

Vocational Service in Practice

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As all of you know, the mission statement of Rotary International, revised by the RI Board of Directors in June 2007, states that the mission of Rotary International “is to provide service to others, to promote high ethical standards, and to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through its fellowship of business, professional, and community leaders.” And the Statement on Vocational Service states: “Vocational Service is the way Rotary fosters and supports the application of the ideal of service in the pursuit of all vocations.”

What is the purpose of human life? Simply put, I believe it is “to be useful to others and society.” The fact that we human beings are able to continue living in societies that developed over the centuries is because of the efforts of our ancestors, parents, families, communities, countries, and people around the world.

Then, it is our duty to recognize and appreciate the benefits that we have received from our forebears, to persist in practicing the spirit of the utmost sincerity, and to repay society wholeheartedly. Only with these attitudes can we build better societies for generations that will follow us.

Rotarians are fortunate. We are in the position to lead the way in practicing the idea of vocational service that is unique to Rotary. A club member I know once told me that he was able to understand the true meaning of vocation only after he joined Rotary. Prior to joining Rotary, he was focusing all activities on himself: how to improve himself, earn a living, and make money. However, it is different now. Serving society has become his purpose in life and vocation. He now finds joy in making others happy, earning trust through honest business dealings, and furthering efforts to be useful to others through his vocation.

We are charged with practicing the ideal of service, manifesting high vocational ethics, and abiding by societal codes in our own actions to promote being ethical to as many people as possible, on all occasions. The best way to be trusted as an individual and as a business is to be “true to our own words,” integrating conviction and action as one, in our personal life, as well as in business.

A Rotarian whom I respect greatly has come up with a motto that serves as a constant reminder that will deter him from inadvertently committing an oversight, although he is fully aware of right from wrong. His motto is “Never be negligent, even for a second. Always take the most righteous path.” No money can buy trust, but it can be earned through the actions one takes daily. Fully aware of right from wrong, he nevertheless has been constantly mindful to behave with self-discipline.

I would like to give you an example close to me. It was during the oil crisis in 1973. In the business environment where many businesses thought the crisis was a rare opportunity to make big profits, one company instructed its employees to be conscientious and keep profits as before. This policy resulted in the price of the company’s goods being lower than others and attracted hordes of customers. However, considering that the volume of goods is limited and that being fair is the most important value for the company, after gaining customers’ understanding, the company allocated goods to each customer according to their past business dealings. Several months later, the crisis subsided. The company’s emphasis on managing the business with trust rather than seeking short-term profits was greatly appreciated and valued by its customers.

Department stores in Tokyo have many clothing retailers as tenants who compete against one another on the same floor. However, one such store stands alone in its business philosophy. When the store does not carry what the customer desires, it empathizes with the customer, viewing the customer as more important than profit, and introduces the customer to a competitor. "Do unto others what you want others to do unto you" is the ideal that the store practices.

Since it takes time to earn trust, which may be lost in a flash, maintaining just judgment and actions is important. Mountain hikers see big rocks and avoid them, but may be severely injured by tripping on unnoticeable small stones or tree roots. Similarly, our imprudence in tiny mistakes or dishonesty, when repeated, can lead to big difficulties. We have to remind ourselves not to take small misgivings with ease.

It is important to be ethical in vocational service. At the same time, it is also important to help develop those who engage in vocations. One such example in Japan is the cooperation between Rotary and the chamber of commerce. In October 2004, a Rotarian who served as the chairman of a chamber of commerce initiated a career-support project to improve the employment environment and motivate young people to work and become contributing members in the community. This idea was taken up by the Japanese government, which established a committee to conceptualize and promote the Job Card program in 2007. Since its establishment, the number of participants receiving vocational skills training has increased rapidly; over 100,000 young people in the nation have obtained qualifications.

Other examples that all of you, as governors-elect, can recommend to clubs include:

- Three- to five-day shadowing programs for middle school and high school students at Rotary club members' businesses. This program can be effective in introducing the importance of work and teaching students to understand how a society is constructed through various occupations. It also provides opportunities for vocational counseling, discussions on employment possibilities, guidance on interviewing, and information gathering. These activities include inviting students to visit Rotarians' businesses or club meetings and conducting training sessions and roundtable discussions according to vocations.
- During club meetings, members can recite The Four-Way Test and the Declaration of Rotarians in Businesses and Professions and be encouraged to put these principles into practice. Members also can share their success stories as well as their less successful efforts.
- Members can provide their professional expertise and skills in club service projects. October is Vocational Service Month, an ideal time to start or plan meaningful vocational service projects.
- At our work places, we can identify and provide work opportunities for persons with disabilities, and we can also recognize outstanding employees.

To promote awareness of the importance of vocational service, many districts in Japan hold vocational service seminars that include presentations on vocational ethics and current affairs. They also hold vocational forums, publish speeches on vocational service, and propose specific club projects related to vocational service.

It was reported that during the Great Depression, companies operated by Rotarians who held vocational ethics high avoided bankruptcy or faced less severe damages in comparison to other companies. In today's economic difficulties, we, as Rotarians, have a timely opportunity to promote the idea of vocational service. Our law-abiding behavior and our actions to promote and practice high ethical standards in vocational service activities will lead to trusting relationships.

Such is the uniqueness of vocational service. Continuous emphasis by clubs and districts on the idea of vocational service that is unique to Rotary will allow Rotarians to proudly proclaim that vocational service is what makes Rotary attractive. Vocational service will be the force that leads Rotary into the future, as long as we keep on promoting, emphasizing, and practicing its unique features.