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# Shares Thoughts

**with Ashok Mahajan**  
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## **What can Rotary do to stop membership attrition? Why have we stopped growing?**

Every Club must have an actual plan for membership. Merely to say, "Our Club needs more members is no plan at all." In many of our training programmes we talk about membership, but seldom give leaders some proven and effective techniques. Also, many of our Clubs have just grown older, and frequently the older and retired members are just not acquainted with the younger generations of business and professional leaders of their community. In addition, we should recognise that society is much more mobile and business and professional people move from commu-

nity to community and from job to job. Thus, it is imperative that Club leaders give introductions to a new Rotary Club when a member moves to a new community. The process to transfer membership should be encouraged.

## **Do you think that business or professional demands do not allow younger people to join Rotary?**

Rotarians must recognise that the business and professional world has greatly changed from twenty-five or thirty years ago. Modern technology expects decisions to be made in seconds and minutes by e-mails, laptops, texting, ipods, computer messages and many other forms of

business communication. We used to say, "I'll handle that when I get back from my Rotary lunch." Now, young executives are expected to be available every hour, every day. If we want the younger generations to become Rotarians, then the older generations must give greater leeway and options in our demands for perfect attendance, regular commitments, the traditional noon lunch meeting and other membership obligations. Furthermore, many clubs have not taken advantage of the provision of the 2007 Council on Legislation change which permits selection to Rotary Club membership, for persons who have the status of a Rotary Foundation alumnus.



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### **Why are existing members hesitant to propose new members?**

There may be several reasons. Many members are not given adequate “Rotary information” when they join a club to be in a position to tell others about Rotary — what the real value of Rotary is and what it does in the community and the world. Some Clubs are so poorly organised and have such dismal meetings and service projects that members are just not sufficiently proud of their club to want to invite others to join. Some members may feel that they might be “rejected” so they don’t even try to invite others to attend a club meeting. Some Rotarians have no imagination and never think that their family members might be prospects or their customers or their accountants, doctors, attorneys, neighbours and others they see frequently could be invited to Rotary. The cost of inviting visitors to Rotary might be a deterrent to some members.

### **I heard you saying “Friendly Fire in the Club” — Could you explain what do you mean by this?**

The term “friendly fire” is used when a military person is injured or killed by one’s own troops — it is an accident, which in not intended, nor planned — but is just a bad mistake.

For example, I frequently see some Rotary clubs “destroying their own club” by unintentional actions or poor judgment, such as demands for 100 percent attendance, which scares off prospective members who are busy or feel they cannot make such a commitment. Friendly fire is also found when members who love and enjoy Rotary so much — but tragically have never proposed a new member for their Club. Sometimes we see Rotarians who just give negative comments which discourages every good idea or new approach the club attempts. Some Clubs have members who enjoy the fellowship of Rotary so much that they sit together in the

same seats every meeting and thus, their friendship is never shared with prospective members, guests or new Rotarians. In all of these cases, there was never an intention to hurt or destroy their Club, but the inadvertent actions may be seriously eroding the Rotary Club membership.

### **Do you think that increasing cost in Rotary causes problems in the growth?**

The cost of Rotary is a major factor to many Rotarians and prospective members. Seldom it is just the cost of district or international dues which is the major factor. Rather it is the costs of meals, contributions, club expenses, conference fees and other financial expectations.

### **Could you suggest some ways cost of Rotary can be reduced?**

Much of the costs are related to meal functions, which add greatly to Rotary expenses. I have seen a few clubs where Rotarians bring their own lunch, instead of eating in a restaurant. Some clubs rent a hall and merely provide a soup and sandwich, instead of a full dinner or luncheon. More careful planning of District Conferences and Assemblies and other events to which Rotarians are expected to attend could decrease the total costs.

### **What is the health of Rotary Worldwide?**

Basically, Rotary is in good health and strong throughout the world. Obviously, there are regions where weaknesses are occurring and some areas where there is vigorous activity.

### **What are your views on 100 percent attendance in the Club meeting?**

Fortunately, I have been able to have 100 percent attendance for over 50 years, but that only says that I have regular habits and have eaten a lot of luncheons. It says nothing about a member’s involvement in the service and activities of a club. An insistence upon 100 percent attendance is often the reason some members drop out

of Rotary or some prospects decline to join a club. Naturally, it is good if a member can attend each meeting because Rotary is based on friendship and representation of a cross section of the community. But adding undue pressure to attend 100 percent of the meetings is misdirected energy and may actually be a negative factor in some clubs, since our by-laws only call for 50 percent attendance at club meetings.

