

A Diversified Team Approach to Conflict Intervention

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A TEAM approach has long been my answer to conflict intervention in public schools. I firmly believe that harnessing the concerns and dynamics of conflict can make the rhetoric of American education operational.

Conflict is often a neglected opportunity. During the summer of 1968, I had a chance to test this thesis by working with a team of adults and youth from Palm Springs High School in California. We were in every sense diversified—intergenerational, interracial, and intercultural (Spanish-speaking plus social class differences). Team members spent three weeks in an institute, planning effective intervention for the conflicts in their school.

Such a diversified team approach is but one way of relating to school crises. Schools from seven other cities were involved in varied attacks on this problem. All worked under the auspices of the Center for the Research and Utilization of Scientific Knowledge (CRUSK) of the University of Michigan, financed by the Ford Foundation.

As consultant to the Palm Springs team, I intended not to manage or to manipulate the group or to attempt large-scale school reformation. Rather, I expected to respond constructively to the following specific situations: fighting (interracial and intraracial), disrespect for teachers that added to their low morale, and exclusive participation in student activities by dominant cliques.

Where these problems exist, however,

they need not pile up into crisis such as now besets many schools. Unresolved conflicts can explode when tensions between school and community are overlaid by the estrangement of student rebellion, which is overlaid by the disruption of faculty unrest, which is overlaid by the turnover rate of superintendents and principals caught two conflicts behind.

Schools will be changed by conflict or they will be changed by attempts to prevent conflict. Knowing this, our team deliberately chose to direct its energy toward practical intervention and action. The team included persons concerned with *solutions*. Teachers, principals, and students worked together exploring new forms of dialogue, involvement, and instruction. Their focus was on the causes of friction as they experienced it and on helping each member of the team and his group to develop strategies of intervention.

The team attacked conflict caused by: (a) students needing to participate in planning their own learning programs and to feel more responsibility for fulfilling their learning plans; (b) teachers and other school adults not knowing how to work in league with youth; and (c) Negroes (8 percent) and Mexican-Americans (12 percent) vying for recognition and status among 1,800 white students.

The diversification of our membership

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aided us in achieving the following goals: (a) retraining teachers by using students as their catalysts and as their peer learners; (b) training students for negotiation, particularly directed toward a more relevant curriculum; (c) increasing the sophistication of subgroups relative to their responsibility, accountability, and power in fulfilling their unique positions; (d) increasing the flexibility and skills the team needed for devising and using alternative means of intervening in conflict.

Program Distinctions

Youth majority. There were 40 students on the team, most of whom had just finished the 11th grade, and 10 teachers. These numbers gave the students a feeling of being in charge and of being essential to the operation of their school. Twenty of the students were black, 20 were white; of the white students, 10 were Spanish-speaking. The majority of the 40 students were disenchanted underachievers; they identified, for the rest of the team, points of impact and impasse based on their own experience.

Youth staff. There were seven youths and four adults on the staff. The youths were either high school students or recent graduates. I had known four of them in a previous desegregation institute. I asked these young people to select the other three members, since we as teachers tend to choose a certain kind of youngster for leadership. They chose a parochial school boy who was Mexican-American and a black girl from a middle-class, Army family. The girl had attended school in many parts of the world but, reacting to family pressure, she had decided college was nonsense and had become a typical "sound-off kid."

This staff was mixed racially, academically, and in aspirations. The common element among the members was that they were all bright, sensitive, perceptive, and had "mother wit." One youth stuttered so much that he was unable to render an uninterrupted sentence when he introduced himself as a staff member. Many persons wondered about the wisdom of his selection. His growth in articulation became a source of pride for the

entire group, pride that we could work across lines of difference with such facility and success.

The young participants experienced both satisfaction and empathy when the youth staff members fell on their faces, but more important when they publicly allowed themselves to be taught. The lesson was that even these much-admired leaders had problems and could handle them.

A strength of the youth staff in working with the diversified team was that they were "on the case" around the clock. They were still "in class" whether riding in a car, walking in the halls, or at their students' homes, continuously diagnosing, instructing, evaluating—with a dedication and energy matched only by the participants.

Indigenous format of segregated groups. In an effort to capitalize on allegiances, everyone on the team was placed in a subgroup with others of the same status, age, and race for part of each day. It takes strength and security to integrate. We fell back on segregated groups with the ultimate aim of building a base for conscious and deliberate reintegration.

Many minority youths have been scarred and frightened by supposed integrated situations. White team members also had had such experiences. Phony integration had reinforced stereotypes and given them narrow expectations for themselves and others. The segregated groups, however, were seen as a means useful for fortifying participants psychologically, for examining the scar tissue, for laughing together at "minority-ness," and for plotting alternative courses into successful reintegration.

