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Operational View of Moderation Management: An Interview with Jim Mergens

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Moderation Management (MM) remains one of the smallest and yet most controversial of mutual aid organizations within the alcohol problems arena. During the summer of 2013, I sought to update my knowledge of MM history and its current status through a series of interviews with key MM leaders. This update included an interview with Jim Mergens, the present Executive Director of MM. Please join us in this conversation about the governance, staffing and operational side of MM.

Tenure of MM Involvement

Bill White: Jim, how long have you been involved with MM and how long have you served as MM's Executive Director.

Jim Mergens: I've served as MM's Executive Director since October 2010. In 2005, I was a person seeking MM's services after reaching a point where I had become concerned about my drinking. I did not want to pursue abstinence so I Googled "moderate drinking" and MM came up. I first signed up for the Listserv and shortly thereafter began volunteering as a Chat Host and eventually assumed the position of Chat Admin, what we have nicknamed, "Chat Boss." Generally, what that means is that I was leading meetings and recruiting volunteers to be chat hosts. After I had done that for a few years (2006-2009), I moved on to be an admin of ABSTAR, which is our Moderation Management tool for counting your drinks and gauging your progress.

Around 2010, a sequence of events brought me into the role of Director of MM. I'd just come from a corporate job position with Circuit City when the corporation collapsed. Ana Kosok, who was at that time the MM Executive Director, had offered to tune up my resume as I began my search for new employment. Much to my surprise, she told me that I had the qualifications Moderation Management needed in its search for a new Director of the organization. So I flew to New York and met with the board and was offered the position. The position pays only a modest salary which I must supplement with other work. It has been a real learning process, but I really love it and what MM did to help me. I answer official e-mails, do the books, contribute to the Listserv, and participate in chat periodically. I also collaborate in locating new admins for our therapist vetting, chat and Abstar admins.

Bill White: Are you the only paid MM staff person?

Jim Mergens: At this point, we only have two paid staff: myself and Kurt Schnakenberg. Everyone else in the organization serves on a volunteer basis.

MM Governance

Bill White: Jim, how would you describe the governance of MM? How are decisions and policies made within the organization?

Jim Mergens: It's a two-fold thing: activities of staff and volunteers and activities of the MM Board of Directors. First, I make decisions on day-to-day decisions and delegate many functions to others within the organization. Kurt Schnakenberg, as you know, is webmaster and so he and another fellow named Eric regularly update our site and manage the Listserv. (Listserv is a function of MM where people post their experiences and ask questions.) We also have a forum, which is overseen by Donna Dierker. There is also the MM chat room on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays with a long term MMer coordinating chats and recruiting new volunteers. He's been at it for a couple of years now and leads the more formal Tuesday night online meeting. I do a lot of the administrative work such as pay the bills, balance the books, answer emails and organize the Moderation Management Board of Directors meetings.

Bill White: How many MM board members are there, and what role do they play setting policies and procedures for MM?

Jim Mergens: We currently have seven board members: Chairman Andrew Tatarsky, Ph.D., Michael Benibgui, Ph.D., Reid K. Hester, Ph.D., Tom Horvath, Ph.D., Marc F. Kern, Ph.D., John Pasagiannis, Ph.D. and Frederick Rotgers, Psy.D. The board of directors are all therapeutic/research professionals who provide their input to policy discussions. The Moderation Management Board of Directors votes on any proposed policy changes for MM.

Bill White: I get asked sometimes, "Is Moderation Management run by its members or is it run by treatment professionals." Are there people on the board who are members of MM and who have experiential knowledge from using MM for management of their own drinking?

Jim Mergens: The MM board is primarily a professional/scientific advisory board in addition to a policy board. They are, for the most part, treatment professionals.

Bill White: What are the sources of funds that support MM as an organization?

Jim Mergens: Our funding comes from two primary sources: from the membership itself and from MM-friendly therapists. The former comes from periodic fundraisers where we send out an appeal to members for support. The latter involves an annual request for financial support from those MM-friendly therapists who are listed on our site—usually a donation like \$50. We also have sponsors of the MM site. One sponsor, Dr. Reid Hester, sends Moderation Management a check from the proceeds from his site, Moderate Drinking.com, which varies considerably from month to month. In short, we're always operating on a shoestring.

Bill White: What is the annual operating budget of Moderation Management?

Jim Mergens: It's less than \$25,000 per year.

Current Status of MM

Bill White: What is the current number of face-to-face MM meetings in the United States and in other countries?

