

# Trust: A New Approach to Student Unrest

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IN THE past, comments such as the following could be heard frequently from various elements of the San Mateo, California, High School educational community: "We don't have any problems here"; or "It just couldn't happen here"; or "Things in San Mateo have *always* been racially calm"; or "Our minority students are very happy with the school situation."

A situation that developed recently at San Mateo High was the result of an incident between some white and black students. This clearly exposed the fact that we *do* have some very serious educational and societal problems that need to be resolved!

The incident that triggered a major confrontation was allegedly started by some statements coming from white and black students about who was supposed to be where and who could not go where, etc. However, what we found was that such comments were only superficial manifestations of deep-rooted, combustible situations. These situations surfaced in terms of fighting, with a few incidents occurring on the school grounds and several away from the school. Thus fear and terror spread quickly throughout the entire school and a large part of the community. A racial war was rumored at San Mateo High School between black and white students; headlines read, "Racial violence closes San Mateo High School." These statements, of course, were blown slightly out of proportion.

Black students became very much concerned about their welfare mainly because they did not feel that the school administration was really on their side in anything that was going on. They believed that the law enforcement agency was not there to represent them; if anything, it was there to protect the majority. All these factors had to be resolved somewhat before we could begin to examine what it was that had triggered this kind of confrontation.

The evening following the major confrontation, black students held a meeting at the Martin Luther King Center. Instead of discussing the cause of the immediate disturbance, they focused their attention on the school. At this point, it was hard for one to find a connection between the demands and the fighting; this, however, was the situation. Shortly thereafter a multi-ethnic group of concerned students from San Mateo High School, who represented various segments of the student body, decided that they also had a list of demands that they wanted to present to the administration. First, though, this group of concerned students was interested in bringing San Mateo High School back to a position where these issues could be discussed, debated, and hopefully resolved.

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The threat of violence at the school and the possibility of its spreading through the community forced the partial closing of the school for two days. The situation became so serious that it was necessary for the faculty to have an all-day Saturday in-service session to take an in-depth look at some of the situations and, more important, at ourselves.

This session produced very significant results. Driven by sincere concern on the part of many faculty members and a strong element of fear, the faculty moved to elect a council that was to represent the staff in dealing with the present crisis and with other matters concerning the faculty. This council represented all views and positions that were held by the faculty. A surprising fact about this diversified council was that in its first meeting we were able to weave ourselves into a very cohesive unit that would reflect a strong united front for doing that which we determined was educationally sound for San Mateo High School. The council then met almost all day the following Sunday and prepared to enter into dialogue with representative student groups.

The first thing we had to do as a council was to find out exactly where we stood and from what philosophical base we were operating. We had to sit down and make a few admissions, such as:

1. The school as it is presently designed is not managing to include all students in its educational program.

2. The school as it is now structured is an outmoded system that was designed for a rural-oriented society that was prevalent a century ago.

3. The present atmosphere at the school did not allow for the due process machinery as it was constituted (that is, student council, delegate assembly, class councils, etc.) to permit students to go through the proper channels to air their grievances, concerns, and questions.

The next thing we had to do was to recognize and to articulate the awesome responsibility that we as a faculty council had accepted. We had to understand that the problems that we were facing with the students, our colleagues on the faculty, and the

community at large were a direct reflection of the social ills of the society as a whole. We totally agreed that our school, with its ethnic makeup, had the potential to become the model school in the district. If equal educational opportunity could work anywhere, it could and should work at San Mateo High School. It was our decision that on Monday morning we would make a statement for publication to the educational community that would act as a position paper.

We also felt, as far as school operation was concerned, that subject matter at this time was secondary and the current situation should be discussed in all classrooms. We felt that it was necessary to enter into immediate dialogue with the delegate assembly, the committee of black students, the committee of concerned students, the students from Shoreview (blue collar area), and some individuals who were instrumental in moving the student body. Not only was it necessary for us to have the representative groups from the student body, but it was also necessary that we find an outside person to moderate our convocation. We were very lucky to have in San Mateo a person with the charm, ability, and a great desire to communicate with all groups in order to make this a better place. This person in our community was Mrs. Eleanor C. She was chairman of the Human Relations Commission. By talking directly to her Superintendent of Schools and her immediate supervisor, the Special Assistant to the Superintendent for Intergroup Education, we acquired Mrs. C.'s services. We felt honored that she would take on this delicate role at such a crucial moment. It was our position, however, that time was not going to be a problem. We were prepared to take as much time as was needed to establish the necessary dialogue.

