

General Service Board Report

74th General Service Conference

Brooklyn, NY

April 14, 2024

At the 73rd General Service Conference, the General Service Board was tasked with the following Advisory Action:

In an effort to improve communication, ensure Board policies are reflective of our principles, and reestablish a relationship of trust between the General Service Conference, the General Service Board and the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, the General Service Board is asked to undertake an inventory prior to the 74th General Service Conference. To assist the Board in this endeavor, the 73rd General Service Conference will establish a working group to aid the General Service Board in formulating possible inventory questions.

This Advisory Action was given the highest priority of the actions coming out of the 73rd General Service Conference, and the oversight of the implementation of this inventory was assigned to the Trustees' Committee on the General Service Conference. A subcommittee was formed and with the help of our dedicated staff, a working group representative of the makeup of the 73rd General Service Conference members was selected, and they started the process of developing questions for the inventory.

There were also two other Advisory Actions that were aligned with reaching the goals of Board Inventory. They are:

- The Trustees' Finance and Budgetary Committee develop additional ways to report quarterly the fiscal performance of the AAWS, GSB and GV Boards throughout the year to the members of the General Service Conference for the purposes of transparency and assisting in the reporting to the A.A. Fellowship.
- To foster unity, trust, and transparency in the Fellowship, the members of the General Service Conference meet outside of the annual meeting for general sharing sessions at least two times per year utilizing virtual meeting technology. The General Service Board Chair and Delegate Chair will set the date and time as well as determine what issues currently facing the Fellowship would be chosen as topics.

In addition to the Advisory actions, other projects were initiated or continued to help meet the goals of the Advisory Action. These include:

- Holding Board Huddles at the Quarterly Board Weekends. This included participation from all three boards focused on alignment of the Traditions and Concepts we use to guide our actions.
- Continuing the work of the Policy ad hoc Committee of the General Service Board. The committee is tasked with reviewing our policies to ensure that they are in alignment with our Traditions and Concepts, while meeting the legal requirements for nonprofit organizations in the State of New York.
- Engaging with the Fellowship wherever and whenever possible, in person or on virtual platforms. This includes forums and other regional events, Area events, District events, and Group events. We have also engaged in phone calls, email and text exchanges with individuals throughout the Fellowship.

The inventory questions were completed, and an outside facilitator was engaged before the Panel 72 members of the working group rotated. The inventory questions were distributed to the members of the General Service Board with ample time to collect and compile the answers before the January Board Weekend. On Friday, January 26, 2024, the General Service Board members met at 475 Riverside Drive to conduct the inventory.

We started the day with a high-level review of the survey results. Each member was given 3 minutes to share any observations or final comments before we split into breakout groups. The inventory consisted of 23 questions, and our membership was split into 5 breakout groups. Each group was assigned questions to review and identify key learning observations as well as possible solutions and actionable steps. After lunch, each group reported back to the full board, followed by feedback and discussion before prioritizing the action items identified. The following information includes the questions with a summary of the feedback and the solutions and actionable steps identified:

Group #1

Question One: Is the ‘collective conscience’ of AA at work within the GSB?

- There were some varied answers which can be attributed to time in service on the Board. Responses were overwhelmingly affirmative.
- We are more unified than we sound.
- Acknowledge that there are outside pressures affecting discussion and decisions of the Board.

Question Two: How does this experience strengthen me? Has it shown me anything that I might work on myself personally or in the GSB as a whole?

- All answered the question from their various perspectives.
- This past year saw unprecedented attacks on individuals and on the Board as a whole which were noted by some respondents as requiring a great deal of strength and personal work to persevere.
- Humility, Leadership, Trust, Courage, Perseverance mentioned repeatedly regarding how it has strengthened respondents.

Question Three: In an effort to appear unified, do trustees have a tendency to

“Circle the Wagons” in defense of board members when controversy occurs?

- We make decisions as a board, not as individuals. We will support all of our board members when controversy arises from those decisions.
- Some felt that under the pressure of lobbying by those outside of the Conference the board was unable to defend those targeted sufficiently.
- There may be different definitions of “Circle the Wagons”
 - We were being supportive.
 - We were being attacked.
 - Staying in unity.
 - Projecting an appearance of support.
 - We were being defensive.

Question Four: What role did social media play in the resignation?

