

PIANO PLAYERS IN A MARCHING BAND: FCS OFFICERS



Jeff Moores

W AFSA'S FCS VICE PRESIDENT COUNTS THE WAYS THAT FCS OFFICERS ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEIR FOREIGN SERVICE, CIVIL SERVICE AND PRIVATE SECTOR COLLEAGUES.

BY PETER FREDERICK

When I am asked to describe the way Foreign Commercial Service officers — the Foreign Service component of the Department of Commerce — are regarded within that agency, I draw on my experience as a musician for an analogy. A piano player in a college marching band is indeed unique, and perhaps not fully appreciated. And even though he or she is as accomplished a musician as the others are, the choice of instrument is off-putting at best.

We in the Foreign Commercial Service can well identify with that analogy. Even though FCSOs have demon-

strated skills equal to those of FS personnel in the other foreign affairs agencies, there is something about them that is different from the rest of the Foreign Service, the rest of the Commerce Department workforce, and our counterparts in the private sector. I'd like to address each of those comparisons in turn.

“Another” Foreign Service?

When serving overseas, FCSOs work closely with our other Foreign Service colleagues to accomplish the mission's objectives. International understanding and cordial relations with our host country are important. However, the profit motive and business success are our principal motivators.

The relationship between State and Commerce has always been clear on paper, even if it has not been consistently implemented. A memorandum of understanding carefully crafted by the two agencies in 1982 guarantees FCS personnel a respected position on the country team and specifies that the senior commercial officer at post is supposed to be the ambassador's prime confidant regarding commercial issues. At least that is the message Commerce gives new SCOs. Yet a few years ago, the Secretary of Commerce sought to explain the agreement to the ambassador at a large embassy and request more careful concurrence with the precepts in regard to the role of the SCO. To paraphrase the secretary's response after meeting with the ambassador, the ambassador was well aware of the MOU and equally aware that she could manage the post as she wanted regardless of that guidance.

The fact that the agreement has not been formally modified in the last 20 years could be because: 1) It's difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate any documents with

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Commerce; 2) State and Commerce officials in Washington think all is well, so there is no need to change the agreement; or 3) FSOs and FCSOs in the field have developed a professional working relationship without need of an MOU. Whatever the reason(s), this isn't the first case where those who do the heavy lifting do it best without close supervision.

Many embassies have formed a Commercial Team (also sometimes known as the Ag-Econ-Commercial Team or the Econ-Commercial Team). Regardless of the name, the team consists of the State economic counselor, the Foreign Agricultural Service officer and the Foreign Commercial Service officer. It has been my experience that the econ officers take the lead on economic reporting and direct negotiations with the host country government; the agriculture officer is responsible for policy issues and promotions related to agricultural products; and the FCSO takes lead responsibility for trade promotion and outreach to the business community (e.g., the American Chamber of Commerce, importers' associations).

It is a classic interagency group with the same problems found in its larger “cousins” within the Beltway. Since the team has no official charter or MOU, it works only if the three agency representatives agree on responsibilities and lead/back-up roles. But when it works, it works well: there has been a consensus among those with whom I have served that trade promotion events organized by FCS are much more enjoyable than treaty negotiations, summit meetings or VIP visits.

For example, the FCSO may get credit for assisting an American-invested company with its first major sale, though that may not have been possible without the economics officer having successfully negotiated a market opening agreement with the host country. And although there are specific agreements between Commerce and Agriculture covering the market promotion of beer, wine, freshwater fish and saltwater fish, I have been accredited to nine embassies and have yet to learn officially which agency is designated to do what. We just always did what needed to be done, often without official guidance.

Even when the agreement is faithfully observed,

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there can be certain disconnects. Our State colleagues at times are puzzled by why we spend so much time at trade shows working the crowds and why we have the authority to manage our own finances distinct from the embassy's administrative section. And chiefs of mission, especially non-career appointees, sometimes find it difficult to relate to an SCO who has as much (if not more) visibility in the host country as they do. I once had the honor of serving with an ambassador who was approximately my height and also had white hair and wore glasses. After he appeared on a national TV show, I received numerous congratulatory messages and thumbs-up from passers-by. I mentioned to the ambassador that I did not want him to think I was trying to steal his "glory" by impersonating him. He assured me that his only concern was how to respond to the questions he had suddenly started getting about customs clearance procedures!

FCSOs are truly unique within the foreign affairs community.

