



## POLICY UPDATE

# SOFT POWER AND THE ART OF DIPLOMACY



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Diplomacy is defined as the skill for dealing with people effectively in a positive way, often between two or more parties who may be angry, or at odds with each other. When a positive sum gain can be achieved between both parties, it is a win-win for all involved. Although diplomacy is most often associated with international relations and nation states, it also applies to interactions with stakeholders and government, whether foreign or domestic. Diplomacy is what I and other professionals practice day in and day out, whether on the phone with, at times, producers voicing frustration with difficult situations, bureaucrats who may believe they are being criticized or under attack, or Deputy Ministers, Ministers, MLAs, MPs and Senators.

In early April, Team Alberta was in Ottawa to advocate alongside

Grain Growers of Canada for sound agricultural policies and programs for our sector. The importance of diplomacy and professionalism cannot be overstated when in Ottawa.

The skills needed for successful diplomacy are those you learn before the age of six. Smile, do not speak with your mouth full, do not use four letter profanities, and if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all. These words of wisdom are what diplomats and those in international relations refer to as "soft power". This is the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction or, in other words, non-coercive. The opposite is "hard power", which includes coercion through payment, threats of violence or typical gun-ship diplomacy. Achieving mutual gains or win-wins is much better than waging a competitive, win-lose negotiation battle or caving in to avoid a conflict. *Getting to Yes*, a book by Roger Fisher and William Ury, is a common resource for international business, commercial diplomacy and international trade negotiations training and education. The authors point out that a winning negotiating strategy of closely listening to the other party, treating everyone fairly and exploring options to increase value for everyone involved can avoid hard-bargaining tactics, unnecessary concessions and potential conflict.

Whether a fellow pulse grower is on the phone and hot under the

collar for any reason, justified or unjustified, with good information or misinformation, the art of soft power must be top of mind. The best international negotiators, heads of states and business leaders are those who are effective listeners. Listening is the most important form of communication. Cool heads prevail, and when a member is concerned about their business, family, livelihood and succession of their family legacy to the next generation, it is hard not to become emotional.

Farmers are facing a very unstable political environment at the moment. At time of print, Alberta is just getting to know Premier Jason Kenney, the canola and China issue was at a head, and the whole concept of carbon taxes was front and centre in Ottawa. In April, testimony to committees on the subject of China and canola, articles in ag media about the carbon tax and ongoing concerns about transportation and rail service were at the forefront. These issues are all complex and they do not have easy solutions or clear win-wins at first glance. How should one proceed? The answer is cautiously and with respect, courtesy, and in an exemplary manner. People are much more open to seduction than to coercion, laughter instead of anger, carrots instead of sticks.

A person's general disposition is largely the difference between getting to yes or walking away with unresolved conflict, concessions, hurt feelings or the need for a

shower, feeling like you were just duped by a con artist. Screaming bloody murder, strong-arming or drawing a line in the sand rarely end well. Soft power is effective when finally dropping in on the crazy neighbour that everybody talks poorly about. Learn more about their needs, wants or why they are, or currently perceived to be in conflict with someone, everyone or perhaps even with you.

It does our sector no good to gripe, scream and kick when we face market disruptions, proposed carbon taxes, labour and safety improvements or other proposed government policies. Getting to yes and a win-win should always be the end-game when starting a meeting or picking up the phone. Remember to open your ears, close your mouth and look for creative ways to ensure you are at your diplomatic best.



Team Alberta and Grain Growers of Canada representatives met with Members of Parliament and other government officials in Ottawa in April. Left to right: Gary Stanford (Alberta Wheat Commission), Ian Chitwood (Alberta Canola), Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food), Chris Allam (Alberta Pulse Growers), Shannon Sereda (Alberta Wheat & Barley), Ward Toma (Alberta Canola), Nevin Rosaasen (Alberta Pulse Growers).



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