

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | MAY 2025

TOASTMASTER®

Matt Abrahams

2025 Golden Gavel Honoree

INSIDE:

How to Ask Culturally
Sensitive Questions

How Socially
Intelligent Are You?

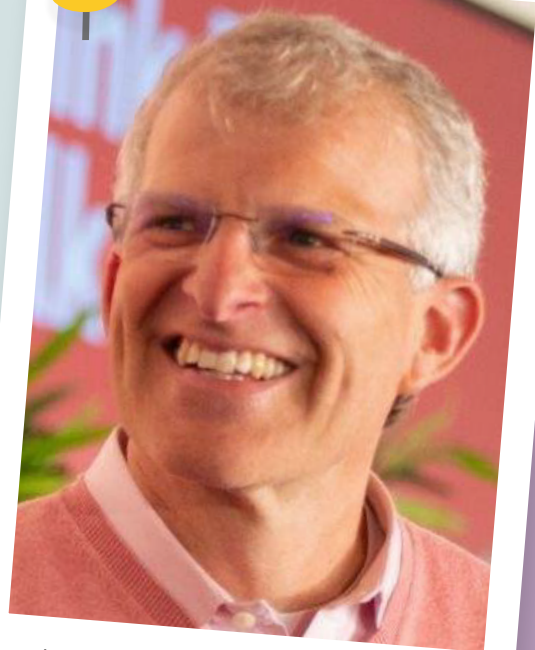
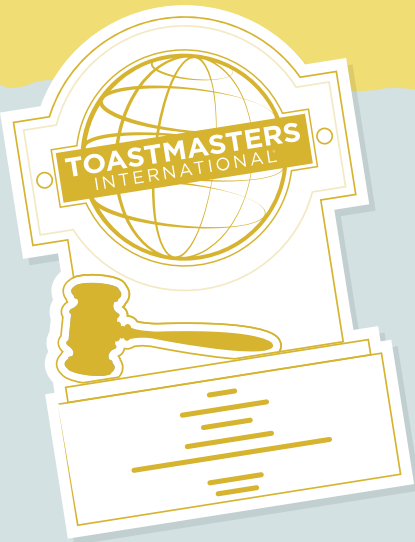
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"FROM SILENCE TO BRILLIANCE:
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Matt Abrahams

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We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



The *Toastmaster* magazine (ISSN 00408263) is published monthly by Toastmasters International, Inc., 9127 S. Jamaica St. #400, Englewood, Colorado, United States 80112.

Published to promote the ideas and goals of Toastmasters International, a nonprofit educational organization of clubs throughout the world dedicated to teaching skills in public speaking and leadership.

The official publication of Toastmasters International carries authorized notices and articles regarding the activities and interests of the organization, but responsibility is not assumed for the opinions of the authors of other articles. The *Toastmaster* magazine does not endorse or guarantee the products it advertises.

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Learning to Communicate Across Cultures

It's vital to know how to connect with people from other cultures in today's interconnected world. Doing so fosters understanding, collaboration, and mutual respect.

My struggles with cultural differences began early. When I was 11, my family moved from Lagos, Nigeria, back to Bangalore, India.

In a social studies class, the teacher was discussing one of India's many dynasties and their complex histories. With thousands of years of history to absorb, I found it challenging to keep up with all the intricate names and details.

My lack of focus didn't go unnoticed, and the teacher called on me, asking me to stand as she scolded me. Instinctively, I met her gaze instead of looking down in a show of contrition. Later, I was told that maintaining eye contact in that situation was considered disrespectful. Who knew? That incident was an eye-opener about unspoken cultural expectations.

Years later, after graduating from college in the United States and starting my first job, I encountered another cultural contrast. I believed that as a new employee, it was respectful to listen attentively and not speak up in meetings unless asked. A few weeks in, my boss pulled me aside and asked if I was following the discussions. I was surprised by the question and assured him that I was.

He then asked, "Then why don't you contribute? Why are you so quiet?" My silence, which I had thought demonstrated respect, was instead perceived as disengagement.

Speaking up was easier said than done, especially when my colleagues projected confidence and authority—even when they were occasionally wrong!

I struggled to find my voice until I discovered Toastmasters. Through its structured

programs and supportive environment, I gained the confidence to express my thoughts clearly and assertively. Today, I no longer hesitate to share my ideas.

I was fortunate to work for a globally diverse company, where our meetings were both productive and enriching. Having a Toastmasters club within the organization was

an even greater advantage. However, you don't need to be in an internationally diverse club to develop strong listening skills, observe carefully, and understand cultural nuances through verbal and non-verbal cues.

Effective cross-cultural communication involves feeling comfortable interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds, while being mindful of differences in language, traditions, values, and communication styles. The Toastmasters program provides a powerful platform for developing cross-cultural communication skills, equipping members with the confidence and training to thrive in a globalized world.

By embracing diverse communication styles, we can foster deeper connections and create more inclusive, collaborative environments.

Radhi Spear, DTM
International President

My silence, which I had thought demonstrated respect, was instead perceived as disengagement.



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Snapshot



Current and past members and leaders of **Infosys Toastmasters, Bangalore** club, in Karnataka, India, celebrate the club's 1000th meeting with inspirational speeches, contests, and high tea and food. The event was held over two days in order to celebrate with both in-person attendees and remote members.

Traveling Toastmaster



Anton Sebagany of Matale, Sri Lanka, and **Shashikala Wanigasinghe** of Colombo, Sri Lanka, enjoy a cup of tea while discussing the *Toastmaster* magazine.



Swarna Kalyan, DTM, of Singapore and her husband, **Ravi**, pose with the centennial edition of the *Toastmaster* magazine near the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt.

The Science of a Good First Impression

It's human nature to judge quickly, so make the first moments count.

By Ben Guttmann



Despite the popular advice, we actually do judge a book by its cover. We can't help it.

Our brains start firing the moment somebody walks into the room or hops on the call. And by the time that first meeting is over, we've built most of our mental model of that person. Do we like them? Do we believe them? Do we trust them? While our first impression doesn't fully answer those questions, it can set us on a path toward that answer.

In a perfect world, we're all judged after careful consideration, weighing the relative merits of our words and deeds. But we don't live in that world and we never have. We're wired to pick up on cues from our environment that help us make decisions. Making quick determinations about that rustling branch or saber-toothed face helped our ancestors avoid becoming lunch. And if we want to avoid a modern version of that fate, it's in our interest to understand and make the most of the science of first impressions.

Mind Your Face

Looking at somebody's face is quite literally the *first* in first impressions—and we begin to

construct our opinions almost instantaneously. Researchers at Princeton University showed that we make most of our judgment on a person's trustworthiness, competence, likability, aggressiveness, and attractiveness within just 100 milliseconds of exposure to a person's face. Without exaggeration, this impression is drawn in less than a blink of an eye.

Everything you do
contributes to that first
impression.

While it's rude to tell a stranger to smile, if you want to make the most of those scarce milliseconds, well, you should probably smile. A wide body of research suggests that genuine smiles make you seem more sociable, more polite, more pleasant, and more honest than people who don't smile. But beyond those somewhat obvious conclusions, it's important to understand that different types of smiles can convey different meanings.

In a 2017 study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, researchers identified a relationship between the intensity of your smile and how warm or competent you come across. A big, broad smile is seen as warmer but can be read as less competent. Inversely, a person with a slight, more modest smile frequently scored as more competent, but less warm.

Depending on your situation, one of these values can trump the other. For example, in one of their experiments, teams on Kickstarter, a platform for creative businesses to fundraise, boasting broad smiles got more Facebook shares and small-dollar donations, but the team with slight smiles in their photos were more likely to bring in larger individual checks.

Speak With Your Body First

In addition to the face, the body also conveys all sorts of information in a first impression. Generally, we understand open postures, such as uncrossed arms and legs, as associated with approachability and openness. On the other hand, crossing our arms or otherwise defensively framing our bodies (think boxer

or bodyguard) makes us read as unfriendly, unwelcoming, and

closed to new ideas.

That said, other body language cues leave positive impressions as well. Research indicates that using hand gestures when speaking can make us more engaging, that sitting or standing tall can convey more confidence, and that nodding along can build rapport. Even subtle mirroring of our counterpart's gestures and posture can help us build a deeper connection.