Back Home at DOC

FCSOs work closely with their Civil Service colleagues in the Commerce Department to form the only federal government agency that has the same objectives domestically and internationally and offers the same service to their clients anywhere in the world. Our primary objectives are to help American-invested companies find fiscal success internationally, increase employment by increasing U.S. exports, and defend and protect U.S. business interests. Our clients — "rating officials" — are numerous, including American providers of goods and services, distributors of American products and services worldwide; and host-country importers and consumers of American products. (To be politically correct, I should also include the country team and DOC, and Congress on the list, as keeping them happy is at times even more important.)

Yet while we serve many masters, and the list of services we provide is long and impressive, all of our "bosses" are looking for the same result: did we close the deal? In that respect, our job is easier than that of our State colleagues, who also have several masters but with different (and sometimes conflicting) priorities. Some might even suggest our job is more fulfilling than others in the Foreign Service since we seek concrete

results, sometimes literally. It may take years of negotiations to win a major power project, but when the concrete is poured, there can be no doubt that the deal was closed!

Yet while we share the same objectives and provide the same service as do our domestic offices (now called Export Assistance Centers), there are obviously some differences in perspective between the 240 Foreign Commercial Service officers assigned to over 140 embassies and consulates and the approximately 37,000 civil servants in Commerce who work throughout the United States. For example, our GS friends wonder why we in the Foreign Service are willing to move every three or four years to a different country, learn a different language and perhaps even a different way of doing our job. And when I tell friends within the Beltway that my children did not live in the same place for as long as four years until they went to college, they respond with the look normally reserved for mean-spirited parents. Every director general of the US&FCS tries to bring the two groups closer, but it is a difficult task. We have different personnel systems and a different award and promotion structure.

Another factor is our management, which often has neither Civil nor Foreign Service experience. There is an unwritten rule in Washington that equates the number of political appointees in a department with the total number of employees; thus, the larger the department, the more political appointees. This practice has a particularly harmful twist within DOC, due to the scarcity of divisions where political appointees can be assigned without seriously impeding the agency's work. For example, approximately half of all DOC employees are part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Because it is necessary to know something about science to understand what those organizations do, let alone to manage them effectively, there aren't many political appointees in NOAA. The same is true of the Census Bureau and many other divisions within Commerce.

Consequently, disproportionate numbers of political appointees end up in senior positions in organizations like the International Trade Administration even though they may never have met a payroll, sold a product, met a budget or managed more than a few employees. Similarly, the FCS Director General position has been a "training slot" for the past 20 years. Several

DGs were quick studies, but others weren't. We have had DGs with two or three years of Foreign Service experience and others who literally didn't even have a passport when they were appointed. Yet virtually every DG has instituted new programs, very few of which survive his or her departure. (At one point we were changing logos and names on an annual basis.) So perhaps this is yet another reason FCSOs are unique within the foreign affairs community

Private vs. Public

Then there is the private sector. When the Department of Commerce first advertised in the *Wall Street Journal* over 20 years ago for FCSOs, it described the duties as similar to those performed by

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the country manager for a multinational corporation. In fact, many of the commercial officers that joined the FCS in the 1980s were former country managers for Fortune 500 companies, where they had been responsible for the profitable use of fiscal and human resources. Adjunct to that responsibility is the authority to manage available resources to position the company and its products in the local

market. FCSOs do all that, not just for one company but for all that ask for assistance.

But there are several significant differences. While private-sector managers have some ability to select and reward their workforce, in most cases, an FCSO must work with FSNs hired by his or her predecessor and depend on embassy awards panels or selection boards

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to reward the staff. In addition, if the private-sector manager is successful, the results are obvious and the rewards significant. If unsuccessful, the reverse is also true. But successful FCSOs will get a good employee evaluation report, letters of commendation from the businesses they have helped and perhaps recognition from the promotion panel. If unsuccessful, they may still get a good EER but probably nothing from the selection board.

As close as our professions are, our private-sector colleagues sometimes question why we would accept a job that requires knowledge of so many markets in different regions of the world, having little control over where we will live, all for, relatively speaking, so little money. I hasten to point out that every several months

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I get a call from one of my private-sector friends, asking if we are hiring! FCSOs are unique within the business community, too.

Perhaps the one attribute we share with the rest of our colleagues (Foreign Service personnel, GS employees and the private sector) is pride of service. The collection of success stories distributed by FCS includes numerous examples of

FCSOs who have been instrumental in closing a particular deal, or making a company's international operations viable. We have done some good for our clients around the world and the American economy (as have many FSOs, of course). So we are proud to be part of the Foreign Service Marching Band, even if at times we would consider trading in our piano for a piccolo. ■

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