

HOW TO FIND A BETTER MEETING

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

We've all heard the phrase, "There's no such thing as a bad meeting." Yet there is such a thing as a bad meeting. If you haven't been to a bad meeting, as the old adage says, then you haven't been to enough meetings. So what is the difference between a good and bad meeting? ¹

Let's start with an example of a **bad meeting**.

"I arrived at the location so early that the room contained only one other person and a dozen empty chairs. As I wondered why no one else was there, the other person asked if I would help set out the literature.

The meeting started a couple minutes late because two people who were apparently lost walked into the room right before the Serenity Prayer began. This month's chairperson seemed to stumble through the preamble before passing to someone who was a better reader. It seems like we would have more time for sharing if we could just let one person read the Twelve Steps and leave out the Twelve Traditions entirely. No matter where I attend a meeting, I always hear the same thing. The speaker for this week's meeting was simply boring—starting with reading from today's date from one of our daily readers and then the speaker talked about experience, strength, and hope. The reading was from a page I had read before, so there seemed to be nothing new for me. Several members shared their tedious monologs of cliché slogans, and an old timer exuded toxic positivity. I'd rather see a miracle than hear about one any day. Although I had decided to share, I found myself with nothing much to say. One person said that fear was faith turned inside out, and another one said that courage is action with a prayer added to it.² I heard someone mention gratitude, but how can I be thankful that I still have the same problems in my life? During one awkward period of silence, I found myself feeling anxious and alone, wondering why silence made me feel uncomfortable. I could not help but notice the many conversations running through my head when no one else was speaking.

I left as soon as the Closing Prayer was finished. Others can put up the books and chairs because I did it last time."

Anonymous Member

In contrast, here is an example of a **good meeting**.

"I arrived at my favorite place early enough to flip on the lights and set out the chairs. After opening the box of booklets, I noticed a member, extended a friendly greeting, and asked for help setting the table with our literature. Two newcomers who had difficulty finding the right room wandered in just in time for me to welcome them with our first names as they found the remaining empty seats.

I noticed how profound the moment of silence seemed before we began the Serenity Prayer in unison. I admired this month's chairperson who, despite having difficulty reading aloud, had the courage to sign up for service. As we went around the room and read the Twelve Steps and Traditions, I realized how these principles of recovery always remain the same, yet I hear something new in them each week. No matter where I find a meeting to attend, it's comforting to know that we are all on the same page at the same time each week. The speaker at this week's meeting was captivating—starting with a page from today's date in one of our daily readers and then sharing experience, strength, and hope. It was a page I had read dozens of times before, yet it was as if I heard someone else describe a secret part of my own life that I had not yet put into words. I often see myself in someone else's story. Several others shared how the reading related to them. Although I had decided to just listen and learn during this meeting, I was moved to say a few words about how anxious and scared I was at my first meeting in contrast to how calm and relaxed I am now.³ I am grateful that I have learned that no situation is really hopeless and no unhappiness is too great to be lessened. During a moment of silence between shares, I reflected on what I had heard today. I realized how much of a sense of safety I feel when surrounded by familiar faces. I remembered how many times I had shared with my sponsor, who often listened in a silent presence without interrupting. As a result, I learned to become comfortable with a calm serenity rather than one-way conversations running through my head.

After the Closing Prayer had ended, the meeting-after-the meeting began. The two newcomers asked questions and discovered they were not alone. One of them thanked everyone for being there and the other one, although tearful at times during the meeting, left with a smile."

