

**Double Your Membership In Six Months:  
10 Lessons from a Rotary Club Pilot**

By Quentin Wodon

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## FOREWORD TO THE SERIES

This book is published as part of the *Rotarian Economist Short Books* series. The books in the series are short, typically at 15,000 words or less. They provide rapid and practical introductions to topics related to volunteer work, service clubs, nonprofits, and the six areas of focus of the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. These areas of focus are promoting peace, fighting disease, providing clean water, saving mothers and children, supporting education, and growing local economies. Other topics will be considered as well.

The book series is associated with the *Rotarian Economist Blog* launched in October 2014 on World Polio Day. The aim of the blog and its book series is to provide analysis that can help readers make a positive difference in the life of the less fortunate. If you would like to receive email alerts of new posts and resources made available on the blog, please provide your email through the widget at <https://rotarianeconomist.com/>.

The editor and main author for the book series works at the World Bank. Although some of the books in the series may relate to topics that the author and co-author(s) may occasionally work on at the World Bank, the opinions expressed in the books are solely those of the individual author(s) of each book in the series and do not represent the views of the World Bank, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. This book series is not associated in any formal or informal way with the World Bank.

If you would like to contact the author(s) of books in the series for a question or to provide feedback, please do not hesitate to send an email to the editor of the series through the “Contact Me” page of the [Rotarian Economist blog](#).

## INTRODUCTION

How can membership and volunteer-based organizations grow? This short book aims to answer this question by documenting the experience of a Rotary club in Washington, DC (USA) that succeeded in doubling its membership over a six months period in the second half of 2016. The purpose of the book is to share simple and practical lessons from the club's pilot experience.

Many membership and volunteer-based organizations are facing challenging times. This is also the case of service clubs. The clubs are non-profit organizations whose members meet regularly for fellowship, occasional networking, and more importantly service to the community. The clubs have millions of members worldwide (1.2 million in the case of Rotary). Apart from Rotary International, the best known service club organizations are probably Lions Clubs International and Kiwanis International. Rotary's motto is "Service above Self". Lions' is "We Serve". Kiwanis' is "Serving the Children of the World". All three organizations were created a hundred years ago or even earlier (1905 for Rotary, 1915 for Lions, and 1917 for Kiwanis).

Service clubs have an illustrious history (see Walsh, 1979, Forward, 2005, 2016, and Carvin, 2011 for Rotary; Martin, 1991 and Martin and Kleinfelder, 2008 for Lions; and Charles, 2003 more generally). But they have been struggling for several decades with the threat of a declining membership in the West (in developing countries by contrast, membership is growing). In the United States, this decline has been linked to a broader loss in social capital and traditional forms of civic engagement (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

As noted by Wodon et al. (2014), a half dozen factors may have contributed to the decline in membership in service clubs in the West: (1) a lack of resources (during hard economic times, individuals may not have the resources to pay club dues); (2) a lack of time (people are busier than ever with long working hours and family responsibilities; they may not have time for service clubs); (3) reduced prestige (while membership in service clubs used to be prestigious, this may be less the case today, at least in Western countries); (4) a lack of vitality (some clubs have an aging membership, and the format of meetings may not always fit young people's needs); (5) a small size at the level of clubs (many clubs have a small membership base, which makes it difficult to be sustainable when some members depart due for example to relocations); and (6) reduced interest in service work (this is debated, but there are some indications that volunteering may be declining – this is for example suggested by recent national surveys in the United States).

While these are challenging times for service clubs and other membership and volunteer-based organizations, there are also opportunities. Many clubs are doing well and some clubs that had seen a decline in membership for many years are rebounding. This is the case for my club, the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The purpose of this short book is to share lessons from the recent experience of the club.

From July to December 2016, the club doubled its membership. This was a sharp recovery after more than five years of decline in membership. In order to expand its membership, the club strengthened its value proposition for both current and prospective members. The club adopted major changes in how it operated on a pilot basis for a period of six months. The basic idea was to increase the value of membership by reducing time commitments for meetings, increasing and improving service opportunities for members, reducing club dues, and investing in the club's public image, with all these elements reinforcing each other in a coherent way. The pilot was a success and the changes are now permanent.

More specifically, four main changes adopted by the club contributed to the club's recovery. First, the club diversified the service opportunities provided to members. It also launched a new pro bono initiative to become a leader in its community for the provision of pro bono advice to nonprofits serving the less fortunate. The objective was twofold: having a larger impact in the community, and attracting new members willing to volunteer their talent.

Second, in terms of public image, the club decided to increase its visibility in the local community. This was achieved by organizing more service-oriented public events at various venues, participating in more events already organized by other groups in the community, increasing efforts to communicate the club's activities through series of articles published in both traditional and social media outlets, and inviting speakers at club meetings in a more strategic way in order to establish partnerships with local nonprofits and flagship organizations.

Third, in terms of membership, the club stepped up its recruitment efforts. Better service projects and stronger local engagement in the community helped for recruitment. But in addition, two new membership categories with reduced dues were approved, first for the spouses/partners of current members, and next for members under the age of 35. Finally, as the club progressively succeeded in increasing its membership, dues were further reduced across the board.

Fourth, in terms of meetings, the club decided to have only two regular meetings per month instead of four. The objective was to increase the quality of the meetings, including in terms of the recruitment of great speakers and better attendance by members, while also increasing the time available for service projects and the organization of public events, among others.

