

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | SEPTEMBER 2024

# TOASTMASTER®



M E E T

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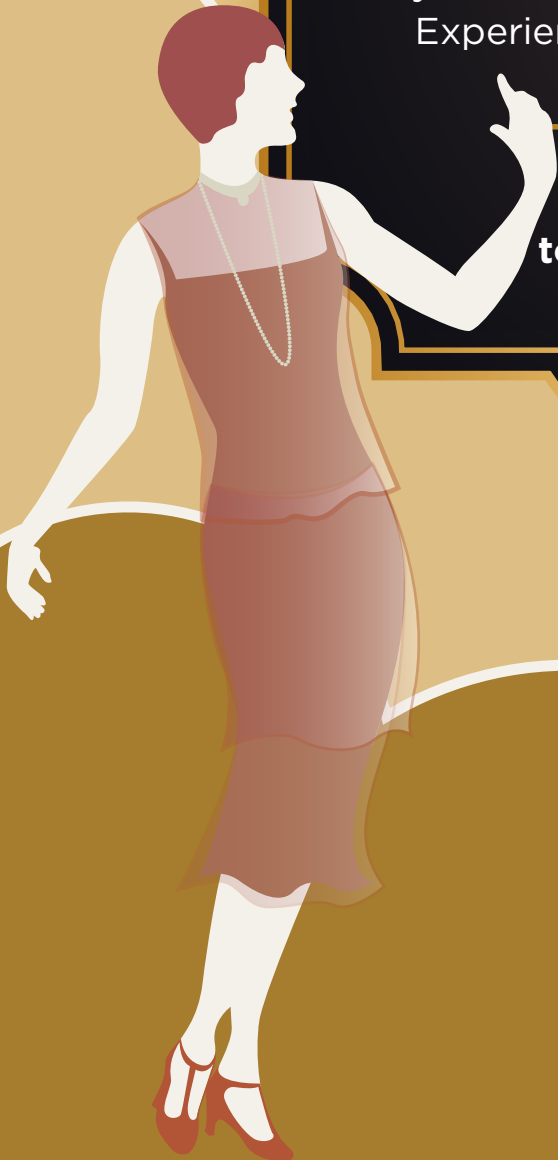
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### TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL MISSION:

We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



WHERE LEADERS ARE MADE

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## Fun and Friendship in Toastmasters

In the fast-paced world we live in, finding a balance between personal growth and enjoyment can be a challenge. Toastmasters, while renowned for its emphasis on communication and leadership development, also offers a unique opportunity to integrate fun and friendship into personal and professional growth.

Toastmasters' founder, Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, said, "We learn best in moments of enjoyment." Meetings are designed to be engaging, with a blend of structured activities and opportunities for spontaneous interaction. This mix ensures that members are not only learning but also having fun while doing so. When people are enjoying themselves, they are more open to learning and less afraid of making mistakes.

Fun in Toastmasters is not just about entertainment; it is a crucial element that fosters creativity and innovation. When members participate in humorous speeches or impromptu speaking, they are encouraged to think on their feet and embrace their unique sense of humor. These activities break down barriers and build confidence, allowing growth to happen in a relaxed and enjoyable setting.

## Fun and friendship are not mere add-ons in Toastmasters; they are integral to our success.

Friendship, on the other hand, is the glue that holds the Toastmasters community together. From the moment a new member joins, they are welcomed into a supportive network of individuals who are all striving to improve themselves. This network provides encouragement, constructive feedback, and a sense of belonging.

Members come from various backgrounds, cultures, and professions, bringing a wealth of experiences and perspectives. This diversity enhances the learning experience and fosters a deeper understanding of different viewpoints. Through fun and friendship, members learn to appreciate and respect these differences, building a more inclusive and empathetic community. This sense of community is vital in creating a safe space where everyone feels valued and encouraged to contribute.

Fun and friendship are not mere add-ons in Toastmasters; they are integral to our success. By creating an enjoyable and supportive environment, Toastmasters ensures that members are motivated to learn and grow.

Does your club provide an enjoyable and supportive environment? If not, let's work together to bring it back to what it used to be. The friendships formed provide a network of support that extends beyond the organization, enriching lives and careers, and lasting a lifetime! In Toastmasters, the journey of personal development is not a solitary one; it is a shared adventure filled with laughter, support, and lasting connections.

**Radhi Spear, DTM**  
International President



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## Snapshot



**DISTRICT 107** officers from Portugal, Spain, and Morocco enjoy a city tour of Rabat, Morocco, after traveling there for a District officer training event in February.



## Traveling Toastmaster



**SURESH KAPITI, DTM**, of Hyderabad, Telangana, India, poses with the *Toastmaster* magazine in Delhi, India, during the National School Games, an annual event where students across the country compete in different sports.



**KEIKO MIYAKE, DTM**, of Shimonoseki, Japan, and **SUE HEREFORD-ASHLEY, DTM**, of Grafton, New South Wales, Australia, hold the 90th anniversary issue of the *Toastmaster* magazine while visiting Brisbane, Australia, to celebrate their 10-year friendship.

# University Club Focuses on Educators

Northern Israel Toastmasters help lecturers improve their speaking skills.

By Stephanie Darling

When Clara Rispler, Ph.D., a college lecturer and corporate consultant, learned about Toastmasters, she was certain a club would benefit her academic colleagues at Max Stern Yezreel Valley College (YVC) in the Jezreel Valley of northern Israel.

"I saw it as a wonderful platform to practice English-speaking skills, strengthen networking opportunities, and build camaraderie among the staff," says Rispler, the club's founder and President. Additionally, the opportunity to hone skills and have fun doing it would give everyone an enjoyable interlude from professional stresses, Rispler adds.

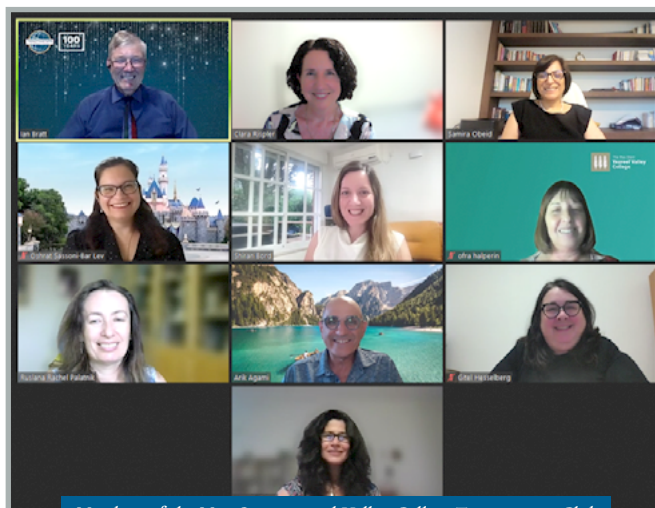
The Max Stern Yezreel Valley College Toastmasters Club, chartered in 2023, is one of some 500 university-based Toastmasters clubs around the world. Membership in many of these include students and staff. However, YVC members are all professional educators. The online club is sponsored by YVC's gender equity committee, which supports efforts to ensure diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect in campus culture.

To charter the club, Rispler asked for help from Toastmasters with academic backgrounds. Ian Bratt, DTM, Ph.D., and his son Michael Bratt, DTM, two longtime members in South Africa, stepped up to help. Between the two, they have decades of club-building, leadership, and competition experience.

"The club wanted a coach who could understand what specific benefits the faculty would want in a club," says the elder Bratt, who lectures at the university level. Both Bratts helped host a successful Toastmasters demo meeting for YVC faculty that resulted in 22 charter members. They still attend and take roles at YVC's monthly online meetings when they can.