- Social media played no role in the actual resignation.
- With limited information coming from the Board, social media platforms filled the void following the resignation.
- Social media provided an alternative to conference member discussions based on factual information conducted using AA principles of participation, minority opinion and trust – there was only one side using the megaphone.

Solutions and Actionable Steps for Group #1

1. Spend time on leadership development on the Board discussing differences between Unity vs defensiveness as well as developing spiritual principles.
2. When we give directions or communicating, we need to clearly define terms and check in to make sure we are all using the same definition.
3. As a Board we need to consider how to encourage the use of our structure. This would include board members engaging in regional and area events, but also working through our service structure and engaging delegates in their sharing of information up the service structure.

Group #2

Question Five: Is there still work to do to communicate with the Fellowship why the Board communicated the way it did? (i.e. legal consultations, Q & A)

Learnings

- The board did not demonstrate an understanding of the urgency for more detailed information following the resignation.
- We did not communicate with one voice.
- We were fighting a wave of mistrust.

- Any efforts by the board to answer these questions have led to further controversy and failed to correct misinformation.

Solutions

- We need to move forward with stronger strategies for communication for serious and urgent matters.
- We have a responsibility to be informed by SME's (Subject Matter Experts), including lawyers.
- For future challenges, we need to ensure we quickly develop group conscience regarding communication.

Question Six: Does GSB consider primary purpose When determining budget?

- Yes. Trustees committees set their budgets reflecting services provided via group contributions, these budgets are largely influenced by Conference actions and trustee committee activities.
- Considerations are a little different with the AAWS portion of the budget where operational support, infrastructure to facilitate services, and publishing operations need to be accounted for.
- AAGV budgets are reviewed with operations, magazines and other products, and services (LaVina) considered.
- This is all in accordance with Concepts VIII, XI and Warranty One where operating expenses are noted as necessary to support the services.

Question Seven: What would help the GSB stay focused on its role as leaders of a spiritual movement.?

- Through the pandemic, the Board has crept into operations responsibilities. This has caused some problems with micromanaging and double-headed management.
- The workload has also increased dramatically, drawing attention away from oversight and focusing more on completing tasks.
- Quarterly Board Weekends have become overloaded with work, leading to 12- to 15-hour days.
- We need to exhibit leadership behavior and ensure we are adhering to Concepts VIII, X, & XI, including:
 - Not overstepping our responsibility of custodial oversight.
 - Following the well-defined scope of our roles.
 - Engaging participation from committees, directors, executives, and consultants provided in the structure.
 - Ensuring time for leadership training, visioning, strategic planning and board development, away from board weekends, if possible.
- Leadership training needs to be conducted away from the Board Weekends.

Question Eight: It was evident that a toxic relationship had developed for some time between the GSB Chair and some Trustees/GSO staff. What actions should Trustees take to address this conduct at an early stage?

- It wasn't evident to everyone at the time.
- The process for bringing issues forward was insufficient.
- The Policy ad hoc Committee is addressing these issues regarding our policies and procedures.
- Conduct leadership training to identify and address inappropriate behavior before problems escalate.
- Efforts were made to address specific matters as early as June 2022.
- Issues such as not adhering to bylaws in the forming of committees, not adhering to Concept III when special meetings were held with only a portion of the board and no reporting was provided, and disregard for minority voice are not matters of interpersonal relationships.

Solutions and Actionable Steps for Group #2

1. More discipline about prioritizing and managing our time.
2. Develop processes/policies for bringing issues forward. (Coaching & mentoring when people are having Issues.)
3. All board members need to be responsible to promptly address inappropriate conduct when it occurs.

Group #3

Question Nine: What are three ways we can improve to better serve Alcoholics Anonymous?

- Improve Communication – standard, consistent messaging.
- Manage Workflow to match the time available.
- Focus on oversight rather than Operations.
- Leadership training/coaching for board servants.
- Include all perspectives in the discussion.

Question Ten: How do we ensure that trustees have an opportunity to express their opinion or any concerns?

- Creating an environment where others feel safe and comfortable.
- Remembering everyone needs to feel valued.
- Remaining open to new ideas.
- Agree on how we will communicate.
- Don't subvert the process.
- Courage
- Provide opportunity to be able to speak. Don't attack each other / no bullying.
- Time limit on speaking to provide equity.
- Avoid meetings in the hallway. Let everyone have the benefit of hearing.

