

Connections, Trust and Diplomacy in the Multinational Workplace

The Importance of Human Bonds in International Environments

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"What sort of thumbprint are you leaving on the lives you touch?"

We find that question worth giving a pause for you to ask the same for yourself. It begs for so many follow-on, personal questions. Am I close and intentional enough to even touch others' lives? Is my mark uniquely my own?

Before we go any further, we kindly note that you would come up empty-handed if you were to search for empirical research or peer-reviewed endnotes in this piece; our omission of such content is intentional. Instead we offer you a voice built on character, encouragement, and shared family values that transcend na-

tionalities, genders, traditions, and uniforms.

In international assignments, ranks and uniforms often define the outer framework, but one must not forget that the core of meaningful cooperation lies in human connections. People shaped by different languages, historical experiences and worldviews come together around a shared purpose. Everyone carries a mindset formed by their nation's cultural mentality, societal expectations, and institutional training. Yet, beyond all these differences lies a quiet but transformative possibility: through proximity, mutual respect, and curiosity, even the strongest mental armour can become permeable.

In multinational cooperation, what mat-

ters is not only the interoperability of systems but the intersection of personalities. Especially in long-term and trust-based environments, national boundaries begin to blur among individuals working side by side. Relationships that begin with a common task often evolve into deeper, more genuine, and more meaningful bonds over time.

Many professional relationships deepen outside the scope of the assignment: conversations held beyond the briefing room, a special occasion celebrated together, an event involving families, or a moment of emotional openness. These experiences remind us that even within formal institutions such as NATO, true



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Above, from left

Community Services Section staff at the gym on the Joint Warfare Centre's Jättå Compound; the co-author Major Marano speaking with a group of JWC colleagues.
Photos by JWC PAO

trust is not built solely through policies. Trust reveals itself in humour, empathetic listening, and sincere interest.

The Power of Presence in Times of Change

While restructuring and digital transformation shape the way ahead for NATO, this transformation affects not only processes, but primarily people.

Organizational change brings psychological weight: uncertainty, role shifts, generational differences. People seek not only updates but also transparency, trust, and the feeling that their voices are heard. They want to know that those leading the change understand not just the operational, but also the human foundation.

In this context, transparency and justice are not merely institutional values; they are lived experiences. When people sense fairness not just in decisions made but also in how they themselves are perceived and heard, change finds a moral foundation. It is at that point that true leadership emerges, not merely in terms of efficiency or rank, but through the strength

that comes from being seen and included in a fair process.

Therefore, leadership, especially in international settings, must remain relational at its core. Systems evolve, structures transform, but the deepest sense of trust emerges when individuals believe they are part of a transparent and just process. It is then that the shared mission becomes sustainable through both mental and emotional engagement.

Shared Humanity Through Different Lenses

In international settings, no individual perceives the same event in the same way. A decision, a word, even a silence may carry different meanings across cultures. The iterative nature of our co-authoring of this article was no different. This is not a weakness, but rather the foundation of multidimensional thinking and mutual respect. The ability to see the familiar through another's eyes is one of a leader's most valuable competencies, and thus an area for growth.

At times, these approaches may clash. But more often, they enrich one another. When leaders not only provide information

but also strive to understand, when they pause not to respond but to reflect, a new language emerges. This language is not found in manuals or presentations, but in glances, shared challenges, and the mutual appreciation of effort. Over time, assumptions give way to curiosity, and certainty yields to inquiry. Leadership draws strength not from offering answers, but from asking the right questions that allow others to share their perspectives in an atmosphere of trust.

Good leadership is not only about what we achieve but also about how we experience it. It considers emotional climate, past experiences, and relational context. And what arises from this awareness is a form of leadership woven with empathy, yet uncompromising on responsibility and accountability at every echelon.

Aligning Together: Generations, Justice, and Voice

Generational differences are often overlooked in international structures, yet they hold significant potential. Young professionals bring demands for innovation, digital competency,





Above, from left:

Traditional hand-painted items at the Norwegian stand at JWC International Day; Major General Ruprecht von Butler, Commander JWC, opens Sports Day; the co-author Colonel Mahnaoğlu. Photos by JWC PAO

and inclusivity, while seasoned colleagues offer strategic depth and crisis composure. When both contributions are acknowledged, institutions do not just progress, they deepen.

Here, justice is not only about the content of decisions but also about how those decisions are experienced. Who speaks, who is heard, how feedback is given, how mistakes are addressed: these seemingly small details create immense trust or mistrust in individuals.

Transparent leadership does not mean perfection; it is about consistency and the courage to change direction when necessary. This approach fosters participation and nurtures institutional loyalty.

Generational awareness is also a reason why we chose to avoid the commonly sought offering of a peer-reviewed article, strategic masterpiece, or theoretical mental model in the construct of this reflective article. Given our credentials and education (both military and non-military), we could have written something longer, more formal and more academically rigorous.

That approach falls short of truly honouring what we value most about our time serving together at the Joint Warfare Centre. It

misses the mark of what we hope to leave for our spouses and children and for the up-and-coming young leaders of our future generations. That approach would not carry our thumbprint.

The Silent Foundation That Carries the Entire Structure

Every nation brings its own assumptions about leadership, justice, and cooperation. These assumptions may sometimes cause friction, but at other times open the doors to dialogue. Leaders who approach these differences with humility show that strength and grace, courage and compassion, can and must coexist.

In such environments, people do not merely complete tasks; they also shape one another's perspectives. When the mission ends, it is not only completed objectives that remain, but also transformed individuals. Not because they have compromised their identities but because they have been able to view themselves through another cultural lens.

This is the essence of quiet diplomacy, which underpins lasting peace. It is neither ostentatious nor loud. But it takes root and endures. At every NATO meeting, every military

exercise, and every coalition mission, there exists an unseen human bond. This bond is not built within systems, but between people. And when nurtured with humility, attentiveness, and sincerity, it gives rise to a shared language that needs no words: mutual understanding.

We were created equal. We arrived differently. But we can depart in connection, perhaps as better leaders, and maybe, we hope, as better spouses, parents, friends, and citizens. And if this shared journey leaves any mark, may it be one our children one day recognize as worthy of their footsteps. ✦



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