Anonymous Member

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all the Traditions, ever reminding AA and Al-Anon members to place principles above and before personalities.⁴ In the stories of two members, the meeting was at exactly the same time and place. The only difference was that two members had entirely different perspectives of the same meeting. As with life itself, so much depends on our attitudes. As we learn to place our problems in their true perspective, we find they lose their power to dominate our thoughts and our lives.⁵

Yet if there is such a thing as a bad meeting, then what is it? Rather than taking a binary view that meetings are good or bad, it may be helpful to consider what makes some meetings better than others. Here are some ideas from a framework shared by an Oldtimer (2011):

Bad meetings occur when members share *neither* the common problem *nor* the common solution. Instead, they share problems other than alcoholism and they offer no solutions other than self-improvement advice. Bad meetings often include gossip, cross-talk, dominance, and dysregulated emotional displays. An AA drunk-a-logue with no turning point is just painful bragging or an ego-stroking monologue. Al-Anon gossip sessions or pity parties with no spiritual solution are tearful tales of misery from self-righteous martyrs. In response, regular listeners are held captive and newcomers—unable to identify with anything in the speaker’s story—may leave the meeting feeling bewildered, more depressed, and isolated from any fellowship.

Bad meetings happen to good people because personal problems can be as entertaining as the greatest show on earth. However, these meetings can also be self-centered and unfocused. Although they are full of drama and emotion, they are filled with topical wallowing, whining, and waiting for someone else to change. To anyone actually seeking a solution to the effects of living with alcoholism, these meetings are bad meetings.

Better meetings are where members share *either* the common problem (alcoholism) *or* the common solution (the practical program of action associated with working the steps with a sponsor). Whereas drunk-a-logues and gossip convey only friction without a sense of hope, speakers who share only the solution without describing the prerequisite pain have no traction in their sharing. In better meetings, members share about the problem or the solution in an honest and personal way that others can identify with. In these meetings, regular listeners can hear themselves in the stories of others. Newcomers leave these meetings feeling less isolated and less hopeless. The majority of meetings provide these experience for members.

Best meetings *connect* the common problem *with* the common solution in a manner that is honest and hopeful. Experience, strength, and hope are delivered in a personalized style that is authentic and genuine.⁶ In response, regular attendees are captivated by the sharing and newcomers—able to identify with elements of the speaker’s story—leave the meeting feeling uplifted, more hopeful, and more connected to the fellowship. Best meetings are those that members leave feeling

inspired and motivated to work the steps while feeling part of a larger community. For those who are searching, these meetings are closer than one might expect. When one is found, it makes an ideal home group.

Notes

1. This resource is designed to be educational in nature and is not intended to provide clinical or professional advice. The reader is encouraged to contact a qualified professional if a mental health consultation is needed.

2. Al-Anon's original daily reader, *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon*, contains a timeless adage: "Courage is action that has said its prayers" (Al-Anon, 1968, p. 84).

Alice B. was 72 years old when she wrote the book that is fondly known as the *ODAT*. She spoke with many pioneers who shared their experience, strength, and hope to provide the fundamental principles for this work. The authorship attribution to Alice B. is further attested to by Al-Anon co-founder Lois W., who wrote this inscription in the 1972 edition of *ODAT*: "To Alice, the transcriber (for I know a Power greater than ourselves is the author) of this book. With all gratitude and love, Lois."

After receiving Conference approval in 1966, *One Day at a Time in Al-Anon* was first published in September 1968. The publication became Al-Anon's first daily reader and its fourth book. The new Preface to the 1987 edition of the book states that it was compiled by the Chairperson of the Literature Committee with input from many other members.

Containing 366 (including a leap year day of February 29) daily reflections, the index contains topics on everything from Acceptance to Wisdom. As far back as 1977, Al-Anon's trusted servants at the World Service Office and the World Service Conference have maintained the position that Al-Anon does not have any promises. However, there are many members in local groups who have long identified two paragraphs in the June 14 reading as reflecting the promises:

"If someone were to say to me: 'Here is a medicine that can change your whole life for the better; it will put you in a state of relaxed serenity; help you overcome the nagging undercurrent of guilt for past errors, give you new insight into yourself and your spiritual value, and let you meet life's challenges with confidence and courage.' Would you take it? That is the promise of the Twelve Steps of AA and Al-Anon, if we do not cling to our burdens, our upsets, family wrangling, and wretchedness." (Al-Anon, 1968, p. 166)

3. Concept Four of Al-Anon states, "Participation is the key to harmony." As explained further in *Reaching for Personal Freedom*, "Participation gives us the courage to speak when appropriate, the maturity to be silent when needed, and the detachment to listen to other points of view without judgment" (Al-Anon, 2013, p. 136).

