

Excerpts from HWYW

This is not a substitute for the convenors handbook. You are encouraged to explore the wealth of information contained in the full book.

2.9 In Appreciation of Convenors

The whole LifeRing network exists so that people in recovery can come to the meetings, talk about their current recovery issues, get their sobriety charged up, help strengthen others' sobriety, put a couple of dollars in the basket, applaud, feel good, and leave. Convenors are the core of our organization, and the bridge to its future.

Your role as a convenor is to protect and occasionally to sweep the philosophical foundations of LifeRing so that the members have a safe, clean, and well-lighted space for their own program-building activity. **You are the guardian of the meeting's process.**

2.5 The Convenor Facilitates Connections

The LifeRing model of recovery differs from many others in that we locate the healing power within people and in their togetherness, and not in something external to them. The force that heals arises from within people and gains power when they connect so that it flows between them. The convenor's actions make it possible for others to connect with each other and to become transformed.

What a Convenor Is Not

Although convenors may help to bring about extraordinary transformations, they are ordinary persons in recovery and do not possess or require extraordinary powers.

For example:

- The convenor is not a psychiatrist who develops deep theories about what is wrong with the patient and prescribes appropriate therapies and medications to cure them.
- The convenor is not a chemical dependency treatment counselor or therapist.
- The convenor is not a professor, wise man, sage, or guru.
- The convenor is not a recovery expert and is not the owner of any special truth. This last point bears emphasizing. The LifeRing convenor does not have, and does not pretend to have, a Truth, a Way, a Magic Bullet, or some other sure-fire cure for addiction, other than the homely wisdom that you will stay clean and sober if you don't put drugs or alcohol into your body. The LifeRing convenor refrains from telling other people what they must do in order to get or stay sober. What worked for one person often fails another. **The LifeRing convenor's role, then, is to facilitate a process that runs between and within others.**

The core of the convenor's role and the source of the convenor's renewal is to connect people with each other in a way that empowers their own inner urge to be free of alcohol and other addictive drugs.

3.11 Starting the Check-In

It's the convenor's call where in the room to start the round of "How Was Your Week?" reports. Since the convenor is also a person in recovery, the convenor will ordinarily be taking a turn. The convenor can go first, or turn to the first person on their left and right, or start with someone across the room, either at random or with a purpose. Here are some points to consider:

- When the convenor knows that someone in the room has an urgent issue, it is often good practice to start with that person, regardless of where they are sitting. For example, it's good to open the floor immediately to a person who has relapsed during the week and is ready to talk about it, or who is in a crisis, for example an illness or death in the family. Starting with that person assures that their concern will get airtime. Anytime there is bad news it is good to get it out and deal with it first thing, or as early as practical.
- **If there are a lot of first-timers**, some convenors organize the check-in in two rounds. In the first round, people only say their names and perhaps a few things about themselves and their week (25 words or less), and they indicate whether they have an urgent concern that they want to raise in the meeting. Then in the second round, the convenor starts with the person or persons who have the urgent concern(s), and goes around from there with a more detailed check-in. Other convenors handle this function by asking at the outset, "Does anyone have any urgent issues?" or something similar.
- Generally it's preferable not to start the check-in with a first-timer because they may feel on the spot without a clear idea what's expected. The convenor might, however, ask the newcomer how they heard about the meeting; sometimes that gets them talking about their week without further modeling.
- **Starting with someone across the room emphasizes the convenor's power at the outset** (*this can be useful when there are difficult attendees.*) When it comes the convenor's turn to check in, the convenor more readily falls into place as an ordinary member. Going first or last tends to emphasize the person's status as convenor at the time of their check-in. Usually after the first person is called on, the check-in proceeds around the room one by one in predictable fashion. If the convenor starts with someone across the room, the convenor may leave it to that person to decide whether the progression goes to the left or the right. The convenor may want to encourage members to pass the turn among themselves without first looking to the convenor to give a nod or say a word. I have also seen meetings where people checked in seemingly at random; whoever felt like going next, did.

Sometimes people who talk address themselves to the convenor rather than to the circle. The convenor may want to deliberately break eye contact with them and look around the room at each member in turn, until speakers get the hint to address themselves to all the members. If necessary, the convenor may ask the group members at the beginning of the check-in to please address the whole group when speaking. The principal purpose of the meeting is for the members to connect with one another

In a full room or where people don't know each other well, the convenor may want to ask people to raise their hands for crosstalk, and call on them by name or with a glance and a nod. Asking people to raise their hands may be particularly useful if a compulsive talker is present – the convenor can then ignore that hand. As people become more familiar with the format and with each other, the convenor will have less and less of a management burden.

