

**BUILDING MORE
EFFECTIVE PARADIGMS
FOR CROSS-CULTURAL
COMMUNICATIONS**

**RETHINKING POLICY-MAKING
PROCESSES**

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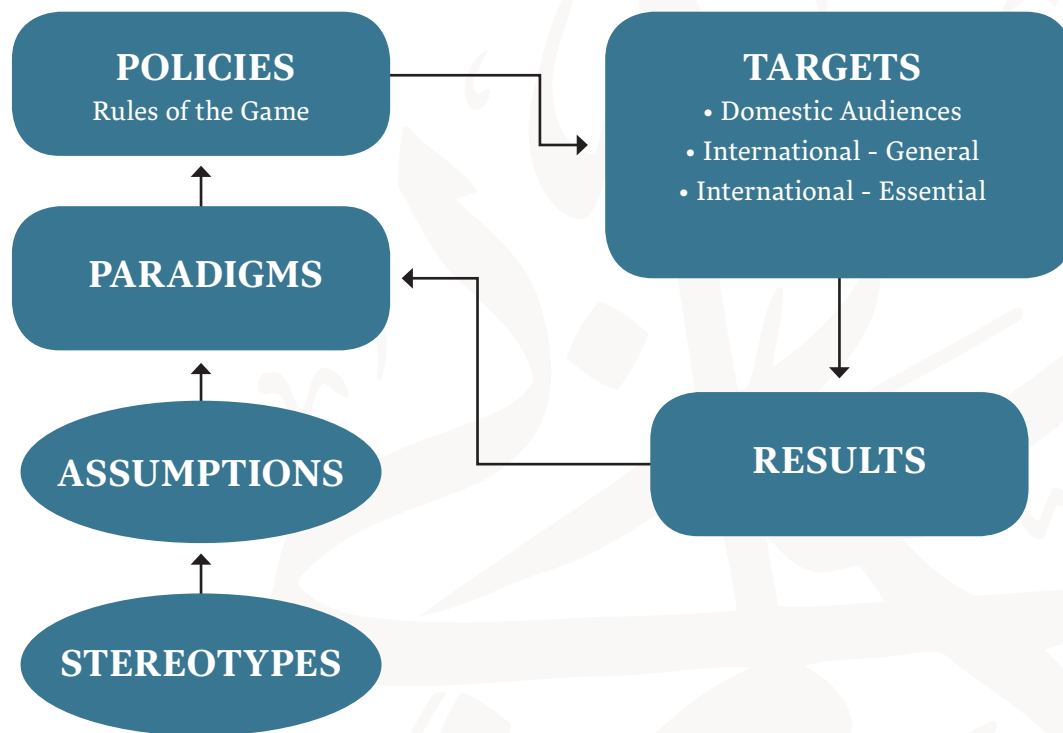
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The word “paradigm” comes from Greek roots meaning pattern, model, or standard. A paradigm describes images certain groups derive about others from observing events, activities, and behaviors. A related word is “stereotype”, defined as a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group. So one can say that a paradigm is a kind of a stereotype because it is a model of what is or should be that is held in common by a group, whether they are policy makers, business executives or an ethnic group. The final member of this interesting trinity is “assumption”, something taken for granted, that feeds the perceptions or value judgments incorporated in our view of the world.

If we are to determine what we can do better, since we can’t rework the past, we need to understand how policies, paradigms, assumptions, and stereotypes interact to generate priorities, rules, and perceptions that define our relations with other countries, customers, suppliers, employees, and competitors.

Let’s begin with a simple schematic that conceptually links the elements:





It is my proposition that there is a reinforcing tendency in both government and the corporate world to view policy making as the outcome of exercising certain paradigms when confronting challenges or obstacles to attaining desired policy goals. These **paradigms define policy options and the “rules of the game”** under which policies are to be implemented.

Policies are defined, crudely or precisely, and directed at/communicated to several key audiences: domestic constituencies (shareholders), the general international community (industry and media), and specific international targets (stakeholders, competitors, potential merger partners, etc.) that are essential respondents if the policy outcomes are to be achieved. The success of the policy and the clarity of its message are reflected in the short, medium, and long-term results that occur.

