

General Service Conference - 1956 "Petition, Appeal, Participation and Decision"

By Bill W.

God has been good to Alcoholics Anonymous. These sessions of the Sixth General Service Conference now ending have marked the time when our Society has taken the first step into the brave new world of our future. Never have we felt more confident, more assured of the years to come than we do this afternoon.

This Conference thinks, I am sure, that its main structural concepts are approximately right. I am thinking of the relation of AA groups to their Assemblies, the method of choosing Committeemen and Delegates, Directors and Headquarters Staffs; also the relation of the Trustees, essentially a body of custody, to the operating services of the Headquarters, the Grapevine, Service office and AA Publishing. These interlocking relations are something, for high confidence already based on considerable experience. Nevertheless we shall remain aware that these structures can be changed if they fail to work. Our Charter can always be amended.

And of course, we shall always be much concerned with those lesser refinements that can improve the working of our main structure.

Recent Improvements

On the first evening here, I explained some of our recent improvements of this Charter - how our newly formed Budget Committee is a fresh assurance that we can't go broke, how our new Policy Committee can avert blunders in this area and take the back breaking load of minor matters off of the Trustees, how our Nominating Committee can insure good choices of new Staff members, Directors and Trustees. In short, our Board of Trustees is now fitted with eyes, ears and a nose that can guarantee a much improved functioning. So far, so good.

But our structure of service is no empty blueprint. It is manned by people who feel and think and act. Therefore any principles or devices that can better relate them to each other in a harmonious and effective whole are worth considering.

So I now offer you four principles that might someday permeate all of AA's services, principles which express tolerance, patience and love of each other; principles which could do much to avert friction, indecision and power-driving. These are not really new principles; unconsciously we have been making use of them right along. I simply propose to name them and, if you like them, their scope and application can, over coming years, be fully defined.

Four Key Words

Here are the words for them: petition, appeal, participation and decision. Maybe all this sounds a bit vague and abstract. So let's develop the meaning and application of these four words.

Take petition. Actually this is an ancient device to protect minorities. It is for the redress of grievances. Every AA member, inside or outside our services, should have the right to petition his fellows. Some years ago, for example, a group of my old friends on the outside became violently opposed to the Conference. They feared it would ruin AA. To put it mildly, they thought they had a grievance. So they placed their ideas on paper and petitioned the AA groups to stop the Conference. Lots of our members got sore; they said this group had no right to do this. But they really did have the right, didn't they?

Yet in our services, this right is often forgotten or unused. It is my belief that every person working in AAs services should feel free to petition for a redress of grievances or an improvement of conditions. I would like to make this personal right unlimited. Under it, a boy wrapping books in our shipping room could petition the Board of AA Publishing, the Board of Trustees, or indeed, the whole Conference if he chose to do so - and this without the slightest prejudice against him. Of course, he'd seldom carry this right so far. But its very existence, and everybody's knowledge of it, would go far to stop those morale breakers of undue domination and petty tyranny.

Let's look at the right of appeal. A century ago a young Frenchman DeTocqueville came to this country to look at the new Republic. Despite the fact that his family had suffered loss of life and property in the French Revolution, this nobleman-student had begun to love democracy and to believe in its future. His writing on the subject is still a classic. But he did express one deep fear for the future; he feared the tyranny of the majority, especially that of the uninformed, the angry, or the close majority. He wanted to be sure that minority opinion could always be well heard and never trampled upon. How very right he was has already been sensed by the Conference.

Therefore, I propose that we further insure, in AA service matters, the right to appeal. Under it, the minority of any committee, corporate Board, or a minority of the Board of Trustees, or a minority of this Conference, could continue to appeal, if they wished, all the way forward to the whole AA movement, thus making the minority voice both clear and loud.

Protective Safeguard

As a matter of practice, this right, too, would seldom be carried to extremes. But again, its very existence would make majorities careful of acting in haste or with too much cocksureness. In this connection we should note that our Charter already requires, in many cases a two-thirds vote (and in some instances a three-quarter vote) for action. This is to prevent hasty or inconsiderate decision by a close majority. Once set up and defined, this right of appeal could greatly add to our protection.

Now we come to participation. The central concept here is that all Conference members are on our service team. Basically we are all partners in a common enterprise of World Service. Naturally, there has to be a division of duties and responsibilities among us. Not all of us can be elected Delegate, appointed Trustee, chosen Director, or become hired Staff member. We have to have our respective authorities, duties and responsibilities to serve; otherwise we couldn't function.

But in this quite necessary division, there is a danger - a very great danger - something that will always need watching. The danger is that our Conference will commence to function along strict class lines.

The elected Delegates will want all, or most all, of the Conference votes, so they can be sure to rule the Trustees. The Trustees will tend to create corporate boards composed exclusively of themselves, the better to rule and direct those working daily at the office, Grapevine and AA Publishing. And, in their turn, the volunteer Directors of the Grapevine and Publishing Company will tend to exclude from their own Board any of the paid staff members, people who so often carry the main burden of doing the work. To sum it up: the Delegates will want to rule the Trustees, the Trustees will want to rule the corporations and the corporate directors will want to rule the hired Staff members.

Headquarters Experience

Now Headquarters experience has already proved that this state of affairs means complete ruin of morale and function. That is why Article Twelve of your Conference Charter states that "No Conference member shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over another."

