

Role of the General Service Board and the General Service Office in Processing Suggestions for Conference Agenda Items

This memo describes the role of the General Service Board and its committees and the General Service Office in processing suggestions for Conference agenda items, and the methods the General Service Board uses to determine which proposals will be forwarded to the Conference.

The authority of the General Service Board to set the Conference agenda comes from long-term practice, the *Current Conference Charter*, Article 10 and *The Twelve Concepts for World Service* – Concepts III, VI, VII, VIII and IX.

In the Conference Charter, Article 10, it states that, “Except in a great emergency, neither the General Service Board nor any of its related services ought ever take any action liable to greatly affect A.A. as a whole, without first consulting the Conference. It is nevertheless understood that the board shall at all times reserve the right to decide which of its actions or decisions may require the approval of the Conference.”

The challenge for the General Service Board and its committees in the evaluation of a proposed Conference agenda item is to determine if the item rises to the level of a matter “...liable to seriously affect A.A. as a whole” or is one where the General Service Board wishes to seek the approval of the Conference.

The General Service Board has generally been quite ready to seek the advice of the Conference on a variety of matters. The General Service Board has historically relied on the General Service Conference for guidance and for wisdom resulting from group conscience decisions based on the Conference process. It does not, for example, make any change to a piece of Conference-approved literature or distribute a public service announcement without the prior approval of the Conference. Proposals which the General Service Board might feel fully justified in approving on its own authority are often referred to the Conference for disapproval, if any, before moving forward. Anyone who has ever participated in a Conference is well aware that there is rarely a shortage of agenda items at a Conference.

Suggestions from the Fellowship are evaluated and in each instance a decision is made on whether the suggestion is appropriate for Conference consideration at this time. The General Service Board's authority to do this is stated in the provision of the Conference Charter cited above, and also in Concept III, where Bill W. wrote in his commentary, “Similarly, the Trustees of the General Service Board (operating of course within the provisions of their own Charter and Bylaws) should be able at all times to decide when they will act fully on their own responsibility and when they will ask the Conference for its guidance, its approval of a recommendation, or for its actual decision and direction.”

Frequently Asked Questions on Group Conscience Consideration for Proposed Conference Agenda Items

This overview is general and includes many but not necessarily all of the possible routes a proposed agenda item follows in the trustee, G.S.O. and Grapevine review process. There is no “one size fits all” procedure and, on a case by case basis over time, there may occasionally be inconsistencies. The trustees, corporate directors and staff bring together years of experience in A.A. service in making decisions about the appropriate process or disposition of proposed Conference agenda items.

Sources of agenda items are described in *The A.A. Service Manual* on page S53 of the current edition as “...individual A.A. members, groups, delegates, trustees, area assemblies, area committee members, and directors and staff members of A.A.W.S. and the Grapevine.”

Routing of proposals

Q. Are all proposed Conference agenda items sent to the Conference Coordinator?

A. No. Items are often sent to other G.S.O staff members who are secretaries to trustees’ committees or directly to the Grapevine. Also, there may be on-going projects in trustees’ committees that are not forwarded through the Conference Coordinator.

Q. What happens when a proposed Conference agenda item arrives at the Conference Coordinator’s desk?

A. The Conference Coordinator acknowledges receipt of the proposed agenda item and lets the sender know which of the following options is most appropriate and, if necessary, an explanation of why and how the proposed agenda item is being directed

1. Forwarding to a Trustees’ Committee via a G.S.O. Staff Member or Department Head:

- If the subject of the proposal is related to a staff committee assignment, e.g. CPC, Literature, etc., or Department, i.e. Archives, Finance, etc., the item will usually be forwarded to the appropriate trustees’ committee and the sender will also be notified of any actions taken.

2. Forwarding to G.S.O.’s Publications Director or Group Services Staff person:

- If the suggestion is related to service material, the Literature Catalog, Publications Department procedures, etc. it is usually forwarded to G.S.O.’s Publication Director or Group Services staff person for gathering of experience or background material prior to consideration/review by A.A. World Services, Inc.

