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WHERE LEADERS ARE MADE

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Take the Time to Form an Effective Team

After inducting the other new club officers, Suzanne, the installing officer read out the duties of the Club President before offering Christian the ceremonial gavel, a symbol of the Club President's authority. She highlighted that Christian is now both a member and a leader of the team. That team, like every team, is more than just a group of people.

Teams are an emotional force rooted in the feelings, thoughts, and actions of all members, with the common goal of achievement, sharing, and mutual support. When team members work well together, they create a healthy, dynamic club.

Like all teams, Christian's team will face stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. Their challenge is to work through each stage as expeditiously as they can to arrive at the performing one quickly. It is in that stage that teammates can most enjoy their work, see achievements realized, and appreciate each other as unique individuals and trusted colleagues. It's also the phase that will bring the most benefit to the club.

When team members work well together, they create a healthy, dynamic club.

Right after forming, the storming phase may begin while the team is getting to know each other—each person's styles and ways of working—and building a foundation of trust. At the same time, the leader is figuring out the best way to lead that team.

Teams need to spend time getting to know each other, allowing people to understand the person behind the position, and giving each other the insights needed to grow trust. Leaders need to purposefully create a sense of psychological safety where people feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly, allowing them to build trust.

Leaders who check in regularly with their team members open up opportunities for reflection and offer a safe place for those who feel more comfortable sharing individually rather than in a group.

Effective teamwork creates synergy, bringing together individual perspectives, experiences, and skills, all of which enable the team to find creative solutions to meet their goals and confront their challenges. Working together effectively also allows team members to support and learn from each other, creating a sense of belonging and commitment.

It helps to remember the words of Executive Coach Barbara Glacel, "A team is more than a collection of people. It is a process of give and take."

I believe Christian and his team will have a successful year together. I believe your club leadership team will too, especially when you navigate the storm and reach the calmer waters of performing.

Have a wonderful new Toastmasters year!

Morag Mathieson, DTM
2023-2024 International President

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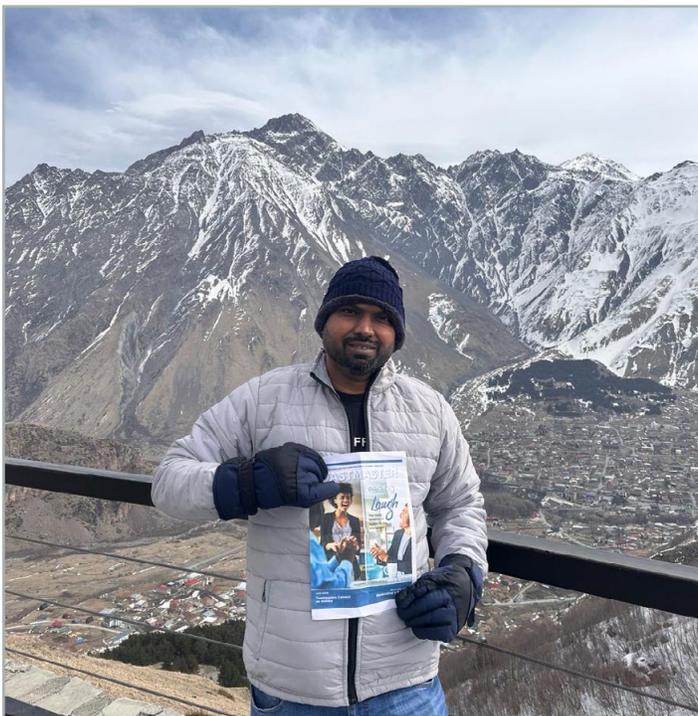
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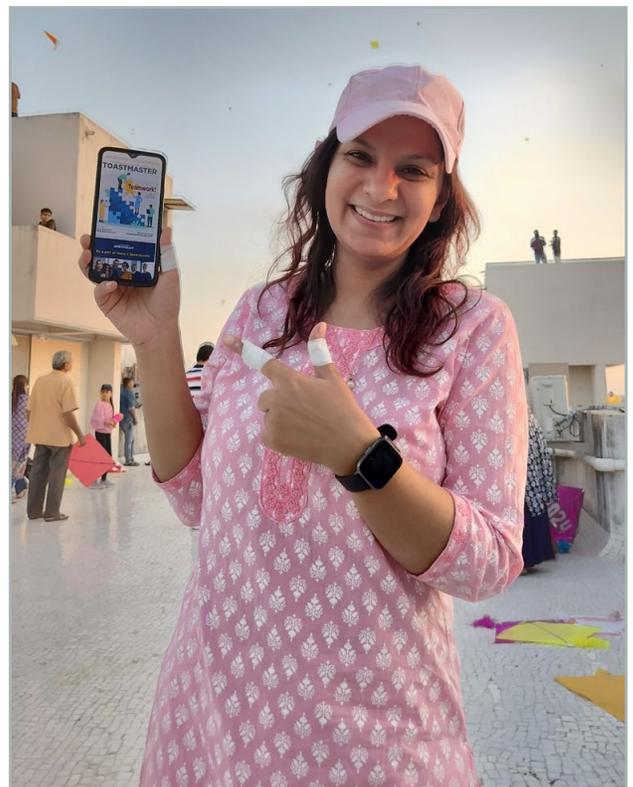
Members from Banks DIH Pacesetters, University of Guyana Toastmasters Club, Bank of Guyana-Royale Toastmasters Club, Cacique Toastmasters Club, MACORP Toastmasters Club, and Legendary Toastmasters Club pose for a photo at the Splashmins Resort in Timehri, Guyana, during a road trip. Photo credit: Banks DIH Ltd.



Traveling Toastmaster



PRASAD KADAM of Dubai, United Arab Emirates, poses with a printed cover of the *Toastmaster* magazine while visiting Mount Kazbek in Georgia.



POOJA SARAN, DTM, of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, celebrates Uttarayan—the transition from winter solstice to springtime—at the International Kite Festival in her hometown.

A Legacy of Love

French dynamic duo are devoted to each other—and Toastmasters.

By Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM

When Odile and Alain Petillot first met, they didn't know the legacy they would build together—in life and in Toastmasters. They have been married for more than 60 years and helped create a Toastmasters culture across France and Europe.

Finding Each Other

Odile says it was love at first sight when she saw Alain, although they weren't even introduced. She saw him playing ping-pong in a classmate's backyard. She was 14, and he was 17 and soon to graduate from secondary school.

Two years later, they met by chance while camping with their parents in the French Alps. Their fathers had been classmates, and the couples enjoyed each other's company. For two weeks, the families hiked together. Odile and Alain became friends.

Although life separated them for three more years—Odile studying German in Paris and Alain studying physics in Lyon—their relationship evolved. They married in 1963.

Finding Toastmasters

Meanwhile, Toastmasters was only getting started in continental Europe. World War II delayed any real growth of Toastmasters there. After the war, language, cultural, and geopolitical issues also served as barriers. In 1956, continental Europe had one club. Twenty years later, there were only nine.

In 1980, a small group of members formed the Continental Council of European Toastmasters (CCET). They wanted to connect the clubs and spread the word about Toastmasters.

Fast-forward to 1990, when the Petillots were living in Paris. Alain was working at IBM. A colleague invited him to something called a Toastmasters meeting, for a club forming at the company. Afterward, Alain described the experience to Odile.

"We went together two weeks later, and I was hooked!" says Odile. "Improvising, speaking in public, and polishing evaluations were a real pleasure for me. Meeting with different people and trying to be as helpful as possible for them—my teacher's self was appreciating each part of the drill." She became the club's Vice President Public Relations.

Because of his workload, Alain was slower to engage in the club. But his interest grew, particularly when he started competing in speech contests.

