

TOASTMASTER

November 2007

Giving
Courage
Through
Encouragement

**The 3 Rs of
Evaluating:
Review, Reward
and Respond**

**Assessing Your
Evaluations**

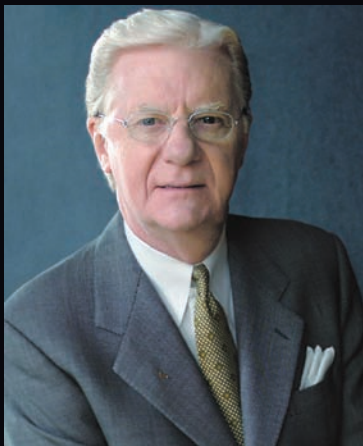
**Tall Tales are
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TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL

P.O. Box 9052 • Mission Viejo, CA 92690 U.S.A.
 (949) 858-8255 • Fax: (949) 858-1207
 Voicemail: (949) 835-1300
members.toastmasters.org

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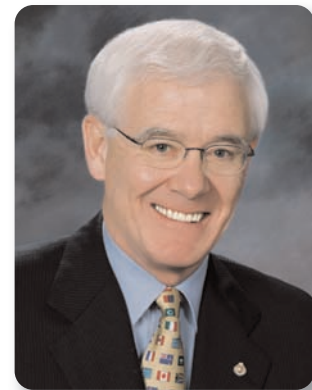
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As Toastmasters, We're “...Shaping Our World”

✦ Last month, I shared with you my thinking about my theme: Toastmasters: Shaping Ourselves... Shaping Our World, specifically the “Shaping Ourselves...” part. So what’s the “Shaping our World” piece all about? Simply stated, it’s the effect or outcome achieved when we apply externally what we have learned internally. To my way of thinking, all the communication and leadership skills we develop through Toastmasters are of limited value unless we export them to our worlds outside the Toastmasters club.

One of the most rewarding opportunities I’ve experienced recently is volunteering with the Canadian Diabetes Association. I was part of a leadership team for the creation of a Speakers Bureau. I developed a communications training plan with fellow Toastmaster Chris Fraser and later got involved in advocacy at the provincial and national levels. The ultimate aim of the Speakers Bureau was to make a difference in the lives of people living with diabetes. This is what I mean by “self-shaping” contributing to “world-shaping.”

What are your worlds outside Toastmasters, and how are you shaping them? Community associations, workplace project teams, charities, minor-league sports teams – these worlds you live in are crying out for accomplished communicators and leaders, and that’s where you, the Toastmaster, can make a big difference! Now some may think I want to turn TI into a worldwide “do-gooder” organization. Not exactly! We already do a tremendous amount of good for our members, and you and I both know that. What I am encouraging you to think about are the reasons you joined Toastmasters in the first place. It’s a safe bet you didn’t want to develop communication and leadership skills just to apply within the club. No, it’s because you had a need to shape your world, and you recognized that if you were going to be successful, you first had to shape yourself.

So when you’re out there shaping your world, let your world know how you became the confident leader, the skilled communicator that is the “new you.” You are the best marketing tool Toastmasters ever invented! Your friends, family and colleagues have observed how you have shaped yourself in order to shape your world; they’ll want a part of the action too! As our organization’s founder, Dr. Ralph Smedley, put it: *“While most of us may have entered Toastmasters to learn to make speeches, that benefit is but the beginning of the good which may come to us, and the good we may do for mankind.”* It is as true today as it was when Dr. Smedley penned those words in 1955.

Chris K. Ford, DTM
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Making the Moment Meaningful

The opening is the most important part of any speech.

By Dana LaMon, DTM

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The Toastmasters Vision:

Toastmasters International empowers people to achieve their full potential and realize their dreams. Through our member clubs, people throughout the world can improve their communication and leadership skills, and find the courage to change.

The Toastmasters Mission:

Toastmasters International is the leading movement devoted to making effective oral communication a worldwide reality.

Through its member clubs, Toastmasters International helps men and women learn the arts of speaking, listening and thinking – vital skills that promote self-actualization, enhance leadership potential, foster human understanding, and contribute to the betterment of mankind.

It is basic to this mission that Toastmasters International continually expand its worldwide network of clubs thereby offering ever-greater numbers of people the opportunity to benefit from its programs.

Rebuilding the speaker I used to be.

From Tragedy to Triumph

Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved public speaking. It came naturally to me. It took me across the globe – from sharing my experiences as an exchange student in Japan to attending college in London. As a student at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, I regularly spoke in front of large groups as a member of the Student Center Programming Board. Getting up to speak in front of a crowd was easy for me, and I relished every opportunity!

My ability to speak before others literally came to a screeching halt shortly after I began my senior year. Four sorority sisters and I were returning to Ball State after spending the day at another campus. Our driver lost control of the vehicle, and it was hit from behind by a speeding Freightliner semi-tractor. While the two girls in the front seat were able to unbuckle themselves and walk away from the crash, the three of us in the back seat weren't so lucky. Two friends, riding unbuckled, were instantly killed. I was the only survivor from the back seat.

Awaking from a coma six days after the crash, I was shocked by the changes. I had to prepare for a new lifestyle. I had sustained a traumatic brain injury, resulting in substantial memory loss. In addition, the right-hand side of my body was paralyzed, my right lung had collapsed, and I had no control over

my bodily functions. Damage to a vocal cord left me unable to speak at first. Once a confident and ambitious young college student, I now spent my days in a wheelchair, enduring the humiliation of wearing adult diapers. My self-esteem and confidence plummeted like stock values in a market crash.

It was a long, slow path to recovery, but a year and a half later, I was able to finish college. Wanting to fully regain my self-confidence, I contacted our local chapter of ThinkFirst, a brain and spinal cord injury prevention organization, and volunteered as a speaker. My first presentation was awful. I had to speak sitting at a desk at the front of a class of high schoolers, reading from note cards because my memory was so poor. I questioned whether public speaking was the right choice for me.

Later, a friend asked me to present the keynote speech at a conference for college financial aid administrators. I jumped at the chance, though wondered whether I could once again speak in front of a large crowd. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to practice before a group of co-workers prior to the conference. One was a Toastmaster, who evaluated my presentation and suggested a few areas for improvement. He encouraged me to join a Toastmasters group where I could polish my skills.

His comments gave me hope. Determined to speak without using notes, I practiced and videotaped the presentation until the repetition overcame my memory problems. The conference keynote went well. I was so excited!

Then one day, my employer, State Auto Insurance, announced it would start a Toastmasters club, and I became a charter member. As I completed my manual speeches, I gained more confidence in myself and my abilities. Table Topics scared me at first because it seemed to take forever for my brain to retrieve and organize information for a response. Repeated practice paid off! On my most recent Table Topics speech, I not only answered the question, but provided three points as support. This was a big deal for me. I didn't think it was possible, with my brain injury, to think on my feet and give an organized answer.

Over the past few years, I've also been able to put my Table Topics experience to the test. Due to my status as an unbuckled backseat survivor in a fatal car crash, my testimony was requested in support of a new seatbelt law introduced in the Indiana legislature during four consecutive legislative sessions. This new law would require seatbelt usage in every position of a vehicle, including trucks and SUVs, with a few exceptions. To say that it was

difficult to stand in front of the crowded Senate and House of Representative chambers to share my experience would be an understatement. Not only did I have to persuade legislators to support my point of view on this controversial bill, I had to answer questions from them on the spot. Thanks to my Table Topics experience in Toastmasters, I was able to think quickly on my feet and provide an answer that also reinforced why they should support the new bill. The new seatbelt law was finally passed during the 2007 legislative session, and I was extremely excited to have played a role in helping to save lives and prevent injuries similar to mine as a result of not wearing a seatbelt.

My Toastmaster experience has taken me back to areas where I feel most comfortable, which is speaking in front of large audiences. Recently, I've been invited to serve as the keynote speaker for seminars, conferences, and meetings for corporations, non-profits and associations. I'm excited to not only share my personal story but also impart some easy-to-understand methods for surviving and thriving through any challenge one may face in everyday life.



▲ Darcy Keith testifies in support of a new seatbelt law in the Indiana State Senate.

This summer, I was the keynote speaker at a luncheon attended by that co-worker who had steered me to Toastmasters. I asked if he would evaluate me once again. At the conclusion of my multi-media presentation, he had a big smile on his face. In his evaluation, he wrote, "I have to say, this presentation is lightyears ahead of the one I saw a few years ago."

Thank you, Toastmasters, for helping me regain my lost confidence. Any tarnish left by my brain injury has been polished away. Once again, speaking comes naturally to me! **T**

Darcy Keith, CC, is a member of Talking Heads Club 761 in Indianapolis, Indiana. Reach her at **Darcy@DarcyKeith.com**.

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The 3 Rs of Evaluating:

Review, Reward and Respond

By David Hobson, DTM

Another project speech draws to a conclusion and the speaker returns to her seat accompanied by a round of well-deserved applause. In a few minutes you will be introduced, rise and walk to the lectern to present your evaluation of that speech. It is your first-ever evaluation of a project speech and, naturally, you are a little nervous. What will you say and, more important, how will you say it?

Evaluations are the life blood of Toastmasters meetings; they are what keep members coming back for more. New speakers depend on them for information, help and development. Long standing-speakers need them to prevent the onset of mental rust or complacency. The evaluation process separates Toastmasters International from any other organization offering public speaking coaching.

