

The Twelve Concepts for World Service

How Bill W explained the spiritual principles that underpin AA's structure and how the parts work together.

This is an illustrated pamphlet about the Concepts; it is NOT the Concepts themselves. They are found in the book *The AA Service Manual / Twelve Concepts for World Service*, and should be read by every trusted servant. (A short version is also printed in *SHARE* and *Alcoholics Anonymous, Fourth Edition*).

The growth of AA began with the groups, only a few at first, then hundreds and then thousands. Very early in the development an Alcoholic Foundation later renamed The General Service Board was formed to be responsible for our affairs. With Dr Bob's death and Bill facing up to his own mortality a General Service Conference assumed the leadership which had previously fallen to the co-founders. Meanwhile, a service office had grown in size and importance to the Fellowship and monthly journals were being published.

For a number of years there was confusion. Which of these entities was supposed to do what? What was their relationship? Who was in charge? What were their responsibilities and what were their rights? Bill W himself sometimes took part in the pushing and pulling that took place and so he saw the need to reduce to writing his concepts of the "why" of the whole structure, the lessons to be drawn from experience, the relationships and, above all, the spiritual principles.

As Bill set them down, the Twelve Concepts are a potpourri: Concepts Three, Four, Five, Nine and Twelve deal with spiritual principles; the remainder, though they have spiritual overtones, are devoted to describing the relationship of the various service entities and how they work together.

What follows in this pamphlet is an illustrated introduction to the Twelve Concepts as they apply to our structure in Great Britain. If it is answers or guidance you are seeking, go to the Concepts themselves.

CONCEPT ONE

Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.

Alcoholics Anonymous has been called an upside-down organization because the ultimate responsibility and final authority for world services resides with the groups rather than with the trustees of the General Service Board or the General Service Office.

In Concept One, Bill outlined how this came about. In order to perform the services the groups could not do for themselves a service office was formed to carry out these functions under the board's direction. Initially the board and the office looked to the co-founders, Bill and Dr Bob, for policy leadership.

Bill had to consider, after Dr Bob became fatally ill, who would advise the trustees and the office in the future. Bill decided the answer was to be found in the collective conscience of the AA groups. The problem was how the autonomous and widely scattered groups could exercise such a responsibility?

Overcoming great resistance Bill managed to convince trustees and members to the idea of calling an AA General Service Conference (see Concept Two) and eleven years later Bill was able to declare that the results of the Conference had exceeded their highest expectations. This Concept was rooted in Tradition Two (*For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority – a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern*).

Bill declared that the principles of Tradition Two were crystal-clear, *The AA groups are to be the final authority; their leaders are to be entrusted with delegated responsibilities only*. Society cannot imagine an organization run this way but Bill called it a spiritualized society characterized by enough enlightenment, enough responsibility, and enough love of man and of God to insure that our democracy of world service will work.

CONCEPT TWO

When, in 1955, the A.A. groups confirmed the permanent charter for their General Service Conference, they thereby delegated to the Conference complete authority for the active maintenance of our world services and thereby made the Conference – excepting for any change in the Twelve Traditions or in Article 12 of the Conference Charter – the actual voice and the effective conscience for our whole Society.

Concept One establishes the final responsibility and ultimate authority of the AA groups. However in actual practice AA's service affairs are managed by delegation through Concept Two.

In order to get the programme going and to spread the message of AA it became necessary for Bill and Dr Bob to invite non-alcoholic friends to help them. They formed a trusteeship and delegated to it the responsibility for finance, literature, public information, the service office and AA publications. However, as the trustees constantly looked to the co-founders for advice and guidance and the groups also continued to hold them accountable, it was evident that the leadership should be transferred to the AA groups as a whole. However if the groups were to carry on their primary purpose, they would have to delegate their leadership role to a General Service Conference.

Each group does this by electing a General Service Representative. These GSRs meet regularly at Intergroup, from where Regional delegates are elected.

