

# No Success without Succession

Michael McQueen  
Founder, The Nexgen Group

Before we start this morning, could I just do a quick survey:

Who here will be at the 2010 international convention in Montréal in June?

Who is planning on being at the 2011 convention in New Orleans?

I wonder who will be at the convention in 2015?

What about 2025?

I wonder who will be at the 2035 international convention?

It is an interesting thought, isn't it? In the few minutes we have together, I want to give you a snapshot of the future of Rotary — not in terms of programs or policy, but in terms of *people*. Who will fill the ranks of Rotary around the globe in the coming years and decades? Furthermore, how can you as leaders help shape and create the Rotary of tomorrow?

My background professionally is in the study of demographic trends, youth culture, and generational transition. Over the past few years, much of my work has been with organizations around the world, helping them understand and engage with the next generation: a group called Generation Y.

I don't know how it is in your part of the world, but in Australia and certainly here in the United States, this generation receives a fair bit of criticism. The media are quick to tell us that the youth of our day are all self-absorbed, materialistic, impatient, and disrespectful.

My goal today, however, is to give you a slightly more balanced, realistic, and optimistic perspective on the next generation. Having spent three years working with and researching over 80,000 young people around the world and writing a book based on the findings, I would suggest that there is a *lot* to be excited about when we look at the leaders of tomorrow.

While it is true that some of the values, attitudes, and expectations of young people can sometimes seem naive, presumptuous, or even offensive to some, there is a generation coming through who are globally aware, ambitious, innovative, and tech savvy. In short, this is very exciting news for Rotary, but it poses a challenge and opportunity that is twofold. In the first instance, you face the task of attracting this group at a club level as new members. Many of them don't really know what Rotary is, why you exist, or what you have accomplished, so you will need to tell them. The second challenge and opportunity is to capitalize on the benefits this group has to offer by engaging them in leadership opportunities once they are members.

As leaders from around the globe, I ask you: What will the legacy of your time as a district governor be? At the end of your tenure, will your clubs be larger, younger, and even more productive than they were when you took the reins? How can you help lay a solid foundation that will carry Rotary into the years and decades ahead?

In our limited time together this morning, I want to give you three important keys to engaging younger generations, both as members and leaders.

**1. Foster intergenerational connections.** Our modern urban society has become very good at segregating generations so that we often end up only socializing with, competing against, and even worshipping alongside people our own age. The hidden danger in this is that it underestimates the critical importance of different generations learning from and being influenced by

each other. While it is true that young generations can be a wonderful source of energy, passion, and enthusiasm, it is equally true that young people are looking to their elders for advice, wisdom, and mentoring.

You will find that many new members and potential leaders will be attracted to Rotary because of the opportunity to connect with older generations. Your clubs are one of the surprisingly few places in many communities where young people can get the chance to interact with and be mentored by adults who they can genuinely trust, look up to, and respect.

**2. Give regular positive feedback.** Around the world, consistent research indicates that a defining characteristic of Generation Y is the value they place on external feedback and affirmation. While previous generations may prefer not to be singled out and recognized for personal contribution or achievement, you will find that positive affirmation is the single most powerful motivator for many young people.

When giving affirmation to Gen Y, I have found that there are two keys to making sure the feedback really hits the mark. First, affirm them in person. For a group who have been raised in an increasingly technology-driven world, the personal touch means more than it ever has before. A handwritten note, eye contact, or even a pat on the back can mean the world. Second, it is important that you affirm this group in public. Gen Y tend to be a highly competitive and ambitious generation who will work very hard to be recognized and congratulated in front of their peers.

**3. Focus on outcomes, not process.** Of the three keys to engaging Generation Y, this last one is probably the most challenging for many leaders, but it is also the most powerful. If we separate these two concepts out, outcomes are all about *why* we do what we do, while process is all about *what* we do and *how* we do it. Although outcomes and process may be two sides of the same equation, I have found that many organizations and businesses tend to focus almost exclusively on process. You look at most corporate induction booklets and training manuals and it is all about process — *we do this, and then this and then this and then this*. They benchmark it, do organizational flowcharts, and specify structures and lines of authority. Then, of course, young people come into the organization, and what is the first question they ask? **WHY.**

Typically, here are two very different expressions of the question of *why* from this young group: First, *Why do we do it that way?* and second, *Why do we do it at all?*

If we look at the first of these, smart organizations are beginning to realize that the question of *why do we do it that way* can actually be a fantastic source of innovation, rather than a challenge to authority. After all, young people have fresh eyes, new perspectives, and an innate understanding of technology and current needs.

The second expression of *why*, however, is equally powerful: *Why do we do it at all?* You will likely find that the most de-motivating thing you can do to young members and leaders is to make them feel like little more than another cog in the wheel. Be careful not to simply give them their spot on the “production line” and then tell them what to do without ever showing how their contribution connects with the overall purpose.

As leaders, can I urge you to take a step back and reflect on your own districts and even your organization as a whole? How much of what you do on a daily and weekly basis in your clubs is driven by outcomes, vision, and a sense of purpose? How much of what you do is connected to the reason you joined Rotary in the first place?

Conversely, how much of what you do is about preserving, protecting, and celebrating *what you do* and *how you do it*? It could be dress codes, meeting structures, or attendance requirements. It may have to do with the symbols of culture or a list of protocols and procedures that reflect what has worked in the past. Naturally, processes themselves are not the enemy. Rather, it is

when the process becomes disconnected from an outcome — when we forget *why* we do what we do.

Now let's be very honest: These are difficult questions to ask. The answers you find may require you to change and to adopt new ways of operating. It may mean that your meetings, your programs, and your members look and sound very different in the years to come. Understandably, all this talk of change and the future may seem daunting, uncomfortable, or even a little overwhelming. Indeed, leading your clubs and members into the future is not going to be easy. However, your relevance and very survival as an organization depends on it.

As we sit here in January 2010, I have to ask you, *What is the Rotary future that you envisage?* It may be wonderful to celebrate the successes of this organization and all that you have accomplished over the last century. However, as the saying goes, the true test of any leader's success is succession. Long-term success is not about what you have already done or what you will do, but it is seen in what you enable and equip the next generation to do. As district governors, each of you has an opportunity to lay the foundations for the *next* 100 years of Rotary.

I am here to assure you that there is an army of passionate, talented, and inspired young people who are ideally placed to join your ranks and continue the amazing work of Rotary in their communities as well as around the globe. However, it is up to you to make sure they have the invitation, opportunity, and permission to do so.

I wish you all the very best.