- Remain non-judgmental.
- Develop the new Code of Conduct and adhere to it.

Question Eleven: How can we better use Language of the Heart when communicating about the business of A.A.?

- What is the language of the heart – caring, compassion, accessible, understandable.
- Listen like we have no opinion.
- Practice authenticity.
- Don't preach.
- Unity – Accept the group conscience when discussion/debate are complete.
- Communication-effective
- How do we gauge - talk with, not at the business of A.A. -Spiritual aspect, the connection for the 7th tradition.
- Respect each other.
- Trust each other.
- The Inverted Triangle is needed always.

Question Twelve: How do we guard against becoming a "seat of perilous wealth or power?"

- Rotation.
- Make sure we understand our roles & responsibilities. We cover this in orientation every year but could expand on it in leadership training.
- Understanding the Concepts & Traditions.
- Open, consistent communication to the Fellowship through the Delegates.

Solutions and Actionable Steps for Group #3

1. Start each cycle with a commitment to shared values which include trust, respect, method of communication, to foster an environment where we can most effectively fulfill our role. (Unity)
2. Written external unified communication to conference members using the language of the heart employing our values (understanding the information we want to and need to communicate) (Unity Service Recovery)
3. Understand the role of a trustee, focused time, less operational, more planning, realistic expectations and effective servant leadership. (Service)

Group #4

Question Thirteen: When a controversial “right of board decision” item is presented for action, how can we seek improvements in full communication of the decision to the fellowship to ensure that unity is effectively considered in the timing and action of such critical decisions?

- There should only be one voice that reflects the group conscience. The minority voice is provided an opportunity to be heard. Once there is an outcome it must be communicated.
- Prompt clear communication and be ready to follow up as needed depending on feedback.
- If the body is putting out a communication, then the body needs to approve, and sign, any communication.
- Arrive at a group conscience on what we can and cannot report and adhere to it. Establish expectations for what "full communication" is. Explain reasons, e.g., responsibility/authority, privacy, legal matters, that we may not be able to provide all information requested.
- Any communication needs to reflect the group conscience, and not any individual board member's opinions.

Questions Fourteen: How can we create better best board practices in non-engagement vs engagement on private social media groups where AAs are gathered? How does engagement in social media groups affect the fellowship, boards, and staff?

- Social media creates haves and have nots. These groups are not the full fellowship.
- Social media does not help with consistent messaging through the service structure.
- Current delegates as well as past delegates and past trustees participate.
- We need to commit to doing well when we rotate.
- Do we play by social media rules, or do we play by AA rules? What if we had our own social media platform?
- Could the regionals work collaboratively to create one regional report, efficiently and everyone gets the same thing?
- We can create the report components as part of board weekend reporting that Regionals could then combine and perhaps add a narrative.
- We need to find a way to get the message out without waiting for the next quarterly session. This will require faster and more consistent reporting.
- Reporting needs to go through the service structure, not social media.
- Find a way to support regionals in collaborative reporting after board meetings.

Question Fifteen: How will we fully utilize the spiritual principles of AA to address leadership problems? How do we incorporate all 36 principles in Board discussions and decisions?

- Proven ways to do both, for example: group conscience, our structure, and personal adherence to AA principles.
- So, what are the barriers? To begin with one thing that is required and largely missing is for those involved to have the courage of conviction to identify leadership problems when they exist and say something. We fail in our responsibility to those we serve, to our mission, and to our common welfare by accepting unacceptable conduct either by participating in it or by saying nothing instead of raising matters of concern to the entity responsible to address it. Our collective failure to accept that some things do require a degree of discretion or confidentiality and take a stand on this principle has deepened our reluctance to speak up.

- Study workspace.
- Study new schedule.
- Study set boundaries - time and work.

Solutions

- Principled Problem Solving
 - PREVENTION
 - From bottom up
 - Select leaders well.
 - In-service training.
 - Speak up before issues escalate, minority voice.
 - Bring issues to the chair.
 - RESOLUTION
 - Bring to committee/officers.
- Creating the right environment to behave; adjusting workload/schedule.
- Ensure that those who raise concerns are not subjected to bullying or targeted harassment or no one will advise when there are matters of concern.

Questions Sixteen: What steps are being taken to ensure that we conduct ourselves professionally, promoting respectful interactions, avoiding discrimination or harassing behavior, and treating all individuals, including staff, with fairness and dignity?

