

# Vocational Service in Practice

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Help myself or help others? A question that is at the heart of defining vocational service and at the heart of our commitment to the ideals of Rotary.

Let me give you a real-life example. I am an attorney. Go ahead — you can cheer if you want. Primarily, my vocational skills are and have been as an advocate for my clients. Through communication, whether in writing or by spoken word, whether communicating with adversaries or with a judge, my job is to sell my client's position. Many of my clients over the years have been successful businesses. However, my favorite client has no ability to pay for my time.

My favorite client is the child most of us will never see. The child who lives thousands of miles away and lives in a world without safe water. The little girl who goes to a school that has no desks, no benches, no chalkboards. The child who has yet to be vaccinated against polio. At my best, I am the voice for that child. Without my voice on her behalf, that little girl may die of waterborne illnesses. Without my voice, she may never learn to read or may end up unable to walk on her own. The photo behind me was taken by Past [RI] Director Mike McCullough when Mike and I were on a volunteer trip to Haiti a few years ago. This young Haitian girl was desperately trying to scoop up broken eggs out of the dirt. The image of poverty forever burned onto my mind.

For much of my working life, on a regular basis, I have found myself choosing between spending time representing successful businesses or spending time being the voice for that little girl. Rotary is a philosophy of life that asks us to choose Service Above Self. It is not an easy choice, but once made you simply know it is the right choice. Vocational service can only be discussed within this context of our commitment to Service Above Self.

Keeping in mind this commitment, I submit to you that there are three primary ways in which we should engage in vocational service. First is to use our vocational skills to serve others in need. Second is to mentor future leaders within our vocation. And third is to promote and foster integrity both inside our vocation and beyond.

Let us start by considering the first aspect: using our professional skills to serve those in need. I want to tell you about one hero of mine, Past District Governor David Fihn from District 5580. Dave is a great example of the first aspect of vocational service — volunteering your professional skills for those in need.

Dave is a retired dentist from Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, USA. Prior to retirement, Dave and his wife, Shirley, traveled internationally 16 different times as Rotary Volunteers. On each of those trips, he has set up temporary dental clinics and provided free dental services for the poorest of the poor. These vocational volunteer trips have taken him to countries such as Honduras, Thailand, and Mexico. He has volunteered his skills at temporary dental clinics along the beaches of Jamaica and in refugee camps outside of Hong Kong.

I vividly remember November of 1995, when I first had the opportunity to meet Dave. Dave was the keynote speaker at a Rotary Foundation dinner, and he was telling us about his then-latest volunteer experience. He had just returned from a trip to the rain forests of Brazil. He spoke of the experience, of pulling teeth and providing dental services to people who had never before visited a dentist.

Almost every one of Dave's volunteer trips was four or more weeks in length. In fact, if you put together the length of each of those trips, Dave has spent more than 20 months of his professional dental career providing dental services for free in needy parts of the world. Now *that* is vocational service at its best! He remains an inspiration to me. May he serve as a reminder to each of us as to what is truly important in this organization and what Service Above Self is all about.

For me, the second part of vocational service is the duty to mentor within our own profession. It is vital that we counsel and help guide young professionals within our own vocations. These young professionals can and will be the future leaders in our communities and in our professions. We can provide insight gathered from years of experience within our vocation. Mentoring involves listening, being a friend and, when appropriate, gently guiding the young professional in the right direction.

I have been blessed in my career as an attorney and also as a Rotarian to have a number of more experienced attorneys who, as Rotarians, helped guide me along my path. The most valuable guidance I received over the years came from Ross Thorfinnson. Ross was not only my father; he was an attorney and a Rotarian. The Four-Way Test hung on the wall in his law office for his entire career, and it went home with him upon his retirement. When I asked for guidance, Dad often pointed to The Four-Way Test. Like each of us, Dad was far from perfect, but he always strove to do what was right and guided me in that same direction. Fortunately, he also guided me into Rotary.

Later in my life, I came across a Rotary senior leader, Past RI President Charles Keller. Chuck and I are years apart in age. Did you know that he attended his first Rotary convention in Chicago in 1955: 55 years ago! In fact, Chuck has been going to Rotary conventions longer than I have been alive.

