Do We Listen Enough to Potential Members?

By Governor Claude LaLiberté, District 7040

My best experience in recruiting talented, younger members was when I didn’t say a word about Rotary.

One of the clubs I served as Assistant Governor was located in a city where there were many service clubs and civic organizations. The club couldn’t attract new members. I suggested they come up with 15 names of community leaders who would be good potential members. It took them about a month.

I sent each of those 15 individuals a personal invitation by mail to an after-hours talk about the community. The only mention I made of Rotary was that the talk would be under the Rotary umbrella. In the following week, I phoned everyone to check if they had received the invitation. On the phone, I explained more about the goal of our meeting, stressing that we wanted their views on issues facing our community. But I did not mention Rotary! Four of my targets declined and 11 accepted. The club secretary confirmed their presence by phone the day before the meeting. Two regretted.

Five Rotarians came to the after-hours meeting. I was there, plus a member who took notes, an observer whose job was to identify the strongest leader among the group, plus two other members who had agreed to act as resources if needed. We had no special Rotary banner or decorations, just the Rotary pins on our lapels.

We welcomed everybody, served them a drink and talked of usual business affairs. Then everyone sat and we began the meeting. I repeated the goal, which was to discuss issues that were facing our community, and I stressed that we wanted their opinions. I told them I only had three question for each of them.

First: In five minutes or less, let us know what you consider to be the most important concern in the community. I addressed this question to each one individually, while we took notes. Of course, they all had an opinion about community issues.

Second: Tell us what you think is the solution or way to get to a solution. Again, they all had opinions. Not always a solution, but at least an approach to get started.

Based on their feedback, we were able to reduce the community problems to four, as some respondents used different words to comment on the same issue. We were also able to identify the strongest leader in the room. And it was to that leader that I addressed the final question:

Third, if we could get a group of civic leaders to help deal with the issue, would you take the lead? And then, would the other community leaders be willing to work with him? After talking extensively about the concern, then advocating for a solution, it was quite easy to get to “yes.”

As a result: The club got seven new members, all actively involved, even though they are all already busy people. The club also received an assessment of community needs, plus volunteers eager to help work on the issues at hand.

What the club didn’t do was “sell Rotary.” Rather, we listened to the community leaders and let Rotary become the answer to their concerns. Rotary became their solution — not our sales pitch!

Membership Matters