Other changes were implemented, but the above four were the most substantive ones. Only time will tell whether the club's membership gains will be sustained in the future, and substantial work remains to be done to strengthen the club in a number of areas. Yet even at this early stage, lessons can already be learned from the Capitol Hill six months pilot. This book shares these lessons learned for the benefit of other service clubs as well as nonprofit and membership organizations more generally.

The book is organized around ten simple and practical lessons: 1) Plan strategically; 2) Reduce meetings, increase service; 3) Improve service opportunities; 4) Reduce membership costs; 5) Partner with local nonprofits; 6) Invest in your public image; 7) Tap your networks; 8) Apply for funding; 9) Set

targets and monitor progress; and finally 10) Ensure leadership and enjoy your luck. Each of these ten lessons is the subject of a short chapter in the book.

The lessons learned from the Capitol Hill pilot are rather simple. But by making the lessons available as a quick read through this book, the hope is that they will be valuable to Rotarians worldwide as well as members of other service clubs and nonprofit organizations that are striving to expand their membership base. If what we did with the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill pilot worked to double its membership in six months, there is a good chance it may work for you too!

## **LESSON 1 PLAN STRATEGICALLY**

All organizations, but especially membership and volunteer-based organizations, can benefit from a clear vision of what they want to accomplish and a practical plan to do so. Strategic plans have value only if they are actually implemented, but when this is the case, they can be a catalyst for positive change. The plans can help organizations define priorities. They can also help motivate the membership to pitch in the time and other resources needed to achieve the plan's objective.

In July 2016, at the start of its six month pilot experiment, the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill adopted a number of major changes aiming to reverse a declining membership. The club's membership decided to:

- (1) Reduce the number of regular club meetings from four per month to two in order to free more time for actual service;
- (2) Improve service activities, including by building on the professional skills of the membership to make those skills available to local nonprofits;
- (3) Lower membership costs, in part by creating new categories of membership;
- (4) Invest in local partnerships, in part through the launch a pro bono initiative to work with local nonprofits on the challenges they face;
- (5) Invest in the club's public image through the recruitment of great speakers for club meetings, participation in community events, the organization of its own events, and the publication of articles in the local press;
- (6) Tap the club's members' networks in order to achieve higher impact and a stronger presence in the community;
- (7) Apply for funding from the local community foundation in order to organize high visibility training events on core skills needed by nonprofits; and
- (8) Monitor progress towards achieving specific targets included in the strategic plan.

Each of these eight components is discussed in the chapters that follow, with the last chapter reflecting on some of the other factors – including leadership and luck – that led the Capitol Hill pilot to be a success.

The changes adopted by the club were guided by a strategic plan, the first such plan prepared for the club since its creation in 2003. Given that the club was not too large, strategic planning may not have been needed in the past. But with a declining membership for many years and potential threats for the long-term survival of the club, it seemed worthwhile to put in writing a new vision for the club to regain its strength.

The club's strategic plan provided a rapid diagnostic of the club's strengths and areas for improvement. It explained the motivation behind major changes in how the club would operate as of July 2016. Finally, the plan outlined priorities with measurable targets to be achieved.

Consider first strengths. The strategic plan noted that the club is friendly and informal. It is small enough for each individual member to make a difference in the achievements of the club. It has a small core of committed members and balance in membership by gender, age, race, and professional backgrounds. Members are service-oriented and willing to participate in service activities. The club has a small foundation that can provide tax deductions for donations by members and others. The club is also strong in terms of annual giving to the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International thanks in large part to a few Paul Harris Society members who give \$1,000 each year. This makes the club eligible for matching grants from the Rotary district (covering much of Maryland and Washington, DC) for the implementation of local and international projects. The location of the club in Washington, DC, brings visitors to the club and makes it easier to attract good speakers. The club faces competition from three other Rotary clubs in the city, all of which were larger at the time of the adoption of the strategic plan, but it is the only breakfast club, which helps for differentiation. Finally, the club has shown a willingness to try new strategies for growth by approving changes that took place as of July 2016.

Consider next areas for improvement. The club had suffered from membership erosion for many years. Just five years ago the club had 31 members. The membership had declined to 18 members by July 1, 2016 with more losses expected due to member relocations. In terms of service, with the exception of core members, involvement of many members in service projects, both local and international, remained limited. Attendance at club meetings was very low, often with only 5-6 members present. The club was not well known and not actively engaged with the local community. It did not have a signature hands-on service project with participation by a majority of the membership, and also did not have a signature fundraising activity. Finally, the cost of membership, at \$600 per year at the time of the adoption of the strategic plan, was relatively high given that members were paying for their own breakfast at club meetings. Overall, the club needed to adopt a more distinctive strategic positioning to attract new members and make a larger impact in the community. While much has been achieved over the last six months, not all of those issues have been resolved. But again, substantial progress has been made.

In terms of strategy, the progressive erosion in the membership over many years was a threat to the club's sustainability. Reversing this trend was identified as the top priority. In order to regain its strength, the club decided to change how it functioned. A six month pilot experiment was approved with a new positioning and more clearly defined targets in key areas – these were the main contributions of the strategic plan. The strategic plan also suggested to document for broader audiences the results of the pilot as they could hold value for other service clubs and membership and volunteer-based organizations more generally. Documenting this experience is the rationale for this short book.



