

OA GUIDELINES



Guidelines for a Group Conscience Meeting

As described in the *OA Handbook for Members, Groups and Service Bodies*, many groups hold meetings to determine how best to conduct meetings, spend funds, organize special events and deal with issues that affect the group or OA as a whole. These meetings to discuss the business of the group allow members to work together to consider and agree on how best to proceed in the interests of OA as a whole.

Our business meetings are conducted by group conscience. Group conscience is about the special ways (unique to Twelve-Step Fellowships) in which the individuals in a group conscience meeting are inspired to enable the meeting to agree on the best decisions for OA.

In our pamphlet *The Twelve Concepts of OA Service*, Concept One discusses the need to reach an *informed* group conscience. Our Twelve Traditions and our Twelve Concepts of OA Service are the basis for much of our decision making and the primary means by which we reach an informed group conscience (other means include the history of the group, what other groups have done in similar situations and other background it may be useful to gather). When we cannot decide what approach to take, it is always prudent to look first at the Traditions and Concepts.

Group conscience demands the private discipline of accepting that our own views are just that, our own views, and listening with an open mind to the views of others. We are prepared to see things differently and to adjust our perception and yield to the group conscience to arrive at consensus.

On page 122 of *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, we are told:

Not all our group decisions will be wise and practical. We do make mistakes sometimes and have to look for better answers to a problem. Another group conscience vote can be taken when something needs to be corrected. Like individuals, OA groups learn from their mistakes—and so does OA as a whole. We find that our Higher Power often leads us through our blunders.

To minimize blunders, it's important that every voting member be fully informed and understand all pertinent facts before voting.

Behind all this lies 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." The only way God can express himself must be through every one of us, so each of us is responsible for attempting to be free of our own will so we may be open to the good of the whole. The same spirit of selflessness applies regardless of the size or service level of the group.

Groups often hold group conscience meetings before or after their regular meetings. Groups may set a regular schedule for these meetings, or any member of the group may call for a meeting.

Providing notice of the meeting and agenda topics a few weeks in advance is a good idea so those attending may have time to think about the items, read background material and find relevant information when appropriate.

In some meetings, all persons attending may vote; other meetings might restrict voting privileges to regular attendees. While some steering committee meetings might restrict voting on routine matters, such as paying bills, to those who meet the committee's abstinence requirements, all group members vote on matters of major importance, such as format and abstinence requirements for speakers and officers.

The *OA Handbook for Members, Groups and Service Bodies* offers this guidance:

Most members have a special feeling for one particular group, and consider it their home group where they accept responsibilities and try to sustain friendships. They do not meddle in the business or policy of groups they visit only occasionally and in which they would accept no service assignments (p. 6).

Your group or service body may find it useful to study the Traditions and Concepts regularly to become better informed about their origin and usefulness. Many groups have a Traditions meeting once a month in which the topic of that meeting is a particular Tradition.

The following is a suggested format for group conscience meetings. It does not require formal decision-making methods such as motion,

amendment and debate because, as Concept Twelve (d) states, “all important decisions shall be reached by discussion, by vote and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity.” But a group may decide that a certain item would be more efficiently discussed by using motions and votes. The size of the group may determine the formality needed. Each group may decide how to conduct their business.

Suggested Format for a Group Conscience Meeting

1. Introduction

“Welcome to the group conscience meeting of the _____ group of Overeaters Anonymous. My name is _____, and I am a compulsive overeater and the chairperson of this meeting.”

2. Serenity Prayer

“Will those who wish to, please join me in the Serenity Prayer:

‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.’”

3. Reading of the Steps, Traditions and Concepts if appropriate.

4. Establishing Ground Rules

“The purpose of this meeting is to make decisions that affect our group. I encourage everyone here to participate. If a matter comes to a vote and you do not attend our meeting regularly or do not plan to, please consider whether it would be reasonable for you to vote. However, we welcome everyone’s viewpoint; we can all learn from one another.

“Please remember Tradition Five: ‘Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the compulsive overeater who still suffers.’ Therefore, anything we decide at this meeting must reflect that purpose. No matter what we believe as individuals, we must be united in our purpose to carry our message as best we can to the compulsive overeater who still suffers. That person is our focus. May we do our best for him or her.”