The Regional assemblies then elect delegates to General Service Conference. Every year the delegates from the Regions of GB and Continental Europe meet with the trustees of the General Service Board, the staff of the General Service Office and specific service representatives. This General Service Conference of AA is the actual voice and effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.

CONCEPT THREE

As a traditional means of creating and maintaining a clearly defined working relation between the groups, the Conference, the A.A. General Service Board and its several corporations, staffs, committees and executives, and of thus insuring their effective leadership, it is here suggested that we endow each of these elements of world service with a traditional "Right of Decision."

Except in a few specific cases, every trusted servant and every AA body, at all levels of service, has the right to decide how they will interpret and apply their own authority and responsibility to each particular problem or situation as it arises. They can decide which problems they will deal with themselves and which matters they will report, consult, or ask specific directions. This is the essence of The Right of Decision.

However this right also means the Fellowship must have trust in its trusted servants. If the groups instruct their GSRs rather than giving them a Right of Decision then the Intergroup is hamstrung. If the GSRs instruct the Regional delegates rather than giving them a Right of Decision then the General Service Conference is hamstrung. Bill pointed out that our Conference delegates are primarily the servants of AA and should cast their votes according to the best dictates of their own judgment and conscience at that time.

Similarly, if the General Service Board were to attempt to manage every detail of the General Service Office then the staff members would quickly become demoralized.

Bill warned against using The Right of Decision as an excuse for failure to make the proper reports of actions taken; or for exceeding a clearly defined authority; or for failing to consult the proper people before making an important decision. But he concluded that our entire AA programme rests squarely upon the principle of mutual trust. We trust God, we trust AA and we trust each other.

CONCEPT FOUR

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 Right of Participation is built into the General Service Conference through the Conference Charter. Voting members include delegates, trustees and certain appointed members of GSO administration.

The General Service Board appoints trustee members and where necessary staff members to the board committees in order to have the advantage of their expertise. There are no 'superiors,' no 'inferiors' and no 'advisers.' New trustees on the General Service Board are sometimes surprised to see staff members and, where necessary, professionals attending the board meetings. They are invited because of AA's Right of Participation. Thus, the trustees are put into direct communication with these workers, who feel wanted and needed. Although they do not vote, these workers may freely participate.

Bill warned against the possibility of new delegates or trustees trying to weaken, modify or toss out the Right of Participation. He argued that our trustees and service workers are not less conscientious, experienced and wise than the delegates. He continued that it is vital to preserve the traditional Right of Participation in the face of every tendency to whittle it down.

Finally, there is a spiritual reason for the Right of Participation. All of us desire to belong. In AA, no members are second class. The Right of Participation therefore reinforces Tradition Two, that no member is placed in ultimate authority over another. We perform our service tasks better when we are sure we belong; when our participation assures us we are truly the trusted servants described in Tradition Two.

CONCEPT FIVE

Throughout our world services structure, a "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered.

Newcomers to AA's General Service Conference are often surprised at the pains taken by the Chair of Conference to make sure the minority has a second opportunity to present its views. Even after extensive debate on an issue, followed by a vote in which a substantial unanimity is reached, those opposed are polled individually to see if they wish to speak further to their minority view. In fact, numerous instances can be cited in which this minority view is so compelling the Conference has then reversed its previous decision.

This is AA's Right of Appeal in action and Bill said the same principle should apply to meetings of our groups, intergroups, regions and boards. On an issue of grave importance, the minority has the actual *duty* of presenting its views.

The Right of Appeal recognizes that minorities frequently can be right. Even when they are in error they still perform a most valuable service when they compel a thorough-going debate on important issues. The well-heard minority, therefore, is our chief protection against an uninformed, misinformed, hasty or angry majority.

According to Bill, trusted servants do for the groups what the groups cannot or should not do for themselves. In exercising their Right of Decision (see Concept Three), trusted servants are almost always a small but truly qualified minority, whether in the form of regional committees, staffs, boards or even the General Service Conference itself. It is incumbent upon them, therefore, in their own meetings, to pay special deference to the minority voice.