By definition, an evaluation is “the act of considering or examining something in order to judge its value, quality, importance or condition.” It is the job of an evaluator to find value in the speech, to examine the quality of its delivery, to consider its importance to the occasion and the audience, and to reflect upon its condition as part of the speaker’s development progression. Evaluators must also add some value by offering help, support and guidance to the speaker. However, there should be no use of the “C” word – Toastmaster evaluators do not criticize – ever!

Criticism is easy; we hear it all the time in every walk of life. However, criticism is the language of cowards. Criticism is negative. Even a *critique* (a term used by

non-Toastmasters), being a critical analysis, almost sounds like a put-down. Evaluation on the other hand considers the value, the good aspects, and adds value with helpful suggestions for improvement.

For each project speech, the speaker must meet specific objectives and guidelines. The evaluator uses these to formulate a report. The verbal evaluation is a mini speech. In the two-to-three minutes

allotted to you, you must create an opening, a main body and a conclusion. You must consider the objectives of the project and establish whether they have been met. In delivering your comments, you must choose the appropriate language, voice tone, body language and facial expressions. You must find words of praise for the good elements and words of help and encouragement in identifying the areas for improvement. And, finally, you must do this in a non-threatening, supportive way.

Use the three R’s of evaluating: Review, Reward and Respond.

■ **Review.** To give the best review you can, consider the speaker’s personal goals as well as the official Toastmasters evaluation guide. While the guidelines for evaluation are beneficial, the speaker may be more interested in developing skills not listed. Before the presentation, determine with the speaker what her goals are as they relate to the project’s objectives.

In your review you should answer the question, “Did the speaker accomplish what she set out to?” If she did, publicly acknowledge that fact in the evaluation. On the

other hand, if you have doubts on this aspect, you may wish to include your comments in your written evaluation or discuss them privately with the speaker, later.

If the speaker agrees that she did not achieve her purpose, she may elect to repeat the project, though this is not required by Toastmasters. You might also offer to act as a mentor (if the speaker does not already have one) to help her make modifications to her current speech or to prepare her next presentation.

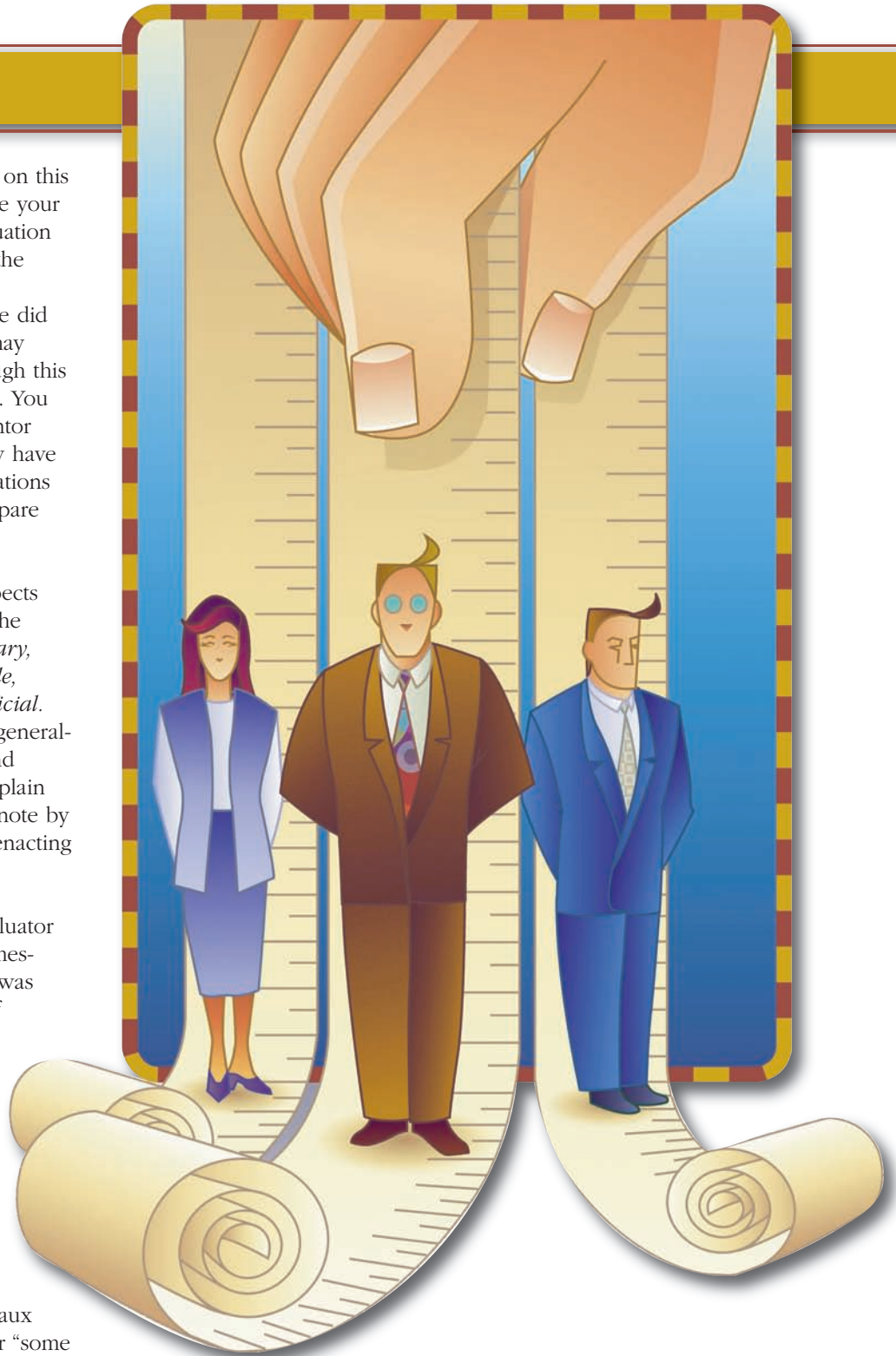
■ **Reward.** Richly praise the aspects that were particularly good in the speech. Use words like *exemplary*, *outstanding*, *effective*, *admirable*, *praiseworthy*, *pleasing* or *beneficial*. Try to avoid overuse of vague generalities such as *good*, *very good* and *excellent*. It's a good idea to explain why the aspect was worthy of note by quoting the exact words or re-enacting a gesture.

■ **Respond.** Your role as an evaluator is to respond to the speaker's message. Not by challenging what was said, but through an analysis of what you heard, what you saw and what you felt:

- ▶ **What you heard.** What words were used? Was the language descriptive and evocative? Did the speaker use *ums*, *ahs* or other fillers? Were there any grammatical goodies (alliteration or rhyming) or faux pas ("there *was* several..." or "some examples *is*...")?
- ▶ **What you saw.** Did the speaker use effective gestures and appropriate body language? What facial expressions were demonstrated? Was eye contact maintained with the audience? Did the speaker step out from, or hide behind the lectern? Did the speaker go over the allotted time?
- ▶ **What you felt.** What emotions were felt by you as a listener? What images could you see in your mind?

Were you moved to action? Could you empathize with the speaker? Did you experience happiness, sadness, anger or excitement – and did it seem like your reaction was what the speaker intended? Could you feel the speaker's passion?

By far the most important aspect for you as an evaluator is to inform the speaker of the elements which, *in*



your opinion, need to be worked on for the next assignment. You should also offer suggestions and provide examples as to how these changes can be made. At least one third of your speaking time should be devoted to dealing with the points for improvement. Failing to do so effectively negates your evaluation; you will not have met your own evaluating objectives. It is your duty to help

“Don’t forget, the evaluation is your personal opinion.”

and encourage the speaker by not only praising his good points, but also by indicating the aspects that did not work quite so well, *in your opinion*, and offering suggestions for ways to overcome the situation in the future.

Having composed your list of comments, now comes the time to walk to the lectern and deliver your message of support and development. But how will you deliver it? There are two trains of thought on the delivery style: the first-person style and the third-party style.

In the **first person style**, the evaluator addresses the comments directly to the speaker using the speaker’s name and phrases such as, “Your eye contact was direct-

ed to the left...”; “I liked your opening statement...”; “perhaps you could...”; or “I suggest you try to...” Often this approach is accompanied by direct eye contact with the speaker for 90 percent of the evaluating time. While this style may make it easier for the speaker to take note of what is being said by the evaluator (it becomes almost like a one-to-one coaching session), there are three major downsides:

1. Direct feedback in this way, particularly when talking about the points for improvement, can lead to conflict. The speaker may perceive an “I am better than you” threat from a combination of the words used and the direct eye contact, with no chance of a response as would happen in a normal coaching conversation.
2. The larger group may sense a loss of sharing. When a verbal evaluation is heard by the whole audience but is only projected directly to the speaker, everyone else feels left out of the learning element of the evaluating process.
3. The normal speaking courtesies (which are often discussed in an evaluation) are often ignored; eye contact to the whole audience, speaking to each individual, using effective body language. The process becomes a one-way conversation between the standing evaluator and the seated speakers.

What? A Standing Ovation for an Evaluation?

