


Research Article

The Graying of Rotary International: Organizational Inertia, Cultural Resistance, and the Struggle for Generational Renewal

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<https://doi.org/10.59652/dxkds248>

Abstract: Rotary International, one of the world's largest voluntary service organizations, faces a demographic and cultural paradox. Notwithstanding its formal frameworks for annual leadership rotation and succession, its membership persists in aging, while authentic generational renewal is constrained. This study analyzes the structural and cultural factors underlying this paradox through the theoretical frameworks of organizational inertia and Michels' "iron law of oligarchy." The examination contextualizes Rotary's challenges within wider sociological trends impacting enduring voluntary associations. The results indicate that formal leadership rotation frequently conceals established power structures and cultural opposition to change, leading to symbolic rather than meaningful regeneration. Furthermore, younger professionals frequently encounter tokenistic inclusion, which perpetuates disengagement and demographic disparity. The paper contends that overcoming these problems necessitates transcending structural reforms in favor of cultural transformation via intergenerational leadership teams, phased succession, and mentorship systems. This study enhances comprehension of how voluntary organizations can reconcile tradition with innovation and maintain intergenerational continuity in the twenty-first century through the integration of theoretical and comparative ideas.

Keywords: Rotary International; organizational inertia; aging membership; generational renewal; voluntary associations

1. Introduction

Rotary International, a prominent global service organization, has consistently underscored the ideals of leadership rotation and renewal. The institutional framework with a one-year presidency at the club, district, and worldwide levels, along with a defined succession strategy, demonstrates a robust paradigm for continuity and organizational adaptability (Rotary International, 2019). Despite these structural mechanisms, Rotary clubs in various regions, particularly in Europe and North America, are facing what scholars of voluntary associations term the "graying of membership," indicating the gradual aging of their member base and the difficulty in engaging younger generations (Putnam, 2000). This demographic trend has raised concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of Rotary and its ability to respond to the needs of rapidly changing communities (Kotsis, 2024).

This phenomenon is not unique to Rotary; sociological research has continuously demonstrated that voluntary associations often experience organizational inertia, wherein established procedures and routines are maintained despite their dysfunctional characteristics (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Under these conditions, older members often dominate leadership roles, periodically exchanging posts among themselves, thereby cultivating a culture of stability that may inadvertently suppress innovation (Kotsis, 2025). Michels' (1999) "iron law of oligarchy" offers a theoretical framework for comprehending this phenomenon: even democratic organizations often centralize power among a small elite, usually consisting of elder members in aging organizations who are reluctant to relinquish leadership.

Research in organizational psychology indicates that age variety may enhance innovation and adaptability, provided that younger persons are genuinely integrated into decision-making processes, rather than just recruited (West & Dawson, 2012). Rotary International has acknowledged this tension. The Strategic Plan 2019-2024 underscores the imperative for generational renewal, increased inclusivity, and professional diversity among its members to

Received: September 11, 2025

Accepted: December 15, 2025

Published: December 30, 2025



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sustain global relevance (Rotary International, 2019). Multiple case studies and membership surveys indicate a discrepancy between formal renewal processes and their actual implementation, leading to what can be described as “formal yet insubstantial renewal.” The persistence of outdated membership frameworks suggests that cultural resistance and entrenched networks within clubs often outweigh institutional goals.

This paper examines the challenges of aging membership and unwillingness to renew in Rotary International by situating it within broader theories of organizational growth and the dynamics of voluntary associations. This study aims to clarify the structural and cultural barriers to generational renewal by integrating concepts from sociology, organizational theory, and psychology, while also exploring feasible strategies for achieving a sustainable balance between continuity and innovation.

This article constitutes a conceptual research work in the domains of organizational management and sociology. It integrates known theoretical frameworks, including organizational inertia, Michels’ (1999) iron rule of oligarchy, and modern models of intergenerational leadership, to elucidate Rotary International’s enduring aging membership and restricted generational renewal. This study formulates a cohesive conceptual model that elucidates how cultural resistance and structural routines impede innovation in voluntary associations by synthesizing concepts from organizational behavior, nonprofit governance, and leadership succession theory. It further enhances existing management theory by suggesting practical techniques, intergenerational leadership teams, phased succession, and mentorship systems that reconcile tradition with innovation. This conceptual essay enhances the theoretical comprehension of institutional transition and informs the management dialogue on sustainable leadership in legacy organizations.

