For Idaho Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis, co-chair of the CSG International Committee, learning proper protocol when traveling abroad has been an exercise in trial and error.

“It has been the learning experience for me to do things wrong, so that I could learn to do them right,” he told participants in the Found in Translation: Global Protocol for Foreign Delegations session, sponsored by the CSG International Committee.

Davis shared with members of the committee and audience a few tips he’s learned along the way, including tips from a recent CSG delegation to China in October. Among his list were to smile, even when tired; visit socially with foreign counterparts, you may just end up with a new friend; use an interpreter—not an app; and never take the opportunity for granted.

Missouri International Trade and Investment Manager Ann Pardalos said global protocol boils down to using good manners and common sense. Using what she called the “platinum rule”—treating others as they would like to be treated—can go a long way to developing rapport with foreign counterparts.

“First impressions are so important,” she said. “Your actions are a reflection of your organization, your family, your state and your country.”

And biases and cultural generalizations, she warned, should be left behind. “If you can’t check biases and negative attitudes at the door then, frankly, you shouldn't get off the plane.”

According to Shannon Shellenberg of the California Senate Office of International Relations, mastering global protocol is about “marrying knowledge with the art of grace under pressure.” Legislators already know a thing or two about operating with grace under pressure, she said. “To be at ease internationally, you just have to add in knowledge.”

Consul General of Canada Louise Blais said that even for career diplomats, learning the cultural nuances of other countries is an important and ongoing process, but officials shouldn’t take it too far. “A little research goes a long way; you don’t need to be an expert,” she offered. “Don't become local ... they won't like that.”

Shellenberg agreed that doing a bit of homework can help. But even then, she warned, sometimes mistakes are made.

“I've never seen a faux pas that couldn’t be fixed without a little communication, understanding and some humor,” she said.

In other words, said Blais, “Be yourself—your most polite, gracious self.”
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