

The Art of Sponsorship: Beyond the Basics

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Ask people with a long stretch of recovery what contributes to their capacity to live without relapse, and it's likely that many of them will mention sponsoring and being sponsored. The tool of sponsorship is one of the great gifts of the Twelve Step program, bearing an extraordinary power to turn a person's life around. Just about anyone in recovery can tell a story or two about a breakthrough conversation with a sponsor and about the difference it made to receive the personal support of a fellow sufferer, to be given a timely word of wisdom or insight, and to be listened to with respect. Serving as a sponsor can likewise strengthen our recovery as we experience the joy of passing on what we have received and of watching our sponsees grow.

At the same time, I expect that many of us could also tell stories about times when the sponsoring relationship broke down – times, for instance, when we experienced our sponsor as being rigid or judgmental, or when our own distractions and preoccupations interfered with our ability to listen with full attention to someone we were sponsoring. Sponsorship may be a powerful tool, but it's one we don't always wield wisely.

What does it mean to be a “good” sponsor? What helps and what harms the sponsoring relationship? What difficulties do we experience as sponsors and sponsees? How can we work through our difficulties and use them as opportunities to grow? What skills might help us to become more effective sponsors? These are some of the questions I began asking myself almost 25 years ago, when I first began exploring the give-and-take of sponsoring and being sponsored in the Twelve Step program. I quickly discovered that sponsorship must be practiced more as an art than a science. There is no single “best” way to sponsor, no cookie-cutter formula for how to sponsor well. What's more, people need different things in a sponsor, depending on where they are in their own journey of recovery. Given all this, it's not surprising that being a good sponsor takes imagination, creativity, flexibility, a willingness to risk and to make mistakes, and a desire to learn.

Some Twelve Step members exercise a model of sponsorship that sets up a fairly rigid, strict, and authoritarian relationship between sponsor and sponsee, in which a “good” sponsor lays down the rules and a “good” sponsee reacts with unquestioning obedience. My own approach to sponsorship assumes a more egalitarian relationship, one that seeks to function as collaboration or alliance rather than as domination. I like a dynamic, developmental model of sponsorship, one that may in some cases begin in a comparatively authoritarian way but that always seeks to strengthen the sponsees' healthy autonomy and their capacity to trust themselves. I value doing what we can to establish and maintain a relationship between sponsor and sponsee that is flexible – changing over time and adapting to the sponsee's emerging freedom. As sponsors, we try to help our sponsees move beyond isolation (what the Big Book calls “self-will run riot”) and also beyond clingy over-dependence and subservience. We want to support our sponsees in their quest, with God's help, to discover and to follow their own inner wisdom as they learn, one day at a time, to live without their drug.

Give Your Sponsee Your Full Attention

One of the most loving gifts we can offer someone else is the gift of our full attention. How rare and precious it is to receive someone's undivided attention! How hungry many people are to be truly listened to, to know that someone is setting aside his or her own needs for the time being and making space to hear what's on their mind and heart! That is a gift we want to give our sponsee: the gift of a listening ear and listening heart.

How do we listen with full attention? First, we quit multi-tasking. When on the phone with a sponsee, we look away from the computer, stop scanning the newspaper, set aside the day's mail, and wash the dishes another time. We may want to set clear boundaries to the call ("I can speak with you for ten minutes today"), but then we give the person our full attention. Giving someone ten minutes of good attention is often more effective – and more loving – than giving thirty minutes of half-hearted (and perhaps resentful) listening.

One reason it can be difficult to give someone our attention is that we ourselves need so badly to be heard. Whenever people get together in informal gatherings, you can see how often they jostle to be listened to, eagerly taking every opportunity to speak, or, when someone else speaks, waiting patiently (or impatiently) to interrupt. The beauty of sponsorship is that it takes seriously our need to be listened to and gives us a way to take turns. As sponsors, our first task is to listen, and because we ourselves have a sponsor, we know that someone will soon take time to listen to us. As a result, we can refrain from grabbing the microphone from our sponsee and turning the conversation back to our own concerns. If a sponsee says something that reminds us of ourselves, we may decide to mention it as a way to share our "experience, strength, and hope," but the basic focus of the conversation must be on the sponsee, not ourselves. If it's helpful, we can always make a quick mental note to speak later with our sponsor about whatever personal concern was stirred up by the conversation with our sponsee.