- When things are stressed due to overwork or meeting late or financial pressures, or all 3 at once, it becomes that much harder to be respectful and professional. These situations need to be avoided.
- Leadership training, communications skills could be good development tools to help build better board behavior.
- Need to look at antecedents as well as the actual bad behavior. What conditions existed that may have influenced the bad behavior?
- Rules of Conduct / Engagement? This is already in our Concepts. Draw the new policies from the Concepts and Traditions.
- We need a board atmosphere that fosters trust, respect, confidentiality. Example: assuming good intention. How do we create and maintain this? How do we course correct?
- If off the rails: assign to a committee rather than having the full board engaged.
- Respectful honesty:
 - The “how” can interfere reception of the message. TONE and TENOR. We need to be mindful that our message is not abrasive and combative.
 - We shouldn't tolerate being disrespected, we need to let each other know or let the chair know.

Solutions

- Understand the Antecedents: what creates the cauldron.

- Leadership training/communication skills.
- We need respectful honesty. Rather than conflict avoidance, raising concerns respectfully can resolve the issue. Encourage use of "I" based feedback and assertive communication.

Questions Seventeen: In what ways do we exercise oversight of the affiliate corporations? Are they sufficient?

- Trustees on each of the corporate boards.
- Delegated operational oversight to the corporate board who then report back to General Service Board.
- The General Service Board approves the budget after passing through the Trustees' Finance Committee.
- Chairs and Treasurers of each corporate board sit on the Trustees Finance Committee.
- Corporations prepare the draft budgets as they have the responsibility and authority as per Concept IV. Trustees Finance and the General Service Board review and approve or suggest changes as needed, reporting throughout the year on any variances.
- Yes, the current structure and process is sufficient.
- If concerns arise with the process outlined above, then we need to always refer back to the guidance provided in the Concepts.
- Exercise oversight, but when there is concern or conflict, we need a better method of raising concerns.

Solutions and Actionable Steps for Group #4

1. Establish principled problem solving, there are steps from prevention to conflict resolution:
 - a. Select leaders well, prompt action to resolve problems early, bring to chair or committee of officers.
 - b. Training in leadership and professionalism, speak up using your minority voice.
2. When there are potentially controversial decisions, we need to use prompt clear and unified messaging that the body approves.
 - a. Arrive at a group conscience on what we will or won't report and adhere to it.
3. Create a healthier environment through schedule management, priority on strategy, tone, and tenor.

Group #5

Question Eighteen: How do confidentiality, anonymity, honesty, transparency, responsibility, accountability, and fiduciary duties come together in our service to the fellowship?

- There is no guidance on transparency in our Service Manual (including the Bylaws, Conference Charter, and Concepts essays), Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, or Alcoholics Anonymous. We can find guidance from Bill regarding all of the other terms, especially responsibility and accountability.

- In our confidentiality policy, the expectations of confidentiality continue after rotation. Disclosing confidential information is a tremendous violation of trust.
- Application of our Steps, Traditions, and Concepts is needed to balance these principles.
- Honesty requires safety.
- Lack of General Service Board understanding of fiduciary responsibilities creates confusion.
- Board huddles on our spiritual principles and how to operate have been effective.
- Board development (training, orientation, strategy) away from board weekend would be very helpful.
- The Policy ad hoc Committee is addressing our policies.
- Reminders of the safety card! It applies to the Board, as well.
- Cross functional group of conference members to set communications need, cadence, roles, timing, plan is recommended.

Question Nineteen: Are we receiving all the information we need from the affiliate boards to fulfill our custodial oversight?

- There has been some overstepping by the General Service Board, leading to micromanagement and double-headed management.
- Additional training on Concept VIII is needed beyond what is covered in orientation.
- Trust needed in the committee system and Concept VIII was weakened through the pandemic, resulting in a lack of understanding of the roles of members and directors.
- Additional Board development in our Traditions and Concepts is recommended outside of the Board Weekends.
- Reset ourselves & share consistently with fellowship.

Question Twenty: Without focusing on personalities, what factors contributed to creating an environment that resulted in a change in leadership being necessary?

