

Business Meetings: Where the Group Conscience Happens

Reprinted from; News and Notes from the General Service Office of A.A. © Box 4-5-9 Vol. 51, No.2 / April May 2005

Group unity is not a destination, it's a journey that is happening all the time, and nowhere more vividly than in business meetings, often called group conscience meetings. "If we called them business meetings at our group," an East Coast A.A. recently joked, "nobody would show up."

Because each group is autonomous, formats vary. But the collective experience of A.A. shows that business meetings, which usually are held on a monthly or quarterly basis, offer an optimum setting in which big and little issues—from how to help a drunk newcomer to whose turn it is to make the coffee—can be aired and reconciled and a group consensus reached. Some groups hold specially scheduled group conscience, or inventory taking meetings, especially when confronted with a thorny issue about which there are strong conflicting views.

The goal is to reach an informed group conscience—a term implying that any vital information has been studied and all views have been heard before the group votes on an issue. Not always understood, the group conscience as expressed in Tradition Two is a basic and powerful principle that makes it possible for people of diverse backgrounds and temperament to rise above personal ambition and unite in one common purpose—to stay sober and help the still suffering alcoholic. In the words of our Declaration of Unity, "This we owe to A.A.'s future: to place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives, and the lives of those to come."

The pamphlet "The A.A. Group"—used by groups around the U.S. and Canada as a guide on how to start a group and help it function—points out that "on sensitive issues the group works slowly, discouraging formal motions until a clear sense of its collective view emerges. Placing principles above personalities [in the spirit of Tradition Twelve], the membership is wary of dominant opinions; its voice is heard when a well informed group comes to a decision. The result rests on more than a 'yes' or 'no' count—precisely because it is the spiritual expression of the group conscience." (p. 35)

Business meetings usually are scheduled before or after the group's regular meeting, and members are given reasonable notice. During this time, announcements may be made at the regular A.A. meetings; if a group has a bulletin board, posting a notice about the business meeting can be helpful. Then there are those instances when a group feels it necessary to call for an impromptu group conscience either before or during an A.A. meeting. Decisions to open a closed meeting or to ask a disruptive person to leave are examples of the situations that can trigger a call for an immediate group conscience. Numerous groups have developed guidelines for dealing with some of the more common situations that can arise.

Business meetings tend to be informal, but custom varies from group to group. Some have tried observing Robert's Rules of Order, only to find that many members are inexperienced in parliamentary procedures and feel too intimidated to speak up. To ensure that everyone present has a chance to share their views, some groups allow each member to speak only twice on each topic—and for a limited amount of time.

Sometimes a decision made by the most ideal of group conscience procedures misses its mark. The A.A. visionaries who came before us anticipated this; they wrote reassuringly in Warranty Four that "when a decision taken in substantial unanimity does happen to go wrong, there can be no heated recriminations. Everybody will be able to say, 'Well, we had a careful debate, we took the decision, and it turned out to be a bad one. Better luck next time!'" (The A.A. Service Manual/Twelve Concepts for World Service, p. 69)