When Monday morning came, Mrs. C. was there to begin the convocation. We had over 100 students assembled, the faculty council was at a separate table, and the convocation began. The tension could be felt by all concerned. The students had a lot of things to say about individuals, policies, courses, teachers, and the school in general. They articulated their concerns with great

clarity and conviction. They told us some things that many members of the faculty council were just not aware of. They talked and they talked. What little we had to say was insignificant compared to the things we were hearing. It was incumbent on us as a faculty council to *listen*.

We listened intently and at strategic moments we interjected comments to correct some distortions of facts, but we did not try to destroy positions or statements that were being made by the students. We discovered that the students did not deal directly with the demands as presented to us item by item. They were more concerned, once they got into the dialogue, with those things that they felt were wrong with the educational process at San Mateo High School.

### To Remake the School

The demands, after 14 hours of dialogue, became extremely insignificant in terms of what we really needed to do to make the school the kind of place that students would enjoy coming to every morning. However, the students were rather pessimistic. They had very little trust and very little faith in what the administration and faculty council would do to resolve some of their grievances. It was our task to show good faith, to show them that we meant what we were saying. We had to eliminate the hypocrisy label that has been, often with *good* reason, placed on adults in our society. The way we felt we could eliminate some of this mistrust and lack of faith was to take a position whereby the students would recognize that we were putting something on the line, and that we as a faculty council recognized that there are certain things happening in our schools today that are no longer relevant and no longer designed to meet the needs of this rapidly changing society. This meant, in essence, the need to show commitment.

The many long hours of dialogue between the students and the faculty council produced one of the most emotional, heart-warming experiences that most of us, and I would say the vast majority of students and the faculty present, had ever experienced in

our entire lives. There were faculty members standing up choked with emotion, making statements about their convictions and how they viewed the educational process. There were students who were just as emotionally distraught and just as deeply involved with the general situation at San Mateo High School.

While we were busy trying to settle some of the differences, exploring the depth of our problems, there were elements in the community that were working against us. A motorcycle gang, "The Sons of Hawaii," had gone through the black community and had beaten with chains a few young black men. This happened two nights in a row.

We were quite concerned with this kind of retaliation because it could unleash a blood bath that would take many outside forces to contain and to dissipate. Working in close coordination with the San Mateo City Police Department, we got extra police coverage in the black community around the Martin Luther King Recreation Center. We also had white volunteers from our student body offer to protect certain black students who lived in Shoreview, a predominately white community. This would allow the black students to move around or to answer their doorbells at night and also would give them someone to call in case they were threatened in any way.

When suggestions like this begin to evolve out of a group that is supposed to be quite hostile, positive change is taking place. One also begins to see that human beings, when all the barriers to communication are broken down, can respond to other human beings on a very humanistic level.

After much discussion, the students and the faculty council alike came to the conclusion that the specific demands as presented to us by the black students and also by the committee of concerned students were only surface manifestations of the deep-rooted problems with our educational system. It was our feeling that to deal with those specific 19 or 20 demands would have been very much like the position that had been taken by our society at large for the past decade. We vowed not to "take aspirin" in a

situation that would have required a heart transplant. It was not our desire as a student-faculty group to have this kind of situation prevail.

We set out to really get down to the root causes of what it was that had students so discontented with the educational process. Before we could begin to examine some of these basic causes, however, something else was necessary, and this had to do with trust, trust in one another. The students had to trust the faculty council and the council had to trust the students. Trust is a quality which allows one to look beyond the normal fears and apprehensions in dealing with other people, to drop the guard, to expose nerve endings that previously have been kept well protected and defended, because as human beings, we do not like to be hurt. The dictionary definition of trust is, "a confident reliance on the integrity, veracity, or justice of another, confidence, faith, also the person or thing so trusted."

After school, the students met long into the wee morning hours trying to decide whether or not they could trust the faculty council. After much deliberation the students came back the following morning and said, "We have to trust you because you're all we've got. If we can't trust and have faith in you, then all is lost." At that point it seemed as though a very spiritual calm prevailed. For a minute or so people just looked at one another; the barrier disappeared. Then we began to discuss the real root problems of student discontent, but only after two full days of deliberation, of emotional outpouring, of confessions, of accusations, of people talking to people, not students talking to faculty, not kids to adults, but *people* talking to *people*.

