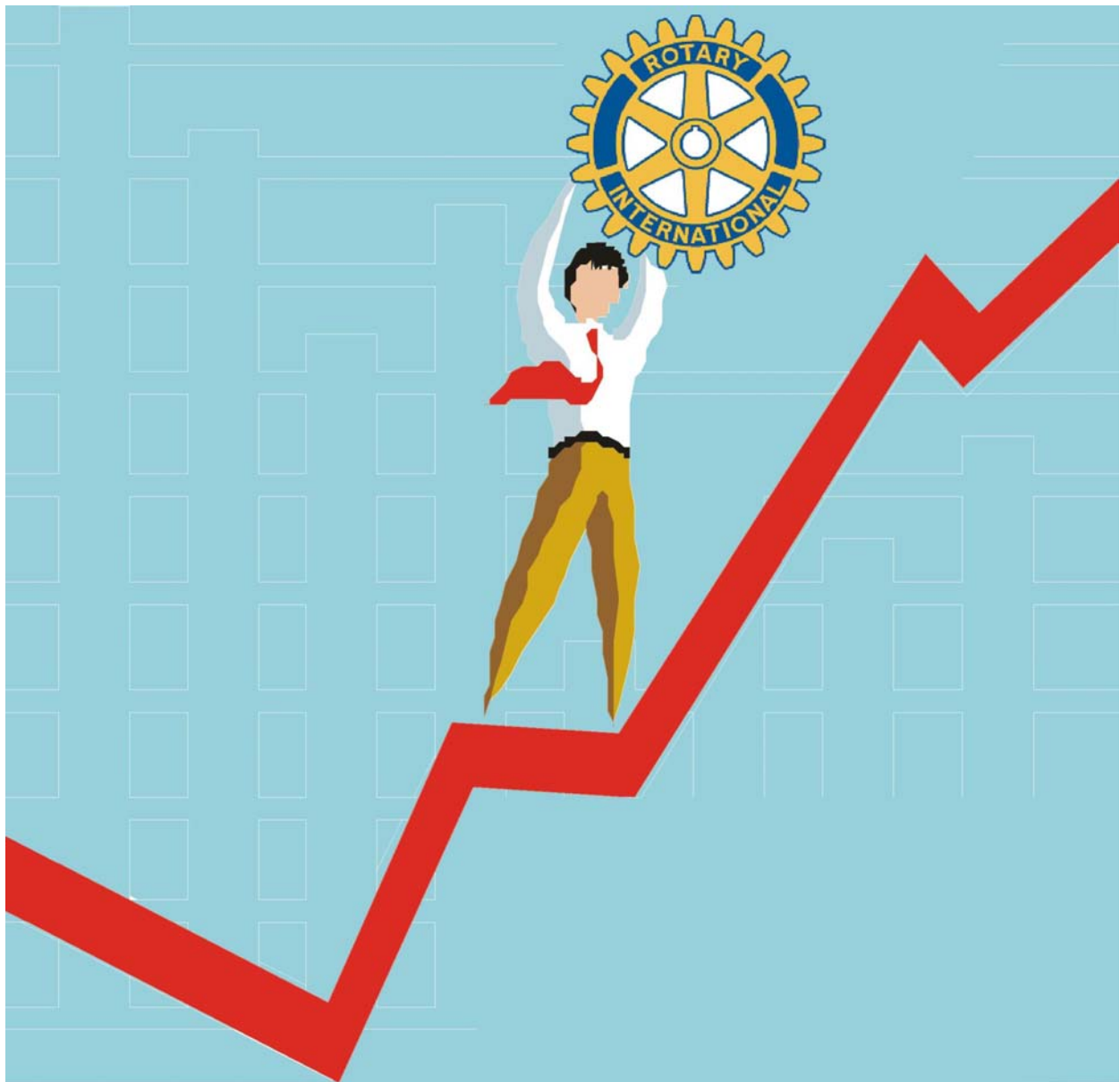


# Reversing a Membership Freefall

A Series

*Jim Henry*

*Zone 34 Regional Rotary International Membership Coordinator 2008 - 11*



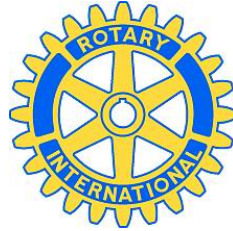
Graphic compliments of Diana White

***DRAWING THE LINE***

St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands

*To pursue new and retain existing members by doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results is lunacy.*

*Rotanomics– Why the Decline of Rotary Membership in North America, April, 2009*  
<http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>



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*Individual articles are available by logging on to the Zone 33-34 BLOG  
at <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>*



# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*First in a series of eight*

## Shifting Membership Development into Drive

by

*Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34*

In an earlier article,<sup>1</sup> the opening comment was, in part, “To pursue new and retain existing members by doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results is lunacy.” No club or district deliberately loses members. External forces cause a low percentage of membership loss. Internal issues that are difficult to recognize and resolve cause clubs’ major losses, primarily because they tend to render the clubs ineffective at satisfying member’s needs.<sup>2</sup> Eager to succeed within Rotary’s one-year leadership cycle, club leaders often try quick fixes (like membership drives) which generally waste time, effort, and resources that should be used to identify and improve the clubs’ ability to satisfy present and future members’ reasons for joining.



*Graphic compliments of Drawing the Line  
St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands*

What are these issues and how do organizations go about overcoming them? The details differ according to time and location, but they fall into these categories, usually in this order: (1) Lack of leadership agreement on purposes and goals. (2) Loss of desire and initiative to make the necessary changes. (3) Losing sight of the overall objective. (4) Failure to properly educate and communicate with all involved.

To overcome these issues, clubs (and districts) should follow these overall guidelines, each of which, in future articles, will be discussed in more detail:

**1. ESTABLISH PRIORITIES.** To reverse membership decline by making clubs more effective is not a one-person show; it requires the cooperation of many. To attain this cooperation, club (and district) leaders must establish priorities around which they can build a consensus. Only then can clubs become more effective in satisfying their members’ needs and further advancing the Object of Rotary.