3. Forwarding to A.A. World Services, Inc:*

The following topics are the responsibility of the A.A. W.S., Inc. Board:

- Suggestions related to the general oversight of the G.S.O.
- Suggestions for format changes to A.A. literature, literature pricing policies, matters concerning the literature catalog, shipping and invoicing practices.
- Any matters related to the G.S.O. A.A. Website

4. Forwarding to Chair of the General Service Board;

- Matters related to Board Decisions/Procedures or to the general oversight of G.S.O and the A.A. Grapevine are forwarded to the Chair of the General Service Board; the chair may answer directly or route the matter to a trustees' committee, another board, the full board, or they might be forwarded to the G.S.O. General Manager – a decision on where an item of this nature goes depends on the particular issue addressed.

5. Forwarding to the A.A. Grapevine Corporate Board Grapevine Executive Editor:*

- Matters relating in any way to the Grapevine or La Viña are forwarded to the Executive Editor for disposition and an explanation of how the proposed agenda item will be handled.

***Note:** The A.A.W.S. and Grapevine Boards can forward proposed items directly to a Conference Committee if they wish Conference guidance, advice or direction.

Q. What happens when it is unclear what committee should address a proposed item or where an item should be routed?

A. When it is unclear where a proposed item belongs, it is most frequently forwarded to the trustees' Committee on the Conference for direction.

Q. Does G.S.O. keep a master list of all proposed items submitted for possible Conference consideration?

A. No, a master list of proposed Conference agenda items has never been maintained.

- Q. When might a staff member assume direct responsibility for responding to a proposal?
- A. The staff member is responsible for following up on items not being forwarded for consideration. The following are examples of instances when items have not been forwarded for consideration:
1. When the matter proposed is not suitable for Conference consideration or is clearly an outside issue; for example, a proposed item from a number of years ago asked that for environmental reasons the Conference discuss banning Styrofoam cups from A.A. meetings.
 2. When there has not been a widely expressed need emanating from the Fellowship regarding a proposal, a staff member may respond after consultation with the chair of the appropriate trustees' committee and with other G.S.O. staff with the suggestion that wider, local sharing take place prior to the proposed item moving forward. Such a response is not a rejection of the item – it is encouragement for further discussion. The sender may choose to follow this suggestion or not, and is free to resubmit the item. Example: a district proposed that the word “disease” be removed from A.A. pamphlets. There was an area assembly taking place prior to the deadline for agenda items to come to G.S.O. and the staff member suggested that the matter be discussed at this assembly; this occurred and the issue failed to achieve substantial unanimity and the district declined to have the item moved forward for further consideration.
 3. When Advisory Actions related to the proposed item already exist, the staff person may respond to the sender with this information – again, this is not a rejection, but a clarification that the matter proposed has been addressed by at least one previous Conference. The sender is free to resubmit the item. Example: an individual member requested that a 4th Step workbook be developed. A staff member forwarded research as to how this matter was addressed by previous Conferences.
 4. When a proposal comes in that is so singular in nature or peculiar that it is not appropriate to pass it along to a trustees' committee, the staff member will let the sender know that their letter will be kept on file for future reference – this does not happen often. Example: an individual member wanted a pamphlet developed to explain the difference between “friendship” and “fellowship.” This is a singular proposal and the sender was asked to seek wider discussion on the matter and notified that their letter would be kept on file for future reference if further interest in the development of such a pamphlet was expressed.