After 10 months of meetings, Forum des Rives de Seine—the first French-speaking Toastmasters club in Paris and the Petillots' first club—chartered in 1991. The club still exists, although it's no longer associated with IBM.

Discovering the World of Toastmasters

Throughout the 1990s, Toastmasters grew slowly throughout continental Europe. Cultural norms throughout much of Western Europe emphasized subject-matter expertise and content above public speaking skills. In the pre-internet world, it was harder to spread the word. There were also few non-English educational materials.

In 1995, the Petillots attended their first Toastmasters conference in Frankfurt, Germany. "It was a complete revelation!" says Odile. It was their first contact with Toastmasters as a global organization. "We understood that outside Paris, outside France, outside Europe, there was a whole world of Toastmasters sharing the same passion as ours, and we had to involve ourselves much more to help more and more people benefit from the program," she says.

And involve themselves they did. Alain served for two years as the first-ever French Area Director. Odile served soon afterward. The Area included clubs in and beyond France. The Petillots, who each earned their Distinguished Toastmaster award, visited their clubs twice a year and attended Area contests and CCET conferences, driving more than 3,000 miles (about 5,000 km) per year and paying for flights, lodging, and other expenses. "Our Toastmasters budget was just behind our income taxes!" says Odile.

Responsibilities and leadership were exciting for Odile. Competition was important for Alain. Relationships inspired them both.

Two-time CCET chairman and 2002–2004 International Director Robert Cockburn, DTM, met the Petillots in the 1990s. "Odile and Alain both understand the personal benefits of Toastmasters and are amazing at showing others what Toastmasters can do for them and how to get the most out of the program," says Cockburn. "Their secret? It's how much they care about their friends and other Toastmasters around them. It's infectious and really helps people discover potential they never knew they had."

Past Region Advisor and 2020–2022 International Director Elizabeth Nostedt, DTM, also met the Petillots early in their Toastmasters journey. "Their effectiveness



Odile and Alain Petillot

“[The Petillots] were willing to step in where leadership was needed to guide a club to success and raise up more leaders.”

—MORAG MATHIESON, DTM

came from their enthusiasm, their knowledge about Toastmasters, and their willingness to share ideas about what had worked from being involved in other Toastmaster groups,” says Nostedt. “Their connections to other Toastmasters around the world were important, too.”

Expanding the World of Toastmasters

In 2003, there were 42 clubs in continental Europe—enough to form the first District. By 2014, there were 407 clubs, and District 59 split into two Districts. By 2018, there were an incredible six Districts across 34 countries there. A cultural shift occurred. TEDx and YouTube motivated professionals to improve their presentation skills. Technology helped spread the word faster and easier.

And the Petillots were among those on the forefront. “This period was exhilarating,” says Odile. “We were creating something that was going to last—something we thought of as bringing peace and comprehension between countries and folks.”

Morag Mathieson, DTM, 2023–2024 International President, led the reformation from two to six Districts and describes the Petillots

as inspiring and supportive leaders. “They were always willing to have a conversation with those who might be willing to take on a role but were a bit uncertain if they could really do it,” says Mathieson. “They were also willing to step in where leadership was needed to guide a club to success and raise up more leaders.”

Odile and Alain have founded many clubs and served as charter members for others. They helped establish The Europeans, a French/English bilingual Toastmasters club in Paris, in 1996, and have remained members since. They have traveled thousands of miles to attend demonstration meetings, charter ceremonies, and club anniversaries in France and throughout 17 other countries.

Tuire Vuolasvirta, DTM, 2018–2020 International Director, met the Petillots when she joined the Toastmasters of Paris club in 2002. She says the couple played complementary roles in their efforts to build Toastmasters in District 59. “Odile was the spokesperson who communicated the vision about Toastmasters in Europe. Alain was the trainer who helped to train and organize club officers’ meetings,” says Vuolasvirta.

Odile and Alain have served as club and District officers, including each serving as District

Director, and organized conferences. They have trained officers and presented District-level educational sessions. For 10 years, Odile worked with Canadian translators to translate Toastmasters educational materials into French.

The Petillots have competed in and won Toastmasters speech contests in multiple languages, including Alain winning the District-level French Speech Contest at age 78. They have also judged contests from the club level all the way to the International Speech Contest. And they have mentored countless new and veteran members from innumerable countries.

In 2009, Odile and Alain received the Toastmasters Presidential Citation. The prestigious award recognizes members who have shown continual support and dedication to the organization.

Leaving a Legacy

Today, their legacy continues. Afton Le Gendre, Past President of The Europeans club, joined Toastmasters at the end of 2020, when the club’s meetings were only online. She noticed the respect everyone had for the Petillots.

“They had an aura that penetrated the computer screens,” says Le Gendre. “I had no clue about their Toastmasters journey, but when they spoke, I knew they were seasoned, knowledgeable members. I also admired the way they communicated through their speeches, their appreciation for each other, and their solid relationship.”

Vuolasvirta sums up what makes the couple so special. “Odile and Alain are very effective and inspiring role models because of three things,” she says. “They were and still are so passionate about Toastmasters; they work seamlessly together and support each other; and they build leaders who are able to build new leaders and build new clubs.”

Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM, is a member of 5-Star Toastmasters Club in Arlington, Virginia, and AAMC Toastmasters in Washington, D.C., and a regular contributor to the *Toastmaster* magazine. Learn more at jenniferblanck.com.

A Pilot's Perspective on Public Speaking

Taking my lessons in aviation from the flight deck to the lectern.

By Phil Wilkes

My phone rang and it was my friend Brenton, who works as an IT professional.

"Hey, I listened to that podcast you were on. It was great! Can I forward your name for consideration as a keynote speaker at a conference I'm attending?"

"I've never even been to a conference, let alone spoken at one," I exclaimed. "I'm not sure I could do that."

"But you make your living speaking," came his rebuttal.

While not entirely accurate, my friend wasn't wrong. Understanding that if you want to master something, teach it, I had grabbed every opportunity since I was a teenager to do exactly that. I ran classes for cadets, coached junior hockey and race driving, instructed on the ski slopes, and, at the time of my friend's call, was a flying instructor for airline pilots. So I did, in fact, earn my livelihood speaking!

But let's rewind a little. By profession, I'm an airline pilot. And after I wrote a book for pilots, I was invited to speak on a couple of podcasts. People listened to those podcasts, and now I was being asked to give a keynote.

"What's the difference?" my friend asked.

What's the difference? My entire speaking experience had been in the role of an instructor and always to small groups: one-on-one in a race car, maybe two on the flight deck, a large ski group of 15. Both my small audiences and I knew the expectation for the presentation—for me to share the knowledge I possessed as a subject matter expert.

Why wouldn't I commit to a conference talk then? One simple reason—I was petrified of speaking in front of a large crowd. So, in the supportive personal development cocoon that is Hawthorn Toastmasters Club Inc., my home club in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, I started to expand my comfort zone.

Then, like most airline pilots worldwide, the pandemic forced me to seek alternative



Phil Wilkes

employment arrangements. I took on a public service management role in my state as part of the government response to COVID. As I delved into this new role, I was struck by an unexpected realization. The skills and processes pilots routinely use are highly transferable to this different management paradigm.

In aviation, we rigorously train and refine our processes in areas like leadership and teamwork, threat and error management, decision-making, maintaining situational awareness, and effective workload management. These skills become almost instinctual.

But certain skills and processes that were second nature to me as a pilot weren't as prevalent in other fields of business. The managers I worked with were undoubtedly dedicated in their respective fields, but they had never been systematically trained or given tools to ensure their success.