Rispler says the club's current priorities include learning and practicing Toastmasters training, which offers the precise core skills that are important to college educators—such as language, critical thinking and deductive reasoning, the ability to analyze information and persuade, advanced writing skills to produce articles and research papers, and the ability to advocate for change—all proficiencies essential to professors in a robust research and teaching culture.

Prepared speeches and Table Topics® are especially valuable, Rispler says. The club holds Q&A sessions after



Members of the Max Stern Yezreel Valley College Toastmasters Club

speeches, so speakers can practice answering questions, as they would in class or a peer symposium.

"Delivering a speech about a research topic in a few moments helps me to adjust my message and presentation," says Oshrat Sassoni-Bar Lev, Ph.D. "Practice has made me more aware of language usage, such as using crutch words."

Vered Elishar, Ph.D., head of the YVC communications department, says Toastmasters expands her speaking versatility.

"There's always room for practice and improvement, especially when it comes to using a second language," she says. "I feel very confident when I lecture, but Toastmasters offers new opportunities to communicate in other contexts and situations as well."

YVC also enjoyed an infusion of cross-cultural connection during the coaching and chartering process. "Having two non-Israeli mentors was extremely beneficial," says Elishar. "They brought an international touch that enriched the whole experience."

South African coach Ian Bratt, a member of the Benoni Club and the Manzini Raconteurs, agrees. "One of the great benefits I've gained from interactions with this club has been to experience a very different culture. It's definitely broadened my horizons ... a benefit I perhaps hadn't fully foreseen when I first got involved."

"I want to applaud YVC members," adds Michael Bratt, who is also a member of the Benoni Club. "They truly see the fact that the more they put in, the more they will get out of Toastmasters." Which is exactly the point for lifelong learners.

"I think Toastmasters makes us better connectors and teachers," Rispler notes. "And what better example, from a learning center like YVC, to show our students that we, too, are committed to learning and growing?"

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

# Communicating as a Scientist

Zhenhua Zeng uses his Toastmasters skills to advance his learning.

By Maureen Zappala, DTM

“Great leaders inspire others, and ... I want to be engaging and motivating. Improving those skills is an endless process.”

—ZHENHUA ZENG

As an accomplished research faculty member at Purdue University, Zhenhua Zeng, Ph.D., knows how important Toastmasters is for technical experts who may not have had much communication training. Growing up in the Henan province of China, English was not his native language. He didn't want to just “nod and smile” and pretend to understand English speakers. He wanted to advance his learning.

Zeng, who researches first-principles-based modeling of hydrogen fuel cells and water electrolysis, joined Toastmasters in 2013. Today, he works closely with the U.S. Department of Energy and industry partners, such as Honda, Toyota, General Motors, and 3M, to advance green hydrogen energy technology. His work has been published in journals, such as *Science* and *Nature*, and has been cited in thousands of studies.

He credits Toastmasters with developing his communication skills. Zeng, who earned his Ph.D. at the Dalian Institute of Chemical Physics in China's Liaoning province, first moved to the United States in 2012, where he continued his postdoctoral research at the Argonne National Laboratory in Lemont, Illinois. Here, he joined the Argonne Toastmasters club.

“I have always aspired to be a public speaker, but more importantly, I want to improve my English,” Zeng says. “Learning it has been difficult. But I'm committed to it because I know it will help me personally and professionally. Today, when I present my research at many international conferences, I use the skills I learned from Toastmasters meetings to prepare. I rarely use notes or words on slides. I also chair international symposiums often and have learned how to introduce speakers and their titles gracefully instead of just reading them.”

Zeng also credits Toastmasters with helping him develop his leadership skills. In 2013, he started his research at Purdue University and joined the Toastmasters at Purdue club two years later. He served as the 2023-2024 Club President.

“Learning how to be an effective communicator and leader is what's most important to me,” says Zeng. He is passionate about this. “In my heart, I know I want to improve. Great leaders inspire others, and when I work with faculty, staff, and students, I want to be engaging and motivating. Improving those skills is an endless process.”

One source of inspiration is the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey, which he reads several times a year. During his time as Vice



President Education (VPE), when busy members were hesitant to commit to meeting participation, he applied the principles.

“I used Principle 1, ‘Be Proactive,’ to schedule members' speeches well in advance. With Principle 2, ‘Begin With the End in Mind,’ I helped members plan their speeches to envision their future achievements. By using Principle 3, ‘Put First Things First,’ I ensured we had at least one speech at every meeting. During my tenure as VPE, we gradually increased from one speech per meeting to three.” With his leadership, his club was back to steady member attendance within six months.

In addition to his communication and leadership skills, Zeng has also gained other tools that he can apply to his work. By using active listening skills he learned through Toastmasters, he has no problem asking someone to repeat or write down something they said that he doesn't understand. He has also worked with a language coach to improve his pronunciation, something he focuses on frequently, especially during speech contests.

As Zeng looks to the future, his desire to inspire is powerful. Having proudly seen some of his students excel in their careers and win notable awards and phenomenal opportunities, he knows his work of helping others unleash their potential.

What advice would he give to other Toastmasters? “Dig into what Toastmasters offers! It really works! Don't be superficial or casual with it. Put in the effort by giving well-prepared speeches and useful evaluations and watch how it can boost your career!”

**Maureen Zappala, DTM**, is a former NASA propulsion engineer. Today she's a professional speaker, author, and presentation skills coach, as well as founder of *High Altitude Strategies*, a coaching and keynote service. She's a member of *Henderson Toasters* in Henderson, Nevada. Visit her [website](#) to learn more.

# From Stage Fright to Limelight

How Toastmasters opened new doors.

By Shane Cohen, DTM

Working in higher education has afforded me many opportunities, including interacting with international businessmen and women. However, what I've achieved in all areas of my life in the past decade would not have been possible without Toastmasters. It has truly changed my life.

About 10 years ago, I was asked to introduce the keynote speaker at a Project Management Institute (PMI) open house hosted by Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, where I worked as a project manager. I thought I had the introduction down cold, but as soon as I stepped up to the podium and saw a sea of professionals looking back, my anxiety kicked into high gear. I started sweating, my face turned red, and I couldn't remember a single thing from my notecards.

I vaguely remember reciting the speaker's name, shaking his hand, sitting down, and thinking, *How could you do that, Shane? That was so embarrassing!* This wasn't the first time I encountered a paralyzing fear of public speaking, but it was the moment I knew something had to change. So I reached out to the best speaker I knew, my best friend's father, who suggested I find a local Toastmasters club.

This conversation led me to the Greater Susquehanna Valley (GSV) Toastmasters in Milton, Pennsylvania. When I walked into my first meeting, a gentleman in a sharp gray suit and smiley-face-patterned tie approached me and quipped, "Well, there's a dapper young man if I've ever seen one!"

That man was Dennis Martz, the GSV Club President at the time. Dennis immediately made me smile and laugh, and put me at ease. I shared my extreme fear of public speaking, and Dennis confidently stated I would get past that fear and "fill stadiums" someday. He immediately took me under his wing, becoming my mentor. Because of his support and encouragement, I joined three weeks later.

Fast-forward 10 years and I'm now working at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as



Shane Cohen

the director of corporate and foundation relations. Part of my job involves collaborative research, and project and recruitment partnerships between university students and faculty. I also give regular presentations, including a multi-million-dollar pitch to the executive board of a prominent organization. The communication and leadership skills I gained have made all of this possible.

The confidence that Toastmasters instilled in me even inspired me to enroll in several improv and comedy classes.

