

PRIP Rajendra K Saboo

in

Conversation

with

RID Ashok Mahajan

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

Ethics is not an easy street to walk along. It never was and it probably never will. Second object of Rotary rose from the vocational service and the very first sentence refers to high

ethical standards in business and profession. It was a tough call for the Rotarians to look up to this aspect as a requirement of their membership in the organisation. In fact, it was one of the founding principles in the wake of corruption in the society in USA, where Rotary was born, around the

period of 1908–1912. It is true that Rotary membership basis was classification system and through the respective vocation of the members there was a prevalent practice of promoting business within members. Nevertheless, ethics and high standard were always considered as part of



the business practice that Rotarians were committed to. This is what made Rotary a unique organisation with its image being of a very respectable premier service organisation of business and professional people. This status led to different professional leaders seeking membership in the organisation around the world.

Unfortunately there seems to be a shift in the values by which society measure the worth of an individual. Material gain or wealth, individual ambition and agenda, fame and name probably are the “ends” that the society recognises more than the “means” and that’s why ethical route which may be more difficult has been discarded in favour of short cuts. This detrimental slide has affected practically all walks of human lives. Rotary too has not remained untouched. However, it is not impossible to avoid getting infected and Rotary can be a powerful antidote to enhance the immunity level. We only need to make the Vocational Service of Rotary strong, powerful and a self analysing elevating tool.

In your article, “Business with Ethics” appearing in December, 2007 issue of Rotary News you have dealt with the subject so well and you have the answers for all your questions.

Should Rotarians be more transparent in all the financial dealings with Rotary? How?

Absolutely. And it is not the question of being more transparent — every Rotarian must be totally transparent in all the financial dealings with Rotary. After all we are dealing with the funds that have been contributed by Rotarians and the community, and we cannot and must not abuse it in any way. Lack of transparency does not mean that there is abuse everywhere but what transparency brings is the practice of honesty with complete visibility and accountability. When we think of temple money or money that we give as offering in the religious

places or even charitable institutions we seek transparency by the people who handle it. We want their hands to be clean and like to see complete transparency in the accounting. The reason probably is that people are either afraid of the divine punishment if this money is mishandled or their conscience does not allow them and this leads to arms-length situation where the money is managed in absolute trust in most cases. If we start having the same trust towards Rotary, transparency will become a part of our culture. This will require people of strong character, reflecting in their conduct. But then a very important issue is, can we expect an individual to be transparent in all the financial dealings with Rotary when in his/her own business or professional life and business dealings such transparency is not practiced.

Also significant is the “dealings” aspect which does not remain limited to finances only. Dealings is a wider term and must be understood in that context. In this regard I have found Rotary a great teacher. You accept the object of Rotary, commit yourself to its ideals and follow them. You will yourself get an enlightenment of self-lifting process within yourself which will lead to financial prudence and sincerity in other human activities in Rotary, reflecting into the dealings in the business and professional life. I have seen and experienced that personally.

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

This is a very pertinent question. It is very interesting how we find the order of the “Objects of Rotary” or for that matter the “Four Avenues of Service.” First, the Club Service; then comes Vocational Service; then Community and after that the International Service. I cannot say what the founding fathers had in their minds or whether this sequence was accidental. I have been a student of Rotary

and according to my own belief it is a natural flow of one service leading into another. Club Service, of course is fundamental to any organisation to become strong. After that comes the Vocational Service which is the basic to the requirement of membership. It is through high ethical standards and classification one enters Rotary. Thus, Rotary becomes a group of like-minded people from different vocations who have accepted the high principles of ethics. This becomes the business for the Vocational Service and only when this group known as Rotary is ethically strong and extends itself to serve the community, the acceptability becomes more profound.

In other words when we are ethically sound we become worthy of truly serving the community. Thus Vocational Service leads us to Community Service. I will not go into further lead from Community Service to International Service but suffice is to say that honesty is paramount for Rotary to have an enhanced image in the community and to be able to earn the respect of the society for its projects and programmes. If not, then the community will treat Rotary like any other organisation, having mediocre values plagued with personal agenda of its members. The community may not give much attention to Rotary or its declared objectives. The community may not give much attention to Rotary or its existence. No honesty of the members - no credibility of the organisation, the equation is in direct proportion.

In all the “messages” of Rotary propounded by RI Presidents, why is Vocational Service ignored?

This is a question that should not be directed to me. Anyway, to start on a positive note, President Wilf Wilkinson has very recently constituted a committee on Vocational Service at the International level to revamp this important but so far somewhat ignored or overlooked fact of Rotary.