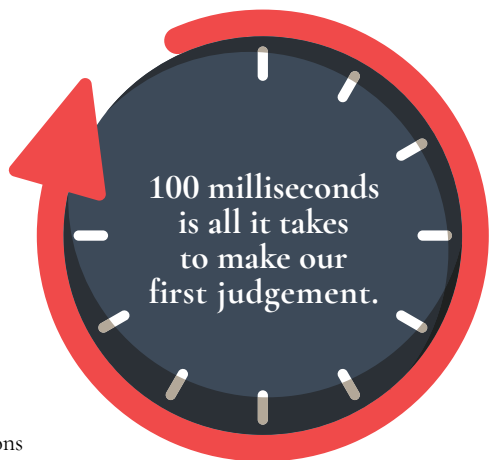
And ultimately, the advice your dad gave you all those years ago was also right: give a firm handshake. Researchers at the University of Alabama tested this bit of folk wisdom by shaking over 100 hands with various degrees of intensity. The better your grip, the higher you rate for extraversion and openness. Give the proverbial “dead fish” handshake, and you'll come across as more shy and neurotic.

Get the Whole Package Right

Everything you do contributes to that first impression. Confronted by new stimuli, our brains are firing away, sucking up as many clues and cues as it can find to figure out what to make of you, and whether we should believe and trust what you're saying.

Our clothing matters. Eccentric or non-traditional clothing can make us read as more creative and free-thinking, but stained and wrinkled clothing gives off the impression that we're irresponsible and undisciplined. Darker fabrics give us more authority, and uniforms make us more trustworthy. Across a wide range of research, we see over and over that this packaging shapes how we perceive the product (in this case, ourselves).

What if we meet somebody virtually? On a Zoom or Google Meet call, better lighting makes our face more visible and our impression



warmer. A clean background makes us come across as more professional.

And in one 2018 study,

researchers found that, even when the content was identical,

better audio quality makes a speaker come across as more intelligent and professional—so invest in a good microphone.

If we're giving a presentation, even the typeface of our slides can make a difference. Experiments show that bold text is perceived as more authoritative and memorable, more rounded letters are warm and approachable, and fonts with sharp angles can be read as urgent or even aggressive.

Adding It All Up

Taking it all together, there's not a single magic pill here. Over millions of years, we've evolved to quickly pick up on signals from our environment to help us make decisions—who is a friend and who is a foe, who can we trust and who should we be wary of.

But if you have to boil it down, it all comes back to intention and effort. The cues of smiles and body language are just visible signals of our positive intentions. The firm handshakes and sharp outfits are manifestations of our efforts.

The most critical factor in making a good first impression is to want to make a good first impression. Everything else comes from that.

Ben Guttman is a marketing executive, adjunct faculty at Baruch College in New York City, and the author of *Simply Put: Why Clear Messages Win—and How to Design Them*. More at benguttman.com.



Toastmasters in the Golden Years

5 reasons why club meetings are great for the over 55 crowd.

By Francine Juhlin, DTM

Entering your golden years doesn't mean slowing down or fading into the background. In fact, it's the perfect time to embrace challenges, discover passions, and continue growing. In 2022, I retired from my career as an aircraft electrician for the U.S. military, and began my new chapter as an author, speaker, and public speaking and confidence coach. I joined Toastmasters in 2015, and even after 10 years, my Toastmasters family continues inspiring me to pursue opportunities I never could have imagined. As people reach retirement age and beyond, the reasons for joining a community like Toastmasters may evolve, but the benefits remain clear.

1. Ease Into Transition

Many over 55 find themselves at a crossroads, ending one chapter of their lives and starting a new one. My fellow Toastmasters gave me the encouragement I needed to stay outside of my comfort zone as I reimagined my life in a new career.

After writing a self-help book for adults, I embarked on a new journey as a children's book author. As the third-place winner in the District Tall Tales Speech Contest, I received positive feedback on my physical humor and character voices. Someone suggested I use these skills and the concepts in my adult self-help book to speak to children. Toastmasters gave me the confidence to embrace this chapter and share my message with a new audience.

2. Stimulate Your Mind

As we age, keeping our minds sharp is essential. Engaging in activities that challenge our brains, such as learning a

new skill or honing existing ones, can help maintain cognitive function. Toastmasters provides a structured yet flexible platform to continuously learn and grow.

The opportunity to participate in Table Topics has been one of my favorite aspects of Toastmasters. It allows me to practice thinking quickly and speaking clearly. This has been especially helpful during author interviews when promoting my books, and as a podcast host actively listening to my guests to ask the perfect question to make them sparkle.

3. Expand Your Social Circles

Social isolation can be a concern as people grow older. Toastmasters clubs offer a welcoming community where members can meet regularly, share experiences, and build friendships. This sense of camaraderie helps reduce feelings of loneliness and fosters a sense of belonging. Additionally, the diverse mix of members, ranging from young professionals to retirees, provides networking opportunities and the chance to mentor or be mentored by others.

Toastmasters has been a way to connect with people who inspire and motivate me. The friendships I've built and the support I've received have been invaluable. Whether through in-person meetings or online interactions, the sense of community keeps me coming back.

4. Find New Interests

Toastmasters' focus on self-improvement and goal-setting is incredibly motivating and provides a sense of purpose and direction. My clubs have shown me the value of stepping outside my comfort zone. Whether

it's taking on club officer roles, competing in speech contests, or embracing the challenges of District leadership, I've pushed myself in ways I never imagined.

For example, I always wanted to be an event planner, so I challenged myself to apply to be the conference chair for my District's Annual Conference. I had so much fun planning this event with my fellow Toastmasters. Each challenge has become a stepping stone to personal growth and a profound sense of accomplishment.

5. Have Some Fun

Toastmasters is just plain fun! As a member of five clubs, a club coach, and a new club mentor, I have found something unique in each club. Each meeting and event is different, offering new challenges and experiences. There's joy in seeing your own progress, as well as watching fellow members achieve their goals. The sense of accomplishment and fulfillment you get from mastering a new skill, receiving a standing ovation, or helping someone else succeed is truly rewarding.

Toastmasters has been a transformative experience, playing a pivotal role in helping me transition from my first career to my new life. It's not just about speaking or leading—it's about building confidence, embracing change, and finding joy in continuous growth. For anyone over 55 looking for a way to stay active, engaged, and inspired, Toastmasters is the perfect place to start.

Francine Juhlin, DTM, is a member of five Toastmasters clubs and is District 84 Division Director. She lives in Jacksonville, Florida.





Mix Up Your Club Meetings

Solutions for your questions and queries.

By Bill Brown, DTM

Let's consider whether Toastmasters should mix up their club meetings and discuss some fun ways to do so. Some of you might be jumping up and down, shouting, "Yes, yes, yes. I love creative meetings." Others may prefer a constant routine. Full disclosure, I am in the second camp.

EDITOR'S NOTE: If you have a question for The Answer Man, email it to magazine@toastmasters.org for a chance to be featured in an upcoming column.

Questions are occasionally edited for clarity and brevity.

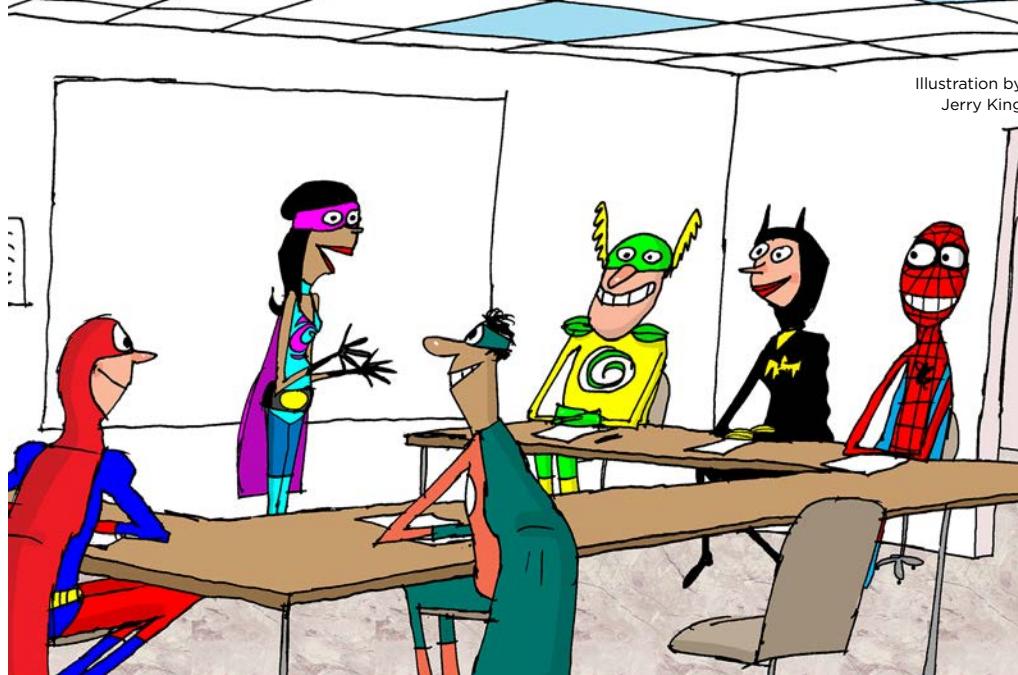


Illustration by
Jerry King

Why should clubs mix up their club meeting format?

