

GSB STRATEGIC PLAN

SEPTEMBER 2020 DISCUSSION GROUPS

EVALUATION SUMMARY

Introduction

To provide General Service Conference members an opportunity to provide input, thoughts, and ideas on the GSB Strategic Plan (e.g., what are the successes, where are the holes, what activities should continue, where should we change course), a series of discussion sessions were held on September 16, 17, 23, 24. Invited participants included all Conference members. Trustee emeriti were also invited to participate.

Utilizing a Discussion Café structure wherein participants were divided into small discussion groups to discuss questions related to Strategic Plan Goals 1, 3, and 6, as noted below:

GOAL 1: The GSB will model inclusivity and acceptance by assisting the Fellowship in carrying the message and encouraging the spirit of the Third Tradition throughout A.A.

Question: **What is your concept of inclusivity, acceptance, and participation, as it relates to Tradition Three?**
a. **At the Group level**
b. **Within the Service Structure**

This topic generated thoughtful insights. From 146 responses, there came a wide range of opinions. Many members seemed to have different interpretations of the term *inclusivity*. “Inclusivity – does it mean diversity?” And “The more we try to align and become diverse, the farther we get from our primary purpose. It is true that people from different cultural backgrounds may be treated differently.”

Some felt that *inclusivity* refers to the way we welcome newcomers, others said we are talking about the way the Fellowship handles race, gender, disabilities, and even types of addiction, specifically narcotics. Responses encompassed so-whats, heartfelt emotions, and practical solutions. One repeated sentiment was that we might start with our Board to address concerns about inclusivity. At the very least, members said, the Board plays an important role:

Then again, one member wondered “Should this even be a Board issue?” Another said that it’s “Not a Board issue, a Fellowship issue. ” And then: “AA itself is not inclusive.”

Many responses focused on the Fellowship's relationship with the Spanish-speaking community: "Intergroups reach out to the Spanish speaking community. They went to the groups and invited them to attend our meetings. Formed a relationship in that way. Get involved!!! GSB needs to include Native American/Handicapped."

Question: Are current GSB actions (for example, workshops — “Who’s Not in the Room”) effective in fostering (encouraging) the spirit of Tradition Three?

Fewer respondents (thirty-five [35] comments) expressed thoughts on this second half of Goal 1: how the GSB encourages the spirit of Tradition Three regarding inclusivity and acceptance.

“Heavily white” is the way one respondent described the Fellowship. Is that simply just the way it is? Is this a situation that really does not need “fixing”? Initially, it seemed that many respondents thought our GSB is indeed effective in this area. One member offered that “We are trying to reach all alcoholics no matter their background.” And no one would argue with “Tradition 3/Concept 4—anybody who needs us can find us. Are we putting hurdles in anybody’s way?” While one delegate took a slightly different stance: “GV is good with focusing on underserved communities and the stories come from the right place (the fellowship).

But overall, many replied that this situation needs fixing. Some members are quite firm in their feelings. One said, “Boards actions [are] largely invisible to fellowship.” Another pointed out that “Areas were asked who their underserved communities are and haven’t heard anything since.” One delegate noted that: “We have one requirement for membership. The GSB is a tool, but it starts with group members, districts, and Areas. If our meetings are set up to be non-inclusive — if we aren’t reaching out and welcoming; we are the ones who are responsible.”

Making an even sharper observation, one member stated that “Bill had trouble getting Black attendees, use Language of the Heart.” So. This is not a new issue, but it is one that seems to need solving, not only with color but also with accessibility.

A significant number of attendees indicated the degree to which they think this issue is affecting the Fellowship: One respondent pointed out that “Leadership is needed — inclusivity is a topic that can be polarizing but we should not be afraid of that. It should be framed around our primary purpose.”

On the other hand, could this kind of “division” be what our various communities want?

Question: Do you feel more actions can be implemented?

- a. If yes, please give an example(s)?
- b. If you believe further actions are not warranted (or that current actions are inappropriate), please explain.

As was the case throughout the discussion sessions, rather than stating solutions, members asked pragmatic questions, such as “Are there physical items to address the physical barriers (that is, handicap)?” and “Why aren’t we seeing deaf people in the rooms? When they get to

the meetings there is nothing there for them (no translation). You don't go to the desert to find water. How can we reach this population?"

Some respondents offered examples of general, workable approaches that might help: One said: "Encourage all that 'your voice matters.' Especially when looking for appointees to committees. Look for minority voices on the board, area, and district levels. We need to invite all — especially the underrepresented." Another noted, "Need to implement a meta conversation — we can't heal what we don't acknowledge." And still another noted that "more languages on website" could be helpful.

