



Structure makes a difference, so let's get any change right

Consultation is key when it comes to large organisational change, and Rotary should be no exception.

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How a large organisation is structured makes a difference to its performance. Arguably, it is not necessarily the biggest factor; its goals, its strategy, the number of supporters it has, and their level of enthusiasm are all pretty important, too. But structure does make a difference and, particularly if it is a bad structure, it will impede rather than enable the organisation to achieve its mission.

So how does Rotary in Australia, New Zealand and the South West Pacific measure up? The first thing to say is that anyone setting out to create a structure that will help members achieve goals probably wouldn't come up with the structure we've got.

Clubs are the cornerstones and the building blocks of the Rotary movement everywhere in the world. Good clubs with active members and programs that engage members and the community, undertaking activities that satisfy members and serve the community, country and the world, are clearly important.

Some of those activities are conducted solely at club level. Rotary trusts each club to know its community's needs best. Other programs are conducted across clubs at a district or national level; others again at an international level. Individual members can choose where to focus their attention.

In New Zealand, districts get in the road because the country is small enough that clubs could have a direct relationship with a national office – if there was one.

New Zealand's retired Governor-General – and prominent Rotarian – Sir Anand Satyanand has called for the country to be one district (as is the case in Ireland). I'd argue that this would work well in New Zealand, but probably not in Australia.

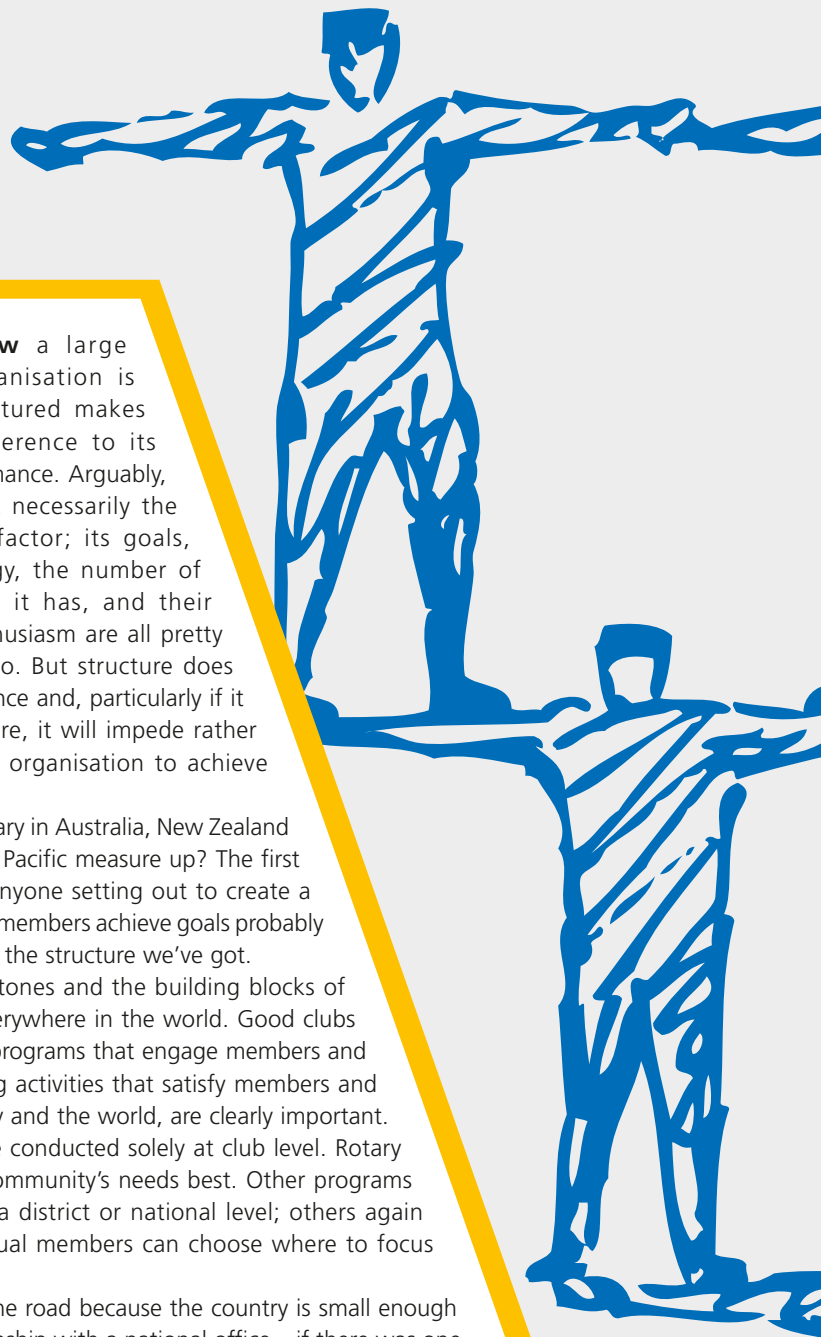
The six current districts are also too large and geographically incoherent to be sensible groupings of clubs with like-minded endeavours. So, what if anything should exist between a club and the putative national office?