In my new role, I found that these pilot skills had broader applications than I had imagined. Elements of leadership, teamwork, and decision-making were universally relevant, but the

perspective I brought from the flight deck offered a fresh angle. These principles from the world of aviation weren't just about flying planes; they were about managing complex situations, communicating effectively, and leading teams—skills essential in any field.

I began to weave these insights into my Toastmasters speeches and explored how the processes we use as pilots could be applied in everyday business. This approach seemed to resonate. People were interested not just in the thrill of flying, but in how the discipline and structure of a pilot's training could be adapted to their own professional and personal challenges.

Still, my biggest fear remained strong—speaking in front of a large audience. So, I started taking every opportunity to speak in front of bigger groups. At a combined club meeting I

spoke about the decision-making process in time-critical situations, and then at a District training event, I shared communication tools pilots use to resolve conflict. I even jumped on the opportunity to speak to a group of 80!

Looking back, what I perceived as a barrier—my experience speaking only to small, specialized groups—was actually a stepping-stone. It allowed me to develop a unique voice, one that bridges the gap between the runway and the everyday.

Now I'm ready to fully explore those pilot management tools as material for the Pathways podcasting elective. It's another way I can reach people who might never set foot on a flight deck, but who may benefit from the perspective of a pilot navigating the complexities of the skies and, as it turns out, the boardroom.

Phil Wilkes is the President of Hawthorn Toastmasters Club Inc. in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. He is an amateur race-car champion, ski instructor, and trainer of airline pilots, as well as the author of *Performance Pilot* and the host of *Like a Pilot* podcast.

Team Building for Lone Rangers

How to work with others effectively.

By Bill Brown, DTM

Team building has never been a topic that excites me. Why? Because I like working alone. I like working on my own projects. I am basically a lone ranger.

That is good for small projects. But the bigger the project, the more you need others. And the bigger the responsibility, the more you need to work in a group. In other words, it is frequently in your best interest to be a part of a team.

There are various ways you can fit into a team. You might be the leader, or you might split up the tasks so each person can work independently. Another option is to be someone who gives input to the task. And then there is the option of being a member and just following instructions. Although, if you are a free thinker like I am, that one might be difficult.

Regardless of what option you choose (or what option is selected for you), how can you be a good team member?

First, choose your projects wisely, if you have a choice. I know how I am wired and prefer not to put myself into a position where I will burn out quickly or lose interest.

Second, when you are a team member, work to be a good one. Be positive, supportive, and encouraging. If you are in a role where you can make suggestions, do so tactfully. Nobody likes working with someone who is arrogant or condescending. And recognize that you might not be the only lone ranger on the team. Understand and respect their “lone rangerness” as well as your own.

Maybe you were “voluntold” that you had to be on the team. Not the best position for a lone ranger, but, especially if you are an employee, it may be required.

If you do find yourself in that role, what do you do? Put a smile on your face and make the best of it. Be that best team member.

If you are the one recruiting a team, what should you look for?

Identify what you can best do yourself and where you need help. When you have identified the gaps, fill them with people that will be good team members themselves and not try to



Sometimes your contribution [to the team] might end up being something that the group hadn't thought of but can take it to a whole new level.

dominate or take over. Then decide who has a personality that will help the group.

I enjoy sports and like to follow my university's teams. Someone recently asked our men's basketball coach how he has built a cohesive team with players that stick around year after year. His response was instructive. He doesn't look for superstars, players who are great and know it. They are not always the best team players. He looks for people that have skills, but also fit personality-wise with the other teammates. He looks for players who are willing to play a role, even if they are not the star. They must be coachable, too.

Another key component is a desire for the team to win. He doesn't want players who try to add to their own statistics rather than do what is best for the group and the victory.

Lastly, he wants to have fun. So, he recruits players that, if he was stuck in an airport, he would enjoy being with. I think that drives it home quite well.

I don't mind being a part of a team, but I want to find the best role for me. I am active with our local Master Gardeners organization. I am an anomaly. I am not a super gardener. I let others make the important decisions. But I can write. So, I write the promotional materials for the organization. This is a role where I can work alone and use the skills that others in the group don't have. It is a win-win.

One last thought. As a lone ranger, I prefer not to be the team leader, but that is me. I will, however, take on whatever role is needed. Anything for the win.

If you are a lone ranger, you can be a productive member of a team. Although you might have to go about it a little differently than most. Sometimes your contribution might end up being something that the group hadn't thought of but can take it to a whole new level. Go team!

Bill Brown, DTM, is a speech delivery coach in Gillette, Wyoming. He is a member of Energy Capital Toastmasters in Gillette. Learn more at billbrownspeechcoach.com.

Starting the New Year Strong

How to guide your club toward success as a new officer.

By Diane Windingland, DTM

Every July 1 is an opportunity for a fresh start as the new Toastmasters program year begins. As you step into your role as a club officer, you have an exciting opportunity to energize your club and guide your members toward a successful year filled with achievement and personal fulfillment.

Your role as a club officer involves more than just administrative duties; it is about leadership and vision. You're now part of a global community of leaders committed to the success and vitality of their clubs. Whether you were elected, volunteered, or "voluntold," your mission is to serve and lead by example. As you take on this new challenge, remember that your actions and decisions will significantly influence your club's culture and success.

Read ahead for advice, strategic insights, and practical steps that will help ensure you and your club thrive in the coming year.

Understand Your Role

As a new club officer, you should first start by meeting with your predecessor to understand the nuances of your role. Gather insights about past practices, ongoing projects, and critical resources like documents or passwords. This knowledge transfer is invaluable and can smooth your transition into your position.

Second, don't skip the Club Officer Training—even if you have served in a role many times. These sessions are not only a refresher on your responsibilities but also a chance to network with other leaders and gain new perspectives.

Third, read through the [Club Leadership Handbook](#) thoroughly. Understand all the club officer roles, timelines, and resources available to you. Familiarize yourself with tools like Club Central and your club's website, which are essential for effectively managing membership and club activities. You can find the [Club Leadership Handbook](#) and many other resources on the [Club Officer Tools](#) page on the Toastmasters International website.

Work as a Team

Effective teamwork among club officers is essential for setting a positive tone and achieving the club's goals. Regular communication, strategic meetings, and mutual

support are fundamental to successful teamwork. Many clubs have monthly club officer meetings, or Club Executive Committee meetings, to discuss goals, progress, and plans, with additional communication as necessary. Club officer meetings are an opportunity to build relationships as well. Fostering a sense of community among officers ultimately strengthens the club.

"Support one another. It's okay to share responsibilities," says Susan Brooks, DTM, Club Secretary for both the Talk of Monmouth club in Tinton Falls, New Jersey, and the Leaders Are Readers club in Laurelton, New York. "Build friendships and professional relationships. Have fun!"

Expect that there will be occasional conflict. Navigating disagreements with diplomacy and fostering a culture of mutual respect among officers is key to maintaining a cohesive leadership team.

Reflect and Plan

You should also take time to reflect on the club's past achievements and challenges in order to prepare the ground for future planning.

A primary resource to help plan for the coming year is the [Club Success Plan](#). This plan acts as a roadmap, helping to guide the club's activities and measure its success throughout the year. Completing the Club Success Plan may feel tedious, but if you create a solid plan early, you have more time to execute it successfully.

"Create a Club Success Plan and revisit it during the year," says Brooks. Establishing a long-term vision for your club, alongside your annual goals, ensures continuity and sustained growth, helping members see a future in their investment of time and effort.

"Talk to your club, create a vision for two or three years, and seek the commitment and support of all members," encourages Jorge Navarro, DTM, of Mexico City. Steady guidance toward your vision ensures that success is not just a possibility but an expected outcome, much like teaching a new driver the rules of the road before handing over the car keys. "You don't only give the car key to your kid," says Navarro, the Club President of Iztapalapa Online. "You teach him and guide him according to your vision of what a good driver should be."



