

## Random Thoughts on Sponsorship from a Traveler on the Road

By Anonymous

“Don’t drink, go to meetings, get a sponsor and work the Steps.” How many dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of times have we heard – or delivered – this familiar four-part AA mantra. Whether we warm with enthusiasm, or roll our eyes, or yawn with boredom at the sound of these words, the plain truth is that very few of us have any success with the first part (“don’t drink”) in the absence of a vigorous application of the other three parts. In fact, there’s a whole chapter in the AA Big Book that explains vividly why “don’t drink” is an impossible command to any “true alcoholic” until we embark earnestly on the Steps. “Go to meetings” is pretty self-explanatory isn’t it? Meetings are crucial for recovery, and we learn why when we – well – go to meetings. There seems to be little room for misunderstanding or much controversy (okay, lawyers can make room for controversy about anything) when it comes to “don’t drink and go to meetings.” As long as we don’t stop there.

But what do we mean when we say “get a sponsor and work the Steps?” This writer has been in (and out – and in) recovery for about fifteen years. Over the course of discovering and re-discovering what works, and what does not, for this recovering person, I have “come to believe” that we don’t all mean the same thing when we hear, or utter, these words. What is a sponsor? How do you “get” one? What is he or she supposed to do, and not do, in that role? How is a sponsee supposed to “use” a sponsor to get and stay clean and sober? How much clean/sober time should a recovering person have before venturing to become a sponsor? How often should a sponsee make contact with his/her sponsor? Who should be responsible for initiating and maintaining contact? Is it okay if your sponsor is also your friend? Is it a good idea or a bad idea to have more than one sponsor? Is a sponsee obligated to follow his/her sponsor’s advice? And what do we mean by advice – directions? Suggestions? Should a sponsor tell a sponsee to “work the Steps” from one through twelve without delay to the best of his/her ability, or tell the sponsee to sit back and listen in meetings until his/her head “clears” enough to work the Steps in due time?

If we have been around for even the proverbial 90-in-90, we have heard the debates, and quite possibly championed a viewpoint or two. This recovering alcoholic thanks his Higher Power that there seems to be only one accurate answer to all of these questions – find and do what works for you with a person you trust who helps you make it work. I believe it is an observable fact, not a debatable opinion, that different modes and means of sponsorship work for different people. The essential ingredients seem to be a modicum of trust up front – perhaps based on intuition or on blind faith and willingness to try – and open, honest, mutual effort. Blend these ingredients with the Steps and the core literature (Big Book and 12-and-12), and magic happens. The gifts of giving – often bittersweet – ultimately are what keep us sober and growing.

So much for warm and fuzzy platitudes. What mode of sponsorship works for this recovering person? Here’s where I risk going Ninja pontific egocentric on you – otherwise known as self-righteous indignation. So I will try to keep doing what has been suggested and has worked for me countless times – share my experience, strength, and hope; speak my truth as best I can; and let go of the outcome – which means I must risk giving offense. So, if you decide to read on, please take what works for you and leave the rest.

It has been my observation, particularly in treatment centers and around those AA groups that often are referred to as “hard core,” that a rigid and supposedly “traditional” mode of sponsorship is espoused with a high degree of conviction and utmost sincerity. In these contexts, we are likely to hear words like “you need to learn how to shut up and follow directions” and “take the cotton out of your ears, stuff it in your mouth, and do what your sponsor tells you to do.” There may (or may not) be great wisdom in these words when a barely sober white-chipper is vomiting scrambled thoughts and self-righteous or self-pitying emotions. And it is undeniable that this “follow directions” school of sponsorship has kept thousands of alcoholics away from the bottle for decades. So I think it’s fair to say that it works – for many folks.

It has never worked for me. “Shut up and follow directions” of course is not likely to be heartily embraced by most of us who have achieved (or lost) any degree of worldly success in the legal profession. That’s not what we are trained to do and it’s certainly not what we like to do. We analyze, synthesize, argue and rebel – and we like it. We think it defines us. But that’s not the point. The “hard core” school says with considerable accuracy that these “control” issues keep us egotistical, angry, resentful and drunk. So, they say – we need to learn to shut up and follow directions.

And therein lies the problem with the “hard core” school of sponsorship. We addicts and alcoholics – lawyers and non-lawyers alike – have a hard time checking our control issues at the door. As a sponsor, who am I to take rigid control of your recovery and demand that you “work the Steps” exactly my way or the highway? Of course, “my way” will be disguised as “the way we do it” or similar garb. And all with the purest, best and most noble intentions – because we have a hard time checking denial at the door, too.

I have never had a sponsor who has given me commands or inflexible directions. I have had four. Each of the two sponsors with whom I have worked for stretches of years over the past 15 of my life has been sober for a decade – or three. They have been brutally honest when they see me screwing up. They have also highlighted progress. Their advice has been specific, practical and at times inspired. We have done Steps the Big Book way. (You know, that book that cautions about the perils of telling any alcoholic what he has to do, and that refers to the Steps as a “suggested” program of recovery that works?)

Don’t get me wrong. Self-will-run-riot is not the key to a sponsee’s enlightenment. I need the blunt assessments and opinions of my sponsor. But recovering people like me respond best – perhaps like children – to leadership by example, to face-to-face and heart-to-heart sharing about what has worked and how for the sponsor, to a candid “this is my slant on this Step” approach. We respond best to truth, compassion, kindness, humility, integrity, candor and humor. When it comes to sponsorship, I do not want a commander-in-chief and I do not want to be cast in the role of a commander-in-chief. I am not responsible for the recovery of any of my sponsees. I am responsible for sharing who I am, where I have been, what works for me, and how I got where I am now. And I am responsible for listening, staying open and alert, and learning as I go, both as a sponsee and as a sponsor.

We are on the road together. That’s where the magic of recovery happens.