

## HOW TO FIND A GOOD SPEAKER

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The prototypical formula for sharing in Twelve Step meetings is contained in Chapter 5 (How it Works) of the “Big Book” 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.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous World Services*, 2001, p. 58)

This three-fold algorithm suggests that speakers identify their qualifications by sharing their story of despair (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 we are like now”). These are stories of *experience* of the past, *strength* of the present, and *hope* for the future.

Whether sharing for 30–45 minutes at a Speaker Meeting or for 2–3 minutes during an Open Discussion meeting, a useful ratio of the relative percentage of time spent on each of these perspectives is suggested by the following suggested guidelines:

1. What was I like? Share your *experience*, especially in terms of how you qualify yourself. In other words, what makes you a “real” AA or Al-Anon? Give your audience a chance to identify with you.  
Percentage: 10%

2. What happened? Share your *strength*, especially in terms of how you found the *solution* and how you did your part to recover.  
Percentage: 70%

3. What am I like now? Share your *hope*, especially in terms of the gifts and promises you received as a result of working the program.  
Percentage: 20%

### Obstacles to Success

Based on the *Al-Anon Service Manual 2022-2025*, three obstacles to success in Al-Anon include (1) discussions of religion, (2) gossip, and (3) dominance (Al-Anon, 2022, pp. 20–21). To this list, I always add a fourth obstacle—*cross-talk*, which can be defined as speaking to another person, commenting on or responding to another person’s sharing, or referring to another person by name. Presented in reverse order, each of these four obstacles is discussed below:

**Cross-talk.** In letters and conversations to Al-Anon’s World Service Office (1988), “Cross-talking has been defined as talking out of turn, advice giving, questioning the person who is sharing, holding private conversations, having an individual comment on everyone’s sharing, and as being discourteous and intimidating.” At best, it can involve being “helpful” or giving advice, both of which are subtle forms of control. At worst, it can involve someone even being bossy or bullying toward others in the meeting.<sup>1</sup>

For purposes of discussion during a workshop at the 1991 World Service Conference of Al-Anon Family Groups, cross-talking was defined as “one member monopolizing meeting time with one-on-one discussions” (Al-Anon Family Groups, 1991, p. 22). This simple definition was formulated at the workshop:

“Crosstalk occurs when one member monopolizes the meeting with one-to-one responses to another member (advice-giving). This includes the chairperson who feels the need to comment on each sharing (coming off as an expert). Other definitions include: not using “I” statements, side conversations and mini-meetings within a meeting. Most members agree these types of sharings are not in keeping with Al-Anon principles.”  
(Al-Anon, 1991, p. 22)

**Call outs.** *Call outs* are a specific type of cross-talk that is more controlling or hostile rather than advising or helpful. *Calling out* someone refers to a group member—other than the designated chair of the meeting—correcting or directing someone during the meeting. It represents both cross-talk and dominance. Calling out a habitual violator of the Group Conscience, when it is done by the designated chair, may be acceptable. In contrast, calling out a newcomer is an affront to the newcomer and to the chairperson and others in the meeting. In contrast to the small harm done by a person’s sharing off-topic, a bigger and more enduring harm is done to the newcomer and to the others in the meeting by calling out someone during his or her sharing. The harm done by a call out during a meeting is rarely—if ever—offset by any perceived benefit from doing so. Other than reflecting an attempt to dominate and poor impulse control of the

person doing the calling out, there is nothing beneficial or constructive to be achieved in this manner that cannot be accomplished by a gentle word said in private to someone after the meeting has ended.

**Dominance.** Most members have the least tolerance for *dominance*, whether it involves the frequency, intensity, or duration of one’s speech or behavior. It manifests as talking too many times (frequency), too loud (intensity), too long (duration), or at the wrong place (context) or time (timing) in a meeting. At best, dominance comes across as bossy. At worst, it comes across as bullying.<sup>2</sup>

**Gossip.** Most members have the greatest tolerance for *gossip*, especially if it means ventilating and complaining about the alcoholic long enough for the newcomer to make the paradigm shift from a focus on others to a focus on self.<sup>3</sup> For some members, it may take a while to learn to focus on themselves rather than others. At best, Al-Anon members share the message, by focusing on themselves and sharing their own experience, strength, and hope. At worst, Al-Anon members share the mess, by focusing on others and complaining about what others are doing or what they should be doing.

**Religion.** Most members stand somewhere in the middle ground on *religion*, tolerating it to a degree if it is a brief part of one’s sharing in terms of spirituality. For some, it may take a while to discern the difference between religion and spirituality. Regardless, evangelizing, proselytizing, or imposing one’s beliefs on others is a form of dominance. Many members are tolerant of someone who shares

briefly about their religion, especially if it helps them tell their story about defining or finding God or a Higher Power. At the same time, those members may already have places they go for religious services and sacred rites. They may not want Al-Anon being discussed at their religious services any more than others want religion being discussed at their Al-Anon meetings.<sup>4</sup>

### **Sharing the Mess vs. Sharing the Message**

Speakers can differ in terms of *content* (what content is shared) and *process* (how the content is shared). Great speakers share the message of experience, strength, and hope in a humble and hopeful manner. Not-so-great speakers share the mess of their lives with self-derived solutions that don't address the problem. An AA drunk-a-logue with no turning point is an ego-stroking monologue. An Al-Anon gossip session or pity party with no spiritual solution is a tearful tale of misery told by a self-righteous martyr. In general, never ask for a topic during the meeting, because usually the sickest person in the meeting will share and the others will try to fix it (Gary N., personal communication, August 08, 2023).