4. Tradition Twelve of Al-Anon states, "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities." AA's Traditions were first published in the April 1946 *AA Grapevine* under the title "Twelve Points to Assure Our Future" and were formally adopted at AA's first international convention in 1950. When the short form of the Traditions were first printed in the November 1949 issue of the *AA Grapevine*, Tradition Twelve ended with "above personalities." The November 1949 issue, which was entirely devoted to the Traditions in preparation for the First International Convention in Cleveland (July 28–30, 1950), included the request that Thanksgiving week be set aside as "Traditions Week" (AA World Services, 1974, p. 213). The initial wording of the short form of this AA Tradition was a bit different from that which is heard in meetings today. Here is an excerpt of the Tradition Twelve taken from pages 15-16 of the November 1949 issue: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities."

The fourth printing of the second edition (January 1, 1973, pp. 561–566) of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* contained a new appendix with the short and long form of the Traditions. However, it mistakenly listed the short form version published in the November 1949 *AA Grapevine* instead of the version of the Traditions published in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. The error was not fully corrected until the sixth printing in 1963.

In 1949, AA's Tradition 6 ended with "primary spiritual aim" rather than "primary purpose." Tradition 12 ended with "principles above personalities" instead of "principles before personalities." When Al-Anon created its version of the Traditions, it had to have used the 1949 version from the *AA Grapevine*, which clearly used "primary spiritual aim" and "before." Therefore, we have an explanation for the idiosyncratic difference between the two fellowships. Some old timers have witnessed sparks flying when a double winner casually reading the Traditions in Al-Anon used "before" rather than "above." Historically, both terms originated in AA (G. Neidhardt, personal communication, March 26, 2022).

5. This section was adapted from the "Suggested Al-Anon/Alateen Welcome" contained in the *Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual* (2022, p. 10): "We urge you to try our program. It has helped many of us find solutions that lead to serenity. So much depends on our own attitudes, and as we learn to place our problem in its true perspective, we find it loses its power to dominate our thoughts and our lives."

6. The prototypical formula for sharing in a meeting is contained in Chapter 5 (How it Works) of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (2001, p. 58, para 2):

"Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps."

This three-fold algorithm suggests that speakers identify their qualifications by sharing their story of hopelessness (i.e., "what we used to be like"), how they have recovered (i.e., "what happened"), and how the hope, gifts, and promises of the program have been fulfilled in their lives (i.e., "what it is like now"). These are stories of experience of the past, strength of the present, and hope for the future. ⁶

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to author and historian Gary Neidhardt for providing information, inspiration, and insight into the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups.

Competing Interests

An actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest occurs when one has *either* two roles with one entity *or* when one has a primary role with an entity and another role with a different entity in which there may be competing interests (Doverspike, 2015, pp. 73–74). For fun and for free, I wrote a back cover review of *Bobbie B.: The Untold Story of A.A.'s "Fantastic Communicator"* (Neidhardt, 2022). I receive no income or funding for the review or for this article.

Neidhardt completed his popular *King Charles of New York City* in May 2015. The publication was perfectly timed—only two months before 57,000 people would fill the Georgia World Convention Center in Atlanta for the 80th International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous. To avoid any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest, Neidhart did not market or sell his book at this conference, which was filled with dozens of book sellers and thousands of potential buyers.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations include maintaining confidentiality and protecting the anonymity and privacy of those sharing their stories at meetings. The two examples described in this article did not involve actual attendees, members, newcomers, or old timers of meetings. The stories are actually fictitious, designed to illustrate principles that are easier to comprehend when there is some skin on them. Composite scenarios are anonymized and fictionalized stories that are based in part on compilations of trends observed or reported by actual people in the real world. Throughout these composite scenarios, background information, demographic data, and other variables have been changed to ensure and protect anonymity. Any resemblance to real people is a pure coincidence—which is God's way of remaining anonymous.

