

SGI-USA

**District Leaders
Handbook**

First Edition
January 2005

Table of Contents

General Director's Message to District Leaders	3
1. Introduction	5
2. Leadership Positions and Organization of the District	6
A) District Leaders	
B) Group Leaders	
3. Specific Responsibilities of Leaders	7
A) All Leaders	
B) District Leaders	
C) Group Leaders	
4. The Discussion Meeting	8
A) Before the Meeting	
B) The Emcee	
C) The Planning Meeting	
D) Meeting Contents	
E) After the Meeting	
F) Other District Activities	
5. Taking Care of Members	12
A) What Members Are Taught in a District	
B) Visiting Members	
C) Study and Publications	
D) Statistics—Treasuring Each Member	
6. Guidance for District Leaders	14
7. Twelve Points of Practice for SGI-USA Activities	20

General Director's Message to District Leaders

The history of the Soka Gakkai is the history of caring for each individual in the district. The district is where people nurture their faith in the Mystic Law and find the encouragement to surmount problems in their families, careers, health, relationships—any and all of life's difficulties. District leaders play a crucial role in warmly guiding people in their Buddhist practice. SGI President Ikeda explains: "I was once placed in charge of a district myself, so I know what it is like. The amount of responsibility and hard work involved is truly great. Yet Buddhism teaches that earthly desires lead to enlightenment. All our hardships, therefore, will turn into brilliant treasures. This is what faith means" (*My Dear Friends in America*, p. 314).

I believe district leadership is the most important responsibility in our SGI-USA organization. You represent the SGI and Nichiren Buddhism on behalf of President Ikeda. You are a beacon to people seeking happiness and solutions to life's problems. All of us who have been so fortunate to join the SGI fondly remember our first district and district leaders who taught us the basics of Buddhist practice.

This sincere care given to each district member is vital to his or her growth in faith. The Lotus Sutra states, "If you see a person who accepts and upholds this sutra, you should rise and greet him from afar, showing him the same respect you would a Buddha" (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 324). Districts are like families where we share our challenges and victories and support one another no matter what. It is where we build trust and respect with fellow members and is an oasis of hope amid the harsh realities of society.

In *The New Human Revolution*, President Ikeda writes: "If we liken the Soka Gakkai to an orchard, each district corresponds to a single fruit tree, while the fruit represents each of you. Without the tree, there will be no fruit. Everything depends on the tree. Similarly, the real basis of the Soka Gakkai is each district that composes it. One could even say that the district itself is the Soka Gakkai" (vol. 1, p. 108).

Being a district leader is not easy. I know that you make untold efforts behind the scenes for the sake of others. I also believe that to be a district leader is a great honor worthy of the Daishonin's praise. He writes in "General Stone Tiger": "Shakyamuni Buddha refused to entrust the mission of propagation to any of these people and gave it instead to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Thus these bodhisattvas are the ones who had thoroughly forged their resolve" (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 953).

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for all that you do. In fulfilling your mission as district leaders, you are absolutely building great good fortune for yourselves and your families, and contributing to the peace and happiness of society.

Danny Nagashima
SGI-USA General Director

1. Introduction

The purpose of this handbook is to explain the definition and function of SGI-USA districts and district leaders. It is a practical exploration—the nuts and bolts—of the most important part of our organization. However, understanding alone will not guarantee the success of a district. As explained in the excerpted guidance of President Ikeda in the last section, prayer to the Gohonzon with a sense of responsibility is the key to success. The SGI is like a family, a living body in which each person is all-important. Although we should be well organized, the members should not be made to feel regimented or restricted.

2. Leadership Positions and Organization of the District

District leaders are representatives from each of the four divisions—men’s, women’s, young men’s and young women’s—when possible. Vice district leaders and group leaders are also drawn from all four divisions.

A) District Leaders

District leaders have overall district responsibility.

B) Group Leaders

A district is typically composed of groups, each with a group leader—or sometimes a team of two or more group leaders—responsible for the membership within the group.

The group can be further divided into smaller units when it has grown to the point where it is difficult for the group leaders to adequately care for the members. These smaller groups consist of a leader and one or more additional members for whom they are responsible.

3. Specific Responsibilities of Leaders

A) All Leaders

- Praying for the happiness and growth of each member of the district
- Communicating with and reporting to their immediate leaders
- Participating in home visits
- Take members for guidance

B) District Leaders

- Giving personal guidance to district members when asked.
- Communicating with and maintaining good relationships with group leaders and other members.
- Planning or supervising the planning of discussion meetings.
- Determining what additional kinds of activities (beyond the discussion meeting) would be valuable to the district.