**2. CREATE A POWERFUL GUIDING COALITION.** At the club level, the board is a logical place to start building a coalition, but it would be a mistake to leave out long-time or new members. The coalition’s size will vary according to club size, but improving effectiveness will fail without a dedicated and cooperative coalition. At district level, the coalition should consist of the present and future leaders and select past district governors.

**3. ESTABLISH AN ATTAINABLE VISION.** The coalition must establish goals that are attainable within a reasonable length of time. This will solidify the group because they will have worked together to define the objectives and, most important, will believe they are attainable.

<sup>1</sup>*Rotanomics– Why the Decline of Rotary Membership in North America, April, 2009* <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>

<sup>2</sup>*Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April 2009* <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*First in a series of eight*

**4. CREATE A SYSTEMATIC STRATEGIC PLAN WITH SHORT-TERM, ATTAINABLE MILESTONES.** Real change takes time, but the vision may become lost in the fog if the coalition does not build in short-term successes. Timely milestones with appropriate celebrations tend to keep the vision in focus while getting more and more people involved. Success breeds success.

**5. COMMUNICATE.** Failure to communicate is a common, costly oversight. Plan to communicate priorities and dependable, accurate, timely updates to all parties involved. For example, at the club level, if the coalition plans to reach a specified membership retention goal, the membership chairperson should periodically bring members up-to-date where the club stands relative to its goal. Districts must do the same with clubs. At all levels, communications must focus on priorities. Priorities must be headliners, not mid-page articles.

**6. REMOVE OBSTACLES.** Obstacles will arise as any organization proceeds on their path to success. Many try to side step or ignore impediments rather than deal with them. Perhaps the most common obstacle is those who fight the winds of change. Leaders should find a way to recognize and overcome obstacles. Leaders will have to make hard decisions like asking uncooperative individuals to step aside. At the district level, do not waste time on ineffective clubs that will not change, but take care: It is much better to populate communities' effective clubs than to populate communities with ineffective clubs.

**7. DO NOT DECLARE THE MISSION ACCOMPLISHED TOO SOON.** This is perhaps the major reason membership drives seldom accomplish their desired goal. It is important that the club and district continue to refine priorities until the new customs and practices that have made them more effective become operational norms. Only then can the coalition declare victory.



# Reversing a Membership Freefall

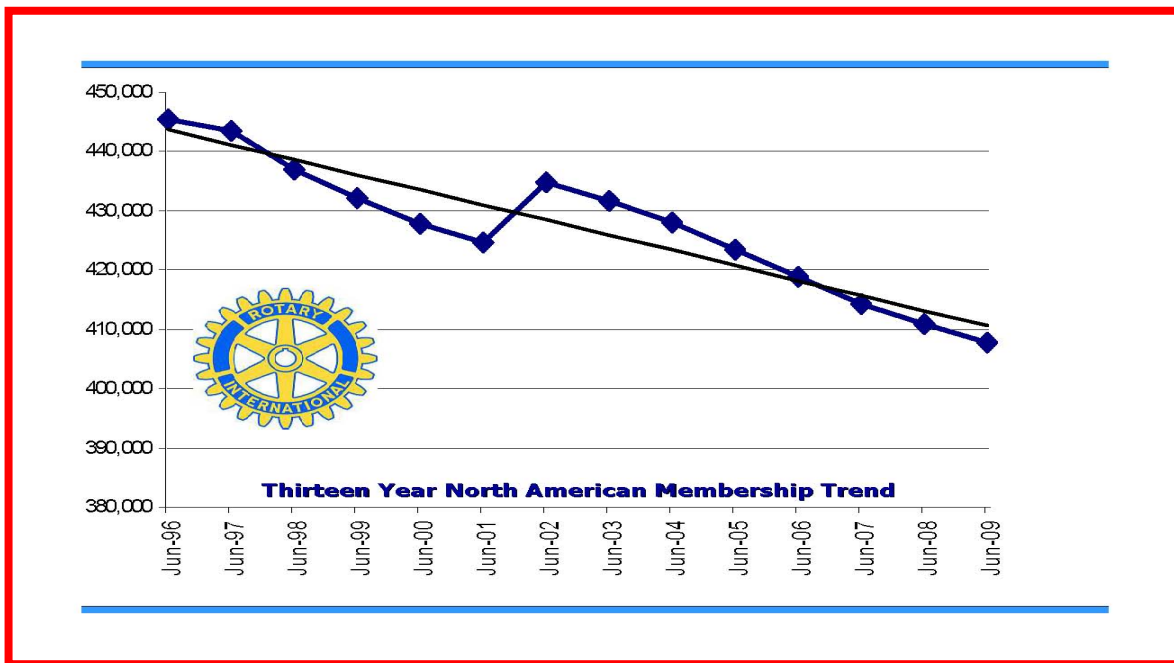
Second in a series of eight

## ESTABLISH PRIORITIES

by

Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

*The simple reality that must be addressed is that if Rotary clubs do not become more effective at satisfying their member's needs, many will go the way of companies that do not adapt to changing times.<sup>1</sup>*



Rotary International is a world-renowned association of individual, autonomous Rotary clubs. Each club is a local network of business, professional, and community leaders, active or retired, who have discretionary use of their time and who joined to advance the Object of Rotary. When discussing membership, some say, “*Is there really a North American membership development problem? Rotary blossomed through WWI, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, WWII, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and through several recessions. This is probably just an economy-related membership blip.*”

Look at the Thirteen Year North American Membership Trend. That’s not a blip. It is a trend that if not corrected will lead to the point of no return. As you examine the trend, remember that 1996 to 2005 were economic boom years and North American membership still declined. Note also that it took less than three years to offset the 2001-02 membership rise, which was a blip. The chart exposes a couple of important items: North American Rotary clubs do not have recruitment problems. The problem is that they cannot keep members. It is also obvious, when one takes off their Rotary-colored glasses, that the reasons are mostly internal – problems leaders can solve if they make it a priority to do so.