Before mixing up your club meeting, consider several factors.

First, think about your club's personality. Are your members more of the happy-go-lucky type? Or are they primarily serious business professionals? If your members are all from one corporation or profession, an industry theme meeting could work.

Second, would your new meeting format build skills or is it for fun? And lastly, how often do you have guests? If one came in and saw your meeting, would that encourage them to come back or not?

There is no right or wrong answer to these questions. Each club must decide whether a new meeting format would be helpful or not.

Additionally, sometimes people need to experience something different. If your members are having to drag themselves to a meeting, a change could be beneficial. Other times there is a reason to have a special event, such as honoring a member.

What are some different ways to mix up club meetings?

Let's look at what I call specialty meetings first. Two years ago, a longtime key member of our club moved out of town. We had a meeting to honor her. Each member who wanted to talk gave a brief thought.

A variation of that meeting type is a [roast](#), a format where an individual is subjected to good-natured jokes. It's a fun way to honor someone and add humor into the meeting.

Another type of specialty meeting is a holiday meeting. Every year my club has a white elephant gift exchange meeting, where everyone brings a wrapped Christmas ornament. Each member, when their number is called, must answer a Table Topics question and then select a gift.

One year we were inspired by a couple of our members who are on the board of our county museum, so we held our meeting there. The Table Topics questions centered around the various exhibits.

Finally, a few years ago I was in a club where you had to sign up in advance for your role. We got lazy and weren't doing it, so the Vice President Education put a fishbowl at the door. As we walked in, we had to pull out a slip of paper and that was our role for that meeting. I pulled out "Speaker." That speech is now a key part of my training sessions.

Another format is the novelty meeting.

One popular novelty style is a backward meeting, where you start at the end of the meeting and go backward (i.e., the evaluators give their reports before the speakers, and speakers must adjust their speech to the "evaluation."). Some members enjoy this change, and it certainly develops creativity. Just make sure everyone understands, as some members prefer receiving relevant feedback about their speech.

You could also have a themed meeting, where members come in costume or adopt a certain persona. Or you could consider hosting a debate or a panel discussion about a topic of interest.

If you want to shake things up but not too much, here is an idea. My club has name tents for each member. We noticed everyone always sat in the same chairs, so when setting up the room, we put the tents in different places. It was fun to see the shock on the members' faces as they came in.

I hope I have given you some ideas. Meetings can and should be fun, even if they follow the same agenda each time. Let your creativity flow.

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.

Tips for Communicating With Your Teen

Using effective talking and listening skills benefits both of you.

By Alice Shikina

Ah, the teen years! The years when your bubbly, smiling child turns into a moody person who just grunts a yes or no and tries their best to avoid any interactions with their beloved parents ... yes, those years. How can we, as parents, teachers, community leaders, or family members, stay connected?

I'm a certified mediator, and have been helping people resolve their conflicts, whether at home, at work, or in a legal setting, for more than 11 years. I am also the parent of two teenagers and have brought many of my professional skills into my own home. I know how hard it can be to approach teenage discord in a civil and effective manner. But it is possible!

Understand the Changing Dynamics

The first thing I tell parents (and remind myself!) is that we need to adjust our relationship with our growing children. We need to provide guidance via suggestions, not orders.

Until a certain age, many children happily parrot their parents' ideas. The adolescent years are when they begin to think more independently and have opinions separate from their parents'. As they start thinking differently

and begin questioning which values to cherish and which to discard, we need to have deeper conversations with them if we hope to continue having an influence over them.

And as difficult as it seems during these years, adjusting our own attitudes and behaviors will help build a trusting and open relationship with your teens.

Here are some tips to help you talk and listen to your teenager.

1. Take an interest in their interests.

Admittedly, not all of our kids' interests are going to intersect with ours. I have two boys who are gamers, and I have no interest at all in gaming. One thing I could do to connect more deeply with them is to sit and play video games with them. However, to be completely honest, I don't think I could stomach that. So instead, I ask them about what games they are into. I also make a point of watching movies together and then asking them what they did or did not like. I show a deep interest in their interests, ideas, and opinions.

2. Withhold judgement.

Few things cause a teenager to distance themselves from a parent faster than feeling judged. They

can sense if we feel they're making bad decisions, or if we imply they're not as smart as we are, or if we act as if they're just naive. So just turn off those thoughts while talking with your teen, and practice active listening.

3. **Stay open to their opinions.** Show an interest in who they are and who they are becoming. Even if they don't have the same opinions as you or make the same decisions you might, resist the urge to tell them they're wrong. If you approach them with curiosity, they are more likely to feel safe engaging with you and opening up about their thoughts. If they feel you will criticize their ideas or not take them seriously, they will choose to keep those ideas locked inside and not share them with you.
4. **Resist being overly positive.** If your teen expresses a negative thought or idea, suppress the impulse to share a more positive view. Really listen and empathize with them. For example, if your teen says, "I hate my math teacher!" instead of responding with something like, "I am sure your math teacher is doing the

best they can. You really shouldn't hate anyone," say something along the lines of, "Really? Why?"

Once they open up to you, you can use phrases showing you empathize with their feelings, such as "Wow, that sounds awful. It sounds like you are not feeling supported in class by this teacher."

5. **Ask open-ended questions rather than giving a solution.** Once you are able to get your teen to open up about their feelings, you can also start to ask deeper questions to help them advocate for themselves. These questions might sound like, "What do you need to feel more successful?" "What would help you in this matter?"

Perhaps your teen will come up with some ideas on how to empower themselves. But if not, don't pressure them. Sometimes, they just need a place to vent and not problem-solve. Pressuring them to come up with solutions doesn't create a safe space to express their emotions, and the next time you ask them to share, you may find them withholding their feelings.

If you find that you are in conflict with your teen more than you wish, slow down the conversation. There are several strategies you can use to do that.

- Make sure that you are not going into any conversation feeling upset or extremely emotional.
- If you do feel frustrated, take a break by saying something along the lines of, "Give me a minute. I will be right back," or "I can't respond right now. I need a time out." When you take a break, use deep breathing techniques to re-regulate yourself. One way is to inhale on a count of four, hold for a count of five, and exhale on a count of six. Just doing this for three cycles can help you bring your emotions back down.
- Once you come back to the conversation, make sure you repeat back everything you heard before you respond. This usually sounds like, "Let me make sure I understood what you said. What I heard you say was ..." After you repeat everything back, you might conclude with, "Is that correct?" Once your teen responds in the affirmative, you can

then respond with your own thoughts.

- If your teen is the one upset in the conversation, repeating back what they said to you will help bring down their emotions, and make them feel more heard and seen. Furthermore, it ensures that there is clear communication going back and forth.
- When you are talking to anyone who is upset, speak slower. Their ability to process information is typically diminished due to high emotions, so speaking at a normal rate will likely mean they are processing only half the information coming at them.
- Finally, try using the four steps of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication framework to connect. It is also a great way to model healthy communication methods. Example:
 1. **Make a neutral observation:** "When you raise your voice when speaking to me ..."
 2. **State the emotion you are feeling:** "It makes me feel disrespected."
 3. **State what you need emotionally:** "I need to feel respected by my kids."
 4. **If needed, make the request:** "Could you please lower your voice when speaking to me?"

This methodology works very well to connect people to each other by using vulnerability and honesty. Anger is typically masking another, more vulnerable emotion, so if you are able to get beneath anger and express what is really happening to you, your child will also react differently. Anger will create defensiveness in another, but vulnerability will create connection.

If you are able to leave judgment at the door and come to every conversation with curiosity and openness, you will have more success connecting with your teen. Allow your teen to become the authority on some topics and you just listen. They will appreciate you for making a safe space for them to express themselves and share their ideas with you.

Yes, teenagers often speak in grunts and find parents annoying, but they are becoming amazing and interesting people. Take advantage of the new relationship!

Alice Shikina is a professional mediator, negotiation/communication trainer, and author. She was a speaker at the 2024 International Convention in Anaheim, California. She lives in Oakland, California, and is the host of the podcast *Negotiation With Alice*. Learn more at shikinamediation.com.



Master

Your Social Intelligence

How to boost your social skills and enhance your relationships.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

As a teenaged camp counselor in training, I once faced a daunting challenge: Pacify a group of my fellow trainees pretending to be crying children. I tried asking them what was wrong. I offered them entertaining activities. Then, at my wits' end, I started "crying" too. To my shock, everyone immediately smiled, and the group, including the trainer, applauded. Turns out I had stumbled upon a textbook example of social intelligence.

Put simply, social intelligence is another term for "street smarts," the ability to read and respond effectively to a given social situation. As psychologist Edward Lee Thorndike understood when he coined the term more than a century ago, social intelligence is that special kind of know-how it takes to solve the equation of human relationships. It allows people to be effective leaders, parents, and friends. In fact, it is key in pretty much any human encounter you can imagine.