And here is an answer that might generate controversy in the Fellowship: "There should be affirmative action in selection of members of the board to ensure greater inclusivity and to recognize the implicit bias."

From the 135 attendees, there were 19 identifiable responses to this question: **If you believe further actions are not warranted (or that current actions are inappropriate), please explain.**

The Fellowship seems to be of one accord when it comes to the issue of inclusivity. Wrong. There were respondents who do not hold that view, with 11 of them expressing their sentiments: For instance, one asked "Should this even be a Board issue?" Another wondered if this would cause "Outside issues [to]come into groups" or "Do Our pamphlets divide us or unite us." A reader might wonder whether this last question implies that we have enough divisiveness already with our pamphlets?

Another respondent wondered, "Should the question be How do we get them here rather than who is not in the room?" And getting back to what *inclusivity* really means, this member stated that "Not really talking about minorities, more about making newbies comfortable." Perhaps, said one respondent, "If the underlying concern is to grow the membership, then focus more on the 5th Tradition.

But some members may wonder if we are introducing outside interests. "We are not a diverse fellowship. Must look at it as being inclusive and not as a diversity issue." Do we see, do we know what the difference is....?

All members will probably find this statement to be the most thought-provoking: "Dogmatic views are dangerous to our fellowship"

Goal 3: The GSB will seek to improve the effectiveness of its communication to remain relevant and connected to those it serves.

Question: When considering how to improve effective communication to remain relevant, what elements are the most important to progress (e.g., the platforms used, the language used, the format used, other)?

This is a time of upheaval in nearly every walk of life — and it is the same for life as an alcoholic as well. The Fellowship understands it is time to improve its means of communications, as shown with the varying responses to this goal. There were 149 responses, with nearly 149 distinctly different opinions, which is addressing one of the most important issues of our time: using new platforms to communicate.

Many A.A.s love the new technologies and say that “GSB is doing good job at looking at different platforms within traditions.” But as is our custom, contrary views claimed a place in the spotlight. For instance, “A.A. has been slow to embrace technology” and “Folks who have left their home group may feel uncomfortable with electronics” indicate some displeasure with the Fellowship’s handling of communications. They also wonder, “There are 3,000 meetings in the area but only 100 are represented at the area meeting. How do we get the information to the remaining 2,000 groups?”

Consider these complaints: One respondent pointed out that “transparency more important than language,” another said, “communication breaks down at DCM level,” and yet another: “having trouble getting responses from GSO.” Widely held concerns seem to be that “GSB has lost touch with pulse of Fellowship, using virtual platforms can help.” And “A.A. has been slow to embrace technology” seems to be the feeling of many. Dramatically different new technology. Same old issues.

A few respondents offered old-school solutions, such as “Have quarterly update calls, corrections or CPC, like Class As did in Montana” or try a “Delegates bulletin board [where we can] share resources.” And these responses kept it simple: “Have more meetings like this one” and “ ‘How-to’ articles in Grapevine.”

At any rate, delegates are more than willing to try new and different methods and new platforms and formats. They do not mind utilizing basic technological devices like “Develop one-minute videos to show home groups” and “Create a virtual newcomer packet.”

One respondent bottom-lined a point that must always stay with our communicators, especially those bringing in the new technologies: “How do we reach members who don’t use social media?” There did not appear to be one answer to that question in all the 149 responses.

Or consider this question: “What about communication outside the service structure? How do we connect to those members?” This is just one more question proffered rather than answers to the already stated question/goals.

Even more important, many delegates pointed out, is that we *always* keep in mind our ever-present goal of maintaining anonymity. In this brave new world, “breaches of anonymity worries especially early on” and “virtual meetings remove all physical barriers” complaints were

pervasive. Conversely, how do those concerns stack up with the observation, “Post what is new on YouTube”? It is a new world indeed.

Question: COVID-19 has pushed the Fellowship much farther along in its use of social platforms to carry the message. How can we capitalize on this shared experience of utilizing technology to further improve the effectiveness of our communication?

One respondent answered in specific COVID terms, describing an aspect of what has happened to the Fellowship because of the pandemic:

“Covid-19 pushed us to learn how to use technology. We have an easier way to communicate with each other on all levels from conference to Areas to groups.” So, what are we going to do? Ask ourselves: “Does COVID lead to the death of anonymity?”