**Not-so-great speakers.** In terms of *content*, not-so-great speakers often share neither the common problem nor the common solution. Instead, they share other problems and they offer no solutions other than self-improvement disclosures. In terms of *process*, they engage in *cross-talk* (advice-giving), *dominance* (talking too much), *gossip* (talking about others), or *discussion* of inappropriate topics such as one's religion, counseling, medication, or outside publications. In response to not-so-great speakers, 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.

**Great speakers.** There are at least two factors—content and process—that define the qualities of good speakers in the program. In terms of *content*, great speakers 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, genuine, and congruent. Rather than focusing on others, great speakers place the focus on themselves. Rather than blaming others, great speakers take responsibility for doing their part in changing themselves. Rather than complaining about the mess, great speakers proclaim the message. By doing so, they leave listeners feeling inspired and motivated to work the steps while feeling part of a larger community. In terms of *process*, great speakers show humility rather than dominance. They do not engage in cross-talk, but instead direct their sharing to the whole group. They do not call out others, but hold themselves accountable. They do not monopolize time, but leave their listeners wanting more. In response to great speakers, listeners 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 connected to the fellowship.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. **Cross-talk** includes some of the following **specific** examples:

- ☑ The Novice Newcomer's inquisitive questions may simply reflect a lack of awareness of how the meeting is not a discussion or process group.
- ☑ The Monopolizing Old-Timer who acts like a subject matter expert violates the spirit of the Second Tradition ("For our group purpose, there is but one authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants—they do not govern").
- ☑ The Problem-Focused Whiner takes advantage of a meeting if there is no designated speaker or topic, and asks, "Who has a problem to discuss?" This cue typically results in (1) one person becoming the focus of attention, (2) a problem-focused rather than solution-focused discussion, and (3) blatant advice-giving if others get drawn into cross-talk and dialogue.
- ☑ The Editorializing Chairperson whose running commentary after each person's share limits the time others have to share while reflecting dominance of the self-appointed commentator.
- ☑ The AI-Pals who engage in side conversations defuse their focus while excluding others from their secrets.

**Cross-talk** includes some of the following **general** examples:

- ☑ Directing comments to the chair (e.g., "correcting the chair") demonstrates attempts to control on the part of the self-appointed director.
- ☑ Directing comments to the speaker (e.g., praising, grooming, or ingratiating the speaker) encourages performance rather than honest and intimate sharing.
- ☑ Directing comments to newcomers (other than reading the Newcomer Statement) demonstrates attempts at control, dominance, and advice-giving.
- ☑ Correcting other members when they make a mistake inhibits others who may be concerned about making mistakes.
- ☑ Calling out a member (with exception of chairperson doing so) demonstrates the character defects of arrogance and dominance.
- ☑ Referring to "you" rather than "I" as the subject may come across as controlling, as the self-appointed proselytizer avoids placing a focus on oneself.
- ☑ Interrupting someone by requesting their name ("And your name is...?") violates the tradition of anonymity.

- ☑ Being bossy or bullying is the worst form of cross-talk and dominance.

**2. Dominance** includes some of the following **specific** examples:

- ☑ Attempting to run the meeting (except when one is the designated chairperson for that meeting)
- ☑ Monopolizing a meeting by talking too often, too long, or too loud
- ☑ Double-dipping (or sharing more than once) before all others in the meeting have had a chance to share
- ☑ Attempting to change the format of a meeting without a Group Conscience
- ☑ Making a suggestion more than once during a Group Conscience meeting
- ☑ Trying to control what others decide during a Group Conscience meeting
- ☑ Correcting someone during a meeting (unless done by the chairperson in accord with the Group Conscience)
- ☑ Interrupting someone during a meeting (unless done by the designated Time-keeper in accord with the Group Conscience)
- ☑ Volunteering to be the Chairperson or Speaker so often that others don't have the chance to do so

- ☑ Making the same announcement at every meeting when everyone present already knows what the self-appointed announcer will say

**3. Gossip** includes some of the following **specific** examples:

- ☑ Focusing on alcoholics or addicts rather than focusing on ourselves results in externalization of blame and diffusion of personal responsibility.
- ☑ Talking about others who are not in the room rather than sharing about ourselves results in reduced intimacy during the meeting.
- ☑ Sharing something that someone said in another meeting results in erosion of trust (i.e., How can others trust that their disclosures will be kept private?).
- ☑ Breaking someone's anonymity by identifying them by name, occupation, or reputation violates anonymity.

**4. Discussions** of religion, professions, outside publications, other philosophies, and other 12-Step programs include some of the following **specific** examples:

- ☑ Discussing specific religious beliefs may inhibit, offend, or estrange others who do not subscribe to those beliefs.
- ☑ Imposing or proselytizing one's beliefs demonstrates attempts at control, dominance, and disrespect for the beliefs of others in the meeting.