C) Group Leaders

- Communicating with and maintaining good relationships other leaders and all members

4. The Discussion Meeting

The discussion meeting began with the Soka Gakkai's first president, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, and was further developed by second president Josei Toda during the organization's reconstruction after the end of World War II. By then, it had become an open forum where members and guests could freely discuss Buddhist philosophy, share their experiences in faith and gain deeper insights through study.

Such gatherings form the essential matrix of SGI activities to the present day, and their format can be traced back to the days of Nichiren Daishonin and Shakyamuni. Question-and-answer sessions were an essential method of teaching employed by Shakyamuni. In fact, most of the sutras are composed in the form of questions asked by disciples, followed by Shakyamuni's responses. Many of Nichiren's writings are similarly constructed. Shakyamuni even characterized certain roles played by his disciples in expounding his teachings. Some disciples taught, others listened and others asked questions. Shakyamuni said that the most important people relating his teachings were those who asked questions, because they provided a focus for both the teacher and the listeners.

In our present-day discussion meetings, the interplay of dialogue among the participants creates a dynamic where attention is heightened and learning is far more effective than simply listening to a lecture. For example, when someone asks for an explanation of a Buddhist concept, not only does the questioner listen more intently, so do the other participants, who are curious to hear how the question will be answered for their own benefit and for those they introduce with similar questions. It is also often the case that one person's question will be representative of other people's questions, thereby benefiting the whole group.

Dialogue is the best way to build a humanistic culture, and the discussion meeting is an ideal forum. People share their experiences, their struggles and victories, and simultaneously learn from and encourage one another.

A) Before the Meeting

- Set the date, time and place.
- Communicate to all members as soon as possible, including guests.
- Chant for the success of the meeting.

B) The Emcee

Discussion meetings usually include an emcee.

- The emcee performs three important functions: establishing the atmosphere of the meeting, keeping the meeting on track, and concluding the meeting on time.
- District leaders should go over the schedule with the emcee before the meeting. This instruction will allow him or her to be confident when speaking and gain a personal victory through the experience.
- Although the emcee does not have to be a youth division member, it has long been considered a fundamental part of youth training. Elementary School Division children may assist the emcee if desired.
- Chanting together and encouraging the emcee to pray for the success of the meeting are important in preparation for the discussion meeting.

C) The Planning Meeting

A planning meeting is recommended in preparation for the discussion meeting. It provides an opportunity for the members to come together and discuss topics that are relevant to them. A successful planning meeting ensures a successful discussion meeting.

- The planning meeting may be open to all district members or left up to district leaders or a committee. The point is to have an effective planning meeting.
- Conduct respectful dialogue during the planning process. Not every idea can be incorporated into the final plan, but everyone who attends the meeting should have an opportunity to have his or her ideas considered.

- Try to have the discussion meeting thoroughly planned by the end of the planning meeting. It is easy to veer off onto other subjects and run out of time.

D) Meeting Contents

- Gongyo and daimoku
Usually recited at discussion meetings except where circumstances do not permit.
- Open discussion
The meeting should include a group discussion or question-and-answer session in an atmosphere in which members and guests feel free to participate. Keep in mind that the purpose of the meeting is to explore the practice of Nichiren Buddhism as it is taught in the SGI.
- Explanation of the practice
This is an explanation of the basics of Buddhist practice especially for guests. That is, we are practicing Buddhism as taught by Nichiren Daishonin, which involves faith, practice and study. Here is where we can describe the great benefits of this practice.
- Explanation of the SGI
Here we can explain that we are an organization of people helping one another practice Nichiren Buddhism. We can relate the history of the SGI and its world peace mission based on the happiness of each individual.
- Experiences in faith
Here members describe how Buddhist practice led to the acquisition of benefits, solutions to problems or a change in character that is referred to as *human revolution*. The ideal experience tells a story that can be easily understood and provide some detail about the process.
- Study presentations
These are usually based on the writings of Nichiren or President Ikeda's commentaries and guidance. The presenter should prepare ahead of time to gain an understanding of the topic and present it in his or her own words. Short quotes are

desirable, but reading extended passages typically makes the presentation less effective.

- Meetings may also include skits, musical presentations, announcements or other features that the planners feel will be encouraging to those attending.

E) After the Meeting

The time following the discussion meeting can be extremely valuable. Often members or guests will want to continue the discussion or receive personal guidance. Friends may appreciate the opportunity to catch up on personal news. Therefore, it's best if people can stay for a short while after the meeting. However, since discussion meetings generally take place in people's homes, consideration of the family providing the meeting place is very important. Some people are happy to have members stay as long as they want, and others have a time after which they are not comfortable with a house full of people. It is essential, therefore, that the district leaders be aware of the circumstances of the particular meeting place and guide people appropriately. We must not take advantage of members who have generously offered their homes for meetings by staying too long.