Say you move to a new area for a job. Are your neighbors friendly and open, or do they tend to keep to themselves? Do your coworkers joke around during the day, or is the office environment more serious and work-focused? Does your boss have an open-door policy? We all know someone hired to lead a team who immediately put their personal stamp on the office without first exploring the corporate

culture. How effective were they in getting buy-in from employees, or resolving conflict?

"Social intelligence and the social skills that make it up are critical for success in relationships and many jobs," writes Ronald E. Riggio, Ph.D., a professor of leadership and organizational psychology at Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, California, in a *Psychology Today* article. Consider the benefits of social intelligence in your own life. It might just help you figure out the right time and place to ask for a raise, make a new friend, and so much more.

Social and Emotional Intelligence

Social intelligence is closely related to [emotional intelligence](#), the ability to understand and manage our own emotions and those of others. Psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, which suggests there are eight types of intelligences, helped set the basis for the concept of emotional intelligence. Prior to that time, people tended to think that only IQ, or cognitive ability, was an important marker of future success.

"Emotional intelligence is predominantly about improving internal states," notes Tampa, Florida-based Arman N. Chowdhury on his blog [ArmaniTalks](#). In contrast to understanding and expressing emotions, he

explains, "social intelligence is predominantly about improving external states."

That is to say, it's everything from being able to understand someone's facial expression to knowing what Chowdhury calls "the etiquette behind social skills," including how to engage in conversation, share jokes, empathize, and generally interact effectively with people. Naturally, the two are inextricably linked. If your internal state is anger, or misery, for example, it's a lot harder to be comfortable with others.

Think of successful psychotherapists, counselors, politicians, or members of the clergy, and you will find that many of them have true social intelligence. The best of these professionals have an uncanny ability to "read the room" by taking the emotional temperature of a person or group and understanding how best to frame and communicate their message.

How to Boost Social Intelligence

Do you tend to find yourself on the edge of groups, unsure how to fit in? Are you constantly one step behind others in social situations? Some people learn how to "work the room" in childhood. But for many of us, becoming a people person takes practice. Here are some ways to get started:

“Toastmasters didn’t just teach me how to speak. It gave me the tools to connect, inspire, and thrive.”

—MONICA MEAS

1. **Pay attention to the behavior of others.** This means not only observing social cues—things as simple as whether someone shakes hands or hugs, speaks formally or more colloquially, or uses humor to good effect—but also practicing [active listening](#). What are they saying, and equally importantly, what are they saying between the lines? You might ask the advice of an insider to find out.
2. **Pay attention to your own behavior.** What facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice do you use when you’re excited or frustrated? Could people interpret them as signs of anger? Ask those close to you for feedback.
3. **Practice, practice, practice.** This is particularly important with respect to small talk. During the COVID lockdown, people who regularly shared a few words with cashiers or crossing guards reported that they missed having opportunities to briefly socialize with others. Even if you’re uncomfortable at first, make a point of starting, or returning to, the habit.
4. **Learn to manage your emotions.** Remember the social intelligence/emotional intelligence link. For a multitude of reasons, your default response to a social situation may be to push too hard—that is, to overwhelm new friends or colleagues with attention or information. But consider: Will the person you’re facing appreciate that response?

“Socially intelligent people have an abundance mindset toward others,” writes Chowdhury. This prevents them from behaving in an overly clingy or needy manner. “When a person dissolves

clinginess and neediness,” he asserts, “the entire world wins.”

5. **Try laughing at yourself.** When we don’t take ourselves so seriously, we exude a degree of positivity and brightness. While that may not be your natural style, it can be a good habit of mind to cultivate. In general, humor can be a great way to lower social barriers. Just try to refrain from put-downs or other jokes until you get a sense of the group dynamic.
6. **Join an improv class.** Improvisational comedy is not really about being funny. It’s about active listening and collaboration. Plus, it’s fun!
7. **Smile!** If laughing isn’t called for, a simple smile can make others feel at ease.

Remember, we all miss social cues, particularly in unfamiliar situations, such as with a new friend’s family or in a different cultural context. Don’t sweat it. Just sit back, tuck the lesson into your toolbox and move on.

Beware the Trap!

It’s one thing to pick up a subtle accent when you’re vacationing in a different area. But you might know people-pleasers who turn themselves inside out to fit in with a prospective mate or boss. We don’t want to use our social intelligence skills to the point at which we lose our personalities and authenticity altogether.

There is a fine line between picking up and correctly responding to social cues and being true to ourselves. Do you feel that you dress or behave a certain way to please someone else rather than yourself? In the office, that might make sense. In a relationship, however, it may or may not. Do you find yourself saying or doing things that you don’t agree with to satisfy others? Again, whether or not this is a smart idea depends on what these things are and what kind of situation you’re in. Changing your behavior or opinions may be red flags that you are losing yourself in order to gain a relationship. Try asking: Am I uncomfortable with who I am when I’m around certain people? Or, talk to a trusted friend or counselor for a second opinion.

Social Intelligence and Toastmasters

Toastmasters is a perfect place to master social intelligence, notes Riggio, the

professor in California. Think about it: The opportunities to speak, observe, and collaborate at weekly meetings and occasional conferences are endless.

Monica Meas says the Toastmasters experience is hugely impactful. “Toastmasters didn’t just teach me how to speak,” says the President of the Starbucks ‘Coffee and Toast’ Masters Club. “It gave me the tools to connect, inspire, and thrive.” These tools include an emphasis on everything from interpersonal relationships to evaluations.

“I began to see social skills, communication, and emotional intelligence as ingredients in the perfect cup of social intelligence,” explains Meas, who regularly speaks on social intelligence in Seattle, Washington. “When they’re in harmony, they create something transformative. Toastmasters gave me the space to test, refine, and finally master that blend.

“And for that, I will always hold it as the perfect pot where my social intelligence was brewed to perfection.”

Caren Schnur Neile, Ph.D., *practices social intelligence in Boca Raton, Florida, as an author, educator, and three-time presenter at Toastmasters International Conventions. Contact her at cneile@fau.edu.*



Monica Meas (in the white jacket), the Club President of Starbucks ‘Coffee and Toast’ Masters Club, with her club officers and First Vice President Stefano McGhee, DTM (in the tan jacket)

“CAN I ASK THAT?”

Learn tips to communicate across cultures and form connections.

By Greg Glasgow

We're fortunate to live in a globalized world where every social outing, business meeting, or Toastmasters gathering has the potential to bring you in contact with people from other cultures and life circumstances.

But along with that increased exposure comes an increased number of questions about what is and what isn't appropriate to ask someone from a culture or background different than your own. How do you balance your own natural curiosity and

genuine desire for connection with respect for other people's boundaries and cultural norms?

Experts say there are several steps you can take to authentically engage with others without offending them, including connecting with people as individuals, educating yourself about cultural norms, remaining genuinely curious, and being willing to apologize if you cause offense.

Personal Connection

A good first step is to make sure you engage with the person as an individual, not as a symbol of their race or background, says Fiona Swee-Lin Price, Ph.D., a cross-cultural communication specialist based in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

“I talk to a lot of people in Australia whose families came to Australia from Northeast Africa as refugees, and they say, ‘They mean well, but white people are always asking me about two things: my experiences of racism and being a refugee,’” says Price, a member of Williamstown Club in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. “‘Can’t they talk to me as a person and ask me about things in my life that you would talk to anyone about?’”



Price says even though it's tempting and perhaps even seems noble to ask about how hard it is to endure racism or the difficulties of being a refugee, those topics may arise in a more natural fashion later, once you've established a personal connection.

"They tell me they'd like to be talked to about the things they're doing in their life, the things they're studying, their friends, their interests—talked to as a person, rather than as a symbol of oppression," she says. "Are you a person who plays the guitar? A person who is interested in studying languages? That perception of someone as 'other,' even if it's well-intended, gets in the way of engaging as a human being."

Similarly, Price says, asking someone where they're from, or about their clothes or accent, can be seen as a form of "othering," which can cause individuals to feel as if they are different and do not fit in. This has the potential to put someone on the defensive and hinder a genuine connection. Instead, she suggests asking a skills-based question such as "What languages do you speak?" or a simple open-ended statement such as "Tell me about yourself."

"If someone has recently migrated from another country, that will be front and center in their mind when you ask that, and they will probably bring it up themselves," she says. However, if someone from a different area has been in your country for a while, they may talk about other things. "That's letting them shape the direction of the conversation. If they want to talk about their experience of immigration or being a refugee or racism, it lets them take the lead, rather than imposing your own preconceptions on them."