If the results are as anticipated, then the policy has been successful. We celebrate a triumph over evil, or an end to violence or the threat of violence; the completion of a particularly difficult negotiation, or whatever else was on the agenda. However, when the results go sour, or are not fully realized, then the paradigm gets reworked, and we will get it right! This is a hallmark of US policy-making and management practice, and has served us well, sometimes.

Little attention is paid, particularly in periods of crisis, to the roots of these paradigms. We ignore looking at the assumptions, based on values, and stereotypes based on interpretive perceptions, that may reflect obsolete or poorly defined assessments of the world as we see it or how others do. Ultimately, we will not master the lessons of September 11 until we make a thorough effort to understand what we do and do not know about the terrorism of that day and its genesis.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

Since September 11, it is even more imperative to understand the implications of the new rules of engagement between the U.S. and the world, which begin with “You’re with us or against us.” What does this mean, practically?

BETTER ANSWERS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Answering this question requires a reassessment of corporate and government paradigms that drive policies internally and externally. Unless we take a hard look at those paradigms, we will continue to support policies that do not deliver the results we want, and ultimately weaken our capabilities to achieve our mission critical goals.



On the macro-level, polling results in the U.S. indicate that there is a continuing concern about what lies ahead. This brings us back to the central point of contention: is there a clash of values, policies, or personalities at the root of 9/11 and the perceptions of the US in the Arab world and elsewhere?

Two points are important in this context. First of all, results of polls globally and specifically in several Arab and Islamic countries indicate that there is a consistent perception of the U.S. as arrogant, insensitive, and unwilling to respect or consult with other countries and cultures. Secondly, the erosion of the perception of the US as a moral leader significantly undercuts our ability to support liberalizing forces in Arab countries that become tainted from any association with us.

Therefore, if US policies are based on paradigms that assume America's military or political leadership in the world is based on our notion of superior cultural values, and, if the U.S. has not achieved the results the policies were designed to reach, then it's critical to rethink the assumptions and stereotypes that generated the paradigm in the first place.

At the core of US policy toward the Middle East are stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims and others that strike people in that region as suspiciously patronizing if not derogatory. Perhaps if there were no access to satellite broadcasts, print media, and higher education, these stereotypes would be less obvious. As it is, until we rethink our perceptions of the Middle East, as well as those of Latin America and most of the rest of the emerging markets, US foreign policy, based on flawed paradigms, will continue to miss its mark in terms of achieving outcomes needed to achieve global stability, security, and prosperity. And this is equally true of the new rules of the game, globalization, and the World Trade Organization.

BETTER PARADIGMS, BETTER RESULTS

The war of competing paradigms is essentially a broad failure to communicate – pitting the fiats (political decrees) proclaimed by the West regarding democracy and globalization against the fatwas (religious decrees) issued by often extremist Muslims on the same subjects. The overwhelming tragedy is that countries universally share the goals of security, prosperity, and stability. The failure is the inability of the parties to perceive these results without sacrifices that they are not prepared to make or accept.



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If we are to achieve better paradigms then we need to accept that in some countries, democracy and human rights are a luxury or a means to an end, not a value in and of themselves at this time. We need to rethink how our paradigms incorporate assumptions and stereotypes that don't serve our long-term goals either internally or in our foreign policy. If we aspire to world leadership, what better vehicle demonstrates our seriousness than a conscious effort to regularly assess and reaffirm American principles and practices towards our citizens and our neighbors? As importantly, it is not a process that should take place in a vacuum.

Just as we are obligated to renew and refresh our perspectives as Americans, we should extend this process, through a nuanced and appropriate methodology, to those with whom we agree and disagree. It is not much different that the process that multinational companies are engaged in every day, negotiating the parameters for building long-term business relationships with host countries, labor organizations, communities, and interest groups.

Yet without listening, how will we hear their voices and how will we hear our own reactions and impulses to the changes and challenges that fill our daily lives. Paradigms exist as a means for coping with a world that often seems beyond an individual's capacity for comprehension. Appreciating these limitations and exercising our best judgment in clarifying the assumptions and stereotypes that define these paradigms is the enduring hallmark of leadership.

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