This Concept also warns us of the tyranny of the majority and points out that in AA, a simple majority is seldom sufficient basis for a decision. That's why we usually require at least a two-thirds majority. Lacking this, it is preferable to delay the decision; or in the case of an election following the Third Legacy Procedure to "go to the hat."

The Right of Appeal also permits any person in the service structure, whether paid or volunteer, to petition for redress of a personal grievance. He or she can complain directly to the General Service Board, without prejudice or fear of reprisal.

CONCEPT SIX

On behalf of A.A. as a whole, our General Service Conference has the principal responsibility for the maintenance of our world services, and it traditionally has the final decision respecting large matters of general policy and finance. But the Conference also recognizes that the chief initiative and the active responsibility in most of these matters should be exercised primarily by the Trustee members of the Conference when they act among themselves as the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

We have seen that the final responsibility and ultimate authority for AA's service activities rest with the AA groups (Concept One), but to carry out this responsibility they must delegate to the Conference (Concept Two). The Conference, in turn, must delegate administrative authority to the General Service Board of Trustees. Again, it is helpful if you are familiar with the Conference Charter as it applies to the General Service Board in understanding this relationship and the freedom of action that the trustees must have.

The trustees have the legal and practical responsibility for the operation of AA General Service Office and Conference approved publications. These bodies have a substantial cash flow each year. The trustees are also responsible for AA's public information activities. They are the guardians of the Twelve Traditions. They are responsible for carrying the AA message to other countries around the world.

Bill made the point that although our objective is always a spiritual one, nevertheless our service is a large business operation. Indeed our whole service structure resembles that of a large company. The AA groups are the shareholders, the delegates represent them at the annual meeting; the General Service Board Trustees are actually the directors of a limited company. This limited company (the General Service Board of AA) actually owns and controls AA and Conference approved publications which carry on the services.

This very real example makes it clear that, like any other board of directors, our trustees must be given large powers if they are to manage the affairs of Alcoholics Anonymous.

CONCEPT SEVEN

The Conference recognizes that the Charter and the Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments: that the Trustees are thereby fully empowered to manage and conduct all of the world service affairs of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is further understood that the Conference Charter itself is not a legal document: that it relies instead upon the force of tradition and the power of the A.A. purse for its final effectiveness.

This Concept attempts to clarify the relationship and balance of powers between the Conference and the General Service Board. This may look like the collision of an irresistible force with an immovable object. On the one hand, the board is invested with complete legal power over AA's funds and services; on the other hand the Conference is clothed with such great influence and financial power it could overcome the legal rights of the board.

Therefore, the practical power of the Conference is, in the final analysis, superior to the legal power of the board. This superior power derives from the traditional influence of the Conference Charter itself; from the fact that the delegates chosen by their regions always constitute more than two-thirds of the Conference members; and finally from the ability of the delegates to cut off financial support by the groups. Theoretically, the Conference is an advisory body only; but practically speaking, it has all the ultimate power it may ever need.

The Conference 'recommends' though their recommendations have the force of directives to the board. The board executes these recommendations. The board does have the legal authority to veto a Conference recommendation but, in actual practice, it never has done so. As Bill tactfully put it the trustees simply refrain from using their legal right to say no when it would be much wiser, all things considered, to say yes.

If the Conference will always bear in mind actual rights, duties, responsibilities and legal status of the General Service Board, and if the trustees will constantly realize that the Conference is the real seat of ultimate service authority neither will be seriously tempted to make a rubber stamp out of the other. In this way grave issues will always be resolved and harmonious cooperation will be the general rule.

CONCEPT EIGHT

The Trustees of the General Service Board act in two primary capacities: (a) With respect to the larger matters of over-all policy and finance, they are the principal planners and administrators. They and their primary committees directly manage these affairs. (b) But with respect to our separately incorporated and constantly active services, the relation of the Trustees is mainly that of full stock ownership and of custodial oversight which they exercise through their ability to elect all directors of these entities.