How did Toastmasters help me make this leap from a nervous speaker to a confident speaker and leader? The answer is simple: mentorship, positive feedback, and contest participation. My mentor, Dennis, helped jumpstart my Toastmasters journey, and three years later, Shel Taylor, DTM, past Vice President Membership for the Susquehanna Advanced Toastmasters (SAT) club,

took me to the next level by "demanding" that I join SAT.

Shel and members of the advanced club rapidly accelerated my growth, and through their support and encouragement I now compete in speech contests. Over time, this growth changed my mindset, until I was excited to perform "under pressure."

The confidence that Toastmasters instilled in me even inspired me to enroll in several improv and comedy classes. I now regularly perform in improv shows and at comedy open-mic events. I recently did my first paid gig, performing improv at a stand-up comedy night!

It's amazing to me that I can not only speak in public but can engage in extemporaneous situations comfortably and confidently.

I am now auditioning to join the Bethlehem SteelStacks improv team, as well as working toward my Accredited Speaker designation. In addition, I am completing a book to help others address the mental and emotional aspects of public speaking and leadership (such as fear, embarrassment, and intimidation) that tend to burden and hold too many individuals back.

A decade ago, none of this would have been possible. I'm a testament to the effectiveness of Toastmasters. I'm convinced anyone can overcome their fear of public speaking with the right tool kit. Find a Toastmasters mentor, compete in speech contests, and consistently participate in club meetings and the Pathways education program. It will change your life.

**Shane Cohen, DTM**, is Vice President Public Relations for the Susquehanna Advanced Toastmasters club in Summerdale, Pennsylvania. He is the director of corporate and foundation relations for the P.C. Rossin College of Engineering and Applied Science at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He is also passionate about mentoring and empowering others in public speaking and leadership. You can reach him at [shanewcohen@gmail.com](mailto:shanewcohen@gmail.com).



# Fun on the Platform

Learn how to make public speaking enjoyable.

By Bill Brown, DTM

**B**elieve it or not, speaking can be fun. *Oh, come on now, Bill. Don't you realize just how terrifying it is to walk to the front of the room?*

Well, maybe you could change your approach. What if you were to look for ways to make speaking fun?

I am going to go out on a limb here and guess that you have fun somewhere in your life, even if you are a complete and total curmudgeon. In fact, if you are a 24/7 curmudgeon, I suspect it is because you enjoy that role.

So, start with making a list of how you have fun, and then look for ways to incorporate that in your speeches.

Here are some examples from my list. Recognize that your list will be different, but, hopefully, this stimulates your thinking.

I enjoy saying fun words. That can take one of two directions. The first is words that sound fun. One of my favorites is “higgledy-piggledy.” Yes, that is a real word, and I am amazed at how often I find it in a book that I am reading. It means “confused, jumbled, or helter-skelter.” The word is fun just looking at—and is even more fun to say. And one bonus thought—it makes a great Word of the Day. Unlike those words that everyone ignores, club members typically enjoy using this one. Give it a try.

The other type of words I enjoy saying are those that feel fun when they roll off your tongue. As a narrator, I have read a lot of scripts. Some words and phrases are just downright fun to say. They have a feel to them.

Usually those words center around the vowel sound combinations. I was in a workshop one time and the speaker asked us what our favorite words were. Other attendees were saying words like “love,” “freedom,” and “grace.” I said “tornadic.” They thought I was crazy, for that is the adjectival form of tornado. But I didn't care about the meaning. I love the combination of the short “o” and short “a.” “Prodigality” has the same combination. These words are fun to say. Other words that I enjoy saying include “ruminate,” “inveterate,” and “perfidious.” These



words flow well and enable me to say them with a certain drama. The more I can incorporate fun words in my speeches, the better I do.

As a wordsmith, I also include [rhetorical devices](#) in my speeches. I especially enjoy triads. This is where you use three words or phrases together. I used two in the previous paragraph. Can you find them? Alliteration and rhyming are also common devices. Like the previous example, they feel good as they roll off the tongue.

Another technique to make speaking fun is to talk about topics that interest you. I enjoy talking about speech delivery techniques. And I am certainly more passionate about this topic than others.

One more area where I have fun is in being expressive. The more the topic and the word selection enables me to be dramatic, the more I enjoy speaking. That's where those fun words come in, and part of that drama, for me, is in character voices. In fact, if I can create a dialogue between two characters, both with distinctly unique styles, the more fun it is. And

if I am having fun, hopefully that enhances the experience for the audience members.

Those are ways that I have fun on stage. What about you? How do you have fun? And is there a way to bring that into your speeches?

And what if you are that curmudgeon that we talked about earlier? If you constantly look at life with a distasteful eye, maybe your message needs to be heard. That could be your niche within the speaking community, so have fun with it.

Can “speaking” and “fun” even be used in the same sentence without a negative word connecting them? Absolutely. It is all in how you approach speaking. Seek to have fun, and maybe you won't be so apprehensive as you approach the platform. In fact, you might end up looking forward to the experience.

Hopefully that makes sense. After all, I would hate for it to be higgledy-piggledy.

**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](http://billbrownspeechcoach.com).



# Jazzed About the Grammarian's Role

A club with diverse members finds a way to help speakers improve their vocabulary.

By Kate McClare, DTM

The Word of the Day was “diversity.” Throughout a recent meeting of the UGA (University of Georgia) Griffin Campus Toastmasters club, speaker after speaker used it correctly in their comments. Their usage didn’t just earn a brief mention in the grammarian’s report but was actively celebrated by the entire club with jazz hands, every member wagging their open palms like a Broadway chorus.

“Jazz hands is something we came up with to highlight someone using the Word of the Day,” explains Revati Narwankar, Vice President Membership for the hybrid club, based near Atlanta. “It assigns a visual element to the Word of the Day and automatically makes your brain want to use it more, or retain the contextual information as to why and how you use the word. It’s a very good way to get members involved.”

Jazz hands is one of the language tools used by UGA Griffin, a bilingual club, which expanded the grammarian’s role during meetings to help its members better understand the English language and use it with confidence. Most remarkable of all, UGA Griffin has made it fun to talk about grammar.

## Everyone’s a Grammarian

Many of the club’s members attend the University of Georgia, although membership is open to all. A high proportion of the UGA Griffin population are international students who are non-native English speakers. They joined Toastmasters to improve their language skills but were hesitant to speak up, especially when each meeting had someone assigned to point out grammatical errors (no matter how kindly expressed). But then one did speak up.

“One of our members, Mayra Villar-Buzo, who is from Mexico, came to us and said, ‘I struggle with English and I sometimes feel like it’s a prohibitive factor for me to talk to people or to introduce certain things, because I’m always under this pressure that if I make a mistake, I’m going to be laughed at or not be taken seriously,’” explains Jouman Hassan, the Club President.

It was a common experience for many members, including Hassan, who is from Lebanon. “Words or phrases were said throughout the meeting that we didn’t understand, and we would just nod along like we did,” she recalls. But that changed after Villar-Buzo expressed her feelings. The club’s members and Executive Committee

*Members of the UGA Griffin Campus Toastmasters club flash their jazz hands, which they do to recognize a speaker using the Word of the Day.*

discussed how they could expand the grammarian role to be more helpful to non-native speakers and to approach it in a relaxed, friendly way.

“We decided to make everyone a grammarian so we can all actively listen to the words and phrases,” Hassan says. In other words, every member is encouraged to assist the designated grammarian on this aspect of the meeting.

Helping non-native speakers feel comfortable also means showing empathy.

“The advice I would give is to just be supportive and be kind, because when you’re correcting someone’s English, it’s a very sensitive topic to all of us,” Hassan notes. “No one wants to be corrected on the way they’re pronouncing a word or the grammar mistakes they’re making.”