2. Theoretical Framework

Comprehending the problem of aging membership and resistance to renewal in Rotary International necessitates a foundation in several essential theoretical frameworks from sociology, organizational studies, and psychology. A pertinent idea is organizational inertia, as articulated by Hannan and Freeman (1984), which elucidates why organizations, once formed, tend to perpetuate their existing structures and routines despite outside pressures for change. Structural inertia results from elements such as sunk costs, internal political alliances, and cultural traditions that collectively hinder change. In volunteer organizations such as Rotary, these dynamics frequently result in the recurrent election of a limited group of leaders and a propensity for preserving established traditions, even when they obstruct the admission of younger members.

Michels’ (1999) foundational concept, the “iron law of oligarchy,” asserts that all intricate organizations, irrespective of their democratic principles, tend to develop oligarchic leadership. This theory posits that leaders accumulate authority over time by managing organizational resources and networks, hence complicating the emergence of new influential voices. In Rotary clubs, this dynamic may result in cultural obstacles that hinder younger or newer members from adopting leadership roles, despite the presence of official rotation and succession systems. The iron law offers a compelling framework for comprehending why formal mechanisms of renewal may not yield significant generational transformation.

From a psychological and organizational behavior standpoint, the research on age variety provides a counterpoint to these rigidity beliefs. Studies indicate that age-diverse teams can improve creativity, flexibility, and organizational resilience when inclusion strategies are well executed (Kunze et al., 2013; West & Dawson, 2012). Without deliberate initiatives to support younger members, age diversity may be superficial, resulting in tokenism instead of authentic renewal. This corresponds with the notion of “formal but not substantive change,” wherein companies project an image of diversity or innovation without modifying fundamental power dynamics (Brunsson, 2002).

The notion of membership graying, as discussed in research on civic involvement and voluntary organizations, underscores demographic changes as a primary concern. Putnam (2000) illustrated that diminishing civic engagement in the United States was significantly associated with the aging demographics of traditional organizations. Rotary’s internal reports and strategy plans recognize this demographic reality and aim to solve it by prioritizing inclusion, attracting younger professionals, and promoting intergenerational mentorship (Rotary International, 2019). However, as the theoretical literature indicates, demographic tactics alone are inadequate if cultural resistance and organizational inertia are not addressed.

Collectively, these frameworks – organizational inertia, the iron law of oligarchy, theories

of age variety, and the concept of graying membership – offer a multifaceted perspective for examining the reasons behind Rotary International’s ongoing challenges in attaining meaningful generational renewal. They also establish a framework for examining how institutional structures might be reconfigured to harmonize continuity with innovation.

3. Rotary International: Institutional Succession

Rotary International exemplifies an organization with well delineated institutional frameworks for leadership succession. At all tiers of governance – club, district, and international – the presidency is restricted to a singular one-year term. This brief term is intended to guarantee a continuous rotation of leadership and to avert the concentration of power within a limited cadre of individuals. Furthermore, Rotary has established official succession planning processes, mandating that each club and district sustain a pipeline of prospective leaders, encompassing the positions of president-elect and past president, to ensure continuity in decision-making (Rotary International, 2019). Structurally, these systems seem to protect against organizational inertia and the oligarchic tendencies noted by Michels (1999).

Notwithstanding these institutional safeguards, the efficacy of Rotary’s succession strategy in facilitating generational renewal has been scrutinized. A concern is that leadership frequently circulates around a limited group of established members, resulting in what scholars refer to as “cycling elites” (Mosca, 1939). This behavior reflects the iron law of oligarchy, in which formal rotation does not inherently result in the incorporation of new or younger perspectives, but instead perpetuates established networks of influence. In actuality, numerous clubs depend on seasoned members to continually occupy leadership positions, thus preserving continuity at the cost of innovation.

Rotary has officially recognized these challenges. The Strategic Plan 2019-2024 designates “expanding our reach” and “enhancing our adaptability” as key organizational aims, specifically connecting sustainability to the recruitment of younger members and more professional diversity (Rotary International, 2019). The incorporation of Rotaract into the larger Rotary organization and the elimination of rigid upper age restrictions for Rotaractors signify significant institutional improvements aimed at fostering a more inclusive pathway for future leaders (Hinck, 2018). However, evidence indicates that these formal attempts frequently encounter cultural resistance at the club level, where entrenched traditions and leadership networks constrain the effectiveness of succession rules.