This Concept deals with the ways the General Service Board discharges its heavy obligations and its relationship with the General Service Office.

Long experience has proven that the board must devote itself almost exclusively to the larger questions of policy, finance, group relations and leadership. In these matters, it must act with great care and skill to plan, manage and execute.

The board, therefore, must not be distracted or burdened with the details or the endless questions which arise daily in the routine operation of the General Service Office or the publishing operations.

The board's attitude has to be that of custodial oversight. The trustees are the guarantors of good management of the General Service Office whilst the executive direction of these functions is lodged in the service bodies themselves, rather than the General Service Board.

Bill drew from earlier mistakes by the General Service Board in trying to run the service functions directly and warned repeatedly against too much concentration of money and authority.

CONCEPT NINE

Good service leaders, together with sound and appropriate methods of choosing them, are at all levels indispensable for our future functioning and safety. The primary world service leadership once exercised by the founders of A.A. must necessarily be assumed by the Trustees of the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous.

No matter how carefully we design our service structure of principles and relationships, no matter how well we apportion authority and responsibility, the operating results of our structure can be no better than the personal performance of those who must staff it and make it work. Good leadership cannot function well in a poorly designed structure. Weak leadership can hardly function at all, even in the best of structures.

Due to AA's principle of rotation, furnishing our service structure with able and willing workers has to be a continuous effort. The base of the service structure and the source of our leadership is the General Service Representative. The GSR is the service leader for his or her group, the indispensable link between the group and AA as a whole. Together the GSRs are AA's group conscience and together, in their intergroups, they elect the delegates to region. The region then elects delegates to Conference and nominates candidates for regional trustee. The General Service Board then selects a trustee from the nominees to meet their specific needs. Groups who have not named GSRs should be encouraged to do so. As the GSRs meet in intergroups care and dedication are required. Personal ambitions should be cast aside; feuds and controversies forgotten. The thought of all should be to elect the best qualified people.

Bill said that no society could function well without able leadership in all its levels and AA could be no exception. Fortunately, our Society is blessed with any amount of real leadership, the active people of today and the potential leaders of tomorrow as each new generation of able members swarms in. We have an abundance of men and women whose dedication, stability, vision and special skills make them capable of dealing with every possible service assignment. We have only to seek these folks out and to trust them to serve us.

A leader in AA service is therefore a man or woman who can personally put principles, plans and policies into such dedicated and effective action that the rest of us want to back them and help them with their job.

Good leadership will also remember that a fine plan or idea can come from anybody, anywhere. Consequently, good leadership will often discard its own cherished plans for others that are better and it will give credit to the source.

Good leadership never passes the buck. Once assured that it has, or can, obtain sufficient general backing, it freely takes decisions and puts them into action forthwith, provided of course that such actions be within the framework of its defined authority and responsibility.

Another qualification for leadership is that of give and take, the ability to compromise cheerfully whenever a proper compromise can cause a situation to progress in what

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appears to be the right direction. We cannot, however, compromise always. Now and then, it is truly necessary to stick flat-footed to one's convictions about an issue until it is settled.

Our leaders do not drive by mandate, they lead by example. We say to them, 'Act for us, but do not boss us.'

CONCEPT TEN

Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority – the scope of such authority to be always well defined whether by tradition, by resolution, by specific job description or by appropriate charters and bylaws.

Our service structure cannot function effectively and harmoniously unless, at every level, each operational responsibility is matched by a corresponding authority to discharge it. This requires that authority must be delegated at every level and that the responsibility and authority of every entity are well defined and clearly understood.