The club made changes incrementally, starting with the Word of the Day. At UGA Griffin, the grammarian gives a lot of attention to the selected word. They start by explaining its meaning with a formal definition and using it in a sentence. Members are encouraged to use it correctly—emphasis on “correctly”—throughout the meeting. The grammarian tries to choose a word that’s relevant to the meeting theme, to make it easier for members to use it.



President Public Relations Jennifer Reynolds, an English literature student.

To reinforce words and idioms they’ve introduced, the club keeps track of the idioms and Words of the Day used in their meetings and sends a list to members every two months to refresh their knowledge.

The club uses several other tactics to help members reach language learning goals. A member who uses the Word of the Day at least once in a meeting is named a Grammar Legend, which counts toward being honored as Toastmaster of the Month.

making mistakes while talking,” Hassan says. “But with more emphasis on the grammarian role, we show members that it’s okay to make a mistake. And if a mistake is made, it’s addressed in a very supportive and a safe environment.”

“We highlight the mistake,” she notes, “and we give our recommendations on how to fix it for next time or how to stop making the mistake.”

The club’s “everyone’s a grammarian” approach also supports the less experienced members appointed to the role. If a newer English speaker misses an error, other members can step in and offer their feedback.

The results of these strategies have been clear. Members’ increased confidence is evident in their active participation, both in speaking and when contributing to the Zoom chat if they’re attending remotely, club leaders say.

“The advice I would give is to just be supportive and be kind, because when you’re correcting someone’s English, it’s a very sensitive topic to all of us.”

—JOUHAN HASSAN

Debbie Thompson, Vice President Education, says the word is usually heard multiple times throughout the meeting, and the resulting jazz hands serve as a positive reinforcement while also making everyone a more active listener.

With all those jazz hands, who wouldn’t look for ways to say the day’s word or listen more closely for the chance to have a little fun?

## Solving Language Mysteries

Besides the Word of the Day, grammarians watch out for idioms, colorful phrases that are often a mystery to speakers of other languages—like “beating around the bush” and “sink your teeth into this.” UGA Griffin members make sure idiomatic expressions are explained so everyone understands them and can get comfortable hearing them outside the meetings. Members often call on the expertise of Vice

The club emphasizes the English language but doesn’t forget members’ international roots. For example, at some meetings, members bring desserts from their home countries. Hassan recently presented “Lebanon 101,” a fact-filled speech about her homeland, and Vice President Membership Narwankar will offer a look at India, where she was born, at an upcoming meeting. Similar presentations are planned by members from Spain, Mexico, and the United States.

## A Safe Place to Make Mistakes

The club’s grammar strategies are critical in supporting the universal Toastmasters mission of creating a safe place where members are free to make mistakes without fear of embarrassment.

“International students tend to use simpler words, and our sentences become very simple or very short, just so we prevent ourselves from

## Advice for All

English grammar is a challenge for many, even to those who have been raised with the language, which is why UGA Griffin’s methods for the grammarian role can be instructive. “Listen to what your members want,” Hassan says. “We would have been none the wiser about this if Mayra hadn’t spoken up. Have a check-in with your members: ‘What do you expect or what do you want to get out of this club?’”

She urges Toastmasters to “be very kind and very conscientious. That’s why our members are becoming more comfortable—because they feel this environment is a safe place for them to make mistakes.”

**Kate McClare, DTM**, is a professional writer and editor and Immediate Past President of Miami Advanced Toastmasters Club in Miami, Florida. She has been a Toastmasters member since 2011.



# Friendships in the Workplace

Discover the benefits of building connections at your job.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

Two of the most beloved comedies in television history in the United States have been the 1970s series *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *M\*A\*S\*H*. It may seem that these long-running shows could not have been more different. The first took place at a small American TV station in the present day. The second was set in and around a mobile army surgical hospital in South Korea in the early 1950s. What could they possibly have in common?

In short, they shared the same element that TV hits like *The Office* and *Abbott Elementary* do: They centered around workplace families. The characters spent far more time with their coworkers than with their loved ones. That doesn't mean they always got along—any more than any family does. But they really mattered to each other.

The fact that these shows were so beloved reflects the importance of our own friendships in the workplace. The relationships that we form on the job can make all the difference. According to a report from Gallup, the average employee spends the equivalent of nine years at work. That means that without office friends, we social beings would be a lot lonelier. In fact, in his book *Blind Spot: The Global Rise of Unhappiness and How Leaders Missed It*, Gallup

CEO Jon Clifton says two in 10 workers in the U.S. report spending large portions of their day feeling lonely. In the U.K., a recent study noted that 9 million adults, well over 10% of the population, are often or always lonely, leading to a “loneliness epidemic.”

“Work is one of the most important opportunities to find friends, build bonds, and enhance interactions [that] contribute to your fulfillment,” says sociologist Tracy Brower, author of *The Secrets to Happiness at Work*. Friendships at work help alleviate burnout and stress. They are so important to employees, according to a survey from BetterUp, that half of us would even give up a raise or promotion if it meant stronger relationships with colleagues.

Office friendships are also beneficial for the company. As good managers know, friendships can contribute to the bottom line because they make us eager to get to work. They boost morale. They promote collaboration and trust, as well as both personal and professional growth. They provide a support system to employees that extends beyond the workplace, so people are less likely to need days off for physical or emotional reasons. (Office friendships also serve as a great network for getting

“Work is one of the most important opportunities to find friends, build bonds, and enhance interactions [that] contribute to your fulfillment.”

—TRACY BROWER

other jobs, but don't tell the boss!) Best of all, says BetterUp, it only takes five to seven good relationships at the office to benefit. We're not talking best friends, mind you. Just people we can talk to, share a joke with, or get a cup of coffee with.

## How to Make Friends at Work

So, if workplace friendships are good for us and our companies, how do we go about creating them? It's a lot like making friends anywhere, notes Inna Utsekha, a human resources business partner at Wilshire, based in London. “Building friendships at work involves engaging in conversations,” she says, “as well as participating in social interactions, offering help, showing genuine interest, remaining approachable, discovering shared interests, practicing active listening, upholding professional boundaries, and allowing friendships to develop gradually.” Maybe you want to volunteer for an assignment, or simply bring in doughnuts for the team. Try complimenting someone—as long as you're not being too personal. Loosen up a little and see what happens.

There are four types of friendships that your relationship with a colleague could turn into: acquaintance, casual, close, and lifelong. While a coworker might start off as an acquaintance (someone you have met, but do not know on a personal level), they can become a casual friend (someone you interact with frequently, often due to a shared environment, like the workplace), or even a close friend once you know them on a deeper level. Research indicates that it takes two people about 90 hours together to become friends if they are both willing, and 200 hours to become close friends. With a typical 40-hour work week, that's very doable.

Try not to stress too much about it, however. “Research shows that people are more apt to like you if they have the impression that you actually like them,” adds social psychologist Angelika Kofler, a consultant on organizational development in Vienna, Austria.

As for business leaders, says Clifton, they can help employees grow friendships by promoting face-to-face conversations and teamwork, and even updating the configuration of the workplace to encourage interaction. They can also foster lunchtime or after-hours shared interest groups, such as a choir or exercise class. Or maybe a corporate Toastmasters club!

## The Downside to Office Friendships

Although office friendships have many benefits, there is a potential drawback to work relationships. We've all known employees who appear to get special treatment, and this is especially problematic when they're friends with the boss or a direct supervisor.

