

The Placement Service of the American Friends Service Committee: A Technique in Race Relations

FRANK S. LOESCHER

Placement Service, American Friends Service Committee

*To provide employment opportunities for trained Negroes of skill and promise in fields not traditionally open to Negroes—where all races may work creatively and harmoniously together.
To facilitate employment opportunities for other "minority group" workers, where such service is not provided by other agencies.*

SUCH ARE the purposes of the non-fee placement service established by the American Friends Service Committee in October, 1945, with Philadelphia as a demonstration area.

The Quakers have not set up a conventional employment bureau, but offer a service through which technically trained or experienced Negroes and other minority group workers may be brought together with forward-looking employers. The aim is not merely to increase employment opportunities but also to create better understanding.

With respect to the Negro minority group, our major interest, the underlying assumption of this project is that the "Negro problem" is in large part a white problem. It is the white man's attitudes and beliefs which need to be changed. We believe that one way to change these stereotypes is to give white clerical, technical, and professional people the experience of working with Negroes of similar background and interests.

Consider these passages from Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, Chapter 30, *Effects of Social Inequality*.

... These middle and upper class Negroes who have stepped out of the servant status, live mostly by catering to their own people. Not only have their economic contacts with whites been reduced but, because they know they are not liked by whites and are likely to feel humiliated in all contacts with them, they avoid whites in all other spheres of life.

It is the present writer's impression that, generally speaking, this tiny upper group of the Negro community often lives in a seclusion from white society which is simply extraordinary and seldom realized by white people. Measured in terms of the

number of personal contacts with white people, there are Negro doctors, dentists, teachers, preachers, morticians, and druggists in the South who might as well be living in a foreign country.

Mutual ignorance and the paucity of common interests is a barrier to, and a modifier of, social contact between even educated and liberal whites and Negroes in the North, even in the extraordinary circles where segregation and discrimination play no role. I have seen Negro and white social scientists together as friends and colleagues, but I know that when their minds meet it usually concerns some aspect of the Negro problem. The Negro is ordinarily not present—and if he is present, he is a stranger—when the whites meet to discuss more general problems. If this is true among liberal social scientists, it is still more true among prejudiced people in all classes. The Negro is an alien in America, and in a sense this becomes the more evident when he steps out of his old role of the servant who lives entirely for the comfort of his white superiors. Ignorance and disparity of interests, arising out of segregation and discrimination on the part of whites, increased by voluntary withdrawal and race pride on the part of Negroes, becomes itself an important element increasing and perpetuating isolation between the groups.

The fundamental aim of the Placement Service is to reduce this "ignorance" and "disparity of interests."

RANGE OF ACTIVITIES

To this end the Placement Service assists institutions of higher learning having Negro enrollment in placing promising graduates, interviews management in business and industry to present suitable applicants, and offers employers skilled assistance in techniques proved effective in integrating and upgrading Negroes.

This Placement Service, collaborating with other organizations, specializes in white-collar and professional positions in business and industry. Opportunities for minority groups are also being explored in education, nursing, medicine, municipal employment, public and private social work. Although the Placement Service is primarily organized to assist college graduates, it will also help place well-qualified high school graduates with fine experience records.

In the further interest of harmonious working relationships among peoples, this service is available to non-Negro persons interested in teaching in Negro colleges or working in inter-racial agencies. The Placement Service also arranges exchange professorships between Negro and white colleges.

The most important aspect of the program is interpreting to placement and personnel directors the practicality of referring and employing workers on merit, and barring none solely because of race, religion, color, or national background. The placement procedure consists of approaching management with the credentials, taken from our files, of a number of persons who have the qualifications necessary for certain types of occupations in the firm under consideration. Individuals are carefully selected on the basis of their vocational fitness and social adaptability. We do not ask the employer to give preference to Negroes, or other minority groups, but to fill vacancies on merit and to take a stand in favor of a policy of non-discrimination in employment.

A word about our relationship to the National Urban League and its branches. We regard our agency as supplementing the work of the Urban affiliates. The author welcomes this opportunity to express his appreciation for the generous counsel of the National Urban League's staff. The American Friends Service Committee believes it can spread the message of fair employment to both Quaker and non-Quaker establishments. Philadelphia, as the historic center of Quakerism in this country, is therefore a natural demonstration area.

What has been learned from our nine months' experience in trying to open up new occupations for trained Negro men and

women? Which previously accepted beliefs about economic discrimination can we still adhere to; which should we question or discard? What new questions are raised?

Twenty-nine of the thirty employers interviewed have given the writer a sympathetic hearing. The average interview has lasted about an hour, in some cases two hours including an invitation to lunch. However, generally the employer replies that his employees would resist the introduction of upgrading of Negroes, or his customers would object. As refutation we present the available evidence of the successful experience of certain concerns in Philadelphia. We cite the practices of department stores, banks, insurance companies, and manufacturers in New York and other states. "Philadelphia is different!" is the usual answer to that argument.

