

Leadership with Finesse—For my SA Friends and Allies

—Conceived and written by Larry A. in 2012

Leadership finesse is leadership using higher-level skills of reflection, observation and direction than the usual SA meeting leadership calls for, but no leader can be totally effective without practicing them. Leadership finesse is about watching yourself doing your leadership, being awake, aware and alert for clues that some aspects of even a "good" meeting can be improved. Leadership finesse is a set of skills that can be taught, can be learned. These skills improve with practice over time.

Leadership finesse involves making conscious decisions about the practice of leadership. As the leader, your practice of these skills mostly goes unnoticed by the SA group during the course of the meeting, but using these skills will improve your SA meeting quality for every member. How much your members enjoy their meeting and get out of attending it are related to how well you practice these skills.

The list includes: remembering names from meeting to meeting, tricks for keeping track of who shared at the current meeting & asking if someone has just had their sharing time taken away by a rude or interrupting member. You can ask the group for an "emotional temperature gauge" when things get tense or boring, shifting the focus of the group to get it back on track when it gets sidetracked.

There are techniques for dealing with frustration and irritation, helping someone "get to the point" when their symptoms include rambling and confused speaking, honoring member expression of strong feelings (while avoiding the alienation of the rest of the group) & practicing skilled patience with unskillful individuals in the group. Sometimes you can soften the blow to one member's self-esteem when the group ignores their expression of suffering. Practice skilled interruption, be a good cheerleader for the positive events in your member's lives, mobilizing the power of social pressure when you need to. Don't forget to use the skilled technique of, "You know, you're right!"

REMEMBERING NAMES

When you use a person's name in a meeting, you are telling them in a deep way that you care. You are saying to Jake, "I care enough about you, Jake, to keep track of who you are and how often you attend SA." When you say to Jake, "Jake, how can we help Cindy tonight?" he knows he has a personal responsibility to help you help her. Jake has ceased to be just a nameless member and has become real. Jake's personhood is affirmed.

When you use a person's name in conversation, they automatically respond with attention. They cannot help it; they have been conditioned since infancy. But to use their name you must remember their name. There are several tricks and

levels to remembering someone's name. First, when you meet someone new and get his or her name, repeat it aloud. Next, focus on two aspects of their appearance—their eyes, head shape, hair color and style, the shape of their forehead or chin or cheekbones, their body shape or teeth—and repeat their name again. In choosing two aspects of their appearance, make sure these are unlikely to change very often, as changes (for instance: changes in clothing or hairstyles) make remembering more difficult.

Next, remark on some aspect of their appearance or relationship to others in your personal history and repeat their name again. ("My sister's name is Carol, too, but she has blue eyes like mine. You have dazzling green eyes, Carol.") This creates a bond with them and cements their relationship with you.

Finally, introduce them to another SA member (that you introduce by name) and tell the other member of the connection who have made, "Jake, this is Carol. Carol has the same name as my sister Carol in New York, but different color eyes." This extends the bond to another member of the group.

During the course of every meeting, there are countless opportunities to repeat names of your group members. You can create opportunities for name sharing, when for instance, your members are feeling burdened with stigma. Have them repeat their name and their diagnosis with the phrase, "And I am not my label!"

We have done this as an empowerment exercise with my own SA groups, "Hi, my name is Larry A. and I have schizoaffective disorder, bipolar type. I am a person! I am not my label!" As you incorporate such name-sharing exercises into your own leadership style, the group will come to value sharing names and will remember each other's names with ease. This kind of leadership finesse is a practice that strengthens the entire group.

KEEPING TRACK OF WHOM HAS SHARED SO FAR IN THE MEETING.

There are three ways to quietly keep track of who has shared during the course of a group meeting. The easiest (1) is to write down the names or initials on paper in a circle, based on who sits where in the room. But most folks I know don't appreciate having anything written in the way of records about their support group, especially names or initials on paper. [An absent-minded psychiatrist might get away with it for a group therapy session, but it is understood from the outset that the doctor is also keeping case records for insurance payments and individual therapy sessions. If a support-group leader tries this, there will eventually come a time when someone will object. This is a certainty!]

Our folks come to support groups because they have difficult feelings and symptoms. Trust is needed for the leader to create a successful support group. Paranoia will inevitably come in some member's baggage. With it come suspicion and doubt. You cannot afford distrust in your group. So what are the alternatives?

A better (2) way to keep track of who has shared during a meeting is to use the table in front of you, and write in the dust, just a circle of dots corresponding to who sits where. As people share, they are, or should be concentrated on the feelings and thoughts they are sharing, and they will not notice any brief finger tapping on the table by the leader. Be discrete. A competent leader can get away with this and stay focused on the content of the conversation. She or he will not need to be compulsive about their little circle of dots, and will easily keep track of the course of even a "popcorn-style," random meeting. At the end of the meeting, the circle of dots vanishes with the sweep of a hand across the table.

The last (3rd) way to keep track of that has shared in a group meeting is to make the "circle of dots" on one's palm, lap or pant-leg. This way has the added advantage of being less noticeable and more tactile: you "feel" the circle; you don't just "draw" it. It is a fact of memory that the more senses are involved in the creating of a memory, the stronger that memory is. So making the circle of dots where you can feel it will succeed in being a good memory-boosting strategy for when the group is large or when the sharing gets really intense.

What should the leader do when he or she inevitably forgets who has shared their stuff during a tense meeting? Members have perfect recall of their own stuff. If you as the leader forget who has shared, lower your standards for yourself, admit your humanity, and ***ask the group for help!***

Use your knowledge of the group members' names to smooth over any forgetfulness. Apologize and move on. You are not God. You can be forgiven. If you get really flustered by the intensity of a group, give the group a "stretch break" while you gather your wits for the remaining minutes. Use the group members' collective caring and sharing to recreate the feeling of competent sharing. Then move on.

Other Leadership Issues

Watch for who is dominating, who is tense, who is uncomfortable with silence, who is doing most of the talking and who is talking most while sharing least—especially if it is the leader! Ask the uncomfortable question of your self "Why am I so uptight tonight?"

Try to feel where the tension is in your body or spirit or conscience. Is there tension in your arms or legs, such that you are holding yourself in an unusual position or posture? What are the muscles in your face doing? Take a breath slowly and let it out while asking, "Where is the pressure?" Is there something about your posture reminiscent of times when you were symptomatic or suffering with anger or fear or disgust? If someone were to give you a neck rub right now, what muscles would be the tightest?

Silently give yourself permission to feel your tense feelings and take in a long, slow breath, hold it for three seconds and let it out slowly. Self-awareness is meant to be a blessing, not a curse. It is essential to good group leadership. If

you, the leader, are tense about something, maybe you are subconsciously being the barometer for the group: your inner pressure is an indication of tension or pressure somewhere else in the group.

Good SA group leadership practice says it's okay to role model the expression of feelings and to tell the group about your own discomfort. You can frame it as; "Maybe I am just feeling my own stuff, but is anyone else feeling tense with the way the group is going right now? I'm just asking because I get symptoms like the rest of you and I'm pretty tense. Can I get some feedback so I can relax and do a better job of leading?"

The leader who can use effective self-disclosure and ask the group for validation of feelings is a strong leader and will soon learn to trust those feelings and deal with them quietly in another more effective way. Leadership is a privilege and responsibility and should never be taken lightly. If the leader cannot openly ask the group for feedback about leadership tension, perhaps she or he can ask their co-leader or staff supporter for support after the meeting.

ENDING:

Always end the Meeting by thanking the Group for being present that meeting!
Use the ***Serenity Prayer***.

Does anyone have questions?

Thank you!

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