

Interamerican District Meeting
June 7, 2009
Cleveland

I am flattered to be invited to speak to you all at this meeting. My very dear friend Rickie Ricciardelli, who was incoming president of my club when I joined and later became a member of the Zonta International Foundation board, and who persuaded me to get active in the club, once said (actually, not once, but more times than I can count), “There is nothing else as past as a past Zonta president!” I have tried to keep that comment in mind for the past three years. So, to be asked to speak as a past president of this organization of my experiences in that job is very great honor, and I thank you for asking me.

My topic is “Leadership secrets and the importance of consensus building.” As far as I’m concerned, in an organization like ours, the second phrase answers the implied question of the first: what the secrets of becoming a leader are. And, much more importantly, I’m afraid that our failure to build consensus will make the secrets of becoming a Zonta leader irrelevant – because we won’t have an organization to lead.

I realize that this is a harsh assessment – especially coming from someone like me, who is generally very upbeat about Zonta, its mission, and its potential to improve the status of women in our local communities and around the world. I am still enthusiastic about our organization, its mission, and its potential, but I am increasingly concerned that the Zonta that celebrates its one hundredth birthday in 2019 will be a very frail, perhaps even pathetic, old girl indeed, if she even makes it that far. Here is why I’m so worried.

Zonta is a membership organization. By that, I mean that the membership votes on what the organization will do and who its leaders will be. We are rightly proud that every member has a vote at the club level and that every club has a vote at the district and International levels. But how much do we know about what we’re voting on? The bylaws amendments are frequently presented with very limited rationales and we do not usually have enough information to figure out what the longer-term consequences of adopting a proposal would be. Similarly, we are not offered a choice among various international service projects and programs, but basically asked for an up-or-down vote on the projects that the president-elect and the international board have decided to put before us. And if we do not know candidates personally, our information about them is limited to what they put in their biographies, what other Zontians who know them have told us, and their three-minute speeches at the convention.

There are good reasons for some of these constraints: a lot of work goes into vetting potential service projects and in preparing memoranda of understanding to implement them. The organizations we fund need to be pretty confident, before our convention, that we will indeed fund them in order for the process to be at all efficient. Similarly, it sounds like a great idea for members to propose projects that they think would be worthwhile. But if we opened up the process to that extent, the president-elect would find herself doing nothing except reviewing those proposals. I think we do come

up with many excellent projects. But we are kidding ourselves when we say that the convention body chose them, and we are being disingenuous when we tell our members that they have an obligation to support the international projects and programs because the convention voted for them.

I do not know what the total membership in Zonta is or where the membership growth, if any, has occurred, but I do know that the membership of my own club and my own district, District 3, are way down. And from what I hear from other Zontians, other districts are in a similar situation. A smaller Zonta does not necessarily equate with a less effective Zonta, but it does mean less dues revenue, perhaps even in spite of the large dues increase that went into effect this month.

All this leads me to the issue of building consensus. I have long felt that a major reason we have such battles over bylaws amendments at the convention is that there are very few mechanisms for members to share their concerns with other members, or raise them to the international leadership: they can ask their governors to raise an issue in their reports to the board; they can talk to a board member if they happen to be at an event a board member attends; they can propose resolutions to go to the international bylaws and resolutions committee; and they can propose bylaws amendments which, if recommended by a district conference, must be considered at the convention. None of these mechanisms involves much give-and-take discussion and, because as members we don't know what we don't know, there are a lot of suggestions and proposals that are unfeasible, inappropriate, or both.

This is where consensus comes in. I would argue that right now we don't have a consensus as to who we are, what we want to be, and/or what we want to do. We do not have a focus, and in consequence members frequently run for election to leadership positions because they want to take the organization in a direction of their choice, not because they want to further the organization along the path it has chosen.

I'd like to make it clear: when I say "focus" I do *not* mean something like, "Our focus is on domestic violence," or "We focus on women's access to higher education." No, I mean something quite different – a convergence of all the different concepts of who we are and what we do, resulting in an expression of our mission in concrete terms and a straightforward explanation of how we will achieve it.