## **LESSON 2**

### **REDUCE MEETINGS, INCREASE SERVICE**

Since its creation, the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill has met weekly. The meetings were held every Tuesday morning for breakfast for one hour, from 7:30 AM to 8:30 AM.

A major change adopted under the strategic plan and six month pilot was to reduce the number of regular meetings to two per month, to be held on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month. Agreement to move in that direction was not unanimous. Several members feared that such a move could weaken the club, as members would see each other less often. Given that many members travel for their work, shifting to two meetings a month could mean that in some cases, some members may not be able to meet with other members for many weeks. There were also concerns that fellowship in the club could be weakened with fewer meetings.

At the same time, there were also arguments in favor of reducing the number of meetings. The main argument was that reducing meetings could free time for more service activities and the organization of public events that would help the club be better known in the community. Another argument was that due to the decline in membership, only five or six members were present at many meetings during the previous year. This made the meetings less attractive, and also made it more difficult to provide a fulfilling experience for speakers (regular meetings in Rotary clubs typically include a speaker who shares her expertise for 20 minutes followed by questions and answers). It was hoped that members might make more of an effort to come to biweekly meetings than to weekly meetings in order to achieve critical mass. In addition, shifting to two meetings per month would make it easier to recruit good speakers, as speakers would need to be invited only biweekly. Finally, fewer meetings was probably a positive change in order to attract new members, many of whom would not have the time to attend a meeting each week.

Some clubs may decide to reduce the number of regular meetings in part to decrease the cost of membership. These clubs typically include a meal in their quarterly dues, so that reducing the number of meetings also reduces the cost of the meals being provided. For the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill, this was not a major consideration because quarterly dues do not include breakfast. Members pay for their own breakfast when they attend, and they are free to order breakfast or not.

Given the pros and cons of shifting to two regular club meetings per month, the decision made by the club board and next by the club membership was to try the new schedule of two meetings per month for a trial period of six months, after which the pilot would be assessed. In addition, it was decided to shift monthly club board meetings to the first Tuesday of the month and encourage members to attend. In essence this would be almost like a third meeting per month, albeit without a speaker and with a focus on club business.

Finally, it was agreed that the club would organize more service opportunities, including on Tuesdays, and more public events as other occasions to meet.

The shift to two regular meetings per month did help in freeing time for more service activities as well as public events, as had been envisioned under the strategic plan. In the six months from July to December 2016, on top of launching a new pro bono initiative discussed in the next chapter, the club essentially organized twice as many service opportunities as it had done for the full previous year. In addition, during the six month pilot, the club organized two public events (a launch meeting for the pro bono initiative at the main community center for the club's location and a seminar on education for peace and social change at the World Bank followed by a reception). It also participated in two other public events (a stand at the Barracks Row Festival and a reception for grantees at the Capitol Hill Community Foundation). And it started planning for another set of public events focused on providing training to staff from local nonprofits. Over the same period during the previous Rotary year, the club only participated in one public event (the Barracks Row Festival) and it did not organize any events itself.

These various changes helped in recruiting new members. As a result attendance in terms of the number of members present at club meetings increased as well. Overall, the shift to two meetings per month appears to have been positive so far. It enabled the club to devote more energy to service activities and gaining in visibility in the community, resulting in gains in membership.

In December 2016, the club board approved the new schedule of two regular meetings per month on a permanent basis. As the club is further strengthened in the future, it may at some point decide to go back to weekly meetings. But the shift to two meetings per month during the six months pilot served its purpose in helping to focus the energy of the membership on activities – especially service activities - that helped for membership growth.

### **LESSON 3**

## **IMPROVE SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES**

In order to grow, clubs need to assess their strengths and areas for improvements. They need to understand who their current and potential members are, why they joined or could join, and why they hopefully remain actively engaged for many years. Clubs must focus on what their members – current or prospective – value. This may mean, depending on the club, focusing on fellowship and friendships, on service, or on networking, as well as any combination of these since they are the three traditional benefits that Rotary clubs provide to their members. Whatever the focus of a given club, its vitality depends on its ability to engage members who often have different interests, so that the whole is larger than the sum of the parts. This is not easy in practice.

In 2012, a survey was implemented for my Rotary district to better understand from Rotarians what they consider the benefits of membership, how they perceived some of the costs of membership, how much they contribute to Rotary in volunteer time and funding, what they are most satisfied with, what could be improved, and what their priorities are (Wodon et al., 2014).

The benefit mentioned most often was the opportunity of serving the local community (37.8 percent of respondents). Enjoying weekly meetings was also mentioned (19.1 percent of respondents). Maintaining and developing friendships came third (15.1 percent). Other potential benefits such as serving the international community, meeting other Rotarians when traveling, enjoying recognition from membership, learning leadership or other skills, serving in club or other leadership positions, and interacting with Rotaract (clubs for college students and young professionals) and Interact (clubs for high school students) were mentioned less often.

Engaging in local service opportunities appears to be the main reason to join a Rotary club today, at least in the United States. It is also very high on the agenda for the members of my club, the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill. Therefore, a cornerstone of the new positioning proposed for the club under its new strategic plan was to improve service opportunities. This was to be accomplished with two pillars: (1) a more diversified set of one-time service opportunities; and (2) new service opportunities through a pro bono initiative building on the skills of members.

