

Panelist commentary

Rotary International YE Pre-Convention Meetings

June 16, 2007

Panel Topic: 'EARLY Returns and Other Incomplete Exchanges'

I think it's important to look at the terms we are using, so there are no misunderstandings. Each of us here might have slightly different interpretations of the words - Early Return or Incomplete Exchange and we may also see it as a larger or smaller problem than some of our colleagues. However, I believe that whether you call them Early Returns or Incomplete Exchanges, they are essentially the same thing. Where the difference really lies is the cause: Was the trigger preventable or not?

Let us look at the Non-preventable reasons first. Right off the top of the list could come natural disaster or sudden political unrest or armed conflict. There could be.... Serious injury or illness, a death or other trauma in the family (either the student's or the host family's) come to mind quickly. We in District 5080 have experienced both of these, but because of the great co-operation of our partners or the incredible strength of the students involved, a magical ending happened instead of the one most people would have imagined.

Let me relate two of them to you:

1. A young woman from our district was diagnosed with a large ovarian cyst. Fortunately her host-father was a medical doctor and his advice and assistance were invaluable. The student returned home for medical treatment, underwent an operation for the removal of the 2.5 lb (about 1 kilogram) cyst and then faced some recuperation time. She then returned to her exchange country, her host club and families and completed the remaining time of her exchange. The amazing part of this was that the insurance company was fully co-operative in all of this.
2. A young man being hosted in our district returned home to be with his dying sister. While the sister had been ill prior to her brother's departure, the illness progressed much faster than expected. The boy returned home to be with his sister and family and once the grieving had reached a certain point, he returned to our district and was received with open arms.

A third example comes to mind for trauma in a family:

Shortly before Christmas, a young woman was traveling with her soon-to-be host mother and father in their town. The two women got out of the car at the market and the father went on to the bank to collect the payroll for the workers at their farm. On emerging from the bank, the father was shot and killed by a disgruntled ex-worker. The women were less than a minute away and were quickly on the scene. This traumatic event could easily have turned into an incomplete exchange – a very understandable thing, but it didn't. Again, with the tremendous work on everyone's part, especially the two immediate families, the student stayed and completed her exchange. Needless to say, she had great support and very strong inner resources. Many would not have been able to do that.

When things were building up to the conflict in Iraq and several Middle Eastern countries were potentially a concern for troop buildup or staging, Turkey had many students there on exchange. We had a student there and were aware that she might need to be evacuated quickly. YE in Turkey was well prepared and did an admirable job of making sure that students were safe. While there was the risk of a premature termination of the exchange, again, good people made sure that things ended well.

It is also possible that some causes while possibly non-preventable but might have been detectable or hinted at prior to the student's departure. We see, from time to time, a student who had appeared to be very well suited to the demands of living away from home for a year but, when actually faced with the reality of the situation, was not able to summon the inner resources to succeed. We have called that a 'failure to thrive' – and while it would be nice to think that we could foresee that in a potential candidate, I don't think we can guarantee that. No matter how we encourage, offer help and other resources, the student is just incapable of making the adjustment and is as surprised as we are when they come face-to-face with that fact. The consequences for the student can be much greater than one might think. I will come back to this later.

Another reason for the 'failure to thrive' possibly comes from inappropriate motivation for the exchange. The exchange MUST

be mainly the student's idea. If parents want the exchange, for whatever reason, and essentially force the student into thinking this is the right thing to do, then it will surely be doomed. Perhaps the selection process by clubs and districts is getting that much better – maybe we are more able to recognize those who would 'fail' early and weed them out. It is also possible that prospective candidates are hearing about the rigors of exchange life from rebound students and making better decisions about whether they are suited to the program or not. This would provide a strong case for recruiting students in the younger bracket of the age range – they return and provide us and peers with good feedback and in so doing, help make the program both viable and stronger. In comparing the two most recent studies from RI – it would appear that such cases as these might represent (if we include 'lack of interest' and similar reasons as the indicative categories) are on a marked decline.

As for the preventable reasons, there are a few categories – clear rules violations are the easiest to see. While we accept the 4 Ds and are rapidly expanding the list to include a few more items, recent reports from RI Youth Exchange seem to indicate that use or abuse of alcohol and drugs is on the increase. Indeed, in the most recent report (2004-2005) it was responsible for 15% of all returns – more than all the other rules violations combined. This is an increase of more than 33% in one year...an alarming statistic.

School performance is a concern in our district – both for poor effort and too much effort. While we appreciate that some students come to Canada and the U.S. for the educational opportunities, it must be remembered that this is first and foremost a CULTURAL exchange. Very few school districts can offer the inbound student a certificate of completion much less a graduation diploma. It is very inappropriate of them to expect it and very disappointing that some recruiting officers have misunderstood or even misrepresented what the exchange can provide.