Cultivate a Positive Club Culture

Creating a welcoming and supportive culture is also crucial to your club's success. Every meeting is an opportunity to foster a sense of belonging and ensure that all members feel encouraged and valued. Activities that promote learning and enjoyment help to strengthen the club's culture and keep members engaged.

"Creating a welcoming atmosphere within the club involves more than just saying, 'Hello,'" says Eleos Gandawidjaja of Empire Toastmasters Club in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. "It requires building genuine connections among members, ensuring everyone feels included and valued, and providing support for their growth and development as speakers and leaders."

Helen von Dadelszen agrees that fostering a positive club culture is an important task for club officers. "Toastmasters is a membership organization, so make sure your members are happy," says Dadelszen, a member of International Toastmasters Club of Nyon in Nyon, Switzerland. "This comes down to providing an excellent meeting each time where all roles are filled, and everyone is given the opportunity to collaborate. This also results in guests walking away delighted and keen to join the productive, welcoming community that's been created in the club."

Encouraging members to take on leadership roles is another crucial aspect of club growth. This strategy ensures the sustainability of the club leadership and fosters a proactive environment where members feel empowered and valued.

"A culture of mentoring is important," says Noor Mohammad, DTM, of Sattvic Toastmasters for Healthy Living in Hyderabad, Telangana, India. "Mentoring is the key to having a strong [Club] Executive Committee. We usually elect officers not for the upcoming term but for the term after the upcoming term. They become mentees to the upcoming executive committee."

Regular surveys and feedback sessions can be invaluable for understanding member satisfaction and for making necessary adjustments. This ongoing dialogue helps keep the club responsive to members' needs and can be dynamic in its development.

Consider conducting a [Moments of Truth program](#) or using the [Club Quality Checklist](#) with your members to evaluate various aspects of club success.

Outside of the club, regular social events can build relationships among members.

"Events can include activities like a club picnic, a movie night, or a themed party," says Gandawidjaja, the member in Indonesia. "Such gatherings provide opportunities for members to bond on a personal level, which strengthens their sense of belonging to the club."

Execute With Consistency

Without action, a plan is just a map to nowhere. As a team, decide on actions to make your plan enhance the member experience.

Your role as a club officer involves executing plans and making decisions that will shape the club's future. Be proactive and ready to experiment with your club meetings and management practices. Remember, Toastmasters is a safe environment to try new things—whether it's tweaking the meeting format, introducing new educational themes, or experimenting with digital tools.

Stepping into a club officer role is both an opportunity and a challenge—a chance to develop leadership skills, build relationships, and contribute to your club's success. Your journey will be filled with learning experiences that will enhance not just your Toastmasters experience but your personal and professional life as well.

Here's to a successful and fulfilling year ahead in your new role as a club officer!

Diane Windingland, DTM, is a presentation coach from Spring, Texas, and a member of three clubs: *Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas*, and *PowerTalk Toastmasters and Readership Toastmasters*, both in Minnesota. Learn more at virtualspeechcoach.com.

Learn to Master Your Moves

How body language can benefit or hinder your message.

By Elizabeth Danziger

Henry, a fictional CEO of a mid-size software company, needs his team to generate creative ideas for a new project. At the team meeting, he sits behind a large desk. His mouth is set in a tight line, his shoulders slightly hunched, and his arms are crossed in front of him. In a flat tone, he says, “Okay, everyone, I want you all to feel free to float your ideas to the group.”

Compare Henry with Eleanor, a CEO of a different fictional software company. She also needs her team to brainstorm. As each team member enters the room, she smiles warmly and thanks them for coming. She is standing straight with her shoulders slightly back. Her palms are open as she welcomes people. In a confident tone, she invites her team to brainstorm their ideas.

Which CEO’s team is more likely to come up with the big idea that transforms the company?

While the examples are exaggerated, it’s clear that team Eleanor will win. Other factors being equal, Eleanor’s nonverbal behavior bespeaks a leader who is self-assured, open-minded, and likely to succeed.

As a speaker, your body communicates as much as your words. Your facial expression, vocal tone and inflection, posture, gestures, and even attire have a powerful effect on your audience. Body language, also known as nonverbal communication, is a key element of impression management at work because people form snap judgments of your personality and professionalism based on the nonverbal cues they perceive.

Where Do Body Language Habits Come From?

Nonverbal communication has three primary sources. First is instinct. Facial expressions like smiling, grimacing, and crying are universal. Even toddlers understand them. You can greet an audience from any culture with a smile and they will know you wish them well (as long as the smile is sincere).

The second source of nonverbal behavior is the repetition of actions you have seen in the past. Deborah Shames and David Booth, cofounders of presentation and communication training company Eloqui, note that you might have been told to put your hands behind your back or you unthinkingly imitate a beloved teacher who always counted on his fingers as he taught. Whatever the source, once you have internalized other people’s ideas about appropriate gestures, you tend to mimic them.

A third source of nonverbal communication derives from unresolved emotional issues. Perhaps you want to look happy and relaxed, but deep inside, you feel anxious and sad. You can only fake it for so long before people begin to get a sense of the person behind the mask. Until you resolve the internal issues that drive your body language, you might find it challenging to bring your nonverbal cues up to your desired level.

Given the strong impulses that drive nonverbal communication, how can you unlearn body language patterns that no longer serve you? Shames recommends that you videotape yourself giving a presentation and watch the video. You might be amazed to see that you are flapping your arms like a bird or staring down at the floor when you thought you were speaking straight and strong. You can also ask a trusted friend or colleague to watch your presentation and give you frank feedback.

Another way to transform your body language is to cultivate greater self-awareness. Note that this differs from self-consciousness, which is an unhealthy focus on yourself and what you might be doing wrong. Self-awareness is a nonjudgmental perception of your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations. When you practice self-awareness, you develop the “observing self” that simply sees what is happening. Once you become conscious of your mind and body, you create the space in which you can change.

How Does Body Language Impact Business Presentations?

When CEO coach and keynote speaker Glenn Gow works with business leaders who present their company’s data to stock analysts, he tells them to stand up straight, smile, and say out loud, “It’s showtime!” before they take the stage. He notes that if a leader is hunched over, disheveled, or sour-faced, employees might doubt the future of the company. He refers to research about body language and the brain: “The smile muscles create positive neurochemicals. If I use these muscles, my brain says, *Oh, something good is happening here.* A similar thing happens when we gesture openly with our hands.” There is a feedback loop between our bodies and our brains: When we smile and stand up straight, we have a real effect on our brain function.



Crisis public relations consultant Eden Gillott has seen business leaders both succeed and fail at using body language in high-stakes situations. She recalls an executive trying to reassure her team that the company was doing well while pacing rapidly back and forth across the room; her body language contradicted her words. Gillott notes, “You can have the most beautifully written speech, but if your body language doesn’t sync, it’s all for nothing.”

Gillott likens body language to the volume knob on an amplifier. Your posture and motion can raise the amplitude of your words from a five to a 10 or even, as in the classic film *This is Spinal Tap*, to an 11. In other words, your actions can make the difference between a ho-hum speech and a blockbuster.

Body Language Do’s and Don’ts

Do:

- Allow your gestures to emerge naturally. As speaking coach Shames points out, “If you don’t gesture naturally, you don’t bring oxygen into your lungs. When you gesture freely, you will breathe easier.”
- Adapt your body language to your audience. As in all cases, understanding your listeners is paramount. If you are speaking to a conservative crowd, keep your hand gestures smaller than if you are pumping up a team of sales representatives.
- Stand tall but don’t be rigid. Good posture brings oxygen and energy into your body.