Moreover, the one-year leadership cycle, although successful in averting entrenched authority, has faced criticism for its propensity to foster short-termism and administrative inefficiencies (Aulgur, 2016; Geib & Boenigk, 2022). Leaders may prioritize the completion of initiatives within their restricted mandate instead of pursuing long-term strategies for generational renewal (Chamberlain & Yanus, 2022). This contradiction underscores a conflict within Rotary’s governance framework: although institutional processes seek to foster renewal, they may unintentionally sustain superficial rotation without confronting underlying cultural obstacles.

In summary, Rotary International illustrates the intricacies of institutional succession within voluntary organizations. The formal structures adhere to optimal principles in organizational governance; nonetheless, the enduring presence of an aged membership and restricted generational turnover suggests that structural processes alone are inadequate. Reconciling institutional design with meaningful cultural change is a primary problem for Rotary as it addresses the demands of demographic evolution and organizational viability.

4. The Aging Phenomenon

Notwithstanding the structural safeguards for leadership succession, Rotary International, akin to numerous volunteer organizations, confronts the ongoing difficulty of an aging membership demographic. Research on civic participation has continually underscored the demographic phenomenon of the “graying of membership,” in which voluntary associations increasingly depend on older populations while facing challenges in attracting younger generations (Putnam, 2000). Internal Rotary surveys and membership reports indicate that in numerous regions, especially in Europe and North America, the average age of members surpasses sixty, while recruitment of professionals under forty is notably restricted (Rotary International, 2019). The demographic disparity has raised concerns regarding organizational survival, with forecasts suggesting that, without significant renewal,

numerous organizations may face diminishing membership and decreased communal significance (Kets de Vries, 2003).

This phenomenon is supported by several connected causes. Cultural dynamics within clubs frequently prioritize stability and tradition above innovation, resulting in circumstances where younger members may experience exclusion or devaluation (Hinck, 2018). This corresponds with the insights of organizational sociology regarding structural inertia, which elucidates why entrenched groups oppose alterations that could jeopardize established practices (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Secondly, leadership posts are often held by seasoned individuals who alternate among duties, leading to what Mosca (1939) termed “cycling elites.” This practice guarantees continuity but concurrently diminishes prospects for substantial involvement from newer or younger members. Third, generational disparities in professional lifestyles and aspirations also contribute significantly. Emerging professionals frequently encounter time limitations, diverse networking inclinations, and an increased focus on adaptable, digitally integrated modes of interaction, which may clash with Rotary’s conventional meeting structures (Lough & Sherraden, 2019).

The ramifications of this demographic disparity are substantial. The predominance of older members may restrict the range of service initiatives, as younger members are typically more aware of emerging societal challenges including climate change, digital inclusion, and diversity (West & Dawson, 2012). Moreover, the absence of intergenerational integration may diminish Rotary’s appeal to prospective members, perpetuating a cycle of aging membership and organizational stagnation. This cycle exemplifies Brunsson’s (2002) concept of the “organization of hypocrisy,” when formal pledges to renewal and diversity conflict with activities that perpetuate the status quo.

The aging of Rotary membership should not be perceived solely as a demographic inevitability; it results from structural, cultural, and generational processes. This trend reveals the disparity between Rotary’s institutional objectives and the actual practices at the club level, emphasizing the necessity for more effective measures to reconcile generational differences and guarantee organizational survival.

5. Resistance to Substantive Renewal

The aging demographic of Rotary membership is not merely a consequence of wider socioeconomic trends; it is also significantly influenced by cultural resistance inside clubs that obstructs meaningful generational renewal. Although Rotary International has established formal frameworks for rotation and succession, including as one-year presidencies and succession plans, these mechanisms frequently result in what scholars refer to as “formal but not substantive change” (Brunsson, 2002). Leadership roles may officially rotate, although they often persist among a restricted group of long-standing members, so restricting younger members and outsiders from accessing substantial leadership chances (Mosca, 1939). This situation exemplifies Michels’ (1999) “iron law of oligarchy,” wherein democratic institutions exhibit oligarchic tendencies as entrenched elites leverage their networks and influence to retain control, notwithstanding institutional vows to renewal.