Rather than six districts, I'd argue for about 11 "areas" in the South Island and about 22 in the North Island, each with a coordinator and a small elected team to get clubs working together on projects they all want to do. These might be in the local community or internationally.

I use the term "area", because "cluster" already has currency, and new language is usually part of a new approach.

Australia is different. The geographical distances are greater, the concentrations of population are different, and states are often the focus and locus of people's attention and loyalty in ways that simply don't apply in New Zealand.

New Zealand abolished its system of provincial government in 1870, which means provincial boundaries are matters of geographical convenience and sometimes of parochial loyalty in sporting contests, but never to the degree found in Australia.





So, what to do in Australia? The first thing to say is that the structures in the two countries need not be the same, and arguably probably should not be so.

However, the pilot regional structure recently approved by the Rotary International Board doesn't really cut it either – in my view.

The article in *Rotary Down Under* (May 2019, pp 48-49) said a petition seeking change had been submitted to the RI Board after gaining approval at the Hobart Conference and had the support of district governors elect and district governors nominee who were also present. So, it went ahead without any real involvement or input from ordinary members.

Tellingly, the article then said a planning group had been set up so “all Rotarians in the region have an opportunity to be engaged in the vision and plan as it is developed”.

So, already, it is a plan to which members will react; not a plan that members develop themselves reflecting their own needs and experiences. Top down planning and consultation on just one live proposal rather than a series of options is usually a mistake. It certainly risks alienating members who may well feel that engagement is not worthwhile if there is perception that this is already a done deal.

This sort of approach is frequently practised in large commercial organisations and in local government across both countries. It risks damaging the credibility of an organisation, breeds suspicion and mistrust, and is simply unhelpful.

To be effective, consultation needs to be open to the possibility that options will be rejected or at least significantly modified. That doesn't look like it is the case here.

Further on, members are invited to volunteer to be involved in a specialist team or in participating in an online reference group.

Where is the plan by the planning group to take their plan, its rationale, its description of what problem it is seeking to solve? Where is the evidence that the solution will solve the problem and a program of how the group intends to listen to members at club level? It's not there. And it should be.

Top down consultation of this sort increases the likelihood that the plan will fail to gain support and will therefore ultimately fail. Which is not to say that the plan in some form won't be approved. It probably will, but it will get through because too many members have disengaged and simply allowed it to go through.

And that is a problem in Rotary. Too often plans developed at the top of the hierarchy struggle for acceptance because they haven't got the support of the ordinary member, and meet the needs of ordinary members, and don't respond to the challenges ordinary members face daily in their clubs.

John Bishop has many years of professional experience in organisational design and structure, and practical experience in change management and restructuring. •

Update...

An update on the Zone 8 regionalisation structure was presented by joint chairs PDG Ingrid Waugh and PDG Peter Freuh at the Zone Regeneration Conference in Christchurch, NZ, at the end of last month. The structure provides for extensive consultation in the next stage through working and reference groups. These are expected to be both culturally and geographically relevant, involving Rotarians at all levels. A full report is scheduled for publication in November.