“You can have the most beautifully written speech, but if your body language doesn’t sync, it’s all for nothing.”

—EDEN GILLOTT

Booth, the presentation coach from Eloqui, advises, “Avoid standing with your legs crossed.” This creates a defensive position and detracts from your professional image.

- Speak conversationally, with a well-modulated, varying tone of voice. Avoid “upspeak”—inflecting upward at the end of each sentence.
- Wear comfortable clothing. Communications consultant Gillott suggests that speakers practice their speech while wearing the outfit they plan to wear on their big day. She says, “Make sure you can raise your hands without ripping your jacket.”

Don’t:

- Don’t hide your hands; allow them to move naturally in conjunction with your words.
- Don’t script your body language and gestures. Avoid telling yourself things like, *When I say this word, I will move my hands*. Let the words guide your gestures.
- Don’t obsess about whether you’re doing everything right. The more self-conscious you are, the more likely you are to commit a gaffe. Keep breathing. Keep your posture open. Be natural. And remember that if

someone in the audience does not like what you say, it’s not the end of the world.

- Don’t strive to be formal. As Booth and Shames recommend, focus on being authentic, whether you’re talking to 10 people or 1,000.
- Don’t freeze. If you notice you’ve been standing in the same position for a while, move around. Stand up. Sit down. Step toward the audience. Let your face relax if you’ve been striving to look suitably serious.

The best way to improve your body language is to create opportunities to practice. Volunteer to give presentations at work, even if the prospect terrifies you. Stay loose and have fun. When you learn to master your movements, the impact of your speaking will soar.

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There is a positive flow that happens when you increase the feeling of belonging: lower turnover, more engagement, and enhanced performance.

Cultivate a Culture of Belonging

7 ways leaders can ensure people feel connected.

By Lauren Parsons, DTM

If you want a thriving Toastmasters club or a thriving workplace team, it's critical to foster a strong sense of belonging. Picture visiting a club meeting where the President greets you warmly, explains how things work, and takes time to introduce you to others. Picture starting a new job and having a manager who takes an interest in you, holds a team lunch in your honor so you have a chance to get to know everyone, and who genuinely thanks you for your input.

In contrast, can you imagine returning to visit, let alone joining a club where you weren't made to feel welcome? Would you go above and beyond or stay long-term at a workplace where you weren't embraced and appreciated?

Let's look at why belonging is so important and seven ways you can foster it.

Our Need for Belonging

For more than 20 years, I've been helping companies create high-performing teams, and have learned that one of the most important

tasks for leaders is to make sure their team members feel a sense of belonging. Humans are hard-wired with a need to belong.

Work can fulfill that need for connection. So can Toastmasters. When people feel connected, they are more engaged, give higher discretionary effort, and stick around longer. Having a sense of belonging directly impacts both businesses' and Toastmasters clubs' growth and success.

Helping people feel they belong isn't complicated or time-consuming, it just requires intentionality. As a leader you set the tone and make people feel so welcome that they want to be part of something, developing into highly committed team members who go above and beyond.

1 Embrace Diversity

We live in a richly diverse world. Embracing diversity is critical not just to ensure equity and fairness but also to allow organizations a wider range of ideas, results, and solutions. If you consistently hire people with similar demographics, you'll create a lack of diversity and foster "group-think" (where people conform to a consensus view rather than voicing their opinions), which inhibits creativity and innovation. When hiring people, it's vitally important to ensure you aren't using affinity bias, which is where we're drawn to people we see as similar to ourselves.

Everyone benefits from interacting with people from different backgrounds, cultures, faiths, and ages, and with distinctive life experiences. Having a diverse team brings a variety of unique insights and experiences to a project or team, and often leads to solutions that wouldn't have been considered by a more homogenous group.

As a leader you can champion diversity, regularly reiterating the benefits of hearing contrasting points of view. Encourage people to show up as themselves and to share their stories.



2 Build Commonality

Fostering commonality isn't about trying to get people to be the same. It's about embracing what makes them uniquely different, while finding common ground to build connection and understanding.

Commonality can be found in shared interests, hobbies, tastes, strengths, and communication styles. Leaders can actively uncover these interests and traits by opening meetings with a question of the day, inviting people to share something, such as their favorite family traditions, where they grew up, or what they're passionate about. The more things you discover you have in common with someone—even someone you may not have immediately warmed to initially because of perceptions or unconscious bias—the better you can work together.

In New Zealand, *tikanga Māori* is a set of principles that outline suitable behavior and customary practices. Traditionally, meetings start with everyone introducing their forebears and their connections to the regions they're from and the region they're visiting, before getting into the purpose of the meeting. This is about honoring those people and places and creating potential connections with others. This practice of taking time to build commonality before diving into business is shared by many other cultures where the success of the preamble often determines the success of the meeting overall.

3 Call Out Cliques

Most of us have been there. The first day at a new school, feeling awkward, not knowing quite what to do or where to go, and seeing groups

When people feel connected, they are more engaged, give higher discretionary effort, and stick around longer.

of people talking and laughing together. Especially for more introverted souls, it can be overwhelming. The same thing can happen when someone joins a new workplace or a new club. Virtually everyone harbors natural (often subconscious) fears like, “Will I fit in?” or “Will they accept me?”

While tight friendships can be good, established cliques make it harder for newcomers to feel included. Call people out if they're behaving in ways that exclude others—for instance, leaving some people off group emails or only offering to help certain people. To acclimate a new team member (or a new club member), intentionally partner them with a buddy or mentor who can explain how things work and ensure they get off to a good start and aren't excluded.

First impressions count. At your club meetings, have a designated greeter welcome people as they arrive and ensure guests are made to feel at home, perhaps by introducing them and seating them with others.

4 Foster Collegial Love

Love may not commonly be talked about in the workplace, yet teams that display collegial love—a type of non-romantic love that's based on

warmth and connection—have significantly better outcomes, higher staff satisfaction, and better teamwork. The Greeks coined this type of love *philia*, defined as “affectionate brotherly love.”

Studies show that the three workplace attitudes that create high-performing teams are joy, interest, and love. Leaders who foster these outcomes help bond individuals to each other, their work, and their organization. You can encourage *philia* by expressing how much you value people and encouraging them to connect at a personal level rather than being solely task focused. For instance, add fun, light-hearted moments into meetings, such as a joke of the day. Laughter is a connecting force.

The more things you discover you have in common with someone—even someone you may not have immediately warmed to initially because of perceptions or unconscious bias—the better you can work together.

Get teams to do a daily quiz at break time together. Encourage staff to share “high fives” (sharing specific praise for a colleague). Celebrate birthdays and other milestones together.

Taking the time to foster a team that not only focuses on the end goal but also ensures people feel a sense of belonging, purpose, and happiness is especially important in extremely challenging settings, such as in the military and in elite sports. These teams have strength and discipline, make tough calls, and are focused on important tangible results; they also care deeply about one another and have each other’s backs.

5 Follow the Platinum Rule

The golden rule teaches us to, “Treat others as you want to be treated,” which is a noble and worthy goal. What is even better, however, is the platinum rule, “Treat others as *they* want to be treated.”

It’s powerful to understand your default communication style and the fact you’ll naturally think, plan, and communicate using your own style. Understanding and tapping into *other* people’s styles allows you to better connect with them.

For instance, if you’re a task-focused person, you’ll get better results with your people-focused colleagues if you spend a little more time at the top of the email or the start of the call to check how they’re doing. Conversely, if you’re more people-focused, you’ll profit from minimizing chitchat and getting to the point for your task-focused colleagues.