It’s safe to say that “COVID allowed individuals to cross the line into technology.” But the following responses might be the way we will deal with post-COVID A.A. sessions:

“Keep Zoom and online even when back in person” and “link between trustee committees and conference committees.”

Question: What currently available specific platforms should be considered in efforts to maintain and enhance communication to those we serve (both inside and outside of the Fellowship)?

The gist of the replies indicate that the Fellowship feels “Virtual platforms are very effective.”

And the following answer and sentiment is woven throughout the evaluations:

—“With this virtual format and ability, I have been better informed as a delegate. How can we stay this informed after rotation? Going forward I hope the virtual workshops/events continue to be available.”

—“Now more than ever, we need to use different platforms. The Fellowship is willing to try new things — but let’s use and develop what we already have (YouTube, LinkedIn, aa.org). or instance, aa.org still has several years old financials posted. We could use these tools more efficiently while exploring other channels.”

The overall feeling generated by responses to this question is that perhaps A.A.s need/want to do something as simple as “Ask the fellowship how they would like to be communicated with.” On the other hand, keep in mind this response: “Instagram or tweet what is coming.” Other positive feelings about these new platforms include “Virtual assemblies have brought some areas closer together.”

But note well: The call for podcasts, audible books, and YouTube is loud and strong. And it throughout.

All these things will not happen without complaints. Consider:

“Our attendance at virtual assemblies is down. We are all scrambling to figure this new platform out. People are burnt out with the virtual meetings.”

“Concerns — Delegates are not seeing some things they should have access to. The August 1 Financial gathering had several questions that still have not been answered. If you’re serious about communication — make sure that questions are answered!”

“Some may see Platforms as a violation of traditions”

“As delegates, how do we know what we can communicate with the fellowship and what we can’t? What is delegate/conference only? We need more guidelines.” (Do we need a swift fix for this one?)

But the following comment is likely true and a little frightening:

One thing COVID-19 has proven to us is that “There are ways of carrying the message we don’t even know of yet.”

Goal 6: The GSB acts as a role model in promoting the critical importance of our Traditions; including anonymity as discussed in Traditions Eleven and Twelve.

Question: Are we underutilizing Class A (non-alcoholic) trustees in carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous?

- a. **If yes, what do you see as the barriers (implicit or explicit) to fully utilizing Class A trustees?**
- b. **What are some creative ways you think Class A trustees might be able to convey the message of A.A.?**

Question: Do you see other actions the General Service Board can take to be a role model or encourage groups in promoting the critical importance of the traditions?

This goal and its questions generated only 96 responses. Yet, those responses included targeted, specific, and firm suggestions. And they were, by far, the most zealous.

Goal #6 covers two issues: Anonymity *and* the function of Class As. The issue of anonymity, always the foundation of our Fellowship, now looms large over our relationship with today's new technology. It is a serious and growing concern.

The second issue is Class A trustees. What is a Class A trustee? A Class A trustee is a non-alcoholic trustee. The A.A. website says that "Class A trustees are chosen from a variety of professional backgrounds including doctors, lawyers, financial professionals, clergy, media and public relations professionals, information technology and communications professionals, correctional administrators, social workers, educators and military professionals."

Focus group responses indicate that Class A members are a treasured asset the Fellowship has not made good use of, and in today's environment, many delegates say their function is desperately needed. Take Class As along with today's new platforms and then add the ability of Class As to state the A.A. case without worries of anonymity — respondents seem to agree that, utilized properly, this combination will establish a powerful way to spread the A.A. message.

The function of the Class A trustee has a rich history in Alcoholics Anonymous, hailing from the Fellowship's earliest days. As one respondent put it, " 'Friends of AA — we let our friends recommend us.' Do we have as many friends now as when that was written? Will we get another Jack Alexander moment?"

What is the Class A position? What is its function? Among our members, there may be some confusion, or, as one respondent put it, "What are the Class A's responsibilities to the fellowship? What do the Class A's do? We need a service piece that describes their role."

Somewhat murky about the Class A function, but certain and sure of the desire to have more input and contributions from those trustees, the Fellowship wants to know more and hear more from Class A trustees. Consider these replies:

“Podcast/videos” where “Class A’s can show their faces.” This widely held position supports the respondents who say, “We hide behind the word promotion — we need to take action to be discovered” and “ We need to get out there.”

To sum up, according to the evaluations offered by the focus groups, A.A. must contend with the challenges of new technology. And then, everyone wants to know, how will our Fellowship function in this new society?

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