

Charismatic Leadership in
Alcoholics Anonymous

A Case Study

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Summary. The dynamics of an Alcoholics Anonymous group and the qualities of its leadership are described.

_____The characteristic leader of a group in Alcoholics Anonymous is a chairman who assumes his duties for a limited period of time - generally several months or a year - and then retires to become once again a member of the group, while another member takes over the chairman's gavel. The case presented here is very different. Katie Bratten**, a charismatic leader of an AA group in Chicago, made a career of it for well past the usual year, during the period of the case study presented here. Katie's influence on her followers can best be explained by her ability to inspire energy and enthusiasm among her fellow alcoholics.

The case study illustrates the variety which exists in AA - variety in structure, in functions and in leadership. Also illustrated here are some of the often unrecognized factors (positive and negative) which enter into the dynamics of A.A. groups.

This 4-year study began in February 1964 when I discovered that next door to my home, located near Lake Michigan on the Near North Side of Chicago, was the Hangout Club. No probing questions were asked concerning my occasional presence in the club; the other members assumed only that I was a fellow alcoholic. What attracted my interest initially was that Katie Bratten appeared to be strikingly like Max Weber's ideal type of the charismatic leader(1). After the study had been in progress several years, Katie quit as leader. The building in which the club was quartered

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** All names of persons and places in the paper are pseudonyms.

had gone into condominium ownership, and the club lease was terminated. The question now became, "Would the club survive, and if so, how?" In Max Weber's terminology, could charismatic leadership be routinized?

The first home of the Hangout had been Katie's apartment. Katie was a "bachelor girl" of 35 when she came to Chicago from New York. She had become abstinent through the help of New York City A.A. groups several years earlier. When she arrived on Chicago's Near North Side, she placed an advertisement in one of the neighbourhood newspapers announcing that an A.A. meeting would be held in her apartment on Sunday nights.

Within about 6 months the rapidly growing club took over Katie's apartment, while she herself moved nearby. Several obstacles faced Katie. Although she had not mentioned her own name in the advertisement, Katie was almost immediately accused by older A.A. members who were living in the neighbourhood of having broken the A.A. rule concerning anonymity (2). But when one of the older neighbourhood A.A. members visited the club, Katie convinced him that in her eagerness to help the A.A. cause, she had simply not stopped to think of the anonymity rule. Thus assured, the Chicago Central Office (which had been reluctant to refer alcoholics to Katie) endorsed her efforts; and when they learned that Katie intended to keep her club running 7 days a week and 12 hours a day, they began directing people who made telephone inquiries to Katie.

These telephone referrals were primarily of persons making their first contact with A.A., and Katie's club provided a place where they could go immediately, still imbued with a high resolve about stopping drinking. The Central Office saw the benefit of using Katie's club for this purpose. Before the Hangout Club became available, it would often have been 2 or 3 days from the initial telephone inquiry to the time when the alcoholic attended his first A.A. meeting; with the Hangout Club available it was often only a matter of hours before the inquirer found himself at a regular A.A. meeting at the Hangout.

The Friday and Saturday night A.A. meetings at the Hangout soon became standing-room-only affairs. One of the attractions of the Hangout was its smallness and the feeling of closeness of 40 people packed into the little basement apartment. By contrast, other A.A. meetings were often held in large church basements where 40 people appeared lost in a sea of empty seats. The atmosphere of the club seemed to encourage a sense of solidarity - a warm feeling of being near together, as comrades who were cheerfully sharing the experience of finding salvation in abstinence.

Katie eventually instituted nine formal program meetings per week, held in the Club quarters, with a permanent chairman of each meeting appointed by Katie. Although some semblance of a "natural" organization could be inferred from the pyramidal structure in the cadre of meeting chairmen, it would be hard to sustain this since each chairman was appointed by Katie without reference to the opinions of others and, as in feudal organization, each chairman held tenure through Katie's "grace and favour." Katie did not appoint her chairmen from any sort of an "inner clique." Instead, unpredictable criteria seemed to guide her appointments, including what appeared to be her belief that appointment of a person to a

chairmanship might help him overcome extremes of self-consciousness, or perhaps build a sense of social responsibility for staying abstinent.

A typical day in the life of Katie and the club may illuminate what she actually did in her role as leader of the Hangout:

The Hangout was open seven days a week from 10 AM to 10 PM. Henry, the janitor-caretaker, arrived before Katie every morning at about 9 and cleaned the floors, dusted and brewed the first urn of coffee for the day. He usually opened the door of the club promptly at 10 and was often chatting with the first caller of the day - over a cup of coffee - when Katie arrived a few minutes later. Often dressed in knee-knickers and a man's plaid sport shirt, she would bounce into the clubroom in a flurry of greeting to everyone. Then, without waiting for an answer, she would more or less simultaneously pour herself a cup of coffee, light a cigarette, glance through the mail, look at the morning newspaper, check the bulletin board for telephone messages, ask Henry if anything needed immediate attention, chat with whoever might be visiting the clubrooms, answer the telephone when it rang and talk to whoever might be seeking the help of the club, and check the meeting schedule to see if a speaker had been lined up for the 1 PM meeting.

