

# SERVICE: THE MOTIVES BEHIND MOTIVATION



Illustration by Dave Cutler

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You may be surprised to learn that in 1905, when Rotary began, it was not based on the idea of Service Above Self. Instead, the two main aims of the Chicago club were “the promotion of the business interests of its members” and “good fellowship and other desiderata ordinarily incident to Social Clubs.”

But for Paul Harris, that wasn’t enough. He wanted a club that would get involved in civic affairs and benefit the community.

A prospective member, Chicago attorney Donald Carter, had been “struck by the selfish character of the organization,” according to Harris biographer Fred A. Carvin. The two conspired to introduce a Third Object of Rotary: “the advancement of the best interests of Chicago.” As Harris later remembered, “I concluded that the most practical method of introducing community service would be to find a worthy cause and then induce members to work for it.”

The club began by buying a horse for a farmer whose animal had died. Members also provided a newsboy with a suit of warm clothes. All along, Harris was planning bigger things, creating a committee to find civic projects for Rotary to participate in. The first issue it addressed was the lack of public restrooms downtown. There was

only one choice at the time – a saloon. Once there, it was said, men could be tempted to take a drink or two. As for women, entering such an establishment was simply out of the question.

So Harris and his committee persuaded the Chicago City Council to fund public facilities to the tune of \$20,000 (almost \$500,000 today) in taxpayer money. And Chicago Rotarians got so much satisfaction out of seeing their work get results that “Service Above Self” became an operating principle, although it didn’t become one of our official mottoes until 1950.

In Rotary, it never has been easy to get every member – or sometimes even most members – involved in community projects. Many people join because they want to give back to society, and community service is what Rotarians often say makes their membership worthwhile. But clubs still struggle to find projects that will inspire their members and attract new ones.

Rotarians enjoy the meals, the socializing, the networking, and the fundraisers, but when a community service project comes up, often they are suddenly “too busy.” Too busy for service after you’ve joined a service organization? Every club leader I’ve ever talked to has heard it.

A major factor standing in the way of greater involvement is “time aversion,” according to Americus Reed, a professor of marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. All of us have limited time on earth and we are, consciously or not, very choosy about how we spend it. In a series of studies, Reed and his colleagues showed that service-oriented people such as Rotarians are most likely to spend their time on specific charitable acts if they are given “moral cues” about how good a particular action will make them feel after they volunteer.

“Giving time more strongly reinforces the moral self, compared with giving money,” Reed and his co-authors say in “I Don’t Want the Money, I Just Want Your Time,” a paper recently published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The research suggests that if club leaders want people to happily volunteer, they will first acknowledge that community service can be hard to fit into a busy life. Then they must work to associate the project with positive outcomes and feelings such as self-expression, connectedness, meaning, and joy.

Another way to make volunteering more rewarding is to make sure that each person is able to express his or her inner motivations. The Three Needs Theory, proposed by psychologist David McClelland in the 1960s, shows that most people are primarily motivated by one of three factors: achievement, affiliation, or power. Achievement-oriented people like to work on concrete tasks where excellence is valued and a sense of closure can eventually be found. Affiliation-oriented volunteers want to work in groups and have interactions with recipients of service efforts. Power-motivated people prefer to be in charge and are happy giving advice or being involved in tasks that result in personal recognition.

Assigning people to volunteer activities based on those personality traits is likely to result in happier volunteers who continue to offer their time, even if they may not be quite sure why their Rotary activities suddenly seem to fit so well. But if a full-fledged application of the Three Needs Theory seems a bit manipulative, consider the method used by the 69-member Rotary Club of Schaumburg-Hoffman Estates, Ill., to create more satisfying community service projects over a five-year period. The club has moved from doing one-off projects to developing ongoing projects to meet some of their community’s most pressing needs.

“Clubs that have community service projects that are soul-satisfying to all members are rare,” says Eileen

Higginbotham, the club's community service chair. "Even if a majority of members say they are happy with current projects, membership changes and people develop new interests."

Higginbotham decided to lead an effort to find the projects that would have the greatest impact in the community and then motivate members by matching their talents to them. Club leaders, she says, "realized that we didn't really know what our members even thought about community service."

The first step was to ask members, in detail, what they wanted from their club. A 16-question assessment of club activities, including community service, resulted in an almost 100 percent response rate. "It gave us more confidence in what we were proposing to the club," Higginbotham says. "You can put a lot of work into a project and then find that people don't want to do it."

The club then explored its community's needs by "following the money." They sent members out to ask organizations they had supported over the years what they really needed in a hands-on project. And they found out that many of their assumptions were a little off. Local seniors, for example, wanted a place to go on Saturdays, but the senior center sometimes had only one person working and could accommodate only about 25 people. Now "Rotary Social Saturday" brings in as many as 70 people. "The Rotarians who asked organizations about their needs have become our ambassadors to them," Higginbotham says. These close connections ensure that as needs change, the club's response can change quickly, too.

Clubs are on a never-ending quest for great projects – and for ways to motivate members to participate in them. The trick is to find the project that meets your members' needs as well as your community's.

Nancy Shepherdson

*The Rotarian*

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## COMMENTS

#1 Submitted By [Nadia Mokhtar](#) on 31-Aug-2016 07:30 am

Very true, members do better and exert maximum effort when they like and believe in the project they volunteer to participate in and work harder to achieve it, they always accomplish successful results

**YOUR NAME** Suzanne Gibson

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