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The Power of Belief and Teamwork

The new Toastmasters program year is a fresh start, and the perfect time for members to review personal goals and pursue them with purpose. Take advantage of this opportunity to engage anew.

Club officers and District leaders already have clear frameworks—the Distinguished Club and District Recognition programs. These aren't arbitrary benchmarks;

they are tools to guide success. These frameworks help us live both our club mission—to provide a supportive and positive learning experience that fosters confidence and personal growth—and

our District mission—to build new clubs and support all clubs in achieving excellence.

Some leaders start the program year with specific strategies in place, while others are still finding their footing. If you fall into that latter group, you're not alone. Toastmasters has a built-in support system and a global network of members and leaders ready to help you succeed. The skills you develop—whether you're a member, club officer, or District leader—will serve you far beyond the Toastmasters meeting room. Toastmasters is an investment in yourself.

But success isn't only about strategy. It's also about mindset. Too often, we inherit limiting beliefs: *This class is tough, this teacher is strict, or this District never does well.* These thoughts

shape our reality before we even begin. However, just because your District struggled in the past doesn't mean it will in the future. Tomorrow doesn't have to be like yesterday.

The power of suggestion is real. My sister, a psychiatrist, often reminds me: "Your perception is your reality." If you believe you can succeed, you're already on your way. As the old saying

goes, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Years ago, a member of my club was also a member of the Clinical Hypnosis Society of New Jersey. We were fascinated by his speeches. He explained that even a

mother soothing a crying baby—softly saying "It's going to be okay"—is a form of hypnosis.

We all have the power to bring about change. The key is to believe in yourself and work together. When everyone carries their part, the load is manageable. But when a few step back, the weight becomes heavier for all. That's when we must use our Toastmasters skills—to inspire, persuade, and bring others along. Together, we can learn, grow, and achieve more than we thought possible.

Toastmasters has a built-in support system and a global network of members and leaders ready to help you succeed.

Radhi Spear, DTM
International President



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Members from **Oasis Toastmasters**, **Kaduvela Toastmasters Club**, **Startup Colombo Toastmasters Club**, **NDB Toastmasters**, and **Torrington Toastmasters Club**, all from Sri Lanka, gather for a trek at the Kithul Kanda Mountain in Padukka, Sri Lanka.

Traveling *Toastmaster*



Tanina Ivory of Sri Lanka stops for a photo with a camel during a trip to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India.



Ruby Paul of Doha, Qatar, displays the Toastmasters centennial logo while visiting the National Museum of Qatar.

Help New Members Find Their Place

How member orientation programs benefit individuals and clubs.

By Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM

Jesly Sabu works for a consulting firm and is looking forward to leading client calls soon. Her manager also wants her to present with him at an upcoming conference. So she joined the Speakeasy Club in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in February 2025.

Sabu attended District 16's new member orientation program shortly after her membership began. To help new members like Sabu, the District offers monthly onboarding sessions. This ensures people across the District receive the same level of training.

"Some clubs offer better orientations than others, so District training is a baseline," says Ron Olsen, DTM, the District's Public Relations Manager.

The new member orientation discusses topics such as Toastmasters beyond the club, the Pathways program, leadership opportunities, and how to make the most of the Toastmasters experience. It also provides a handbook that covers Toastmasters International's history, protocol, roles, Pathways learning experience, and website.

Anyone can [view the handbook and register](#) for District 16's monthly, 90-minute orientation. "I like to say, 'Whether it's your first time or you want to learn something new, please attend,'" says Olsen, a member of Tulsa Club in Tulsa, Oklahoma. "There's always something changing. We want to make sure members are getting what they're paying for and achieving their educational goals."

In addition to participating in the District 16 program, both the Speakeasy Club and Tulsa Club teach new members how to navigate their clubs' websites and share more about Pathways.

There's also mentoring at the club level. "We

try to get new members into the mentoring program right away—to get them going on the first speech," says Olsen. "Usually, it's the first three speeches that make or break a member."

Measuring Success

District 105, which spans Jordan, Oman, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates, also offers a monthly online training and sends a [new member handbook](#) to each newcomer. This encourages clubs to partner with the District and be creative in their own new member orientation.

"The primary goal is to ensure each new member feels like a valued part of the club right from the start—giving them tools and resources so they thrive in their public speaking journey," says District 105 Club Growth Director Ramanujam Raghavan, DTM, from Orbit Toastmasters Club in Muscat, Oman. "They should have a clear picture of a way forward."

Like District 16, the orientation covers Toastmasters basics and club expectations. It also offers resources and will soon include a centralized mentoring pool for members across the District.

District 105 measures success of its orientation programming in four areas:

- 1. Retention rates:** Are new members renewing, particularly at their first renewal cycle?
- 2. Engagement levels:** Are new members

attending events, volunteering, and participating in committees?

- 3. Leadership involvement:** Are new members filling club roles?
- 4. Educational path progress:** Are new members moving through the Pathways program?

Benefiting New Members and Clubs

District 120 (India) also offers an orientation to new members and measures its success through member retention and club health. The District provides a [welcome kit](#) to share more Toastmasters resources and works in collaboration with its clubs, so there are orientation activities at both the club and District levels.

Clubs in District 120 focus on ensuring new members understand expectations, opportunities, and the support available. Mentors are assigned to help guide newcomers through their initial speeches and roles.



Toastmasters International offers an interactive orientation presentation, which clubs can customize.

Find the presentation and other resources on the **New Member Orientation webpage.**

For clubs, the goal is to integrate new members into Toastmasters, motivate them to contribute during meetings, and help them grow.

