



Speaking Terms

Toastmasters International CEO Daniel Rex on the power of communication

By Chris Norris • Illustration by Lucie Birant

T In 1989, MBA student Daniel Rex attended his first meeting of a Toastmasters International group. He didn't walk out with a slate of public speaking gigs, but something clicked for him, and after finishing school he got a job at Toastmasters' global headquarters. Now, 35 years later, he presides over a nonprofit with around 270,000 members and 14,200 clubs across 148 countries. The organization, which helps foster the art of public speaking, grew out of a small YMCA speaking group began by founder Ralph C. Smedley, and it celebrates its centennial this year. "Somehow," Rex says of Smedley, "he realized that there was this large group of men—and, at the time, it was only men—who needed help with job interviews, giving toasts and speeches, being able to serve on a committee, and just working with others."

A In the century since, Toastmasters has helped millions of people discover confidence, build speaking skills, and become stronger leaders in life, and Rex is grateful to be shepherding that legacy. "You can walk into a meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal," he says, "and find people there improving their education and lives through learning to speak together."

On the power of communication skills: "When I first started on this job, I visited a meeting near my home that was at 6:30 a.m. on Tuesdays in a section of a restaurant, and everyone was there because they enjoyed it. These people might have despised public

speaking, or were terrified of it, but I was entranced seeing so many different people there. I've been to hundreds of meetings all over the world, and this thing happens that I wait for at every meeting: Someone comes to me and says, 'Toastmasters changed my life.' I keep thinking the phrase will evolve or change from country to country, but it doesn't. While to much of America our brand is 'public speaking,' as people get into it and discover the different, nuanced parts of communication, it helps them in every aspect of their life."

On the definition of "public speaking": "Most of us don't have to get up on a microphone in front of a bunch of people, but we all have conversations—with our families, with coworkers, within our communities—and we could all be more effective at them. *How can I put my thoughts together quickly? How do I listen to and critically think about what someone's telling me? How do I answer?* These are all skills developed at a Toastmasters meeting, through standard elements like, say, Table Topics, where you're asked to come up and speak on an impromptu topic for no less than 30 seconds and no more than a minute and a half. You learn if you're speaking too quickly or too briefly, along with other rules of engagement. Breaking it down to manageable elements enables tremendous growth."

On the digital age: "The year before the pandemic, less than 2 percent

of Toastmasters groups were meeting online or in a hybrid way. By May 2020, virtually all of them were, and they all started learning new skills. Our groups in China were affected first, and they sort of led the way, and Toastmasters helped them get good at it faster, because people didn't want to stop having their meetings. Media and opportunity are so dramatically different today. There's no longer a single group of amazing speakers; there are hundreds of thousands in different contexts—rather than a handful of people known for being on the stage—but they must still decide what they're trying to do, what their media of choice is. If you're good at TikTok, it doesn't mean you're good at Instagram or at talking to your employees at work. Just because you're TikTok famous doesn't mean you can look someone in the eye when you're having a conversation."

On embracing your fear: "When I was 14, I had to give a four-minute presentation to a community group. I was terrified going into it, and when I finished I returned to my seat and had a complete emotional collapse—started crying and the whole thing. What's funny to me now is, I give presentations all the time, and people will say, 'Wow, you look so confident, like you weren't afraid at all.' To this day, I'm still like, 'Are you kidding me? I'm *always* worried about the presentation.' But that's OK; it's often part of what makes us better. I refer to the old adage: Keep your butterflies flying in formation."