References

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Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters moved its office from New York City and opened its office for business in Virginia Beach on June 1, 1996. Prior to this date, Al-Anon literature was published in New York.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2013). *Reaching for personal freedom: Living the legacies* [P-92]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author.

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters. (2022, March 25). 2022–2025 Al-Anon/Alateen Service Manual [P-24/27]. Virginia Beach, VA: Author. https://al-anon.org/pdf/P2427_online.pdf

Alcoholics Anonymous (1939). *Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how more than one hundred men have recovered from alcoholism*. New York, NY: Works Publishing Company.

On April 10, 1939, 4,730 copies of the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* were published by Works Publishing Company at \$3.50 per copy. The printer, Edward Blackwell of the Cornwall Press, was told to use the thickest paper in his shop. The large, bulky volume became known as the Big Book and the name has remained. On page 170 of *AA Comes of Age* Bill W. wrote that the idea behind the thick, large paper was to convince the alcoholic he was getting his money's worth. The first edition was approximately 6 x 9 inches, and it was not until the 16th printing when the Big Book became its current size. New York member Hank P had persuaded Bill to form Works Publishing Company and sell stock to raise funds for the book project. Works

Publishing eventually became known as AA World Services. There were 600 shares of stocks issued. Bill and Hank each received 200 shares, and 200 shares were sold to others. It was decided that the author's royalty (which would ordinarily have gone to Bill) went go to the Alcoholic Foundation.

In May 1940, Works Publishing Company was legally incorporated as a publishing arm of the Alcoholic Foundation. This action ensured that the ownership of the Big Book would be held in trust for all members of the AA Fellowship. Bill W and Hank P gave up their stock with a stipulation that Dr. Bob and Anne would receive 10% royalties on the Big Book for life.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1953/2010). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author.

Copyrighted in 1952 by The AA Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (now known as Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.), the first printing of the book was in April 1953. This book was written by AA co-founder Bill W., who had introduced the Traditions to the Fellowship in an April 1946 *Grapevine* article titled "Twelve Suggested Points for AA Tradition." Bill W. published more than 150 articles in the *Grapevine* between 1945 and 1970. These articles were collected in the anthology known as *The Language of the Heart* (1988).

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The fourth printing of the second edition (January 1, 1973, pp. 561–566) of the Big Book of *Alcoholics Anonymous* contained a new appendix with the short and long form of the Traditions. However, it mistakenly listed the short form version published in the November 1949 *AA Grapevine* instead of the version of the Traditions published in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. The error was not fully corrected until the sixth printing in 1963.

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This book was not cited in this paper, but it is listed in the references section in order to provide context between the publication of the fourth printing of the second edition in 1973 and the first printing of the third edition in 1976.

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Author.

This fourth edition was published in 2001, which followed the third edition (1976), second edition (1955) and the first edition (1939).

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Neidhardt, G. W. (2022, November 3). *Bobbie B. The untold story of A.A.'s "fantastic communicator": A window into the Alcoholic Foundation Office in the 1940s*. Lilburn, GA: Author.

Back cover review: "For those interested in the life of one of the inner circle of confidants of AA co-founder Bill Wilson, historian Gary Neidhardt shares an encyclopedic knowledge gathered from previously unpublished letters and archival materials. Compellingly written with curiosity, compassion, and intellectual rigor, this treasure is densely packed with an enormous amount of information about the life and times of Bobbie Burger. During her tenure at the AA Central Office, she was the central nexus whose letters shaped autonomous groups across the country to become more unified by a common set of principles. Neidhardt's biographical account of this enigmatic figure reflects meticulous attention to the small details while describing the big picture of AA's early development as seen through the eyes of a woman who was close to the center."

Oldtimer. (2011, July 19). *Good, bad, and great AA meetings*. Pause when agitated: Wisdom from Alcoholics Anonymous. <https://pausewhenagitated.com/good-bad-and-great-aa-meetings/>

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