F) Other District Activities

Other district activities might include:

- District leaders meetings (sometimes referred to as district 4Ds) are highly recommended. This is an opportunity for district leaders to meet face to face and talk about district affairs. It is also an opportunity to chant daimoku together and get to know and care about one another.
- Chanting sessions
- Study meetings are also highly recommended and provide an opportunity for members to read and discuss Buddhist philosophy to strengthen their faith.
- Other activities that, in the judgment of the district leaders, will be encouraging to the faith of the members.

5. Taking Care of Members

The person who introduces a new member, generally referred to as the sponsor, is usually the first person who teaches the new member how to practice, including chanting, reciting the sutra, caring for the Gohonzon, and so forth. Ideally, the sponsor's involvement continues, especially through the early period of practice. At the same time, as a new member becomes integrated into a district, a unit or group leader will be assigned to contact and support the individual. Within each district, the leaders should clearly know who is responsible for contacting whom, and the district leader should be aware of anyone who needs help in his or her practice.

A) What Members Are Taught in a District

- Prayer: daimoku and gongyo
- The concept of benefit: what it is and how benefits are acquired
- The importance of study
- The importance of SGI publications
- The Gohonzon
- Contributions
- Receiving guidance—why and how
- Propagation and the spirit of compassion

B) Visiting Members

It is invaluable to visit district members and chant together with them. Visiting members is, above all, an expression of friendship. We shouldn't give people the impression that we are "checking up on them" or that the only reason we are going is because they haven't been at meetings for a while. Meeting one on one with members is the model of dialogue that the SGI is all about. That means connecting with people by listening first.

While we, of course, pray for the members' happiness, our purpose is not to give personal advice, solve people's problems or be a resource of ongoing personal favors. Our intention should be to guide people toward their own solutions and fulfill their own

goals through applying the powers of faith and practice and discovering the power of the Gohonzon within themselves.

Whenever possible, it is valuable to take someone less experienced in faith along to show through example how to make the experience of visiting members a deeply rewarding one for all concerned.

C) Study and Publications

Study deepens confidence in Buddhist practice, especially when one faces difficult times, when doubts may arise. Members who study develop wisdom and tenacity and don't give up on themselves or their practice. They are also better prepared to share Nichiren's Buddhism with others. Toward that end, district members learn that reading something each day from the *World Tribune*, *Living Buddhism* or *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin* inspires them to face daily challenges with hope and conviction.

Including study at the discussion meeting, home visit or any activity, are ways to help members feel comfortable with study and apply Nichiren's teachings to their daily lives.

D) Statistics —Treasuring Each Member

Maintaining and reviewing membership cards for each person in the district are crucial to making sure no one is overlooked. Every two months, district leaders meet to go over all the membership cards for their district. Information is corrected or additions made and the well being of each member reviewed. Each card represents a precious member of the SGI.

In commemorating the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Statistics Department of the Soka Gakkai, President Ikeda said: "The Soka Gakkai will be an organization of shakubuku and kosen-rufu for all eternity. For this reason, membership statistics is the most essential foundation for the Soka Gakkai's progress, which is the Buddha's intent and mandate. Membership statistics is a lifeline for our unshakable development into the eternal future of the Latter Day of the Law."

6. Guidance for District Leaders

The following are excerpts of President Ikeda's guidance on the importance of the district and the role of district leaders.

The Importance of the District

- The district lies on the forefront of our movement and has a direct connection with each individual. At the same time, it is endowed with all of the functions necessary to support our daily activities. You might say that all our struggles in the realm of faith have centered on the district and that it is within the district that each of us has grown. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 108)

The Growth of the District

- The organization will change and develop in any number of ways depending on the *ichinen*, or deep-seated determination, of the central figure. People will follow a leader who always fights for them. But they will eventually perceive the real nature of someone interested only in personal fame or fortune and will stop supporting that person. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 61)

- You cannot expect that people will naturally develop into capable individuals. They will grow in proportion to a leader's wholehearted efforts to realize that purpose. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- The organization's effectiveness is determined by the combination of different individuals. When leaders of various backgrounds, personalities and thinking combine their energies, they can nurture people of rich and diverse ability, creating a broad-minded, humanistic organization capable of facing any problem. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 281)

Healthy Relationships in the District

- There are many different kinds of people in our organization, and each has his or her own mission to fulfill. In this sense, everyone is a child of the Buddha. Therefore, I hope that you will not pass judgment on and exclude anyone based on some emotional reason.