“Potential challenges with friendships at work include perceptions of favoritism, conflicts of interest, and interpersonal conflicts,” explains Utsekha. Think about it: What if you hurt your friend's feelings by passing them over for a special project in order to help out someone else? To address these issues, she says, it's important to ensure fairness and transparency in all interactions, as well as to establish clear boundaries between the personal and professional, to address conflicts promptly and constructively, and above all, to prioritize work responsibilities.

Employees who also interact with others frequently, such as those who congregate at the watercooler Monday mornings to discuss their weekends, are, in effect, stealing time from the company. So are those who have such a good time at lunch, they forget that their hour is over. Or people who go down the rabbit hole of amusing interoffice emails. It's important to remember that work is—well, work.



## Putting It All Together

Like most things in life, office friendships have their pros and cons. In this case, the benefits are so plentiful for both employees and their companies—and don't forget clients who deal with happy workers—that most business experts agree that these relationships are well worth the effort.

Incidentally, the same can be said for friendships in Toastmasters. We can build positive relationships by introducing ourselves to new members, offering to mentor a fellow member, and accepting invitations for out-of-club events. These friendships can be golden, enhancing our experience in a thousand ways, including providing motivation to reach our personal goals in and outside of the club meetings, and offering just plain fun.

Although we are off the clock—even in a corporate club—we should still behave professionally, which means fairly and transparently, to fellow officers and club members. It isn't always easy. But like any other skill we pick up as budding leaders and speakers, it will serve us well for a long time to come.

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“We have a very bright future ahead of us as we go forward.”

—RADHI SPEAR, DTM

M E E T

# Radhi Spear, DTM

The 2024-2025 International President is gearing up for growth.

By Laura Mishkind

**R**adhi Spear, DTM, is the 2024-2025 Toastmasters International President. She is also a world traveler and exercise enthusiast, has served in numerous Toastmasters leadership roles, raised two daughters, and is a software engineer at AT&T. But before all these life experiences, she says she was a very shy, quiet child.

The youngest of five sisters, Spear was born in Bangalore, Karnataka, India, but spent her childhood in Lagos, Nigeria. In elementary school, she would whisper her responses and tremble when told to speak up. But, as she put it, she survived.

Her family moved back to India when Spear reached high school, and while she looked like the other students, she had a Nigerian accent. “The minute I opened my mouth ... they all started laughing,” she says. “I tried to get an Indian accent overnight. I wanted to blend in. I wanted to be like them.”

This desire to blend in continued for years. Spear moved to the United States to pursue her master’s degree in electrical engineering and was the only woman in her classes. She’d try to sit in the back, but eventually the professor would notice her and ask her to answer a question or solve a problem.

“I did not have Toastmasters to give me the confidence. I survived. I managed. I graduated.”

During a milestone birthday celebration for her father, Spear and her sisters gave toasts. Each sister spoke, from eldest to youngest, with Spear going last. As Spear recalls, “It was one sentence. It was terrible.”

One of her sisters was a Toastmaster in India and encouraged Spear to join a club, and the idea stuck in her head. A few years later when a club formed at her office—AT&T Middletown Toastmasters—she joined as a charter member, and never looked back.

## Sharing the Secret

Now, Spear is a proud member of three clubs, including the AT&T club, L.A.C.E. Toastmasters, and Virtual Parliamentarians, and feels the organization is the best kept secret that shouldn’t be a secret. “I wish I had found it sooner,” she says. “I want more people to benefit from this program. It works. Think about it. We are in 150 countries, all different cultures, all different backgrounds, all different perspectives, but we’re all human beings. We want this feeling of community. We want this support. ... It’s a tried-and-tested method, so I’m a true believer.”

It’s this belief in the program that pushes Spear to spread the word about Toastmasters and inspired her primary goal as she heads into her year as International President: membership growth. She partially jokes, “I want us to double in size and add all these other countries we’re missing.” One initiative for doing that is encouraging members to participate in the [Plus One Pledge](#)—a pledge drive asking each member to bring a guest to the club meeting by the end of December. “It’s such a perfect way to honor our founder,” she says.

Spear is beginning her service to the organization during a momentous milestone—this October, Toastmasters International is celebrating 100 years of teaching leadership and communication skills. When asked how she has been celebrating this memorable time in history, Spear pointed at her [virtual background](#) designed by the Graphics Team at World Headquarters to showcase the Toastmasters brand and 100-year logo. “Show pride!” she says. “I keep telling all my club members to show the background. We want people to know that we’ve been here for 100 years.”

## A Push to the Starting Block

Growth takes work, but Spear is no stranger to challenging herself or those around her. Where did that desire for growth begin in a child who once couldn’t speak up to answer a question in class? Spear says, “My mother was a huge influence, and she was always insistent on being self-sufficient and independent.” She may have been shy, but Spear quickly learned to embrace challenges thanks to her mother.



Spear speaks at a District 108 Conference in Łódź, Poland.



Spear and her husband, Steve, in front of the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt during one of their trips.



Spear presents Jennifer Wolgram with a corporate recognition award at Roche Diagnostics in Indianapolis, Indiana.



*Spear (behind banner) poses with her home club AT&T Middletown Toastmasters of Middletown, New Jersey. The club has been President's Distinguished for 15 years in a row.*



*Spear and her husband, Steve, at their wedding ceremony at the Hindu temple in Queens, New York.*

When she was 15 years old, and her family was living in India, Spear had been practicing her swimming twice a day, every day, in a newly opened Olympic-size swimming pool near her home. There was a race set to take place, and Spear planned to compete, but began to get nervous and skipped some of her practice laps.

When the day came, she went to the pool and asked the other racers what their best times were. She soon realized they were all much faster than her, so she decided not to bother. Spear and a friend went to a local bakery instead, and

when she returned home, her mother asked how it went. Upon finding out her daughter didn't try, she said, "You just gave up? This is your idea of sportsmanship? This is not what I taught you. You were practicing all this while and you just gave up without even attempting?"

Spear took the lecture to heart and raced back to the pool with just enough time to spare to jump onto the starting block for the 400-meter freestyle final. With the taste of her bakery sweets in her mouth and her

mother's words in her ears, young Spear took third place. And that felt like such a victory.

"It's a sense of accomplishment, and you only feel that sense of accomplishment when you do something difficult. Anybody can do something easy," Spear says of the lesson learned. "Why do we appreciate someone who ran a marathon? It's because it's hard, not because it's easy. So when I look back, my mom taught me a good lesson. She was there pushing me, so that's why I went back [to the pool]."

From the moment she joined Toastmasters, Spear had fellow club members and mentors encouraging her, and pushing her to speak, take roles, and grow. She was asked to be Area Director and she honestly shared that she only agreed because she wanted to earn her Distinguished Toastmaster designation. But she says, "You can make one small decision and your whole life could change and you don't even realize."

Serving as Area Director opened her eyes to the Toastmasters world beyond her club and she began advancing in leadership roles from there. Spear was encouraged to run for what was Division Governor at the time. She was honored to be nominated and showed up to the conference where members would vote for the new leaders. Running unopposed, she didn't worry about preparing a speech, but then someone decided to run from the floor.

"Why do we appreciate someone who ran a marathon? It's because it's hard, not because it's easy."

—RADHI SPEAR, DTM

"I should have been prepared and I could have given in, but luckily I didn't," Spear says. She scrambled to figure out how to best pitch herself, and ultimately, won the election. From that day forward, there was an opposing candidate for every position she ran for until she reached the election for First Vice President, but she was always prepared and came out on top. "I think that's a good thing looking back because it makes you a better candidate. Maybe the immigrant in me wants to show I can succeed."