A few months ago, while hiking in Sedona, the red-rock country an hour and a half north of Phoenix, Arizona, I met a woman who was also a Toastmaster. When she found out I was a member of Park Central Toastmasters, she said, “I’ve heard a lot of great things about Park Central, but the one thing I’ve heard most often is, ‘If you want to experience superb evaluation, go to Park Central.’ “I was happy to hear her view because I think well-intentioned, honest, supportive, encouraging feedback accelerates the learning curve and inspires us to reach up and take risks when we speak.

Intelligent, thoughtful evaluations are unique to Toastmasters. Our friends and relatives may listen endlessly as we rehearse our speeches. They may even tolerate our spouting off spontaneously on odd topics at unexpected times. Civic involvement as well as work

Thoughts on giving an exceptional evaluation.

By Judith Tingley, Ph.D., DTM

can encourage us to learn, expand and use our leadership skills. But I know of no other settings where we can receive targeted, objective and constructive feedback on our speeches. And there are no real-life negative consequences even if the evaluation is negative – with the exception of an occasional bruised ego.

Years ago I earned the nickname “boom-boom” in my club because in one of my early evaluations of an experienced speaker, I mentioned that his speech was on a trivial topic and was boring too – a double lowering of the boom. I’ve learned since how to do a better job of

Perceptions are important and should not be overlooked. To avoid the perceived conflict and “shutting out” effect, it is better to use the **third-party style**.

In this style the evaluator addresses the comments to the whole audience and uses phrases such as, “John had a very dramatic opening”; “Jane was able to convey humor”; “I particularly liked her alliteration”; or “Did you notice how his body language helped to convey the message?”

Eye contact with the whole audience is inevitable as the evaluator projects his message to everyone. Opponents of this style may say, “You should not talk about someone while they are still in the room” or “It is impersonal to give an evaluation in such way.” While this may be true, this method works far better for the individual and the group.


By using the third-party style, you are actually singing the praises of the speaker as you address the strengths. This makes most speakers feel good about themselves in front of their peers. You can comment on their points for improvement, and everyone will learn from your suggestions. Additionally, a person being evaluated will not perceive any threat of superiority from the evaluator and will be more receptive to the feedback as she sits and listens comfortably. She won't feel that she's in the hot seat.

In summary, this style has three major advantages:

1. There can be no perception of threat or superiority.
2. The evaluator is able to share the message with the whole audience.
3. Speaking courtesies are observed as the evaluator delivers the message in a natural manner using eye contact, voice modulation, body language and, probably, some gentle humor.

Don't forget, the evaluation is *your personal opinion*. As long as your comments are given in a helpful and supportive manner, the speaker will accept your opinion. Similarly, whether you choose the first-person or third-party style is your personal choice.

Toastmasters develop into effective public speakers through a combination of practice and evaluation.

It is imperative to pass on the correct skills in order for our art to thrive. Using the techniques of reviewing, rewarding and responding will ensure that our speeches continue to improve and that every evaluation adds value. 

David Hobson, DTM, is a member of Abbotsford Sundown Toastmasters Club 965 in British Columbia, Canada. He runs training and coaching sessions on aspects of business communications. He can be reached at www.hobbitcommunications.com.

being honest and constructive rather than honest and harsh.

Most Toastmasters have their own strong ideas about how evaluations ought to be conducted, and I'm no exception. My club uses these basics to guide evaluators:

- **Call the speaker before the meeting**, find out the manual she's using, the level and the objectives of the speech as well as the speaker's particular needs related to her development.
- **Check in again the morning of the speech**. You're the coach and you need to know how your speaker is feeling, thinking, being. Be sure you have his manual so he can receive credit for the speech.
- **Be ready to give your total attention to your speaker**, even before she comes to the lectern. Clear your mind of judgments and extraneous thoughts, and tune in. Listen openly and attentively.



- **Make some notes**, but don't attempt to write the evaluation as you listen.
- **Summarize your notes**, using the objectives from the manual, and organize your evaluation as you would a speech: with an introduction, a body and a close.
- **Get ready to give the evaluation**. This is your big moment. Whoops, think again! This is the speaker's big

moment, to hear the thoughts, feelings and suggestions you have about the speech.

- **Stand up in front of your audience** as you would if you were giving a regular speech. It is one – although shorter than the typical five- to seven-minute speech. Address the general evaluator, your audience and particularly the speaker.

Here are some more tips to help you do the most valuable evaluation.

- **Focus on specifics.** “Your enthusiastic opening inspired us from the start.” “Your clear chronological organization helped us understand your speech quickly.”
- **Focus on positives.** “Your opening grabbed the audience. The audience looked mesmerized.”
- **Give concrete suggestions.** “The splashy ending might have worked better as the opening.” “Decrease the details in the stories or the number of stories you told so we could stay on track.”
- **Point out needed areas for improvement.** “This speech would have been even more effective in front of the lectern.”
- **Don’t repeat the speaker’s content.** We’ve heard it.
- **Focus entirely on the speaker,** not on yourself, your similar or different experiences, or your equally stellar qualities.
- **Focus on the speech,** not on the speaker’s personality, values or lifestyle.
- **Focus on the delivery,** not the rightness or wrongness of the content or your agreement or disagreement with the speaker’s perspective.

Two or three years ago, at Park Central Toastmasters, Lee Robert received a standing ovation for her evaluation of Frank Switzer’s contest-winning speech about sex offenders. That was a first in my years of experience as a Toastmaster. What did Lee do that made her evaluation so outstanding? What can we all learn from her success that we can use to improve our own evaluations?

- **Lee focused on the speech, the construction, the organization, the delivery.** She didn’t focus on the challenging content and tell us what Frank had told us. We heard him, loud and clear. She never talked about her opinion about sex offenders, her experience with sex offenders, sex offenders she had known, or about her perception of Frank’s opinion, his values, his personality. She focused on the speech and its delivery. She gave concrete, specific suggestions about how Frank could improve his speech, which she also briefly demonstrated.

- **Lee adapted her evaluation to the speaker.** What does that mean? She introduced her evaluation by saying, “This is an advanced evaluation for an advanced speaker.” We all knew, as did Frank, that a powerful critique was coming down the pike. As Lee said later, “If Frank is going to the regional conference, he certainly needs to be ready to hear more than a whitewash.”

Evaluators need to make an acknowledgement of the level of the speaker’s progress in the Toastmaster manuals. When the evaluator structures his or her evaluation with the manual objectives, not only the speaker, but the whole audience understands exactly what the expectations are.

The evaluation of new speakers needs to be encouraging, but not without constructive thoughts for future improvements. The evaluation of experienced speakers requires more analysis and in-depth evaluation, without whitewashing, so that they, too, are challenged to escalate their skills.

- **If in doubt, ask others.** As part of her evaluation, Lee asked us all as a group, before she stated her opinion, whether we were offended by a certain comment in Frank’s presentation. When a large number of people said they were, she commented, “Drop that part, Frank.” She didn’t give him heat for his comment. e.g. “Frank, that’s really insensitive, bad judgment or poor taste.” She just stated the obvious. “Let it go.”

Another way to do the same thing if you’re not sure about your own reaction, is to ask the people around you what they think. Did they see the organization of the speech clearly, even if you didn’t? Did they get the point early and you didn’t?

Being well and thoroughly evaluated is perhaps the biggest opportunity Toastmasters offers all of us. Most of us can’t find that feedback anyplace else. Everyone wants to improve and wants to help others improve. And I know you’ll agree, one of the very best ways to achieve that goal is to work on perfecting our evaluations.

Do your fellow Toastmasters a favor. Whether you evaluate them on paper or upfront, give each a solid evaluation, adapted to that speaker, focused on the speech, offering objective comments. Make that a goal, fellow Toastmasters, and the quality of your already great club will improve dramatically in the next year as the quality of your evaluations improves. You too, like Lee Robert, may be surprised by a standing ovation! 📌

Judith C. Tingley, Ph.D., DTM, is an author and psychologist as well as a Toastmaster for more than 20 years. Based in Phoenix, Arizona, she can be reached at drtingley@fastq.com.

By John Spaith, ACS

Maximize the help, and minimize the hurt.

A wise Toastmaster once said that if you give a speech without getting an evaluation, you might as well have given it to your car. Getting a bad evaluation can be even worse. I take evaluating others very seriously because I know firsthand just how important they are. Here, I'll share my evaluation techniques, as well as some common evaluation mistakes.

Good and Bad are Real

When you're watching someone give a speech, there are so many things to look for: Organization. Emotional appeal. Audience interaction. Vocal variety. Gestures. You have to listen, watch and take notes all at once. You shouldn't be thinking about sugar-coating your feedback because you're too busy. When I evaluate, I just write a column that says "good" and one that says "bad".

I know "bad" is a bad word in Toastmasters – to the point that I realize I risk getting kicked out for suggesting this. Certainly never tell someone they did badly! I find that writing the word *bad* on my private notes, which I never share, focuses me on being brutally honest and quick when the speaker is talking.

And it reminds me that even the best speeches have something broken in them, much better than the wishy-washy "suggestions" suggests. I've seen evaluators write out way too much in the middle of the speech they're evaluating, no doubt preparing what they're going to say later, only to miss bigger blunders the speaker makes.

The Spaith Five Box

When I take notes during the speech I'm evaluating, I divide the paper



Assessing Your Evaluations

Greetings fellow Toastmasters and those who've happened to pick up this magazine. I'm excited today to share some of the things I've learned about evaluations because, you see, when I first joined Toastmasters there were some things I needed help with from from my evaluators and..."