- Virtual meetings stunted relationships and trust climate for authoritarian leadership take over.
- Lack of formal feedback structures.
- Double headed management of affiliates and executives.
- Secret meetings of select few rather than the entire board, with no reporting function to the Board.
- Unenforced Code of Conduct issues creating risk to the organization and employees.
- Methods of selection did not identify issues.
- Conduct of more than one trustee that was harmful (bullying, marginalized etc.) accepted silently by board.

Solutions:

- Changes have been made to the nominating process for General Service board chairs, including using a consultant, reference checks, and more in-depth interviewing.
- Onboarding / orientations for new chairs.

- Board zero tolerance for misconduct:
 - Policies
 - Course of action
 - Corrective measures
- Note – some are too serious and require immediate action.
- Two-way communications for board chair and the board.

Question Twenty-One: Staff and delegates - What more can be done to support them?

- Zero tolerance for mistreatment of employees.
- Post resignation communication was slow. This delay harmed the Delegates, Non-trustee Directors, and Staff.
- Workload and the workflow issues need to be addressed.
- Lack of consistency in reports from boards and trustees is a problem.
- No consistent / mutual communications plan expectations are in use.

Solutions

- In the event of another unplanned chair vacancy – immediate leadership committee should be formed to work with the interim chair.
- Boards/Staff - ID problems and solutions. Don't push, show gratitude.
- A Cross functional group consisting of conference members to identify problems and solutions.

Question Twenty-Two: As a board, how do we handle challenges that can affect Board unity or influence or impact our group conscience?

Learnings

- Board leadership needs to be objective & neutral.
- We have faced a lack of listening when challenges noted.
- We have faced a lack of time for discussion and/or lack of timely background.
- Respect for the group conscience and how it is achieved was lacking.
- We face challenges when influence is from past trusted servants.
- Influence of social media has created challenges.
- No board policy in terms of response to lobbying.

Solutions

- Take time.
- Prioritization for workload effectiveness – use the Concepts.
- Use the general sharing session to destress (roundtables).

Questions Twenty-Three: As a member of the General Service Board, what does the word “trust” in the term “trusted servant” mean to you?

Learnings

- Trustees do not feel trusted by fellowship.
- Trust within the board is inconsistent but improving.
- Micromanagement erodes trust.
- Our personal conduct is key – attraction.
- Fear is a barrier to trust. There is a lot of fear from receiving threats and harassment.

Solutions

- Discuss as topics at General Service Conference and Regional Forums.
- Conference / boards must encourage open communication. Draw out the quiet voices.
- Dedicated sessions to building trust.

Top Three Solutions

1. Board Development including board huddles, training, orientation, strategic planning away from board weekends.
2. Develop cross functional group of conference members to determine communication needs and establish a plan (cadence, rules, timing).
3. Board zero tolerance for misconduct. Address it early. Some situations are serious and require immediate action.

Conclusion

Following the resignation of the Board Chair, the communication from the General Service Board to the Fellowship was ineffective. This was made worse because we failed to anticipate the nature and volume of communications from those not on the General Service Board. Together this caused harm to our staff members, Non-Trustee Directors, and Delegates. On behalf of the General Service Board, I offer my sincerest apologies for the damage our poor communication has caused. The General Service Board is committed to changing how we communicate, but we going to need the help of General Service Conference for this to be effective.

To date, these are the changes we have made:

- We have implemented the Advisory Action calling for at least two virtual sharing sessions. We have held three sharing sessions since the 73rd General Service Conference. I would like to recommend that we survey the conference members to determine the effectiveness of the sessions and to see if there are any improvements that can be implemented.
- We have implemented the Advisory Action regarding quarterly financial reporting. We have made some adjustments to the process and look forward to discussing how we can be more effective with this reporting.
- We have made progress with our Policy ad hoc Committee reviewing and updating the Code of Conduct Policy, the Whistleblower Policy, and the Confidentiality Policy. We will have drafts to review this week.
- We have held Board Huddles at the Quarterly Board Weekends to align our Board servants with the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts.

The items we have identified in the inventory that we plan to implement include:

- Holding a Board Retreat to conduct leadership training and strategic planning.
- Implement a workload management plan to relieve the oversaturated workload placed on the staff and Boards.

The item we will need help from the Conference on is:

- Create a cross-functional group of Conference members to identify improvements in our communication and reporting between the Boards and the Conference members.

Thank you all for your time, patience, and attention.

In Love and Service,

Mike L

West Central Regional Trustee

Interim Chair, General Service Board