Even as she was advancing in Toastmasters leadership, it never crossed Spear's mind that she would serve on the Board of Directors or become International President. She received a Presidential Citation from Jana Barnhill, DTM, AS, 2008-2009 International President; spoke about success in District leadership at an International Convention; and was part of the very first International Leadership Committee, a group responsible for nominating International Officer and Director candidates from the pool of applicants. As Spear puts it, "My Toastmasters journey was going great!"

But with a flourishing career and two daughters, juggling her responsibilities became difficult, and Spear opted to step back from Toastmasters to help her daughters in school.

### Diving Back In

While Spear wasn't active in Toastmasters for a few years, she decided to attend the 2014 International Convention with her sister in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Toastmasters' first convention outside of North



America). There she ran into Deepak Menon, DTM, 2019-2020 International President, who encouraged her to get involved again and run for Region Advisor. At this point, her daughters were in college and the timing with work felt right.

"I have to say, every time I go on a District visit, I think what really inspired me the most was women would come up to me and say, 'Wow, you made it this far,' and I think it's important for people to see that representation," Spear says of returning to Toastmasters leadership. "It made me feel good that they all came up and spoke to me."

Spear is now the ninth woman to serve as Toastmasters International President, and she's thrilled to see more women becoming District leaders. "I don't mean to generalize, but I feel women can underestimate themselves sometimes, and I would like them to believe in themselves," she explains. Just as her mother pushed her and her sisters to believe that they could accomplish anything, Spear wants that for her fellow Toastmasters.

"Toastmasters gives you those tools—the confidence to try things," she says. "You may have the knowledge, you may have the ability, but you need that self-confidence, and that's what Toastmasters gave me."

Even when Spear ran for Second Vice President and lost the race her first time, she leaned on her Toastmasters confidence to try again. Her husband also played a role in getting her back on the starting block, just as her mother did when she was a teenager.

Spear says she ran a second time, "because there's no shame in losing." She continues, "I was lucky I had him the second time. I had my mom, but all of us have our clubs, if not our family, to push us."

## The Gift of Diverse Viewpoints

From improving her self-confidence to inspiring others, to raising her daughters and advancing her career, Spear's Toastmasters skills have been instrumental in allowing her to speak up. And the diverse environment of the organization is another aspect that has helped her grow.

"In Toastmasters we have people from around the world, and you can learn so much about all different types," Spear says. "I think that's one of the things that makes it so much fun. The diversity of the people, the different perspectives, the different backgrounds—it widens your mind and it's really wonderful."

Her team at AT&T is also diverse. She has coworkers from Nigeria, Egypt, Mongolia, Germany, and more, and she finds it beneficial when coming up with new ideas and perspectives. Thanks to Toastmasters, she's also comfortable speaking up in meetings or when she's in charge of a project.

"I can give feedback to others, and I'm willing to listen to feedback also because it's so multicultural, I don't presume to know all the answers, but I know that when you have a diverse group of people, you get more robust solutions and I think that's a good thing," Spear explains.

She maintains that mentality with the diversity of Toastmasters and the organization's Board of Directors. "We think more broadly before we come up with a decision," Spear says. "We have a very bright future ahead of us as we go forward."

## The Year Ahead

In part thanks to her international moves as a child, Spear has an immense love for travel. She hopes to do some traveling for Toastmasters in the coming year to meet and assist members, and for fun, she'd like to visit New Zealand next.



*Spear and her husband on a bike ride near the Jersey Shore.*

When she's not at work or Toastmasters, planning her next trip, or spending time with her new grandson, she enjoys going to the gym and reading books on fitness and wellness. She's still swimming, though not competing like she did as a teen. Her most recent hobby is bicycling, and she and her husband can often be found on some of the trails near their New Jersey home. During her term as International President, Toastmasters will be her focus with her eye trained on growth for the organization and its members.

"I just want members to know they're fortunate they found Toastmasters, because there are many people out there who are not lucky enough to have found it," she says. "In this 100th year, we should be proud. Let people know there's Toastmasters and in Dr. Smedley's memory, get someone to attend a meeting and see for themselves."



*Spear with her husband, two daughters, son-in-law, grandson, and "grandpup."*

**Laura Mishkind** is associate editor for the Toastmaster magazine.



# Bringing Back Playtime

How and why to play as an adult.

By Megan Preston Meyer

Remember recess? That magical time of day when you were set free from school and could go out and play? Whether it was kicking a ball with friends, playing tag, swinging on swings, or just hanging out, recess was rejuvenating. It was a blissful break for the mind and the body because the sole focus was fun.

*Yep, those were the days*, you might be sighing. But *these* days, now that you're an adult, you're arguably more in charge of your time and what you do with it than you were when you were young. You're perfectly positioned to bring playtime back as a regular part of your schedule. Of course, we're not little kids anymore; play looks different for an adult than it does for a child. That doesn't make it any less necessary, any less accessible, or any less fun. We just need to look at play from a grown-up perspective.

## Presence, Not Practice

First of all, what is “play”? It's easy to picture what play looks like for children—swing-sets and rubber balls—but it's harder to pin down when it comes to adults. Definitions of “play” vary, but there is one common element: doing something just for the sake of doing it (i.e., for fun), rather than as a means to an end.

Play is not results-oriented; as such, it's not practice. Think of the little girl crossing the monkey bars on the playground; she's not doing drills in order to increase her

upper body strength. Think of the little boy playing hopscotch on a chalk-drawn grid; he's not trying to increase his step count to hit his daily fitness-tracker goal. They aren't concerned with the results of their playtime; they are fully engaged in the play itself.

“When I think of play,” says Michelle Pijanowski, travel blogger and founder of the solo travel guide [heypj.com](https://heypj.com), “the key for me is that I'm not necessarily doing it for improvement.” That allows her to be more present—to turn off the “analytical, overprocessing part” of her brain and be in the moment.

It's like the difference between going on a run on your typical route and going on a hike in the mountains. Both can be fun, but on a routine run, you may be tempted to try to match or beat your past results, and thus may focus too intently on your pace or performance. On a hike, however, you're covering new ground; with nothing to compare to, you're more likely to stay in the moment.

A typical Toastmasters meeting includes opportunities for both practice and play. When you're delivering a speech for a Pathways project, you've prepared it beforehand. As you speak, your mind may be running through a checklist: *Does my posture appear confident? Is my voice strong and modulated for the message? Is my pace faster or slower than the way I had practiced?* During Table Topics®, on the other hand, you may not know what you'll say until you say it.

Thoughts will pop into your head—*Should I be funny? Should I exaggerate? Shouldn't the green signal already be up?* Since this, too, is uncharted territory, you're likely to be more present in the moment, and you'll—hopefully—have fun.

It's tempting to turn all play into practice, but you should make time for both. “[If] I'm always trying to do things because I think it would make me better, that means I'm always working,” says Pijanowski. Play should be a respite from work, providing enjoyment, relaxation, and the clarity of mind that comes with not worrying about the metrics.

## Imagination and Exploration

Not worrying about the metrics stands in contrast to the hyperfocus on achievement that seems common nowadays, especially at work. This is precisely why play is beneficial, says Roger Do, who works in artificial intelligence. “In the corporate environment, most people are assigned to do one thing—to become a specialist. Exploration and play are very minimal.” They're valuable, though.

Exploration and imaginative play allow us to expand beyond boundaries, to think outside of our everyday experiences. If a child is using her imagination, she's more likely to roleplay as a valiant knight than as a mid-level bureaucrat, and if she's fighting a dragon, it's probably a *huge* dragon that breathes dry ice and freezes everyone in its path, not just a normal-sized, merely fire-breathing one. Kids know about fantasy and about dreaming big, but as adults, we sometimes find ourselves caught within the confines of what's expected of us, what we're used to, or what we see others doing around us.

