

Small “t” Traditions for Doing Business in CNCA

As Perceived and Documented by Jeff

Area Committee Meeting, DCMC sharing session, June 2007; Revised Sept, 2012

As a DCMC and later as CNCA chair, I more clearly understand the Area Committee and Assembly process of “doing business the AA way” by conducting business this way myself when chairing service meetings. I grasp the Delegate’s report on the Conference by experiencing “business the AA way” at sundry levels.

This document contains mere thoughts and ideas to ponder based on principles, **not rules**. I would never expect anyone to use this as an exact script. I use it as a personal reference and as a guide, constantly reminding myself about “Rule #62.” Certainly these informal thoughts are no substitute for reading the vast amount of literature available on this topic, with the guide of a service sponsor or spiritual mentor.

As I mention below, the chair does not have to (and often should not) answer questions or provide responses and defenses while facilitating a business meeting or sharing session. From Chapter Four, “The Area Assembly and Activities,” of the *A.A Service Manual*, under **Sharing Sessions**: “(The Sharing Session’s) format is aimed at drawing out the ideas of even the shyest participant, and keeps the more articulate from dominating the meeting. Each person offers an opinion, and never needs to defend it. The chair or leader functions more as a timekeeper than a participant.” Referring to those of us in *Onandonandonandon*, this section later suggests that the leader may employ a “loud bell” to limit sharing to 90 seconds or two minutes each. And: “Usually no one is permitted to speak twice on the same subject until all who wish to have spoken.” In my opinion, this varies significantly from *Robert’s Rules of Order* in which the more articulate and aggressive participants more easily gain the upper hand. The *A.A Service Manual* indicates that areas should be more sensitive about bringing forward shy members than the Conference or say Parliament. As the area progressed through agenda topics at the Pre-Conference Assembly, at least one area chair called to the microphone only GSRs who had not spoken on any previous topic.

The chair is no smarter than anyone, but hopefully has a little experience. The chair has no moral or spiritual authority, and may issue no judgment of others’ morals. The chair has been delegated to carry out some of the groups’ chores—not because she/he is wiser but because somebody’s got to do it.

In CNCA, we integrate components mostly from the below sources:

- Informal small “t” traditions, which are not approved guidelines
- *a little bit* of Robert’s Rules of Order
- AA traditions, concepts and warranties— and even the steps

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- The Conference Charter
- Shared and documented experience from various current and past trusted servants
- Experience gleaned from the annual General Service Conferences—
Obviously, the cycle of a motion, from presentation to voting in CNCA, does not apply to the Conference.
- Miscellaneous AA literature

Presentation of Business: New Business

Clearly written. Minimum of 3 copies

1. chair
2. recording secretary
3. maker of the motion to read from when presenting the motion.

Motions from Group Conscience (e.g., district or committee) do not require a 2nd. Personal motions made by an individual, not a group, and hence not been discussed by a group of trusted servants: require 2nd.

The concept is that at least two people are in favor of the new motion. Hopefully we're not all utterly crazy on the same day.

In rare cases, the chair may refuse a motion, e.g., a personally punitive one.

Ask questions for clarification only; no debate, no discussion.

Housekeeping motions: Simple in nature, handle minor objectives, not expensive, not set precedent, not affect other entities or AA as a whole. Lower impact. Procedural only; i.e., should not affect policy. Often routine motions, though not always routine if they are simple and non-controversial; e.g., Panel 59 registrar presented a HK motion for \$200 to assist with the annual updates (because of changes at GSO) and this passed without objection. This particular practice had never been done by CNCA, so it wasn't "routine." However it has since become routine. Housekeeping motions are only "presentations," so there may be clarification or questions, but not substantial discussion or debate. Any objection causes it to become "new business."

Area committee or the assembly?? Decided by simple majority. Decision is *sometimes* influenced by whether the motion is a question of policy or procedure. Procedural (one-time, no precedent) usually stay at ACM. Policy matters go to either. My research indicates that the important questions are around impact. *Possible touchstones for "lower impact" business discussed and decided by AC*

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and not the assembly: does not impact or interest the AA groups directly, or other areas, or AA as a whole; less money; less controversy. Often, matters affecting policy of the area, particularly only the AC, are discussed and decided by AC; e.g., guidelines, equipment, committees. Perusing the *CNCA Motions* book further leads me to conclude that this is more of a question of “impact” and less of a question of “policy vs. procedure”. Methinks the spiritual concepts of traditional “*right of decision*”, “*delegated authority*” and “*active responsibility*” apply. Example: All motions regarding the CNCA website were decided by the AC. On the contrary, motions of larger impact and/or higher interest to AA as a whole or the AA groups are more likely to go to the assembly. This soon gets esoteric and philosophical because anything *could* affect anything. So who knows really? Common sense, trust, and our gut instincts often prevail. But here’s the final question: ***Will the GSRs want to vote directly on this? Or would they be satisfied just voicing their opinions to their DCM /DCMC?***

New business: (usually next meeting, but may be expedited if timely)

Commence discussion. An item of new business remains on the agenda as new business if the group (or district or committee or assembly) has ***not*** yet discussed it. It remains on the agenda as new business until it is discussed.