As we have seen (Concept One) final responsibility and ultimate authority reside with the AA groups, and they delegate this authority to the Conference (Concept Two). The Conference, in turn, delegates to the General Service Board the authority to manage AA's affairs (Concept Three) on its behalf. The board is in authority over its subsidiary operating General Service Office and Conference approved publications but it delegates the authority necessary to run these service bodies. Finally, the directors delegate to the GSO staff members and other employees the authority necessary to carry out their important service jobs.

Bill said that it was perfectly clear that when delegated authority is operating well, it should not be constantly interfered with. Otherwise those charged with operating responsibility will be demoralized. For example, the General Service Board owns AA and AA Conference approved publications and its authority over them is absolute. Nevertheless, so long as things go well, it is highly important that the trustees do not unnecessarily interfere with or usurp the operating authority of these entities.

Let us always be sure that there is an abundance of final or ultimate authority to correct or to reorganize; but let us be equally sure that all of our trusted servants have a clearly defined and adequate authority to do their daily work and to discharge their clear responsibilities.

CONCEPT ELEVEN

While the trustees hold final responsibility for A.A.'s world service administration, they should always have the assistance of the best possible standing committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs and consultants. Therefore, the composition of these underlying committees and service boards, the personal qualifications of their members, the manner of their induction into service, the systems of their rotation, the way in which they are related to each other, the special rights and duties of our executives, staffs and consultants, together with a proper basis for the financial compensation of these special workers, will always be matters for serious care and concern.

In this, the second longest of the Concepts, Bill explained in great detail the composition, functions and relationships of the committees of the General Service Board, the General Service Office and the AA Conference approved publications - as they existed in 1962. As AA has grown and changed, many of the descriptions have been amended and some of the issues that were addressed have been deleted as they are no longer relevant. Nevertheless, the full text is valuable as an historical document and many of the principles still apply as summarized below.

Underlying the service structure we have been discussing there is another internal structure of service consisting of the executives and staff members. Bill declared that members of this group not only support the leadership of the trustees: they share the leadership with them.

The following are several principles that apply to AA and the AA publications

1. The status of executives

No active service can function well unless it has sustained and competent executive direction. This must always head up in one person, supported by such assistants as they need. That person has to have ample freedom and authority to do their job, and they should not be interfered with so long as their work is done well.

2. Paid workers, how compensated

Each paid executive, staff member or consultant should be recompensed in reasonable relation to the value of his or her similar services or abilities in the commercial world. Cheap help is apt to feel insecure and inefficient. It is very costly in the long run. This is neither good spirituality nor good business. Assuming service money is available, we should therefore compensate our workers well.

3. Rotation among paid staff workers

At AA's General Service Office each staff member is expected to possess the general ability to do, or to learn how to do, any job in the place – excepting for office management.

4. Full Participation of paid workers is highly important

We have already discussed the necessity of giving key paid personnel representation on any of our committees and boards. They should enjoy a status suitable to their responsibility, just as our volunteers do.

CONCEPT TWELVE

General Warranties of the Conference: in all its proceedings, the General Service Conference shall observe the spirit of the A.A. Tradition, taking great care that the conference never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds, plus an ample reserve, be its prudent financial principle; that none of the Conference Members shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others: that all important decisions be reached by discussion vote and whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that no Conference action ever be personally punitive or an incitement to public controversy; that though the Conference may act for the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any acts of government; and that, like the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous which it serves, the Conference itself will always remain democratic in thought and action.

This Concept consists of the General Warranties of the General Service Conference. It is cast in stone; that is, although Bill left the door open for alterations and changes in the other Concepts and points out that the rest of the Conference Charter can be readily amended, these General Warranties, like the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions, can be changed only by written consent of three-quarters of all AA groups in the world!

The reason is that these Warranties indicate the qualities of prudence and spirituality which the Conference should always possess. These are the permanent bonds that hold the Conference fast to the movement it serves.

The Warranties also express spiritual principles which apply to all other AA bodies as well. Let us consider these principles one by one:

Warranty One:

The Conference shall never become the seat of perilous wealth or power. The Seventh Tradition protects us against the accumulation of too much money. So long as we refuse to take outside contributions and limit individual members' donations we shall not become wealthy in any perilous sense. If we live by Tradition Two, that our ultimate authority is a loving God and that our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern, then we are safe from perilous power.