If you give yourself four seconds to read the above out loud, you'll get a flavor for how fast I spoke when I joined Toastmasters. This wasn't stage fright. I just naturally talk too fast and worse, never

realized it. After four years in Toastmasters I would still be Fast Johnny were it not for my stern but kindly evaluators who kept saying, "John, slow down. John, slow down. John, slow down."

into thirds. In the top third I jot down the key outline points of the speech as it goes along (whether or not the speaker made them clear). I divide the middle third into two boxes, the left side being “Content Good” and the right side being “Content Bad.”

Content Bad does not mean “Speaker hates President Bush but I love him. I’ll tell the speaker he’s wrong.” In the Content section, I refer to fundamentals of speaking, such as organization, flow or char-

acter development. If not, I change my focus. Usually I’ll have three to five comments in each of the content/delivery good/bad boxes by the end. This gets paired down to the critical points in the next stage.

Take Time to Prepare

Take a few minutes after the speech to organize the giant jumble you have into something coherent before delivering your evaluation. Circle the three good and three bad points

and delivery is reasonably balanced. If not, I change my focus. Usually I’ll have three to five comments in each of the content/delivery good/bad boxes by the end. This gets paired down to the critical points in the next stage.

Common Mistake: Regurgitation Evaluation

John, in your speech today you had three points which I’m going to repeat. Then you told a joke that I’m going to repeat and a story I’m going to repeat. I’m not going to do anything more than repeat what you’ve said. Thank you.

How many times do you get an evaluator who really does no analysis of a speech, but gives it back in book-report form? Unless the speaker got hit in the head during the break and is suffering amnesia, they don’t need this. Say why and how a speech was and wasn’t effective.

In particular, new evaluators tend to regurgitate. I’m guessing because they’re not confident yet. Just because you’re new doesn’t mean you can’t have an opinion. I’ve given the speech that inspired this article six times to five different clubs. The best feedback I received was from someone who was at his second meeting and wasn’t a member yet.

“Your job is to help the speaker. If you have an ego to satisfy, give a speech of your own.”

acter development. If you disagree with a speaker philosophically, that has nothing to do with the evaluation of his speech. The bottom third is split between “Delivery Good” and “Delivery Bad.” Because this system gives me five boxes in total and I’m egotistical, I’ve named this the Spaith Five Box.

Keeping the outline is helpful because sometimes I get so frantic in noting minutiae of a speech – such as an odd hand gesture – that I miss bigger structural flaws in it. By keeping the outline, I have something on paper to help refresh my memory. For example, suppose a speaker claims upfront to have three main points. I question that assertion and check to see if he really has four main points, or spoke 80 percent of the time on only one point. By keeping an outline of what the speaker really talks about, not just what he says he will, helps me double check this.

One of my biggest weaknesses is that I focus too much on content and not enough on delivery. So halfway through a speech, I’ll look at the Spaith Five Box and make sure that the number of notes on content

and review the outline for structural problems. Most importantly, this is when I apply the sugar-coat layer: “Bad” turns into “suggestions.” Try to make real suggestions for improvement other than just pointing out problems. And do your best to avoid some common mistakes:

Common Mistake: No Suggestions for Improvement

John, your speech was so good, Cicero would bow down before you. Perfection! There was nothing wrong with it!

I admit that I’ve never seen white wash laid so thick, but I’ve seen close. Don’t do it. Think of it like this: If the evaluators in my club never prodded me to slow down, I’d still be Fast Johnny. Where would you be without people telling you where you need to improve, never mind Toastmasters? I’m all for sugar-coating feedback, but getting an evaluation with no ways to improve is worse than giving a speech to your car. Your car won’t tell you that you’re Cicero, will it? Someone once told me when you see a speech you think was perfect, imagine you just paid

Less Common Mistake: Brady Bunch Evaluation

John, your speech about your trip to Hawaii reminded me of the Brady Bunch episode where they went to Hawaii. Remember how Peter found the haunted Tiki and Alice hurt her back on the surfboard and... Three minutes pass. Anyway that was a great episode, wasn’t it?

When I gave this presentation across my area last year, some clubs nodded their heads sadly at this point and others gave me confused looks. I hope you’re confused. Making this mistake means you are not evaluating the speech at all, but instead talking about yourself or the Brady Bunch or anything but the speaker. I’ve never seen a full three-minute digression, but I have seen it take half an evaluation.

While this is a less common mistake, it's more obnoxious than the two above. Being too nice and the regurgitation mistakes are motivated by the understandable fear of hurting the speaker's feelings. The Brady Bunch Evaluation is motivated by wanting to talk about yourself. Your job is to help the speaker. If you have an ego to satisfy, give a speech of your own. If your ego is boundless, name an evaluation scheme after yourself and publish it in the *Toastmaster* magazine.

■ **Worst Mistake: Too Harsh**

Though it may not be as common, the worst mistake by far is being too harsh in an evaluation. The horror stories of speakers never returning or even running out in tears float around this organization. This goes beyond just the evaluator's target. I know a guest who was

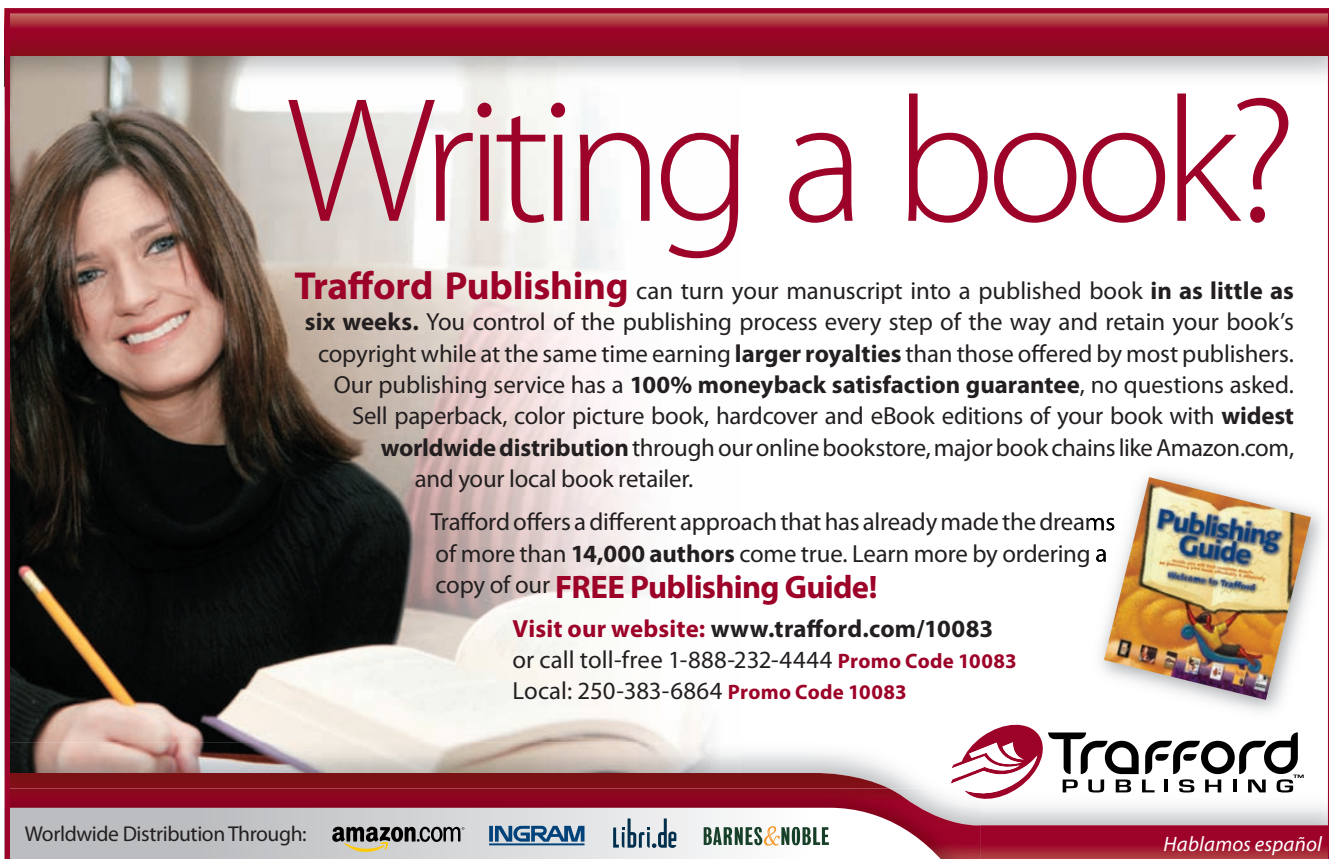
so turned off by a brutal evaluation one member gave another that she almost didn't join Toastmasters, fearing that this was typical. You're better off talking about Brady Bunch for three minutes than tearing someone to pieces.

As the saying goes: When in doubt, omit. Avoid mentioning anything outside the speaker's control. When evaluating newer speakers, don't forget the sheer terror you probably felt when you were in their shoes. For something embarrassing that absolutely needs to be called out (think of a fly being unzipped), mention it to the clueless party in private. The human ego can be a fragile thing, especially when publicly humiliated. Fortunately, most Toastmasters realize this. I estimate I have seen more than five hundred evaluations, of which only about five were too harsh.

