

INNOVATION AND FLEXIBILITY

By John Hewko, Rotary International General Secretary

Innovation and flexibility. Those are two words you hear a lot today when we think about any organization adapting to a rapidly changing environment. But what do those two words mean for Rotary?

In short, they will define Rotary's future, because they are fundamental pillars of our strategic plan for enhanced impact, reach, engagement and adaptability.

If we are really serious about growing Rotary and attracting new members from all demographics, we must innovate.

That innovation will need to take various forms.

It begins, **first**, with making the idea of innovation in Rotary a mindset. It begins with developing a culture of positive change and adapting to the needs of our new realities and challenges.

Second, innovation is also about **transformative technologies**. We can call this sustaining innovation – that is, constantly developing our suite of products to serve our existing members.

We have implemented this concept of sustaining innovation through three channels of new technology: **Rotary's Learning Center, Rotary Club Central**, and an enhanced **online membership leads program**. Now, all these tools are at your disposal, and many new ones are in the process of being developed. Their consistent use should be a key foundation of our future growth strategy.

The **third** kind of innovation that we must aspire to generate at Rotary is called **disruptive innovation**.

In the world of business, it refers to a product or service, often very simple in its first design. This product or service takes root at the bottom of a market, and then relentlessly grows in popularity, until it displaces established competitors.

Think of how the traditional taxi cab business has been changed forever by ride sharing platforms such as Uber, which connects consumers who need rides with drivers willing to provide them.

With a growing group of individuals looking for connection, friendship, and an opportunity to get involved in the world around them, Rotary is well positioned to be a disruptive innovator.

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Imagine for a moment what Rotary clubs could look like in the future. Clubs that could change their meeting schedule and format, can relax attendance requirements, and offer multiple membership types.

Think of a club where you can invite Rotaractors to be members of your club while they are still in Rotaract.

A club of the future, where measuring adherence to the rules is replaced with measuring progress against goals to improve the community and to grow the club.

Well, you don't have to imagine very far, because these clubs already exist.

[Next Rotary Generation Invercargill](#) is a family-friendly club in New Zealand with fluid meeting times and venues. While attendance is encouraged, it is not compulsory.

[The Rotary Club of Aruba](#) systematically engages with its local Rotaract and Interact Clubs to ensure a smooth and natural transition into the Rotary club. As a result, half of the club members are former Rotaractors.

Then there are the so-called **Passport clubs**. Three years ago District 5180 in California began thinking about a club model that would be attractive to younger members who were not interested in attending weekly meetings or paying dues they could not afford.

The district chartered what they called a Passport club with 20 members in Sacramento, California. The club meets only six times a year with an optional social event in the month between meetings. In addition to attending the six required meetings, every year passport members must either contribute \$1,000 to the Rotary Foundation OR do at least 40 hours of community service with Rotary clubs or other non-profits in the district.

This club has more than tripled its membership in three years.

A long-term sustainable growth strategy just doesn't appear out of thin air. It requires a commitment to club innovation and flexibility; a commitment to best serving the specific needs of our communities as they evolve, and to incorporate Rotaractors into Rotary.

I challenge all of us to think out of the box, and to grow Rotary through new innovative club models and to try new approaches.

I'm confident that we will embrace the opportunities ahead of us through innovation, flexibility and thoughtful change.

INCREASE YOUR KNOWLEDGE, PLEASE READ CASE STUDY

Is this case study to be shared with the participants? I think it's quite good.

Note: This case study is not intended for use in the classroom, only to increase your knowledge to lead this class.

REAL CASE STUDY - HOW TO MAKE YOUR CLUB IRRESISTIBLE

(credit PDG Louisa Horne and Diana Schoberg)

1) Your club went from 22 to 60 members in three years. How did you do it?

It started with recognizing that we needed to ask some different questions. The question had always been, "How do we get more members?" So we'd have everybody invite somebody, or we'd host an event. But membership challenges are a symptom. We needed to look in the mirror to figure out how the club itself could be irresistible.

So we looked at every interaction a potential member had with us. We asked ourselves: If someone were coming to a meeting for the first time, what would they see? What does the room look like? Is it easy for them to find us? Does the seating arrangement work? What do we eat? Then we went on to the avenues of service. What are our projects? Are they "same old, same old"? Are they interesting for a range of people? We looked at fundraisers. How do we do them? Are we driving ourselves crazy pushing tickets at the same people

all the time? Does that draw people in? Finally, we asked: Is our club one that you would get up early on a Friday in winter for, because you don't want to miss it?

2) What were the specific steps you took?

We did some workshops within the club, and then we did in-depth interviews with everyone who had left in the past few years; who had come once and hadn't come back; or who we thought would join but didn't. Too often, we focus on the people who are there. But what we need to understand is what's going on with the people who don't choose to be there. We started with Rotary's Member Satisfaction Survey, modified some questions to be more specific to our own activities, and added questions about other things. From the interviews with people who had left, we heard about cost, club culture (too formal), food (not great), engagement in activities (not involved or not asked), and lack of inclusion, diversity, and respect for other cultures (saying Christian grace, not clearly welcoming LGBTQ people). We started by picking off the low-hanging fruit. Not everything is going to work, but when you try things and you start seeing different people showing up, that's golden. If you find yourself trying to talk somebody into coming, you're barking up the wrong tree.

3) Can you give more specifics?

We eliminated fines. Some people have to drop their kids off at day care, which means they were five minutes late to every meeting, and they were made fun of every time. It wears on you. Paying for meals was a big thing for some members who didn't want a big breakfast; they just wanted coffee. We worked with the venue on that. We got rid of a beloved fund-raiser that didn't make any money. We walked in the Pride parade. All of those were part of the transformation to becoming a vibrant, growing, diverse club.

Data were a big part of getting support for changes. For example, there was a data point that people didn't necessarily like all of the club rituals. In our case,

those included saying grace. It's easy to say that nobody minds that. But seven of the 10 people who left brought that up.

4) What things are you still working on?

We will always be working on inclusion — that is an ongoing focus — as well as being creative in the ways we engage people and ensure that we have the range of activities that will be irresistible to a range of passions. It is a moving target in terms of community needs and of the interests of people who are attracted to us, and it is our responsibility to meet those needs and enable people to live those passions.