



GENERAL SECRETARY AND CEO'S REMARKS

John Hewko

Rotary International General Secretary and Chief Executive Officer

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Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Orlando, and to the 2026 International Assembly.

Now, you're going to hear a lot this week about leadership and innovation. One of the greatest challenges of leadership is learning how to reach people. And that's not always easy in an organization such as ours, with nine official languages and numerous programs that span cultures, geography, and generations.

Last year, I did a social media video that tried to communicate across that generational divide in a Gen Z language called *brain rot*, with slang phrases popular at the time among young people in the United States.

Now, if you don't understand some of the things I'm saying in this video, that's OK, because I don't understand it either. So, let's take a look: [*Video plays.*]

What did you think of that ... 6-7?

OK, OK, I know that was cringe, and probably not something you'd expect a CEO to say. But we need to meet people where they are — especially the younger generation.

In fact, a longer, somewhat different version was one of the most popular videos that I posted on my social last year. And you'll notice that we didn't even try to translate this video into other languages, because it can't even be translated into standard English.

But that feeling of *not* understanding is important. Young people across continents are now creating and sharing words, humor, and urgency — all in real time — using language, expression, and concepts that are totally foreign to our generation.

And this matters.

Just last year, youth-led movements shook Indonesia, Nepal, Kenya, Madagascar, Peru, Morocco, and Mexico, all of them nourishing one another.

A slogan or image shared in one country appeared in another by morning. Memes became manifestos. Outrage traveled before anyone was sure of the specific source of conflict. This is the new global grassroots. It's fast, borderless, and unplanned.

And this is only one type of rapid change underway in the world.

We're also seeing a retreat from global problems and solutions by nations and institutions. The old global order is fracturing, even as technology continues to shrink the world.

That order was called *multilateralism*. It consisted of country-to-country interactions, treaties, and global institutions.

The New Multilateralism is people-to-people.

Connections and agreements among people are becoming more important than big global conferences. Now, one-to-one connections — that sounds a lot like what Rotary does. And there is a huge opportunity for us in this New Multilateralism.

This is our strength. We know how good we are at connecting: bringing people together at large global events, building relationships, engaging in service projects, promoting incredible programs like Youth Exchange, supporting generations of peace fellows, fostering future leaders through Interact and Rotaract. This is the real power of Rotary, which makes us very relevant in this new world.

Let's go back to those strange words and memes. It's true that Rotary is grassroots. We are local everywhere. But even the meaning of *grassroots* is rapidly changing. In many countries in Africa, most of the population is now under the age of 21.

So, who is closest to that generation — the local Rotary club or the TikTok influencer who could be anywhere?

You know, it's also true that we often have very little understanding of how people outside of our familiar circles connect and share ideas. So, Rotary's future mission is clear: We need to focus on connecting and reaching people, growing Rotary, making our clubs more relevant, and reaching out to the people we serve. And we can do this, and improve the impact of our projects, by focusing on innovation.

Now, in Rotary, innovation is the courage to listen. The humility to adapt. The willingness to let change rise from the edges, from the grassroots, rather than from the top down. It doesn't mean trying to keep up with every social trend or immediately adopting the latest technology.

Rather, it's about proving that a 120-year-old organization still has some revolutionary qualities. Because throughout our history, Rotary has consistently dared to be different. And today, we're on the brink of eradicating polio because Rotary was relentless, innovative, and yes, revolutionary.

So, let's dive into ways to make Rotary more innovative, using people-to-people multilateralism to achieve our greatest impact.

A great example of our potential can be seen in the environment. Rotary committed to the environment when we made it our newest area of focus five years ago. In fact, Bill Gates recently said that it might be beneficial to place less attention on meeting emissions goals and instead focus on the impacts of environmental change in communities most affected.

Now, that is something Rotary does well. For example, our program of scale in India sets a new standard. It's focused on helping farmers adopt sustainable irrigation, build check dams and ponds, diversify crops, and strengthen food systems across four states, impacting thousands of farmers.

This transformative work is led by local Rotarians who understand their land. And it's proof that innovation arises not from technology alone, but from Rotary's ability to connect expertise to need. Rotary can take on larger environmental projects in the years ahead and perhaps join with partners who can help us scale our efforts.