Q. Can the G.S.O. staff pass along agenda items directly to a Conference committee?

A. The Group Services staff member passes along items directly to the Conference Report and Charter Committee since there is no corresponding trustees' committee to review suggested changes to the Service Manual and Directories.** There are times when the service committees, TF, CF, PI and CPC., have very light agendas for an upcoming Conference. Occasionally, in the past, Conference committee secretaries have added one or two discussion agenda items to flesh out the agendas – this has often proven beneficial because the topics get discussed at many pre-Conference events. The policy now is that one or two discussion topics may be added only if, after consultation with the trustees' and Conference chairs of the particular committee, they deem the discussion topics appropriate and useful.

****Note:** This will change beginning August 2008 when the trustees' Literature Committee plans to assume additional oversight of the Service Manual.

Trustees' Committees

Q. Prior to the trustees' committee meeting, do the committee members receive background related to the item so they can make an informed decision?

A. Yes. Members of the trustees' committees receive extensive background material and subcommittee reports several weeks before their quarterly meetings. If background was not provided with the original agenda submission, the staff secretary may write to the sender and ask that pertinent background be supplied. In addition, the staff secretary will gather pertinent background from G.S.O. resources.

Q. Do the trustees thoroughly discuss each proposed item?

A. Yes, they do. Occasionally, they have studied the background and thought about the issue in advance of their quarterly meeting, and they will find themselves in general agreement to either move the item forward to a Conference Committee or not or to send the item in another direction in which case there may not be a lengthy discussion.

Q. What options does a trustees' committee have in disposing of a proposed Conference agenda item it is considering?

A. Here are some options:

- The committee can agree to forward the item to a Conference committee for consideration.
- The committee can approve implementation of the suggestion, and, when appropriate, choose not to seek Conference ratification of this decision. Example: three areas requested that a trustees' committee be assigned or formed to oversee the annual revision of The A.A. Service Manual. The committee agreed this was a good idea but one that needed to be addressed by the Chair of the General Service Board. It was forwarded to the Chair and after further consultation, it was decided to place oversight of this document with the trustees' Literature Committee.
- The committee can take no action on the item which means that, for any number of reasons, they do not feel Conference or further trustees' consideration is warranted at this time. The committee secretary is often asked to explain to the sender the reasons the committee made this decision. Often suggestions like the suggestion to publish the Fourth Edition of the Big Book are considered over many years before the concept is accepted by the trustees, and, eventually, the Conference.
- The committee can forward the item to another committee, to A.A.W.S. or the Grapevine Board, to G.S.O. or to the General Service Board if it believes more information is needed before making a decision, or if it believes that the item would be more appropriately handled by another group conscience.
- The committee can form a subcommittee to examine the matter more fully before making a decision.
- The committee can table the matter until its next committee meeting.

Q. Do the trustees' committees give more weight to an area's agenda submission than to other's submissions?

A. There is no absolute "yes" or "no" to this question. Every effort is made to act fairly and on principle on all items submitted. The trustees' most important consideration is the subject matter. The procedures outlined above have been in place for many years, over all have been accepted by the Fellowship and are consistent with the Conference Charter and Concepts. The committee members must determine if their informed group conscience feels the proposed agenda submission should be placed on the Conference agenda. Having said that, the trustees recognize that a proposal that has been put forward by an area assembly has been widely discussed, has received substantial unanimity at an area assembly and, therefore, has the overall support of groups who attended and voted at the area assembly.

Q. Shouldn't an area's submission take precedence over everyone else's proposals?

A. Based on the guidance in the Concepts, the Conference Charter and the A.A. Service Manual, the trustees' committees and the General Service Board are charged with taking each proposal primarily on its merits not its source. Nowhere is it stated that, in terms of proposing Conference agenda items, an area is more important than an individual A.A. member, group, district or anyone else eligible to submit items for consideration. As human beings, though, the trustees' committee members cannot but note, for example, that an item is coming from an area assembly, a past delegate or a trustee and, possibly, have some tendency to consider an item from these sources a bit differently. The procedure is not an exact science but, again, every effort is made to act fairly and on principle, to seek God's will for us and have the courage to carry it out in order to safeguard, support and serve the Conference process.