Play can help us identify and ease those constraints, especially if we play the right way. “There are different types of play,” says Do. “One type of play is where the rules are already laid down. You're playing what's in the framework.” He makes the distinction between a board game like Snakes and Ladders versus a bucket of Lego blocks. With the former, you're following rules, trying to succeed within constraints. With the latter, there *are* no



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Play should be a respite from work, providing enjoyment, relaxation, and the clarity of mind that comes with not worrying about the metrics.

constraints, except for your own imagination: “You're playing with different things to understand potential.”

Both types of play are beneficial, especially in combination. Too many constraints stifle creativity, but too few constraints can be overwhelming. Do, who spent many years in Toastmasters in the U.S. and Taiwan, suggests storytelling games with no directive (many come in card game format), which provide just enough structure to get you started. The same principle is at work in the Pathways learning experience, which provides a solid foundation and framework, but then encourages exploration as you choose elective projects in levels 3, 4, and 5. You have the opportunity to try something new—and fun—that stretches your potential.

## Benefits as a Bonus

In addition to boosting creativity, play has many well-documented benefits: It can relieve stress, boost your mood, and improve your cognitive ability. But, as mentioned, these results shouldn't be the goal. “You can only have true play when you're not doing it for the benefits,” says Pijanowski. “But it *has* benefits, and seeing those benefits may help people accept that they

should be [playing] more.” The secret to getting the most out of play lies, paradoxically, in not worrying about getting the most from it. “Trust the process,” Pijanowski says.

As adults, we may find it difficult to justify carving out time in our schedules to do something for the sake of doing it, but the more you integrate intentional play into your routine, the more you'll find that your entire life becomes more fun. That way, it won't just be another self-help tactic to squeeze into your schedule or a box you have to check, and it won't be an escape from your obligations either. “It's not a recess,” Do says. “It's not a break from what we do. It's a re-envisioning, and having a different perspective.”

We're adults now, older and wiser and taller than we were as children, and so we *do* have a different perspective. It's time to re-envision what playtime looks like in our lives today—and it's time to bring it back.

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# How to Have Those Awkward Conversations

You really can say anything to anyone when you're prepared.

By Shari Harley

We've all been there. Someone does something irritating, off-putting, or upsetting, and we must decide to speak up or say nothing. We ask ourselves—is it worth it? Will the conversation make a difference? Will the behavior change? Do I even have the right to say anything? If I speak up, will I damage the relationship or make the situation worse?

If someone's behavior is negatively impacting them, your organization, or you, it's okay to say something. I regularly give speeches on the [subject](#) and even wrote a book on the topic, *How to Say Anything to Anyone: Setting Expectations for Powerful Working Relationships*. That said, there are a few things to consider before having an awkward conversation.

## Who Are You Talking To?

First, ask yourself if you have the kind of relationship to give this person feedback. People are more receptive to negative feedback when they trust the person providing it. If you don't have a trusting relationship, it's very difficult to give feedback without damaging the relationship.

Second, evaluate whether the person is open to hearing the feedback. If they aren't, it's better to say nothing. When there is a lack of receptivity, you'll be faced with resistance and won't see behavior change. You can give feedback to a senior person at work, a fellow Toastmaster, a family member, or a friend, provided you have a trusting relationship with that person, and they are open to your feedback.

Let's say the criteria for giving feedback are met—there is a significant impact on the person, on the organization, or on you; the person trusts you and your reasons for speaking up; and the person is open to your feedback. When all these things are true, how do you say what you want to say, and where and when do you have the conversation?

## Preparation Is Key

If a conversation is going to be particularly difficult, write out what you want to say. Then save those notes as a draft and come back to them the next day. Your message might be different a day later when you're feeling less emotional. Never give feedback when you're upset.

Next, practice what you're going to say out loud. Speaking words out loud and "saying" them in your head are not the same thing. Use your notes to guide you. Typed, bulleted notes, double spaced, with large font will help if the conversation becomes emotional or tense. Your handwritten notes will not help you during times of stress.

I always start difficult conversations by telling the person the reason I'm speaking up. It could sound something like, "I care about you and your career. I'm seeing something impact you negatively and I want to tell you." Or "I care about you and our relationship. Something is impacting our relationship and I want to tell you about it." Or "I need to talk with you. This

In my book, I call vague feedback Cap 'n Crunch. Vague feedback is just like the children's breakfast cereal. It contains no nutritional value and leaves you feeling hungry 10 minutes after eating. Vague feedback leaves people confused, defensive, and wanting to know more. If you really want to help a person or alter a behavior or situation, you'll be specific.

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## If someone's behavior is negatively impacting them, your organization, or you, it's okay to say something.

If you aren't sure what to say, ask for help. Everyone but you will do a better job planning a hard conversation because other people aren't emotionally involved. It's our emotions that make feedback conversations difficult. If the situation is work related, ask for help from people outside your organization. Change the name of the person involved. Don't increase the gossip that is pervasive in most organizations.

### Time to Talk

Once you've typed out talking points, reviewed your notes when you're not upset, practiced out loud, and possibly received some help planning the conversation, you're ready to ask for time to talk. The location and timing of awkward conversations are essential to being heard, strengthening the relationship, and seeing behavior change. Ask the person for time to talk. Always give negative feedback privately. Make sure the person can focus on the conversation and isn't distracted by looming deadlines, an upcoming meeting, a vacation, or a sick family member. If the recipient is distracted, you're talking for yourself and won't see the receptivity or change you're looking for.

You can give feedback in person, over the phone, or via video. Any of these mediums will work. Pick the medium that will allow you to provide feedback within a week or two of the event you want to address.

If the timing is right, you are both in a private place, and you've planned your conversation, it's time to deliver the feedback.

might be awkward for both of us, but I'd rather you hear this from me than from someone else." A phrase like this explains why you're talking. You're planting little seeds of trust. Because when people trust your motives, you can say anything. When people don't trust your motives, nothing you say will get through.

### Say This, Not That

Now it's time to give examples. When you give feedback, provide one to three specific examples of the behaviors you saw the person exhibit. If you can't give an example, you're not ready to give feedback. Saying, "You hurt my feelings," without telling the person what they said or did that hurt your feelings, only creates paranoia and defensiveness. Vague statements violate the purpose of giving feedback—which is to be helpful to another person.

Instead of saying, "You're sleeping on the job," say, "You volunteered to run this year's team builder. Our retreat is in 10 days, and I haven't seen a plan yet. Is there something going on?" Instead of saying, "You're taking advantage of our hospitality," tell your house guest, "We love having you here. We're happy to host you for the week. After that it would be best to find a hotel." Instead of telling someone they're a gossip, say, "I heard that you were talking about me to others in the club. This makes me feel like I can't trust you. What's happening?" Helpful feedback provides just the facts. Skip the subjective judgments, which increase defensiveness. Instead, focus on observable behaviors.

### On the Defense

Now, let's talk about defensiveness. Most people say they avoid giving feedback because they don't want to hurt another person's feelings, or they're afraid the person will quit a volunteer or paid role. But what if we, the feedback provider, just don't want to deal with the person yelling, crying, being angry, or giving us the six-months-long silent treatment?

Human beings get defensive when they receive feedback. Defensiveness is a normal, natural, and even healthy response to feedback. Human beings want to be seen as competent. Negative feedback calls our competence into question and the brain reacts, defending itself. When you give feedback, your job is to tell it how you see it. The listener's job is to defend themselves. Defensiveness is a normal and predictable part of the feedback process. Instead of avoiding the person's defensiveness, plan for it. Use your notes to bring the conversation back on track when the listener takes the conversation offtrack.