If businesses are not keeping customers, the leaders generally make it top priority to find out why and correct the reasons or they most likely will not be leaders for very long. Common sense says the same principle should apply to Rotary. Clubs’ customers are its members. Districts’ customers are its clubs. Effective leaders know that retaining customers has to be top priority. Effective leaders are also keenly aware that others will know their priorities by observing where they spend their time, talent, and treasure. As the motivational maxim implies (*and the IRS knows,*) checking accounts and calendars are priority logs.

<sup>1</sup> Membership – A Chilling Analogy, February 2009 <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Second in a series of eight*

Clubs and districts with chronic membership loss know that they must make reversing their membership freefall top priority. So why don't they? Most probably do not because they have PFS (*Parent Fear Syndrome*.) This syndrome manifests itself when parents fear quizzing their teenagers about what they have been up to because the offspring may actually tell the truth forcing parental reaction and action. Maybe leaders fear pursuing membership related issues because they may have to evaluate sacred cows and put some out to pasture.

Leading clubs to become more effective requires a multi-year effort, not a hit-and-miss one-month-a-year stab. It takes focus, which is often lost in time and the jumble of other activities. However, it is vital that the leaders keep membership satisfaction in sharp focus because often it will be necessary to change past customs and practices, which will be easier if everyone has the endpoint in view.

When we analyze the operations of effective clubs, we find that they are clear about whom they want as members and what it takes to satisfy their members' needs. As mentioned earlier, a Rotary club is a local network of business, professional, and community leaders, active or retired, who have discretionary use of their time. This definition focuses on a limited number of people (*BFLOB<sup>2</sup> - Not everyone is a leader.*) Effective clubs generally set and enforce membership standards because, if they do not, the very people they would like to attract to the club may not be attracted to the club. Again, to simplify a complex problem, effective clubs advance the Object of Rotary, which satisfies their members' networking, friendship, and achievement needs.<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the needs of individuals with leadership characteristics may mean that clubs and districts will have to strive for excellence rather than settling for mediocrity.

After establishing as top priority making clubs more effective at satisfying their members' needs, it is the leaders' job to keep the endpoint in focus while delegating responsibilities. Then they must see that the designees have the freedom and resources to do their job, and continue to follow up, offering guidance when necessary and giving recognition when due. Leaders also must remember that *most communication is non-verbal*. Leader's actions – *where they spend energy, time, and budget* – continually publicizes their priorities. Reversing the membership freefall must receive top billing in letters, newsletters, training sessions, web pages, club bulletins, speeches, awards, projects, conferences, and assemblies; otherwise, it will not happen and the inspiration and enthusiasm of those charged with responsibilities will cease.

To reverse a membership freefall, clubs must focus on becoming more effective in satisfying their members' needs. It will not happen until leaders at all levels establish doing so as their number one priority. Otherwise, clubs and districts will continue doing what they have always done, and, as the thirteen-year trend indicates; many clubs and some districts will reach their point of no return – their tipping point – and will cease to exist.



**Reversing our  
Membership Freefall  
must be the number  
one priority of all  
clubs and districts.**



<sup>2</sup> *BFLOB – Blinding FLash of the OBvious*

<sup>3</sup> *Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April 2009*

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

Third in a series of eight

## CREATE A POWERFUL GUIDING COALITION

by

Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

The number one internal problem of membership-distressed clubs<sup>1</sup> is the lack of consensus among the leaders, followed closely by frustration and apathy, resulting in the loss of desire and initiative to make necessary changes. The past, present, and future leaders themselves have not reached a consensus on the direction the club should be heading. In this context, *consensus* does not mean that clubs should be run by committee, a common concept when using *consensus*. For many reasons, clubs need to operate on the committee system, but day-to-day operations are not one of them. Club and committee leaders have to make many on-the-spot decisions. However, all leaders must have faith that everyone is heading in the same direction. Otherwise, the club will navigate an erratic course and will evolve into a membership-distressed club.

In such clubs, the major conflict most often is that leaders do not agree on the club's purpose.<sup>2</sup> When asked, Rotarians often say a club's major purpose is performing community service. Some say abide by the Four-Way test. Still others say practice Service above Self. A district governor once announced that a club's major purpose was to support the Rotary Foundation. All these are worthy aspirations, but they are all the result of a **Rotary club's only purpose, which is to advance the Object of Rotary**. As a guiding coalition charts a course, it must be in full agreement that the **Object of Rotary** is its compass.

The **Object of Rotary** is to encourage and foster the ideal of service as a basis of worthy enterprise and, in particular, to encourage and foster:

**FIRST:** The Development of acquaintance as an opportunity for service.

**SECOND** - High ethical standards in business and professions; the recognition of the worthiness of all useful occupations, and the dignifying of each Rotarian's occupation as an opportunity to serve society.

**THIRD** - The application of the ideal of service in each Rotarian's personal, business, and community life.

**FOURTH** - The advancement of international understanding, goodwill, and peace through a world fellowship of business and professional persons united in the ideal of service.



The guiding coalition for historically effective clubs has been, and is, their Boards of Directors, and their compass and chart has been, and is, their constitution and by-laws. Ineffective club administration is where membership distressed clubs have some major commonalities: The boards of directors (*if they have one*) lack focus; leaders neglect to advance the Object of Rotary (*often because they have misunderstandings about the club's purpose;*) lack of consensus on policies and procedures (*because they have not read the club's constitution and by-laws;*) lack of using an organized process to identify, sponsor, induct, and orient qualified members (*often because they are desperate for members,*) and lack of a functioning committee system, (*often because it takes effort on the part of committee chairs it involve others.*)

<sup>1</sup> Rotary is a club-based organization. In this article's context, clubs means all levels of Rotary governance.

<sup>2</sup> Rotanomics – Why the Decline of Membership in North America, April 2009, <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Third in a series of eight*

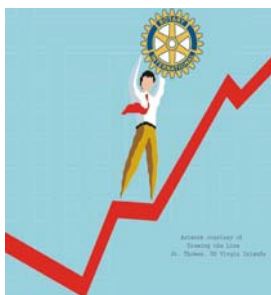
Consensus also does not mean that the clubs are not in need of strong leaders. They do – to keep the objective in focus – to keep the club from wandering too far off its plotted course. However, if a club has a board of directors functioning as the guiding coalition, it can normally withstand a weak leader for a year or two, providing the coalition is working together to keep the club on track.

