



Ralph Hayes. Photo taken by Jim Levitt.

Chapter 13

THE DISADVANTAGED IN AMERICA

BY RALPH HAYES

The term disadvantaged in relation to specific minorities in America is a fairly recent term. In fact, it hardly existed a decade ago. And if my memory is correct, its initial usage was in connection with education – the lack of educational opportunities, the lack of motivation, handicaps in connection with language usage, etc. In an economic sense, and surely this is what concerns you most, the concept disadvantaged is of even more recent vintage. Just a couple of years ago, the federal government, afraid of more Watts throughout the United States, convinced a group of business men they should undertake a short-range employment program to hire the “hardcore unemployable and unemployed.”

We may substitute here. The term disadvantaged as applied to American industry has all the similarities of the disadvantaged as it applies to education. These people do not possess the required skills to qualify for skilled labor; these people do not have a sense of “time” necessary to get them to work at the designated hour; these people do not have middle class America’s values about spending, saving or even investing pay checks; these people – like many of their youthful contemporaries - have dress and headdress standards wholly threatening to the accepted standards of most industries. These people,” in the immediate Seattle labor market, are mostly Black. But they need not necessarily be Black, as the film we will see later in this program shows. They may be White, Chicano or Native American.

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- How do these people get this way?
 - Why can’t they work hard and raise themselves up the American success ladder like anyone else?
 - Are they just too lazy?

- Are they victims of welfare handouts to the extent they don't want to work?

These are just a few questions some of you may be thinking about. Let's try to answer these questions, and then take up any more you may wish to raise from the floor.

Why can't the disadvantaged work hard and raise themselves up the American success ladder like anyone else?

Consistent with what was said at the beginning of this lecture, the disadvantaged were identified as having no experience or few of the skills required by American industry. So you may say, neither did my father – or my grandfather. Right. But neither your father nor your grandfather went job seeking at a juncture in the development of the American economy when machines, science and technology demand great skills and exactness from factory workers.

If industry had demanded then what it does now, many of your parents and your parents' parents would not have come to America. The immigration laws would have kept them out of this country, just as present immigration laws keep out the illiterate and the unskilled. You are undoubtedly aware of the fact that immigrants today must be sponsored by employers or persons who are capable of supporting them while the immigrants find work. The disadvantaged do not work because they are thought to be unemployable by reason of lack of marketable skills.

In the Seattle area labor market most dis-

advantaged are Black – and this raises the question of attitudes: attitudes of employers, attitudes of supervisors, attitudes of fellow workers. In short, middle class America seldom sees, thus hardly knows anything at all about the Disadvantaged. This lack of knowledge is not at all by accident or apathy; much of it is by deliberate design.

Examine your city and county zoning codes; examine your express routes; examine your freeway routes and your speed limits; examine your police records for classifications of criminal conduct. The kinds of laws broken by the poor – another term for the Disadvantaged – are generally laws governing property and persons. Thus, violators of such laws are generally arrested for homicide or misuse of property. The type of violations frequently engaged in by middle class Americans are beyond the jurisdiction of police arrests. Sociologists classify such crimes as White Collar Crimes.

More significantly, middle class Americans have "connections," know how to secure legal advice, know how to secure financial aid for legal fees, and know that because they live in middle class neighborhoods they have built-in advantages. By built-in I am referring to institutional practices. Each of you may not know personally how to exercise the advantages institutionalized in America by and for Americans, but you know how to go about calling these institutions into action on your personal behalf or on behalf of your businesses. The Disadvantaged have no direct contact with your institutions to the extent that these can be called into action

on their behalf. Nor do they own businesses. Capitol is not available to them through hire or heredity.