Teacher learning. Adults came thinking that their own students, enrolled with them as fellow team members, would be "impossible, sassy kids." The turning point came through collaboration on common problems and cooperative strategies. Yet, when there was rapport, teachers had another worry: Could they and their students make the necessary adjustments when back in school?

The youth staff members provided the answer. Despite their bravado, understand-

ing, and skill, the youth staff members needed help. Their need warmed the hearts of the teachers, who answered with a new subtlety that was not the heavy hand of I-am-the-authority. Teachers learned how to help the youth staff and still retain their role as students. This procedure also reassured them that role reversibility can be functional within a school setting.

Community involvement. The team members took their experiences to the community in three evening meetings. Attendance at the meetings increased from 60 at the first one to 200 at the third meeting—evidence of the appeal of this kind of public relations program. Team members of different speech styles stated that integration is essential to a high quality of education. One lad, for whom football alone was school, struggled with new-found confidence to make his halting remarks more cogent. He stated, "These things are ours for the asking, but *we must ask together.*" A black man embraced him, then turned to me and said, "That boy lives down the street from me. I didn't know he could say a word except 'Hi!'"

Access and support. We all worked together at the same level—visiting consultant, adult and youth, staff and nonstaff. All persons were accessible and were mutually supportive. Familiarity did *not* breed contempt—that old nonsense! This approach evolved from staff members' helping others make their point, not abandoning a person alone on a position. Further, after seeing a staff member fall through the thin ice of his analysis, and seeing someone, staff or participant, drag him up again, it became safe to venture out on the thin places in one's thinking. This was a way of making minority-ness safe; it was not aloneness.

Intervening in conflict can be a way of giving support. Each person plots his own progress chart in situations fraught with conflict and he is the only one who knows when and in what direction he is ready to go. Team involvement can mean that you find yourself supporting another in his strength, helping him round it out, communicate it, enjoy it. You go to his defense in his weakness, aid

him in seeing its dimensions and in discovering solid ground. Accessibility and support showed the subgroups a way of achieving clarification, identity, and commitment.

Outcomes

The impact of the team was felt in its use of strategies for conflict intervention. Its interaction crossed group lines, resulting in new coalitions producing bold, adaptive solutions.

The Human Relations Commission on campus met for the first time with its counterpart in the city of Palm Springs. The resulting collaboration benefited both groups, and each was greatly strengthened by the insights and involvement of the diversified team when intergroup tensions were confronted.

The formation of the Ashanti Club for black students was a test of commitment to pluralism in the school. When this club's constitution had to travel all the way from the student council to the Board of Education for approval, the uneasy distinction between being different and being apart surfaced. The same was true for the brown students forming MAYA (Mexican American Youth Association). Negative faculty and public opinion tested the commitment and negotiation skills of team participants. Both minority groups were successful in maintaining their new-found group identity. They then had achieved leverage with which to negotiate.

The adult participants on the team involved their faculty colleagues and the community in their newly acquired role of learning with students and of using students as consultants and staff. Unfortunately, the Messianic force of their conviction intimidated some faculty members and retarded their in-service education program within the school. However, faculty members received many requests to appear with young people before professional groups and at regional and state meetings.

The conviction of the faculty members on the team was that a school cannot afford an uninformed or insensitive staff or student body. Neither can the school afford a staff or student body unsophisticated in or unskilled

in working with differences. The faculty team members also made it clear that administrators must develop mechanisms for rapid response to potential conflict.

Each of the subgroups within the diversified team found, in its segregated identity, ways of eliciting interest and response from students so far removed from the "mainstream" that their dreams and grievances generally go unheard. The subgroups also developed strategies for reintegration, because they found that intergroup affiliations were frequently requisites for change. For example, curriculum reorganization became feasible as a result of the political skill of the team, exercising pressure both in subgroups and collectively.

Program Implications

The diversified team approach proved a fruitful exploration, justifying investments in long-range development programs in which students and faculty participate together.

The notion that the "good" school is one where there is no conflict should be challenged. The intervention of a diversified team can reveal the nature of conflicts and the potential they offer for constructive action; it is the quality of contact across differences that bespeaks the real caliber of school life.

Hasten the day when school administrators compare conflicts and the progress made toward their resolution as marks of a school's excellence, along with the expenditure per pupil, teacher-student ratio, and test scores.

Performance and not course input became the test of this approach. Adults and youths together influenced the social environment of the school which purports to serve them. The several elements constituting the school population became more interdependent through the model of the diversified team.

That the entire school was not changed is not significant. That it became susceptible to the influence of these team participants was a significant breakthrough. The team members themselves changed as a result of being change agents. The outcomes were unquestionable.

Public school education can only lose if racial, cultural, social class, and age groups do not have the means to resolve problems. Students' development and usefulness as articulate, respected advocates of change have proven viable. In the diversified team approach at Palm Springs, students and teachers worked in league with one another to keep the school operational and operating in a manner consistent with our democratic way of life. □

The Supervisor's Role in Negotiation

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