I'm sure there are fantastic evaluators who disagree with much of what I've written. That's fine. I hope that you can incorporate at least some of what I've shared here. When you evaluate this article, please don't be harsh!

I've been helped enormously by all the feedback I've received over the years. Evaluation is ultimately not about ego or Spaitth Five Boxes and is not an analytical exercise for its own sake. It's about helping all the Fast Johnnys, Slow Billys, and Mumbling Sallys be better speakers than they were before. 📖

John Spaitth, ACS, won the District 2 Evaluation Contest in 2005. A member of Redmond 2828 Toastmasters in Washington, he writes a blog with topics of interest to Toastmasters at <http://my.spaitth.com/>

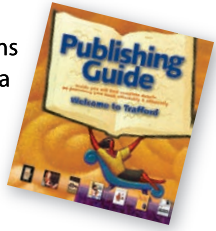


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You Must Be Kidding:

Tall Tales are a Tall Order

By Caren Neile, Ph.D., ATMS

How to be the biggest liar this side of Mars.

I was late submitting this article because the icemaker in my freezer was on the blink. It just wouldn't stop pouring out ice. Pretty soon the house was so cold that our parakeet froze solid in flight. And when I tried to boil water on the stove, the bubbles froze in the pot.

A plausible excuse for a late submission? Hardly. But it does have the makings of a good tall tale. With the Toastmasters Tall Tale Contest just around the corner and plenty of other contests and storytelling opportunities nationwide, this is a good time to brush up on this quintessentially American art form.

According to Carolyn S. Brown in *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature*, a tall tale is “a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdotes, which challenges the listener’s credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional.” In other words, because the tall tale is presented as a spontaneous reminiscence that happened either to the narrator or to an acquaintance – with true-life, ordinary details that build up almost imperceptibly to something outrageous – even listeners who hear it as fiction often play along and act as though they believe it to be true.

Perhaps it’s that semblance of truth that has made the tall tale, or whopper, so successful throughout American history. From the country’s inception, Americans have crowed about how the U.S. and its inhabitants, whether an anonymous farmer or the legendary Pecos Bill, were larger, stronger, and wilder than life. Both ordinary pioneers and celebrities from 19th-century author Mark Twain to current-day radio personality Garrison Keillor have celebrated the nation’s grandness – and the urge to tame it – with this inimitable type of story.

Not everything was rosy in the history of tall tales. For one thing, they tended to give short shrift to minorities,

women and animals. And they were not what you’d call eco-friendly. But the 18th and 19th centuries were different times, and today, most examples of the genre are as inclusive and respectful as they are fun. Tall tales are regularly shared throughout the United States at what are known as liars’ contests. Some of the most well-known of these are in West Virginia, Nebraska, Florida, Indiana, California – and of course Texas, which, like a certain well-known burger chain, could be called the Home of the Whopper.

Perhaps the most common example of a tall tale is heard almost every day at docks and fishing holes throughout the land. My favorite traditional “fish tale” concerns the storyteller’s having become so attached to a prize catch that she taught it to walk, only to have it subsequently drown when she gave it swimming lessons!

In the rules for the Toastmasters Tall Tale Contest, one of the event’s primary goals is listed as “to provide participants with the opportunity to create an original, highly improbable, humorous tale.” Before you throw your hat in the ring, here are a few suggestions to bear in mind:

First and foremost, the tall tale must be a story, that is, a sequence of related events with a beginning, middle and end, characters and action. It can’t just be a shopping list of absurd details. That said, it doesn’t have to follow a particular structure. It can be based on traditional tales you’ve heard; on actual, if unusual events; or on your own imagination.

The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration. The most common types of exaggeration include size, abilities such as intelligence or strength, or the

aggressiveness of animals or weather. But exaggeration isn't all that's required. The teller should also compare things, says Brown, in a concrete and comical way. That includes making animals seem human, as in the fish tale above.

Here's an excerpt from a tall tale called "Mississippi Mosquitoes," retold by S.E. Schlosser, on americanfolklore.net:

A visitor to Mississippi decided to take a walk along the river in the cool of the evening. His host warned him that the mosquitoes in the area had been acting up lately, tormenting the alligators until they moved down the river. But the visitor just laughed....

As he promenaded beside the flowing Mississippi, he heard the whirling sound of a tornado. Looking up, he saw two mosquitoes descending upon him. They lifted him straight up in the air and carried him out over the river....

You'll notice that the mosquitoes are compared to a tornado, and the way they carry off their victim likens them to vultures – big ones at that!

And now, a word about performance. While it helps to be a comic actor, the best tall tale tellers use a deadpan style that helps to lend an air of believability to even the craziest story. It's okay to laugh at the end of the tale to assure your audience you're not losing your mind, but you may also choose to sum up by insisting that

“The secret to a good tall tale is exaggeration.”

every word you said is true, or by inviting listeners to check out the evidence.

Tall tales should come across as stories of the common people, not highbrow literary creations. It's helpful to speak in short, simple sentences, with pauses, vocal variety, variations of rhythm and timing, and all your other good speaking skills. Make your images sharp and easy to imagine. Use comic understatement. That is, when you say something absurd, don't overplay it; let the details speak for themselves. Overall, remember, your goal is not to inform, inspire or touch, but to amuse.

Bil Lepp: The Liars' Liar

You don't need to take my word for any of this. If you want to learn the truth about lying, there's no better expert than Bil Lepp, a nationally renowned performer and five-



Storyteller Bil Lepp in action at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee.

time champion of the West Virginia's Liars' Contest. Lepp is an award-winning storyteller, author, and recording artist, whose release *"The Teacher in the Patriotic Bathing Suit,"* recently received the coveted Parent's Choice Award. Says Bil, "Everywhere I slept, I've lied."

I first heard Bil perform several years back at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee. He told a tale called "Buck Ain't No Ordinary Dog" from his CD of the same title. The story, which can also be found in his book *The Monster Stick and Other Appalachian Tall-Tales*, features an image I will never forget: someone hanging from a speeding train by his frozen tongue.

I recently asked Bil for his advice about creating a tall tale.

"My best advice is to start with something true," he said. "Most of my tales are based on things that have happened to me, or someone I know. I start with the

truth, and stay true, or plausible, as long as I can, to lure the audience in.

“As far as presentation goes, I stick with Mark Twain’s advice: You have to tell the story like you believe every word, and you don’t get why the audience is laughing. I try very hard to keep a straight face on stage. I also let the story do the work. I have some gestures and movements when I tell, but I try and keep my feet in one place, to avoid ‘acting’ out the story.”

The most common pitfall to creating tall tales, according to Lepp, is too much jargon.

“I’ve seen people write tales about sailing or flying that might be very good,” he explained, “but are so full of technical language that Popeye and Chuck Yeager would leave scratching their heads. Write what you know, but make sure it’s also something somebody else knows. That’s why I stick to dogs, trains, and kids as subjects. Everybody knows about those things.”

Finally, Bil’s typical set-up for a tall tale is a simple, believable situation or statement, such as “I have a dog.”

“Everybody can understand that; everybody knows what a dog is,” he said. “There are no dog agnostics. Then I’ll do a few jokes, sort of like one-liners, to let the audience know that this is supposed to be fun. After that, I set the stage for what is going to happen in the tale. Then I start my gradual exaggeration, building

slowly toward where the story takes off completely from the world of possibility.”

Once the story takes off, Lepp explains, he can go anywhere with it, as long as he stays true to the context he’s established. The end of the tale usually ties back into the beginning of the story in some manner. To find out more about Bil, **visit www.buck-dog.com**.

Before creating your own tale, you may want to familiarize yourself with collections of tall tales online or in libraries until you’re fairly comfortable with the form. Most of all, have fun, both during the writing and the telling of your story. As with most other storytelling and speaking, don’t try to memorize more than your opening and closing lines. Let the images run through your head like a movie, and describe them as you see them.

The last time I did that, the audience laughed so loud the building collapsed around our ears. They were still laughing as we climbed out of the rubble. As a matter of fact, I think I hear them laughing now. **T**

Caren S. Neile, Ph.D., ATMS, directs the South Florida Storytelling Project at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. An ATMS and a CL in West Boca Toastmasters, she is 10 feet tall and wins first, second and third place in every contest she enters. She can be reached at **cneile@fau.edu**. Really.



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Paris Hilton Enters Speech Contest!

† *In an effort to repair her tarnished reputation and speak on her own behalf, heiress Paris Hilton has joined a local Toastmasters club!*

She was seen recently as a guest of Richard Stewart at the Renaissance Speakers Toastmasters Club in Hollywood, where she said she intends to enter Toastmasters' District 52 Tall Tale's Contest.

If you find the above paragraphs incredible, but somehow possibly true, you now know the flavor and spirit of a good tall tale. Of course, some tall tales I have heard are *impossibly* true, but the sincerity and delivery of the speech made you wonder...

So what is a tall tale? I can explain it better by telling you what the *Los Angeles Times* wrote about me in 1989 when I won the District 52 Tall Tales Contest: "Richard Stewart is the biggest liar in Los Angeles." Yes, I was somewhat ambivalent about that title.

So in short, a Tall Tale is a big lie, the more creative and believable the better. If you find yourself having fun while telling it, you are on the right track.