A good example of building a consensus is the Florida Gator basketball team. For the last several years, the Gators have put many outstanding college basketball players on the floor. A few years back, the Gators had several individual stars; outstanding guards, excellent forwards, and three-point production machines, but the teams did not win an SEC championship and were eliminated by the second round from consecutive NCAA tournaments. In the following years, the Gators had many good players on the floor. However, they had established a strong consensus and put a priority on what they wanted their team to accomplish. The team won back-to-back SEC and NCAA championships and most starters were drafted into the NBA.

Consensus does not mean agreement on every detail or silencing differing opinions, but it does mean agreement on the overall objective. When club's officers and committee chairs make decisions, the other leaders must operate with the clear consensus in mind. If they do not, the most common result is discord and dissention, which are manifested in membership split on purpose, lack of members adhering to processes, poor participation in programs and projects, and/or disagreements in fundamental Rotary principles. Resolving differing opinions is a vital part of building a consensus because listening to and understanding differing ideas is necessary to keep the club focused as times change.

Membership development, creating a more effective club, and having a powerful guiding coalition have something in common – they are 'soft' issues. They are abstract concepts, making them much more difficult to define. Raising money is easy – here is the reason we want the money (*the purpose agreed upon by the project's coalition.*) This is how much we need (*the set, reasonably attainable goal.*) This is when we need it (*the end.*) All those are finite issues. However, building a coalition and consensus on long-term matters and processes can be tedious, but, to reverse membership freefall, it is necessary that clubs know how to do it. Club leaders must come together, build a consensus on how to make their clubs more effective in attracting and keeping members. In essence, clubs must get back to basics – **Advancing the Object of Rotary.**

Imagine a coalition retreat where the primary goal was to come away with a direction for the club's future. An open-ended question that could be asked at the outset might be something like this, "What do we have to do to reverse our membership freefall and sustain the reversal by guiding our club to become more effective in advancing the Object of Rotary?" With the average Rotarian being a business, professional, or community leader, the retreat, I suspect, would be anything but boring. It would also be a failure if the coalition did not come away with a consensus regarding the club's future.



**Any club that wants to reverse their membership freefall must develop a guiding coalition that has reached a consensus on the most effective ways to advance the Object of Rotary.**



# Reversing a Membership Freefall

Fourth in a series of eight

## ESTABLISH AN ATTAINABLE VISION

by

Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

The success of any Rotary club depends on its ability to attract and keep members just as the success of any business depends on its ability to attract and keep customers. To achieve this success, membership-distressed clubs' leaders must come up with simple, singular, directional visions that will be easy for all members to grasp. Another simple fact club leaders must accept is that a Rotary club's major competitor is not other organizations or the economy; it is an individual's personal time. So the decision whether or not a prospective member will join a Rotary club boils down to a simple time-use equation (*similar to what most people subconsciously use when making decisions*<sup>1</sup>.)



### BPCL Select EX = Time

Where **BPCL** = Business, Professional, or Community Leader

**Select** = The Decision the BPCL will make

**EX** = Extracurricular activity in which they will participate

**Time** = The time the BPCL will expend satisfying their networking, friendship, and achievement needs.<sup>2</sup>

Another fundamental principle in establishing an attainable vision is to define a Rotary club's identity that separates it from other organizations. For example, take a pencil and paper and list all the volunteer service organizations in your community. Then list all the organizations dedicated solely to satisfying the networking, friendship, and achievement needs of the community's business, professional, and community leaders. The former list will outnumber the latter twenty or more to one.

Why compare oneself with a myriad of organizations when Rotary clubs have a unique objective? The sole purpose of a Rotary club is to advance the Object of Rotary, which begins by developing acquaintances with peers and honoring one's vocation as a legitimate method of serving. Yet if you ask any Rotarian what is the Object of Rotary, seldom, if ever, will you get even a simple summation. Most Rotarians simply do not know the object of the club in which they are a member.

Research<sup>3</sup> indicates that the first five years a member is in a club they are generally interested in networking, building friendships, and, if starting a business, developing leadership and other related skills, which are accomplished while advancing the first and second Objects of

<sup>1</sup> Variation of equation, pp 132, "When Growth Stalls" Steve McKee, ISBN 978-0-470-39570-7

<sup>2</sup> Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April 2009 <http://membership33-34.blogspot.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Rotary Club of Buffalo, NMA Research, June 8, 2007

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Fourth in a series of eight*

Rotary. Once the member has achieved these goals, for the next fifteen years they want to connect to the community and provide service to others. After that, they want to maintain friendships while providing service to others. Advancing the third and fourth objects of Rotary helps members satisfy these personal achievement needs.

For any club, a simple vision statement might be:

*To grow in size to \_\_\_\_ members by (date three to five years out.) To do this, the club must satisfy the needs of existing members and continually attract new, qualified members. The club will accomplish this goal by improving its retention percentage to \_\_\_\_% and budgeting for members to invite as guests \_\_\_\_ qualified visitors per month and induct \_\_\_\_ new members per year.*

This is simple and to the point. All the club has to do is decide what numbers to plug in. However, the club must carefully target whom it wants as members. The club must have a selection process and, even more important, all members must follow the process. Too often clubs fall victim to membership drives and let the membership process slip, which often leads to inducting questionable members. For example, a club wanted to increase its membership by ten net to earn the Governor's Award. What did the club do? First, they quickly inducted anyone who expressed interest in joining, bypassing their formal proposal/board approval/information meeting/application/publication process. Second, as members left through normal attrition the club secretary, at the president's request, did not take them off the rolls until the following year's July 1 semi-annual report. Inadvertently these tactics created a major problem – the club inducted unqualified members and got the reputation that anyone could join. Because some of the new inductees had questionable qualifications, a few longtime club leaders, after unsuccessful attempts to rectify the situation, resigned and started another club, which became very successful. The original club, after struggling for several years, turned in its charter.

