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Grievances of Black Citizens assignment, circa 1985

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GRIEVANCES OF BLACK CITIZENS

During the fall of 1967 the research staff of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (the Kerner Commission) studied conditions in 20 cities which had experienced riots during 1967. The 20 cities were made up of nine cities which had experienced major destruction, six New Jersey cities surrounding Newark, and five cities which experienced lesser degrees of violence.

In each city staff members interviewed persons from the official sector (mayors, city officials, policemen and police officials, judges, and others), the disorder area (residents, leaders of community groups) and the private sector (businessmen, labor and community leaders). Altogether over 1200 persons were interviewed.

Using this material the investigators identified and assigned weights to the four types of grievances which appeared to have the greatest significance to the black community in each city. For each city they made judgments about the severity of particular grievances and assigned a rank to the four most serious. These judgments were based on the frequency with which a particular grievance was mentioned, the relative intensity with which it was discussed, references to incidents exemplifying the grievance, and estimates of severity obtained from the interviewees themselves.

Four points were assigned to the most serious type of grievance in each city, three points to the second most serious, and so on through all four.

When the point values were added four all cities, a list of 12 grievance types emerged, rank-ordered. The grievance type which was considered the most serious in the most cities was number 1. The one which seemed generally least serious was number 12.

On the next page are the 12 grievance types reported by the Kerner Commission. You are to guess the way they were rank-ordered by the staff of the commission.

Put a 1 beside the type of grievance you believe the staff judged that black citizens felt to be the most serious to them across all 20 cities. Put a 2 beside the second most serious and pervasive, and so on down to a 12 beside the least widespread and least serious.
GRIEVANCES OF BLACK CITIZENS

Decision by Consensus

Your group is to arrive at a single rank-ordering of the 12 grievances that each member of the group will support as the single best prediction of the rank-order reported by the staff of the Kerner Commission.

This is an exercise in the use of consensus to make decisions. Consensus is not the same as unanimity. A vote of 12 to 0 is unanimous, but it may not be based on consensus. The essential feature of a consensus is not that a decision is agreed to by all members, but that all members understand the reasoning leading to the decision and are willing to support the decision. Each member may not completely agree with the decision, but all feel they have had a fair chance to influence the decision, that others have understood their information and opinions and taken them into account. The final decision, thus, is one which they understand and are willing to give enlightened support. In striving for consensus, then, the emphasis is upon reasoning about the problem and creating solutions together rather than on coercing and persuading others to adopt a particular solution.

In trying to reach consensus about the way the Kerner Commission staff rank-ordered the 12 grievances, the following guides may help.

1. Try to view disagreements and differences of opinion as showing the need for fuller communication and fuller mutual understanding rather than as evidence of stubbornness.

2. Approach the task by sharing information, reasoning together and exploring possibilities together rather than by attempting to change other persons' minds to coincide with your position.

3. Avoid trading or averaging as a way of making decisions.

4. Avoid changing your mind only in order to give the appearance of unanimity. Support only solutions which you understand and believe to have a reasonable basis.

5. When the group is deadlocked and the issue seems to have been thoroughly examined, try to create a method of resolving the deadlock that all can support as the best course of action at that time. That is, try to develop a consensus on the method of deciding the issue.