Do Your Homework

You don't always know in advance when you'll be interacting with someone from another culture or background, but if you do know beforehand, it doesn't hurt to do some research on the person's culture. Pellegrino Riccardi, a cross-cultural expert from the United Kingdom who now lives in Oslo, Norway, says new technology makes research easier—though you should always double-check its accuracy.

"In the old days, I would have to look up the culture of the country—body language, where you can show the soles of your feet,

"Social rules and norms in one culture can be very different from what they're like in another."

—FIONA SWEE-LIN PRICE

personal space, dynamics," he says. "Now, I just go to ChatGPT: 'I am talking to someone from this country. Is there anything I should avoid, to avoid cultural clashes or offending?' You've got to learn to prompt it, ask it, 'What's your source? Where did you get this from?' but it's great that kind of information is instantly available."

Researching beforehand can also help you understand the social rules and norms in different cultures. Experts say communicating effectively across cultures and backgrounds requires both social awareness—the general ability to understand and relate to others and to react to body language and other social cues—and cultural awareness, the awareness that different cultures have different norms

when it comes to what types of questions are appropriate to ask.

"I remember when I traveled to India, people would ask, 'Where are you from?' and 'Are you married?' Those were the first two questions," Price says. "In Australia, those questions would not go down well. It's not really a question people ask. Social rules and norms in one culture can be very different from what they're like in another. A lot of the friction between cultures arises because of where those rules differ."

Taking time to research and understand different cultures can prepare you for these types of interactions and help you avoid offending someone.



Remain Curious

Although researching is good for background, genuine curiosity is more likely to get a genuine response, Riccardi says.

“You can ask any question about anything, provided it’s done in the right way with the right intention, the right vibe,” he says. “People love it when you’re curious about them—they really do.”

As an example, Riccardi recalls the time he was seated at an event next to a man from Oman who had two wives.

“You probably should not ask questions about that, but I had to know. I was fascinated,” he recalls. “We were eating together, talking about normal things like family, weather, job, and then I put on my curious face, which is not difficult, because I am really curious, and I said, ‘Do you mind if I ask you a bit of a personal question?’”

What made the conversation possible, Riccardi says, was his genuine curiosity and his ability to employ empathetic listening to remain culturally aware.

“Empathetic listening is listening for the emotion, listening for the person behind the conversation, and putting all judgement aside,”

“Empathetic listening is listening for the emotion, listening for the person behind the conversation, and putting all judgement aside.”

—PELLEGRINO RICCARDI

he says. “I’m not trying to solve any problems; I’m not trying to convert you or prove you wrong or prove I’m right. There’s none of that. It’s like reading a book and turning the pages: ‘Cool.’ ‘Oh, wow.’ ‘I had no idea.’ It’s that kind of approach.”

The Art of Apology

If you do offend someone with a question you ask, it’s important to be just as genuine with your apology, Riccardi says.

“You can say something like, ‘I’m sorry. That wasn’t my intention.’ Sometimes I ask, ‘Could you tell me what I said that was offensive?’ And if they’re willing to tell me, I say, ‘Thanks for teaching me. I’m really glad I’ve learned something new. I’ll be more mindful next time.’ Humility goes a long way.”

It’s also important, he says, not to beat yourself up if you upset someone by asking an insensitive question.

“That’s how you learn, and that’s how you build resilience as well,” he says. “By getting things wrong, feeling the discomfort, explaining yourself, and negotiating an interaction with another person.”

Price adds that another strategy for dealing with offense caused by a poorly worded question is to immediately reframe the conversation—defuse the awkwardness by attempting to connect with the person as an individual.

“Redirect the conversation so you’re asking questions that you’d ask of anybody, rather than immediately asking questions about their cultural background,” she says.

When Traveling Abroad

Much of the conversation around cultural awareness and communication involves speaking with people from other cultures and backgrounds whom you encounter in your everyday life. Similarly, when you travel somewhere—or are in a situation where you’re the outsider—make a point of communicating

as an “outsider” and notice how people communicate with you.

In those situations, Riccardi says, it’s important to enter conversations with a sense of humility and an arsenal of questions that can quickly create connection.

“I often ask things like, ‘What’s your most important holiday of the year?’ or ‘What’s the biggest day for families?’” he says. “Then I just let them talk. You don’t even need to ask another question. You just listen and pick up on things they’re saying: ‘Oh, tell me more about that.’ ‘Oh, that sounds fascinating.’ They may ask you a similar question, and now we’ve got a conversation.”

And if you don’t speak the language? Try talking about soccer, he advises.

“Soccer, or football, is one of the big icebreakers around the world,” he says.

Take the Plunge

You always have another option when it comes to engaging with people from other cultures, Price and Riccardi say: Don’t say anything. But if you’re not reaching out, you’re probably missing out.

“Don’t be afraid to ask people things,” Riccardi says. “The worst thing is that you might offend them, which you probably won’t if you ask with genuine curiosity.”

But if you just stay quiet and don’t ask any questions?

“You’re missing two things: You’re not learning and you risk not connecting,” he says. “The easy way out is not to ask, but your life would not be richer, and you could potentially miss out on a connection. We are human beings, after all—we are social animals. We thrive on connections.”

Greg Glasgow is a Denver-based author and freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the *Toastmaster*. He is the co-author of *Disneyland on the Mountain: Walt, the Environmentalists, and the Ski Resort That Never Was*.



7 Ways to Listen Better

Active listening is one of the most important skills to have when communicating with others. It can help foster understanding and respect, make a speaker feel important, and help you form connections with others.

Effective listening starts with knowing the difference between passively hearing others and actively listening to them. Here are seven ways to optimize your listening skills.

1 Maintain eye contact.

Always face the person speaking and maintain eye contact. In an online meeting, look directly into the camera to show the speaker that you are fully engaged with what they are saying.

2 Nod when you agree or understand.

Nodding is one of the most effective ways to show support for a speaker. Nodding is also very easy, so do it often enough to be noticed.

3 Use listening time to listen.

It may be tempting to plan what you're going to say next when someone else is speaking, but this is disrespectful and can be very perilous. Misunderstanding someone because you didn't effectively listen to them can damage your credibility.

4 Reflect questions back.

Try to repeat questions and concerns back to the speaker before offering your perspective or proposing a solution. This powerful acknowledgment elevates trust and demonstrates empathy even before you address the concern.

5 Don't interrupt.

Avoid interrupting a speaker or finishing their sentences. Sometimes we think we're affirming someone else's point by finishing their sentences, but even if that's true, we're still trampling on their perspective.

6 Respect the speaker's point of view.

Stay objective and keep an open mind. Understand that everyone has their own unique ideas. Show the speaker that you are interested in what they have to say.

7 Ask probing questions.

After listening to the speaker, ask clarifying questions to show that you paid attention, value their feedback, and are open and eager to learn.

TOASTMASTERS PATHWAYS

— learning experience —

The Pathways learning experience offers a Level 3 "Active Listening" elective project. This project teaches you the difference between hearing and listening and how to connect with a speaker, and provides opportunities to practice your listening skills.

Adapted from an article in the July 2022 issue of the Toastmaster magazine.



TEARING IT UP

2025 Golden Gavel honoree scores successes onstage, online, and in the classroom.

By Paul Sterman

All you public speakers out there, imagine yourself in Matt Abrahams' shoes. When he was 14, that is.

He was competing in a Northern California public speaking competition for high school students. Heeding his teacher's advice to always start with an attention-grabber, Abrahams opened his speech about the martial arts by executing a spirited karate kick.

A little too spirited, apparently. He split his pants wide open. Abrahams cringes during a recent video interview as he recalls standing there, mortified and with absolutely no idea what to do next. Fortunately, a quick-thinking teacher took off the sweater she was wearing over her shirt and tossed it to the teen. He wrapped the sweater—a fluorescent pink—around his waist, covering what needed to be covered. And carried on with his speech.

Not only did he persevere past that painful moment, but the judges awarded him first place in his category (Expository Speaking). "I think they felt sorry for me," he says, laughing.

From such colorful beginnings are distinguished careers in communication born. Today Abrahams is a lecturer in organizational behavior at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, the author of two books on public speaking and communication, and the host of an internationally popular podcast, *Think Fast, Talk Smart*.

The affable Abrahams has been named Toastmasters' 2025 Golden Gavel recipient. As the organization's most prestigious honor, the



award is presented annually to an individual who distinguishes himself in the fields of communication and leadership.

The author of *Speaking Up Without Freaking Out*, Abrahams says he's a fervent advocate of Toastmasters and regularly promotes its benefits. He's a former member himself. Abrahams is scheduled to deliver his Golden Gavel presentation August 22 at the [2025 International Convention](#) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Man on the Move

Besides the classes he teaches at Stanford's graduate business school and his writing and podcasting, the father of two is also a keynote speaker, communications consultant, and speaking coach. His clients have delivered TED Talks, spoken at the World Economic Forum, and presented to investors at business road shows.