If a referral from the Chicago Central Office of A.A. arrived and was in pretty bad shape, but, in Katie's opinion still something less than a candidate for hospitalization, she would enlist the help of a club member to take the alcoholic to a nearby medical clinic for an injection of B-complex vitamins. Katie was probably aware that there is not much to be gained, medically speaking, from giving an alcoholic a single B-complex vitamin shot, but Katie felt that the action impressed the newcomer that somebody cared and was trying to help. The vitamin injections were billed by the clinic to the club. If the newcomer appeared to need hospitalization and agreed to commit himself to Manteno or Elgin State Hospital, Katie would telephone a club member to drive the newcomer to the hospital and see him safely admitted.

Katie handled all the money transactions of the club, paying the rent, light and telephone bills, and Henry's meagre salary. Every day she gave Henry cash to buy coffee, sugar and other club supplies at a nearby grocery store. Katie had worked out her schedule with Henry so that one or the other of them was on the premises at all times. Around 12:30 PM every week day the members would start arriving for the 1 PM meeting. Katie seemed to say at least a few personal words to each person who came in before the meeting began.

Katie had usually scheduled a speaker for each of the daily meetings, but if the speaker did not arrive, Katie efficiently chaired and opened the meeting herself, often asking someone from the audience to serve as the main speaker. The regular chairman and the scheduled speaker would both sit at the speaker's table during a meeting; the average afternoon meeting was attended by about 25 people and lasted about an hour. The chairman would introduce the speaker who usually talked for 20 to 25 minutes. Then would follow a 5-minute coffee break while a basket was passed for a "free-will offering," followed by comments from the audience, each person being called in turn.

Usually, by 2:30 PM the meeting had broken up and the crowd had thinned out enough so that Katie could return to her own living quarters for about 2 hours of privacy, while Henry "held the fort." By 4:30 PM Katie would check back in at the club, soon leaving to

attend 5 o'clock Mass, inviting anyone who might wish to accompany her.

Back again at the club by 6 PM, Katie "held court" with members who stopped off at the club on their way home from work. Usually there would be 15 or 20 people all talking simultaneously during this 6 to 7 PM period, when Katie again would again start getting things lined up for the evening meeting. People would start filtering in and by * pm often as many as 45 or 50 people would be present.

Katie's charismatic influence was due, first, to her personality - vivacious, outgoing and friendly, she exuded a contagious and cheerful enthusiasm. Second, she constantly emphasized that it was only God (in A.A. terms, the Higher Power) who could grant sobriety to the alcoholic. Katie continually admonished her followers to turn all of their problems over to the Higher Power that would carry their burdens for them and grant them the necessary "courage and serenity" to stay away from the first drink.

Third, Katie maintained a direct personal relationship with each member of the club, exacting from each the promise to telephone her first when tempted to drink. Katie's followers seemed to believe that if they needed it, a kind of supernatural help awaited them at katie's end of the telephone line. Her apparent deep devotion to the Higher Power was discussed among the club members. Her sacrifice and devotion was cause for wonderment and awe. "What is it that keeps Katie going, if not some kind of supernatural help?" This seemed to be the belief of everybody I talked to during this study.

A crisis occurred when the building in which the club was housed decided to transform all rental units into condominium ownership. Katie accepted the loss of the space as a sufficient reason to retire from her leadership position; if the club were to survive, it would have to do it without her help. Nevertheless, she started to seek new homes for the meetings which had been held in the club. But when Katie called a meeting of the membership of the club to discuss its fate, faced as it was by the impending cancellation of the lease, there were surprising developments. First, a rather quiet-mannered, retired older man, Stanley, announced that he had rented space in a building across the street, and that the club would need only to carry its furnishings there when the lease ran out; it would be possible to move the club intact without having to "farm out" the meetings as Katie had feared. Second, two factions disagreed over the proper role of the club in the future. One, led by an older wealthy member, wanted to reorganize the club on a dues-paying basis. The other faction wanted to maintain the status quo of the club, supported by monthly contributions and not restricted to dues-paying members. The second faction won by about a three-quarters majority upon a show of hands. (The defeated faction supported the will of the majority in the following months.)