Education is another area of critical need around the world. UNICEF recently warned that global cuts to education could leave 6 million more children out of school by the end of this year. This is a crisis that demands new thinking.

Over the years, Rotary has proven that we can make a huge impact on education. And the gold standard of our work is the Guatemala Literacy Project. Since 1998, more than 400 Rotary clubs in Guatemala and North America have partnered with a nonprofit organization, the Cooperative for Education, to provide textbooks for children and so much more.

What makes this project so powerful is that it has continuously adjusted to school needs. It has scaled up by providing textbooks, training for teachers, computer labs, and new literacy teaching methods for primary and middle schools.

The impact is astounding. More than 277,000 students have benefited through the years. And together, we've helped the country double — *double* — its literacy rate, from 1 in 3 people who are literate to 2 in 3.

Now, projects like these are important and often take many years to reach fruition. But it's important to make long-term commitments — commitments that continue beyond your term in office.

Lasting change takes time, but there are many things that you can do right away as district governor that can help foster innovation and build our grassroots strengths. One way you can do this is by empowering your assistant governors. Your AGs can be an enormous help, becoming your eyes and ears across the district. You simply won't have time to keep up with everything happening in every club in your district, but a strong team of assistant governors can make that happen and can help spread innovation across your district.

A second way you can act, right now, is by chartering new clubs. It is one of *your* most important duties as district governors. New clubs are vital to Rotary's future. But it's just as important that the new clubs respond to what people in the community are actually looking for.

Now, club model innovations are underway around the world. Some clubs are experimenting with service-only meetings, others are focused on networking, and others rotate locations. Some clubs liked the experience of online meetings during the pandemic and became hybrid, creating a mix of in-person and virtual meetings.

And, if clubs need more ideas about how to innovate, the Rotary Action Plan is an incredible resource to help them reimagine the experiences they are providing.

Now, as a district governor, it is your responsibility to take a hard look at your clubs. If traditional clubs are doing well, great. But for those that are struggling, it's time to change. We cannot keep investing in failed club formats and models. And so, it's up to you to let clubs understand that Rotary is much more than a celebration of our traditions.

Encourage clubs not to get stuck in how they operate today. Think differently and create attractive club experiences for current and future members. Change times, locations, the length and formats of meetings — whatever suits your members.

Remember, every Rotary club is for the benefit of its members, not to serve as a museum of civic virtue. Corporate clubs, cause-based clubs, flexible clubs, hybrid clubs, additional meeting times — these are not exceptions. They are a key to Rotary's future.

And so, as we look to make Rotary a true grassroots organization, ready and eager to lead in a rapidly changing world, I want to leave you with three clear calls to action — things you can focus on to help Rotary make the most of this moment.

First, as I just discussed, charter new clubs, especially new innovative club models that will be attractive to younger generations. Every new club brings at least 15 new members into Rotary. If every district started five new Rotary clubs, that's at least 75 new Rotary members in every district. That's at least 39,000 new Rotary members every year. This is the simplest, most scalable path to growth, and it is entirely in your hands.

Second, focus on the club experience. It is not enough to bring in new members. We need to keep the members we have. And our research shows if we can keep a member for three years, there is a high probability they will stay a member for a long time. We need to ensure that new members have the club experience that makes them become Rotary members for life.

And finally, when it comes to service, focus on impact, commit to greater scalability, partnership, sustainability. Be aware of how the world is changing, and promote projects big and small that demonstrate how Rotary can connect a divided world.

You are an important part of that mission.

Don't wait for the world to slow down before you lead. Don't hold back your ideas because the moment feels uncertain. Don't cling to the way things have always been done because it's familiar.

Do create the space where new voices can reshape what Rotary becomes.

Do charter clubs boldly, experiment freely, and protect the clubs that dare to be different.

Do build projects that meet this moment, rooted in impact, grounded in need, carried out with dignity.

Do lead with the full force of Rotary's global perspective — steady, compassionate, unafraid.

And do step forward, together, to unite for good and create lasting impact.

Thank you, and have a great assembly.