Rotary clubs, Rotary International, and the Rotary Foundation together furnish various avenues for advancing the Object of Rotary. All have the mechanisms to assist members in satisfying their individual networking, friendship, and achievement needs, which will keep clubs growing. However, clubs must keep Rotary's distinctiveness in sight.



**For clubs to grow and prosper, they must have a simple, singular, directional vision and utilize Rotary's uniqueness.**



# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Fifth in a Series of eight*

## CREATE A SYSTEMATIC STRATEGIC PLAN WITH SHORT-TERM ATTAINABLE MILESTONES

by

Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

In order to create a systematic strategic plan for long-term survival, any organization must center the plan on satisfying its customers by establishing a distinctive position (*core strength*) that gratifies the customers' needs! Then the organization must adhere to this position so diligently that other organizations will find it too difficult or too costly to duplicate.

Rotary clubs' present customers are its members. To maintain long-term growth and viability, clubs, like other organizations, must attract new customers (members.) So, what is the profile of Rotary clubs' potential members, and what needs do they have that club membership can satisfy?

### Potential Member (Customer) Profile:

They are active or retired leaders in their businesses, leaders in their professions, and leaders in their communities. (*Note the common characteristic: they are all leaders.*)

### Characteristics:

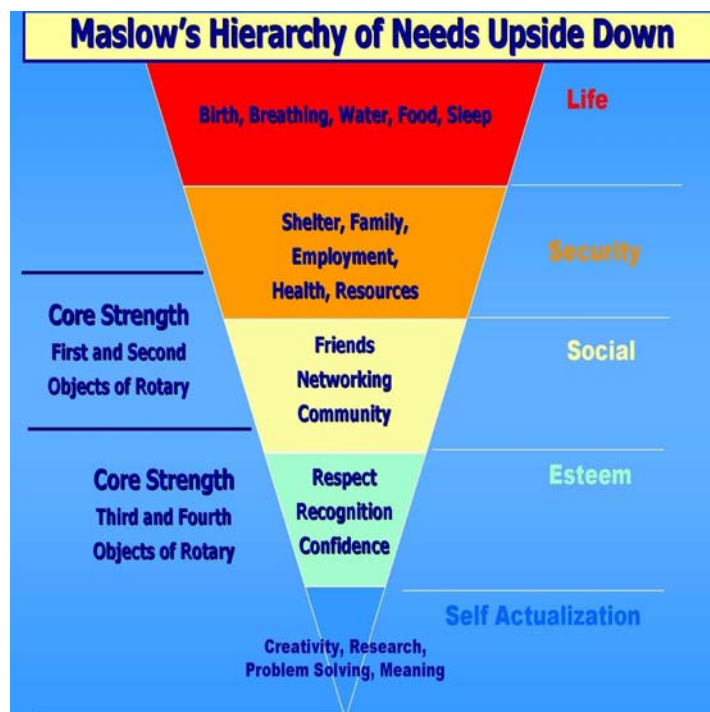
- Time is more precious than talent or treasure.
- If in a relationship, both are often working and sharing household and child rearing duties.
- They have or have had a supervisor or co-worker of a different gender or ethnicity.
- They have always had access to a computer and are usually proficient in its use.
- Many do not subscribe to or get their news from local daily newspapers.
- They are comfortable with, and often prefer, on-line shopping, completing forms, networking, etc.
- They have used email, portable electronic calendars, voice mail, and mobile phones most of their professional life.
- Many do not have landline telephones.
- File transferring is electronic rather than snail mail or fax machines.
- Instant messaging is common, as is changing careers, single parenthood, multiple marriages, and commuting thirty or more minutes one way.
- If a professional, sole proprietor or consultant, they often work from home.

### Needs:

Research<sup>1</sup> indicates that the time line needs for Rotary club members are:

(Maslow's *Hierarchy of Human Needs* corroborates these findings.<sup>2</sup>)

- One-to-five year Rotarians – Networking, building relationships, developing leadership skills.
- Five-to-fifteen year Rotarians – connecting with the community.
- Twenty+ year Rotarians – sustaining friendships while continuing with varying achievements.



Trying to sustain long-term viability on service alone is like trying to build on an unstable, point-loaded base instead of a sound foundation.

<sup>1</sup> Rotary Club of Buffalo, NMA Research, June 8, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Why are Effective Clubs Effective? or What Motivates Rotarians, April, 2009 <http://membership33-34/blogspot.com>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Fifth in a Series of eight*

## Distinctive Position (*Core strength*)

Many Rotary clubs have tried to sustain and increase membership by stressing service as their core strength. This creates a major membership development obstacle because it ignores the new members' needs, which leads to the inability to attract and keep them.<sup>3</sup> Objectively examine the issue from the outsider's point of view – they can gratify their service needs by participating in one or more of the thousands of organizations that offer similar opportunities – with little or no time, talent, or treasure commitment. Service to others is a critical Rotary attribute, but it is not a distinctive position. Trying to sustain growth on service alone is like trying to establish permanency on a point base instead of a solid foundation (*Please see illustration on the first page.*)

On the other hand, how many organizations offer business, professional, and community leaders the opportunity to network, build friendships, develop leadership skills, and satisfy their service needs while socializing with a multitude of differing leaders? Very few. Advancing the Object of Rotary is a distinctive position because it satisfies most members' varying needs. For almost ninety years, through two World Wars, the Great Depression, several military conflicts, sustained periods of economic growth, recession and changing work ethoi, Rotary clubs experienced exponential growth. Advancing the Object of Rotary was their core strength.