Listen with an Attitude of Kindness and Respect

It's important not only to give our full attention, but also to be aware of the quality of attention that we give. We know what it feels like to be treated with judgment, criticism, rejection or contempt; similarly, we also know what it feels like to have our own minds filled with judging, critical, rejecting and contemptuous thoughts about other people. Receiving contempt – or doling it out – makes us feel constricted and unsafe, wary and defended.

Conversely, when we are listened to with kindness and respect, a space opens up that allows us to explore and share what's going on in our lives. When we are listened to in this spirit, we find ourselves saying things we hadn't known we knew, feeling things we hadn't known we felt, and spontaneously reconnecting to our own inner wisdom. When someone listens to us with kindness and respect, gradually we learn to listen to ourselves. Gradually we feel freer to grow and to change.

Listening to our sponsee with such an attitude does not mean that we approve of everything he or she has said or done, or that we respect the prudence of every decision he or she has made. Even in the process of recovery, all of us – including our sponsees – can make serious mistakes.

But what a sponsor can do is to keep focusing on the sponsee's desire to be well. As sponsors

we make an alliance with the sponsee's intention, however frail and feeble it may be, to be in recovery, a day at a time. That desire and intention deserve our deepest approval and respect. When we listen to our sponsees with this spirit, we honor their deep longing to be set free and their hunger to be whole. When our sponsees are awash in shame and self-doubt, our attitude should remind them of who they really are: beloved children of God.

Ask Clarifying Questions

Questions of clarification signal that you are still listening, that your attention continues to be focused on the sponsee, that you want to understand what he or she is saying, and that you care. Asking a clarifying question is not the same as prying. Offering a paraphrase ("What I hear you saying is...") is another good way of staying connected with your sponsee, inviting him or her to correct our possible misinterpretation. Remarks such as "Tell me about it" or "Would you like to say more about that?" are a refreshing change from what people often give each other: criticism, advice, moral lessons, or interpretation.

Of course, there are moments when offering our sponsee some advice and guidance is just what is needed, but taking time to ask clarifying questions first, or to paraphrase what we hear, helps to ensure that our advice is sound. What's more, pausing to ask some questions and to listen to the answers can cut through a habit common to many of us: eagerly jumping in to judge, rescue, fix, solve, or otherwise try to control our sponsees' lives. Asking clarifying questions can help to keep the locus of change where it belongs: in the sponsee's hands, not ours.

Listen for Feelings

Many addicts at the beginning of recovery are quite cut off from their feelings. They may feel chronically angry, depressed, spacey or numb. When they put down their drug, a day at a time, before long all sorts of long-suppressed feelings will likely come roaring back to the surface. This is not comfortable. Some sponsees handle it by talking and talking very fast, as if a rush of words could control the feelings and keep them at bay. As sponsors, we want to give permission for feelings to be felt. Whatever the sponsee is feeling is OK. Of course, taking destructive action on a feeling is not OK, but we want to give our sponsees the freedom to feel what they feel. Asking questions such as "What are you feeling right now?," "When did you start to feel that way?," "How do you feel now as you say that?," or "Where in your body do you feel it?" can support our sponsees to be more comfortable with their felt experience.

I cringe when I hear people say at a meeting that their sponsor told them to "get off the pity-pot." Obsessive self-pity is one thing, but maybe the sponsee simply needed to grieve. What the sponsor dismissed as "self-pity" may in fact be genuine sorrow. Being sad is fine. Being angry is fine. It is normal to have feelings. If we sponsors are not comfortable with our own strong feelings, we may well become anxious when our sponsees feel something, and do our best to shut them down. Sensing our discomfort, our sponsees may in turn begin censoring how much they tell us, for fear of "being a burden." This is not helpful.

I must also acknowledge that some recovering addicts do get stuck in particular emotional patterns, such as endlessly ranting or complaining. Our job as sponsors is not to be a therapist but to listen with

patience and, if possible, with empathy, and to suggest how our sponsees can best work the program in the given situation (e.g. is it time for them to work a particular Step? to make a gratitude list? to take a moral inventory? to pray for guidance? to offer service?). We can also suggest professional therapeutic help.

Create Space for Silence

Many addicts love to talk. We fill up the space with words, regale each other with stories, and re-play in vivid detail all the daily dramas of our lives. Words can certainly be expressive, energizing, and powerful vehicles of healing. Giving words to our experience can be a way to make sense of our lives and to build connections with other people. But words can also be used to avoid authentic connection. Our words become empty, for example, when we find ourselves launching into a much-rehearsed litany of blame or another round of gossip, or when we jabber on about trivial things that don't really matter to us. Sometimes our too-ready words prevent us from really listening to what is going on inside us.