### **Why do Rotarians find it so difficult to practice Vocational Services’ most important constituent — Ethics?**

It is tragic that many people in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society do not have some basic truths or moral values upon which their lives have been built. Much of society has compromised basic standards by making ethics “conditional.” Thus, decisions are made on the circumstances of “each case” rather than on certain fundamental beliefs and basic truths. Unfortunately, many people no longer believe that some things in life are “black or white,” but rather think of their actions in “gray areas.” These people prefer not to consider “truth” is true all the time, but rather that they will “tell the truth” or “act ethically” only if the circumstances warrant that action. When people, whether they are Rotarians or not, do not base their lives on sound and firm moral principles, they find it almost impossible to act in all instances in ethical ways.

### **Can Rotary be accepted by the community if honesty is sacrificed? How can we be more relevant to the community?**

If Rotarians (and a Rotary Club) are not considered to be honest and honourable individuals, I think they will soon have totally lost community confidence. The name “Rotary” must stand for the highest level of ethical, honest, dependable and reliable business and professional principles

and practices. Any activity which diminishes Rotary's name or reputation will reduce the effectiveness of Rotary as a service organisation in the community.

A Rotary club should regularly meet with the leaders of the community (governmental, youth organisations, medical groups, senior centre leaders, school officials, police and safety officers, etc.) to discuss the needs of the community and how Rotary can be relevant to the real needs of the community.

**Has the Four-Way-Test become redundant? Why is it displayed with vigour but practiced so seldom?**

I certainly would not say that the 4-Way Test has become redundant because it is a very useful guideline for personal decision making. Sometimes, Rotarians do not consider the eight primary words — “Of the things we think, say or do” — to be an important part of the Test. The four questions are useful guides to assist individuals determine how they think, speak or act. In dealing with others, everyone needs to have some fundamental principles which guide their relationships. The 4-Way Test is a good starting point in human relations.

**Could you say something about your theme in the year 1992-93?**

The theme I selected for Rotary International in 1992-93 was “Real Happiness Is Helping Others.” I truly believe that when you reach out to assist other people, so much good comes back into your own life. Seeking happiness in their lives is a universal goal for all people and we emphasised that some of the greatest moments of happiness comes when we help other people.

**Will Polio be eradicated from the face of this earth in the next 10 years?**

Rotary, in cooperation with our several partners, will certainly achieve this 25-year goal within a

year or two. Rotarians have done so much and we are so close to reaching a “world without polio” that it would be a folly to stop before we have completed or to doubt that it is possible.

**Do you believe that greater emphasis be placed on literacy, ecology, water conservation, global warming, etc., whilst we continue to promote Polio Eradication?**

Although I support the concept that nothing should deter us from reaching our goal of polio eradication, I think that we should have active committees working on plans for our next projects. Rather than one single project, I suspect Rotary would be better with a multiple programme of worldwide activities. It takes a long time to implement a major project. Few people recall that our first major effort to eradicate polio in the Philippines took place in 1980 and it took at least eight years, until about 1988, before we effectively launched the worldwide polio immunisation programme called PolioPlus. I believe that Rotary International has the resources and resolve to complete polio eradication, while we still plan several major multi-year action programmes.

**TRF is prospering because of the generosity of Rotarians and even non-Rotarians. What is the future of TRF?**

The future of The Rotary Foundation in almost unlimited. The need for humanitarian and educational service is beyond the imagination of all Rotarians. In my opinion, Rotarians of the world must realise that becoming a “Paul Harris Fellow” is not the goal or the end of Rotary Foundation giving. It is merely the acknowledgment of a milestone to be passed to a person, Rotarian or non-Rotarian, who shares his and her resources to help the people of the world. A Paul Harris Fellow recognition can be “whatever you think it is” but should not place a limit on one's personal contributions or discourage personal gifts to The Rotary Foundation.

**Rotary is unable to utilise fully the talents of Rotary's ambassadorial scholars and GSE team members in promoting Rotary. Any suggestions?**

Far too many Rotary Foundation scholars and other alumni of TRF have never been advised that they have or are expected to have, any continuing role or responsibility to associate with their Rotary Club sponsors or The Rotary Foundation after their experience is completed. Additionally, many Rotary clubs do not invite Ambassadorial scholars or GSE team members to report back to their sponsoring districts or clubs. Most of the benefiting scholars or team members accept the experience as a “nice free educational experience — with no expectation of return.” Rotary International, districts and sponsoring clubs have a far greater obligation to prepare students and team members in advance with clear information and expectations prior to their experiences if Rotary expects them to become Rotarians or future supporters of Rotary programmes.

