

Sanford High Race Riot

Opportunities and Choices for the Third Side¹

Scenario Description

Robin Smith, Director of Conflict Resolution in the Schools Initiative, Office of the Attorney General (OAG)

You just got a phone call from a colleague in the Mayor's office about a student riot that occurred yesterday at Sanford High School. The Mayor of Sanford and the Principle of Sanford High have asked you, on behalf of the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), to help restore order. The mayor explained that state and local police were called in to quell the riot involving over fifty black and white students. To stop the riot the police used mace and dogs, which called further attention to the situation. The community and parents became angered by this approach to dealing with the problem. To avoid any more fights and to try to ease tension the principal has cancelled classes until this situation can be sorted out.

The reason the mayor and principal called you is because your office was created to handle and/or organize people to address conflicts that arise in the school system. As such, you have been given a budget of \$75,000 for your expenses and to pay mediators, facilitators, arbiters, and other conflict resolution trainers for their services when necessary (some will do this work voluntarily, but their availability is in sporadic). Due to an unprecedented increase in problems this year your budget has dwindled to \$5,000. The mayor was uncertain if any additional funds would be available for your potential efforts.

After receiving the call from the Mayor, and in accordance with OAG protocol on intervention, you call the Principle, Dr. Pinelli, to conduct intake and assessment. (Before any intervention is contemplated, you need some basic information about the situation, the school, and the City of Sanford.) Still in shock from the incident, Dr. Pinelli tells you that based on his information a fight broke out yesterday during lunch in the cafeteria between a white and black student when the former shoved the latter. Racial slurs were exchanged and punches were thrown. Friends of both students got involved and the fight turned into a melee that eventually spilled out into the corridors. The police were called in and they broke it up, arresting fifteen students for disorderly conduct and assault and battery -- most of those arrested were black. One white student, the captain of the baseball team, was seriously injured and taken to hospital.

Nothing like this has happened in Sanford for over 25 years Dr. Pinelli explains. Sanford, after all, is known for its racial harmony. Pinelli explains that blacks of African and Caribbean decent have lived in Sanford, a largely Italian- and Polish-American suburb of the State's largest metropolis, since the Civil War. In fact, they have settled in South Sanford, and have created a nice middle class neighborhood that is well integrated into the rest of the City. Lately, Sanford (population 50,000) has been

¹ This case was written by Joshua Weiss, Brian Blancke, and Chang In Shin. It is intended to be used when teaching about the third side as espoused by Dr. William L. Ury in *The Third Side*. New York: Viking Press. 2000.

undergoing substantial demographic change as a large number of urban families have moved there (to escape a steady trend of increased violence). The High School minority student population of 240 (or 20%) reflects the latest trends.

Pinelli admits to you that there have been some problems as the High School has become more diverse, but he did not realize that they were so serious. He vehemently rejects the allegations some black parents and students have made about his administration; particularly that he has been avoiding the growing racial tension between and among students and teachers in the School. He explained that he has an open door policy and any student, faculty or administrator can meet with him to air complaints. In fact, a black student, accompanied by the sole black teacher in the school did meet with him about racial insults another teacher allegedly made, but the student refused to put the complaint in writing so there was nothing he could do.

As for other complaints made by black students, parents and community leaders, he does acknowledge that blacks are woefully represented in Sanford's schooling system (there is only one black teacher out of a faculty of one hundred and five black administrators). Unfortunately, under proposition one property taxes have been cut back and the overall budget for staff and faculty has shrunk as a result. He has had to dismiss a number of teachers and staff (along seniority lines), many of who were minorities.

The principal thinks an influx of new students, a breakdown of discipline, and a lack of student teachers, that often leaves students roaming the halls unsupervised during certain periods, are the roots of the problem. He admits to you very frankly that he really does not know how to proceed. He is afraid that if he reopens the School new fights might break out. Not to mention the potential problem of whether parents will even let their children return to the School. He asks for your help.

As you deliberate on intervention strategies, you ask the Principle if there is anyone you can talk to in the School who might have another perspective about what is going on there. He refers you to Mrs. Roberta Benton, the Director of Multicultural Programs at the High School, whom you speak to later in the day.

Mrs. Benton, one of the five black administrators, states confidentially that the Principle, while an honest man, is naïve. He does not believe that racism, along with sexism, homophobia and anti-Semitism exist in the School. But over the last year racial tensions have grown. Many black students have come to her to complain about how they have been treated by white students and faculty. Teachers who did not know their names called them "Tyrone" and stood by while white students made racial remarks. In yet other cases, particular faculty ignored or even demeaned black students who asked to have their history taught as well. She is adamant that the Principle was warned about these problems and turned a blind eye. The brawl during lunch last Thursday was simply the last straw. Black students, frustrated by how they have been mistreated by whites in this School, simply could not take it anymore.