A première example of this core strength at work is Rotary's ambitious, famous, and great service project – Polio Eradication. Rotary International leaders and Rotary clubs, advancing the Object of Rotary, created and led perhaps the greatest health initiative the world has ever experienced. This project's success has depended upon networks of business, professional, and community leaders achieving their esteem and self-actualization needs, and has earned Rotary worldwide recognition and respect. HOWEVER, this service project did not create Rotary's core strength; Rotary's core strength created the project (*and thousands of other local and international service projects.*)

Identifying future member characteristics, knowing their needs, being selective about who is invited into club membership then creating a systematic strategic plan centered on satisfying their needs should assist any club in becoming more effective. The plan should go into detail about specifying which committees are responsible for advancing each Object of Rotary; ways and means for committees to accomplish their objectives; and short and long-term goals with realistic timelines to measure effectiveness. Creating and executing such a plan would be a major step toward a club achieving long-term sustainability.

Because clubs are autonomous and different, this article cannot go into strategic plan details, but a group of club leaders should be able to hammer out those. Some clubs accomplish this in one evening; others in one or two day retreats. Outside assistance in developing a strategic plan is often preferred and is usually available at little or no cost to the club. Rotary International has strategic planning literature, and, in many districts, the Rotary Leadership Institute will be able to assist.

In strategic planning, it is vital to keep this fundamental principle in mind:



**For an organization to maintain long-term growth and viability, it must establish a distinctive position that satisfies its customers' needs. For Rotary clubs, that distinctive position is the Object of Rotary.**



<sup>3</sup> *Rotary Membership: A Chilling Analogy*, Feb 2009

<http://membership33-34.blogspot.com>

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

Sixth in a Series of eight

## Communicate

by

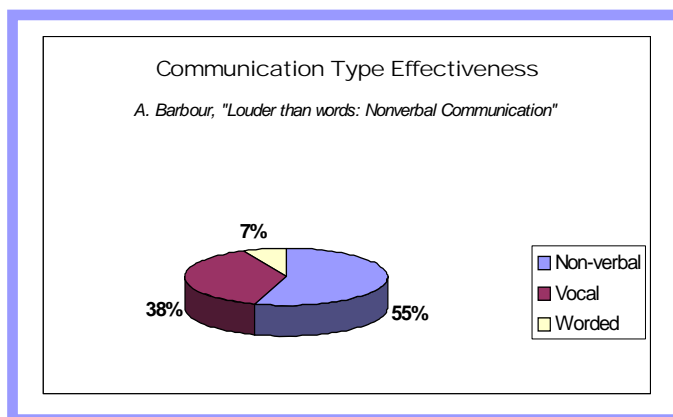
Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

*“What we got here is failure to communicate!” Cool Hand Luke, chain gang captain*

**The organization’s guiding coalition has created a strategic plan centered on satisfying members’ needs utilizing Rotary’s distinctive position - the Object of Rotary. What now? Communication! Poor communication has caused many strategic plans to fail. Effective communication begins before leaders unveil the plan, and must continue after achieving the planned objectives to assure that the new practices have become the norm. But what makes effective communication?**

If we take communication lessons from the professionals, the major principle is for the communicators (*those who want to deliver information*) to make it easy for the communicatees (*those who communicators want to receive information*) to receive, have interest in, and understand the topic, which, in this article, is the strategic plan.

To be effective, communicators should follow three fundamental rules: – **1** – make it easy for the communicatee to receive and understand the plan, – **2** – keep plan progress in front of them without annoyance, and – **3** – do not assume that anyone is going to *remember* anything! Many effective leaders say that there is a communication commandment - **orchestrate non-verbal communication.**



**PRESENTING THE PLAN** – Huge amounts of non-verbal communication takes place before the leaders unveil the plan. By far the best way to present the plan is through a carefully prepared presentation at a club assembly, but not until after the members have had a chance to review and make notes on a printed copy. All members should get a copy a week or two in advance (*rule #1*) along with a note asking them to review it and mark suggestions for improvements and/or comments. Many will not read or study the plan, but (*here comes non-verbal communication*) because someone went to the trouble and expense to make a hard copy and get it to them, they will feel that their time and opinion is valued. That action makes them immediately feel more important and part of the process.

Why a hard copy? See rule #1. Sending an electronic copy causes the communicatee, or their company, to expend effort, time, and expense – they have to use their computer to open the document, and their paper, printer, and ink or toner to print a copy, and their stapler or three-hole punch to bind the pages.

Prior to presenting at the meeting, the presenter should prepare and rehearse in front of the guiding coalition. It is unfortunate, but too often presenters believe they can wing it. See rule #1. The object of the presentation is to make it easy for the members to understand what’s going on and why. That is why practice before others is necessary. What may be perfectly clear to you may not be clear to your audience. In addition, (*more non-verbal communication*) practicing to assure a clear presentation makes your audience friendlier because it will be obvious to them that you considered them important enough not to waste their time with a sloppy presentation. Too often, communication amateurs prepare verbal and written communication for their own convenience and understanding, not for the communicatees’.

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Sixth in a Series of eight*

**THE PLAN HAS BEEN APPROVED AND IS IN PROGRESS** – *Once the plan goes into effect, rules #2 & #3, and the commandment, become substantially more important.* Let's again discuss non-verbal communication, which, at this stage, frequently overwhelms vocal and printed messages. The plan's central theme is the club's distinctive position, which is advancing the Object of Rotary. If leaders expound its importance in their unveiling speech, but never mention it again, will members really consider it important? If front-page articles on each bulletin and newsletter do not reflect the Object's value to members, are the leaders effectively communicating the plan's importance? If most communication does not convey the Object's benefits to members, are they going to remember the Object or its benefits? This non-verbal communiqué broadcasts priorities loud and clear, and blatantly violates rule #3.

Communication is a critical tool on any organization's path to success. A major reason clubs lose members is that they fail to communicate the value of membership. Clubs must plan to communicate continually the distinctive position's value to members – lest they forget. (*Rule #3.*) At all levels, leaders often fail to delegate the communication responsibility, empower the communicator, and follow up to assure that they are applying the communication rules. Big mistake! The more people involved the more likely the plan will succeed.

