

questions is "yes." Lack of trained people, not money or equipment, usually is the limiting factor.

11. Local inexperience with machinery and maintenance concepts generate numerous problems.

Example: After studying the printing equipment needs of a local university, you recommend that the equipment just installed at a nearby center would best serve the institution's needs. A clerk visits the center, obtains copies of the specifications, and places the orders. Several months later the equipment is installed. The motors burn out when started. The clerk had failed to take into account that the center's specifications called for 110-volt equipment, while the university's only electrical supply was 220 volts. You, the consultant, must attend to every possible detail. If something can go wrong, it will.

12. There is a lack of professional colleagues with whom to interact.

Example: Professional agricultural communicators are difficult to find in most developing countries. Frequently, none exist; others may be employed in other types of positions. Their abilities and insights as communicators helped them to advance into managerial or political posts. You will find little interaction either within or among these three groups: (1) social scientists studying communication, (2) information specialists working in public agencies, and (3) mass media practitioners. If your field is agricultural communication, few of the individuals you meet will have either agricultural background or education. The situation is improving in some countries, but slowly.

13. There is a lack of support from colleagues back home.

Example: No matter how well you prepare, you run into situations that could be resolved in a matter of minutes back home. You would know where to look, whom to call, where to go to get the answer, the supplies, or the repair part. So, you remember all those colleagues you left behind and you write or send a telex to the person whom you believe will be most likely to reply. You wait and wait, but nothing happens. Perhaps your first message was never received, you figure, so you repeat the process. You quickly learn to improvise and begin generating new channels of support. In order to survive, you quickly become an expert in areas you hardly knew existed.

## A Few Helpful Hints . . .

In spite of all this, there are some things, which, if done, are likely to make your consultant experience abroad more personally rewarding and professionally productive:

- Insist on detailed, clear terms of reference for the assignment. If time permits, a review of draft terms along with an exchange of correspondence will help. At this stage it is important to clarify your principal role as a consultant, as an advisor, or as the person expected to produce what is wanted. Some organizations and some consultants never seem to get this issue clarified.
  - Find out as much as you can about the country where you are going. Reach beyond tourist literature on the country to articles and books with background on its history, culture, geography, demography, and politics. Find out the why's as well as the what's and where's. You frequently can learn a great deal from fiction books and short stories by natives.
  - Learn all you can about the organization with which you will be working—the people, mission, budget, problems. Study available publications.
  - Consult with others who have worked in the country, particularly in recent years.
  - Consider what you may do while in the country that will make the experience more personally and professionally rewarding upon your return. Few people think about this, and hence do not prepare for it.
  - If a major agency is underwriting your assignment through a grant or loan, become familiar with the work of that agency, particularly in the country where you are going. Knowledge of the agency's operations in the country may identify some potential sources of help.
  - Find out what other major agencies have projects or are providing technical support in the country. Perhaps some also are providing consultants in communication. You may be able to meet with them.
  - Identify potential sources of technical information and supplies before leaving the United States. Get the names, addresses, as well as telex and telephone numbers of individuals whom you can contact. To the extent possible, bring with you catalogs, specifications, and price lists.
- Finally, experience suggests that a consultant going into an assignment take into account that the communication problems and potentials of an organization exist in at least six

distinct but interrelated areas. While the individual's assignment may lie in one particular area, it is important that he or she do everything possible to accomplish it within the context of what should be the total communication concerns of the organization.

These six areas or domains of communication concern are:

- With the legislative and executive support base of funds, and with the external donor community. This is a pervasive concern of senior officers of developing country organizations, as well as those at home.

- With the colleagues of the professional staff, wherever these colleagues may be—within or outside of the country. If it is a research organization, priority frequently goes to communication outside the country through English language journals. Some countries even start English language publications for this and related reasons.

- With the lay client group of the organization, whoever these people are—farmers, homemakers, health workers, urban residents, etc. To a certain extent, each organization rightly feels a responsibility to send information to its broad-base client group.

- With other organizations within the country, particularly if the successful execution of programs and campaigns depends upon the cooperation and participation of these organizations.

- Throughout the organizational structure. How rapidly and smoothly do information and instructions flow between and among supervisors and workers, planners and doers, scientists and technicians, headquarters and field stations, executive suite and employees' cafeteria? What spirit permeates meetings? To what extent do people operate on rumors?

- For the organization. This includes books, journals, newsletters, films, tapes, photos, and maps, as well as the results of formal studies, informal surveys, and opinion polls. Overall, activities include libraries, data banks, and other collections of information. Here the feedback process is institutionalized, and the information screened, processed, circulated, and stored for ready retrieval.

To an increasing extent, communication consultants are being asked to recommend ways to improve an organization's library and documentation center. Sometimes one or more of the other communication functions are incorporated into the library/documentation center operation.

Whatever the assignment, no matter how well or how poorly defined, it is appropriate to remember that the problems and dilemmas you encounter are associated directly with the state of development of the organization and the country. You can achieve your mission and preserve your perspective if you remind yourself daily that you are there to:

- Help not hinder;
- Teach not order;
- Demonstrate not direct;
- Solve, not create, problems.

If problems did not exist, you would not be needed!

In concentrating on the dilemmas, we bypassed the opportunity to describe the many personal and professional satisfactions, rewards, and excitement associated with consulting abroad. But there is a risk: If you try it, you might like it!

### **Some References on Consulting**

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