

The Importance of People

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The great commonwealth lying south of Oregon and west of many other states certainly has no more than its proper share of educational problems. It was therefore probably native endowment rather than environmental pressure that led the authors of the following statement to make their discovery of these ingenious ways to side-step professional difficulties. Every problem-ducker in the country, this editor included, must be grateful to them for their useful suggestions.

Harold Benjamin

How To Avoid an Educational Problem

THE AUTHORS were impelled to the endeavor hereinafter described by certain unhappy experiences in educational discussions. These experiences were connected with desperate but clumsy attempts to escape from the problem under consideration. The desperation came from a feeling that members of the conferring group were trapped with the problem and had no real prospect of regaining their freedom. The clumsiness arose from trying to answer the question directly, a practice that causes unnecessary embarrassment. It is virtually impossible by such methods to attain the comfortable feeling that the problem has been completely whipped.

The following suggested measures are derived from firsthand study of many discussions. It is hoped that they may remedy the usual deplorable situation by supplying group leaders with alternative modes of retreat, enabling them to withdraw their forces gracefully instead of abandoning the problem, baffled and helpless.

Reliable Techniques

The first step is to find a scape-goat and ride him. Teachers can always blame administrators; administrators can blame teachers. They can both blame parents, politicians, radio, tele-

vision, or "modern education." The scientific name for this method is the *goat-offense opening*. If the conference is relatively open, however, and representatives of possible goats are present, it is better to try another method.

An old reliable technique in almost any type or stage of discussion is to say frankly that you do not have the answer, implying at the same time by intonation and eyebrows that only a fool or a charlatan would profess to have the answer. This lets you out of having any answer. The technical term for this procedure is the *certainly-no-answer gambit*.

A more modern approach is to look slightly embarrassed when the problem is presented. Hint delicately that the question is in bad taste. If your conferees do not rise to this bait, suggest generously that you are willing to take time to discuss the problem, but you had assumed it was too elementary for mature consideration. "I had thought," you can always say as a clincher, "that we got into more advanced matters after we left the teachers college." In the few situations where even this tactic fails to secure results, you must bring up your heaviest gun. "In view of—er," you begin hesitatingly to show how balanced your judgment is, "the present state of public opinion and some of the

recent attacks on education, I am wondering whether a discussion of this problem may not be misinterpreted by outsiders. No school man or woman would for a moment misunderstand, of course, but—ah—did you see the June issue of *The American Legion Magazine*?" The *we're-not-scared-but-maybe-we-should-be* approach is very powerful. It must be used carefully, however, because it tends to stifle discussion, which is the life-blood of democracy.

A related campaign device is that of a whole list of assorted possible dangers attached to or emanating from the suggested problem.

"Does this committee have *authority* to consider the proposed resolution? I doubt it. Show me in the minutes where it says we do."

"Do we know this definitely? We need more research before we take a stand. Let's get the facts."

"The untrained or misinformed teacher will not understand this. We are running the risk of unfair criticism, hurt feelings, and—." Here let your voice trail off apprehensively.

This *think-of-all-the-dangers* technique is not very elegant, but it is almost fool-proof. Anybody with a little ingenuity can stall a discussion practically indefinitely by this method.

Another excellent device, that of *let's examine-the-philosophical-basis-first*, is much more difficult to handle expertly. A good knowledge of metaphysical and logical terminology is indispensable for the skillful retrograde movement involved in this maneuver. The aim is to move lightly from proposition to premise to assumption ever further back from the original problem until all the conference is lost in awe at your erudition. Do not attempt this method unless you are adequately trained for it.

These are the standard techniques.

Ordinarily they will suffice. There are times, however, when the proponents of the problem are so enthusiastic and press so resolutely toward a solution that it is necessary to resort to one or more of the following desperate, delaying-action, scorched-earth tactics.

Bombard the group with a formula like, "In a Pickwickian sense," "As a substantive matter," or "For group-dynamic intervals." Any formula will do, so long as it means nothing and can therefore have any interpretation.

Suggest a long list of "improvements" which are so minor that they will have no effect on the *status quo*.

Summarize, explain, and clarify over and over again. Repeat everything that has been said by anyone and relate it all subordinately to what you have said. Go through this process whenever it appears that anyone is going to say something new.

Begin the question in reverse. For example, begin with a problem like "What should be the content of our core program?" Then lead the discussion artfully around corners until you end with, "Maybe we ought to consider setting up a core program."

In those very rare instances where, in spite of all such defensive blocks, any actual solution is proposed, bring up the shock reserves. They are two in number.

First, say with a touch of patient scorn, "We have been doing this in Podunk for the last ten years. Of course we never called it by these fancy names, but we have it. Come over and see it."

This will almost invariably stop the eager problem-solvers. If, miraculously, it fails, you have to resort to in-fighting.

Appoint a committee.

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