Though he works across varied platforms, Abrahams says he draws on strategies common to all communication.

"Audience first—it's about them, it's not about you," he states. "You need structure. You can't just randomly list random ideas. You need to listen deeply and understand, be present."

He continues, "When I'm a podcast host, I get to do a lot of inquiry and paraphrasing. When I'm a teacher, I get to think about what's the best way for people to learn and practice these skills. ... So you have to adjust and adapt.

There is no one way to communicate. But it's predicated on these foundational principles."

His interest in communication started young. Abrahams' father was a lawyer and later a judge, and his mother taught English to non-native-speaking adults. Watching them, he says, he learned that words, and how you express them, matter.

He attended Stanford and has now taught at the university for more than 20 years, 15 of them being at the graduate business school, where he teaches on topics such as strategic communications and presenting online. He also teaches a workshop for Stanford's new Master of Business Administration (MBA) students that emphasizes spontaneous speaking.

"If you think about it, the vast majority of our communication is spontaneous," says Abrahams, whose most recent book, published in September 2023, is *Think Faster, Talk Smarter: How to Speak Successfully When You're Put on the Spot*.

Before teaching, he held leadership positions at several software companies (and belonged to the I'm Feeling Chatty Toastmasters Club at Google's headquarters in Mountain View, California, for four years).

Communication in the Classroom

In his graduate classes, Abrahams provides an academic framework for improving communication skills, along with opportunities

"If you think about it, the vast majority of our communication is spontaneous."

—MATT ABRAHAMS

for students to practice what they learn—for example, in communications-related scenarios in the business world.

"I find that with my students, as with many of the Toastmasters I know, learning the 'why' behind the 'what' is really important," he says. "It's not just 'go do this.' It's 'here's why it's important.' So that's where we blend the theory with the practice.

"But their intent is to get better. I mean, the students realize that communication is critical to success in business."

Shawon Jackson is Abrahams' co-instructor in the class "Essentials of Strategic Communication," taken mostly by students pursuing their MBA. He describes his colleague as a dynamic communicator who is also approachable.

"Of all the wonderful qualities I admire about Matt, perhaps what I appreciate most is his ability to weave in humor into his talks, helping him connect with our students in a more authentic way," Jackson says.



Chubing Li took the strategic communications class as a master's student and afterward did independent research under Abrahams' guidance, with a focus on inclusivity in storytelling. She says her mentor's communication techniques benefited her greatly, especially as an international student navigating culturally diverse environments.

"Whether drafting a proposal, engaging with colleagues, or speaking to an audience, I rely on the foundational principles Matt taught: clarity, empathy, and intentionality," says Li.

The Pleasures of Podcasting

Abrahams, who has written tips-filled articles for the *Toastmaster* magazine over the years, has been pleasantly surprised by the success of the

Think Fast, Talk Smart podcast, which he hosts and produces. He started it in 2020 when the Stanford Graduate School of Business wanted to experiment with its first-ever podcast. (The school sponsored the show for its first five years.)

Abrahams says he loves its international reach. According to him, the podcast is in 95 countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, India, China, Mexico, and Brazil, and has close to 3 million listeners around the world. ("I think they should all be Toastmasters members," he quips.)

On the program, he interviews experts in the communication field. Last year it won a Webby Award (the Webbys recognize top online content) for best individual business-podcast episode. On that episode, Abrahams interviewed author and CEO coach Kim Scott on the power of feedback and "radical candor."

TO LEARN MORE
ABOUT MATT ABRAHAMS,
VISIT HIS [WEBSITE](#).

"It's a pleasure to interview experts and learn from them," he says. "It's fun to come up with questions that help unlock things."

Job Fulfillment

Abrahams says his work is deeply rewarding, from coaching speakers to create better presentations, to helping students become savvy communicators, to providing communication insights to podcast listeners.

The common thread is helping people speak and communicate with more confidence.

"I firmly believe that we, as a society, are better off when we hear multiple voices, and if somebody has anxiety that restricts their voice, then—I don't take credit, but I certainly take pleasure in seeing people get better, and I am so fortunate to be able to help them."

He says he sometimes receives letters from podcast listeners telling him about their successes or thanking him for helping them learn and improve.

"It feels really good."

Paul Sterman is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for Toastmasters International. Reach him at psterman@toastmasters.org.



REGISTER for the 2025

International Convention and the chance to see Matt Abrahams' Golden Gavel presentation, "From Silence to Brilliance: How to Craft Compelling, Clear Communication," on August 22.

Keep Your Communication Style Authentic

Adapting to different situations doesn't mean sacrificing your true character.

By Shen Wu Tan

Have you ever felt pressure to present yourself a certain way, a way that didn't feel genuine to you? Maybe you've felt you needed to present yourself as more outgoing and energetic despite your introverted, reserved nature?

As someone who strongly identifies as an introvert, I have felt societal coercion at times to mold myself into a more bubbly, charming person—an extrovert, essentially.

Recently, I felt a bit of this pressure at a Toastmasters meeting. One of the more extroverted club members suggested that speakers should not be afraid to “go big” and act out scenes, use body gestures, and so forth. As said club member was offering these recommendations, all I could think to myself was, *Nope. I'll pass. Thanks.*

I'm not saying it was bad advice—it could be helpful for some, but I don't think his suggestions apply to everyone or every presentation. For more introverted people, “going big” might feel like forcing yourself into being someone you're not.

And if someone's recommendations don't align with who you are and how you communicate, then is it the best advice for you?

4 Different Communication Styles

As outlined in the Pathways project “Understanding Your Communication Style,” there are [four communication styles](#): direct,

initiating, supportive, and analytical. The direct communication style is described as decisive and confident, while the initiating style is summarized as enthusiastic and sociable, the supportive style as sincere and calm, and the analytical style as logical and precise.

Your communication style might change depending on the situation and the people you are talking to. Yet it's also crucial to remain true to your character, your words, and your values.

But how, exactly, do we accomplish that?

Diana Robertson, a former Toastmaster, who considers herself an “adaptable introvert,” says staying authentic to her communication style begins with knowing what feels natural and what feels forced.

“I think it's important to recognize your natural communication style and use it as your ‘everyday’ approach, because relying too heavily on styles that don't come naturally can feel draining or even frustrating over time,” Robertson says. “That said, personally I don't believe anyone should stick to just one style. In certain situations, adapting your communication style can lead to much better results—or even prevent bad outcomes.”

Previously active with Riverside Communicators and the London Business

School Public Speaking Club, both in the United Kingdom, and WorldSurfers in Russia, [Robertson](#) held several club leadership roles. She says she tends to gravitate toward a mix of direct and analytical communication styles and prefers a more reserved style to a loud one, avoiding overperformance.

“That doesn't mean I never adapt—I will adjust my tone or approach depending on the audience or situation—but I always do it in a way that still feels true to me,” she says.

For instance, Robertson might rely on more animation and high-energy gestures while delivering a humorous speech. But if discussing statistics with her team, her communication style is direct and calm. She uses a similar approach in her interpersonal interactions, mostly depending on a direct, analytical communication style.

However, if she's engaging with a person who requires more emotional reassurance, Robertson will adopt a more empathetic tone. But this doesn't mean she pretends to be someone else or forces flowery language, she says.

“Instead, I focus on listening carefully and responding sincerely, in a way that feels genuine and works for both of us.”



Diana Robertson

Authenticity Is Essential

From Adarsh Chandran's perspective, individuals will always pick up on when a person is not being authentic with their communication style.

"Audiences can easily spot when someone is being fake," he says.

Although he resides in Trivandrum, Kerala, India, Chandran is a member of the Speak With Confidence Club in Canada. He gives an example of a club member who was leading Table Topics® and seemed to be attempting to imitate a formal, professional speaking style. The member switched back to their natural voice after a few lines, he notes.

"I've noticed some people sound artificial at the start of their presentations to appear professional, but they quickly revert to their natural style," he says. "I share this because I've learned the importance of being natural rather than artificial."

"Be true to your communication style," he adds. "Don't fake it to impress an audience; aim to be genuine for yourself."

Establish Trust and Honesty

Division Director Veniece Tse, based in Munich, Germany, says building trust as the foundation of communication is more critical than ever in these days of ever-present social media. Not only should one be authentic if they communicate on social media, but honest as well, she says.

"Once you make a lie, sometimes you need to have another lie to cover that lie, so you get into this cycle of just lying all the time, and you lose yourself," Tse says.

Chandran agrees with that sentiment. "Being honest, genuine, and trustworthy is crucial for anyone who communicates

or presents," he says. "You can lose years of goodwill in an instant if you damage your reputation, and it may never return."

Tse says the three pillars of trust are logic, empathy, and authenticity, and stresses the authenticity component.