One secret to success in delivery is staying in character. A good actor

knows this. If you break character by laughing at your own incredibility, you quickly lose the spirit of belief in your tale. Another key ingredient for a winning tale is embellishment and details, details, details. I think I accomplished this in my 1989 Tall Tales contest speech:

It was mid-December; I was in the air, 2000 feet above Normandy, France, 1945. Sure I was only four years old, but I was big for my age, and besides, I was sort of proud of the fact that I was the youngest fighter pilot working for General Patton.

Later when I "had to bail" and my parachute wouldn't open, I was able to embellish more:

The rip cord didn't open! I looked down and I started to panic. I saw the ground racing up before me! I knew I was going to die! I started crying like a three-year old.

In another contest I secured some credibility by calling on my (pre-arranged) lawyer in the audience. I asked him to stand up and simply raise his hand when I mentioned him. I also warned the audience that my "testimony" was being video

taped for evidence (and pointed to the real camera filming me). I then went on to say how Toastmasters ruined my life and I was filing a class action law suit against them. (You had to be there...).

One of my favorite tall tales was given by a district winner in Orange County, California. He spoke of his grandfather who had a wooden peg leg. The grandfather worked hard as a farmer and would use his wooden peg to stomp the fields and plant corn. Well, they were so poor, when the grandfather died, they couldn't afford a coffin. To save money they just took Grandpa to the back 40, stuck his peg leg in the dirt, held his arms out and screwed him into the ground.

I hope my brief notes here inspire you to dive into your district's tall tales contest! If you do, let me know. I'll bring Paris as a guest and come hear you! 📺

Richard Stewart, DTM, is the founding president of Renaissance Speakers in Hollywood, California. He has won three District Tall Tales contests and three District Humorous Contests. And that is no Tall Tale!



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When partners in crime give a speech that's divine...

Also, the cues have to be well-planned, and it's best if you say them verbatim. Although you can ad-lib a bit during the speech, you cannot ad-lib cues, or you'll run the risk of confusing your skill and ruining your scheme.

Just how do you impact the audience? Most speeches are pretty straightforward. However, sometimes you want to add humor, or drive a point home without sounding preachy or self-righteous (especially if the speech topic is something you feel strongly about). Your skill can make this happen for you. For example, when I performed the "Make 'Em Laugh" speech from *The Entertaining Speaker* manual in the *Advanced Communication Series*, I wanted to explore what makes comedy funny to us, but it seemed silly to stand up there and lecture about the rules of comedy. I imagined the audience members nodding off in their coffee while I blathered on and on...zzz.

So I decided to act out comedy in the form of improv, (à la "Whose Line Is It Anyway?") and planted a skill... well, actually I planted two skills. (Pay attention now – this is advanced stuff!)

The first skill became my partner in an improv game with a pre-planned ending. We decided to play a game in which the audience calls out the emotions or behaviors of the players. For example, we start the scene and I am "crazy." Then a member claps, we freeze, and that member calls out, "Kris, joyful." We then pick up the scene right where we left off, except that now I act joyfully.

Planting a Skill in the Audience

Music doesn't do much for people," I began, sinking into the rhythm of my speech.

"Balderdash!" someone yelled – my guest no less – interrupting me.

"Shh, Nate! I'm doing a speech here..."

"Well, you're wrong about music!" And then he walked on to the stage with his guitar, sat down, and began to play. My audience was unprepared for this – you should have seen the looks on their faces! But soon, they realized I had tricked them, and that Nate's act was a part of the speech. They relaxed and had a lot of fun as we "played" them.

Yes, planting a skill in the audience is a sneaky trick. But when used properly, that person can really help you maximize the impact of your message.

Well, that's all fine and dandy, but how do you do this, and do it well? It will require careful planning to pull it off and make it look unplanned, but it is well worth the effort.

First, decide who to use. In the above example, I brought in someone from the outside so I could come up with a legitimate excuse for the presence of a guitar at our regular Toastmasters meeting. However, most times you need to use someone within the group so that no one will suspect your deception. In that case, choose someone close to you and swear that person to secrecy. The key is that you must rehearse together at a time and place away from your meeting. Toastmasters are a savvy group, and they will notice you rehearsing in the hallway!

Obviously, I could not guarantee which emotions the audience would choose or in what order. Enter, my second skill. I chose a friend who had acting experience to set up the moment. She waited until the light turned green (which was her cue) and then she called out my partner's name and switched her to "rage." That was *the* cue. My improv partner picked up a cake (also a skill in the form of a prop) and smashed it directly in my face.

It was perfect! The audience was shocked, and there were even some screams! They laughed and yelled so loudly that the manager of the restaurant poked her head in to see what was wrong.

While this is an extreme example, you can see how a skill can make it much easier for you to execute your speech. My point in this example was unsaid but nonetheless made: An unexpected twist makes comedy effective. Saying the words just doesn't have the same impact as leaving a Toastmasters meeting with frosting in your ears.

If you are delivering a professional speech for an organization, planting a skill is a bit trickier. Also, I would not recommend the cake idea.

So what to do? If you bring someone from the outside, you must have a plausible reason for them to be present. The easiest way is to introduce your companion as the person who will help you demonstrate your points. This can be a highly effective way to make your point quickly, or to instruct the audience in exactly what you want them to do without

Above all, be sure your skill is poised enough to handle the job. I have made the mistake of choosing a skill that I thought would rise to the occasion. What happened was every speaker's nightmare – he didn't react to his cue. I even blatantly signaled him and he still remained lost in a fog, forcing me to ad-lib an ending. So I learned:


“Show, don't tell, and you'll have the audience eating out of your hand.”

that long, tedious explanation. Show, don't tell, and you'll have the audience eating out of your hand.

Your companion can also assist you with answering questions, passing out materials, changing slides or transparencies, and even manning your back room sales table.

Another tactic is to ask someone in a corporate audience – perhaps your introducer? – to help start the ball rolling during a Q&A session. Give them a planned question or two to ask. The people who are paying you for your expertise might actually appreciate this thoughtful gesture and consider you quite the smart one.

Be sure you've have prepared for any and all disasters and have a contingency plan ready to go.

There is definitely an art to skill-planting, but it can be a highly useful tool in your bag of speaking tricks. Use it sparingly and wisely. Plan it out carefully and it will serve you well. 

Kristen Johnson, ACB, CL, is a freelance writer, professional speaker, improv performer and active member of Hardhats Toastmasters in San Diego, California. Reach her at writeandspeak2@yahoo.com.

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Meet Toastmasters' 2007 World Champion of Public Speaking: Vikas Jhingran.

Answering the Swami's Question

Ask 2007 World Champion of Public Speaking Vikas Jhingran about developing and delivering an award-winning speech, and he'll tell you to simply look inside yourself and follow your passion.

"There's really no rocket science involved. It's all about being true to yourself, tapping into your strengths and working hard," says Jhingran, 34, a native of Morabadad (a suburb of Calcutta), India. His award-winning speech, "The Swami's

Question," combined humor with a personal tale of being a not-so-motivated student in India. His parents took him to the village wise man, or swami, to motivate him to get his grades up, and the swami asked him to answer the question: "Who am I?" Jhingran did, his grades improved, and he eventually was admitted to the graduate school of his dreams, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he is currently a doctoral candidate in Ocean Engineering.

His speech turned the swami's question around and asked the contest audience to answer that question for themselves. Jhingran explained, "Our lives are often so busy, we don't take time to know ourselves – our goals, our dreams, our weaknesses or strengths... This is the story of how excellence is in all of us, if we just stop and listen to ourselves every day so that we align our actions outside with who we are inside."

A Toastmaster since October 2002, Jhingran completed his first 10 speeches within eight months, and entered speech contests soon after joining.

"I didn't do very well in the competitions early on, but I learned from every one of them, which

helped me improve and reach the championship level," he says. He is a member of the Humor and Drama Club and Toastmasters at MIT, which both meet on campus. "Entering as many competitions as possible is the best way to improve your speaking skills and gives you a vehicle for practicing the same speech until it's the best it can be."

Jhingran grew up in a country where public speaking is not encouraged in the educational system. Soon after coming to the United States for a graduate degree at Texas A&M University, however, he learned how beneficial speaking up for yourself can be.

"For eight years I worked for a company in Houston that designed oil rigs, and while I liked the job, I didn't like the fact that when presentation time came around, the work of junior engineers like myself was presented by individuals who were better at public speaking," says Jhingran. "When I asked if I could make the presentation about my own work, I was told that I needed better speaking skills."

Jhingran started his journey to world class public speaking with a three-month course at the Dale Carnegie Foundation. While the experience taught him about speaking and leadership skills, the best part was hearing about Toastmasters.

"Vikas joined Toastmasters as soon as he heard about it and began giving the organization his best effort," says his wife, Anjali



Vikas Jhingran with his World Championship of Public Speaking trophy.

Jhingran, who is a member of the Arthur D. Little Club in Cambridge. “Vikas is very passionate and driven about what he does, and he was no different with Toastmasters,” she says.

By the time Jhingran made the decision to pursue the world championship title, he had won a wide variety of regional and district speeches. But he still felt that he had a lot to learn.

“I picked up some very important lessons as I prepared for the championship contest,” says Jhingran. “For instance, I discovered that the process of getting and giving feedback is highly underrated, but very critical to the speech crafting process. Toastmasters teaches you to spot your weaknesses and ask for specific feedback and then maximize that feedback by identifying what will work for you and applying it.”