6 Display Shared Icons

Another way to build belonging is to have visual reminders that reinforce your culture. Think about the pride and connection most people feel when they see their nation’s flag. Seeing consistently branded posters,

stationary, uniforms, and badges help create a sense of commonality, pride, and connection.

Toastmasters’ banners, certificates, and pins all proudly display the instantly recognizable Toastmasters logo. This is key not just for marketing to guests but also for reinforcing belonging among members. We feel instantly connected to and reassured by the familiar logo. Sharing photos on social media highlighting members’ achievements and displaying the club banner bolsters belonging. It also raises awareness to nonmembers and could lead to a desire to visit and join.

7 Have Shared Catch Phrases

Familiar sayings build a sense of belonging where we have an affinity with the well-known words. A shared vocabulary can glue a team together. When I worked at the New Zealand College of Fitness, we had a whole language that staff embraced. Because the college wanted to encourage a high-energy, positive environment, days of the week were renamed Terrific Tuesday, WOW Wednesday, and Sparkleday Saturday. Lecturers weren’t just lecturers, we were “Presenters of Fun and Laughter”—it was even printed on our name tags! Feedback became “feedforward” and was presented as a positive thing to look forward to, to help us grow. We used the motto “There are no problems, just challenges with three solutions,” whenever we found ourselves in a tough

situation. By owning and using these common phrases we felt more connected and in-sync as a team.

Toastmasters comes with a built-in shared vocabulary, think Table Topics®, grammarian, Ah-Counter. I will never forget the day I visited Ottawa Toastmasters Club. Having just moved halfway around the world and not knowing anyone in the city, being welcomed into the club with the familiar Toastmasters phrases felt like coming home. It was a wonderful feeling and certainly made me return!

An Ongoing Commitment

Belonging is something that needs to be continually reinforced; much like in any personal relationship, it’s not enough to say or do things only once. You need to frequently send signals that people are valued.

Reflect on which of these seven things you’re doing well—in your workplace and your Toastmasters club—and most of all, which ones you could enhance. There is a positive flow that happens when you increase the feeling of belonging: lower turnover, more engagement, and enhanced performance. Go out and foster a highly connected team and enjoy the environment that comes from having a team of committed people who care deeply and go above and beyond to deliver their best.

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Sense-ational Presentations

Activate the 5 basic senses to make your stories memorable.

By Stephanie Darling

When memorable speakers take the stage, they quickly turn narratives into compelling relatable messages that grab and hold audience attention. Inevitably, these speakers use a variety of techniques aimed at activating the five basic human senses: sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. Research shows that when multiple senses are triggered, people are more likely to engage, remember, and act on messages.

That knowledge underpins Toastmasters teaching, which has long emphasized the sensory appeal of vocal variety, gestures, props, dialogue, audience participation, images, humor, and more to augment the speaker's words. These techniques, when combined to drive the speaker's key message, are likely to spark a real connection between speaker and audience.

Mixing sensory techniques also helps listeners relate to presentations, because people receive and process information from the environment around them in different ways. A single approach won't capture the attention of

everyone. That concept is covered in the "Understanding Your Communication Style" project in Level 2 of the Pathways learning experience. Some people respond best to visual cues, while others learn more quickly when combining senses, such as sight, sound, and touch. Understanding that idea is applicable in structuring any type of communication, including speeches.

"Absolutely there is a science and psychology as to why presenters need to appeal to a variety of the senses and learning styles," says Kevin Snyder, DTM, an Accredited Speaker (AS) and keynoter.

"An effective speech is not a one-way conversation—that's a monologue. Successful speakers know they must connect with audiences through a variety of ways," he notes.

Snyder demonstrated that awareness in his 2022 presentation to earn the AS designation. He darted onstage to snappy music and immediately invited the audience to mimic his dramatic arm gestures. He deliberately

designed his speech to include a mix of sensory strategies, using poetry, songs, changing visuals, and a continuing conversation with the audience to tell his story of vulnerability and hope.

Sensory Strategies

Teresa Zumwald is a charter member of Downtown Morning Toasters in Dayton, Ohio, and CEO of Zumwald & Company, an executive communications firm. She also recommends incorporating sensory strategies into presentations. As a speechwriter and speech coach, she's an expert on the power of spoken and unspoken messages.

According to Zumwald, strong speeches of any kind—including those aimed at the five senses—begin with intention. “If you're just putting in sensory tactics to check a presentation box, it's not driving your purpose,” she says. Set an intention and then decide what senses you'll use to tell the story.

- Smell is the strongest of the senses in creating memories, due to how scent is interpreted by the brain. Bring something the audience can smell and pass around, like a piece of old wood, a flower, or a specialty soap. (Remember to find out first if anyone in the audience has allergies or other issues with smells.) The same is true for taste; it's a powerful sense that could be a problem for some people. The alternative is to arouse those senses with vivid language—describe the scent of a cozy campfire or biting into a crisp apple right from the tree.
- Inclusive language is powerful because it feels personal. If applicable, call on some people in the audience by name to ask a question or share a comment. Bring listeners into the story with “you” messages, like “Today you will learn...” or “You are curious about...”
- Nearly every listener will react to surprises. Use the power of the unexpected. For example,

jumping to make a business analogy. The details were so unique that the audience got the point by experiencing the thrill and life lessons of a sport they knew little to nothing about.

Lynne Strang, DTM, a member of the Galloping Governors Advanced Toastmasters club in Fairfax, Virginia, won the 2020 District 29 Tall Tales Contest by implementing sensory techniques she'd not used in previous speech competitions. Although she had a background in drama, she'd never translated that experience into a speech. So, she tried it.

“I told the audience they would hear a story, that it was about someone special to me, and it involved love, which is a strong emotion,” Strang says. She relied heavily on facial expressions, sound effects, and props. At one point in the story, she even imitated the sounds and motion of an airplane in flight.

In a surprise ending, she tied the tale together by donning an Elton John-style feather

“Successful speakers know they must connect with audiences through a variety of ways.”

—KEVIN SNYDER, DTM, AS

Zumwald says presentations have two purposes: to change the way an audience thinks or behaves, or both. Sensory techniques should help make those things happen, she notes.

She advises speakers to use details—don't be vague. Details create mental pictures and stir emotions. “A lot of people don't go to that degree, but that's what gets people to remember,” Zumwald explains. At the same time, she notes, make *every* word, emotion, or sensory perception support the *one main point* in your speech.

Consider these sensory tactics and tips to immerse audiences in your message:

- Jump-start presentations with tactics that appeal to the minds and bodies of listeners, shifting their experience from passive listening to active participation. Open with a dramatic fact, a striking visual, a short video, an inspiring quote or song, a warm conversational style, or a poll that invites audience interaction.

if you're speaking on environmental conservation, begin with routine verbiage. Then show a slide of an intense image—taken from space—of burning tire waste sites around the world. The conflagration can be stunning.

Putting Senses in Storytelling

“You can incorporate the senses by the way you tell a story,” Zumwald, the Toastmaster from Ohio, says. Creating word pictures by arousing the senses inspires audiences to “paint a picture of something in their own minds and to *feel* something,” she says.

Two examples: Zumwald advised a keynote speaker reflecting on her desire to start a family by sharing a memory of spending time with her toddler nephew. She first used his name to build a character, and then described the crunchy leaves, rosy cheeks, and peals of laughter she enjoyed with him that day.

In another speech, Zumwald used the vivid sights, sounds, and feelings of Olympic ski

boa and colored glasses. Strang believes her sensory antics kept the audience entertained and engaged in her improbable story.

Zumwald's bottom line: “If the senses are going to move the story forward, I'm going to fight for them every time. If they are going to detract from the message, or are just being used for theater, then we're going to set them aside.”