Consider first the need to offer diversified one-time service opportunities. Members enjoy the opportunity to engage in service projects, but many also have limited time, so they may prefer one-time as opposed to recurring volunteer engagements, or short term as opposed to longer-term commitments. The key is to provide enough volunteering opportunities to fit the member's interests given their time constraints. Our club still has some way to go in diversifying and strengthening the volunteer opportunities it provides. But for the pilot from July to December 2016, we provided more one-time service opportunities than had been the case in the previous entire year. Examples included putting together

packages with toiletries for homeless university students; collecting clothes for the homeless as part of a city-wide annual drive; collecting clothes, games, and other items for a local nonprofit thrift store; providing gifts for Christmas for residents at a shelter for women victims of domestic violence; ringing the bell for the Salvation Army; distributing dictionaries for third graders in public and charter schools; providing funding for the first spelling bee in Sierra Leone; and serving breakfast at a local shelter for homeless men.

Consider next the possibility of providing service opportunities that build on the skills of members. In July 2016, we launched the Capitol Hill Pro Bono Initiative. Club members are now providing pro bono advice to several local nonprofits on the challenges they face (this is described in more details under lesson 5). The hope is that the initiative will help increase participation in service projects by the club membership; increase the visibility of the club locally; help retain existing members and attract new members; and most importantly achieve higher impact in the community. The target for our club for the 2016-17 Rotary year is to complete eight local pro bono projects.

In addition, the club is also working on two international global grants in Nepal. One project is about teacher training in Humla district, one of the most remote parts of the country. The second is about providing digital libraries in secondary schools, again with appropriate teacher training. Both global grants build on the technical expertise of members in the club and are implemented with great local nonprofits and the Rotary Club of Kathmandu Mid-town.

## **LESSON 4 REDUCE MEMBERSHIP COSTS**

The cost of membership in Rotary varies a lot depending on the club. While dues to be paid by clubs to Rotary International are the same for all clubs, and while dues to be paid again by clubs to their district change a bit depending on the district, the main variation in the dues paid by members to their club comes from what clubs offer, and their cost structure. Some clubs are very nimble and charge low dues. Other clubs provide lunches in premium locations, which tends to increase dues substantially. Some models are not necessarily better than others, and there is a lot to be gained for Rotary districts from having different types of clubs, but each club must make appropriate decisions regarding its member dues.

In the membership survey conducted in 2012 for my Rotary district, club dues as well as payments for weekly meetings (which typically include a breakfast, lunch, or dinner) came up on average to US\$ 1190 per year for Rotarians, which is relatively high. Other costs including voluntary contributions to clubs and club foundations, as well as voluntary contributions to the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, led to the total costs of being a Rotarian amounting on average to \$2,122 per year in the district (Wodon et al., 2014). This does not include other costs such as those of participating in annual district conferences or the annual convention of Rotary International and other events. Clearly, even if our district is located in one of the wealthier areas of the United States, these membership costs are far from being negligible. They are likely to be a barrier to entry into Rotary for many potential members who might consider joining.

Before the pilot that started in July 2016, the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill offered only one standard type of membership with dues of \$600 per year. This was more than was needed to operate the club because members paid for their own breakfast when attending meetings. It seemed clear that at least for some potential members who might consider joining, this level of dues was relatively high.

Two main changes were therefore adopted. First, at the start of the pilot in July, two new categories of membership were adopted. First, it was decided that the spouses or partners of existing members could join for \$200 per year. Several spouses indeed joined the club.

Second, it was decided to offer a corporate membership for nonprofits or local businesses, but we haven't had much success yet with this category. About a month later, the club board approved another category of membership. It was decided that individuals under 35 years of age would be able to join for \$400 per year, or two thirds of the normal dues. Quite a few new members under the age of 35 joined as a result. It is worth noting that if one spouse is under 35, while the other is not, the combination of dues for the two spouses, at \$600, would be

equivalent to the dues paid by the older spouse. In other words, the structure of the fees could help attract both spouses when one was under the age of 35.

At the beginning of the pilot, the club board did not approve a reduction in the standard dues of \$600 per year. It was feared that this could reduce the resources needed for the club to operate, including in terms of funding service projects. Six months later, however, as the pilot from July to December 2016 proved successful in doubling the club's membership, all dues were reduced. This was feasible because the fixed costs of operating the club could now be spread among a larger number of members. As a result, standard membership dues are now at \$400, while the dues for those under 35 are at \$250 and the dues for spouses/partners are at \$150. Despite these cuts in dues, and thanks to the growth in membership, the club now has more financial resources to fund its work than was the case at the start of the pilot, and we hope that the additional reduction in dues will help increase the membership further in the next six months.

One last point is worth mentioning on dues. For Rotarians who used to pay \$600 in dues, the option was given to either pay \$400, or keep paying \$600 with \$200 automatically transferred to the small charitable foundation of the club. Since the club foundation is a recognized charitable organization, members would receive a receipt for their charitable donation. This has enabled us to keep having many members contributing at the level of \$600 per year. That option is also available to new members who join the club if they are willing to contribute at that level.

## **LESSON 5 PARTNER WITH LOCAL NONPROFITS**

Most Rotarians join clubs to get involved in local service projects, make friends, and establish new connections with their community. While many clubs, including my club, also work on international service projects, the “soul” of most clubs lies in what they do locally. In order to be contributing to the local community, and benefit from support from the community, clubs need to partner with local nonprofits. They also need to participate in local flagship events (as discussed under lesson 6).

