Sara Nobbs, Assistant Program Manager for CIL, spoke with Mary Curtin, Diplomat in Residence at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, on October 14, 2014.

Sara Nobbs: What was your first posting when you became a Foreign Service Officer?

Mary Curtin: When I became an Officer I was posted to Santiago, Chile as a Consular Officer. My job was to adjudicate visas for Chileans who wanted to travel to the U.S. as tourists, for business, as immigrants, and for American parents adopting children from Chile. I also worked with American citizens who came in if they had a problem, including arrest cases. That is very typical of the Foreign Service; you have to do a tour as a Consular Officer. It’s considered an important part of your training to understand that aspect of State Department work overseas. I also had a chance to work in the political section here reporting on events in Chile leading up to the 1988 plebiscite against Pinochet. I got to travel around the country and report on political developments related to the plebiscite.

SN: What were some early leadership lessons for you?

MC: You can exercise leadership even if you’re at a very low level in an organization. For example, I was a first tour [Foreign Service] Officer and we had a little bit of a reputation of being impolite to visa applicants, but also to American citizens in Chile. There were a number of American citizens in Chile who opposed U.S. policy and felt that the U.S. was complicit in overthrowing the Allende regime. I took some small steps to reach out to them and talk to them and overcame a lot of the mistrust that had been there. In many cases, it could be as simple as making a phone call to see that someone was okay after they were beat by the police. I learned that those little things can have a big impact.

I learned two other important things. First, I learned a lot from women in my first tour back in Washington, DC. It’s really important for women to figure out how to operate within the system, the State Department system, but also how and when to call out discriminatory behaviors in the system. I was at the State Department at the time when a couple of my supervisors were part of a class action lawsuit against the State Department. They successfully worked within the system but also challenged the system when it was discriminatory. Those women rose to high levels in the State Department and helped change it.

Secondly, people can successfully exercise different leadership styles based on who they are. For example, a quiet person or a more extroverted person would have different styles of leadership, but can be equally effective. It’s more important that you are true to yourself. You have to challenge yourself as a leader to go outside of your comfort zone, but there are many types of good leaders.
SN: Can you describe a challenge you have addressed that required working with individuals from different types of institutions (government, private or non-profit sectors), different countries or cultures?

MC: The biggest challenge that I worked on across sectors was when I was on the U.S. delegation to the U.N. World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, China. Our delegation was made up of people from many different backgrounds, with different points of view. We all had to work together to have a unified U.S. position in the negotiations. We then had to work together to reach out and find alliances with different delegations from around the world on different issues. Each country comes in with its own point of view and priorities. It was necessary to build bridges to countries that aren’t always our natural allies in order to come out at the other end with a coherent worldwide document that governments can actually use to promote the status of women.

SN: What techniques or skills have been helpful to you in leading across organizational boundaries or cultures?

MC: I found that what worked best [for working across boundaries or sectors] was a combination of my natural style of being consultative and inclusive in order to build teams and to encourage people to do their best work, but combining that with working to develop a more forceful approach to deal with those who were unresponsive or combative. I developed that more forceful style and kept it in reserve and found that I learned to use it very effectively. I had to rely on my natural style but then also develop styles that were outside my comfort zone. The combination made me more effective.

SN: Given your background in diplomacy, do you have good techniques for having difficult conversations?

MC: I had to have difficult conversations both as a manager and as a diplomat. As a manager, you have difficult conversations when people are not doing their job well. My natural style was to avoid those head-on, conflictive conversations, but I learned that when there is a difficult situation you have to calmly and directly address the situation, or it will just fester.

When you become more senior in the Foreign Service you have more situations in which you are called upon to have difficult conversations with leadership in other countries. You have to be clear and straightforward and not beat around the bush. You also have to recognize differences of culture and background. Sometimes people are really good at being direct and delivering difficult news, but not as good at expressing understanding. Others are the opposite. A good leader needs to draw on their natural strengths, but learn to do the other side as well.

SN: What advice do you have about creating a process where institutions and individuals can come together across boundaries to address a common challenge?
MC: The bigger the issue, the harder it is to convince people on your own side that the process has to include compromise. Nobody gets everything that they want. A good leader in those processes both reaches out to the other side but also brings along their own people to understand what compromises are necessary and why compromise is a good thing. There have been leaders like that over time. For example, in the process in Northern Ireland that Senator Mitchell led, leaders on every side not only made compromises, but also brought people in their communities to see the value of the compromises.

SN: What lessons have you drawn about leadership or collaboration from diplomatic failures you’ve observed?

MC: When was in Brussels from 2009-2011, Senator Mitchell visited during his efforts at Middle East negotiations. You can have someone who is a good and dedicated negotiator like Senator Mitchell, but if parties are not yet ready to make the compromises that have to be made, bringing in even a great diplomat like Senator Mitchell won’t provide a magic solution.

SN: How has your leadership style evolved?

MC: In many places, like in the Department of State, you are often selected for a leadership position because you’re good at doing a certain job. But then you have to stop doing what you’re good at and be a leader instead. When I arrived in Poland to become Political Counselor, my immediate supervisor told me I had been selected for the position because I was good at being a political Officer, but that now I had to stop being a political Officer and become a manager. I had to let other people do their jobs—to help them grow, but not to step in and do their work for them, even if their work was not good at first. It was really good advice.

SN: You’ve been working with a cross-disciplinary group of Humphrey School and Carlson School students to support a cross-sector committee convened by the U.S. Department of Commerce and chaired by Trudy Rautio, the President and Chief Executive Officer of Carlson, a global hospitality and travel Management Company. The committee’s job is to make recommendations for facilitating travel to the U.S. by improving the visa issuance process. What do you hope the students learn from working across disciplines and with private sector and government leaders?

MC: What I would like to see them learn is that it is possible to find allies amongst groups that may not at first glance seem like allies. Especially in our current political environment, I hope the students learn that it is possible to build coalitions. They are learning already that this kind of effort requires really solid background work and an understanding of what the issues are as the foundation of any advocacy effort. This project is introducing them to a complex process that involves government management practices, policies, legislation, and the political and economic issues that impact all of these. It provides them the opportunity for a really great learning experience and exposure to many aspects of the professional world.