Katie proposed that the proper heirs of leadership for the club should be the collective group of chairmen of the various A.A. meetings held in the club. The proposal was quickly ratified. Since

the chairman's committee was, in fact, a group which had been originally hand-picked by Katie, continuity of leadership was provided, rather than new strands of leadership which might have been provided by fresh elections. Soon, however, the real reins of leadership were handed over, by the chairmen's committee, to Stanley, who was not a former meeting chairman and who had not been closely associated with Katie in the old club.

Stanley supervised the remodelling of the apartment across the street and the members carried the furniture into the new club on the day the old lease ran out. This phase of the club was to last only 6 months, however, due to another lease termination. It was then decided that the club would have to agree to being classified as a commercial tenant, rather than a residential one, so that future landlords could not complain of unusually heavy use of their property. The third home of the club, a basement facing on the street, very nearly recaptured the charms of the first location. Its apparent drawback came from being located only a block away from a notorious Skid Row area.

Stanley usually spent the winters in Florida, leaving his Chicago apartment in charge of Kane, a fellow A.A. member. When Stanley went to Florida he nominated Kane for the presidency of the club. The club quietly ratified Kane's nomination, but because Kane had a job which prevented his being there in the daytime, a new custodian, Roy, was appointed to assure that somebody would look after the club during the hours it was open. During the daytime hours, Roy now found himself in charge of maintaining discipline. As president, Kane had prestige and authority to maintain the unwritten and implicit rules which were developed under Katie's charismatic leadership. As the new custodian, Roy lacked these advantages, and he found himself forced to substitute explicit written rules. He first tried printing various admonitions on cards: "Do not leave coffee cups on the main desk"; "Keep out of the Tool Room This means you," etc. When these had no effect, he demanded and received from the chairmen's committee of the club a list of house rules which were duly posted, with Roy himself given full authority to enforce minimum standards of acceptable conduct in the club. Thus was the charismatic rule transformed into routine: Roy came to function more as a policeman than as a leader. So the club discovered that it could not simply "run itself"; that some person had to be the locus of authority. When she left, Katie had taken her charismatic authority with her. The authority that partook of the "sacred," in Becker's sacred - secular continuum (3), was gone; the new authority at the Hangout was undoubtedly more secular.*

*Probably under any kind of leadership, in A.A. groups the range would tend toward the sacred end of the sacred-secular continuum, because of the quasi-religious nature of A.A.

Kane did not believe in a supernatural spirit as agent of his abstinence. Instead, he expressed a belief that it was - if any kind of a spirit - a kind of "esprit de corps," which could be explained on naturalistic grounds. This notion, although differing from Katie's is also widespread among A.A. members, especially among those who find that a supernaturalistic agency is beyond their belief.

The Club Membership

The members average age was 37; men outnumbered women; Catholics outnumbered Protestants; years of schooling were slanted a few years beyond high school; few members had college degrees. My first hypothesis was that members of the hangout would have in common a marginality between a past and present modern culture, causing a conflict of identity; many of them were, however, third and fourth generation Americans. I took for granted the absence of lower social-class southerners (Black and White). Presumably in the club's early years such people were unwelcome. It may be illuminating to compare the club with a defunct A.A. group which used to have its headquarters in a church about 10 blocks north of the Hangout. The group once enjoyed an attendance of approximately 60 people every Tuesday night, in an upper-middle class environment provided by the church in the form of one of its attractive social rooms, furnished with a mahogany breakfront, a Steinway grand piano, etc. Founded by several young businessmen who nearly all married and moved to the suburbs, the group soon found that it had lost the energy which had kept it going, and in about a year it fell apart and disbanded. Probably what happened was that nobody bothered to show before meetings to make coffee or to arrange for a speaker, etc. Many of those who came may have left the meetings disgusted at its lackadaisical spirit, and did not return.

To many A.A. members, abstinence may seem like a stroke of fortune that demands no additional personal reform. Such a program of personal improvement is, indeed, embodied in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (2), but a suggested goal of A.A. has it that "We seek spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection" (4, p.72).

"Doing good" frequently implies a kind of doing good at other people while neglecting one's own development. The Hangout, in fact, sought to do both kinds of good: To encourage each member to improve himself, and to carry the "message" (3). A few A.A. exist which have little concern for alcoholics who are still drinking or who keep falling off the wagon, and which often restrict their membership to those who have remained abstinent for 6 months or more. These emphasize the specifically club aspect, while deemphasizing the treatment aspect of their organization.

But the special trademark of the Hangout is its established image as a kind of treatment centre or, in words preferred by Katie, a service centre. The particular and unique stamp of the Hangout is precisely its active and continued concern with helping other alcoholics, reflecting the influence of its founder. The club survived her departure, and thus, in Weber's terminology, charismatic leadership was successfully routinized.

References

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