You really can say anything to anyone when people trust your motives and are open to your feedback. Prepare. Make typewritten notes, practice out loud, get help when you need it, and gather your courage. You can say more than you think you can.

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# Job Interview Strategies That Make an Impression

4 tips to showcase your Toastmasters skills and land the offer letter.

By Joel Schwartzberg

If you look to the internet for job interview tips, you'll find a goldmine of resources for addressing some of the most popular questions, such as "Tell us about yourself," "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" and "Why do you want to work here?"

While this is good content advice for responding to specific questions, your overall impressions of confidence, clarity, and word economy (i.e., not being a rambler) can significantly impact the interviewer's perception of you.

So how do you nail an impression versus simply answering a question? Fortunately for Toastmasters members and other experienced public speakers, basic presentation skills can help you project these critical qualities. It may help to consider each interview answer a tiny Table Topics® speech.

Here are four classic public speaking tactics to leave your interviewer not just informed but impressed and intrigued.

## 1 Raise Your Volume

When I ask participants in my workshop to [speak more loudly](#) and then solicit reactions from the rest of the group, their feedback is remarkably consistent: They say the speaker seems more assertive, excited, authoritative, and confident. These impressions are equally admired during a job interview, so increase your usual speaking volume when answering questions. In addition to elevating your impression, you will also more effectively grab and sustain their attention.

A louder voice (but not a shout) also projects passion and excitement, which will come across as enthusiasm for the job opportunity. And for you fast talkers, raising your volume makes it harder for you to speak quickly because most people don't have enough breath to speak both quickly and loudly.

## 2 Be Concise

Given the value of your interviewers' time and the number of applicants they need to meet, they want and need you to be concise. But being concise requires

knowing the difference between "brief" and "concise." A brief communication is merely shorter (because you cut it), whereas a concise message has been boiled down to its most essential and impactful elements (because you curated it).

Answer each question directly and reduce stories and examples to their most pertinent elements to be more concise. Don't worry about making your stories riveting and loaded; focus on making them relevant and lean.

Suppose an interviewee answered the question "Tell us about a successful project you're proud of" like this:

"As the project lead, I brainstormed the idea with my team of seven in 2023, and we submitted it for approval to the department director and later to the senior vice president. After it was approved, I met with the design team, and we developed a logo, iconography, and fonts. There were many moving parts involving multiple departments, but regular check-ins kept us on track. We tested it three times with potential users and created a detailed internal and external launch plan involving all of our communication teams. After it launched, we saw public engagement increase 23%, thanks in large part to the participation of key social media influencers. Later that year, my team and I won a quarterly internal innovation award presented by the CEO and the executive team." (130 words)

Remember that your interviewers—like your public speaking audience—are not only listening to your point but digesting it, pondering it, considering its relevance, and deciding whether to write it down. So, when you load an answer with both essential and less-important details, your interviewers may miss the most impressive ones.

With all of this in mind, a better answer would be:

"I brainstormed the idea with my team in 2023 and was the project lead. There were many moving parts involving multiple departments, but regular check-ins kept us on track. After launch, we saw a 23% increase in public engagement, which was boosted by our partnership with key influencers. I'm thrilled the team received an award from the CEO for our work." (61 words)

Here is a good roadmap for keeping your stories and examples lean:

1. The purpose of the project
2. How your role contributed to the project
3. The results of the project
4. What you learned from working on the project

### 3 Speak Decisively

Be decisive in your responses to each interview question, just like you do when you deliver a speech's primary point or call to action.

When I was interviewed several years ago for a speechwriting position, I was asked whether or not I would hypothetically approve a controversial tactic.

Wrong answer: "I can see both sides."

Right answers: "I would do X because it would result in Y" or "I would not do X because it would lead to Y."

Remember, you're not an expert on the organization's work yet, so making a decisive point is more important than giving the "right answer."

### 4 Make Eye Contact

Direct eye contact with an interviewer or panel conveys confidence because it indicates high self-esteem and a commitment to purpose. By contrast, avoiding eye contact can be seen



as an indicator of nervousness, anxiety, and low self-confidence.

On video calls, direct eye contact means looking into a camera, not the grid of attendees. Speaking to a tiny dot versus a human face can feel awkward initially, but the more you practice it, the more comfortable and confident you will become.

Remember: A job interview is an opportunity to showcase your best qualities and competencies by describing and modeling them. Take

full advantage of everything you've experienced in Toastmasters and elsewhere in your public speaking journey to give yourself a valuable edge.

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**Joel Schwartzberg** is a former senior director of strategic and executive communications for a U.S. national nonprofit; a presentation coach; and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team* and *Get to the Point! Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter*. Follow him on X @TheJoelTruth.

## More Interview Tips

Now that you know how to leave your interviewer impressed, [check out these tips](#) from Eva Finn on how to inform them of your professionalism and abilities.

### Know the Answer to "Tell Me About Yourself"

The interviewer wants to get to know your personality and see if you'll be a good fit for their company and culture. Margaret Walker Scavo, president of MWS Executive Coaching, who has helped place hundreds of job seekers, wants to hear stories about who they are.

"I don't want bullet points of I can do this, I can do that. I want to know about their story. If their story sells me, I can teach them the other things," she says.

### Learn How to Think on Your Feet

Developing your impromptu speaking skills will help you gain more confidence at networking events, handle curvball questions in interviews, make new friends, and even land first dates! Table Topics will help you practice and hone this skill.

### Develop Your Soft Skills Through Passion

Make sure that you've done your research and that the company who has selected you for an interview aligns with your passions. "Liking something a lot makes soft skills easier to master," explains Chris Deninno, creative director at Innocean USA, a global marketing communications company. Passionate optimism will help you stand out and make it easy to get engaged with the work you want to do.

If you're hired, continue to express your passion—ask questions and get involved. Talk to others and show interest in work and the lives of those around you. Deninno believes this is how to master soft skills and succeed.



# Creative Club Locations

For 100 years, members have challenged themselves to speak in unique settings.

By *Toastmaster* magazine staff

**T**oastmasters' founder, Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, once said, "We learn best in moments of enjoyment." Over the years, many clubs have taken to heart the concept of learning while enjoying, and have gone to great heights, and depths, to practice speaking, and listening, in unusual environments.



In 1940, 23 members of the Downtown Toastmasters Club of Los Angeles flew in a huge transcontinental sleeper plane, piloted by Captain (and club member) Byron O'Hara.



The Madison Toastmasters Club in Madison, Wisconsin, holds a "Table Topics on Wheels" event in 1958.



Members of the Bakersfield Toastmasters Club of Bakersfield, California, hold a meeting at 14,496 feet (4,418 meters) elevation at the top of Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the contiguous United States, in 1959.



Members in Michigan conduct a meeting in 1966 in an underground mine (complete with a Toastmasters lectern).

Members of Coimbatore Toastmasters Club, along with their family members, hold an outdoor meeting in Coonoor, a hill station near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, in 2017.



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



Toastmasters in Division N, District 98, host a meeting onboard the Mazi Metro in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India, in December 2020. The meeting space allowed for social distancing protocol during the COVID pandemic, and introduced a new metro system to nearby residents.



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One of the best ways to promote your book(s) and yourself as an author is through your own website. We have developed software specifically for authors and their needs.



### Online Course

Take our online course to learn the strategies that will help make your book a best seller. For each strategy, a detailed audio and/or video explanation of the idea is included.




## 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 

We are happy to speak with you about your publishing needs.  
Call us at 978-440-8364 or visit us at <http://www.eBookIt.com>.



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