

WHAT MAKES OXFORD HOUSE WORK

Tradition Two of the Oxford House Traditions requires that all Oxford Houses be run on a democratic basis. Any group, in order to function effectively, needs leaders. Oxford House depends on democratically chosen leaders, but the leaders are but trusted servants and cannot serve in the same office for a continuous period of longer than six months.

Officers elected in an Oxford House are but "trusted servants." Their power is limited by the will of the majority and the Oxford House Traditions. One of the reasons that every member of an Oxford House pays the same weekly or monthly share of house expenses is that every voice in the house carries equal weight -- one man or woman has one vote concerning all decisions of the house. This principle of assuring every member of a house an equal voice in the affairs of the house was of great concern to the founders of the first Oxford House in 1975. They had been living in a county-run halfway house in which payments were based upon earnings and ranged from \$15 a week to \$45 a week. One of the first things the members of the first Oxford House did was to decide that equal payments were necessary in order to give all the residents an equal voice in the running of the house. Therefore, the first Oxford House residents decided on a flat weekly payment of \$25 to cover the expenses of rent, utilities and staples for the house. That principle of equality has been part of the Oxford House concept and system of operations ever since.

The next thing the original members of Oxford House did was to decide that they needed officers to provide leadership and order for their new venture. They had already determined that they could not afford to pay the house manager, who also acted as the cook, and the counsellor who had been employees of the halfway house that was closing. The elected officers would have to fill the void left by not having a manager and counsellor. The officers they decided on were five -- a President, a Secretary, a Treasurer, a Comptroller and a Co-ordinator. The Treasurer and Comptroller had somewhat overlapping functions in that both could collect rent, but only the Treasurer and President could authorize the expenditure of funds.

The co-ordinator had the job of dividing up the work details necessary to keep the house clean. The job was not the most sought after -- but quickly the new group learned that democracy (a majority vote of all members in the house) has a wonderful way of filling all jobs -- particularly if the job is only for a period of six months.

The "six month" rule was one of the first adopted by Oxford House -- in part because no one wanted anyone else to become the "big boss" -- like they felt the house manager had been -- and some of the more difficult jobs -- like co-ordinator or comptroller -- could more easily be filled if the job lasted no more than six months.

Today the term in any one office continues to be for a continuous period of but six months. (An individual can be elected to the same office again after an intervening term of six months has elapsed. This is often necessary in smaller houses having very little turnover.)

The number of officers in an Oxford House depends -- in part -- upon the particular house. Every Oxford House elects the following officers:

- President
- Treasurer
- Comptroller
- Secretary

Each of the above officers has a specific role to play in making the Oxford House System of Operations work.

The **President** presides at the weekly house business meeting of the house. In that role he or she brings up items of business in a regular order, recognizes all the members wishing to comment on any issue or to bring up new issues, and conducts votes to determine the decision of the membership, when appropriate. Usually the President of an Oxford House will be one of two individuals whose signature will be required on each check written by the House. (The other signature required is generally that of the Treasurer.) ***NOTE: Proper management of finances is very important in a self-run, self-supported recovery house. Two signatures are always required to write any checks and checks should always be written at house meetings while all members are present. The money belongs to all members of the house as a group and great care must be taken to make certain it is expended only for expenses authorized by the group.***

Finally, each of the house Presidents exercises leadership by resolving disputes among house members, listens to individual members who have problems to discuss related to their own recovery, and represents the entire house in monthly Chapter meetings where several Oxford Houses in a geographic area work with each other to assure the good name and high quality of all Oxford Houses.

The **Treasurer** has primary responsibility for maintaining the finances of an Oxford House in good order. The Treasurer keeps the checking account in balance, writes checks for timely payment of house bills, collects the rent and lets the members know the financial status of the house at every weekly business meeting. Most houses post the Treasurer's Weekly Report in a prominent place in the house so that each member can examine it at his or her leisure -- there are no secrets when it comes to house finances.

The **Secretary** records minutes of each house business meeting. Those minutes are read at the next business meeting so that the group will be able to focus on unfinished business and continually keep track of house problems, policies and decisions. The Secretary also keeps track of applications for membership in the house, arranges interviews for applicants, and maintains a file of applicants accepted and rejected.

The **Comptroller** is an assistant to the Treasurer and has primary responsibility for collecting weekly rent from the members of the house on time. Every self-run, self-supported recovery house charges each member the same amount of weekly rent as an equal share of the house expenses. Because there is no "fat" in the weekly rent assessments, everybody must pay on time. Each week the entire house discusses what to do about any member's overdue rent. In general, most houses try to collect rent at least one week in advance of when it is due.

Some houses elect a house **Coordinator** to oversee shared chores to keep the house clean both inside and out. Working together to keep a house clean is one of the ways house members learn responsibility and gain self-esteem. For those houses that do not elect a coordinator the task of seeing that various work tasks are performed falls upon one of the other officers of the house -- usually the President. Some houses also institute a system of "fines" for work tasks not done. These "fines" go into the house account and sometimes are used to buy luxury items such as a new television or VCR.

Group decisions are made by majority vote, except with respect to admission of new members into the group. To admit a new member, an 80% favorable vote by existing members is needed. The purpose of the 80% vote is three-fold: (1) acceptance of a new member into the group involves a commitment by nearly everyone in the house and a newcomer should be assured a supportive environment when he or she moves in; (2) knowing that an 80% acceptance vote is needed, the newcomer will value his or her admission more than if admission were by a simple majority, and (3) an 80% admission vote forces thoughtful consideration by the entire house when a newcomer applies for admission.

The importance of the weekly business meeting cannot be overstated. It not only serves to keep the members of a house up-to-date concerning the financial matters of the house but also serves as a place to resolve personality differences between house members. It also provides a forum in which peer pressure can be used to encourage each member to work his or her own 12-step program of recovery. In brief, the house meeting becomes an important opportunity for members to help each other keep on a steady course to develop a new comfortable lifestyle that is free of alcohol and drug use.

The most difficult -- and most important decision -- a self-run, self-supported recovery house has to make is whether or not a resident has returned to using alcohol or drugs. The decision is made at a meeting of the house residents. The facts are considered by the members -- all of whom know about addiction from their own experiences -- and a vote is taken on whether or not a relapse has occurred. If a majority of the members vote that the resident has relapsed, he or she must leave immediately.

Since recovering individuals are highly vulnerable to relapse, it is likely that many houses will have some members who relapse. Each member, however, realizes that the system works only if the relapser is expelled. The common welfare of the group in maintaining an alcohol and drug-free living environment is too great a risk by not expelling any individual at the first sign of a relapse. Moreover, each member knows that failure to expel a member who has used drugs or alcohol places the charter of their house at risk. Oxford House, Inc. makes it clear that a charter can be revoked if members who return to using are not expelled.

The expulsion of relapsers has a positive effect on both the relapser and the other members of the house. As painful as an expulsion may be, it is a judgment by one's peers. The peers themselves who make the difficult decision seem to have their own sobriety reinforced.

The democratic nature of the house organization, the written system of operations, the election of officers, the written traditions and the grant of the charter all work together to promote recovery through the exercise of responsibility. As the members enjoy their recovery and realize the role that the self-run, self-supported recovery house has played in their recovery, they help replicate the experience for others by starting another recovery house.