

The Most Common Criticisms of American Technical Assistance Workers

By Their Foreign Co-Workers <sup>1/</sup> Jack D. Gray

The "common" people of the poverty areas of the world: the peasant, the laborer, the man in the street; all are waking up to the fact that there is a much better way of life than they now have. They also are beginning to hope that this better way of life is possible for them. At the same time they are rapidly becoming aware of their own potential importance, politically.

This awakening process is so widespread that it is thought to be one of the most important influences in world politics today. One of the indications of the importance in which this phenomenon is held by the political leaders of the "developing" countries of the world is that an improvement in living conditions is one of the first things they promise the people.

Many of the countries are newly independent and their people are determined to catch up with "the rest of the world."

In countries heavily rural in structure, the primary plank in the politician's platform is programs for rural community development. The governments in many of these countries feel that their tenure in power will depend to a large extent on how successful they are with these programs.

These factors all add up to an almost worldwide demand for rapid rural improvement. People and their governments want to

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modernize their agriculture and to use science and technology in an application to the age-old problems of disease, ignorance and poverty.

This situation has been recognized by the United Nations, by governments of several of the so-called "advanced nations", by private foundations and by missionary groups. The concern of these groups for this problem is attested to by the millions of dollars in grants-in-aid, loans and free technical assistance that have been extended to the governments and the people of these countries during the past few years. For one reason or another, programs of assistance are in operation by the United Nations in various forms such as the FAO, WHO, UNESCO, etc., the International Cooperation Administration of the United States Government, the Colombo plan of the British Commonwealth; the programs of various private foundations and others.

In nearly all of these programs of assistance, technical advisors have been sent along to assist with the organization and launching of the new rural improvement programs.

In this paper we want to concern ourselves with the question of the efficiency of these technicians and advisors. How well have they done? What have their weaknesses been? What are some of the mistakes they have made?

We are interested in these questions only for the help they will render in selecting and training technicians for similar work in the future.

From the standpoint of the local technician, local administrator or other 'host' official who receives the foreign technician as his

advisor, what have been the most common mistakes made by the American technical advisor in his working relationships?

According to eight host workers and officials from different countries of the world, all of whom have had experience in working with American technicians, here are some of the most common of the criticisms of American technical advisors and similar workers (the statements quoted in this paper were taken from interviews with the eight workers as indicated above. <sup>2/</sup> The comments not in quotes are based upon the experience of the writer):

1. "Americans have a feeling of superiority. They know the answer to everything." These were the most frequently mentioned criticisms by the eight workers who have had experience as working counterparts of American technicians.

This is a fairly common attitude on the part of the Americans. Anything American is good per se. Anything foreign is "just naturally" inferior. It usually comes as quite a shock to an American to learn that some people might prefer their own cars, their own clothes or their own ways to his. Or to learn that people are not interested in learning to do things "the American way."

When an American advisor demonstrates this attitude in his day-to-day relationship with the people he is working with, they react in just the way we would expect them to react: negatively. If he takes a superior attitude toward the country, the culture and the

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<sup>2/</sup> The eight respondents were students at Cornell in the Spring of 1957.

people, it shows in practically everything he does. As soon as this is clearly understood by his counterparts in the host government his chances of helping them are practically nil.

2. "Americans want to take credit for what is accomplished in joint programs." "The American advisor took all the credit for the work of the entire program."

This was the next most frequent criticism of American technical assistance workers. They insist that their names be in the paper, that they get public credit for any work they engage in or are involved in in any way.

Although on analysis, it is not hard to point out why the American seeks credit, it does not make it any less objectionable to the people accepting aid and assistance from American programs.

In the first place, Americans place such a high value on success that they want to be assured that they are succeeding in whatever work they happen to be engaged in. Therefore, it is difficult for them to stay behind the scenes and let someone else take all the credit for achievements.

In the second place, the technical assistance worker was selected, in many cases, because he had been successful in "credit-getting" in his last job. Public programs in America are frequently greatly affected, as far as appropriations are concerned, by the amount of publicity they get. An individual worker who reflects a great deal of credit on his organization is likely to be rewarded by a high rating and, therefore, may be the first one recommended for a "foreign job."

This kind of an individual, who is accustomed to frequent public acclaim and praise from his superiors, may have an extremely difficult time avoiding "taking all the credit", or seeking the limelight instead of pushing his foreign counterpart forward.

