

September, 2010

Thank you for inviting me to share some ideas with you at your joint Mid America / Mid East Region convention.

I know I am preaching to the choir today. You are the choir. You make good music and you get things done. That's why you are here. You are the backbone on your Y Service Clubs.

We live in a changing world. For example, Y's Men as a name worked just fine when our movement began in 1922. Today, in the English speaking countries of Australia, Canada, and the US, it sounds sexist because we have women members. So we now in the US call ourselves Y Service Clubs, International, even though on the world stage, we are still Y's Men International. The Y's Men International name doesn't seem sexist in the other languages because they don't translate the word Y's Men.

The US Area is in the process of changing our official name on our corporate and tax documentation. This naming of our movement is still a work in progress among our US clubs. We haven't all agreed on a perfect solution.

Besides the name change in the US Area, we see constant changes in economics, technology, culture, jobs, immigration -- all sorts of upheaval -- change is everywhere and it seems to be increasing. Think of all the changes you have seen in the last 20 years, 1990 to 2010.

Some may see all this change as threatening, but for us Y Service Club members, change is an opportunity. Because of change, people always need help. WE HELP. That's our mission...helping people through the YMCA and through community service projects. As the old adage says, "Maybe the happiest people don't necessarily have the best of everything - they just make the most of everything that comes their way." There is opportunity for service all around us. We just have to see it.

What is an opportunity? It is an opening in a favorable direction. My central theme for you today is that we should be getting our clubs to continually look for opportunities because opportunity stirs up enthusiasm. And enthusiasm is what keeps the engine of life and the engine of our clubs going.

Let's apply these two words by looking at the unofficial stages of club life.

Stage One is the beginning. The club gets a project that new members find intriguing and rewarding. There is eager participation. Projects are mostly successful. The new members hold interesting meetings and make new friends.

Pete and I visited a new club in Okinawa in August. They call themselves a baby club. They were chartered in November, 2009, with 100 members. They are very enthusiastic about their projects and are trying to learn all they can about Y'sdom.

Stage Two. The well established club continues and enlarges their collection of service projects. They establish meeting rituals, contribute to international funds, have Brother clubs, Brotherhood visitors, participate in all the activities of their Region, area, and International. Members are satisfied. At this time, the successful club should begin to examine all their activities from every angle to meet the needs of their rapidly changing community. The club that does this will renew its membership and stay at this stage for many, many years. They try not to fall into the comfortable trap of business as usual. They don't just think about today; they try to look ahead asking questions like, "Where is our club going? How can we change for the better? Are we getting a new diverse membership that reflects our community? How do our meetings look to visitors?" This is important because the time to renew a club is when things are going well. This is comparable to a healthy person exercising.

Stage Three. The club becomes very comfortable. This comfortable club phase may last for years. They don't care about changing anything about the way they meet. They look inward. The same people run projects because they always do a good job. The club looks inward..."our projects, our YMCA, keep our money local...let's not worry about International...let's just concentrate on our backyard...we don't want women (men). We have our sacred cows. We won't discuss and we won't compromise." And the members are growing older.

In this kind of club, some members only show up to work on projects. The same people continue in office because no one else will step up. When asked to take office, they say they don't feel adequate to the job or they are too busy. Busy. Everyone is well intentioned. The club is in danger and they don't know it or won't acknowledge it. The club may continue in this mode for a long, long time.

Stage Four. The very comfortable club progresses to something I call "The Shell." The club pays dues. It seldom meets. Sometimes the dues are paid out of the treasury. The members are getting older. This false sense of security stage may last for several years. One day the Regional director gets a phone call, if he/she is lucky, from the club president who reports that the other member has just passed away and the funds have been donated to the YMCA. They have made their last contribution. (I wish it had been to our International funds.) And the person says, "By the way, would you like our flag set, our bell, our extra jackets?" R.I.P.

Now I don't like negativity in my speeches, so let's back up.

It is possible for a club to back up a stage. How?

Make Extension (the getting of new, diverse members) a club priority early on...back in the well-established and comfortable routine stages. This should be as important as fund-raising or a work project at the Y. It is a strategic, looking forward exercise. It's maintenance for club health - like regular medical or dental checkups for the human body.

Look at every aspect of club life. Look at your meetings, projects, and membership as a prospective member might. Are you repeating certain rituals just because you have always done them? Is having a Y's Guy passé? It was in my club and we eliminated that ritual. Turns out nobody much liked the Y's Guy routine, but they do like the jokes we substituted instead.

Where do you meet? In a drab room at the Y? Can you paint it? At a restaurant? Do you serve good food? Do you have interesting outside speakers? Do you have contentious business meetings to which you have inadvertently invited outside guests? Those guests tend to never return.

Do you take care of your members? Keep them informed about Region/Area/International information and activities? Do you telephone them to see how they are if they haven't been around? Send them greeting cards? Visit other clubs?

Do your members always sit together at the same places? Remember the "We like it just as it is."

OK. It is perfectly OK to keep the club just as it is. You really don't have to change. But give permission to start a second club. A parallel club that doesn't report to you. A younger, more diverse club. The idea is to keep generating life - enthusiasm - in response to the change that goes on around us. The opportunities are endless.

I can understand grandchildren not wanting to share a club with their grandparents. The jokes told in the older members' clubs are always about old people. Then start a youth club for the younger generation. They can tell their own jokes which we might not understand. It is their interests, their energy, their enthusiasm, their project. They already like the Y and community service. They grew up watching you and me and maybe they helped us with projects. They need a push and some help. The starting of Youth Clubs is a priority from International set during the last International Council Meeting and the Yokohama convention.

In review, people join our clubs, first of all, to participate in community service. This leads to the formation of friendships. Personal development happens along the way. We don't always realize it is happening, but it is. Use this personal development to improve the functioning of our clubs. A few people shouldn't do everything.

Don't let your club get into a rut. Look for ways to be more effective so we can respond to the opportunities which change gives us. This leads to enthusiasm which is an attractive energy that keeps our clubs growing and thriving.

As Hebrews 12:12 in the Living Bible translations says, "Take a new grip with your tired hands, stand firm on your shaky legs, and mark out a straight smooth path for your feet so that those who follow you, though weak and lame, will not fall or hurt themselves, but become strong." With opportunities and enthusiasm, we can do it.