### **Needed: A Relevant Curriculum**

Through many more hours of deliberation, discussion, and sincere dialogue, the usual complaints and concerns of the young people in our schools today were driven home with clarity. They no longer found the curriculum that they were presently subjected to as being relevant to their needs. They found that the teaching methods and techniques

that were being employed in their school were outmoded and did not make for a motivating and interesting classroom atmosphere. They found that many of the teachers were there by the grace of a tenure law, which basically meant that the longer a teacher is there, the harder it is to fire him. Retention of such teachers had nothing to do with the quality of their teaching in the classroom.

The young people were quite concerned about the positions of the faculty and administration on given social issues. They were concerned about the war. They were more concerned about changing the entire structure of how the school was operating rather than about moving to rebuild upon an outmoded foundation. They were interested in changing the monotony of the daily schedule, with the first-period class meeting every day Monday through Friday from 8:30 to 9:25. They would like to see the schedule vary to some degree, so that it would show a little versatility and give people time to breathe. They wanted to see new courses instituted along psychological lines: sex, humanities, ethnic studies, and so forth.

After listening intently, two things became very clear to the faculty council. One was that the black students were saying, "Please include us in your educational program," and that many of the other students, mainly white and Oriental, were saying, "How about a little choice in our program?" Another point that came through loud and clear from *all* students was, "We want to be heard. If there is something we have to say that is educationally sound, then move on it, implement it to the best of your ability, show good faith, show a willingness to change, show flexibility, show sincerity, show honest faith."

I think that the situation at San Mateo High School further substantiated a personal belief that I have had for many months. There is no such thing as a generation gap. The generation gap, in my estimation, is a myth, perpetrated by the mass media in our society. The media are trying to reinforce the idea that people over 30 years of age really cannot communicate with those under 30. If we look very closely at the rapport developed between the faculty council and the stu-

dents, we will see how well we communicated, for only one member of the council is under 30.

I think we gained an insight and an empathy about their problems and about our own problems that far surpassed any level of communication that we as individuals or a group had previously reached. If there is a gap that exists, not just between older and younger people, or fat or skinny people, or black and white people, but just between people—that gap is probably best described as that which exists between the exposed as compared with the unexposed and the open mind as compared with the closed mind.

The problems at San Mateo that were uncovered during the time of crisis are not new in scope or degree, and they are not problems that are particularly unique to the San Mateo community. I think these problems can readily be found in many communities across the nation. At the time this article was written, our problems in San Mateo were not solved. However, I do think that the *technique* employed was a sound one and one that would work in time of crisis or calm. We must look at students in a very realistic way, and I think that there is a need to categorize them. Students are a *minority group* in our society, and the basic resources that students have, like many other minority groups in our society, are: (a) their body, and (b) their character. The other characteristic that they have which is consistent with other minority groups is that they are *powerless*. Students trying to make it and trying to be heard in a power-oriented society can only meet power with power. Student power today manifests itself in terms of students' crying out for a sincere open ear, to be involved, and to possess the right to have a say in determining their educational destiny. Right or wrong, power is the name of the game.

Since students on our college and high school campuses today have grown up in a society that has been totally imbued with protest, demonstration, and civil disturbances, they have clearly recognized that the way to get the "establishment," the status quo, or those individuals in positions of authority to move is by some show of force.

This truism has been supported and demonstrated time and time again in the past five years. The way that we can head off this kind of political confrontation is to open the channels of communication. Tokenism—no! Commitment—yes!

In summary, the feature that needs most to be emphasized in this article is the technique employed to deal with the student unrest that occurred. May I quickly reiterate the steps and techniques used to handle the situation that developed at San Mateo High School:

1. I think it was extremely necessary that we had all sides represented in the conflict.
2. I think that *time* must be *unlimited*, that the factions represented in a given convocation or a dialogue must have all the time necessary to develop what it is that is really causing the friction or the discontent.
3. An outside moderator who is objective and humanistically oriented should be obtained.
4. It should be the aim of one or more of the represented groups to enter into a *trust relationship* with the other groups involved. We know that some factions or some groups are going to be more reluctant than others to extend this kind of trust relationship; however, one group is going to have to take the initiative to really force this issue of trust, because without it there can be no resolution of serious problems.
5. Once that trust relationship is established, we must *examine causes* and not symptoms.

In our society today, we no longer have the lead-time that we once had several decades ago. Because of the position in which our society finds itself, we must plan and provide leadership that will be geared to eliminate the causes of conflict, and not produce temporary cures for symptoms that appear before us day by day. If the technique used at San Mateo High School were employed in other situations it seems highly plausible that equitable solutions could be reached meeting the needs of all concerned. □

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