In the early days, this principle was hard to learn. Over it we had battles, furious ones. For lack of a seat on the several boards and committees that ran her office, for lack of defined status and duties, and because she was "just hired help," and a woman besides, one of the most devoted Staff members we ever had completely cracked up. She had too many bosses, people who sometimes knew less and carried less actual responsibilities than she. She could not sit in the same board or committee room as a voting equal. No alcoholic can work under this brand of domination and paternalism.

This was the costly lesson that now leads us to the principle of participation.

Participation means, at the Conference level, that we are all voting equals, a Staff member's vote is guaranteed as good as anyone's. Participation also means, at the level of the Headquarters, that every corporate Board or Committee shall always contain a voting representation of the executives directly responsible for the work to be done, whether they are Trustees or not, or whether they are paid or volunteer workers. This is why, today the president of AA Publishing and the senior Staff member at the AA office are both Directors and both vote on the Board of AA Publishing. This puts them on a partnership basis with the Trustee and other members of the Publishing Board. It gives them a service standing and an authority commensurate with their actual duties and responsibilities. Nor is this just a beautiful idea of brotherhood. This is standard American corporate business practice everywhere, something that we had better follow when we can.

In this connection I am hopeful that the principal assistant to the Editor of The Grapevine, the person who has the immediate task of getting the magazine together, will presently be given a defined status and seated on the Grapevine's Board as a voting director.

So much, then, for the principle and practice of "participation."

Now, what about decision?

Our Conference and our Headquarters has to have leadership. Without it, we get nowhere. And the business of leadership is to lead.

The three principles just described - petition, appeal and participation - are obviously checks upon our leadership, checks to prevent our leadership running away with us. Clearly this is of immense importance.

But of equal importance is the principle that leaders must still lead. If we don't trust them enough, if we hamstring them too much, they simply can't function. They become demoralized and either quit or get nothing done.

How, then, are AA's service leaders to be authorized and protected so that they can work as executives, as committees, as boards of trustees or even as a Service Conference, without undue interference in the ordinary conduct of AAs policy and business?

The answer lies, I think, in trusting our leadership with proper powers of decision, carefully and definitely defined.

Trusted Executives

We shall have to trust our executives to decide when they shall act on their own, and when they should consult their respective committees or boards. Likewise, our Policy, Public Information and Finance Committees should be given the right to choose (within whatever definitions of their authority are established) whether they will act on their own or whether they will consult the Board of Trustees (Our Headquarters can, of course, have no secrets).

Similarly, the Grapevine and AA Publishing Boards should be able to decide when to decide when to act on their own and when to consult the full Board of Trustees.

The Trustees, in their turn, must positively be trusted to decide which matters they shall act upon, and which they shall refer to the Conference as a whole. But where, of course, any independent action of importance is taken, a full report should afterward be made to the Conference.

And last, but not at all least, the Conference itself must have a defined power of decision. It cannot rush back to the grassroots with all its problems or even many of them. In my belief the Conference should never take a serious problem to the grassroots until it knows what their own opinion is, and what the "pros" and "cons" of such a problem really are. It is the function of Conference leadership to instruct the Group Conscience on the issues concerned. Otherwise, an instruction from the grassroots which doesn't really know the score can be very confusing and quite wrong.

Informed Groups

Therefore Conference Delegates must have liberty to decide what questions shall be referred to the AA group and just how and when this is to be done.

The conscience of AA is certainly the ultimate authority. But the grassroots will have to trust the Conference to act in many matters and only the Conference can decide which they are. The Conference, however, must at all times stand ready to have their opinions reversed by its constituent group but only after these groups have been thoroughly informed of the issues involved.

Such, I think, are the several powers of decision that our Conference and Headquarters leadership must have or else fail in their duty. Anarchy may theoretically be a beautiful form of association, but it cannot function. Dictatorship is efficient but ultimately it goes wrong and becomes demoralized. Of course AA wants neither.

Therefore, we want leadership that can lead, yet one which can be changed and strained. Servants of our fellowship, however, our leaders must always remain trusted. We surely want leaders who are enabled to act in small matters without constant interference. We want a Conference that will remain extremely responsible to AA opinion, yet a body completely able to act alone for us when necessary - even in some great and sudden crisis.

Such then could become the AA service principle of decision.

If we now begin to incorporate the words - petition, appeal, participation and decision into our service thinking and action. I believe that many of our confusions about AA's service functions will begin to disappear. More harmony and effectiveness will gradually replace the service gears that still grind and stick among us.

Of course, I am not now announcing these as permanent principles for definite adoption. I only offer them as ideas to ponder until we meet again in 1957.

Therefore I don't see why we should delay trying the experiment I have just outlined above. If it doesn't work, we can always change.

AA has often asked me to make suggestions and sometimes to take the initiative in these structural projects. That is why I have tried to go into this very important matter so thoroughly.

Please believe that I shall not be at all affected if you happen to disagree. Above all, you must act on experience and on the facts; and never because you think I want a change. Since St. Louis, the future of AA belongs to you!

P.S. Some AAs believe that we should increase our Board from 15 to 21 members in order to get the 10 alcoholics we need. This would involve raising the non-alcoholics from 8 to 11 in number. But, might this not be cumbersome and needlessly expensive? Personally, I think so.