**Why is it that TRF does not collect a satisfactory amount from certain geographical areas? Any plans to popularise TRF in these areas?**

Over the years Rotarians in some areas have established their own personal “charities and support groups,” which are different from the programmes of The Rotary Foundation. These clubs and districts work with other charities, rather than The Rotary Foundation. In some areas, Rotary Clubs and districts believe that they should have full control over all contributions, have fewer procedures and time delays than working with TRF in spending their money and thus have established local foundations in lieu of The Rotary Foundation. Another reason that some Rotarians do not support The Rotary Foundation is the excuse that a Paul Harris Fellow is a “very high honour” and reserved for only special persons and thus “no one would ever buy a honour,” by mak-



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ing a gift to The Rotary Foundation. The irony is that the Paul Harris Fellow recognition was created for the single purpose to raise funds for The Rotary Foundation and now is being used by some Rotarians as an excuse not to give contributions. What they overlook is the fact that we can all give to The Rotary Foundation each year without ever asking for or receiving Paul Harris Fellow recognition, if that is our wish.

**Will the Rotary Foundation evolve new strategies to promote Peace?**

We have to look at “peace” as much more than the absence of war. Peace comes in many forms. Peace in the family; peace in the community; peace in the world; peace between nations; peace from hunger, famine, hopelessness, disease, illiteracy, and poverty in its many forms. Rotary International does not have the “weapons of war” — tanks, battleships, rockets, planes and military weapons. Rotary works with the “instruments of peace” — food, education, health care, clean water, shelters, and all the means to meet basic human needs. Rotarians must clearly define the peace to be achieved within our capacity. Rotary can be an “influence to create peaceful conditions” by which people can live, even though we may not be able to bring an end to hostilities in the world.

**What are the major challenges Rotarians will have to face in the coming year?**

Our new President, DK Lee, has given us a message to “Make Dreams Real” and thus help the children of the world. I would suggest that our major challenge is that far too many Rotary Clubs and Rotarians have no dreams. And, how can you “Make Dreams Real” if you don’t have any real dreams. Many Clubs are not thinking large enough to be using all the resources of the men and women of their clubs.

**Rotary Foundation spends millions on Peace scholars. Is Rotary’s gain going to be commensurate with our efforts to promote Peace?**

I don’t think that we can evaluate the Peace Fellows for another 10 or 15 years. We have to give these young people time to find their places in the work of the world. If even a portion of the Peace Fellows achieve their greatest “dreams” the programme will be well worth the efforts of Rotary International.

**Woman empowerment is the need of the decade and next. Will TRF enter into some programme promoting woman empowerment?**

Education of girl children is one of the great needs of the world. I would hope that some new programmes for such education are developed. A series of short-term “teacher edu-

cation” programmes would be an important step if combined with a programme of Rotary Clubs “adopting” schools in developing nations and in poor communities.

**What difference you find in Rotary today and what it was two decades ago?**

There are many differences. For example, far greater time and effort seems to be placed on fund raising for The Rotary Foundation, in order to support more programmes. There is an exhaustion factor creeping into the PolioPlus programme, which may be creating a deterioration of interest. There is a growing feeling that the complexity of procedures and paper work in securing grants from The Rotary Foundation is a barrier rather than an enabling agent. Many Clubs and Districts seem bothered by the impact of “legal” requirements, limitations and risk management. The role and activities of District Governors have been substantially changed by the creation of Assistant Governors, Governors-elect Training, reduction of International Assembly instruction, creation of district goals and other changes in Governor’s responsibilities. Rotary International has established greater public relations and image building efforts. There seems to be far greater “hands on” activity by clubs and districts going to other parts of the world as a result of national immunisation days, distribution of wheelchairs and shelterboxes, medical missions and similar person-to-person activities. The emergence of Rotary Action Groups has become a new dimension of service in the world. The Polio-Plus programme has given Rotary much greater international prominence, respect and expectation from the nations of the world and United Nations.

**What is your message to Rotarians?**

The world needs Rotary today just as much or even more, than ever before and therefore it is a challenge to every Rotary club to be active, to be creative and to maintain the elements of dignity, good fellowship, fun and service.