Partnering with local nonprofits seems obvious enough. And yet, not all clubs excel at doing so. The Rotary Club of Capitol Hill had partnered with nonprofits in the past, but many of these engagements had waned in recent years. A deliberate effort was therefore put in place as part of the new strategic plan to reestablish essential connections with local nonprofits.

The most important component of our outreach to local nonprofits has been our pro bono initiative. As part of this initiative, we started to work closely with local nonprofits on the challenges they face. Let me give four examples of such engagements.

First, we designed and implemented an impact evaluation for the largest argumentative writing program in the city’s public and charter schools. The program is run by One World Education, with two members of the club serving on its board. In 2015-16, the program reached closed to 6,000 students. One World Education collected essays written by more than 500 students both before and after the program. The essays were graded by a team of English Professors at American University. Members of our club analyzed the impact of the program statistically, showing that it did increase student performance in more than 90 percent of participating schools. The evaluation has helped One World Education demonstrate the impact of its work, and has been instrumental in its growth. In addition, an article written about the evaluation has been accepted for publication in English Journal, the award-winning publication of the National Council of Teachers of English focusing on teaching English in junior and senior high schools and middle schools.

Second, we conducted a survey of volunteers working with Capitol Hill Group Ministry, a local nonprofit serving the homeless. One of their innovative programs is HART, which stands for Homeless Assistance Response Team. HART volunteers are trained in street outreach techniques and processes to be able to help the homeless access shelter, especially on hypothermic nights. When temperatures are very low, the body may lose heat and lead to hypothermia, which can ultimately lead to death. This makes it essential to have volunteers checking on those who need shelter. But the program also runs at other times of the year to provide snacks and seasonally appropriate supplies to the homeless as needed. The fact that the program runs year-long is a great way to build relationships with those who are homeless and make sure that if they

need support, such support can indeed be provided. HART is operated by volunteers to complement outreach by case workers. The survey that we implemented with the nonprofit measured satisfaction with the program among volunteers, as well as suggestions they have for improvements.

Third, we are conducting a cost-benefit analysis of a program for highly disadvantaged youth operated by the Latin American Youth Center. More than 17,000 young adults ages 18-24 in the Washington Metropolitan Area are considered as disconnected from work and school. These youth typically face multiple challenges, including homelessness, issues with the courts, or substance abuse. These challenges prevent them from successfully transitioning into adulthood. The Latin America Youth Center uses an innovative approach to address the needs of these youth. Its Promotor Pathway is a long-term, intensive, holistic case management and mentorship intervention. Data from a five year impact evaluation suggest that the program has led to positive changes in terms of increasing school enrollment, reducing birth rates, and reducing homelessness among youth participating in the program. Our club's contribution is to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the Promotor Pathway program, so that the nonprofit can use the analysis to seek funding to expand the program.

Fourth, we launched a series of briefs in collaboration with the World Bank on innovative education programs in Washington, DC. A half dozen briefs have been published in the series with more to come. Most briefs feature great programs from local nonprofits that we are engaging with. Apart from briefs on programs run by One World Education and the Latin America Youth Center, two organizations already mentioned above, other briefs feature the Urban Alliance, a program for high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds to obtain summer internships, and Street Law, a program that provides materials for teachers to teach social justice in schools.

The above are examples of pro bono work that builds on the skills of some of our members. The pro bono projects are typically implemented by teams of 2-4 individuals, including Rotarians as well as non-Rotarians interested in working with us. They have enabled us to have stronger partnerships with local nonprofits, as well as higher visibility in the community.



## **LESSON 6**

### **INVEST IN YOUR CLUB'S PUBLIC IMAGE**

A club's public image is essential for sustainable membership growth. As part of our new strategic plan, we invested in four types of engagements to improve our club's public image in the community.

First, we used club meetings to invite leaders from local nonprofits to tell us their own story. Between July and December 2016, speakers from more than a half dozen local nonprofits came to our club – these nonprofits included those we started to partner with for pro bono work. Inviting speakers from local nonprofits is something that many clubs already do, but perhaps not something that our club had done enough in recent years. Even more importantly, we followed up before or after those invitations to seek partnership opportunities. Examples of these partnerships as part of our pro bono initiative are provided under lesson 5.

Second, we decided to participate in more community events. We held a stand at the main festival for our community held in September, as well as at the main event for matching volunteers to local nonprofits. We also held a stand at the World Bank Volunteer Day attended by more than a thousand World Bank staff, taking advantage of the fact that several of our members work at the World Bank. In addition, we became members of the local (Capitol Hill) Chamber of Commerce. Finally, we are now planning a series of training events for local nonprofits (as explained under lesson 8). While some of these efforts to work with the local community are more important than others for membership growth and our public image, they all contribute to our club's visibility in the community.

Third, we started to organize more public events ourselves. In July we put together a launch event for our pro bono initiative at the main community center for our neighborhood in Washington, DC. In September, for the International Day of Peace, we organized an evening seminar on education for peace and development at the World Bank featuring great local nonprofits. This was followed by a reception so that we could network afterwards. In February, as just mentioned, we will organize two training events for local nonprofits, again at the main community center for Capitol Hill, thanks to a grant from the Capitol Hill Community Foundation (this is explained in more details under lesson 8).