She also reminds Toastmasters of some fundamental facts. Understand the power of your own voice. Don't compare yourself to anyone else. Keep this top of mind before writing the speech or thinking of how to enrich it with sensory tactics.

Know your own gifts, she adds. “You have certain gifts as a speaker; reflect on what those are and how you can get better. Start with what you're doing right.”

Stephanie Darling is a former senior editor of and frequent contributor to the Toastmaster magazine.

Strengthen Your Conversation Skills

Enhance your communication skills for better relationships.

By Charles Duhigg

A few years ago, I fell into a bad pattern with my wife: I would come home after a bad day, complaining about my coworkers, and my wife would reply with practical suggestions to improve the situation.

But that would only make me even more upset, and we would both walk away frustrated.

Why? Because we were having different kinds of conversations.

It's easy to believe that some people are born great communicators, or we need to be charismatic or extroverted to connect with others. But what we've learned is exactly the opposite: Communication is a learned skill, and anyone can get better at it.

We're living through a golden age of understanding the neurology of communication. Thanks to advances in neural imaging and data collection, research has shown that nearly every discussion is actually made up of three different *kinds* of conversation:

1 There is a **practical conversation**, where we are discussing *What's This Really About?*, and the goal is to discover—and negotiate—what each person *wants* out of this discussion.

2 There is an **emotional conversation**, or *How Do We Feel?*, where the aim is to recognize—and reciprocate—vulnerability.

3 And there is a **social conversation**, *Who Are We?*, where each person explains how their background—where they grew up, where they work or went to school, who they are friends with, or how they see themselves—influences the ways they listen and speak.

Here's the big insight: If you don't know what *kind* of conversation is occurring, you're unlikely to connect. This is known as the "Matching Principle of Communication." To connect with someone, we need to be having the same kind of conversation, at the same time. If we want to be heard, and hear others, we need to recognize which kind of conversation is occurring, and match others and invite them to match us.

This, in fact, is what was happening with my wife: I was having an emotional conversation, and she was having a practical conversation; therefore, we had trouble hearing each other and connecting.

Recognizing what kind of conversation is occurring, and then matching that, is easier than it might sound. If we listen for clues, and look for opportunities, they often become obvious. For instance, if you're chatting with a colleague before a meeting starts, and they mention they recently attended their kid's graduation, they are hinting at an emotional experience. Instead of simply saying "Congratulations!" try to match them by asking "What was it like to watch your kid walk across the stage? Did it feel amazing?" Such a question invites—but does not mandate—an emotional response: "It was incredible. I felt so proud, and relieved, but also a little sad because



Practical Conversation

Emotional Conversation



Social Conversation





Every meaningful conversation is made up of countless small choices.

themselves, to listen more closely. Looping has three steps: Ask a question; repeat back what you heard in your own words; and then ask if you got it right. This is powerful because one of the strongest human impulses is social mimicry. If someone starts asking questions and looping their companions, everyone else becomes more likely to ask questions, listen closely, and loop in return.

All these skills have something important in common: They allow supercommunicators to *show* their companions they *want* to connect.

Take, for instance, laughter. Studies show that roughly 80% of the time when we laugh, it is not in reaction to anything funny. Rather, we laugh in response to something banal (“Are we finally going to dinner?”) to show that we want to connect with someone. And when they laugh back—the most natural reaction—they are showing us they want to connect with us, as well.

The same thing happens with other forms of non-linguistic communication. When someone frowns, or their voice goes quiet and intimate, we have an instinct to mimic them, to apply the Matching Principle of Communication. Supercommunicators

listen to those instincts and nurture those urges, because they know that when we match someone, we show them we want to listen—and they become more willing to listen to, and trust, us.

We can all learn to hear more clearly, to speak so we’re easier to understand, to connect on a deeper level. And, today, learning to have meaningful conversations is, in some ways, more urgent than ever before. It’s no secret the world has become increasingly polarized, that we struggle to hear and be heard. If we know how to sit down together and listen, even if we can’t resolve every disagreement, we can find ways to coexist and thrive.

Every meaningful conversation is made up of countless small choices. There are fleeting moments when the right deep question, or a vulnerable admission, or a kind word can completely change a dialogue. A silent laugh, a barely audible sigh, a friendly expression during a tense moment: Some people have learned to spot these opportunities, to detect what kind of discussion is occurring, to understand what others really want. They have learned how to hear what’s unsaid and speak so others want to listen. And that’s important because the right conversation, at the right moment, can change everything.

3 Tips to Hone Your Supercommunicator Skills

1 Prepare before a conversation.

In one experiment focused on helping people reduce the anxiety associated with conversations, participants were asked to jot down a few topics they would like to discuss before a discussion began. This exercise took roughly 30 seconds, and often, the topics written down never came up once the conversation started.

But simply preparing a list, the researchers found, made conversations go better. There were fewer awkward pauses, less anxiety, and, afterward, people said they felt more engaged.

it means she’s leaving home, you know?” If someone mentions a bit of office gossip, it might be a signal they are in a social mindset. If they start a conversation with “Okay, here’s what I want to talk about,” they are indicating they want a practical conversation.

Once we learn to recognize what kind of conversation is occurring—and match our companions and invite them to match us—it becomes a habit. This habit has helped save my relationship with my spouse. Now, when we talk to each other about something that might be challenging, we always start with a question: What kind of conversation are we having? My wife might ask “Do you want to solve this problem, or do you just need to get this off your chest?” It makes a huge difference. In schools, many teachers are told, when a student has something important to discuss, to ask “Do you want to be helped, heard, or hugged?” Those are the three conversations—practical, emotional, and social.

The good news is that anyone can become a supercommunicator—it’s just a series of skills to learn.

The Skills of Supercommunicators

One skill is asking questions. Research shows that supercommunicators ask 10 to 20 times as many questions as the average person—but many of those questions (“What did you think about that?” “What did you say next?”) hardly register, except to make us feel like someone is listening. Other questions—what are known as “deep questions”—ask people to describe their beliefs, values, and experiences in ways that reveal something about themselves beyond the simple facts of their lives. (“How’d you decide to become a lawyer?” “What was it like growing up in a small town?”)

Supercommunicators are also good at reading the room: When a conversation gets stuck, they make it easy for everyone to take a quick break by bringing up a new topic or interrupting an awkward silence with a small joke.

What’s more, supercommunicators often engage in a process known as looping for understanding, which encourages everyone, including

Whether you're meeting a new manager for the first time, going out to coffee with a potential mentor, or trying to connect with a peer you admire, in the moments before a conversation starts, describe to yourself a few topics you might like to discuss. Being general is okay: *Last night's game* or *What you think about next quarter*.

Conversations can change our brains, bodies, and how we experience the world.

The benefit of this exercise is that even if you never talk about the things on your list, you have them in your back pocket if you hit a lull. By anticipating what you'll discuss, you're more likely to feel confident and prepared to have an interesting exchange.

2 Ask deep questions.

Once the conversation gets going, it's time to throw in one or two deep questions to get to know each other in a meaningful way.

What exactly does a "deep question" entail?

A deep question asks someone to describe their beliefs, values, and experiences in ways that reveal something about themselves beyond the simple facts of their lives. It can be as light as "What would be your perfect day?" or as heavy as "What do you regret most?" Some deep questions may not even seem deep at first: "Tell me about your family" or "Why do you look so happy today?" Nonetheless, they are deep because they invite others to explain what makes them proud, worried, joyful, or excited.

Questions about facts ("Where do you live?") often lead to a conversational dead-end ("I live in Boston"). However, those same inquiries, recast slightly ("What do you like about your neighborhood?"), invite others to

share who they are ("I love that it's close to the city, because I really enjoy walking to the theater downtown.").