No two interviews are alike. The approach to each employer is individualized in terms of what is known of his attitudes and the problems of his institution with respect to personnel and the public. In every case, however, we grasp the opportunity to describe the frustrations of Negroes and other minority groups and the cumulative effects of employment discrimination. We explain that in the Philadelphia public high schools young people of all racial, religious, and nationality backgrounds are studying together and playing together, that it is at graduation that they find some classmates given jobs with opportunities for promotion and others either turned away or offered only dead-end jobs. Many employers are surprised to learn, for instance, that 16 per cent of the students in Philadelphia high schools are Negroes and, therefore, under existing employment patterns a large proportion of our Philadelphia youth are being thwarted.

DISCRIMINATION WIDESPREAD

Discrimination in white-collar and professional occupations in Philadelphia commercial and manufacturing establishments is widespread. Our interviews with 30 executives in 25 commercial, industrial, educational, and medical institutions, Quaker and non-Quaker, are evidence that the job ceiling has not changed very noticeably despite the

war and the Fair Employment Practices Committee. The all-out educational offensive, recommended by Gunnar Myrdal, has yet to begin.

On the other hand, the executive secretary of one of the manufacturers associations offered last fall to give us letters of introduction to a number of firms when we have on our roster qualified electrical and mechanical engineers or other highly trained and experienced technical persons. He believed we would have "some success" during the current shortage of such workers.

Until the past month or two, despite our effort to reach qualified technical people through the usual public and private channels, we had none registered with us. We now have a few and can explore this area. At least two concerns in the Philadelphia metropolitan area are known to employ Negro engineers.

In clerical positions the picture is practically unrelieved.

Much the same can be said for salesclerks. Except for some food stores in Negro neighborhoods and two small downtown stores, there are no opportunities for Negroes to work in sales. None of the department stores at the present time employs Negro salespersons, although as a result of a carefully organized cooperative campaign by several agencies, some Philadelphia department stores may soon follow the more enlightened pattern being established in New York, Boston, Hartford, and other cities.

But as in the case of the technical fields; so with the secretarial, we have some data that call for revision of our earlier assumptions. Religious organizations and social agencies have asked the Placement Service for stenographers. Not many requests have been made, some fifteen during the past nine months, but we have been able to fill only a few applications because we cannot locate in Philadelphia trained stenographers available for employment. There are Negro stenographers in Philadelphia; a large number are working under Civil Service. One also finds a Negro stenographer occasionally in offices of religious and social agencies. (The American Friends Service Committee itself is probably the largest private employer of Negro file

clerks, typists, stenographers, secretaries, and bookkeepers in the city.)

In addition to the above occupations, the Placement Service learned of possible openings for chemists, professors in some northern colleges and universities, librarians, research and educational workers in unions, administrative positions in a housing authority, a variety of positions in mental hospitals and reformatories, and opportunities for social and religious workers, educators, physicians, and nurses through the programs of religious agencies in foreign countries.

THE SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED NEGROES

Why are there not qualified people for these clerical and technical positions? First of all, willingness to consider Negroes is a recent development related to the increasing awareness and concern among some white people and also the scarcity of white clerical and technical workers. Second, there is the principle of the vicious circle. Since there has been but a handful of jobs for trained Negroes in the mainstream of American life, Negroes have not had the incentive to prepare themselves to qualify for these openings.

Third, those who did sacrifice to get the training naturally prepared themselves for positions where there was less resistance, such as teaching in segregated schools or working in Civil Service. Many highly trained Negroes are working in Philadelphia, but they have jobs, often in government, where there is less discrimination and more security. (However, the Federal Government is reducing its personnel and many Negroes will feel these cuts.) Fourth, there is the whole socio-economic situation—low income, poor housing, overcrowding, ill health, family disorganization—which operate powerfully against Negro youth in a highly competitive economy. Even public higher education is not "free" to most Negro youth since they have to work to eat, to buy clothing, and to help support their families. Fifth, Negroes are discriminated against by many schools and colleges. Some of the better secretarial schools in Philadelphia, for example, do not admit Negroes.

Still another factor is the inadequate vocational guidance of Negro youth. One finds,

even in 1946, that Negro boys and girls are being dissuaded from preparing for positions requiring advanced education and training. Counselors, white and Negro, are amazed when they are presented with positions known to the Placement Service, or the list of Negroes now teaching in Northern colleges.

We realize that our present staff of two persons working in a city with a population of more than 2,000,000 can only scratch the surface. It is our hope that before long the effectiveness of this approach can be evaluated and if the method should appear to be a valid one, that other organizations, social and religious, will initiate similar demonstration projects.

The Placement Service as a technique in race relations is not an alternative to na-

tional, state, and municipal fair employment practice legislation. This person-to-person approach can help to create a wider understanding of the job ceiling faced by Negroes and other minority groups and thus build up popular support for legislation which would undergird the desires and efforts of employers who would like to employ on a non-discriminatory basis but who are reluctant to stand alone.

Finally, if the American Friends Service Committee can assist more employers to integrate Negroes successfully, there will be additional evidence to the growing body of experience that employment on the basis of ability, irrespective of race, creed, color, or national background, is not only a worthy ideal but a practical possibility.

Before taking his present post Dr. Loescher was for three summers associated with the American Friends Service Committee Work Camps. He did his undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. As Special Fellow and Visiting Lecturer he did research at Fisk University for his doctoral dissertation, "The Protestant Church and the Negro." He has taught in secondary schools and colleges and published numerous articles in his field.