Warranty Two:

Sufficient operating funds, plus an ample Reserve, should be its prudent financial principle. Although many of us active alcoholics were free spenders, when it comes to supporting AA service overhead, we are apt to turn a bit reluctant. Yet, in AA the cost of the service office is relatively low in terms of the number of groups served and if the need for support is made clear the contributions are forthcoming. The Reserve Fund should be one full year's operating expenses of the GSO and ancillary functions. The Reserve Fund comes almost entirely from income from the sale of AA literature, which also is used to make up the deficit between group contributions and the cost of group services.

Warranty Three:

None of the Conference members shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others. This principle is discussed earlier in Concept Four, but it is so important we have made it the subject of this Warranty; a strong stand against the creation of unqualified authority at any point in our Conference structure.

Warranty Four:

That all important decisions should be reached by discussion, vote, and wherever possible, by substantial unanimity. This Warranty is, on the one hand, a safeguard against any hasty or overbearing authority of a simple majority; and, on the other hand, it takes notice of the rights and the frequent wisdom of minorities, however small. This principle guarantees that all matters of importance, time permitting, will be extensively debated, and that such debates will continue until a really heavy majority can support every critical decision.

Warranty Five:

That no Conference action shall ever be personally punitive or an incitement to public controversy. Although practically all other societies and governments find it necessary to punish individual members for violations of their beliefs, principles or laws, Alcoholics Anonymous finds this practice unnecessary.

When we fail to follow sound spiritual principles, alcohol cuts us down. No humanly administered system of penalties is needed. This unique condition is an enormous advantage to us all, one on which we can fully rely and one which we should never abandon by resorting to personal attack and punishment. Of all societies, ours can least afford to risk the resentments and conflicts which would result were we ever to yield to the temptation to punish in anger.

For much the same reason, we cannot and should not enter into public controversy, even in self-defence. Our experience has shown that, providentially, AA has been made exempt from the need to quarrel with anyone, no matter what the provocation. Nothing could be more damaging to our unity and to the worldwide goodwill which AA enjoys than public contention, no matter how promising the immediate dividends might appear.

Some situations which may require Conference consideration are:

AA may come under sharp public attack or heavy ridicule, perhaps with little or no justification in fact. Our best defence in these situations would be no defence whatever, namely, complete silence at the public level. If the criticism of AA is partly or wholly justified, it may be well to acknowledge this privately to the critics, with our thanks.

Public violations of AA Traditions.

Our own members may try to use the AA name for their private purposes. Aggressive or punitive action, even in this area, must be omitted. Privately, we can inform Tradition-violators that they are out of order. When they persist, we can use such other resources

of persuasion as we have. In the long run, though, we shall have to rely mainly on the pressures of AA opinion and public opinion.

Another kind of problem is the severe internal disagreement that comes to unwelcome public attention. As GSO is not a police operation we can only offer AA's experience as a matter of information.

Warranty Six:

That though the Conference may act for the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any acts of government; and that, like the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous which it serves, the Conference itself will always remain democratic in thought and action.

The AA Traditions accord the individual member and the AA group extraordinary liberties. In fact, we AAs probably enjoy more and greater freedoms than any Fellowship in the world. We claim this as no virtue. We know we have to choose conformity to AA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions or else face dissolution and death.

Because we set such a high value on our great liberties and cannot conceive that they will need to be limited, we here specially enjoin our General Service Conference to abstain completely from any and all acts of authoritative government which could in any way curtail AA's freedom under God. We expect our Conference always to try to act in the spirit of mutual respect and love one member to another.

Freedom under God to grow in His likeness and image will ever be the quest of Alcoholics Anonymous. May our General Service Conference be always seen as a chief symbol of this cherished liberty.