5. Minutes from Previous Meeting

“Are there minutes from our last meeting?”

Secretary reads minutes, if available, or distributes copies.

“Any corrections or additions?”

Applicable corrections or additions are made.

6. Setting Up the Agenda

[At this point, the chair presents the agenda and asks for additions or amendments. The agenda often results from discussions at previous meetings, or people at the current meeting may make suggestions. The chair should make certain that the agenda is clear, in a logical sequence and agreeable to those attending the group conscience meeting. The attendees address each item on the agenda.]

7. Making Decisions

[Some agenda items may require collecting information before the meeting; e.g., if one item is “should the meeting start half an hour earlier,” it would be important to check if the room is available half an hour earlier. Depending on the nature of the issue, decisions can be made in different ways. The issue might not be controversial at all. It might be supported or opposed by most people in the group, but vehemently opposed or supported by a minority. It might have the support of only slightly more or less than half the group. Each of these possibilities can require a different approach.]

To determine how to handle the issue, the chair might begin with a general statement, such as:

“The issue here is whether or not this group should change its meeting format to have a Traditions meeting on the last Monday of the month. Does anyone feel strongly one way or the other? Let’s go around the room and have people indicate how they feel, what they think would be best for the group, and why they think this would be helpful to the group.” (or “Let’s have a quick vote. Those who like the proposal, please raise your hands. Now, those who don’t like the proposal, please raise your hands.”)

General Consensus

If it becomes clear that the members generally share the same opinion, the chair can say something like the following:

“It seems that we may have reached a consensus. Let’s make certain. Does anyone oppose (or support) this proposal?”

If no hands are raised, the chair may say:

“Let’s go on to other business. Would our secretary please record that we reached a consensus to have (or not have) a Traditions meeting on the last Monday of the month.”

Some Support or Opposition

If it is apparent that some feel strongly for or against the proposal, the chair may say something like the following:

“It is clear that at least some members feel strongly that this proposal should (not) go forward. We in OA try to find a consensus, so it is important that we hear all points of view. Often those who disagree with the majority can best educate us by explaining the reasons for the views they hold. Let us remember that whatever decision we make can always be changed if our experience suggests it isn’t working. Let us have two people who support the proposal and two who oppose it speak for two (or three or five) minutes each, alternating one for and one against, followed by another vote.”

Clear Result from the Vote

If the results of the vote are clear—very few members either oppose or support the proposal—then the chair may say something like:

“It appears that this proposal has (or does not have) the support of the majority of the group. Accordingly, would our secretary please record that we reached a group conscience on _____.”

A Large Minority

If the vote doesn't show a clear consensus, in the interests of developing a true group conscience, the chair should try to work toward a greater consensus in the following suggested manner:

“Concept Twelve (d) says, ‘all important decisions shall be reached by discussion, by vote and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity.’ In my opinion, we have not reached substantial unanimity. A large number of members present oppose (or support) this proposal, and to go with the majority would not achieve unanimity.

Does anyone have an idea of how to develop our informed group conscience in this situation?”

Here are some ideas that different groups have used to develop a group conscience:

- Ask for suggestions, changes or amendments to the proposal that might address some of the reasons it has not found substantial unanimity. Perhaps those in the minority who are opposed to the proposal largely support it but disagree with one or two parts. Amending those parts could result in substantial unanimity.
- Appoint a committee of two, four or six members, evenly divided on the issue, to discuss it and make recommendations to the group.
- Try the proposal for a limited time and monitor its effectiveness. Schedule a group conscience meeting for one to six months in the future to decide whether to continue using it.
- Hold the proposal until the next group conscience meeting, and announce at each OA group meeting that it did not achieve substantial unanimity and that it is important for all regularly attending members to be at the next group conscience meeting to discuss the proposal fully.

8. Closing

“Is there any further business to conduct? Does anyone want to raise an issue for a future meeting?”

“Thank you for coming. To close the meeting, let us have a moment of silence followed by _____ [a closing of your choice].”