We may need to say to our sponsee, "Take your time; you don't have to hurry." This message can be a marvelous antidote to the anxiety that propels so much speech. When a sponsee has been rambling on to no apparent purpose, we might ask a question (e.g. "What is the essence of what you're trying to say?") that helps him or her to find the focus. Asking for a shared moment of silence can give a sponsee space to listen inwardly, to check in with his or her feelings, and perhaps to receive a word from God. We might say, for instance, "Let's take a deep breath together," and then invite the sponsee to comment on what he or she noticed in the silence, or on what he or she is feeling, or on what God may be trying to show him or her.

Of course, it's always helpful for us, as sponsors, to spend some time in silence before our sponsee's phone call, or at least to take a deep breath before we pick up the phone. In the silence, we have a chance to check in with ourselves, to notice what we're feeling, and to ask that God may work through us in the upcoming conversation with our sponsee. Silence can open a hospitable space inside us so that we truly welcome our sponsee's phone call. Prayerful silence before and after speaking with a sponsee is a wonderful way to "frame" the encounter and to turn it over to God.

Keep Mutual Expectations Clear

It's helpful from the beginning to be as clear as possible about what our sponsees can expect from us and what we in turn expect from them. For instance, I've spoken with many sponsees who fear being "dropped" by their sponsor. Their anxiety about being summarily rejected or abandoned does not necessarily translate into a daily commitment to staying abstinent, clean, or sober. Trusting a reliable sponsor can give sponsees a crucial inner sense of companionship when faced with the temptation to pick up their drug; anxiety about whether or not a sponsor is there for the long haul can sabotage a sponsee's making healthy choices. I think sponsors can reduce the anxiety of their sponsees by being clear from the beginning about the extent and the limits of their commitment to them. Sponsees are consequently not left guessing and worrying. For example, we may be willing to sponsor someone for a week or a month or three months whether or not the sponsee is completely abstinent (sober, clean), or we may be willing to sponsor someone only if he or she has no slips at all. We may be willing to sponsor someone

only if he or she calls us faithfully every single day at the appointed time, or we may be willing to sponsor someone if he or she simply calls “as needed.” We may be willing to sponsor people who show no signs at all of making any discernible progress in the program, or we may be willing only to sponsor people who make some discernible progress within a specified amount of time.

I don’t think that any of the above positions are necessarily better or worse than the others; what’s important is that we are clear with ourselves and our sponsees about the help we are and are not able and willing to provide.

Speak the Truth in Love

Good sponsors offer their sponsees ongoing and steady support. Good sponsors also know when it’s time to give what is delicately called “negative feedback.” Confronting sponsees must always be done in love. Our job is not to blast or blame. Unloading a lot of anger on sponsees may not contribute to their recovery, so if our feelings are strong, it’s worth asking ourselves, Why am I so upset? Am I invested in an unhealthy way in my sponsee’s recovery? Have I taken on the job of ‘saving’ my sponsee, so that I’m personally affronted when my sponsee has a relapse? Is my sponsee triggering something that relates to some other aspect of my life? Should I talk to someone else first for a reality check?

Just as carrying out an all-out assault on our sponsees is unhelpful to anyone’s recovery, so is dodging the naming of hard truths. Letting sponsees get away with ignoring or violating their program agreements does not contribute to their recovery, or to ours. Unfortunately, many sponsors are so desperately afraid of conflict that initiating any kind of confrontation seems supremely difficult. This is where we recovering co-dependents need to work our program and to learn and re-learn the lessons of how to speak up for ourselves, to set boundaries, and to quit “people-pleasing.”

So how do we sponsors “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)? When things go wrong, we offer our feedback as soon as possible; we don’t let things simmer or slide. Our feedback is as specific as possible, focusing not on the presumed motives of our sponsee but on the actual behavior. We remember that our job is not to figure out or analyze our sponsees, but rather to remind them of their commitments and to hold them accountable – gently but firmly – if those commitments are not honored. If our sponsor/sponsee relationship becomes uncomfortable and stuck, we might want to reflect on the question, “How can we move forward in this situation?”

Sponsorship is a privilege. As sponsors, we participate in the intimate, challenging, often daily work of encouraging those in our care to live drug-free. What’s more, sponsorship provides a context for our own growth, too, as together with everyone in the Twelve Step Program we “work out [our own] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), giving thanks that God is at work among us.



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