Fourth, we started to write stories for local media outlets, including a weekly newspaper (the Current Newspapers), a monthly magazine (the Hill Rag), and a local blog (the Hill Is Home). In particular, we now write a monthly column on volunteering opportunities in Hill Rag, the main magazine for the Capitol Hill neighborhood. The focus on volunteering is intentional, since it ties in perfectly with our mission as a service club. The idea of the monthly column is to talk about the work of other local nonprofits, while also briefly mentioning our club and its support to these nonprofits.

Let me explain the logic of those stories a bit more. Once in a while, a Rotary club may have a great story to tell about its own achievements or service

projects. However, blogs, newspapers, and magazines are unlikely to repeatedly publish stories about the activities of a single Rotary club. This is where writing about other organizations active in the community comes into play. Instead of writing stories about our club, we write stories about our partners in the community, especially nonprofits doing great service work, but we mention how we work with them. Most articles therefore feature one of our nonprofit partners, focusing on their achievements and mentioning only briefly how we try to help them.

This approach seems to be worthwhile to get our club better known locally and, more importantly, to give visibility to great nonprofits serving those in need. The approach also brings goodwill. Our nonprofit partners are grateful when we write about them and they have told us that this has helped them, among others to recruit new volunteers.

## **LESSON 7 TAP YOUR MEMBERS' NETWORKS**

Many Rotarians have solid networks, which can bring great ideas to clubs as well as an ability to mobilize others for a cause. During the six months pilot, we made a conscious effort to tap into the networks of some of our members. The best example is the collaboration with the World Bank, as well as the recruitment of several new members who work for the World Bank.

In July 2016, two members of the club were working at the World Bank, and a third was a World Bank retiree. By December 2016, we had more than doubled the number of members from the World Bank to seven. This was mostly the result of personal interactions of existing club members with World Bank staff, but more generally, our club is now better known among World Bank employees thanks to a series of activities that enabled employees to contribute.

A good example of such activities was the clothing drive for the homeless that we participated in. One of our relatively new members is a core volunteer for Gift for the Homeless, a nonprofit launched by a group of lawyers. The nonprofit collects each year in December some 3,000 bags of clothing for shelter residents on a city-wide basis. This member suggested that our club participate in the initiative, which we did. Another member working at the World Bank sent a notice to colleagues from three departments to collect clothes. As a result, World Bank employees from those departments donated more than three dozen large bags of quality clothing that our club then brought to Gift for the Homeless. This was great to help those unfortunate to be homeless, and it also helped spread the word about the good work of both Gift for the Homeless and our club.

Several other activities with World Bank staff participation are worth mentioning as examples of the benefits from tapping Rotarians' networks. As mentioned under lesson 5, we launched a series of briefs on innovations in education in Washington, DC in collaboration with the World Bank Education Global Practice. As mentioned under lesson 6, our club also organized an evening seminar on education for peace and development at the World Bank featuring great local nonprofits. Another project that emerged from a connection made at the World Bank was our club's support for the first spelling bee held in Sierra Leone in Kono district in November 2016. Finally, in the training workshops that our club is organizing in February for local nonprofits, several of the instructors are World Bank staff, and a number of other instructors were contacted through the networks of World Bank staff (see lesson 8 for more details on this initiative). We also relied on a number of other existing networks to disseminate widely the information on the training workshops in the community.

As one more example of good use of existing networks, one of the new members of the club since July 2016 is the Executive Director of a residence providing temporary housing (from a few weeks to up to two years) for young women in Capitol Hill. Established more than 150 years ago, the residence provides welcoming, heritage-rich accommodations that make life in Washington,

DC, easy for its residents. When we held a stand at the main annual event in the community (the Barracks Row Festival), several staff and residents from the residence came to do face painting for children. We are also considering moving the regular meetings of the club from our current location to the residence, given its great amenities as well as its location.

These are very simple examples of how our club has relied on existing networks in the past six months, as is often done by other clubs. Tapping a club's networks may seem a rather obvious strategy for a service club to conduct its work, but it is an important strategy to emphasize in order to be able to muster the resources needed to have a larger impact in the community.

## **LESSON 8 APPLY FOR FUNDING**

Many Rotary and other clubs provide funding to nonprofits, and so does my club. In fact, there are thousands of Rotary club foundations in the United States alone that are recognized as charitable organizations by the Internal Revenue Service. But nothing prevents clubs from applying for funds as well in order to mobilize a larger resource pool for their service projects. For the first time in the history of the club, this is what we did for our pro bono initiative.

In the past, our club has applied for funding from our Rotary district. Clubs often do this in order to benefit from so-called district designated funds provided to districts by the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International. The allocations to districts are based on past contributions by the districts to the Rotary Foundation. Districts then use the funds allocated by the Rotary Foundation to support various activities, including through matching grants to clubs for local projects. Our club has applied for such grants, including for funding our pro bono work in the 2016-17 Rotary year. But we had never applied for funding to external organizations in order to mobilize more resources and thereby be able to implement new service projects.

In September 2016, we applied to the Capitol Hill Community Foundation for a grant to help us organize two training events for local nonprofits. The events focus on 1) essentials of monitoring, evaluation, and cost-benefit analysis for nonprofits; and 2) essentials of communications, from websites to social media and power point presentations. We obtained the funding in November 2016 and we are organizing the workshops in February 2017.

While several factors may have played in our favor for receiving the grant, the fact that we invited the Vice President of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation to visit our club as a speaker probably helped. This shows how getting more involved with the local community generates a positive loop to in turn get support from the community to implement service projects.