Where people have just gained their political independence as is so frequently the case with the developing countries, they are naturally highly sensitive to any kind of foreign domination. To give public credit to a foreign technician or foreign agency for even joint accomplishments is usually repugnant to them and may often be a serious political mistake on the part of a local government. The local government may need all the credit for accomplishments that it can get. To admit that a foreign government or its representatives have helped, is, to a certain extent, admitting a kind of foreign domination; which is, in most of the newly independent countries, political suicide.

3. Americans are frequently unable or unwilling to learn to respect and to adjust to the local customs and culture. The following criticisms are indications that this point is true.

"The Point 4 worker is unwilling to adjust his working hours to those of our office."

"Some do not have any understanding, nor do they care to learn about the customs, culture and traditions of the local people."

"American technical advisors fail to see the point of view of the local people."

"They violated the most inviolate of the customs of our culture-- i. e. place their feet on a high official's desk--; fail to remove their shoes in the house, etc. "

These are a few of the criticisms of American technicians for not taking the trouble to learn and follow the common customs and courtesies of the host country's cultures.

The American who violates the basic rules of a culture indicates in an unmistakable way his complete lack of concern or respect for the feelings of the local people. He also brands himself as unworthy to advise or consult with in the future. He, therefore, has nullified any influence his position carried and has ended his usefulness in the assignment.

4. "Americans attempt to plan and launch programs without spending enough time to get the necessary facts. "

"Most (technical assistance workers) try to apply things which work in the U. S. A. without taking into consideration the great differences between the two countries. "

"Americans always tend to go for big stuff; big tractors, when the farms are small; big road equipment when the local government can't maintain them. "

This mistake, although not in the realm of personnel problems, is certainly a pertinent one and where information is lacking about people, can well apply.

It may take a great deal of time for the technical advisor to learn about the local administrative system, how it functions and how to get things done in it, but if he really expects to accomplish anything during his assignment it is worth the time and effort and must be done.

5. Failure to work through the normal channels for getting work done was mentioned.

"Some (Point 4 workers) because they are 'experts' often bypass the director of the service; going directly to the Minister of Agriculture or some other high official."

"Point 4 workers do not try to involve the field personnel in 'their' projects from the beginning."

"Channels of communication between Point 4 workers and natives only function from their level up to the high officials."

"Most...try to work so as to please the higher administrators rather than at the local level."

In many cases an American technical advisor will have an "ascribed status" which is very high from the very start of his assignment. Unless he is scrupulously careful about not taking advantage of this circumstance he will alienate some of the very officers he hopes to 'assist'. Projects which have to be executed at the director level should not be discussed with a minister by a Point 4 technician unless it is a part of the strategy mapped out with the director. Until the Point 4 worker understands the administrative system and how it works, he would do well to go slowly.

6. "Some Americans tend to lose their democratic way of working and acting when they get in a foreign assignment where this is possible."

This was a complaint by two of the informants. Americans attempted to use authority in getting changes they wanted and thought desirable.

To some extent this may seem inevitable. When an American goes into a society where the pressure to be democratic with others is lessened, the natural tendency is to be less democratic. He may have servants for the first time; and servants who are so accustomed to being servile in their relationship with their employer that they force him into a more dominant role than he has ever had to assume before. To avoid this mistake, an American would need to be aware of the pitfall and be prepared for it.

Another facet to this problem is the failure on the part of the American advisor to recognize and make allowances for the fact that his values and those of the host country may be different in many respects. Because he places a great deal of value on getting things done quickly and efficiently is no guarantee that his local co-workers will place the same value upon it. The frustration this lack of understanding causes frequently leads to dictatorial attitudes and action.

### Some Possible Ways to Avoid These Mistakes

#### 1. Do not expect gratitude for any financial aid given.

At one time or another, it has been thought that if the technician could have some financial aid to render and administer he would have an easier time establishing effective rapport with his counterparts. This is a mistake. Actually, if a technician does have aid to grant it almost guarantees that he can never establish the kind of rapport necessary to be really effective. Accepting financial aid hurts the pride of the recipient in almost all cases and oddly enough, seldom ever results in real gratitude for the donor. If forced to acknowledge the aid publicly, the recipient may come to actually hate the donor.