- ☑ Discussing one's education, occupation, or profession violates one's anonymity and may create a hierarchical rather than egalitarian culture in the meeting.
- ☑ Discussing one's involvement in another 12-Step fellowship may confuse newcomers, bore old-timers, and defuse the focus on the present fellowship.
- ☑ Discussing one's counseling or psychotherapy may confuse newcomers, bore old-timers, and blur boundaries.
- ☑ Discussing one's ADD, OCD, or PTSD detracts from the spiritual program and suggests that the member may not be spending enough time with their therapist.
- ☑ Discussing one's medications suggests that the member may not be spending enough time discussing with their prescribing professional.

### 5. Using the Four Obstacles as Incentives

The only difference between a stumbling block and a stepping stone is how it is used. Similarly, obstacles are neither good nor bad. How they are used is all that matters. They can be adaptive if used as early warning signs or reminders to consider other actions. Using the word "I" as a reminder to take personal responsibility, there are ways the four obstacles can be used as incentives and reminders to engage in better actions at home, at work, and with others:

#### **Dominance vs. Humility**

- ☑ I can practice letting go.
- ☑ I can avoid giving advice.
- ☑ I can avoid interrupting others.
- ☑ I can keep my suggestions short.
- ☑ I can remember to listen and learn.
- ☑ I can avoid talking too much or too long.
- ☑ I can remember to say, "You may be right."
- ☑ I can avoid bragging about service I've done.
- ☑ I can respect silence so that others can share.
- ☑ I can make a suggestion once and then let go of the outcome.
- ☑ I can avoid correcting others, unless it's part of my role as a Chair or Director.
- ☑ I can make it explicit when I am invested in advocating for an agenda or outcome.

#### **Gossip vs. Anonymity, Intimacy, and Privacy**

- ☑ I can focus only on the people in the room.
- ☑ I can keep the focus on myself and not others.
- ☑ I can avoid talking about others in a negative manner.
- ☑ I can ask myself: "What is the purpose of my disclosure?"
- ☑ I can ask myself: "What would I say if they were listening?"
- ☑ I can avoid forwarding a member's emails that is not intended for others.
- ☑ I can avoid sending blind copies of a email reply – except to myself.

#### **Discussion of Religions vs. Spirituality**

- ☑ I can stay on task at board meetings and committee meetings.
- ☑ I can avoid going off on tangents during my sharing at meetings.
- ☑ I can live my beliefs rather than impose them on others.

- ☑ I can live my faith in action rather than talk about it.
- ☑ I can focus on my relationship with God rather than talk about my religion.
- ☑ Atheists can focus on spirituality rather than brag about their atheism.

### **Crosstalk vs. Inclusivity**

- ☑ I can use the pronoun *I* rather than *you* when I share myself with others.
- ☑ I can avoid *you* as the subject of a sentence, because it can sound like an indictment.
- ☑ I can speak to the group when I am part of a group.
- ☑ I can share what I do, but not what I think you should do.
- ☑ I can avoid giving advice, unless I am specifically asked for it.
- ☑ I can remind myself that side conversations exclude others.
- ☑ I can avoid correcting others when they make mistakes, unless it is in my role.

## References

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On April 10, 1939, the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* consisted of 4,730 copies 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 stuck ever since. 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 second edition was published in 1955, the third edition in 1976, and the fourth edition in 2001.

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This issue is identified as Dec/Jan 1988-89:

"Cross-talking has been defined as talking out of turn, advice giving, questioning the person who is sharing, holding private conversations, having an individual comment on everyone's sharing, and as being discourteous and intimidating."

Connecticut Area 7. (2015, December). No cross talk please! *Lifeline: Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen*. [https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web\\_lifeline\\_dec-2015.pdf](https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web_lifeline_dec-2015.pdf)



## Resources

The following material was taken from page 4 of the Connecticut Area 7 *Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen* (2015):

*As part of their opening format, some meetings read the following statement on cross talk.*

### **No Cross Talk Please!**

Cross Talk is: talking out of turn; advice giving; questioning the person who is sharing; holding private conversations; having an individual comment on everyone's sharing; and being discourteous and intimidating. If you want to speak on what you hear, speak of your own recovery only, addressing a topic with "I" instead of "You."

All Al-Anon discussions should be constructive, helpful, loving, and understanding. In striving towards these ideals, we avoid topics that can lead to dissension and distract us from our goals, including discussions of religion, other philosophies, programs, nonconference approved literature, therapies, or gossip.

Please remember that we have no cross talk in our meeting, which means we do not interrupt, criticize, or give advice, nor do we comment directly on another member's share, ever keeping the focus on ourselves.

(Connecticut Area 7, 2015, p. 4)

Connecticut Area 7. (2015, December). No cross talk please! *Lifeline: Newsletter for Al-Anon & Alateen*. [https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web\\_lifeline\\_dec-2015.pdf](https://www.ctalanon.org/images/lifeline/web_lifeline_dec-2015.pdf)

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## Correct Citation for Reference Entry

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