Perhaps one of the most critical lessons Jhingran learned while preparing his speech is the importance of staying true to his own speaking style.

“Many speakers never really spend the time to understand what their speaking style is, and as a result they don’t understand what their strengths and weaknesses are,” he says. “There are many ways to get to the top. My question is, What is your way? An effective speech has to be written to your strengths. For instance, for someone like me, the strength is in the writing and the content of the speech, not so much in the dramatics and moving around the stage.”

When you know your strengths as a speaker and the best style for you, you are comfortable enough to establish a connection with the audience, which is your most important task, Jhingran says.

“A good speaker uses words and gestures to establish an emotional connection with the audience,” says Jhingran. “Being able to successfully transport the audience to that emo-

tional point makes the difference between winning or losing.”

Jhingran has found that one key to making an emotional connection with the audience is leading them from a very funny moment to a very profound one, which is a technique he mastered when he spoke about visiting his village swami in India and learning to meditate, followed by asking the audience to be introspective and answer the swami’s question, “Who are you?”

“Rather than instruct the audience about what to do, I wanted to leave them with a strong urge to look inside and figure out what they

“My hope is that my winning will encourage people who are shy or have an accent to realize that they can do it, too.”

really wanted to do with their lives,” he says.

Mary Agnes Mallowney is a charter member of Toastmasters at MIT and reigning District 31 evaluation champion. She coached Jhingran during his speech preparation. “Vikas is a very powerful speaker,” she says. “The first time I saw him talk, I was mesmerized. As an ocean engineer, he spoke about waves and the dynamics of tsunamis. He expertly shared technical information, while weaving a story and making the subject come alive in a way that made me think: He belongs on an international stage, and I wasn’t talking about the Toastmasters International Speech Contest.

“I thought of how an ocean engineer with his vision and speaking ability could change the world. Vikas incorporates storytelling, fables and parables. His speeches aren’t linear, or the predictable ‘you can improve your life’ messages. His presentations pack a powerful, philosophical punch.”

Since she also works at MIT, Mallowney often ran into Jhingran

in the hallways, where he would ask for feedback on his speech.


“Throughout the process, he remained totally committed to the truth of his speech and the importance of the audience grasping that truth and being changed by it,” she says.

Like any good speaker, Jhingran worked hard on perfecting his message and elicited the help of other Toastmasters along the way. “Vikas sought out practice time with a variety of clubs and audiences,” says Ruth Levitsky, a fellow member of the Humor and Drama club at MIT. “It was fascinating to hear

him refine his message and discover what he wanted to say. From watching his progress, I learned that to give your best to the audience, you must carefully consider what it is you want to give them.”

When it’s all said and done, Jhingran is not only happy about the championship, but also encouraged about the impact he has made on other Toastmasters.

“I am the first Toastmaster from Asia to win as well as the first person whose second language is English,” he says. “My hope is that my winning will encourage people who are shy or have an accent to realize that they can do it, too.”

In the future, Jhingran hopes to use his speaking skills to advance his career. “Now I can be the one to describe my own research and accomplishments,” he says. He is also interested in developing his leadership skills and will be seeking out opportunities to grow in that area. 

Julie Bawden Davis is a freelance writer based in Southern California. Reach her at Julie@JulieBawdenDavis.com



Making the Moment

Meaningful

By Dana Lamon, DTM

▲ General session presenter Jeff Crilley (bottom left) asks audience members at the 2007 International Convention to blow bubbles to illustrate a point in his speech about creative publicity ideas.

As an administrative law judge for 26 years, I have heard and written decisions in about 6,400 cases. My unscientific estimate is that in about 95 percent of them, I knew what I would decide before the hearing was over. After 19 years in Toastmasters and 16 years as a professional speaker, I have learned that the audience, too, will make quick decisions. They will judge a speaker and his or her speech well before the presentation is done.

The opening is the most important part of any speech.

That is why I have come to believe that the most important part of my speech is the opening. It is more than just a matter of beginning with punch, which refers more to the delivery. It is about providing solid evidence as the basis for the listener to make his or her decisions. Three of four crucial decisions the audience will make are based on the speaker's opening.

Here are the issues each member of the audience will decide:

- Am I going to listen?
- Am I going to benefit from what is said?
- Will it be valuable enough to take with me?
- Am I going to act on what I hear?

If you, the speaker, want to make your presentation meaningful for your audience, you must convince them to make Yes! decisions to these four questions, and you must do so early. The audience will make their decisions in the first minute or two of your presentation.

Am I Going to Listen?

The answer to this question will be the first decision your listener makes. If the answer is No, nothing else you say will matter. If this happens when you're giving a six-minute speech in your Toastmasters club, your supportive fellow Toastmasters will grin and bear it and give you another chance the next time you are on the schedule. But if it occurs in a heart-to-heart talk with your daughter, an interview for a new position at your job, or a 45-minute presentation at a training conference, you've created a disaster you may never be able to clean up.

You are more likely to get a "No, I'm not going to listen" decision if you start your presentation with:

- **Thanking the person** who introduced you for "that lovely introduction." This often-feigned expression of gratitude is about the speaker, not the audience. Besides, the phrase is trite, overused and lacks sincerity.
- **Thanking the program planners** or "the people who made it possible." Again, this expression of thanks is not about the audience but about specific organizers.
- **Noting the presence of certain people in the audience.** When you focus your attention on only certain people, you leave out others. Those others – the majority of your audience – is likely to decide No on listening to you. Why should they care about you when you have given indication that you don't care about them?
- **A joke that is too familiar**, poorly told, not relevant or not funny. This way of opening your presentation suggests to the listener that you are about to give them something they've heard before, won't be relevant or well-presented.
- **"My name is ..."** or **"The title of my speech is ..."** Such openings communicate that your presentation is about you and not the audience.

There are many ways to open your presentation and obtain a "Yes, I'm going to listen" reaction from the audience. You can use a story that is humorous or suspenseful, ask a question, recite a poem or noteworthy quotation, make a bold assertion, or even sing. The key is that whatever you do, focus on the audience. Your objective is to provoke thought and/or stimulate emotion. You've got the bodies in the room. What you must do with your opening is to gain their hearts and minds.

"You've got the bodies in the room. What you must do with your opening is to gain their hearts and minds."

Am I Going to Benefit From What is Said?

You cannot get a Yes! to this second question if you didn't get a Yes! to the first. You'll be talking just to fill up your scheduled minutes while you waste the time of those who have decided that their minds will be on something else.

To get your audience to see the benefit to be gained from listening to you, you must clearly and concisely state the purpose of your presentation. If the purpose is not evident from the title of your talk, you must state it in your opening.

In general, the purpose of your speaking should be for the audience to learn something, think something, feel something, and possibly do something. Specifically it can be represented in assertions or questions such as:

- "Want to know how to make a million while sleeping?"
- "Beneficial health care services must be made available for all citizens of this country."
- "I am convinced that where I stand now is the happiest place on earth."
- "It is better to give bad advice than no advice at all to your child."

As you prepare your talk, condense its purpose into one sentence, so if a news reporter asks, "What will you talk about this afternoon?" you can answer with a clear and concise statement that you'd be proud to see as a headline in tomorrow's paper. Once you have such a statement, put it in your speech several times, particularly in the opening and in the conclusion. Then when the reporter asks an audience member, "What did the speaker talk about this afternoon?" the person interviewed will give the same answer you gave.



Having a clear statement of purpose in your speech does not guarantee that everyone in the audience will see a benefit, but it does guarantee that everyone will be able to make an informed decision as to its benefit.

Will It Be Valuable Enough to Take with Me?

Do you know what facilitates your going into the store and walking out with what you went to buy? Organization. A retailer organizes products on the shelf or in a display case to make it easy for you to find what you need and walk out with it. The same concept applies to an oral presentation. It is not enough that you offer a benefit. You must organize the content to make it easy for your listeners to pick out what they need and take it with them. One sign that the audience has decided that there is something of value to take with them is their taking notes.

The decision to take notes or commit to memory what the speaker has to say is made early from the speaker's setting forth his or her outline. This is where specifics are important.

A statement included in the opening such as, "Let me share with you five ways to..." helps the listener decide if there is something of value to take with her or him. First, it indicates that something substantive will be offered. Second, the elements of the presentation will be identifiable, with clear transitions, so the audience will be able to distinguish one point from another. Third, having the number helps the listener decide whether to use memory or pen and paper.

If what you said is embedded in the listener's memory or written down, he or she can then take it and refer to it later.

"The purpose of your speaking should be for the audience to learn something, think something, feel something, and possibly do something."

The only people for whom this third issue matters are those who have said Yes! to listening and Yes! to expecting a benefit. It would be a shame to disappoint this portion of your audience by not presenting an organized talk that clearly identifies the substance of your message. These people are already in your corner, and you don't want to lose them.

Am I Going to Act On What I Hear?

The people who will say Yes! to this fourth question are the people for whom your presentation was planned and presented.

They've decided to listen, to glean something from your speech, to write it down or commit it to memory, and now to act. The Yes! to action decision is the one that will be made at the conclusion of your presentation. Hence, you ought to conclude with a clear statement of what action you seek to induce. Don't expect the audience to figure out the purpose you had in mind.

