

RI succeeding in getting more women leaders:Holger Knaack

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His first priority during his year as **RI** President will be “to grow Rotary at all levels. Membership is our first internal priority, while polio is our external priority.” RI President Holger Knaack said, addressing a virtual meet of PETS. RI District 3201. His other top priorities would be getting more young professionals and women who occupy leadership positions into Rotary.

In a conversation with PDG Sunil Zachariah, and answering a question on what Rotary was doing to promote more women in leadership positions, he said: “We are doing what we can do, that means we can promote them, inspire them and ask clubs and districts to look for women in more leadership positions. But we can’t control that. What we can control are our regional leaders, coordinators, and training leaders. So whatever RI can do, we are doing.”

And there was evidence that sometimes it worked. “A few years ago there were no women members on the RI Board. But on my board, next year, there will be six women and on Shekhar Mehta’s board, there will be eight women. So we are making progress.”

When asked to clarify the new Rotary mantra that there is “no wrong age to join Rotary”, and its contradiction with the search for younger members, Knaack said, “Yes, we are looking for young professionals, specially in areas like Europe, where the average age of Rotarians is increasing year by year, as also in the US and South America. This is necessary to ensure that Rotary remains relevant. But that doesn’t mean we are not looking for other members.”

Elaborating, he said that in the US and “my own country, there are so many early retirees; people who are looking for an opportunity for service, for networking and they have the time and the passion...so we are looking for those people too. Because they can contribute so much to our organization.”

As a strong votary of Rotaractors, what would he recommend Rotary clubs do to make Rotaractors feel at home and comfortable, as from July 1, Rotaractors will be equal members of Rotary?

Knaack responded: “First of all, it is all about mutual respect between Rotarians and Rotaractors, if we really want to work successfully together. Because those young professionals are so much like us: they are as successful in their clubs as we are in our Rotary clubs. They may be younger than us but they are as effective as we are. So we have to extend a strong co-operation to them.”

To attract young professionals into Rotary clubs Rotarians should first of all have a “strategic meeting of the club and look at what value you have to offer to young professionals. The next question is, do we, in our club, meet the needs of young professionals? If you think about our costs, our meeting time and location of those meetings, are these locations where young people would love to go? We really have to look at the needs of young professionals,” he added.

Asked if environmental concerns will become the seventh area of focus in Rotary, Knaack said: “We are all excited about the next Board of Trustees meet. I don’t want to put pressure on them but all of us can be excited about what we are going to hear from our Trustees,” he smiled.

Next Zachariah asked him as the first international president to take office virtually, what was his learning from this pandemic, as well as challenges and opportunities for the future.

Knaack said the corona pandemic had offered so many “learning opportunities. I am the first president in direct contact with so many Rotarians across the world through virtual meets. I am hopeful that before the end of my year, I will be able to travel and meet Rotarians personally. But with daily Zoom meetings with Rotarians across the world I feel very close to them, and it’s a really good connect.”

This pandemic had taught all senior leaders “a new way to connect and definitely in the future there will be more board meetings virtually. We are flexible and of course saving costs because everybody can do this from their own homes. We will take this learning into the future.”

So will the Taipei convention be held virtually too? “Well, as I said all of us are learning from this experience, and I do hope that the convention will be in person. But I can tell you that several parts of it will be digital. So we’ve already decided at the RI leadership level that we will stream online several plenary as well as breakout sessions. But we will learn more about the online experience in a couple of weeks when we have our first virtual convention in June and we will see many more virtual part of the convention in 2021,” he added.

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