

THE REAL ROTARIAN

LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY RI PRESIDENT RICHARD D. KING

The world has changed many times over since founder Paul Harris and his three friends first met in 1905. The 20th century was "the best of times and the worst of times." Through two world wars and countless "smaller" ones, financial ruin and success, environmental pollution, wars against old and new diseases, astounding advances in communication and technology, natural disasters and a population explosion, acts of kindness and unbelievable acts of terror and hate, Rotary clubs moved through the 20th century doing small and large humanitarian deeds. As the organization grew and expanded globally in the post-WWII years, it attained a degree of recognition and prestige that went along with the title of Rotarian.



The 15 October 2001 issue of the respected business magazine *Fortune* featured an article entitled "Rotary at the Crossroads: What has happened to the Cadillac of business organizations?" This challenging and provocative article describes Rotary's greatness as if it were in the past. The author uses such statements as "If it were the 1950s, you might say Rotary was the Cadillac of community clubs" and "Rotary... the oldest and in years past, most elite..."

Today, Rotary is at a crossroads. We Rotarians resist change and innovation, particularly as we grow older. There is such a longing for the "good old days": when Rotary grew slowly but surely every year, when we were not concerned with the health of Rotary, because it *was* very healthy.

The challenges Rotary faces today fall into four distinct categories:

- 1) Membership recruitment, orientation, assimilation and retention.
- 2) Public image – the fact that we have hid our light under a bushel for so long, and have not "marketed" the Rotary image or concept.
- 3) Strength and development of the Rotary club.
- 4) Education and training of Rotary leaders and individual Rotarians.

If we do things right, Rotary is poised to become the most important nonprofit, volunteer organization in history. The opportunities for Rotary's greatness through humanitarian service are endless. Every day, 40,000 children under the age of 5 die from starvation. Illiteracy plagues 1.5 billion people, and one billion people live in poverty. Three billion people – half the population of the earth – live in mud huts and sleep on the streets or dirt floors. There is so much environmental pollution, so much disease that comes from malnutrition. There are so many blind people who could be cured with a simple cataract operation, so many immobile people who could function with dignity if they had a wheelchair, so many thirsty children who

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need clean water. And so much understanding of one another needed for peace to exist.

Who is going to solve these problems of humanity? I believe Rotary is the organization that can change the course of history in the 21st century. We have the

strength, the volunteers and the resources. Hopefully, we have the will. For it is vision and commitment that determine the course of human lives, and the life of organizations like Rotary.

How can we do this? We Rotarians are unusually successful in our personal and business lives, but when we approach the work of Rotary, we often act like amateurs. We set goals in our clubs that are so low that if we set them in our businesses, we would go bankrupt. Far too many Rotary clubs are bankrupt — or close to it — in the business of mankind.

I have heard it argued that the goal of one new member a month for an entire Rotary club is too difficult. It is inconceivable to me that anyone seriously believes this. We would never make such an excuse in our own businesses — if we wanted to stay in business. I believe we must bring to the work of Rotary the same dedication, competence, motivation, energy and enthusiasm that we bring to our professional success. Many clubs have sent me their five-year plan for club membership growth, service projects, public recognition and image development — the same sort of plan that any business must have in order to succeed. Rotary also requires a strategic plan, a business plan, and Rotary leaders to *work* the plan.

If we are to meet our destiny in the 21st century, three steps are necessary. First, a *goal* must be set. How many new members? How much per capita to The Rotary Foundation? What kind of public

relations? What community and international service projects? Where does the club want to be at the end of this Rotary year? In five years? Nothing happens without first setting a goal.

The second step is to devise a business *plan* to reach the goal. How exactly is the club going to reach this goal? Every Rotarian needs to meet certain club service commitments. The club president can make assignments to every Rotarian and hold regular assemblies to review and analyze the plan's success.

Third, the club members must *work* the plan. Every week there should be status reports on its progress.

As in any business, a Rotary club needs goals, planning and work to achieve success. This long-range strategy requires leadership at its best: influencing change and moving the bottom line. Influencing people to a course of action is the core objective of leadership. Speeches, meetings, slogans and seminars may all be important parts of leadership; but true leadership means the bottom line has actually been accomplished.

