

Promoting Membership with new ideas

Strengthening Rotary's membership is not just important for incoming district governors, it's critical. That's the message they received from several key speakers at their training event, the 2015 International Assembly in San Diego.

For membership to grow, leaders must be willing, for example, to ease stringent club meeting protocols and make other efforts to accommodate a younger, digitally oriented demographic.

Seventy percent of Rotary members are 50 years or older, while half of the world's population is under 30, according to Rotary leaders. The contrast shouldn't be something to fear, but rather something to embrace, said Rotary member Michael McQueen, a bestselling author who studies social change, youth culture, and cultural issues and whose consulting firm, The Nexgen Group, specializes in demographic shifts and social trends.

To engage this young demographic, McQueen says that staying relevant is crucial. He shared three key ways that enduring organizations can do that: recalibrate, re-engineer, and reposition.

But relevance does not involve compromise, McQueen stressed; the values, priorities, and commitment of Rotary should never change. "Any organization that is willing to compromise its DNA in order to stay relevant never lasts. After all, if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything," said McQueen, a member of the Rotary Club of Crows Nest, New South Wales, Australia.

RI General Secretary John Hewko expressed a similar view when he addressed the assembly. He said it's clear that members have been able to accomplish a great deal, but asked what they are "willing to do" to make Rotary stronger.

"So I'm asking all of you, in the coming year, to be voices for doing everything we can in Rotary, not just everything that's comfortable or easy or the way things have always been done," he said. "Be advocates for thoughtful, positive, and lasting change. We have a great tradition in Rotary, but it's our tradition. We made it, we own it -- it doesn't own us; if it no longer serves its purpose, we can change it."

McQueen suggests adjusting some of the traditions, processes, and protocols that "could be the very things that cause us to lose relevance."

In McQueen's native Australia, the Rotary Club of Toronto Sunrise, New South Wales, has three members sharing leadership responsibilities for a year as co-presidents. The club reports that having the skills and ideas of three leaders is prompting other changes, and has already resulted in a 25 percent gain in membership.

According to McQueen, change and innovation are led by people with fresh perspectives. Rotary members can draw new ideas from new members, guest speakers, family members, even children who tag along to club meetings.

"The beauty of people with fresh eyes is that they don't know how things have always been done because no one has told them yet," said McQueen. "They have no trouble thinking outside the box because no one has told them what the box even looks like."

And young people, he said, "represent an enormous opportunity for this organization from a membership point of view. They are an ambitious bunch of natural networkers who, contrary to popular opinion, have a strong sense of civic duty."

Change is never easy, McQueen conceded, but Rotary members must be open to it. "We must avoid the trap of ever feeling we have arrived at the winning formula, which we then set in stone. After all, the moment you think you've made it, you've passed it."

Growing membership is a major goal of Rotary President Gary C.K. Huang. Engaging youth, inviting more women into clubs, and embracing change are all important to increasing and keeping members, Huang said.

Sometimes, he noted, adding a member is as simple as asking someone to join. Since he took office on 1 July, Huang has recruited several dignitaries while traveling, including Ed Royce, a U.S. congressman from California; Mulenga Sata, deputy mayor of Lusaka, Zambia's capital; and Beatrice Lorenzin, Italy's minister of health. All of them, Huang said, praised Rotary's work before being asked to join.

RI President-elect K.R. "Ravi" Ravindran applauded Huang's tireless work, calling him a "one-man army" promoting membership.

"All of you are going to be busy people next year, and I urge you to make a habit of asking other busy people to join. Don't leave them out," said Huang, "Maybe some of them will say no, and that's OK. But I don't want any of them to say they are not Rotarians because nobody ever asked."

He added: "Our membership and services are what make Rotary powerful and strong. To keep it strong, membership recruitment and retention have to be a priority for every incoming Rotary leader."

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