3.10.3 Some Common Issues in Crosstalk

Crosstalk is ordinary friendly conversation, and most of the time people handle it without any difficulty and without any need for the convenor to speak up. But people vary in their conversational skills, and some may be a bit rusty after years of isolation or drug-talk. Others have only experienced crosstalk in very different settings with very different ground rules, such as the “attack therapy” used in some “therapeutic communities.” (For a vivid illustration, see Shavelson 2001: 149-154) Some people have never experienced crosstalk at all. Consequently the convenor may need to get things unstuck from time to time.

Here are some points to watch out for:

- **Interrogation.** Asking questions is a normal part of crosstalk. But sometimes a participant overdoes it. Question follows question like a courtroom cross-examination. The convenor will want to watch the person being questioned for signs of discomfort (**read the feet!** -watch body language) and step in quickly before the experience becomes hurtful. For example: “OK, Ronnie, if you have more questions for Alex maybe you two can talk after the meeting. Let's move on.”
- **Private conversation.** Occasionally two people in a meeting discover that they have friends in common, or went to the same school, or are planning to attend the same social event, etc. They may use the crosstalk format as a way of having a private conversation on group time. The convenor needs to invite them to do it later.
- **Lost focus.** Occasionally the meeting may lose focus and several people start talking at once in a chaotic manner, either across the room or to their neighbor. The convenor will want to restore focus, for example by recognizing one person to speak, and asking the others to be patient and wait their turn.
- **Spinning the wheels.** If a person has an emergency or other urgent issue in their life, it makes perfect sense to focus much of the meeting's time in crosstalk on that person's situation. But sometimes a person becomes the focus of the meeting and takes up a lot of its time for no productive reason, and the meeting gets stuck, spinning its wheels. For example, sometimes a newcomer will be deluged with “helpful suggestions” from other participants. Sometimes a person misuses the opportunity of crosstalk to hog center stage at a meeting because they crave to be the focus of attention.

Sometimes also a person is the recipient of more crosstalk than is comfortable for them, and they would like to get the spotlight off them. In such cases, the convenor needs to step in and move the meeting along. **How and when to step in is a judgment call for the convenor to make.** Often the other participants will signal their discomfort unconsciously by jiggling or twisting their feet. One positive way for the convenor to get the meeting moving again is to ask the participants to give the person in the spotlight a round of applause by way of support, and then ask the next person to share their news of the week.

- **Attack mode.** Occasionally a first-timer at crosstalk will go into confrontation therapy mode: “I think the way you're looking at yourself here is bullshit. You're just putting up this big defensive wall. This is a fatal disease and you're in denial, goddammit!” Whoa! The convenor will want to step in immediately and remind the attacker that this is a support meeting, not an attack meeting. **When people feel safe, they may let down their defensive walls; but if they are attacked, they never will.** Occasionally people say things in meetings that with hindsight don't seem very perceptive. That happens in life. Among the most helpful things that other people can do when this happens is to keep silent and move on. Attacking the person is not the answer.

- **Jumping out of turn.** Sometimes one person's weekly review stimulates another person to share something in crosstalk that turns into that person's own weekly "highlights and heartaches." That's fine, but the convenor then needs to remember who's next.
- **Unsolicited Advice.** The convenor may want step in quickly to shut off any flow of unsolicited advice before it becomes a deluge. "Pat, don't forget that you need to ask Gloria whether she wants advice or is just putting her stuff out there."
- **No Crosstalk At All.** Occasionally in a new LifeRing meeting where most of the people have experienced nothing but twelve-step meetings, they sit there as if in a coma until it comes their turn to speak. The convenor may have to invite crosstalk repeatedly before people wake up. "OK. Any comments, questions, or other feedback for Sandy?" The convenor may have to model crosstalk, but has to make sure that people understand that crosstalk is for everyone, not just for the convenor. This is not easy. Sometimes the convenor may have to create general silence until someone opens up with crosstalk. In time and with modeling and patience people will come to life.
- **A Crosstalk Monopolist.** Occasionally one person has a crosstalk comment for everyone on just about every issue. After the pattern is clear and saturation has been reached, the convenor can ignore the person and not give them the nod, or ask them directly to hold off and give other people a chance to get their two cents in. "Thanks, Pat, but I asked if anyone else had a comment for Alex." If the person is a habitual monopolist, a quiet word on the side after the meeting may be called for.

