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Bill W.'s Twelve Concepts for World Service

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The Fourth Concept

Throughout our Conference structure, we ought to maintain at all responsible levels a traditional "Right of Participation," taking care that each classification or group of our world servants shall be allowed a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.

THE PRINCIPLE of "Participation" has been carefully built into our Conference structure. The Conference Charter specifically provides that the Trustees, the Directors of our service corporations (AA World Services, Inc., and the AA Grapevine, Inc.), together with their respective executive staffs, shall always be voting members of the General Service Conference itself.

Exactly the same concept is borne in mind when our General Service Board elects the Directors of its wholly-owned active service corporations, AA World Services, Inc., and the AA Grapevine, Inc. If it wished, the General Service Board could elect none but its own Trustees to these corporate directorships. But a powerful tradition has grown up to the effect that this never ought to be done.

For example, AA World Services, Inc. (which also includes the AA

publishing division), currently has seven directors, only two of whom are Trustees. The other five, non-Trustee directors, comprise three volunteers, expert in both office management and publishing, and two directors who are paid staff members: the general manager and his assistant. The general manager is traditionally the president of AA World Services, Inc., and his assistant is a vice-president. For communication linkage, the editor or a staff member of the Grapevine or his nominee is invited to attend AA World Services, Inc., meetings.

Therefore, the active management of AA World Services, Inc., and its publishing division is composed of Trustees whose mission is to see that these projects are properly managed; of volunteer experts who contribute their advice and professional experience; and of two paid office executives who are charged with getting

most of the work done. It will be seen that each member of every classification is a director and so has a legal vote; that each corporate officer bears a title which, both practically and legally, denotes what his (or her) actual status and responsibility are.

Such a typical corporate business management easily permits a proper degree of voting "participation." Every skilled element to do the allotted job is present. No class is set in absolute authority over another. This is the corporate or "participating" method of doing business, as distinguished from structures so common to many institutional, military, and governmental agencies wherein high-level people or classes of people often are set in absolute authority, one over the other.

We should also note that the seven [now nine] AA Grapevine directors are elected on the same principle as those of AA World Services, Inc. Here, too, we see Trustees, volunteer experts, and paid staff members acting in concert as the active managers of that operation. And a world service nominee should be present at all GV meetings, both corporate and editorial.

The General Service Board, furthermore, rigorously abides by the

principle of "Participation" whenever its chairman makes appointments to the Board's principal standing committees. Numbers of non-Trustees and paid staff workers are customarily chosen for these important posts. As with the active service corporations, the same elements are nearly always present in these committees, viz., representatives of the General Service Board non-Trustee experts, and one or more staff members who must do most of the legwork. All can vote, and therefore all can truly "participate." When the time comes to ballot, there are no "superiors," no "inferiors," and no "advisers."

To this highly effective and unifying principle of "Participation" at all responsible levels, there is one regrettable but necessary exception. Members holding paid staff positions cannot become Trustees. This cannot be permitted because such a practice would interfere with the four-year rotation of the AA Trustees. And if ever the General Service Board had to be reorganized by the Conference, paid AA Trustees might prove to be a vested interest most difficult to dislodge.

Nevertheless, our Trustees of today traditionally invite paid executives, staff members, accountants,

and any others whose reports or advice may be required, to attend each quarterly meeting of the General Service Board. Thus the Trustees are put into direct communication with these workers, who are thus made to feel that they are wanted and needed. Although they do not vote, these workers may freely participate in debate.

The preservation of the principle of "Participation" in our service structure is, to those of us who already understand its application and benefits, a matter of the highest importance to our future. Experience suggests, however, that some of each new generation of Delegates and Trustees will inevitably try to weaken, modify, or toss out the principle of corporate "participation." Every year, a few Delegates will question the "right" of the corporate directors, of the staffs, and even of the Trustees to vote in Conference. New volunteer corporate directors will ask

why any paid woman staff member should also be a director and thereby have a vote as good as their own. Every now and then, a move will be made to abolish AA World Services, Inc., and the AA Grapevine, Inc. It will be urged that these separate corporations ought to become "departments" or "committees" of the General Service Board, mainly managed by Trustees. To my view, it is so vital that we preserve this traditional "Right of Participation" in the face of every tendency to whittle it down that we should here bring some of our pioneering experience to bear upon the problem.

In its early days, the AA Headquarters [now the General Service Office] was run on authoritarian and institutional lines. At that time, the Trustees saw no reason to delegate their managerial powers or to work in voting participation with any others outside their own body. The result was often grievous trouble and

misunderstanding, and it was out of this rough going that the principle of "Participation" finally emerged. This lesson was learned the hard way, but it *was* learned.

We have seen how Doctor Bob and I had placed our Board of Trustees in full legal possession of all of our service assets. This had included our book literature, our funds, our public relations, and our AA General Service Office. This is how our early Trustees came to have all of the authority there was. But most of the actual responsibility for the conduct of AA's Headquarters nevertheless fell on me, my assistant, and her staff. On the one hand, we had Trustees who possessed complete authority, and on the other hand, there were founders and office managers who had great responsibility but practically no authority. It was a kind of schizophrenia, and it caused real trouble.