Effective communication employs all three rules, and is vividly demonstrated by a lesson I learned early in my sales engineering career. On a flight from Chicago to Dallas, my seatmate, sales vice president for a valve manufacturer, and I struck up a conversation. It turned out that we were staying at the same hotel so we continued exchanging stories over drinks and dinner. His company was the world's top seller and most profitable manufacturer of the very expensive oil patch valves they sold. Naturally, I assumed that their valve must be the best on the market, but he said no, all manufacturers' valves were the same: design, materials, tolerances, assembly, and shipping cycles. Disassembled and examined, according to him, end users could almost mix and match parts. So what was his company's secret? Effective communication.

His company sold through manufacturer's representatives, his company's customer. (*Note that his customer was not the valve's end user.*) To develop acquaintances as an opportunity for service, he visited each representative at least twice a year. Every two weeks, he sent each representative a simple little postcard that had one pre-printed valve feature on it, added a brief personal comment that did not require a response, and signed it. So the secret was continually reminding their customer of valve features? No. Remember, all manufacturers' valves were the same. The secret was that he expended effort (*non-verbal communication*) that communicated the value of the manufacturer's representative's time; the post cards were delivered and easy to read (*rule #1*), dependable (*rule #2*), and frequent (*rule #3*).

## Communication Rules and The Commandment



- 1. Make it easy for the communicatee to find and understand the information being transmitted.**
- 2. Keep the objectives in front of the communicatees without annoying them.**
- 3. Do not assume that anyone remembers anything.**



**And the commandment: Orchestrate non-verbal communications.**

*Thought to ponder: Do your newsletters & bulletins satisfy any or all rules and obey the commandment?*

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Seventh in a Series of eight*

## Remove Obstacles

by

Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34

*“Cause change and lead, accept change and survive, resist change and die.”*

*Ray Noorda - 1924-2006, technology pioneer, Novell Corporation CEO.*

North America’s membership freefall suggests that changes in most Rotary clubs is not an option, it is a necessity. Obstacles generated by the *Derriere Syndrome* (“*This is where I always sit*”) will inevitably arise to defend the status quo because change threatens comfort levels. However, Rotary is an organization of leaders in businesses, the professions, and in the community, most of whom have experience in causing change within their organizations. A major reason people join Rotary<sup>1</sup> is to network with such leaders. What better way is there to sharpen leadership skills than causing changes that improve the club’s service to its members, which will create membership growth and improve service to the local and international communities?



Clubs that plan to change will face obstacles. When properly approached, the obstacles can create major improvements in the strategic plan, which increases the odds of the plan succeeding. Often obstacles are only *reluctance* to change rather than *resistance* to change. Overcoming either begins when establishing the guiding coalition because reluctance and resistance will appear within the coalition itself.

The leader (*note singular*) who is heading up the strategic plan first has to communicate why the club must change. This addresses the first objection that pops into almost everyone’s mind – is change necessary? When meeting members’ needs is established as the club’s top priority, communicating

is an absolute necessity. Stable clubs may find this a difficult task even to identify, much less overcome. It is common for a stable club to grow older in age but not wiser in the Object of Rotary because it is bringing in and losing members at the same rate. All clubs should determine their retention rate.<sup>2</sup>

Obstacles fall into root forms, the most common of which are rational, emotional, and political, and often arise at unpredictable times. Leaders should be prepared to deal with every obstacle just as soldiers train for warfare because, at some point, leaders may think causing change is war. This is why it’s necessary to have the organization’s leaders in place and ready. Overcoming every obstacle will improve the odds of implementing necessary changes.

**Rational** obstacles are easiest to prepare for and overcome. The need for change, in most cases, is logical and can be mathematically proven by analyzing the club – how many are joining, how many are leaving, and why. Once accomplished, rational thought will win out. If the club is stable or has a declining membership, the response will be yes, change is necessary. Nevertheless, thoughts like, “*We tried that and it didn’t work,*” will surface, as will “*We’ve never done that before*” or “*We always do it this way.*” Leaders usually can remove these obstacles by initiating early, honest, and respectful communication. But remove they must or plan implementation will be dead in the water.

<sup>1</sup> Rotary Club of Buffalo, NMA Research, June 8, 2007

<sup>2</sup> Club Assessment Tools, Rotary International Booklet #EN-808.

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Seventh in a Series of eight*

**Emotional** obstacles will be erratic, different, and often surprising. This obstacle is generated by fear of the unknown and usually first surfaces when establishing the guiding coalition. In the beginning, almost everyone will be excited and inclined to have outbursts of enthusiasm. Leaders tend to visualize the potential improvement and emotionally arrive at the end. Then, during plan implementation, obstacles appear, many manifested by thoughts like, “*Are we going about this the correct way? Is this the right thing to do? This is not going as smoothly as we expected.*” These detours can become major issues, but will be easier to navigate if the club has effective and consistent communication methods.

**Political**, or social, obstacles will certainly arise and are perhaps the most difficult to remove. Questions like, “*Is this what Rotary is all about?*” surface, as will individual thought patterns represented by “*How is this going to affect me?*” “*Am I going to lose my power? Is my importance to the club going to dwindle? Will my sacred cow be sacrificed? Why wasn’t I included in the decision making?*” Often these are the most delicate to handle because members with these doubts are often active in projects that may be no longer accomplishing their intended purpose, often referred to as sacred cows. Recognizing the reality of this type obstacle usually requires that the leaders talk personally with those involved.

Then there’s always **Apathy**. Wonder why? Combine these ingredients: Rotarians are busy people whether active or retired. They normally have strong personalities, and some, for differing reasons, will be comfortable with the status quo. Change requires adjustment, and some people are reluctant to adapt (*most clubs lose members when they change meeting time or location*). Rotary leaders at all levels must recognize that club membership, while important, is not on top of members’ time-use list, particularly if it is not beneficial to all concerned. Leaders themselves often create almost insurmountable obstacles by promoting membership numbers instead of maintaining standards; being ill prepared for meetings, turning them into time-wasters; or distributing mistake-riddled or confusing communications. Apathy and the rational, political, and emotional question, “*Does membership affect my self-image or how others view me,*” are closely related. Apathy will be easier to overcome if the club has been maintaining operational standards and expectations representative of its members, and pro-active in promoting advancement of the Object of Rotary among business, professional, and community leaders.

