

Tradition Eleven

"Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films."

WITHOUT its legions of well-wishers, A.A. could never have grown as it has. Throughout the world, immense and favorable publicity of every description has been the principal means of bringing alcoholics into our Fellowship. In A.A. offices, clubs, and homes, telephones ring constantly. One voice says, "I read a piece in the newspapers. . ."; another, "We heard a radio program. . ."; and still another, "We saw a moving picture. . ." or "We saw something about A.A. on television. . . ." It is no exaggeration to say that half of A.A.'s membership has been led to us through channels like these.

The inquiring voices are not all alcoholics or their families. Doctors read medical papers about Alcoholics Anonymous and call for more information. Clergymen see articles in their church journals and also make inquiries. Employers learn that great corporations have set their approval upon us, and wish to discover what can be done about alcoholism in their own firms.

Therefore, a great responsibility fell upon us to develop the best possible public relations policy for Alcoholics Anonymous. Through many painful experiences, we think we have arrived at what that policy ought to be. It is the opposite in many ways of usual promotional practice. We found that we had to rely upon the principle of attraction rather than of promotion.

Let's see how these two contrasting ideas--attraction and promotion--work out. A political party wishes to win an election, so it advertises the virtues of its leadership to draw votes. A worthy charity wants to raise money; forthwith, its letterhead shows the name of every distinguished person whose support can be obtained. Much of the political, economic, and religious life of the world is dependent upon publicized leadership. People who symbolize causes and ideas fill a deep human need. We of A.A. do not question that. But we do have to soberly face the fact that being in the public eye is hazardous, especially for us. By temperament, nearly every one of us had been an irrepressible promoter, and the prospect of a society composed almost entirely of promoters was frightening. Considering this explosive factor, we knew we had to exercise self-restraint.

The way this restraint paid off was startling. It resulted in more favorable publicity of Alcoholics Anonymous than could possibly have been obtained through all the arts and abilities of A.A.'s best press agents. Obviously, A.A. had to be publicized somehow, so we resorted to the idea that it would be far better to let our friends do this for us. Precisely that has happened, to an unbelievable extent. Veteran newsmen, trained doubters that they are, have gone all out to carry A.A.'s message. To them, we are something more than the source of good stories. On almost every newsfront, the men and women of the press have attached themselves to us as friends. In the beginning, the press could not understand our refusal of all personal publicity. They were genuinely baffled by our insistence upon anonymity. Then they got the point. Here was something rare in the world--a society which said it wished to publicize its principles and its work, but not its individual members. The press was delighted with this attitude. Ever since, these friends have reported A.A. with an enthusiasm which the most ardent members would find hard to match.

There was actually a time when the press of America thought the anonymity of A.A. was better for us than some of our own members did. At one point, about a hundred of our Society were breaking anonymity at the public level. With perfectly good intent, these folks declared that the principle of anonymity was horse-and-buggy stuff, something appropriate to A.A.'s pioneering days. They were

sure that A.A. could go faster and farther if it availed itself of modern publicity methods. A.A., they pointed out, included many persons of local, national, or international fame. Provided they were willing--and many were--why shouldn't their membership be publicized, thereby encouraging others to join us? These were plausible arguments, but happily our friends of the writing profession disagreed with them.

The Foundation* wrote letters to practically every news outlet in North America, setting forth our public relations policy of attraction rather than promotion, and emphasizing personal anonymity as A.A.'s greatest protection. Since that time, editors and rewrite men have repeatedly deleted names and pictures of members from A.A. copy; frequently, they have reminded ambitious individuals of A.A.'s anonymity policy. They have even sacrificed good stories to this end. The force of their cooperation has certainly helped. Only a few A.A. members are left who deliberately break anonymity at the public level.

This, in brief, is the process by which A.A.'s Tradition Eleven was constructed. To us, however, it represents far more than a sound public relations policy. It is more than a denial of self-seeking. This Tradition is a constant and practical reminder that personal ambition has no place in A.A. In it, each member becomes an active guardian of our Fellowship.

* In 1954, the name of the Alcoholic Foundation, Inc., was changed to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous, Inc., and the Foundation office is now the General Service Office.

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