Typically, no “action”— no voting or decisions— on new business. Reasons:

- Gather group consciences 1st .
- Share group experience.
- Carry back what they have heard from others in the discussion.
- Change opinions and make other recommendations .
- Then, gather more informed group consciences.
- The watchword is “pause.” Time allows us to quell our passions.
- Take measures to bring out the minority opinion, and the shy voice.
- Remember, this is a spiritual process. Ultimately we have the right of decision. *The group conscious evolves.* We are informed, not instructed. Trust the spirit of the moment. There is no one method on how to allow for this evolution. Recall that our principles are just that: spiritual principles; not rules. (This was not in my consciousness for many years.)

However, → Exceptions may be made if an issue is urgent.

Old business: (usually next meeting, but may be expedited if timely)

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Old business, been discussed already, and carried forward to the next meeting. May vote but → if not prepared to vote it will continue on the agenda as old business. Tradition: “*talk it to death*”. See “new business reasons” above!

Full discussion should take place *before* the vote. Saving “minority opinions” for after the vote, when there is no rebuttal, is a time-waster, for it can force the body to reconsider an item that might have been decided first time around.

Ready to vote? A motion should not be voted on until it is old business. But-- just because it is old business does not mean that we vote. It’s old business until the chairperson feels the discussion has wound down. Chair may ask if the body is prepared to vote, but simply to get a “sense of the room.” *There are many other ways besides a “show of hands” to discern whether to vote on the motion:* e.g., listening for group consciences. Err on the side of “*talking it to death*”; usually, no hurries. Contrarily, if there is urgency, we may vote sooner than usual. See “new business” above. Chair might ask who are “ready to vote.” But-- Chair has “right of decision.” 90% of voting members may indicate that members are eager to vote, but the body might not be adequately prepared or informed to vote. If new information is brought forth, particularly information that ought to be verified, the watchword is “pause.” A considerable amount of abstentions indicates that we voted too early. But what is considerable? Also, chair should guard against the “tyranny of the majority” but how this is done is usually learned from experience.

Simple majority (over 50%) or a 2/3’s majority, decided by simple majority:

Both the “Policy vs. procedure” and “impact” questions apply.

A. Simple, i.e., over 50%:

- i. Procedural
- ii. Less controversial
- iii. Less money
- iv. Lower impact

B. Substantial Unanimity, i.e., at least 2/3’s:

- i. Affects policy
- ii. Sets a precedent, alters how things will be done in the future
- iii. More money
- iv. Larger Impact: impacts AA groups, other areas, AA as a whole, impact beyond CNCA. In SF, for example, impact beyond District 06
- v. Controversial, lots of loving discussion and lively discourse, even if it’s about coffee or even if none of B.i – B.iv above apply.

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- vi. Less chance of “railroading” or “politicking” something through
- vii. Avoids tyranny of bare majority

Impact of the motion if it passes: Just prior to taking a vote, the chair informs the group of the impact if they pass the motion.

Note: Addressing the impact earlier often is helpful.

Voting: Counting off may not be necessary when the outcome is blatantly obvious, e.g., absolute unanimity. Err on side of counting though, especially on emotional topics that have been discussed extensively so the area has a record of the count. Sometimes one might perceive a spiritual nature to the voting process. For the impatient hearts, the chair may suggest standing and sitting meditation.

In Favor? / Opposed? / Abstained?

The abstention votes do not count in the outcome.

Cheat sheets are helpful when 2/3rd are required.

Minority opinion: Minority → losing side, not necessarily the lower number; minority can be up to almost 2/3rd.

Reconsider? After hearing the minority opinion, the chair asks the group if there is anyone who voted in the “majority” (the prevailing side, could be as low as just above 1/3rd) who wants to make a *motion to reconsider*.

Vote to reconsider: If seconded, simple majority vote to reconsider and reopen discussion. Continue loving discussion, probably at next gathering.

Revote: No minority opinion heard nor vote to reconsider after a 2nd vote.

Vote on
whether
we will
vote

Calling the question: We don’t like this in CNCA. We are more interested in the “right of participation”, giving everyone a voice at business meetings, than maximum efficiency. The chair should resist unnecessary pressure to vote and be unmoved by a tyranny of the majority, though the latter can be difficult to discern.

