The elephant in Rotary’s living room

Attendance = Engagement

By Terry R. Weaver, governor of District 7750 (South Carolina, USA)

In my travels as a newly fielded district governor, I’ve run into a misperception that several clubs have told me is getting in the way of membership growth.

The elephant in the living room? ATTENDANCE.

Let’s step back. Several years ago, Rotary’s Council on Legislation declared that almost ANY legitimate Rotary activity qualifies as a make-up. This includes not only attending another club’s meeting, but also a committee meeting or board meeting, working on a project (some clubs say for at least one or two hours), etc. “Etc.” means anything that can reasonably be called a Rotary service activity. Now, of course to get “credit” for a make-up, the member has to report that qualifying activity to the club secretary. Most clubs use a sign-in sheet at a committee meeting or project and then forward the whole list to the secretary.

Measuring engagement

Why did the Council do that? Because the point of tracking attendance is not to make people come to meetings. When measured this way, it’s a measure of engagement — a key performance indicator of how your Rotary club is doing at involving members in Rotary activities. Believe me, we have the data to prove that when a member isn’t engaged and involved in the club, it’s a short trip to a resignation letter. Look at your members’ attendance percentages. Those at the bottom of the list are thinking about resigning. What can you do to get them engaged, involved, and — hopefully — passionate about something the club is doing?

More importantly, tracking engagement (attendance is a surrogate) is an important way of ensuring that members get the return on their Rotary investment that they deserve. Members who don’t show up for club activities aren’t getting the benefit of Rotary, and if we can identify those folks early, we can intervene and get them involved in something they’re interested in.

Participation versus attendance

So, let’s not only treat attendance as a key performance indicator for engagement but let’s explain it the same way to prospects. Rather than, “You have to attend four meetings a month,” say, “We expect you to participate in some Rotary activity four times a month — you pick the activity that works for you, and you pick the time.” I think that’s a whole different message, and actually what we’re attempting to promote and measure.

It’s not about making people come to meetings. It’s about offering them a platform where they, in their own ways and based on their own preferences, can Be a Gift to the World.