3 Ask follow-up questions.

One reason deep questions are so powerful is because they offer an invitation—without overstepping into a demand—for someone to reveal something personal.

But what should you do once you've asked a deep question? How do you keep the conversation going?

In 2016, a group of scientists from Harvard University began wondering the same thing. They scrutinized hundreds of conversations that had been recorded during events such as speed-dating meetups and gauged which conversations were successful (as measured by people saying they wanted to go on a real date) and which weren't (people indicated they didn't want to follow up). They found that during successful conversations, people tended to ask each other deep questions, but there was also another key finding: The best conversationalists asked follow-up questions that *showed* they were listening.

Follow-ups are a signal "that you want to know more," one of the researchers, Michael Yeomans, says. "They allow self-disclosure without it seeming like self-obsession."

As Yeomans points out, one of the best things about follow-up questions is that they offer us an opportunity to reciprocate. Say your work friend finishes answering your deep question ("What was your favorite part of college?") but fails to ask a question of their own. You can keep things flowing by answering the same question yourself, and then following up with another deep question ("Your favorite part of college was ultimate frisbee? Me too! Do you still love to play?").

Why Connection Matters

In 2023, after over 80 years of studying the lives of thousands of people to see what characteristics made for happy, healthy, and successful lives, a group of scientists at Harvard published their results: "Good relationships keep us healthier and happier."

In many instances, those relationships were established and kept alive via long and intimate discussions. Connecting with others can make us healthier, happier, and more content. Conversations can change our brains, bodies, and how we experience the world.

That said, there is no single right way to connect with other people. There are skills that make conversations easier and less awkward. There are tips that increase the odds you'll understand your companions, and they'll be more likely to hear what you are trying to say. The effectiveness of various conversational tactics waxes and wanes based on our surroundings, the types of discussion we're having, the kind of relationship we hope to achieve. Sometimes we get there; sometimes we don't.

But what's important is *wanting* to connect. There are skills and insights that can help us satisfy our desire for connection, and they are worth learning, practicing, and making a commitment to. Because whether we call it love, or friendship, or simply having a great conversation with someone unexpected, connection—authentic, meaningful connection—is the most important thing in life.

Charles Duhigg is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author of the bestselling *The Power of Habit* and *Smarter Faster Better*. This article is based on content from his new book *Supercommunicators*.





Putting the Spotlight on Speech Contests

Members have been competing on the Toastmasters stage for nearly 9 decades.

By *Toastmaster* magazine staff

“Whether a man wins or loses in the contest, he is a winner in what he has gained from making the effort.”

Toastmasters founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley wrote these words in a 1960 issue of *The Toastmaster* magazine, as he reflected on the purpose of speech contests. He believed strongly that everyone who participates in such events benefits and grows from the experience. Many members have reiterated the same sentiment over the years.

The contest tradition started in 1931, when Paul Demaree—the Toastmasters International President in 1932–1933—proposed a competition for local students. The result was the High School Speech Contest. After a few years, Toastmasters members wanted in on the action. The high school event thus became the Intra-Club Speech Contest, where members competed with each other.

Then, in 1937, the Inter-Club Speech Contest began.

This started at the club level, and winners then met up at their Area contest. The Area winners then competed at a District contest. Winners of the District competition advanced to the International Contest, which was built up to be the high point of the summer International Convention. This was the equivalent of what we know today as the World Championship of Public Speaking®.

The Inter-Club Speech Contest grew in popularity, and winners were awarded the Dunlap Cup, named in honor of William Dunlap, 1937–1938 International President, an advocate of the event. By the 1960s, the competition was known as the International Speech Contest, and in 1976, the final round of the contest became known as the World Championship of Public Speaking.

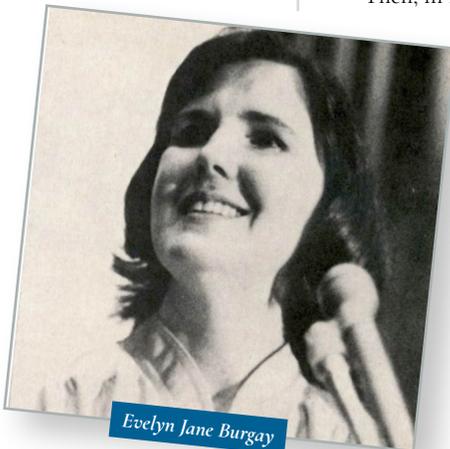
For a long time, members outside North America had to hold their own speech contests, including early during convention week, to send a winning representative to vie against the other contestants (all from North America) in the championship. That situation ended in 2010, when semifinal rounds for the International Speech Contest were added to the convention. This meant that all qualifiers from

Districts around the world would compete together in the semifinals, and then the winners in those rounds would take the stage at the World Championship two days later.

Today, more than 30,000 Toastmasters compete in a variety of contests, including the Humorous, Evaluation, Tall Tales, Table Topics®, and International Speech contests. Winners of the District-level International Speech Contest proceed to the region quarterfinal level, which was added in 2019. Top finishers advance to the semifinals, and those winners compete for the world champion title.

Here are some highlights from Toastmasters’ championship contests through the years.

- In 1977, Evelyn Jane Davis (later Burgay), DTM, of Washington, D.C., was crowned the first female World Champion of Public Speaking. Burgay lost her sight as a teenager and had been blind since.
- In 1982, Kenneth Bernard of Sydney, Australia, became the first person outside of North America to win the title.
- In 1986, Arabella Bengson, of Ontario, Canada, broke another barrier as the first non-native English speaker to take the title.
- In 2018, Toastmasters history was made when the top three finishers were all women: Ramona J. Smith, from Houston, Texas; Zifang “Sherrie” Su, of Tianjin, China; and Anita Fain Taylor, from Pembroke Pines, Florida. The feat would be repeated in 2023, with Jocelyn Tyson, of Mount Laurel, New Jersey, finishing in first place, Nisha Shivram, DTM, of Doha, Qatar, in second place, and Maryam Ganni, of Quebec, Canada, in third place.
- After COVID-19 hit in 2020, Toastmasters held the International Convention that year completely online, a first in the organization’s history. The winner of the 2020 online-only World Championship of Public Speaking was Mike Carr, of Austin, Texas.
- The following year, the event was again held online, and Verity Price, DTM, AS, of Cape Town, South Africa, captured the championship. She became the first person from Africa to ever win the title.



Evelyn Jane Burgay



Mike Carr

In honor of Toastmasters International’s 100th anniversary, this is the seventh in a year-long series of articles commemorating historic milestones.

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CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM

You might know Bo as the creator of FreeToastHost, the host of the Toastmasters Podcast, or the Founder of eBookIt.com. Or perhaps you never heard of the guy. Either way, you will enjoy his latest book, *Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring*.

What is a "normal childhood?" Does it include almost being murdered by your sister with an ax? Speeding around town in the back of a station wagon because your mom is chasing an "alien spaceship"? Being busted by the police for intent to light a pond on fire? Tackling your mom to the ground and wrestling a knife out of her hand because she was trying to kill your dad? While my stories may be unique, readers will be able to relate to the broader themes that are part of a normal childhood such as sibling rivalry, eccentric parents, doing stupid things, and frequently preventing one's parents from literally murdering each other.

Although some of the subject matter is not something one would generally laugh at, you have my permission to laugh. Social rules don't apply here; my rules do. It works for me, and who knows, after reading the stories from my past, you might be inspired to see your own screwed up past in a more humorous light.

Some Really Personal, Yet Entertaining Stories From My Life That You Will Enjoy and May Even Find Inspiring by Bo Bennett is available in ebook, paperback, and audio, at 

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