

President's Letter  
Consistency in SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> Meetings  
Tom Horvath

How desirable would it be for SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> meetings to have a basic consistency, regardless of where they take place or who leads them? I think this would be desirable, and in this column I will suggest a way to move in that direction. I solicit your feedback, because the changes proposed here will not be accomplished if we do not develop a shared vision of the future of our meetings.

There are a number of advantages of consistency. A major component of SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> is meetings, whether face-to-face or online. If these meetings vary widely, then who are we? If a Coordinator were having momentary or longer lasting difficulties, how would a participant know that the meeting was not typical, if there were no typical? How would Coordinators know whether they were improving, if there were nothing to compare with?

From another perspective, we have been in the business of providing meetings under the name SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> since 1994. We have learned a few things, and we can incorporate the "tried and true" into a meeting format that is powerful, yet flexible. By using that format, we can increase our chances of reaching and helping the broadest range of participants.

I propose that we agree as an organization that our meetings have at least six basic elements:

1. Welcome and Introduction
2. Check-in
3. Agenda Setting
4. Working Time
5. Pass the Hat
6. Check-out and Closing

For special circumstances, the Coordinator always has the authority to delete one of these elements. Some Coordinators may also routinely add other elements (such Sharing Successes, Developing Homework Projects, or Social Time). However, experience has shown that the routine elimination of any of these elements is very likely to impair the effectiveness of the meeting.

*1. Welcome and Introduction.* This element is needed to orient newcomers and recent members, and to indicate to everyone that the pre-meeting chit-chat has ended and the meeting has begun. Newcomers need to be clear about what is expected of them. A simple version would be:

"Welcome! My name is Tom. I will be leading this SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> meeting.

SMART stands for Self Management And Recovery Training. I'm passing around a meeting outline, so you will know what to expect. This meeting will last 60 (or 90) minutes. This meeting is open to anyone. No one is required to participate or use your name if you don't wish to. There is no charge for this meeting, but we will gladly accept your donation when we pass the hat later. Our discussion topic is how to abstain from any type of addictive behavior, including alcohol, drugs, and activities such as gambling.

“SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> views addictive behavior as a complex maladaptive behavior, not as a disease. We view recovery as our own responsibility. We teach self-empowering skills designed to help you build and maintain motivation, cope with urges, identify and solve the other problems in your life, and achieve lifestyle balance in order to prevent relapse.

“This meeting is confidential: we expect that what is said here, stays here. If this is your first meeting you are welcome to mostly listen, or to jump right in and join the conversation, whichever seems better to you. We have literature that you can purchase after the meeting, and the meeting outline explains some of our fundamental ideas. “Okay, that was the Welcome and Introduction. Next is the Check-in. Susan, let's start with you, and then go around the circle.”

2. *Check-in*. In a smaller meeting (e.g., only a handful of participants), the Check-in, Agenda-Setting, and Working Time may merge into one item. It could seem quite artificial to limit someone to a few minutes of Check-in, if the meeting is small and the person is obviously "on a roll" and eager to talk. In a larger meeting more structure will be needed. For a large meeting, limit each participant to perhaps one to three minutes.

Otherwise Check-in will take up the entire meeting. Without a Check-in, you won't know what issues are present in the room. Tell the group: "In the Check-in we simply state what has been happening recently that is important for us, and our reactions. If you are new, you might want to tell us what led up to your coming here." If it is clear that someone has more than a few minutes of talking to do, you might say: "After we finish the Check-in, let's get back to the issues you are raising, because I think they will be meaningful for the whole group."

3. *Agenda-Setting*. It may be clear after the Check-in who is ready to work, or that no one has a pressing issue. If there are several participants ready to talk, identify the order they get to go in. It might go like this: "Several of you seemed to want to talk more. So, how about this as our agenda? Mary, how about if you start, then Jamal can follow, and Shedonna last. You will each have about 10 minutes." If only one person has an issue, it would still be useful to state, "Jaime, you can begin, but after about 20 minutes, I'm going to ask if someone else has thought of an issue to focus on."

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4 *Working Time*. Many meetings will use this discussion time to construct an ABC at the board or flip chart. I propose that the ABC itself be optional, but that all meetings use this

time to listen and understand participants, and suggest alternative perspectives for participants to consider. These suggestions need to be made tentatively and considerately. Crosstalk is great at our meetings. It is more important that a participant leave a meeting feeling understood, than having been overloaded with a rational perspective that may be too much to digest all at once.

If there are no pressing issues, have a prepared topic, such as one of the four points (of the 4-Point Program <sup>TM</sup>). It is not necessary that you lecture about the topic. You might simply read a paragraph or two out of the *Member's Manual* or other book from the Recommended Reading List, and ask for reactions. After some period of discussion, it would be useful to ask if someone has thought of an issue to focus on. If so, state the new agenda: "Great, Maria, let's look at this issue for about 10 minutes, then I'll check to see if someone else has also thought of an issue."

5. *Pass the Hat*. It's hard to tell for sure which section of the meeting outline is most difficult for most Coordinators, but this one is certainly a leading candidate. If you find yourself not doing this, you have a great opportunity to identify and correct inaccurate thinking! A suggested Pass the Hat statement is provided on page 1-5 of the *Coordinator's Manual*. In summary, this statement is: "SMART Recovery<sup>®</sup> is a non-profit, but has expenses like any other organization. There is no charge for this meeting, but we gratefully accept any donation you can provide. The cost of a drink would be one size donation to give."

6. *Check-out and Closing*. If you skip this step you lose a valuable opportunity to learn how the meeting affected all the participants. Even those who have been silent until this point typically will speak--and it now may be necessary to limit them! Participants can also learn a great deal from each other. When both a Check-in and Check-out are provided, everyone has two structured opportunities to speak, which can be a great encouragement to those feeling timid. You might say: "It's time to Check-out. Let's go around the circle again, in the same (or reverse, or some other) order. I'd like to hear what was most meaningful for you about this meeting, or anything else you want to tell us. You each have about 30 seconds."

When everyone is finished you can simply say: "Thanks for attending. If anyone has any questions, or wishes to purchase literature, or needs a court card signed, I will be staying for a few minutes. I hope to see you next week. Good night." Just as it is important to know when the meeting has begun, it is also important to know that the meeting has ended.

This column has ended also, but I hope that it initiates an ongoing dialogue about the level of meeting consistency we want to have, and how to achieve it.