Jim Mergens: We have twenty two active face-to-face meetings. The majority of them are in the states but we also have a meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, London, England, Dundee, Scotland and Berlin, Germany. There are also six "emerging meetings" that are in the process of being started and developing. It's where a person will show an interest in starting a meeting and running it. We currently have five on that list. We're also developing a meeting in Kentucky, a new one on Long Island in New York, one in Toronto, Canada and one in Brussels, Belgium.

Bill White: Is there a way you quantify the level of online MM activity?

Jim Mergens: I would say we have about 500 people involved in active participation at any time on the forum and we have 80-100 active contributors on our Listserv. A lot of members have been involved on a fairly informal basis, which we call "lurkers." They're fairly anonymous, mostly following the discussions on the List Serve and on the Forum. And for the ABSTAR program, which is probably one of our most active programs, there are five thousand people subscribed. Some of those are duplicate members. A more realistic number is about two thousand or so. Abstar is a counting database where member can enter their numbers of drinks on a private or a public basis, usually using pseudonyms. It's used to monitor their progress towards achieving their drinking goals.

There are many different venues in terms of chat. Any given night, we'll have about 10-25 people go into the chat room to express their thinking on either their personal issues or pose questions in general about Moderation Management. We also have what we call our "Book", *Responsible Drinking* that was authored by Fred Rotgers Psy.D, Marc Kern Ph.D and Rudy Hoetzel. In fact, there's a discussion of various chapters of the book held on Monday nights where people discuss the information and issues in the book. It covers every aspect from starting out in MM, figuring out what the program is all about, self-assessment and how to make a decision whether or not moderate drinking or abstinence would be the best choice for you.

The idea is to quickly determine for yourself and in your life whether or not moderate drinking is for you or not. There's actually a segment of Moderation Management which is comprised of non-drinkers. They're closely associated with MM, most having been involved in MM for a long time. They've gone through the ups and downs of maintaining moderate drinking and they've decided to seek the abstinence route. For those choosing moderation, they learn the MM tools to drink moderately such as delaying the daily start time of drinking, having a set time between drinks, and having regular days of abstinence to keep our tolerances low. We also have guidelines for number of drinks to maintain a blood alcohol level of below .055 or less in order to not get overly intoxicated and yet enjoy what has been nicknamed "the Moderate Buzz." It is also suggested that people begin MM with a 30-day abstinence period.

The Future of MM

Bill White: What is your personal vision for the future of MM?

Jim Mergens: The future of MM is always a concern since MM is comprised almost exclusively of volunteers. I think our goal is just to obtain an operational presence and find a way not to be so terribly dependent on donations and all the ups and downs that come with that. I am not a crackerjack grant person and it seems like a lot of the grant money has dried up. It hasn't deterred me and it's a goal of mine to pursue them. The goal for MM as I see it is to have a healthy operating budget, a good cohesive team to administer our various services to serve our membership and mainly to promote MM through various forms of publicity. A lot of our board members use Twitter to publish stories and articles about Moderation Management. I have started an MM Facebook page, and so we are getting into social media. We are strongly allied with Harm Reduction groups and expect that association will continue.

Bill White: What do you think MM's most significant contribution has been within the whole spectrum of resources for alcohol and other drug problems?

Jim Mergens: I think MM has made multiple contributions. We're very well placed. When "moderate drinking" is Googled, we will typically come up as one of the first organizations listed. A lot of people who are concerned about their drinking will simply get on the web and Google a subject related to drinking problems or moderate drinking and, more often than not, Moderation Management will come up as a source. The challenge we face is to serve a constantly evolving membership. The real goal of Moderation Management is to get people involved, get them to address their drinking and then ideally move on to a place where drinking is a small, but enjoyable part of their lives. Our active membership will turn over frequently, probably every 60 to 90 days. There are people who stick around to provide anecdotal advice to discussions in chat and on Listserv in the forum, but generally speaking, the most active members are people who have just come in don't know much about moderate drinking, didn't know it was really an option and are assisted to develop their own moderation techniques. Some stick around long term to contribute and share their experiences and successes and a lot of them go on to live their lives, what I like to call "graduating" from Moderation Management.

Bill White: That could be good for individuals who got what they were seeking from MM, but it would seem to create an inherent instability for MM as an organization.

Jim Mergens: Well, that is possible, but I do not see MM developing a large membership that maintains lifelong involvement in MM. Our future is in getting the word out via the various internet venues and simply keeping the word out there and growing the membership as we move along. Our membership will ebb and flow based on our level of public and online visibility. It also depends a lot on each individual person progresses within the MM program.

Bill White: Jim, thank you for taking this time with to share your work with and thoughts about MM.

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