

# What About Crisis Education?

JOHN R. O'NEIL \*

OUR first question is whether crisis management is a temporary phenomenon or is, indeed, a way of life. One answer is that for many educators and administrators, crisis management is certainly a change in life style.

Many businessmen feel that the process of management is really the containment or organization of crisis situations. The military and the police have existed to stop crisis situations. Foreign policy experts purport to anticipate and prevent emergencies. Many say that the mass media thrive on the tragedy of upheaval, and some say that they sometimes enlarge or even create troublesome situations.

The important lesson for managers that comes out of recent social strife is to learn that no institution is crisis proof. It should be no solace to a business manager to see colleges breaking apart at the same time that his company is moving profitably along and suffering only routine crisis situations. Certainly bureaucrats and foundation management should not feel complacent. Young radicals are saying that all of the major institutions are interlocked and incestuously control the power that determines how people live. Ridgeway, in his book, *The Closed Corporation*, portrays most of the board room characters as being in one huge collusion to control power.

If one assumes that more crisis situations will be the fate of institutions, then there are at least two possibilities for educational solution. The first option is to attempt to train or educate present and future power managers to solve the basic problems that create crisis. The second approach is to educate leaders and potential leaders to nimbly manipulate situations and people so that crisis will be reduced and less disruptive.

It seems that neither of those solutions is very practical. It will take too long to reorder priorities, clarify and strengthen communications, and create new delivery systems. Also, there is no certainty that nimbleness and personal qualities are critical factors in solving crisis situations which result from system failures and power politics.

The social battlegrounds that have been in evidence around the world result from rate of change or from demands for change. The institutions

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extant are often guarded by power managers who have been successful in preventing change. This would also apply to faculty members acting in their guild mode. The managers, who have grown up in institutions, have been rewarded for their ability to maintain the integrity of the institution. Many of the new generation have not responded to the same reward system. Their system might include activism, power, and self actualization (or freaking out), as opposed to financial or status rewards.

## **The Change Process**

The way out of the collision course and the way to approach crisis education may lie in: (a) defining crisis as institutional and systems failures which have not been accepted by recipients; and (b) redefining education as a total process of learning about the nature of self and the way in which self is enhanced by viable institutions.

In order to take the first steps, the real education must be applied to the current power managers. The educational community must see as top priority self-education and the training of institutional leaders. These leaders must be shown the gaps that exist between delivery system outputs and consumer expectations. The overwhelmingly difficult job is to persuade the power holders that their results and internal measurements are not giving them an adequate picture of success. This boils down to the application of a hard-nosed internal audit which only the institutional managers can force upon themselves. If educators can be successful in persuading the nation's leadership that change and not repression is a responsible and prudent response to the future generation of consumers, then crisis education will be a workable possibility.

To continue the analogy between business and education, consider the process that takes place when a business suffers a downturn. A healthy chief executive demands information which will help to pinpoint the problem. If sales are slipping and customers complaining, the response is not to blame or to disregard them but instead to repair the system. The Muscatine Report showed how outdated undergraduate education was at Berkeley, but change was slow in coming even with the "new customers'" (minority students') demands being placed on the University.

Of course it was the same isolation or imperialism that caused Montgomery Ward to slip far behind Sears Roebuck. Montgomery Ward misread what customers wanted. The questions are those of time and commitment to take the hard internal look.

The extraordinary pressures of time are exacerbated by Viet Nam and by man's accelerating destruction of his ecology. Student leaders are intolerant of change not generated at their own pace. They believe that most institutions not only will not change but inexorably will seek more power and control over lives and will take on more war research over time. The students believe that their approach to this problem has been successful.

Sydney Hook predicted in 1964 that a turning point had been reached in the pattern of development of higher education. Yet he recently said,

I confess that I have been taken somewhat aback by the rapidity of the change, but not its direction, by the escalation of the lawlessness accompanying the change and by some of the secondary consequences of the accelerating

disorders—fear among administrators lest their campuses be struck; confusion, bewilderment, and divided loyalties among faculty, together with some *Schadenfreude* at the humiliation of administrations; sustained apathy among the majority of students whose education has been interrupted by militant students; and the mixture of rage and disgust among the general public.<sup>1</sup>

The price of commitment involves the following efforts:

Institutional management must develop a sense of revolution for change. There must be a shakedown of procedures and systems to avoid failures at the place where service delivery systems and service recipients interface. Tired dogma which purports to define institutional objectives must be scrapped. All this will unquestionably mean the loss of certain leaders who will not be able to work within the newer and more open systems.

In other words, institutions can survive if they can take the initiative in the change process. If institutions demand sharper solutions to social problems, conduct internal social audits, and finally advocate new programs for social justice, then the institutions will flourish. □

<sup>1</sup> Sydney Hook. From a speech entitled "The Trojan Horse in American Education."

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