Opposition to generational renewal within Rotary might be interpreted as a protective strategy to maintain organizational identity. For numerous senior members, Rotary serves as both a volunteer organization and a source of social identity, prestige, and continuity (Kets de Vries, 2003). Delegating authority or ceding power to younger members may be viewed as a challenge to one’s identity, reflecting insights from organizational psychology that indicate older leaders frequently encounter difficulties during transitions that necessitate the surrender of control, a phenomenon occasionally referred to as “retirement syndrome” (Kets de Vries, 2003). This hesitation may seem as cynicism towards younger professionals, whose methods of service, networking, and digital engagement may differ from established traditions (Lough & Sherraden, 2019).

Moreover, organizational research indicates that cultural opposition frequently surpasses structural reform. West and Dawson (2012) discovered that age-diverse teams can enhance creativity and performance, but this potential is actualized only when inclusion is authentic rather than merely symbolic. In Rotary, younger members are occasionally allowed to join without being incorporated into decision-making processes, leading to tokenism instead of meaningful participation (Hinck, 2018). This dynamic sustains a cycle wherein newer professionals either disengage or depart, so perpetuating the clubs’ aging demographic.

The enduring resistance to meaningful renewal highlights a paradox within Rotary: while it is officially dedicated to diversity and renewal, as articulated in its strategic plans, its club-

level practices frequently uphold conventional leadership and cultural norms. This contradiction illustrates the disparity between institutional design and actual organizational experience, emphasizing the necessity for tactics that transcend formal structures to tackle fundamental cultural issues. Unless Rotary surmounts these obstacles, the prospect of generational renewal may remain predominantly symbolic, rendering the organization susceptible to ongoing demographic decline.

6. Comparative Perspective: Challenges of Aging Membership Across Voluntary Organizations

The difficulties encountered by Rotary International in reconciling organizational succession with meaningful generational renewal are not uncommon. Numerous established volunteer organizations face analogous challenges of an aging membership, cultural resistance, and restricted intergenerational integration. A comparative analysis indicates that these difficulties are ingrained in the wider sociology of voluntary groups and fraternal organizations.

Lions Clubs International, a comparable global service organization with a similar governance framework, has recorded the identical pattern of demographic aging and challenges in recruiting younger members. Research indicates that, despite the structural rotation of leadership, Lions Clubs frequently depend on a limited group of senior members to occupy successive positions, fostering the illusion of renewal without a meaningful change in generational involvement (Kou et al., 2014). Similar to Rotary, Lions Clubs have sought to tackle this issue through youth-focused projects and leadership development programs; nevertheless, the outcomes vary significantly among regions, primarily due to deeply rooted cultural norms at the club level.

Fraternal groups like the Freemasons exemplify a more pronounced instance of organizational aging. Studies indicate that Masonic lodges in North America and Europe are experiencing significant membership decreases, since younger generations view them as antiquated or inconsequential (Hinck, 2018). Efforts to modernize rituals, communication methods, and community involvement have frequently encountered opposition from older members, who perceive these alterations as threats to the organization's identity and tradition. This relationship exemplifies Brunsson's (2002) concept of the "organization of hypocrisy," when formal promises to modernization coexist with activities that perpetuate archaic systems.

Empirical research on voluntary groups largely affirms that aging membership and resistance to renewal are prevalent phenomena. Putnam (2000) emphasized the gradual decrease in civic engagement in the United States, attributing a portion of the issue to the inability of conventional groups to effectively incorporate newer generations. Recent literature suggests that in the absence of intentional initiatives to redistribute power and foster intergenerational collaboration, voluntary groups may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of exclusion and demographic decline (Cornforth, 2014).

Consequently, Rotary's experience exemplifies a more extensive structural and cultural dilemma within the voluntary sector. Despite having more formalized institutional mechanisms for succession and renewal than many similar organizations, Rotary's ongoing issues with an aging membership and insufficient youth integration indicate its susceptibility to inertia, oligarchic concentration, and mere symbolic renewal, as extensively documented in organizational theory. Positioning Rotary within this comparative context highlights that the challenge of meaningful generational renewal is not solely a Rotary-specific concern but a systemic characteristic of numerous voluntary and fraternal organizations.