By and large RI Presidents have talked about Vocational Service but not always with great emphasis. Some of them have and, without naming any individual, I must say that there have been years of great focus with special reference to ethics. In fact, ethics has now been introduced in the leadership training programme as well. I, of course, must confess that there has been a slippage in the attention to the Vocational Service and because of that we have lost the importance of the classification system. RI President Bhichai Rattakul during his term had appointed a Four Avenues Committee of which I was the Chairman. During that year we tried to give added importance to Vocational Service but succeeded only to some extent. The good thing is that with the permission of the RI Board, the committee for Vocational Service is in place which is for a period of 3 years on a staggering basis and this shows the importance and significance to Vocational Service now being given by RI leadership for this year and the two successive years. This augers well for the organisation.

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

The Four-Way-Test are as valid and relevant today as they were in 1934 when they were perceived. May be

their relevance has increased more in the prevailing situation in today's world. As I said before, it is easy to preach than practice. It is easy to talk but difficult to walk the talk. When the clubs are encouraged to take up Vocational Service project one of the easiest way is to circulate the "Four-Way Test" amongst young people, display it in offices and business places, distribute them or get them printed on stationery to show Rotary's commitment. The display is easier but we cannot influence the society which will judge us by what we practice and not by what we preach. I know that some clubs or dis-

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tricts even promote essay competition amongst school children on "Four-Way-Test" or even eloquence contest but very rarely have I seen Rotarians

addressing the "Four-Way- Test" on themselves. May be I am very critical on it and I may be guilty of overstating for that. I cannot help if I feel too strongly on the subject. People say that in the present day society the "Four-Way-Test" is not possible to follow. My answer to them is that if you cannot achieve 100 percent at least try to get the maximum marks. Just as our children require very high level of performance in scores to get entrance to any good and high standard educational institutions, we also need to score well in "Four-Way-Test", even if we cannot have a perfect 100 percent, as an entry point to rise to the high level life's learning and leading process.

Can RI institute and "award" on the lines of "Service above Self Award" recognising the honest, the ethical and the "clean" Rotarian?

Of course, it can. In fact, few years back the Board of Directors of RI had decided to institute such an "Award" but before it could go on stream the idea was withdrawn. It can be argued that every Rotarians is supposed to be honest, ethical and clean, as you have referred, then how can you or should you distinguish one from the other in order to recognise an individual or group of individuals for an Award. By the same argument, every Rotarian is supposed to adhere to the "Service Above Self" motto and, therefore, how do we select one from all others for exemplary practice of the motto to get the "Service Above Self" Award. Saying is one thing and practice is another. Even amongst all those who pursue high values there are some who by practice set examples for others, who can be identified for exceptional conduct and ethical standards. Thus, if you ask me, I think it is not only possible it is an excellent idea that will help in Rotary's recognition of this important aspect at the highest international level.



If Rotary has to champion the concept of ethics in all our deals, what should it do to achieve the desired goal?

First, ethics must not be related only to business deals. Ethics is a way of life — either you are ethical or non-ethical. This is how I feel. Yes, Rotary can do much to promote the cause of ethics. It is part of becoming a better human being and Rotary with its ideals channelising through Vocational Service Avenue is an excellent forum to achieve this. Of course, Rotary will have to be pro-active and aggressively champion the concept through its policies and programmes. Vocational Service with emphasis on the object of Rotary requiring “high ethical standard in business and profession” should be repeatedly pronounced as a priority factor in all considerations and undertakings. Ethics must be a mandatory subject in all the training programmes at all levels. The level of ethics in individuals must be regarded as one of the most important measure in any selection or election or appointments at club, district and most importantly, international levels. In fact, the process of infusing ethical high standard in Rotary must start from the inflow and induction of new members.

Unfortunately, our zeal to increase the membership growth has cost us very dearly in terms of vocational excellence, pride in representing a classification, human qualities and commitment to integrity. Our filtering process by design must become strong and effective to let the right people get into our membership. I am glad this year the emphasis is on membership growth with qualified people. This factor of “qualified” will need to be brought home to the districts and the clubs with continued process. We have seen that easing of the membership eligibility requirements and giving a go-by to classification principles in practice has not necessarily given us the membership growth that we had envisaged. Without meaning to be disrespectful to our members,

I have to say that quality level of our membership profile has gone down. We must work on the plan to restore the classification system and uplifting the quality in our new inductions. I strongly believe that in this process we will not be losers but in the long run we will stabilise and have net gains in our membership. This eventually will create the ripple effect with ethics being regarded as one of the important identities of every Rotary member or leader.

Do you think that improvement in our vocational practices and all deals should start from the higher rungs of Rotary

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leadership?

I suppose you are referring to the ethical practices and this is true that we need to see the highest standard of value based behaviour in our Rotary leaders. It is well-known that there is no alternative to leading by personal example for any qualities that is desired to be imbibed in the organisation by its leaders. Thus, it starts from the top whether at the international, district or club levels, more so at the very top. By and large we see this in Rotary and it speaks well for the organisation although there may have been some aberrations. Fortunately these aberrations do not make the rule but then they do pull down the organisation even if it is temporarily. The important thing is that the ethical

values and practices must not remain dormant or silent in the leaders. They must come out in the dynamic form reaching out and touching others. Care also has to be taken not to allow any deterioration of this quality and value at the club and district because from there the future top leadership will emerge.