The training workshops will be held at the main community center for our neighborhood in Washington, DC. The focus on monitoring, evaluation, and cost-benefit analysis as well as on communications stems from the fact that when interacting with nonprofits, these topics appeared to be related to important areas for which nonprofit staff are not always equipped with the knowledge they need. In addition, these topics tie in nicely with the pro bono initiative that we launched in July 2016 whereby we use our expertise to achieve larger impacts in the community.

In order to organize the training events, we are benefitting from the expertise of members of our clubs as well as friends and colleagues from organizations based in Washington, DC. Instructors for the two training workshops include staff from the Center for Nonprofit Advancement, the Communication Center, the Urban Alliance, and the World Bank.

In addition, between the two training workshops (one is organized on a Friday morning and the other that same Friday during the afternoon), we will provide a free lunch to participants of both workshops with a keynote address from the Chief Executive Officer of the Grameen Foundation, a well-known organization providing micro-credit globally.

In order to promote the training events, we designed posters/fliers and shared them widely to potential participants using a variety of networks (see lesson 7). Again, this is a good example of a project that gives visibility to the club and helps us mobilize resources by tapping into the networks of members and friends as mentioned under lesson 7.

Registration for the training has been brisk, with the event essentially reaching the room's capacity with more than 100 participants signing up in just a few days. Another advantage from such training events is that apart from showing our club at its best in serving the community, it may help us in recruiting new members in the future. Overall this project also shows how we can increase our impact in the community by applying for funds on top of what we would be able to finance with our own resources only.

## **LESSON 9**

### **SET TARGETS AND MONITOR PROGRESS**

As mentioned under lesson 1, the changes adopted by the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill were guided by a strategic plan. Such strategic plans have value only if they are implemented. In order to assess implementation itself, it is however essential to first set clear targets and next monitor progress towards achieving those targets.

Ideally, targets should be SMART, which means that they should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. The Rotary Club of Capitol Hill's strategic plan defined targets to be achieved over the 2016-17 Rotary year in seven areas: (1) Service projects; (2) Visibility and public image; (3) Membership growth and fellowship; (4) New generations (which refers to Interact and Rotaract clubs) and young members; (5) Club meetings, speakers, and location; (6) Giving and fundraising; and finally (7) Knowledge dissemination.

In addition to club-specific targets, the strategic plan also mentioned the criteria required for clubs to receive the Rotary International Presidential citation. While the objectives for the club are not *per se* to obtain the Presidential citation, the criteria for the citation represent priorities for Rotary International as a whole and it makes sense for the club to contribute to these priorities. Receiving the Presidential Citation would also provide recognition for the efforts of the club's membership to strengthen the club and achieve a higher impact in the community.

At the time of writing this book, as of early February 2017, the club is on track to achieving most of the targets set forth in July 2016. In some cases, including that of membership growth, the targets have already been exceeded. In other cases, including in terms of per capita giving to the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, the targets have not yet been achieved, so that more efforts will be needed. This is in part because maintaining high levels of per capita giving to the Rotary Foundation, as has been the tradition in the club, is more difficult when a majority of the membership is made up of new members who only have a few months of experience in Rotary. Nevertheless, the simple fact of having quantitative targets is helping to focus attention to areas that need more engagement.

One of the issues though with some of the initiatives and targets adopted by the club is whether they will be sustainable. Substantial energy was devoted to reenergize the club and expand the membership. On the one hand, the growth in the membership is good news for the ability of the club to expand its service work. But on the other hand, it is not clear whether the same level of effort on the part of the leadership and membership of the club can be maintained. Some of the initiatives launched, including the pro bono work, appear to require substantial time and expertise that is not always available in the club.

Therefore the club may well have to reduce its targets in some areas in the future. But this type of adjustment is part of a normal process, as targets and

strategic objectives need to be revised over time, possibly even every year to adapt to new priorities set by the incoming President and leadership team (the leadership of a Rotary club or district changes from one year to the next). There must be some continuity over time in the strategic objectives and positioning of a club in its community, but this should not prevent adjustments from one year to the next in terms of the targets that a club sets for itself.



## **LESSON 10**

### **ENSURE LEADERSHIP AND ENJOY YOUR LUCK**

Substantial progress towards strengthening its membership has been achieved by the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill under its pilot experiment from July to December 2016. After several years of declining membership, thanks to a number of changes in how it operates, the club has succeeded in doubling its membership in just six months.

The gains in membership obtained by the club result in large part from deliberate choices made by the club's membership. This included reducing the number of its regular meetings, increasing and diversifying service opportunities, reducing the dues to be paid by members, and investing in many different ways in the club's public image, including through articles in the press and the organization of, or participation in public events.

Support from the club membership for the changes made in how the club operates as well as strong leadership from club leaders were essential for the pilot to actually work. Strategic plans and good ideas do not make a difference if they are not implemented well. The importance of good leadership to help a club grow should not be underestimated.

At the same time, luck was also involved for some of the gains in membership. As just one example, while the club lost two members due to relocation, two new members joined the club from other Rotary clubs because they relocated to Washington, DC. Another new member who used to be a Rotarian many years back joined our club because he met us at the stand we organized at the main annual festival for the community. Finally, a few new members contacted us "out of the blue" – in those cases, we simply benefited from Rotary's recognition as a service club organization in the United States and our own club's social media presence in Washington, DC. Several of these new members are already playing an important role in the club.

