

## Working Together—At Home and Abroad

**W**ORKING TOGETHER sounds so simple. Yet how complicated it is, whether it is a couple of nursery school or kindergarten children learning to share their building blocks or to take turns on a slide, a group of adolescents wrestling with the art and science of committee work, a group of teachers working on a new course of study—or United Nations secretariat members trying to learn to live amicably with persons from radically different cultures than their own.

### Attitudes Are Most Important

Many persons assume that working together is a skill or series of skills. Usually it is listed under aims of a unit or course in such fashion. Actually, however, working together is a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. And the greatest of these is attitudes.

A person may have a great deal of information about how groups can work well together, he may have considerable skill in working with others, but without a desire to work effectively with others, these skills and information are worthless.

In any human enterprise it is essential that people realize what is to be gained from team work. This applies at every level, from the egocentric individualist in the primary grades to the ethnocentric citizen criticizing the United Nations and its specialized agencies. Teachers would do well to place far more stress on the frame of mind which makes cooperation possible, in-

stead of putting all their emphasis upon the skills of working together.

### Appeal to Self-Interest

The appeal may be at first on the basis of self-interest, often called "enlightened self-interest." Boots will come off more easily and quickly if two are working on them than if one is trying to do the job alone. Committee work will be done more quickly and efficiently if several persons are pooling their findings rather than hiding their results from one another. At the international level, a higher standard of living and a world at peace can be attained by nations helping each other rather than hindering one another.

### Appeal to Fun

Too seldom is there any reference to "fun" in our schools. In working together there is an element of fun which should not be overlooked. A group of high school students can enjoy painting an eye-sore in the community—if they are doing it with their peers in an atmosphere of enjoyment as well as service.

Teachers can really enjoy curriculum planning if workshops are held away from the school building and include some social events as well as hard work. International seminars on technical assistance or international understanding have proved very effective when days of lectures and study groups have been mixed with dances, good food, and recreation of many kinds.

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## Differences Do Exist

In their anxiety to promote cooperation, some people fall into the pitfall of overlooking differences. They are so concerned with stressing similarities that they overlook the fact that differences do exist. To do so is merely to live in a fool's paradise and to postpone the time when differences must be recognized.

That there are differences in mental capacity must be faced and groups organized around these differences. That there are religious differences in a community must be recognized and the reasons for them explained. That there are differences in educational philosophy might as well be acknowledged rather than sidestepped. That there are many countries and cultures is a primary fact to be faced in our emerging world community; to belittle their importance is foolish.

## Acting on Common Goals

In any human group, however, it is possible to find at least a few areas in which people have common goals. Then one can start to act on these areas of common interest instead of merely talking about them, since agreement comes most easily when there is something for people actually to do together instead of something just to talk about in a group.

Parents and teachers may not always agree on statements of educational philosophy, but they can find things to do together in which the welfare of their children is involved.

Teachers may not always agree on educational philosophy but they can examine the reasons for drop-outs and

ways to keep high school boys and girls in school.

International diplomats will rarely find common agreement on statements of political philosophy, but they can work together to eradicate poverty, disease, undernourishment, bad housing, and illiteracy. The success of organizations like UNICEF, the Food and Agricultural Organization, and the World Health Organization is ample proof of the possibilities of working together instead of talking so much about aims and goals.

## Skills Are Learned Slowly

The emphasis thus far on attitudes and action is not intended to minimize the importance of skills. Even if skills are secondary, they are still of great importance.

And the skills of cooperative endeavor must be learned by repetition and under competent guidance. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the skill of committee work. Far too many teachers try to do some committee work, find that pupils cannot function efficiently under this method, and therefore abandon this method as just another fad in education.

The skill of working in any group is dependent upon a score of lesser skills, each of which must be learned by a great many well guided experiences.

## Repeated Attempts Necessary

Attempts to get agreement among a group of teachers or professors may fail in the first instance and consequently be discarded as outside the realm of achievement rather than being recognized as only one attempt. Here as in other phases of life, it is important to

remember that one of the major lessons learned from labor-management international mediation is that a great many alternatives must be tried and the mediator must keep people in constant communication rather than writing off the possibility of success with the first failure. Ralph Bunche has testified that this was part of the technique in the seemingly hopeless initial efforts to achieve some kind of *modus vivendi* in the Arab-Jewish controversy in Palestine.

Perhaps the most important contribution of mental hygienists to the art and science of working together is their insistence that there be a "permissive atmosphere" in which people can speak freely. How difficult it is for teachers to let children speak their minds, even "blow their tops," before they start to accept new ideas. This approach is almost the exact opposite of our training and we all find it difficult at times to use the therapeutic approach which we know intellectually is conducive to cooperative endeavor.

### Leadership Is Important

A few months ago a particularly unruly and disorganized group of prospective teachers came under the writer's guidance. As one method of learning to work together, the class was turned over to a motley crew of persons who felt that they were authorities in "group dynamics." These persons had had a few lessons in another class and

felt they were experts in this important field.

They decided to demonstrate to the class how group discussion should be carried on, and determined that there should be no chairman or leader. The discussion would just "flow." Needless to say, their experiment was a dismal failure, except for the fact that they learned that leadership is vital to any discussion or group work, whether in a panel or in any other activity.

Perhaps this is another common misconception of cooperative effort—that leadership isn't important; everyone plays his "role" and leadership is not essential. Actually, how far this is from the truth. Whether it is in a primary grade or in the United Nations General Assembly, skilled, competent guidance is vital. Different qualities are needed, but leadership is just as essential in democratic as in authoritarian groups.

In every place in the world and at every level of our world society working together is demanded now and will be increasingly demanded as our national culture and world community become more closely knit and more group conscious. Developing attitudes, learning skills, gaining knowledge, and practicing this art and science are primary responsibilities of our schools.

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