Discussion items:

Anyone can ask the chair to add an item of discussion to the agenda. A discussion item is not a motion, but usually is a topic of importance to the group, which may require substantial discussion. A discussion item might be for education, clarification, or problem resolution. Sometimes after substantial discussion, it leads to the development of a motion.

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A body may informally agree to something without a formal motion or vote. Example: SF district 06 overwhelmingly decided to 1.) participate with inter-group in outreach and 2.) submit a bid for the *Comentarios*— based on discussion items without motions; this included a few informal shows of hands. This is tricky, and might make some members uncomfortable, especially since there is no formal minority appeal, call for reconsideration, etc. The chair should clearly explain what’s happening, and give the body the opportunity to slow down and go through a more formal motion process.

Assembly, Comments, Comentarios and ACM Coffee bids:

Simplified derivative of 3rd legacy, similar to many AA group elections. Often simply majority. If more than two bids, and 1st ballot does not yield simple majority, chair may keep the top 2 only for a final vote. Tie might go to hat. Chair decides process in unusual situations.

Principles that might apply at various times:

Microphone: Prepare & write thoughts. Speak less than two minutes and do not return to the microphone until everybody else speaks. See the “loud bell” reference above.

As chairs, here’s a pointer to help guard against making it *about us*: **Chair does not, and quite often should not, have to answer questions.** Questions often may be left hanging, for anyone to address later. There are rare occasions to jump in, but **when in doubt, close the mouth.**

Recall: there are no governors, gurus, or deities here.

Remember the grouch and the brainstorm?

In extreme cases, the chair may terminate comments that are personally punitive.

Only
during
New
Business

Amending a motion: A motion might be amended, typically to modify the wording within reasonable limits and if it is not used to change the intent of a motion. The chair would normally ask the maker of the motion and the second (if applicable) if they agree to the changed language of the amendment. If they agree, the amended motion is then discussed. While some areas will consider amendments at any time, **CNCA typically only amends motions during “presentation” or early during “new business” discussion.** Once a motion has a “life of its own” it’s usually left alone. Amended motions are recorded in the minutes using the amended language. **CNCA normally never votes on whether to amend a motion.**

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Withdrawing a motion: The maker of the motion and the second (if applicable) agree to withdraw. Motions belong to the body, so there must be a reason to withdraw that has been brought to the chair’s attention. Still, the chair has the discretion to ask the maker. **CNCA normally never votes on whether to withdraw a motion.**

Procedural

***Point of order:* Anyone may indicate that an oversight occurred. Chair will usually take appropriate action. Again, the chair has “final authority” and “active responsibility.”**

Redundantly Redundant Redundancies: CNCA has no policy on whether a point should be reiterated. Here we see human opinions varying to extremes. Again, trust and common sense ought to prevail. Members may ask themselves: “Am I contributing to the overall sense of the discussion?” Or think: “Has my viewpoint been stated just once or twice? Or seven or eight times?” This is all quite subjective. The chair might consider articulating these ideas using his/her own style, applying the spirit of “Rule #62.”

Presenter’s Conclusions / Observations / Interpretations:

Perhaps CNCA’s having no written guidelines is a healthful application of Tradition 9. In my experience, relearning customs and small “t” traditions, perhaps a little differently at times, is often innocuous— and frequently enlightening, interesting and fun. Besides, we don’t have to be *that* efficient in General Service. Less rigid customs might be more malleable than formal guidelines, and hence more easily applied to our functions as DCMCs.

For a counterpoint, I’ve distributed copies of select pages from the *General Service Committee of Eastern Massachusetts Area 30 Handbook*— what I judge as an excellent example of more formal guidelines for conducting AA business, including a flowchart.

Disclosure: This document has not been approved by anyone.

Please consider this a living document. Thank you for your time.

Jeff

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References:

- *The New Robert’s Rules Of Order* –Mary A. DeVries, Signet, 1990
- *The AA Service Manual Combined With Twelve Concepts for World Service** –Bill W
- *How the General Service Conference Operates*
- *CNCA Motions* book rev. 2011
- *Robert’s Rules Definitions* –Anonymous
- *How we do business the AA way* –Earlene W.
- *Chairs Rules vs. Robert’s Rules of Order* –Anonymous
- *The Motion Process, AKA, Emotion in Motion* –Anonymous
- CNCA Comments and agendas
- Other AA General Service Areas, including guidelines
- Interviews with current and past AA trusted servants
- Personal experience

**Various other AA literature not cited here which ought to be read with the guidance of a mentor or advisor.*