Inducing action is more than just making the listener feel good. It is more than just presenting a strong conclusion to incite a standing ovation. When you look for a standing ovation, you have turned your focus away from the audience and onto yourself. Action will occur when you have specified the action, you have given a reason to act, and you have built up the audience's confidence about taking action. When you conclude your speech having brought these three elements together, the listener will want to pop up out of his or her seat and shout Yes!

This article is not about the content of your speech. That is something on which you must decide. Instead, it's about what the audience will decide from listening to what you have to say. If you want to make your presentation meaningful to the listener, you must present your content in such a way to persuade a Yes! to decisions about listening, seeing a benefit, taking value and acting on it. The decisions the audience makes in the first couple of minutes of your presentation will determine whether or not your presentation is meaningful for your audience. **T**

Dana LaMon, DTM, is an Accredited Speaker and Toastmasters' 1992 World Champion of Public Speaking. He is a member of four Toastmasters clubs in Lancaster, California. Contact him at dana@danalamon.com.

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*“Those who are lifting the world upward and onward
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– ELIZABETH HARRISON

It was the most humiliating moment of my life! As a representative of one of the world’s largest insurance companies, I was asked to speak before an association of tiny insurance companies in Illinois. Only minutes into my presentation, however, fear gripped me with such force, I struggled for breath and trembled noticeably. I could not continue, so I sat down, drowning in shame and despair.

Why this particular attack of stage fright far surpassed any I’d ever felt is not important. What happened, however, as a result of that experience nearly 30 years ago changed my life. I had hit bottom, and yet those people who saw my meltdown accepted me into their organization without reproach. And what’s more, they showed me through words and kindness the power of encouragement.

A definition of encouragement is “instilling with courage and hope.” That’s how it worked for me, because the support I received from that audience of insurance company employees enabled me to challenge my fear of speaking, and this led to my discovery of Toastmasters. Soaking up encouragement simultaneously in both organizations enabled me to

take risks and to grow as a communicator and as a person.

I progressed as a speaker, and the small rural insurance companies in the association provided the first opportunities for me to give humorous and inspirational talks outside my Toastmasters club. This led to opportunities to speak for diverse audiences in several states. A highlight was when I spoke, years ago, at the national convention of the same insurance association I had faced and failed years earlier. I told 900 people that day how much the encouragement from their peers had empowered me.

It was in Toastmasters, however, that I most felt the value of encouraging others. Having battled through anxiety, self-doubt and disappointment, I felt especially attuned to the need for encouragement in my fellow Toastmasters members. Encouraging others came naturally for me.

Opportunities to encourage others abound in our clubs and at other Toastmasters events. For example, when a contestant named John Hutchins gave a powerful speech in a local speech contest, I sensed he was very disappointed and discouraged at not winning. Even though he belonged to another club and I

did not know him well, I wrote him a letter telling him that I had experienced similar disappointments but had used these as motivation to prove myself as a speaker. More important, however, I stressed all of the positive traits he had going for him and encouraged him to continue his quest to be an outstanding speaker.

John really blossomed as a Toastmaster, serving in numerous offices in District 54, including district governor, before moving to Wisconsin where he earned his DTM and served as a district governor again. John and I became reacquainted in 2000 at a Toastmasters region conference in Peoria, Illinois, where he introduced me as the keynote speaker. In doing so, he pulled from his pocket a crumpled sheet of paper and read it – it was the letter I had sent him more than a decade earlier. He told how my letter had contributed to his resolve to succeed in Toastmasters.

Tragically, in 2003 John died in an auto accident. Soon afterward, I learned that he was an encourager. Various articles in his club newsletters attested to this. An article in the Allis Chalmers club 189 newsletter by DTM Kathy Shine credits John’s mentoring for much of her personal and professional growth. She said John “saw something that nobody else had seen” and encouraged her to accept new challenges.

Although I have no way of knowing how much that letter of mine actually influenced John, the mere possibility that it had an impact is affirming for one who believes that those who are encouraged tend to become encouragers.

Often, we do not get to see the results of the encouragement we give, and we should not expect to. However, there's much reason to give it anyway. Author George M. Adams says: *"Note how good you feel after you have encouraged someone else. No other argument is necessary to suggest that we never miss the opportunity to give encouragement."*

Mastering the Art of Encouragement

Consider being a mentor if you have the experience. This is a structured and proven way of providing encouragement. However, everyone needs encouragement, so you can be a regular encourager in Toastmasters. To do this, you should be:

- **Intentional.** Offering encouragement takes extra effort and a sense of purpose. It doesn't happen accidentally. Listen carefully and pay attention to cues such as body language as well as words. Assume that it is your responsibility and privilege as part of being a Toastmaster and be alert for opportunities, not only at regular club meetings but also at other occasions. For example, say something kind when you've seen a person speak at a special event, such as a contest or conference.
- **Empathetic.** Be especially attentive to the needs of others. What did it feel like when you gave your Ice Breaker or tried a new role for the first time? Were you ever embarrassed, disappointed or discouraged? Think about how you felt. Did someone encourage you? If not, imagine how encouragement might have helped. Use these thoughts to help



you detect who needs encouragement and how to give it. Keep in mind that even the most experienced Toastmaster still needs approval and support.

- **Specific.** Follow the basic guidelines for an effective evaluation. Don't just say, "Good job!" Provide details, especially concerning progress. Showing someone that you're paying attention can be encouraging in itself. Offer suggestions and remember that constructive criticism can be as inspiring as compliments.
- **Sincere.** One way to show your sincerity is to offer feedback more than just once, for as long as you sense there's a need. But don't dole out unmerited praise or flattery. Don't exaggerate a person's competence or potential. Being believable will help to build trust.
- **Prompt.** Respond as soon as possible, preferably face-to-face. Making affirming comments publicly, when appropriate, can compound the positive effect. Providing a brief written comment at the end of the meeting may be helpful too.

- **Thorough.** Following up by writing a detailed letter of encouragement can really uplift a speaker. E-mail is also a suitable method for doing this. Putting words in writing not only reinforces oral comments but it also provides a bonus – a tangible document that the recipient can save and refer to for needed encouragement.

- **Creative.** Use your imagination when giving feedback or support. You might, for example, seek recognition for someone's achievements by writing an article in a club newsletter or a congratulatory note to the person's employer or supervisor. (But be sure to ask the person's permission first.) You might also send a greeting card or some token that expresses a sentiment.

Once, after I had an especially trying time during a meeting, someone sent me, anonymously, a single yellow rose with a note of encouragement. It made my day! Let's do the same for others. **T**

Jerry Parsons, DTM, is a member of Emerson Street Speaker Club 1668 in Bloomington, Illinois.

Planning TI's Future...

The Board of Directors met in August during the International Convention and made the following decisions:

Board Action:

- As part of the governance reshaping, the Board discussed the role, personal attributes, basic qualifications, tasks and tools of the proposed position of region specialists.
 - ▶ The region marketing specialist would assist district leaders in enhancing the performance of clubs through training and assistance in club extension and retention and membership building.
 - ▶ The region education specialist would assist district leaders in enhancing the performance of clubs via training and assistance in achieving educational awards, training club and district officers, conducting conferences and helping all clubs meet member needs.
- In preparation for governance reshaping, the Board:
 - ▶ Brainstormed the composition, nomination procedures and use of surveys and other tools for the International Leadership Committee, which will be responsible for nominating officer and director candidates.
 - ▶ Proposed creating an International Director Candidate Survey, similar to the International Officer Candidate Survey, to assist the International Leadership Committee in nominating candidates.
 - ▶ Confirmed that all elections will take place at the International Convention and, ideally, will be contested. Drafted a campaign timeline and discussed campaign



The Board of Directors in action at the International Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, in August.

- ▶ policies for both nominated and floor candidates.
- Reviewed the proposed budget for fiscal year 2008 and recommended approval.
- Approved a request for funding to renovate office space at World Headquarters. This funding will be allocated from the portion of reserves designated for infrastructure improvements.

During the Annual Business Meeting at the International Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, delegates voted on and passed by more than the required two-thirds vote the proposed amendment to the Bylaws of Toastmasters International that would result in removal of the member dues amount from the Bylaws of the organization.

The new policy of setting dues requires the Board to review membership dues every three years beginning in 2009, resulting in smaller and more incremental increases than in the past.

The revised Bylaws of Toastmasters International can be found on the TI Web site at members.toastmasters.org and search for Bylaws.

- Reviewed membership data and growth trends relative to the formation of boundaries for regions worldwide.
- Brainstormed how district processes and structures could be improved with two key objectives in mind:
 - a. Increase alignment from the club level through the district level and on to the international level of the organization.
 - b. Create a structure and processes that will help solve problems with the current system, such as accountabilities at the leadership level, political friction among the district officers and short-term focus.
- ▶ Reviewed the hierarchy of the current district top three officer positions, the line structure and the staff structure among district officers. Considered an option similar to that of having a president-elect at the international level: Having a district-governor-elect position would provide an opportunity for an individual to prepare for the coming year, rather than waiting until one month prior to starting the term.
- ▶ Discussed changing the titles of some offices in order to improve clarity about the roles. ■

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- How to change the pace to keep the audience invloved (*Connect with Any Audience* CD 2)

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Darren LaCroix, 2001 World Champion of Public Speaking

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