Reversing a Membership Freefall

Shifting Membership Development into Drive
by
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In an earlier article,[1] the opening comment was, in part, *"To pursue new and retain existing members by doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results is lunacy."* **No club or district deliberately loses members. External forces cause a low percentage of membership loss. Internal issues that are difficult to recognize and resolve cause clubs' major losses, primarily because they tend to render the clubs ineffective at satisfying member's needs.[2] Eager to succeed within Rotary's one-year leadership cycle, club leaders often try quick fixes (like membership drives) which generally waste time, effort, and resources that should be used to identify and improve the clubs' ability to satisfy present and future members' reasons for joining.**

Graphic compliments of Drawing the Line
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

What are these issues and how do organizations go about overcoming them? The details differ according to time and location, but they fall into these categories, usually in this order: (1) Lack of leadership agreement on purposes and goals. (2) Loss of desire and initiative to make the necessary changes. (3) Losing sight of the overall objective. (4) Failure to properly educate and communicate with all involved.

To overcome these issues, clubs (and districts) should follow these overall guidelines, each of which, in future articles, will be discussed in more detail:

1.   ESTABLISH PRIORITIES. To reverse membership decline by making clubs more effective is not a one-person show; it requires the cooperation of many. To attain this cooperation, club (and district) leaders must establish priorities around which they can build a consensus. Only then can clubs become more effective in satisfying their members' needs and further advancing the Object of Rotary.

2.   CREATE A POWERFUL GUIDING COALITION. At the club level, the board is a logical place to start building a coalition, but it would be a mistake to leave out long-time or new members. The coalition's size will vary according to club size, but improving effectiveness will fail without a dedicated and cooperative coalition. At district level, the coalition should consist of the present and future leaders and select past district governors.

3.   ESTABLISH AN ATTAINABLE VISION. The coalition must establish goals that are attainable within a reasonable length of time. This will solidify the group because they will have worked together to define the objectives and, most important, will believe they are attainable.

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[1]*Rotanomics– Why the Decline of Rotary Membership in North America, April, 2009* **http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/**
[2]*Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April 2009*   **http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/**

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      4.   CREATE A SYSTEMATIC STRATEGIC PLAN WITH SHORT-TERM, ATTAINABLE MILESTONES. Real change takes time, but the vision may become lost in the fog if the coalition does not build in short-term successes. Timely milestones with appropriate celebrations tend to keep the vision in focus while getting more and more people involved. Success breeds success.

      5.   COMMUNICATE. Failure to communicate is a common, costly oversight. Plan to communicate priorities and dependable, accurate, timely updates to all parties involved. For example, at the club level, if the coalition plans to reach a specified membership retention goal, the membership chairperson should periodically bring members up-to-date where the club stands relative to its goal. Districts must do the same with clubs. At all levels, communications must focus on priorities. Priorities must be headliners, not mid-page articles.

      6.   REMOVE OBSTACLES. Obstacles will arise as any organization proceeds on their path to success. Many try to side step or ignore impediments rather that deal with them. Perhaps the most common obstacle is those who fight the winds of change. Leaders should find a way to recognize and overcome obstacles. Leaders will have to make hard decisions like asking uncooperative individuals to step aside. At the district level, do not waste time on ineffective clubs that will not change, but take care: It is much better to populate communities' effective clubs than to populate communities with ineffective clubs.

      7.   DO NOT DECLARE THE MISSION ACCOMPLISHED TOO SOON. This is perhaps the major reason membership drives seldom accomplish their desired goal. It is important that the club and district continue to refine priorities until the new customs and practices that have made them more effective become operational norms. Only then can the coalition declare victory.