It was natural for the Trustees,

who had all of the authority and all of the money, to feel that theirs was the duty to directly manage the office and to actively superintend practically everything that was done. To accomplish this, two Trustee committees were formed, a policy and an administrative committee. We at the office had no membership on these committees and hence no real "participation." Of course, I could go to Trustee meetings to persuade or advise, and the same was true of the committee meetings. But my assistant, who really carried the greater part of the office load, couldn't get inside a Trustee meeting, and she was called into committee meetings only to make suggestions and reports, answer questions, and receive orders. Sometimes, these committees issued us conflicting directives.

The situation was complicated by yet another wheel in the management machine. Our publishing company (then Works Publishing, Inc.)

was of course wholly owned by the Board of Trustees. Except in one important particular, Works Publishing, Inc., had, however, become a pure "dummy." It had nothing to do with the active management except to issue checks for office and publishing expenses. An old AA friend of mine, its Trustee-treasurer, signed those checks. Once, when he was a bit out of sorts, he tore up all of our paychecks because my assistant had issued them a couple of days early so that the gals in the back office could buy Easter bonnets. Right then and there, we began to wonder how much *absolute* authority over money and people any one of us drunks could handle; also, how much of this type of coercion we alkies on the receiving end could sit and take. In any case, it had become dead sure that our Headquarters could not be run by two executive committees and a dummy corporation, each able to issue point-blank nonparticipating directives.

The point may be made that nowadays we drunks can "dish it out" or "take it" better than we used to. Even so, I would sure hate to see us ever go back to a nonparticipating setup. Now that we have more service people involved and more money to handle, I am afraid the result would be much the same and maybe worse. There was really nothing exceptional about the incident of the torn-up checks. Every time an absolute authority is created, it always invites this same tendency to

ward overdomination respecting all things, great and small.

It was years before we saw that we could never put all authority in one group and virtually all responsibility in another and then expect efficiency of operation, let alone real harmony. Of course, no one is against the idea of final authority. We are only against its misapplication or misuse. "Participation" can usually stop this sort of demoralizing nonsense before it starts.

Let us look at another aspect of this participation problem. The final authority for services must lie in the AA groups; but suppose the groups, sensing their great power, should try to overexercise it by sending in Delegates irrevocably instructed as to how to vote on most questions. Would the Delegates feel that they were participants, trusted servants? No, they would feel like agents and order-takers.

The Delegates themselves, of course, could also give the Trustees this same treatment. The Delegates' power is so great that they could soon make the Trustees feel like rubber stamps, just as the Trustees unknowingly did to workers at Headquarters. If, therefore, the Conference ever begins to refuse the Trustee vote in it, and if the Trustees ever again refuse to let corporate service volunteers and staff members vote at the level of their own corporate and Conference work, we shall have thrown all past experience to the winds. The principle of

allowing a proper voting participation would have to be painfully relearned.

One argument for taking away the Trustee and service-worker vote in the Conference is this: It is urged that there is danger if we allow service people and Trustees to vote on their own past performance; for example, their annual reports. To a certain extent, this argument is sound. As a matter of tradition, there is no doubt that Trustees and service workers alike should refrain from voting on reports of their own past activities.

But those who would *do away entirely* with the votes of Trustees and service workers in the Conference overlook the point that such reports of past performance constitute only a fraction of the business of that body. The Conference is far more concerned with policies, plans, and actions which are to take effect in the future. To take away the votes of Trustees and service workers on such questions would obviously be unwise. Why should our Conference be deprived of the votes of such knowledgeable people as these?

(There is another very practical reason for not giving Conference Delegates absolute voting authority over Trustees, service Directors, and staff members. It should be borne in mind that our Delegates can never be like a Congress in constant session, having its own working committees, elected leaders, etc. Our Delegates cannot possibly function

in this manner for the simple reason that they meet for a few days only, once a year. Hence they cannot have an extensive firsthand acquaintance with many of the problems on which they are expected to vote. This is all the more reason for allowing the sometimes better-informed minority of Trustees and Headquarters people the balloting privilege in all cases where no self-interest is involved.)

Perhaps someone will object that, on close votes in the Conference, the combined Trustee and service-worker ballots may decide a particular question. But why not? Certainly, our Trustees and service workers are no less conscientious, experienced, and wise than the Delegates. Is there any good reason why their votes are undesirable? Clearly, there is none. Hence we ought to be wary of any future tendency to deny either our Trustees or our service people their Conference votes, except in special situations that involve past performances, job qualifications, or money compensation, or in case of a sweeping reorganization of the General Service Board itself, occasioned by malfunction of the Board. However, this should never be construed as a bar to Trustee vote on structural changes. It is also noteworthy that in actual practice our Trustees and Headquarters people have never yet voted in a "bloc." Their differences of opinion among themselves are nearly always as sharp and considerable as those to be found among the Delegates.

There is another good reason for "participation," and this one has to do with our spiritual needs. All of us deeply desire to *belong*. We want an AA relation of brotherly partnership. It is our shining ideal that the "spiritual corporation" of AA should never include any members who are regarded as "second class." Deep down, I think this is what we have been struggling to achieve in our world service structure. Here is perhaps the principal reason why we should continue to ensure "participation" at every important level. Just

as there are no second-class AAs, neither should there be any second-class world service workers.

The "Right of Participation" is therefore a corrective of ultimate authority because it mitigates its harshness or misuse. It also encourages us who serve AA to accept the necessary disciplines that our several tasks require. We can do this when we are sure that we belong, when the fact of our "participation" assures us that we are truly the "trusted servants" described in AA's Tradition Two.