Some of you may remember that there was a long-range planning process in the 2004-2006 biennium. A task force of Zonta International and Zonta International Foundation board members and senior staff came up with a comprehensive plan that included goals, objectives, activities, outcome measurements, etc. But in the end, we failed. The international board did not like the plan and, in consequence, it was never presented to the membership. I consider the demise of that plan to be my biggest failure as International president.

And I think I know why the effort failed and I am still kicking myself that I didn't see it coming in time: The international board was not sufficiently invested in either the process or the resulting plan.

What can we learn from those mistakes? To begin with, we have to build the basic consensus I mentioned a minute ago: what do we want to be about and how will we do

what we set out to do? In order to accomplish that, I would say that first, the leadership needs to explain to the membership what the leaders think we are and, maybe more importantly, what we are not. I'll give you an example: in the immediate aftermath of the 2004 tsunami many Zontians asked me what Zonta International was going to do to provide relief to the hundreds of thousands of people who were horrendously afflicted by that disaster. Those Zontians were very distressed at my response – that ZI was not in a position to do anything except encourage our members to donate funds to relief agencies. These Zontians did not understand that Zonta is not a relief agency itself. We could become one, or at least a funder of relief efforts if that is what we want to be, but it isn't what we are now.

Second, we need to ask our members what kind of organization they want. And then we have to act on the answers.

I think that's the hardest part. What if what the members want isn't what the leadership wants? Then the leadership is faced with a tough choice: follow the membership and change the organization as necessary, or continue to tell the membership what they are *supposed* to want and hope they're persuaded. So far, the second course of action doesn't seem to be working. Part of the problem in building consensus – a big part – is communication. We've been talking here about being technologically more up-to-date. But culture lags behind technology, and we need to address issues arising from some of our members being more technologically proficient than others.

There is another piece to this consensus-building process. I think it is time to get rid of the circularization rule as it applies to discussing issues and candidates. The rule is rule of procedure 3(2), and says "Zontians will not use membership lists to contact other Zontians for the purposes of lobbying for proposals that will be voted on, or candidates who running for office, at international conventions, district conferences, or other Zonta meetings." In my view, and I'm only speaking for myself, obviously, the current ban on communicating with other Zontians about candidates and proposals impedes the free exchange of ideas and insights on issues that are critical to our organizations. Our members are sophisticated professionals and business executives; they do not need to be protected from the free flow of ideas

If we can achieve a consensus on the basic issues, then I think we can build a stronger organization that really can make the world a better place for women. And as I - and lots of you – keep saying, a better world for women is a better world.

This sort of consensus would lead to much stronger leadership development. We could ask candidates just what they would do to further the mission, whether they think the current governance structure is the most effective way to conduct the business of the organization, what should be the relationships among the international board, the district boards, the clubs, and the members, and do all this in a framework that sets out what our overall goals are.

As I noted earlier, we don't know what we don't know. And all too often, the members who most need training in what Zonta does and how it operates are the ones who don't attend the training sessions we offer. We often say that once a member attends an area meeting, district conference, or international convention she will be hooked, and

to some extent that is true. But it's not universally the case. How can we make training so interesting, so worthwhile, that members will move it up their priority lists and make the effort and spend the time and money to come? At risk of sounding simplistic, I think it goes back to this consensus thing. If I really, really believe that this organization has the potential to accomplish something that I think is vitally important, and that going to some meeting is going to provide me with the tools I need to help the organization achieve that potential, I'm much more likely to go.

I think getting rid of the circularization rule would also help in leadership development. We have members from many different cultures, many different models of governance, and who speak many different languages. I would venture to say that for most of our members English is not the first language. There is no way that we can build a consensus if we can't talk with each other – a lot – not just in a few-minute bylaw debate or a three-minute campaign speech.

Another part of leadership development is something several people touched on yesterday – we need to be kind to each other. If every time you open your mouth, I jump down your throat, you will eventually stop talking. And I'll never know what information or insights you have to offer and what you can contribute to the work of the club. And it's being asked to contribute and participate that develops leaders – it's being asked to serve on a committee, to undertake a specific task (and being offered guidance on how to do it), but still allowing room for creativity. And let's not forget the importance of a thank you!

Thank you.