Despite our differences in age, Chuck has become a great friend and mentor to me. He has counseled me and encouraged me. He remains a trusted voice and a source for me to go to when I have questions or concerns.

Like so many of you in this room today, I owe a great deal to Rotarians like my father and Chuck Keller. They have taken the time to make sure that I became a better person and a better leader. Thank you, Chuck!

The third aspect to vocational service is the most important: integrity. Integrity has been a core value of our organization for most of our 105 years, and vocational service has played a key role in keeping us focused on integrity.

For most of us, our first experience with integrity in the context of Rotary was hearing club members recite The Four-Way Test. Developed by Rotarian Herb Taylor for use in his business, The Four-Way Test has been a part of vocational service from almost the beginning.

The Four-Way Test was recited at the Hopkins, Minnesota, Rotary club 30 years ago, the day I joined Rotary. I didn't think much about it at the time. I was naive and thought it was a little ridiculous to recite the test every week, since the statements seemed so simple, so obvious. After 30 years in business, I have experienced the real world and now realize how important and rare integrity is. As reality has hit me, I have learned to truly value The Four-Way Test. We as Rotarians must promote integrity and strive toward its ideal.

Over the years, I have witnessed a few of my best clients crack under pressure and make very poor decisions on how to conduct themselves. One of my clients, when under stress, decided to misrepresent his company's financial assets to his lender. When the lender discovered the truth, the lender withdrew all financial support for the business and reported the misrepresentation to

the local authorities. My client lost his business and his reputation, and over 1,000 employees lost their jobs.

As an attorney, clients have often asked me whether they can “legally” take a certain approach to a situation. Simply engaging in conduct that meets some minimum legal requirement is not necessarily ethical. Just because conduct is legal does not make it acceptable. We must set a higher standard in our society and in the world of business, and we as Rotarians should lead the way in this regard.

It is time we start demanding more. With all that is wrong with this world, it is time for Rotarians to become the voice that demands integrity in this world. Consider the standard that is imposed on judges in many judicial systems around the world. In most developed countries, judges are required to conduct themselves in a manner that is above reproach. Judges must avoid even the appearance of impropriety. This would be a great standard for all leaders to strive toward.

As part of our vocational service commitment, it has never been more important to promote integrity. We cannot simply recite The Four-Way Test at club meetings. We must promote integrity throughout our organization, we must promote integrity within each of our own professions, we must promote integrity within our own community, and we must promote integrity throughout the world.

Five years ago, a friend from college, Ann, called me. I was thrilled to hear from her, and even more thrilled to hear she was president of a local Rotary club in my district. She asked me to come and speak to her club to encourage Foundation giving. It was great to see her again and renew our friendship.

However, a few months later, Ann again gave me a call. Her club’s contributions to The Rotary Foundation had not been received by the Foundation. After some investigation, it was discovered that the club treasurer had never sent the money to the Foundation and that funds were missing from the club account. Ann called the club treasurer and asked him to join her for breakfast the next morning. The time for the breakfast meeting came and went, and the treasurer never showed. Later that day, Ann received a call from another member of her club, who was the chief of police in her community. He was calling Ann to let her know that the club treasurer had developed a gambling habit and that his financial mismanagement led to a personal tragedy: He had committed suicide.

It is not enough to simply promote integrity. At the club level, Rotarians must insist on transparency and integrity from their club leaders. At the district level, club leaders must insist on transparency and integrity from their district leaders. At the zone level and beyond, you as district leaders must insist on transparency and integrity from the Rotary International Board of Directors. And we, as members of the Board, must be watchdogs, insisting on transparency and integrity from the Trustees of The Rotary Foundation, from our president, and from all other Rotary senior leaders.

Vocational service is vital to Rotary. It is a unique feature that sets Rotary apart from other service and humanitarian organizations. But to achieve the greatest possible impact, we must all contribute by volunteering our professional skills, mentoring future leaders and, above all, consistently insisting on and demonstrating integrity in our professional, personal, and Rotary lives.