Mentioning the role that luck – good or bad – plays in the success of a club is important because we should acknowledge that many factors affecting a club's growth may not be under the control of the club or its leadership. In some cases, a club may enjoy a significant growth in membership without too much work or new ideas. In other cases, despite substantial effort by members and a club's leadership, a club may lose members, sometimes for several years in a row. This can be disheartening. What matters in such circumstances is to keep trying.

In the case of the Rotary Club of Capitol Hill, it seems fair to say that the strengthening of the club and the growth in membership that occurred over the past six months resulted not only from new ideas and hard work by the leadership team, but also from a bit of luck.

## CONCLUSION

Service clubs in North America and Western countries are confronted with a challenge in terms of recruiting and keeping members. This is also the case for Rotary clubs. While many clubs remain strong, some have seen a decline in their membership.

Such declines can however be reversed. More generally, even for healthy clubs, there is plenty of scope for growth, whether in terms of membership or impact in the community. The aim of this short book was to share simple and practical lessons on how to grow the membership of service clubs and achieve higher impacts in communities. Lessons were learned from a pilot implemented by the Rotary club of Capitol Hill in the second half of calendar year 2016. The pilot appears to have been successful. It has enabled the club to double its membership in six months and expand its service activities.

As mentioned in the introduction, only time will tell whether our club's membership gains and the expansion in our service work will be sustained in the future. In the case of membership, when a large number of new members join a club, we should expect that some may leave after some time. This is a normal process. Personal circumstances may force some new members to resign or take a leave of absence. For other members, what a club is able to provide in terms of service work, fellowship, and networking may not be on par with the expectations of new members. Member retention is never guaranteed.

But a first essential steps for revitalizing or strengthening a service club with a declining membership consists in recruiting new members. For that step at least, the Capitol Hill pilot appears to be a success. While a lot still needs to be done to strengthen the club in other areas, even at this early stage, lessons can already be learned from the club's six months pilot for the benefit of other clubs and membership-based organizations.

Ten lessons emerge from the Capitol Hill pilot. In order to grow the membership of service clubs, the experience of the pilot suggests that it is a good idea to (1) Plan strategically; (2) Reduce meetings, increase service; (3) Improve service opportunities; (4) Reduce membership costs; (5) Partner with local nonprofits; (6) Invest in your club's public image; (7) Tap your members' networks; (8) Apply for funding; (9) Set targets and monitor progress; and finally (10) Ensure leadership and enjoy your luck!

None of this is rocket science. These are simple lessons that service clubs and other membership and volunteer-based organizations should be able to implement if they can count on the dedication of the organization's members and its leadership.

The lessons should be adapted to the particular circumstances of any given service club or membership-based organization. Some lessons may be more important for, say, smaller as opposed to larger service clubs. Some lessons may apply more to clubs in large cities, while others may be more useful for clubs located in smaller towns. Most lessons should be relevant to a wide

range of clubs in Western countries, but many should also be valid for clubs and other organizations located in developing countries.

Overall, the hope is for these simple lessons from the Capitol Hill pilot to be useful to other Rotary clubs, as well as other service clubs and membership-based organizations that rely on volunteers to improve lives in their communities.

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Any potential errors or omissions in the book are mine only.

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Quentin Wodon is a Lead Economist in the Education Global Practice at the World Bank where he leads work programs among others on equity and inclusion in education, child marriage, out-of-school children, and the wealth of nations. Previously, he managed the World Bank unit on values and development, served as Lead Poverty Specialist for West and Central Africa, and as Economist/Senior Economist in the Latin America region.

Before joining the World Bank, he worked among others as Assistant Brand Manager with Procter & Gamble, volunteer corps member with the International Movement ATD Fourth World, and (tenured) Assistant Professor of Economics with the University of Namur. He has also taught at American University and Georgetown University. A lifelong learner, he holds graduate degrees in Business Engineering, Economics, and Philosophy, as well as PhDs in Economics, Environmental Science, Health Sciences, and Theology and Religious Studies.

Quentin has more than 500 publications on a wide range of topics. Books published since 2014 include *Water and Sanitation in Uganda* (World Bank), *The Economics of Faith-based Service Delivery* (Palgrave Macmillan), *Climate Change Adaptation and Social Resilience in the Sundarbans* (Routledge), *Investing in Early Childhood Development* (World Bank), *Infrastructure and Poverty in sub-Saharan Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan), *Education in sub-Saharan Africa* (World Bank), *Faith-Based Schools in Latin America* (World Bank), *Climate Change and Migration* (World Bank), and *Membership in Service Clubs* (Palgrave Macmillan).

A recipient of the Prize of Belgium's Secretary of Foreign Trade, a Fulbright grant, and the Dudley Seers Prize, Quentin has served on several advisory boards for non-profit organizations and university programs, and as Associate Editor for academic journals. A past President of the Society of Government Economists, he is currently serving as President of the Association for Social Economics.

Quentin is actively involved in Rotary with his club (currently serving as President), District (former Evaluation Adviser and Interact Chair, among others), and Rotary International (committee member for the Rotary Foundation and other roles). His father was a Rotarian. His daughters founded the Interact Club of their High School. Quentin launched the [Rotarian Economist blog](#) in 2014 on World Polio Day and the *Rotarian Economist Short Books* series in 2017.

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