Please advance together, chanting for and embracing one another with a magnanimous heart. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- People can't help judging others according to their own standards. If you're logical and systematic, for example, you'll probably see ability in those who are also methodical and analytical. On the other hand, if you're impulsive and not prone to giving matters much thought, you'll tend to regard those who have similar tendencies as capable. Also, if you're extremely self-centered and full of your own importance, you won't be able to appreciate people's strengths or good points. Instead, you'll see only their faults. Ultimately, the ability to find capable people depends on whether we can see others' strengths, and the only way to do this is to develop our own life-condition. If anything, I feel we have a multitude of capable members, each like a precious diamond. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 117)

- It is important for leaders to have the spirit to bring out each person's potential. Leaders shouldn't judge others based on outward appearances or decide from their own narrow perspective that someone is unsuitable or no good. Racking your brain over how to uncover and bring out others' strong points is the true measure of a leader, the very art of leadership itself. (Sept. 22, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 10)

- Leaders must never scold the members but should encourage and communicate warmly with them. The mission of leaders is to always protect the members and give them a sense of security and courage. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- The safety and well being of the members are always the first priority. It is the duty of leaders to protect the members. No matter what anyone might say, I will always stand by the members. I live for their sake. I hope that all of you share this spirit. (April 7, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- It is natural to encourage a person who is standing right in front of you. However, the true worth of leaders is determined by the extent to which they can direct their attention toward those supporting that person at home or behind the scenes. Behind each individual is a network of connections with many others, including family members and friends. What is important is how much

consideration we can show toward these people. (January 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- A mother who loves her children and thinks constantly of their welfare knows what they want merely from their cries. Children, too, feel content and reassured when they hear their mother's voice. Similarly, a leader who has a strong determination to cherish the members can understand their worries and desires, and the members will in turn respond to such a leader. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 138)

The Discussion Meeting

- The discussion meeting is a miniature portrait of the Soka Gakkai. It might be described as an oasis in today's world where people from all walks of life, young and old, men and women alike, encourage one another and discuss the means for attaining happiness. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 20)

- Kosen-rufu is a very long struggle. It is a march that will continue over the 10,000 years of the Latter Day of the Law. Therefore, let us advance joyfully and unhurriedly. Activities must not be conducted in such a way that people suffer and become exhausted. Meetings should be short and not too numerous and conducted so that they are valuable and productive for all concerned. It is SGI policy that all evening meetings end by 8:30. Afterward people should leave promptly so they can get enough rest. (Aug 11, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- Leaders must also carefully consider what they are going to speak about, and how to present it, so that the members will readily understand and accept what they have to say. It is important to continue making such efforts. When I have a meeting to attend, I always make sure that I am thoroughly prepared. I rack my brains and try to come up with creative ideas.

This is a leader's duty. If a leader just talks about the same old thing and never offers anything fresh or new, it is discourteous to the listeners. It is a sign of an irresponsible leader who has fallen into force of habit. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 138)

- It is a leader's responsibility to have accurate and detailed knowledge of all the current issues and problems of society. A leader

must possess a modern vision and be able to present ways of resolving these various problems based on a sound system of values. (June 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- You could say that giving an experience in faith involves an airing of past humiliations. The willingness of Soka Gakkai members to so readily and happily share their experiences, however, came from their immense joy at having triumphed over suffering. This overrode any embarrassment they might have felt. Sharing an experience was also an expression of compassion, stemming from the hope that others with similar problems would overcome them and become happy as quickly as possible. Such an open and honest sharing of experiences is possible only when trust exists among the members, allowing them the complete confidence that they will not be judged or discriminated against because of their past. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 269–70)

- It is important that we sufficiently discuss and crystallize activity plans so that everyone can be convinced and satisfied with them. (May 26, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- A true leader must pay attention to details. Such a meticulous attitude reflects a genuine sense of responsibility. Leaders who are careless and lack compassion, who merely give orders and issue directives, cause suffering for everyone. A leader who becomes self-centered is no longer qualified to be a Buddhist, let alone a leader. (July 28, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

Youth in the District

- I would like the youth to serve as the driving force in our discussion meetings and warmly embrace their fellow members with their youthful and vibrant spirit. The youth are the hope and life of the district. “This young person is the pride of our district. Our district is solid because of this person’s presence.” Those who are valued in this way by the men’s division and women’s division members may be called the true leaders of the next generation. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 29)

Qualities of a District Leader

- What you'll need, first and foremost, is a strong determination to help each person in the district become happy. You should also try to become someone whom everyone can talk to, always thinking about how to enable each person to bring forth his or her potential. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 53)

- A leader is one who causes people to feel joy. The mission of a leader is to encourage people and elevate their spirits. A leader absolutely must not scold others. Nothing qualifies a leader to castigate a friend. (Aug. 4, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 3)

- What is the purpose of the existence of leaders? It is to give the members hope and courage. It is to enable them to strengthen their faith and gain benefit. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and Buddhist leaders exist in order to enable those who are suffering and having a hard time to become happy. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4).