If Rotary has to remain relevant in this century, what changes do you recommend?

Born in 1905, Rotary had 95 years in the 20th century during which some major changes altered some of the original ideas without deviating from the basic concept. In fact, even in concept there was a gradual evolution. Thus, to predict what will happen or say what should happen will be impossible. However, one can think of the road ahead to some extent for the next 20–30 years. What I have felt is that to be relevant to the society in the present and upcoming times, Rotary will have to find a new identity. But that identity could be based on personal perception of what society will look like and what it would need. During the time of Rotary’s peak growth in the past, Rotary was not only accepted but sought after in the community. The reason was that Rotary membership gave the individuals an identity and they wanted to belong to the organisation. It also gave them the opportunity for networking. I feel that the time has come when the society is looking for and is ready to respect the successful business and professional people who are ethically clean and have a commitment for *Social Corporate Responsibility*. If Rotary can build its image of an organisation that consists of such people and that promotes these values then Rotary membership will be considered and looked upon with high regard leading to attracting more people. These factors will also appeal to the new crop of business and professional leaders. It will present a welcome opportunity also to

those who will retire early but will still have many years of active life at their disposal. I feel that the emphasis on Vocational Service and commitment to social responsibility followed by the appropriate public relations will put Rotary in the upswing mode with resurgence of real growth. Perhaps we will then be able to break the box of the present membership limitation as we see. And with the increased trend Rotary will be able to take up more service activities on larger scales giving added image. This can lead to the beginning of a positive cycle. Of course, to achieve what I have said, will require very affirmative action which must start now.

Don't you feel that Vocational Service has become Vocational Service or Occasional Service?

It appears that you have referred to my own terminology "vocational" or "occasional" or may be it is just a coincidence. This is how I have been referring to the treatment that I see being given to "Vocational Service" by and large in the clubs or the districts. I have observed that Vocational Service Committee generally is given to one who is not very active either on the Board of Directors of a Club or in the district structure. In fact, Vocational Service is a difficult subject to deal with and should be given to one of the most experienced, committed and active Rotarians. Unfortunately the impression or perception is that this service does not require much of attention and, therefore, is not considered important enough an assignment.

This perception has further perpetuated by lack of importance in the signals coming from Rotary International guidance or directives. There is hardly any literature on Vocational Service or any write up to provide ideas for clubs at the field level to take up. All that we see being done are to get Four-Way Test promotion, Vocational Training, Career Guid-

ance or Vocational Awards. There is hardly any programme that talks about excellence in one's own vocation, or any other activity with reference to the vocations of the Rotarians. Nor is there any effort for uplifting the ethical standard in business and profession of each individual as very strongly referred to in the "Objects of Rotary". This inward looking, self assessing and personal enhancing exercise though difficult, needs to be considered seriously and taken up as club/district programmes. In fact, there is utter indifference towards classification system which has further given

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the impression that the vocation of a Rotarian is not very critical. This is what bothers me. I am happy that the international leadership seems to be now taking up the issue most fervently and emphatically. May be we will need to think out of the box and not recycle the old ideas but we do have to look at our Vocational Service and activate the clubs with proper guidance, direction and emphasis.

Don't you think that prominence to Vocational Service will enhance the image of Rotary?

Most certainly it will. I have said that in my answers to your earlier questions how important Vocational Service is in context of our present and immediate future times. There are host of service organisations in the market place and not many address to the issue of ethics, and integrity combined with service. If we can project the image of Rotary with high ethical standard and commitment to service then we

can give Rotary a very unique, refreshing and much admired image. And the Vocational Service is the right avenue for achieving that.

Another very distinctive feature is that Vocational Service brings to the organisation a structure that links individual vocations of its members into a network that can give a collective boost to the social fabric on one side and promote the ideal of service to the vocations on the other. It can open opportunities to connect with the corporate world and open a new dimension to Rotary's relevance.

Your message to the Rotarians?

Our Founder Paul Harris when asked what would be one most important word for Rotary, his answer was "toleration." If Paul Harris had been alive he himself would have given one exception and that is "no toleration for anything unethical that smacks of questionable integrity." I will, therefore, say that Rotary and Rotarians should have "zero-tolerance" towards any ethical practice, conduct or behaviour. Those who are thinking for the good of the organisation will have to be vocal about it and stand up firmly on this issue.

To my fellow Rotarians, each and every one, I will appeal to make good and sound practices in business and profession part of their culture. And through that culture, let this become a tradition of Rotary. When I was President of one of the well-known Chambers of Commerce we had started the permanent slogan "Ethics is Good Business". Perhaps we can talk of "Make Ethics Rotary's Tradition."