It also requires commitment, which means more than talent, intelligence or natural ability. I vividly recall looking into the eyes of commitment. One day about a dozen years ago, as I sat eating my lunch at our World Headquarters building, I saw

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an old man. He was probably in his late 80s or early 90s; his face wore the lines of a person who had lived through the tumultuous events of the 20th century. He walked slowly, with a shuffle, and I watched as he was escorted into the room by a young staff member. I was fascinated by the look on his weathered face.

After I finished my dessert, I went over and sat down beside him. "You are getting a tour of the building?" I remarked.

"Oh yes," he replied. "All my life I have wanted to see Rotary headquarters." He told me he was from Prague, Czechoslovakia.

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"Are you a Rotarian?" I asked. He looked at me for a moment, and his old eyes misted. "I hope so." Intrigued by his answer, I asked him to explain.

He said, "Rick, I joined Rotary in my youth. Prague was a beautiful city then. And we had a wonderful Rotary club that met at a downtown hotel. We wore our Rotary pins with pride, and we flew the Rotary flag at our meeting. I said to my wife, 'Someday I am going to America to see where this Rotary idea began.' But in 1939 the Nazis came. Some of our members were arrested and shot. The club disbanded. We could no longer fly the flag; we could not wear the Rotary pin. And I was not a real Rotarian anymore. But a few of us met secretly every week, for just a moment, to keep alive the Rotary spirit. We did this for six

years.

It was a glorious day," he said, when the Allies came in 1945. Prague once again had a Rotary club, and once more I was a real Rotarian. We could fly the flag; we wore our pins. Again I planned for that day when I would come to America, to see where it all began.

"Just three years later, though, the Communists came. And once more, the club had to disband. The flag could not fly, and we could not wear our Rotary pins. And once again, I was no longer a real Rotarian. But, as before, a few of us decided to meet secretly, every week for just a moment, to remember that we were once Rotarians. Only this time, we met secretly for 42 years." His eyes again grew moist as he said softly, "I knew I would never be a real Rotarian again,

that I would die before ever coming to America, to see where Rotary began."

And then he said, "But, Rick, last year a miracle happened. The wall came down. And next May, for the third time in my life, we are going to charter a Rotary club in Prague. And finally I had to come and see where Rotary began. Today is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. And once more before I die, I am going to be a real *Rotarian*."

I held his hands and looked into his eyes that were filled with so much emotion, and said to him, "Somehow, I think you have always been a real Rotarian!"

God grant that Rotary may long be blessed with real Rotarians — men and women of commitment who will take us to our rendezvous with destiny. After all, **Mankind Is Our Business.**

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THE ROTARY SPIRIT

The many comings and goings of Rotary in the Czech Republic

Rotarians in the Czech Republic know what it means to persevere. They have chartered and re-chartered their clubs not once, not twice, but three times during the past century. Still, their ranks remain nearly 1,000 strong.

Rotary first appeared in the former Czechoslovakia in 1924, with the inauguration of the Rotary Club of Prague. For the next 14 years, Rotary prospered in the capital city, helping to lay groundwork throughout the country for a proud tradition that would soon have to endure a tumultuous half-century.

When German forces occupied Czechoslovakia in the months leading up to World War II, Rotary clubs quickly became obsolete. But while formal meetings were nonexistent during the war, many service-minded individuals remained committed to Rotarian ideals and values.

After World War II, former Rotarians were keen to revive their clubs. A 1945 letter from Rotarian Jaroslav Podhajsky reads: "The Rotarians of Prague stuck together during the occupation and everybody did their part to help the other fellow Rotarians. The call of re-establishing Rotary in Czechoslovakia has been loud . . . they all believe that they never stopped being Rotarians . . . all remain true Rotarians in spirit."

Sentiments like this helped Rotary rebound quickly after the war — but they weren't enough to see the clubs through in the face of tightening government controls. In 1948, just three years after Rotary resurfaced, the Soviet government declared Rotary clubs illegal and terminated all 31 clubs that Czech Rotarians had recently formed or re-chartered. For the next four decades, while Czechoslovakia remained under Soviet authority, Rotary was silent.

In 1990, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Rotary Club of Prague was re-established for the third time. Today, the Czech Republic is home to 38 Rotary clubs.

— M. KATHLEEN PRATT

This article in the June 2005 *Rotarian* reminded Webmaster Jacque Foreman of the Richard King article that had appeared in the March 2002 *Rotarian*.

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