- Attempting to move people to action merely by orders or rallying cries is cold and mechanical; it is not humanism. It is all too easy to deal with others in a bureaucratic and impersonal manner. Managing people in this fashion is dangerous. Leaders should not think about becoming great in terms of the organization but as human beings. (Jan. 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- Leadership is not a matter of ordering people around, but first taking action yourself. By initiating action yourself, you will win others' trust, and then they, in turn, will follow suit. (Sept. 22, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 11)

- When leaders, owing to arrogance or decadence, cease to develop, the organization that they head falls to ruin. This is a basic principle of history, an unchanging truth in all ages. (Jan. 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- In a true democracy, no one is above or below anyone else. A leader doesn't have to be anyone special, just a person who values and respects all people equally. A leader who is not one of the people will not be able to understand their hearts. A person bereft of simple humanity will not understand others' feelings. No matter how high their positions, leaders have to remain of the people. While this may seem an unremarkable observation, this is an

essential requirement of a democratic leader. (June 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 5)

- You can't judge a person by his speaking ability. If being a good speaker meant being an outstanding person, then most politicians would be people of excellent character. But aren't there many politicians who make fine promises at election time but don't hesitate to break those promises once they're in office, doing nothing for the people? What counts as a human being is not eloquence but honesty and the sincerity to think of others. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 175)

- A requisite for leaders is sincerity. You must not be arrogant but exert your utmost for the sake of the members. Honesty, kindness, a sense of responsibility, belief and ordinariness—people are seeking for leaders with such humanistic qualities. Therefore, leaders must base their lives on faith, be true to themselves and develop as human beings. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- Most people find it is all they can do to worry about their own happiness and that of their immediate family. It is, therefore, no easy feat to live for the happiness of your friends and fellow members, for the sake of the Law and for kosen-rufu, while at the same time grappling with your own personal problems.

The fact is, however, that when you worry, pray and struggle for the sake of others, you are proving by your very actions that you have transcended the bounds of your own individual concerns and are opening the way for your own splendid human revolution. (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, pp. 60–61)

- The mission of leaders is to show actual proof of victory for the sake of the members. They must never make the members feel disappointed. (March 17, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

- What will be the main theme of the SGI from now on? It will be the growth of leaders. This must be the focus. (Jan. 16, 1995, *World Tribune*, p. 4)

7. Twelve Points of Practice for SGI-USA Activities

(These points were distributed to all SGI countries in 2003)

The SGI is a body that spreads the correct Law throughout the world based on the teachings of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism. The SGI organization exists to encourage faith based on the concept of "many in body, one in mind."

The proud standards by which we carry out our worldwide kosen-rufu movement will always be the spirit of oneness of mentor and disciple maintained by the first three Soka Gakkai presidents and their selfless actions to propagate the Law without begrudging their lives.

The SGI promotes correct faith, practice and study based on the humanism of Buddhism and the guidance of the first three presidents, with the aim of realizing world peace and contributing to the happiness of all humankind.

To resolutely protect the harmonious unity of the SGI, and to ensure that each member can practice correct faith and advance along the path of complete fulfillment in life, SGI leaders in each country are asked to bear these 12 points in mind:

1. Maintain a harmonious organization, based on dialogue and consensus.
2. Conduct steady propagation activities based on established SGI membership guidelines, while encouraging new members' growth in faith.
3. Make daily efforts to study the writings of Nichiren Daishonin and deepen one's understanding of Buddhist philosophy.
4. Study the guidance of SGI President Ikeda.
5. Encourage all members to attend monthly discussion meetings, which are focused on personal experiences in faith.
6. Cherish the youth and foster successors.
7. Promote four-divisional unity, taking care to respect the opinions of women.

8. Promote continual education in the tenets of Soka Spirit and conduct continual dialogue with members of Nichiren Shoshu.
9. Conduct public relations activities thoroughly, making full use of SGI publications.
10. Contribute to the community as model citizens.
11. Those who take advantage of the sincere faith of the members and cause trouble to them through engaging in irresponsible financial dealings, sexual misconduct or the like are subject to dismissal from leadership and removal from the organization.
12. SGI organizations outside of Japan will have no involvement whatsoever in political activities.