"The foundation of relationships, to me, is always having a trustful relationship, which [means] being able to be authentic," Tse says.

"I think early in my career, there was this motto of 'fake it 'til you make it.' I don't think that's authentic, and it causes me to have anxiety."

Tse strives to be honest in both her personal interactions and in the workplace. For instance, she says it's better to be open and honest if you don't feel you can meet a project deadline for whatever reasons.

When it comes to public speaking, Tse also stresses the value of sharing honest, personal stories to attract and connect with an audience. Talking about your vulnerabilities and who you are will resonate more if they are truthful.

While Tse identifies as an extrovert, she understands that it might be more difficult for introverts to speak out or utilize body gestures and vocal variety during their speeches. To tackle this challenge, she suggests using different mediums to get messages across, whether that's writing, presenting online, or using visual aids, such as props or data graphics if needed.

Embracing Our True Self

Being authentic doesn't mean limiting yourself. Learning how to be authentic to her character and with her communication style has taken Robertson on an adventure of self-discovery. At first, she felt uncomfortable "going big" during her speeches, but she pushed her limits with each

"The foundation of relationships, to me, is always having a trustful relationship, which [means] being able to be authentic."

—VENIECE TSE

subsequent presentation. With more time and practice, "going big" began to feel more natural, and she even began to enjoy it and flourish, winning awards in the Humor and International Speech contests.

Nonetheless, she came to realize that her efforts to appear more extroverted began to drain her. A reserved demeanor felt more natural and authentic. These days, Robertson embraces and nurtures her true introverted character more, but still "goes big" with her presentations from time to time.

"Today, I use both styles strategically. I turn to the 'going big' approach when I want to create high energy and engagement, but in most situations, I rely on my natural, calmer, and slower style," she says.

Robertson continues, "It's one thing to have the ability to speak confidently and apply it when the situation calls for it. It's another thing entirely to constantly push yourself to act against your natural tendencies just to fit a mold that doesn't feel true to who you are."

"The key is balance: Build the skills but use them in an authentic way that feels right for you and your energy."

Indeed, you can work on enhancing your communication and presentation skills, but in an authentic way—and not at the expense of your true character.

Shen Wu Tan is a member of a Toastmasters club in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is a freelance writer and editor.



Adarsh Chandran



Veniece Tse

Saluting Toastmasters Centenarians

California man and Australian woman still participate in club meetings.

By Paul Sterman

Walter McHugh and Jose Petrick are dramatic proof of the adage that it's never too late to learn in life. One is 100, the other 101, and, remarkably, both are still members of Toastmasters.

The two live on opposite sides of the world—McHugh in Southern California, Petrick in Australia's Northern Territory—but they share a love for Toastmasters and the benefits it provides. They also share the same birth year with the organization: McHugh, Petrick, and Toastmasters International were all born in 1924.

Here's more on these two venerable members.

Walter McHugh

McHugh, who turned 100 in December 2024, became a Toastmaster in 1981, 44 years ago. He is a U.S. Army veteran who served as a radar technician and operator in World War II. After the war, he moved to Southern California to work in the aerospace industry as an engineer, joined the San Pedro Toastmasters Club, and has remained a club member ever since.

"What I think I've enjoyed most is how I've gotten to meet some pretty interesting people along the way," says McHugh in a phone conversation.

He has made many longtime friends of all ages in the San Pedro club, which



Above: Walter McHugh, Walter McHugh (seated), surrounded by fellow members of the San Pedro Toastmasters Club.

Below: playing checkers with his great-grandson, Porter, 6.

itself is nearly 90 years old—the club chartered in 1938. McHugh says he has found Toastmasters to be a great place for creativity, whether giving prepared speeches, doing Table Topics®, or participating in speech contests, all of which he has done many times. "I like to tell stories," he says.

McHugh's speeches through the years have been entertaining and intriguing, says longtime club member Binoy Yohannan. "He often talked about his life experiences—growing up in Mississippi and Arizona, his college experience, his job, meeting his wife, travel, etc.," says Yohannan.

McHugh, who also worked for 15 years as a math and science teacher, says



he still goes to most meetings of the San Pedro club. A caregiver brings him and he participates in a wheelchair.

His son Kevin, who lives in Washington state, has visited the group's meetings with his dad a number of times over the years. In a visit about six years ago, he videotaped one of his dad's speeches. It was about one of the most valuable books McHugh said he

ever received: the *Boy Scouts Handbook*, given to him when he was 12. It was the source of great information, he said in the speech, the book becoming “my Wikipedia, my Google, my Siri.”

Kevin said his dad appreciates the camaraderie of the club. “It’s been a very good thing for him,” he says. “I think [Toastmasters] is one of the things he really enjoys and even now he looks forward to.”

McHugh enjoys touting the successes of his club. He said it has helped improve the speaking skills of those in high-stakes professions, including police officers and firefighters. The San Pedro Toastmasters Club has also aided local high school students, helping them hone their communication abilities for academic competitions.

“I’m proud of my club,” says McHugh.

Jose Petrick

Petrick (whose first name is pronounced Jo-zee) is a resident of Alice Springs in Australia’s Northern Territory. She joined the Alice Springs Toastmasters Club in 1993 and has been an enthusiastic and dedicated member ever since, still active in club meetings, say fellow members. In her mid-90s, she dove into Toastmasters’ new education program,



In 2000, the year the Olympics were held in Sydney, Australia, Jose Petrick carried the Olympic torch through Alice Springs.



At left, Jose Petrick with one of her mentees, Helen Lamech, a fellow member of the Alice Springs Toastmasters Club.

At right, holding an award from District 69 recognizing her for turning 100 in the same year (2024) as Toastmasters’ 100th anniversary.

Pathways, and advanced to Level 5 in the Presentation Mastery path.

“Jose shows you can be a Toastmaster, still practicing and learning, at whatever your age,” says club member Jill Brew.

Petrick turned 101 in February. Asked about her motivation, she says, “What keeps me going is trying to remember funny sayings and happenings for the Humorist [meeting] role, and working on my next speech.”

Petrick has lived a colorful life. She worked as a registered nurse in her native England, before moving to Australia and working on a cattle farm in a remote area of the country. At 52, she began a journalism career, writing for a local newspaper, the *Alice Springs Centralian Advocate*.

Later, she wrote a popular history book, *The History of Alice Springs Through Street Names*, which tells the stories of the 250 people after whom the town’s streets were named. Before joining Toastmasters, she was a member of the local [Toastmistresses club](#). (Toastmistresses was a separate but similar organization for women that was created in the 1930s, before women were officially allowed to be Toastmasters members.)

For members of the Alice Springs club, Petrick’s positive spirit and her wisdom are a gift. “Jose’s speeches about life and experience with World War II are always very captivating, and her humor is on point,” says Club President June Larchin.



Fellow club member Brew was introduced to Toastmasters by Petrick more than 20 years ago. She marvels at how her friend remains genuinely interested in other people’s lives and stories.

“Jose welcomes interaction,” she says. “She has a smile that draws people in. She also has a great sense of fun.”

Petrick says she loves laughing with her fellow members and takes pleasure in seeing the young members—the “youngies” as she calls them—becoming comfortable in the club and having fun.

“I enjoy seeing the youngies being so pleased to see each other as they come through the door,” she says.

Petrick’s research and writing on local history contributed to her being awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 2000, for her service to “the preservation and recording of the history of Alice Springs.” (When the Olympics were held in Sydney, Australia, in 2000, Petrick carried the Olympic torch through Alice Springs.) In 2017, the Historical Society of the Northern Territory published her autobiography, titled *Bournemouth, The Bush ... and Beyond!*

Paul Sterman is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for *Toastmasters International*.

Learning to Love Decisions

Spring to action with techniques to make choices.

By Craig Harrison, DTM

Every day we are constantly making decisions, whether by choice or necessity. Big ones. Small ones. Easy ones. Hard ones. Ones that pertain to you and your life, and decisions involving others and your relationships. Ones we make automatically, and ones made deliberately and often collaboratively. Research shows the average adult makes approximately 35,000 decisions a day!

Exercising intelligent decision-making moves your life forward in ways big and small. The challenge is to apply appropriate tools and wisdom to make informed decisions for yourself and those in your life. Understanding how the human brain works will help you replace fears, doubts, and indecision with confidence.

How Humans Make Decisions

As humans, we are equipped for decision-making. In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, explains the two systems for rational decision-making—fast and slow thinking. Fast thinking is intuitive and driven by your emotions or gut feelings. Many of these decisions are simple, recurring, or routinized choices you make for yourself automatically or subconsciously: how to walk, recognizing someone you know, the direction to drive on your morning commute.

Your slow-thinking system is more deliberative and logical. These decisions are more complex or life-altering: your next career move, where to live, or when to retire. You may

use a pro vs. con approach, apply a cost-benefit analysis, review or conduct research, or consult subject-matter experts to make these choices.