3.14 When the Convenor Must Speak

Most of the time, the convenor's role as convenor is to listen attentively. The convenor will participate in the check-in and in crosstalk like every other member. In a meeting that is running well, the convenor will have little occasion to speak as convenor apart from a few words at the opening and closing. Some garden-variety situations where the convenor probably will want to intervene have been covered above. (See Section 3.10.3 on page 46.) In addition, there are some other situations where the convenor must speak up. These are extraordinary, but it is well for the convenor to be mentally prepared.

For example:

- **Incivility.** The convenor must speak if someone in the meeting makes racist or sexist remarks, or attacks or insults another member, or otherwise seriously oversteps the bounds of civility. We're not a Sunday school meeting and we don't flinch at earthy language and colorful expressions, but we always try to remember that the point of the meeting is to bring people together in recovery.
- **Intoxication.** Convenors need to speak up if a participant attacks the sobriety foundations of the meeting. If an individual who is currently under the influence is trying to speak or disrupt, or if someone advocates drinking or drug use, the convenor needs to take control and ask the participant to maintain silence or leave.
- **Politics.** The convenor has to step in if the discussion turns to politics. It is fine for LifeRing members to be passionately active in political arenas, but LifeRing meetings are not a political arena and political argument does not belong there.

- **Theology.** No less divisive than politics is discussion of religion or theological issues. It is fine for LifeRing members to have passionate theological beliefs and to be active members of their churches, synagogues, temples, ashrams, atheist or agnostic clubs, or whatever. But LifeRing meetings are not the place for theological discussion.
- **Breach of Confidentiality.** The convenor has to step in if someone is violating someone else's confidentiality. Who is present and who says what at a meeting is supposed to stay at that meeting. This ground rule is essential to give members a feeling of safety, and the convenor has to enforce it.
- **Bashing Other Programs.** Sometimes people come to LifeRing straight out of intense twelve-step involvement with the sense that they have escaped programming by a cult. (See, for example, Bufe 1998). The convenor may let them vent briefly, but if this becomes the person's main topic or if the person invites other people to develop the theme, the convenor has to step in. People with cult deprogramming issues should seek referral to specialists in that therapy.

When a convenor has to interrupt, as a general guideline the best first move is to deflect and move forward. "OK, Marty, we heard you, that's enough, it's time to move on now. Pat, how was your week?" If that doesn't work, the next best move may be to share with the person how their words are affecting you personally. "Ronnie, what you're saying makes me feel really uncomfortable and I'm seeing people looking for the exit. Now I'd like to hear from Chris." If that still doesn't work, the person is probably not just being insensitive or having a bad moment, but has come to the meeting in bad faith. If so, the convenor has to be firm and clear and ask the person to be quiet or leave the meeting. Fortunately, instances of this kind are extremely rare in face meetings.

I have found it helpful to try to remember that the purpose of the meeting is to facilitate connections between the "sober selves," the "S" inside each participant. When the "S" is speaking, participants deserve the widest latitude and the utmost freedom. But on rare occasions, the "A" inside one or several individuals at a meeting may surface and attempt to establish a connection with another "A", or to break up the connections between the "S" and the "S." In those situations, the convenor's task is clear: shut down the "A" connections, re-establish the "S" connections. Abstract principles such as "freedom of speech in general" are misplaced here. It is not the purpose of the meeting to provide a forum for addicted speech, but rather for sober speech, and sober speech only.

In all situations of this type, the convenor's personal style and social skills will play a role in shaping the outcome. Convenors with a relaxed, humorous style will often be able to defuse budding problem situations quickly with just a word or two before they get out of hand. Convenors who lack assertiveness in the face of disruption may find that the meeting gets chaotic and turns into an uncomfortable experience for many of the participants – an experience that undermines rather than fortifying their sobriety. Participants look to the convenor to take charge, and when that does not occur, tensions rise. **Convenors may need to remind themselves that the interests of the meeting as a whole clearly outweigh the interest of a disruptive individual.**