

# The Importance of People

Stephen M. Corey

## UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

MARTIN DAVIS was 38 years old and taught sixth grade at the Ellsworth School. The fall of the year 1942-43 was a bad one for him. His wife had had a serious operation, which worried him, but he was also mixed up about his teaching and his motives and the war. His confusion and distress made him do odd things. He would talk half of the time at one staff meeting and then kick himself for doing so and keep absolutely quiet at the next one.

He quickly became irritated with the children and even cuffed a boy who was mischievous rather than bad. His feeling of guilt following this incident made him so solicitous for a couple of days that the youngsters were unable to analyze the situation. They proceeded to take a few of the liberties that had been allowed them previously and were promptly scolded. This ambivalence and unpredictability made the children restive. As time went on the restiveness changed to a slight hostility which made Davis resentful and the hostility increased.

Davis' principal, Douglas Sals, was distressed at what appeared to be the regression of a once fine teacher. He found himself several times talking with pupils from Davis' room who had been sent to the office for disciplining. This was most unusual. Even some parents had sought Sals out saying that their children in the sixth grade were com-

plaining about school and seemed for the first time to dread to go to class. Other teachers began to talk about "the change that has come over Martin." Davis sensed criticism in the attitude of his colleagues and became defensive.

### *The Teacher Is Perplexed by His Own State of Mind*

Davis himself was not certain what was happening to him, but he was uneasy. He began to worry and could not go back to sleep after he once awoke early in the morning. His appetite fell off and so did his weight. His physician, however, could find no symptoms of any illness but made some rather vague remarks about the importance of freedom from worry. Davis began to worry more. His feeling that the other teachers were down on him grew. He detected personal "slights" in many situations that earlier would not have bothered him at all.

The climax came in February, 1943, when he learned that a committee of which he was a member had met and he had not been notified. This was, of course, an oversight, but at lunch time Davis went straight to the chairman of the committee, Miss Plank, a first grade teacher, and accused her of "cutting" him purposely. Some sharp and personally damaging remarks were exchanged. Davis thought his stand quite courageous and "direct" at the time but

very soon afterward he was excruciatingly ashamed of himself and what he had said. But he could not bring himself to apologize. During the period following this altercation he was so nervous and his hands shook so that he could not even write on the board. At 3:30 that afternoon he went to see Mr. Sals. He felt that he was at the end of his rope.

Mr. Sals was not one who would be called by many people a "strong" administrator. He did not push the teachers around, was quiet, and sympathetic, and almost completely lacking in aggressiveness. As has been said, he had been troubled about Davis whom he had considered one of his best people. He had heard the other teachers talk and had seen Davis gradually go to pieces and become increasingly ineffective with his pupils and his peers. He had recognized for some time that sooner or later Davis would come for a conference and he had thought long and hard about what he could do.

#### *Talks with His Principal Give Him New Vision*

The first interview lasted almost an hour. It was strained despite everything Sals could do to take some of the tenseness out of the atmosphere. Davis was querulous and self-deprecatory by turns. He talked most of the time and then by implication accused Sals of not helping him and of wanting him to resign. When the 4:30 bell rang, Davis got abruptly to his feet, thanked Sals for his time, and started to leave hurriedly to hide a quivering chin. Sals could do no more than urge that they have another conversation the following Tuesday.

Over the week-end Sals did some more thinking. He knew that Davis was in bad condition emotionally and he sensed, too, that the only solution was to have Davis come to some sort of terms with himself. Sals wanted to help all that he could and he decided that if necessary he would spend some time helping. He had always been interested in the personal adjustment of his teachers and had long since given up the practice of trying to "master mind" their problems and tell them what to do. It had taken him almost eighteen years to learn that peace of mind comes only to those who are able to work through to tranquility themselves. No one else can do it. An outsider can listen and be concerned and help analyze and explore implications but he can do little else.

So Sals and Davis had a second talk Tuesday and another one the following Thursday and then one each week for three and one-half months. At first Davis was defensive and seemed to expect that Sals would blame him for the things that had gone wrong. Gradually, however, he talked himself out and, with the help Sals was able to give, he slowly began to get insight into some of his own difficulties.

The implications of these insights were gradually realized and at the end of several weeks Davis came to the point where he was able to explore verbally this or that alternative action and to make some resolves that indicated he was getting out of the woods. During the course of the weeks he tested himself in various situations and developed enough confidence to face the fact that he only could help himself and that this would require a fairly complete re-

evaluation of some of the things that he had taken for granted in the past.

### *He Becomes His Own Master*

By the middle of June a great improvement had taken place in Davis' outlook. The improvement was so great that one afternoon as he was about to leave the principal's office he stood by the windows, completely relaxed, with his hands in his pockets, and said, "I'll not be in again next week, Mr. Sals." And then after a moment he went on, "You'll never know what these weekly talks have meant. As I look back, what has happened to me seems almost impossible.

"Last winter, when we started to talk these matters out, I was defensive and confused and trying desperately hard to put the blame for my own troubles on someone else. I wanted ever so much for you to tell me what to do because I was afraid to tackle what I dimly realized I would have to do. You made me look pretty deeply into my own motivation. Time and again I resolved that I wouldn't come back to you because I began to see clearly that I was going to have to do something and I didn't have the courage to get down to it.

"At first I hardly knew what your role was," Davis continued. "You didn't blame me at all for things I'd done that I knew were wrong, but you kept asking me how I felt about this or that and encouraging me to talk and get myself out in the open where I could examine me. Almost before I realized it I was telling you things I had hardly admitted to myself. You must have had a pretty low opinion of me many times. I know I worried myself almost sick frequently because I had told you, as my coun-

selor, things about myself that no principal should know about one of his teachers.

"Then about six weeks ago I began to feel much better. You must have noticed it. Things began to click. I found it easier to make decisions. I knew much more clearly what I was after. My classes began to go. Even at home my family noticed the difference. They said that I was more like my old self. Now I really feel fine. I sleep better and have gained back most of the weight I lost during the winter. I've enjoyed the youngsters for the past three weeks just like I used to. This summer I am going to work three months helping Higgins build ships and then I'll be back here next fall."

Mr. Sals walked home slowly that evening. He felt warm and pleased with the fruits of his labors. Davis had taken at least twenty hours of his time since the first of March but rarely had he felt so satisfied with the use to which so many hours had been put. They had been, he decided, a fine investment for his school and for himself. He said to Mrs. Sals that evening at dinner, "Davis and I have finished our talks. He is on his own. You know the oftener I see what good work teachers can do if they feel right about themselves and their world the more convinced I am that we principals have been chasing up a lot of blind alleys in our attempts to be helpful. I am going to tell the next young man I meet who wants to become a great school executive to make Rogers' *Counseling and Psychotherapy* his handbook. In comparison with what Rogers writes about, the *mechanics* of school administration are easy."

Copyright © 1943 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.