I have partially explained how the Disadvantaged got to be the way they are through the functioning of America's institutions and America's preference for White over Black, White over Red, White over Brown and White over Yellow. In a sense the Disadvantaged are the inheritors of cycles of disadvantages in education, in employment, in income. They are disadvantaged in what we call The Good Life – the good things in life that other Americans enjoy. Unless these cycles are broken, the Ghettos will produce future generations of Disadvantaged people. The reservations will do likewise. And the most numerous Disadvantaged in America – the poor White – will continue to be unnoticed and ignored.

Are the Disadvantaged victims of welfare handouts that cause them not to want to work? A few perhaps. But the vast majority are too conscious of the advantages enjoyed by the working men and women of America compared to themselves. They see TV; they hear if they cannot read the sponsor's messages on the screen; they see Americans boarding jet airliners. They hear newscasts and they know their vocabularies are vastly different. They know that middle class Americans operate through layers of organizations for their own benefit. They know they are unorganized and incapable of organizing because they know the middle class would resist pressure from them.

a. They know middle class Americans, es-

pecially businessmen, talk loud and long about the virtues of rugged individualism, but more frequently than not they enjoy the comfort, prestige and power of their organizations, clubs, banks, lodges, institutions and businesses.

b. They know laborers enjoy their unions, vacations and benefits.

c. They know that middle class America appears to need something or someone to blame – to kick around. They serve the purposes; they serve the purpose of offering politicians a way out. When budget problems arise - blame it on welfare programs.

d. When they want votes, dangle a higher welfare check in front of the Disadvantaged; when other politicians want to appeal to their exclusively middle class constituencies, they blast welfare programs for keeping taxes high for people too lazy to work.

e. When some Indians, for example, undertake to reclaim their tribal rights, middle class Americans scream, "Those lazy Indians want to take away my favorite weekend activity – fishing."

f. When some Blacks scream "Black Power," or "Black Capitalism" middle class Americans become so frightened they purchase guns and more guns, and many others begin sharpening up their wits so as to more effectively conjure up methods by which the white man maintains or gets more control over such projected

power: economic or political.

In essence, what I am saying is this: the American society into which you fit so well is the reverse of the American society of the Disadvantaged. Your families evolve around such concepts as success, promotions, profits, status and the written language. How can anyone who is disadvantaged claim success on your terms? What is there to be promoted from? They own no stocks, have no bank accounts, are generally unemployed, and do not sell commercial goods – so how can they make profits? They do not have the power to dictate the markup or wholesale or retail value of any commercial items. You know it; they know it. The super markets and the corner store claim the greater portion of their income, if they have any at all. And if they are on welfare, there are severe penalties they must pay.

How successful could you be if you needed glasses and could not afford them? How successful could you be without a bank account, savings or loans? How successful would you be if you had not started early in life playing the game, as they say? You join the Scouts – Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Brownies, Girl Scouts, Kiwanis, Lions, Masons, and Rotary. How many times have you heard your father, mother, brother, uncle or minister, say, “Join a service club. It may prove useful. You can make valuable contacts there.” No such options are open to the Disadvantaged.

Your business firms thrive on annual reports, on monthly statements, on advertisement, on P. R. men and women, on the Yellow Pages, on charge accounts and on expense

accounts. The Disadvantaged do not qualify for any of these advantages. Nor do they feel anything but initial threat when confronted by one of your “forms.” Even when they turn up for employment, one of their first responsibilities must be to file an application, then make out a W-2 form. Frequently they must be interviewed. What an experience trying to understand your language. You call it communication.

Let us now attempt to communicate with each other by accepting individual questions from you (this should consume 30-40 minutes). I shall then summarize the session before Mr. Hillard takes over.

THE DISADVANTAGED IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: HOW DO THEY FEEL AND ACT?

Like any living person, the Disadvantaged tend to run the gamut of emotional experiences when it comes to attitudes. They may be quick to express tensions under certain conditions of stress and strain; from tensions the Disadvantaged express anxiety and unless a first-line supervisor recognizes the situation that produces the anxiety, he is likely to see a hostile attitude expressed though some overt act. This overt act may very well be described as hostile, like swearing, throwing an object, stalking off the job, etc.