Your fast-thinking self relies more on intuition, emotions, and biases; your slow-thinking self weighs experiences, training, data analysis, and other factors. Together, these two systems help you navigate the constant decisions required of you, both in the moment, and with long-term implications. When you sense a big or complex decision ahead, your brain will shift to the more deliberative, rational system for more effective decision-making.

Consider the Greater Good

A tool that retired Navy commander Mary C. Kelly, Ph.D., cites as part of her decision-making process is the concept of *Kīnaʻole*. “It’s a Hawaiian value: Doing the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, in the right place, to the right person, for the right reason, with the right feeling.” This holistic approach helps leaders in any organization look at the big picture and give voice to diverse viewpoints and perspectives. As a leader, can you see the impact of your decisions from the standpoint of *all* your constituents?

2019-2020 Toastmasters International President Deepak Menon, DTM, and the Board of Directors were pushed to focus their decision-making process on the greater good in a particularly challenging time—the COVID pandemic. Menon says the Board anticipated a three-month regional disruption that instead

grew into a worldwide lockdown. After almost a century of Toastmasters holding in-person meetings, they had gargantuan decisions to make under intense time pressure.

As the Board grappled with high-stakes decisions and their worldwide implications, Toastmasters’ values helped guide their decision-making. The questions they returned to again and again were “What is the impact on our members?” and “What is best for them?”

Menon explains, “In concert with members’ governments we wanted to keep members and their families safe.” Member safety and well-being were their top priority, leading to the decision to officially shift to online meetings—the strongest choice for the greater good.

Overcoming Fear

All of us, at some time or another, have difficulties making a decision. What holds you back? Are you afraid of making the wrong choice? Are you worried about blowback from those who disagree?

“Most people are inclined to decide what is easy,” according to Kelly, a member of the National Speakers Association’s Speaker Hall of Fame. “An easy decision now is going to make things harder later, and a hard decision now will make things easier later.”

Numerous studies confirm that once you have 75% of the best available information required to make a choice, it’s time to decide. As new information arrives, you can make

modifications, but opportunities are lost when delaying decisions.

Performance psychology consultant and executive coach Bill Cole helps professional athletes and executives overcome the factors impeding effective decision-making. Like many of us, some of his clients fall prey to procrastination or paralysis by analysis—thinking about the situation so much that no decision is made at all. Cole recommends decision makers identify, explore, and reality-test various fears. Ask yourself these questions:

- What are you hoping to achieve from this decision?
- What are your options?
- What are some unintended consequences?
- What's your timeline?
- What happens if you don't make a decision?
- What does a good decision look like?
- A bad decision?

Often the fears are in your head. But once explored, you can overcome your fears and take action.

Deadlines Are Your Friends

Deadlines ensure productive behavior. They also bode well for collaboration and help everyone focus by providing guardrails

and facilitating strategic planning. Once established, deadlines allow you to plan backwards from due dates to create milestones and markers for adjustments. They are not to be feared but embraced.

The sooner the deadline, the more likely you and others are to honor it—having a shorter turnaround helps us to avoid analysis paralysis and make a call. We often presume we'll have more future time to address work we're deciding about, so setting a deadline pushes us to work more quickly.

When setting deadlines, don't forget to consider your contingency plans. While you hope for the best, plan for the worst. Explore contingencies and post-decision, evaluate and make any adjustments as needed. Once announced, marshal your forces and proceed with confidence!

Battling Decision Fatigue

Having trouble concentrating? Procrastinating? You might be suffering from mental exhaustion brought on by the burden of making excessive decisions in a short time frame. Yet remedies exist for decision fatigue. Kelly recommends delegating when you're able to. Pamela D. Rolle, DTM, agrees.

Rolle served as 2023 Toastmasters International Convention Co-Host District

Research shows the average adult makes approximately 35,000 decisions a day!

Chair in Nassau, Bahamas. She and Anthony Longley, DTM, oversaw 13 committees, made myriad decisions, and formulated numerous contingencies. She leaned on her talented committee members and split tasks with Longley to keep moving forward. Rolle also recommends using mentors. "There's always somebody else out there who's done it," she explains.

She also encourages her team (and herself) to monitor their mental health to avoid burnout: are they eating right, getting enough sleep, and taking mental breaks to avoid working incessantly?

Similarly, Kelly says Kina'ole helps get her and her team "out of their heads" to refocus on the bigger picture. Revisiting their objectives and deciding for the greater good helps to combat the stress that can come with taking on decisions as an individual.

Claiming Your Confidence

Rather than dreading, fearing, or cowering from looming decisions, acknowledge the past choices that brought your life to this moment. Much of your success is the result of the research, analysis, caucusing, and yes, *deciding* to say, do, choose, or believe in something—often yourself. With experience, you'll make more and better decisions in the future. Your decisions create opportunities and allow you and those in your orbit to chart new courses for success.

Craig Harrison, DTM, a Past District Director, is now a professional speaker based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He cites joining Toastmasters in 1992 as one of the best decisions in his career and life. Email him at craig@expressionsofexcellence.com.





A Woman's World

Roberta Perry's perspective is unique, her successes many.

By Paul Sterman

What was it like to be one of the first women in Toastmasters?

I recently asked this question of a woman who was, in fact, part of that pioneering group: Roberta Perry, DTM. The longtime Toastmasters leader, still a member, joined in 1974, about six months after the organization voted in the summer of 1973 to officially admit women as members.

Having researched and written so much about Toastmasters' history for its 100-year anniversary last year, I was eager to talk to Perry. Over lunch, she told me about that time.

Once women became members, there were certainly men who "were extremely hesitant about having us strange things in their presence," she notes, but says her experience was overwhelmingly positive. She joined the Seattle General Toastmasters Club in Washington state, and recalls there being around 25 men, and one other woman.

"They were extremely welcoming," she says. "It was a very safe environment."

When a man did throw up a roadblock, Perry wasn't fazed. She simply rolled up her sleeves and showed why they were wrong.

Case in point: Early on, she wanted to serve in a District officer role and asked the District Leadership Committee to nominate her. However, a male committee member—a high-ranking international leader for the organization—didn't feel a woman should be in that position, Perry says. He wouldn't put her name forward.

She promptly signed up to be on a committee he was chairing. The next year, having watched how she worked, he advanced her name for the position.

Perry has a seemingly boundless reserve of good stories, tidbits about the business world, and enthusiasm for Toastmasters. She joined the organization shortly after she was hired as a secretary for a national restaurant chain. She was eager to advance in the company, and the chain's founder, Stuart Anderson, told her to join Toastmasters. And when you get there, he added, say yes to everything. It's a philosophy Perry says she has lived by ever since.

Once a member, she improved as a speaker by leaps and bounds. When she started gaining more responsibilities at work, Anderson told her, "What I've noticed is that when you're with the ladies, you're confident, and when you're with the men and you're in meetings, you're not as confident. I need you to be confident."

Toastmasters, says Perry, "gave me the confidence I needed to be in front of men."

She became the chain's national director of entertainment, changing the arc of her career. (The pitch she made for the position to the company's board of directors was drawn directly from the persuasive speaking strategies she had learned in Toastmasters, Perry says.)

She also took advantage of leadership opportunities in Toastmasters to further her career development. She took on officer roles at every level, ultimately serving on the Board of Directors from 2010 to 2012. Not only did she learn a great deal about being a leader, she says, but she broadened her cultural awareness.

In the 1980s, she switched her career arc again, this time to business development, overseeing audio and visual entertainment for theme parks, museums, and other high-profile venues. For the past nearly 25 years, Perry has run her own consulting business.



She's had many mentors in Toastmasters, both men and women. One was Helen Blanchard, DTM, a trailblazing figure for women in Toastmasters, who was, among other firsts, the first woman to serve as International President.

I've read and written so much about Blanchard that she's assumed a larger-than-life quality in my mind. The Toastmasters historian in me had to find out more. I asked Perry what Blanchard was like. "Helen was the embodiment of encouragement, and I never heard her say anything negative about anyone," she replied. She added that Blanchard was also a great listener and question-asker—spending time with her was like "sitting with Socrates."

Perry's passion for Toastmasters continues. The Los Angeles-area resident belongs to four clubs and tries to provide guidance to young women in their careers.

She follows a dictum her mother constantly stressed: Always leave a place better than you found it. That's why she is so intent on improving Toastmasters clubs. (Perry has launched more than 50 of them through the years.)

But she also wants to make something clear. "I try to help as much as I can," she says, "but I can never give as much to Toastmasters as it has given back to me."

Paul Sterman is senior editor, executive and editorial content, for Toastmasters International. Reach him at pssterman@toastmasters.org.

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CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM

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

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

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

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