

## Engagement and Retention - John Hewko, RI General Secretary and CEO Addressed the Virtual International Assembly on 3 February 2021. (Text)

Video: [https://cdn2.webdamdb.com/md\\_2vRnqfgIaJD4.mp4](https://cdn2.webdamdb.com/md_2vRnqfgIaJD4.mp4)



Hello, everyone.

In a normal year, I would address you in person, or at least from our headquarters in Evanston. Unfortunately, the coronavirus has made that impossible. So I'm speaking to you from my home, but you can see behind me our new visitor center, and I look forward to welcoming you here when we can all gather again. But until that day, as we all know, the coronavirus has changed life for all of us. It has claimed lives and destroyed livelihoods.

I'm sure that for many of you, our new world of lockdowns and social isolation has been hard, has been difficult. But it has forced us to reflect not only on personal priorities, but also on Rotary's mandate over time.

Now, personally, I have found consolation in seeing the world through the eyes of my father, Lu, who was a dedicated member of the Rotary Club of Clarkston, Michigan, USA, for over three decades. You see, my father kept almost all of his Rotary papers and magazines, and during the extra hours I've spent at home, I've been sorting through a lot of them.

And as I went through these documents, two major turning points in Rotary's history clearly stand out. First, the creation of our 3-H Grants program, designed to carry out large-scale service projects in the area of health, hunger, and humanity. And the second, the creation of PolioPlus.

Now, in the world of COVID-19, I'd be very surprised to find a Rotary member who questions the value of our polio initiative, or doubts the worth of large-scale, more sustainable projects and grants. In fact, the concept of transforming the health and well-being of others on a huge scale is now part of Rotary's DNA. Yet at the time these ideas were conceived, they were considered almost revolutionary and were the subject of intense, intense debate.

Past RI President Jim Bomar spoke about this debate at the 1979 International Assembly. Bomar had received a letter from a Rotary member who said, "You know, we don't need any changes. Everything is just all right. Let it remain as it now is." And in response, Bomar asked whether keeping things as they were "will meet the tests and demands of the 21st century."

Well, ultimately, we know the answer to Bomar's question. There is a clear need to adapt our policies and outlook to the changing world we live in. And, thanks to the decisions of the RI Board, the Foundation Trustees, and the Council on Legislation, the 3-H program was launched and a 55-year prohibition against corporate programs in Rotary was overcome.

The foresight of that decision — despite strong, strong opposition — is hugely significant as we think about Rotary's future today. Without 3-H, there would be no PolioPlus. In fact, our history would have been very, very different.

Thanks to PolioPlus, 19 million people who would otherwise have been paralyzed are walking today. And thanks to PolioPlus, Rotary's stature on the global stage has been elevated to a level we could never have dreamed of without it.

If the 3-H and PolioPlus programs were clear turning points in Rotary's 20th century history, the year of the coronavirus is a test of Rotary's ability to adapt in the 21st. So as you take up the challenge of being district governors, remember that although new and bold ideas might face resistance, if they are responsive to the need for Rotary to continually grow and prosper, they will prevail.

And the reality is that many Rotarians feel that Rotary should be more responsive to new ideas and change. Furthermore, 60% of respondents in our strategic surveys thought that enhancing participant engagement was one of the most important priorities. Given the pandemic and the threat it presents to community cohesion and all membership organizations, this priority is even more pressing.

For example, we know that it is the newest members who are most prone to leave Rotary. And why do they leave? Well, our data shows a number of reasons: the club environment and culture, the cost or time commitment, and unmet expectations.

So, to address this, I'd like to focus on potential engagement strategies. If we think about 3-H and PolioPlus, they were ultimately supported by the vast majority of Rotary members for one reason: They provided opportunities to make an impact through service projects.

Time and time again, when reading my father's papers, I was inspired by his ability to channel his passion into Rotary. He worked with five other clubs to establish the first Rotary club in Ukraine — the country of his birth — after the fall of the Soviet Union. He then led two multidistrict projects there to supply medical equipment and services, and one to help the victims of the Chernobyl tragedy. He was a part of numerous local projects in Michigan. In fact, I even found copies of the articles he wrote for media outlets to publicize the work of his club, and speeches he gave to his district.

It was very clear to me that my father stayed in Rotary because of the opportunity to get involved in significant projects. In Rotary he found a network that empowered him to make a difference in the country where he was born, and to give back to the country that welcomed him at the end of World War II.

This is the key point I want you to remember from this session: Engaged members stay with Rotary, and through Rotary they can accomplish great things. And the variety of service opportunities to engage members today is even greater than it was for my dad. Whether you wish to mentor local high school students or participate in our newest cause, the environment, or our newest grant type, Programs of Scale, there really is something for everyone at Rotary.

Now, it's also vital to help plan the experience of new members from the moment they express an

interest in joining a Rotary or Rotaract club. In this regard, we must give new members clear roles from the beginning.

The Rotary Club of Central Ocean in New Jersey, USA, implemented a “Bring Your Own Project” approach to give new members immediate ownership of something important to them. The club was able to complete nine — nine! — service projects in the first half of one Rotary year and thereby engage and retain its newest members.

Now, in addition to engagement at the club level, don’t forget the fellowships and Rotary Action Groups, which connect members across the world who share a passion. And to keep members engaged, we must also encourage them to make full use of the more than 600 courses in over a dozen languages available on the Rotary Learning Center. And they can also take communication and leadership development courses, thanks to Rotary’s alliance with Toastmasters.

So, to recap:

- First — to retain and engage our membership, we must understand why they joined our organization, and then fulfill their expectations.
- Second — think about how new members can make an immediate impact by giving them ownership of projects that are of interest to them.
- And third — promote the personal and professional growth opportunities available through our Learning Center and our partnership with Toastmasters.

In what has been a difficult year, we should all be inspired by the innovative spirit of Rotary’s founder, Paul Harris, who said back in 1935, “This is a changing world; we must be prepared to change with it.” For most companies, COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies by several years, and some things will need to change permanently as we move forward. And I know that many clubs have found creative new ways to connect and serve, which we should look to maintain in the post-COVID era.

Because this is our opportunity to learn from our members and adapt, and change. And your role as district governor is critical. Because now is your time to lead, to shape a better world as we emerge from this crisis. And if you can engage and retain our greatest asset — that is, our members, especially those members who are newest to Rotary — we can seize the moment and prepare for a better future.

Because you are far more than administrators. You are the agents of change and innovation. In the words of one of Rotary’s greatest innovators, the late Past President Luis Vicente Giay, you are “the architects of the future.”

So, thank you, and enjoy the rest of the International Assembly.