The police's overreaction – the excessive use of force -- has only made things worse. Now black community leaders -- a very powerful and often productive force in the community -- are meeting with parents to consider filing a lawsuit alleging police brutality. She also heard from some observers that the police only went after the black kids; thirteen of the fifteen students arrested were black. Apparently, according to Benton, the schools are not the only institutions that are racist. Finally, Benton did say that parents from both sides of the conflict appear very concerned by these recent problems and they had met with local clergy to discuss the situation.

Benton is especially angry that some School Committee members are blaming her for the violence and intolerance in the School. They say that she has not implemented any multicultural programs or diversity curricula since she was hired. She counters that a peer mediation program was set up a year ago and that there was only

enough money from the City or the State to create and operate one program. Regardless of what others claim, the bottom line for her is that when black and other minority points of view are ignored, which they are at Sanford, that sends a message of disrespect. The school system is responsible for what happened, not her, and change is needed at many levels. The City has to learn to deal with its racial problems. Finally, Benton thought the Department of Justice's Community Relations Service might be able to help with this problem. You are unsure of bringing them in because of a negative past experience with them and it might suggest that the state office cannot handle the situation.

What is clear to you from your discussion with the Dr. Pinelli and Mrs. Benton is that they both desire to heal the wounds opened by last Thursday's riot. And, immediate aid is needed to restore calm and help the school reopen. You have the weekend to develop a strategy. You must decide what to do and who to seek help from. Here are some questions that will help you to do so:

1.
 - A. Where might you begin and what is your logic?
 - B. Would you try to get the third side to prevent, resolve and/or contain this conflict? Why?
 - C. At what level(s) of the problem – for example, the city, Sanford High School, students involved in the riot, etc... -- would you seek to mobilize third sides and why?
(For A, B, and C, what questions would you need to ask people involved about the past, present, and future in order to make this determination?)

2.
 - A. Broadly speaking, who are the people influencing this situation?
 - B. Who is the third side and what roles are already being played?
 - C. Who is not involved that should be? How would you try to mobilize them?
 - D. Are there any pre-existing relationships across conflict lines that could be helpful as you seek to mobilize the third side?
(For A, B, C, and D, what questions would you ask people involved to find these things out?)

3.
 - A. How would the roles you mentioned work in a coordinated fashion?
 - B. Which roles would be dispatched first?
(For A and B, what questions would you ask to help you determine the coordination and sequencing?)

4.
 - A. What relationships would need to be built in order to implement the third side intervention (for example, with the media, the administration, etc...)?

5.
 - A. What are the impediments and constraints to mobilizing these roles?

Preliminary Teaching Note

This case is designed to get the participant to think through the choices associated with mobilizing the third side.² The person involved is given the task of trying to mobilize the third side to address the conflict in question. The case is based on an actual situation in the city of Medford, Massachusetts in 1992. Moreover, this exercise is focus on making an analysis of the situation, thinking about the levels at which the conflict is occurring, determining whether to prevent, resolve, and/or contain the conflict and in what order, to think about which third side roles are applicable and how those roles can be pushed, nudged, and cajoled into working in a systematic fashion. The simulation is also intended to get participants to think about which questions to ask at each stage and why.

As the instructor you may want to use the following questions to help debrief the simulation:

1. How did you analyze this conflict? What did you determine to be the sources of the problem? What questions would you ask about the past, present, and future to help you make this determination?
2. What level did your third side intervention plans focus on and why? (i.e. city, school system, teachers and students, students only, only those that rioted)
3. Which perspective -- prevention, resolution, and/or containment -- made the most sense in trying to mobilize the third side to act?
4. What roles from Ury's list needed to be played to deal with this conflict? Which were already acting and which were not but could have been harnessed?
5. How would you try to mobilize different people to play the different roles of the third side? What arguments/questions would you use to get them to get involved and to think through the issues?
6. How did you deal with the question of coordinating these roles in a coherent and systematic manner? What questions came to mind when thinking through this issue?
7. What did you perceive to be some of the obstacles to addressing this conflict from a third side perspective? (i.e. authority, permission, commitment by school to implement what is agreed to, resources, media, coordination, turf issues)

Time Needed: Preferably from one class to the next. In class time needed for the exercise is 1.5 hours with 1 hour to debrief.

Materials: Each participant needs 1 copy of the scenario description. You may also want to make copies of the attached newspaper articles for participant review after the debrief.

² The authors assume that the participants have read or are currently reading *The Third Side*.