7. Recommendations for Rotary International

Confronting the demographic and cultural problems of an aging membership in Rotary International necessitates a holistic strategy that transcends conventional succession methods. Although Rotary's current frameworks, including one-year presidencies and succession planning, serve as effective safeguards against entrenched leadership, they have demonstrated inadequacy in promoting meaningful generational renewal. To achieve long-term sustainability, Rotary must implement methods that combine structural reform with cultural development.

A primary recommendation is the intentional formation of intergenerational leadership teams; wherein younger and older members together assume responsibility for essential

duties. Studies on age diversity indicate that companies gain from the diverse talents and viewpoints of many generations, resulting in enhanced innovation and adaptability (West & Dawson, 2012). By integrating intergenerational collaboration into leadership frameworks, Rotary may diminish dependence on recurring elites and offer younger members genuine opportunity for impact.

Secondly, Rotary could execute incremental leadership transitions, wherein incoming leaders progressively undertake tasks in conjunction with their predecessors. Comparable frameworks in higher education and nonprofit governance have demonstrated the ability to alleviate resistance among senior leaders while concurrently enhancing the capabilities of successors (Cornforth, 2014). This method directly confronts the psychological and identity-related opposition articulated by Kets de Vries (2003), who highlighted that senior leaders frequently find it challenging to cede control when it jeopardizes their feeling of significance. A gradual transition mitigates this hazard by reconceptualizing leadership succession as continuity instead of loss.

Third, mentorship methods ought to be broadened and institutionalized throughout Rotary. Mentoring enhances information transmission and legitimizes younger people inside the organization, endowing them with relational capital to negotiate established networks (Allen et al., 2004). Encouraging senior Rotarians to train younger members in leadership and service initiatives enables Rotary to bridge cultural barriers while preserving continuity of ideals.

Ultimately, Rotary must reconceptualize member participation to correspond with generational anticipations. Emerging professionals frequently prefer flexible, project-oriented, and digitally facilitated service formats over structured weekly meetings (Lough & Sherraden, 2019). Modifying meeting forms, adopting hybrid participation, and emphasizing service projects pertinent to current challenges like climate change, diversity, and digital equity will augment Rotary's attractiveness to new generations while preserving its fundamental ideals.

Collectively, these methods emphasize the necessity for Rotary to transition from symbolic renewal to meaningful intergenerational transformation. The integration of structural changes, cultural transformation, and adaptive engagement strategies provide the most viable approach for Rotary to maintain its mission throughout a period of demographic shift.

8. Conclusions

Rotary International illustrates the potential and the contradiction of institutional succession within volunteer organizations. The formal mechanisms, such as annual presidencies, succession planning, and new initiatives to incorporate younger professionals via Rotaract, offer robust institutional protections against entrenched authority and conform to governance best practices (Rotary International, 2019). However, as this article demonstrates, these methods frequently yield only superficial rejuvenation, while genuine generational transformation remains unattainable. The enduring presence of an aging membership signifies not merely demographic determinism but also the impact of organizational inertia, oligarchic inclinations in leadership patterns, and cultural resistance stemming from identity preservation among senior members.

Comparative analyses reveal that Rotary's challenges are not singular; analogous dynamics are observable in other service and fraternal organizations, including Lions Clubs and Freemasons, where demographic aging and reluctance to modernize have hindered revitalization initiatives. This overarching trend highlights that the issue of generational renewal is systemic throughout the voluntary sector. Rotary maintains unique advantages because to its global presence, organizational flexibility, and clear acknowledgment of the necessity for generational renewal in its strategic planning.

The way forward necessitates reconciling structural mechanisms with cultural realities. Strategies such as intergenerational leadership teams, gradual leadership transitions, and mentoring programs provide effective methods for harmonizing continuity with innovation. Equally significant is the reconfiguration of involvement to align with the expectations of younger generations, who emphasize flexible, technologically integrated, and socially pertinent modalities of civic participation. In the absence of these reforms, Rotary may perpetuate cycles of superficial change and demographic deterioration; conversely, with them, it may emerge as a paradigm of sustainable intergenerational cooperation within the volunteer sector.



The sustainability of Rotary in the twenty-first century depends on its ability to reconcile tradition with innovation. Embracing authentic generational renewal will guarantee the organization's continuity and improve its capacity to address the changing problems of global civil society. Rotary's legacy has consistently relied on its adaptability and service principles; its future hinges on its readiness to convert institutional commitments into meaningful cultural change.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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