When addressing obstacles, it’s better to be respectfully proactive than negatively reactive. Leaders must remember that change upsets many members’ comfort levels and that problems will surface. Leaders must treat questioners with respect and as if they are not resistant to change. However, they want to make sure the changes will be beneficial to all concerned. Regardless of how obstacles are presented, leaders should address each in a non-confrontational manner. Carefully planned communications, particularly non-verbal, are a necessity. Eyeball-to-eyeball conversations, especially with those who disagree, are vital.

Removing all obstacles will result in the plan’s improvement and better the odds for success. But the task will be much easier if leaders have been effective communicators, treated the obstacles as opportunities, respectfully addressed differences, and engaged members reluctant to change.

**To overcome obstacles, the strategic plan’s guiding coalition must:**



- Accept that obstacles will occur**
- Communicate**
- Treat obstacles respectfully**
- Effectively communicate**
- Approach obstacles as ideas for improvement**
- Communicate even more**



# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Eighth in a Series of eight*

## Do Not Declare “Mission Accomplished” too Soon

by

*Jim Henry, RRIMC Zone 34*

*A Georgia ex-Rotarian said about Rotary: “It wasn’t worth the time or money I had to invest.”*

When the club has accomplished its vision, a celebration is in order and the club president should shout, “**VICTORY! We have accomplished our vision.**” All the club has to do now is to let the accomplishments fly. It is as simple, and as difficult, as that. Mark Hurd, Hewlett Packard CEO says, “*Without execution, vision is just another word for hallucination.*”

Execution is everything. Planning is necessary, but to establish and hold onto the distinctive position, execution is everything. It encompasses all aspects of member service – all the time – forever – from now on – by every member – especially the leaders. If successfully executed, every member from the newest to the oldest will be proud.



Winged Victory  
The Louvre, Paris, FR

In this series, we have covered many details on how to reverse our membership freefall, starting first with all Rotary leaders recognizing that halting our exodus has to be top priority, or the vision will become a delusion. We have all heard stories expounding that we cannot serve two masters. The same is true with priorities – there is no such thing as having two top priorities. (*Multi-taskers may not agree, but, in fact, they also work on the priority system; they just switch priorities frequently.*) Rotary clubs, like other businesses, do not have that option. To maintain viability and growth, Rotary clubs must satisfy members’ needs by centering their activities on their distinctive position, the Object of Rotary. To portray the importance of making changes that might have made membership worthwhile for the Georgia Rotarian quoted above, here is a Rotary quasi-allegory based on applying the Object of Rotary to members’ needs:

New Rotarians join Rotary because they want to network and establish additional friendships. If early in their career stages, they also want to develop leadership skills. If they are long-time Rotarians who have recently moved to the area, they still want to network and establish friendships, or, as Rotary’s founders put it, to ***development acquaintances as an opportunity for service***. It may be for business reasons, social reasons, or service reasons, but it’s still networking and developing friendships.

The new members, particularly those in growing businesses, want to be known as having ***high ethical standards in their business and profession***. As a Rotarian, they should ***recognize the worthiness of all useful occupations and dignify and treat their own occupation as an opportunity to serve society***. While satisfying these initial needs, the members learn about the ***worthiness of all useful occupations***, and that everyone benefits when applying the ***ideal of service to their personal and business life***. If the club has been diligent in pursuing their distinctive position, members will enjoy witnessing ***high ethical standards*** in use and that ***applying the ideal of service to their community life*** is beneficial to all concerned, including themselves, whether it is for personal or business reasons.

# Reversing a Membership Freefall

*Eighth in a Series of eight*

These activities will gratify members for a long while, but some will strive for higher levels of achievement by *advancing international understanding and goodwill*, and will participate in one or more of the many international programs the Rotary organization has to offer. By now, the twenty-plus year Rotarian has developed lifelong friendships and experienced years of varying types of service. If the club continues to execute aggressively their distinctive position, the veteran members will continue *developing acquaintances as an opportunity for service* by sharing experiences with new Rotarians, extending Rotary's circle of life.

Sound like a fairy tale? It isn't. It's representative of Rotarians whose clubs are intent on making membership worthwhile. Any club can achieve this sustaining cycle of life if they perpetually advance the Object of Rotary for their members, the community's business, professional, and community leaders who have discretionary use of their time. All this is possible if, and only if, clubs strive for consistency in pursuing excellence to the degree their members demand. One measure outsiders use to judge people is the quality of the organization of which they are a member. As one Rotarian put it, "*The way the president runs the weekly meeting is one way my guest views me, and is the only way they first view the club.*" **The difficult part of declaring victory is that ALL club (and district) activities must mirror their distinctive position – at all times.**

Effective clubs concentrate on satisfying all members' needs, but membership-challenged clubs will face a dilemma in the changes they must make. Putting together the necessary changes will be even harder than it sounds because members themselves usually have only a few needs<sup>1</sup> at any given time. The club must strive to assure these needs are met while accommodating long-time members, whose needs have changed. So how is a club going to change and execute the Object of Rotary to the satisfaction of ALL members?

First, the club must operate on the committee system because that's the only means of effectively involving all members in club activities. It is in the committee system that long time members can share their experiences with new members, and new members can inform long time members of changes in the workplace. Every club should have active committees, worthwhile projects, and other interesting programs. It is within these activities that members *develop acquaintances as an opportunity for service* and where they effectively network<sup>2</sup>, solidify friendships, and have fun while developing leadership skills, all of which helps make membership in the club worth their time and effort.

Second, the cycle will sustain as long as clubs satisfy their members' needs by diligently

## Advancing the Object of Rotary!



**Reversing the Membership Freefall is not an option, it is a necessity.**



<sup>1</sup> Create a Systematic Strategic Plan with Short-Term Attainable Milestones, this series, pp 9.

<sup>2</sup> Membership – It's Okay to Join Rotary for Business Reasons Appendix page - - Jean and Lex story