A few years ago, we had to return a student to her home country because she was totally misinformed about what she could expect to receive from the school if she studied really hard. Luckily, our hosting club counselor was very skilled and attentive and noticed the student concentrating so hard on nothing else but her schoolwork. With some communication with her sponsor district, we were able to return her home in time for her to start the second semester of her own school, thus not losing much time and minimizing her stress.

It was encouraging to see that there was a decrease in the number of early returns due to school situations in the most recent two surveys. Neither year showed a large number but any number linked to this reason is too much – I think it is a fault of several persons and can only be prevented by an active campaign of information, repeated several times to both the outgoing student and the parents. Its impact can be as severe as a death in the family.

An odd situation arises every so often – and it has the potential of having unpredictable but serious consequences for the student and the survival of the exchange. I refer to abrupt changes in family structure...and not limited to the student's family. It is easy to see what such a change – usually divorce, can have on a hosting family, if it happens during a hosting. A student may have very mixed emotions about their involvement. Here, the host club counselor has a strong responsibility to make sure the student is well cared for, listened to and reassured that they are not responsible. When the changes are within the student's own family, the distance factor can greatly enhance the feelings of stress – of responsibility, of abandonment and other feelings that can be very powerful. We, in our orientation sessions with student and parents, try to stress how important it is to discuss openly and thoroughly all possibilities of events that might emerge during the exchange year and how each person might react. We have had a few of these cases in our district in recent years and each case has resulted in quite a different reaction – from 'no problem' to 'early and abrupt return'. This is a situation that just has to be handled on an ad hoc basis and as carefully as possible.

Any breach of the law is very likely to result in a speedy departure and although it might have resulted from an impulsive act, if our interviews are sufficiently probing, we should expect to be able to identify those who are more likely to do such things.

We had a particular case in our district involving an inbound student a few years ago. In this case, the student said – out loud and on several occasions, some very inappropriate words related to possible explosive contents of another student's luggage. This resulted in the airport being immediately closed down and the student being taken into custody. It took some time but eventually we were able to persuade the authorities that – if we returned the student to his home country, there would be no need to proceed with legal charges. In this case, it was very clear that the student had been thoroughly counseled NOT to do such things before he had left his homeland, yet he did it anyway. Could anything further have been done to prevent it? I don't think so.

Stealing – whether it is from shops in the community, host families or other students is not all that common but is something that needs to be handled right away. The broken trust that results can do permanent damage to the program and the clubs. If we assume that this represents the majority of reasons for 'breach of the law' then that number of returns doesn't seem to have changed much in recent history. I don't know if that's a bad thing or a good thing.

Laws, to say nothing of the social customs, surrounding sexual activity can be quite different from one country to another and this needs to be emphasized both before a student leaves their home country and when they arrive in their new country. It is not good enough to say – teenagers will be sexually active. Indiscriminate sexual activity while on exchange is not only dangerous but illegal in many places. It does not indicate a romantic involvement, necessarily, so perhaps we need to be more explicit in our Ds when we list them. It is hard to say if these types of activities are being reported under 'Romantic Involvement' or 'Breach of the Law'. It may even be that they are being included in 'other reasons', but from our district's perspective, we view this as a very serious rules violation and subject to almost immediate return.

Regardless of how the exchange came to an end earlier than normal, there are some things that always need to be taken care of. These clients of ours – the students are still children and as such must be treated with not only respect but some compassion. No matter the reason for the premature ending of an exchange, there are consequences suffered by all sides and they need to be recognized and dealt with.

I think there are also some important details that need to be in place:

1. There must be reasonable and detailed dialogue between the two districts (sponsor and host) and an understanding of exactly what the process is to be. If we are pro-active then there will be early 'intervention' and information exchanged between districts that shows care is being taken to address problems early. In so doing, we can prevent many situations from 'exploding' into a crisis. If problems continue, at least all parties are well aware of the efforts taken to solve them so that, should we reach the 'return home' position, no one is blind sided.
2. It is important that the lines of communication be clear and defined. When decisions are being made regarding the possible early return of a student, it is appropriate that only responsible district officials talk with each other – not parents who plead for more chances. Rotarians do not enter into such decisions lightly and are well aware of the consequences of such decisions.
3. Once a decision to return a student has been made – and properly communicated between districts, the student and student's parents, there needs to be assurances that there is going to be someone at the other end (return destination) who will greet the student on their arrival and take care of them. While it would normally be the parent(s) in some circumstances it may have to be someone else – another relative of even a trusted member of the YE Committee.

4. The opportunity for the sponsor club, a District Committee member, the student and parent to get together to discuss the events that led to this situation and the student's return – a debriefing, if you will, is important. Many things can be learned from such a meeting and it gives the student a chance to express their feelings after what was surely a trying experience and bring some form of closure to the episode. It is not a time for recrimination of finger-pointing. If it can lead to improved selections, better cultural understanding, clearer communication, then that is a good thing.

We must remember we're dealing with teenagers – they are delightful but can be unpredictable. We can use lots of sieves in our selection but these students are works in progress and as such are prone to pushing the envelope on occasion.

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