So, in reality, financial aid greatly complicates the job of the technical advisor. His attitude toward it should be to never mention it to any of his co-workers in the host government and to never, never attempt to use it to gain any kind of advantage in his relationship with his co-workers.

#### 2. The Point 4 Worker's job is to build the local technician.

In the past, Americans and other technicians have justified their assuming the role of an in-line officer, an administrator, a supervisor, or an operator of a program, by saying that they were "demonstrating" to the people what could be done with such a program or they were operating a pilot project. This excuse no longer holds good. If the chief administrator of a country has not heard of the basic elements of community development and extension by now, then he is a rare exception

to the rule. At any rate, these programs are not in the demonstration stage any more and there is little excuse for a Point 4 technician or an extension advisor to assume an operational role in a foreign assignment.

Parfirio Gomez, Extension Specialist with the Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences, Turrialba, Costa Rica, has defined the role of a technical assistance advisor by saying that the advisor should assume the same role in the foreign assignment that a good extension worker would assume in a county.

To train, to encourage, to advise, to help to grow and develop in his job, these are all acceptable functions of the technical assistance worker in relation to his local co-worker.

3. Credit for accomplishments are not for the technical assistance worker. For reasons already stated plus many others, foreign advisors cannot afford to share in the credit for successful ventures.

One of his most important objectives is to build-up the confidence, the prestige and the general stature of his co-worker or co-workers. An important aspect of this is the reinforcement of their successful experiences with praise and commendation. The advisor cannot share in this even though he may have shared in the work, else he spoils the effect.

4. Unless a Point 4 worker can learn to like and respect the people, he cannot work with them.

Cultural differences make for strangeness and a difficulty of adjustment but a technical assistance worker must be willing to undergo this adjustment or give up his assignment.

If he feels superior to the people and the culture, he is headed for trouble. He should study the local customs, the history, the culture in every aspect and in firsthand personal observation and attempt to identify interesting strong points. A foreign advisor should spend at least six months of his first year in a new country in intensive study of the situation he is to advise on.

He should give no advice until after this period of study.

5. Teach by example--considering language difficulties and other communication blocks, teaching by example will possibly be the most effective teaching a technical assistance worker will do. He should, therefore, concentrate upon it until he is teaching what he wants to teach. For one thing, he should be democratic in all his contacts. He should strictly practice what he preaches.

6. Learn the language. This cannot be overemphasized for if an advisor cannot communicate with the common people, he can never be sure of his information.

It is also important from the standpoint of gaining and maintaining rapport.

7. The Point 4 worker's whole family should mix socially with the local people. This is essential for several reasons. It helps greatly in gaining and maintaining rapport with coworkers and other people of the country. It keeps the whole family interested and gives them a sense of mission. And a most important function of parties and other social affairs is that they are effective influencing processes, if properly handled.

Because the teaching can be indirect, they can make up a very important part of a 'learning' situation for officials who because of prestige and position cannot assume the role of students or 'advice-takers'.

8. Criticism of the local people, their customs or any other aspects of the culture is a sure way to end the effectiveness of a technical advisor. Direct or implied criticism is strongly resented by the majority of the people of any country. The reaction is most frequently covert and, therefore, the foreign advisor, unless he is extremely sensitive, will not be aware of the damage he is doing.

One of the most destructive forms of implied criticism is the foreigner who takes the condescending attitude toward the local people and their culture. Such a person privately feels that the local culture is vastly inferior to his own, but is extremely solicitous of the feelings of the local people with whom he works. Although he may never openly criticize, his true attitude shows at every turn and he soon becomes completely detestable to the people.

9. A technical assistance worker should avoid these two extremes.

The people of cultures greatly different from our own suspect our sincerity if, when we go to their country to work, we go 'completely native'. They feel that either we are trying to gain some undue advantage by this or that we are some kind of an 'outcast' in our own culture. Certain aspects of the foreign advisor's culture were admired and considered desirable by the local government or he would not be there; so if he gives up these aspects, of what further use is he?

The other extreme is the person who attempts to live exactly as he did at home. Certain aspects of the local culture are obviously superior in the new situation to what the foreigner could import. Certain foods, drinks, working hours, visiting hours, social customs, etc. , have been developed in the local situation. The more quickly the Point 4 advisor and his family recognize this and develop new tastes and habits to accommodate such cultural traits, the better off they will be.