Let it also be said that management frequently expresses hostile behavior in the form of attitudes hostile to toward the Dis-

advantaged. Unlike the Disadvantaged who is forced to resort to a hostile form of expression, the ultimate examples of success in Middle Class /America may show restraint, but still manifest hostility.

For example, making condescending remarks about “those kinds of people”, or constantly criticizing the best efforts of the particular disadvantaged employee, or cracking jokes carefully contrived to insult.

Previously we have said your expectations are pointed in the direction of success; theirs – by your standards – failure. They know this; you know this, but mutual knowledge of this need does not necessarily contribute towards the hardening of hostile attitudes. In fact, the reverse is what you strive to achieve, otherwise you would not be here. Some of you are doubtless here because your company has willed it; others, perhaps, are convinced it is good business, still others because you feel it is the thing to do, and others are neutral. However one totals up the reasons, let’s say most of you have had very little experience with the disadvantaged. Thus a new experience contributes towards producing fear.

Where you are skilled in muting or diverting inner fears, so are they – but for dissimilar reasons: you, because you have experienced social situations where unacceptable social behavior may get you fired; he, because he is severely limited. He does not understand the social codes which to him come from a world outside his general environment. Should you come into his social environment and see how his close associates be-

have, you too would feel as an outsider. Several repetitions of these kinds of experiences would produce tensions, anxiety and overt action – withdrawal, for example. With the Disadvantaged these reinforce his self-image of failure. On your part this may reinforce your feeling of superiority, his of failure. This would be tragic for all – including your company.

Just as your job, your home, your associates and your family all reinforce your attitude towards the Disadvantaged and his way of life, so the reverse is true in his case. Silently, yet loudly and clearly, these facts are told and re-told to each other. Your neighborhood has noises you easily adjust to; his ghetto has noises you can’t endure. Your silence disturbs him. You read at night after dinner; he watches TV; you watch TV, you make business and social calls; he gets into the street for social life.

These patterns of living are often referred to as cycles. You take yours for granted. You don’t know much about his – and what’s more, you don’t care. He knows more about yours than you give him credit for. His pattern of living is reinforced by the cycle of poverty. He has no control some kinds of choice you have – and that reinforce your pattern of living. You do have some control over your pattern of living; you have some control over his as well. He is unemployed and unemployable for reasons previously established. You are employable and employed, also for reasons previously established.

Let’s return for a moment to the theme of fear. Fear is an on-going human experience

in this particular situation and will continue to be unless both sides work hard to conquer it.

The Disadvantaged in your world enters a world of masculinity. Men dominate the scene. He is accustomed to splitting the scene when it becomes too threatening, if he cannot adjust to it. But in this situation he cannot leave. He has come for employment.

His ghetto, his home, his expectations are all fashioned in a matriarchal society. American business is a long way removed from women making initial and final decisions. Right? Not long ago there was an article in a Seattle paper indicating 65 percent of all children in Seattle schools are from one-parent families. That parent is Mother. Thus the evolution of the concept called “The Man” – a mysterious figure. Not so in your world. You are men; you are accustomed to male figures as adults. The Disadvantaged, particularly the Black ones, are not. How do you handle this?

Let us put the problem in perspective with some random considerations to keep in mind when attempting to understand the Disadvantaged and their problems:

1. Americans have a tradition of conquering material obstacles
2. Overcoming worldly adversities through legends
3. The wilderness of the frontier
4. The Climb of the High Mountain
5. Little David conquering the giant
6. Ability to listen to reason

7. Tradition of deep seated hatreds and fears of people who are different
8. Remember that some people have not learned to live in an urban environment
9. Some have not yet considered non-material cultural values as significant as material values

Could involvement in the lives, the work, and the employment of the Disadvantaged be the start of something new?

The answer must come from you.

The alternative may be more violence, more hatred, more lock-ups, more crime – and more waste in human talent.