“Ultimately, the program aims to empower new members to set personal goals, enhance their public speaking and leadership skills, and make the most of their membership,” says District 120 Club Growth Director Aswathy Rajan, DTM, Ph.D., from Dynamic Leaders Forum Toastmasters Club in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

District leaders have found that well-oriented members become engaged members, who add to other members’ learning journeys and a club’s overall success. They also tend to remain members.

“When new members clearly understand the club structure, meeting roles, and learning opportunities, they are more likely to participate actively, keeping the club vibrant and dynamic,” says Rajan.

Complementing the club orientation, the District provides a broader picture of Toastmasters. “All About Toastmasters” sessions are offered during District 120 Club Officer Training.

“These sessions are designed to familiarize new members with the organization’s global structure, leadership pathways, and networking opportunities beyond their home club,” says Rajan. “The District-led orientation also creates a sense of belonging to a larger community, motivating members to actively engage in their growth journey.”

District 16, 105, and 120 leaders all emphasize that retaining members is vital for club health. Because retention is so important and can be a challenge, it’s important to establish a welcoming and supportive environment starting with the guest experience and continuing that throughout club members’ journeys.

It’s also essential to understand individual members’ goals. “When people join the club, we ask what they want to accomplish, and we check back in,” says Olsen.

Most new members are focused on their initial goals and how their club works. It can be exciting for them to learn about Toastmasters’ global structure and reach. It can also be overwhelming.

Still, it’s important for members to understand they’re now part of a worldwide

Toastmasters community. Oftentimes, this is a key focus of District orientation programs, which can plant a seed for members’ future growth opportunities.

A sense of belonging is another important goal for new member orientation programs, whether at the District or club level. Effective onboarding also develops members’ confidence and feelings of empowerment.

Starting on the Journey

After completing the District 16 new member orientation, Sabu felt encouraged. She also appreciated hearing people’s stories about their Toastmasters experience.

“I understand there are a lot of resources, and I can reach out to people if I need anything,” says Sabu. “Everyone was willing to help. I know I have support on this journey.”

For District 16, that means its new member orientation accomplished its mission. “Members matter the most,” says Olsen. “The best way to show members they matter the most is to take care of them.”

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

Well-oriented members become engaged members.



A Journey in Learning ENGLISH



Mastering the language was only the first part of my Toastmasters growth experience.

By Ana Yudha

Life is all about growth, and Toastmasters has been an integral part of my growth journey. In particular, it has helped me dramatically improve my English skills in both speaking and writing.

I grew up in Indonesia and first started learning English at the age of 12, in junior high school. I fell in love with the language, but in high school and after, my progress was slow. However, when I started working as a civil servant teacher and finally had some savings, I took a three-month leave to attend an English-learning program. It included a public speaking class, and one of my class tutors was a member of the Malang Toastmasters Club in Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

The club was far from my home—it took three hours by bus to get there. At that time, I had to focus on my 2-year-old daughter and my baby, so I tucked my dream of joining the club deep inside my heart. But when the pandemic hit and Toastmasters meetings moved online, I became a club member. This gave me new opportunities to learn English and practice my communication skills.

I took advantage by consistently attending and participating in club meetings. I took on meeting roles such as Ah-Counter and timer, then eventually began giving speeches—and finally felt confident enough to be a speech evaluator.

One role that is especially helpful for my language skills is the Toastmaster of the Day. It has helped me memorize words and sentences in English, and as a result, I have become quite fluent.

Being a working mother with two young daughters (now 5 and 7) was not easy at all. My first year in Toastmasters came with constant challenges in my personal life. With my babies at home with me, it wasn't always easy to

concentrate during our club's online meetings. I remember one time, right in the middle of my speech evaluation, one of my children started crying and screaming. I lost all focus and couldn't continue participating in the meeting.

Tough times and self-doubt were part of my journey, but step by step, I handled the challenges and turned them into things I'm proud of.

I could feel my progress in Toastmasters. The year after I joined, I became the club's Vice President Education. I also became a speaker and teacher facilitator in my region of Indonesia: Probolinggo, in East Java.

My journey in
Toastmasters has
taught me resilience,
boosted my confidence,
and opened doors
to opportunities
I never imagined before.

When my school leader encouraged me to join the “best teacher” competition in my region, I submitted all my Toastmasters achievements, including speaking awards I had won in club meetings, and my regular participation as Toastmaster of the Day. In December 2023, I won the competition and was named best teacher in the region.

There have been other highlights in my Toastmasters journey. I collaborated with a fellow member from Japan, Mr. Maurice, an American who works as an English teacher

there. We conducted a joint meeting where my students practiced speaking English with him.

I was also a judge for college speech contests. Our club provided feedback and evaluations for the contestants, boosting my confidence in presenting evaluations and enabling me to apply other skills I've gained through Toastmasters.

In addition, I used to only write in Indonesian, but after joining Toastmasters, I noticed that my English writing skills became much better. When we write drafts of our speeches, we work on crafting an opening, developing content, and connecting ideas between paragraphs.

Toastmasters has helped me achieve a new level of comfort and confidence with English after many years of effort. I'm not just learning English conversation, I'm learning public speaking, and I have seen the steady improvement in both my conversation and speaking skills.

In the 2024–2025 program year, I served as the Malang Toastmasters Club President. My journey in this organization has been transformative, shaping not only my communication and leadership skills but also enriching my personal and professional life. It has taught me resilience, boosted my confidence, and opened doors to opportunities I never imagined before.

Toastmasters is a community that empowers you to discover your true potential.

Ana Yudha is the Immediate Past President of Malang Toastmasters Club in Malang, East Java, Indonesia. She is an English teacher at a junior high school in Probolinggo in East Java. Reach her at ayu973140@gmail.com.



Controlling Your Pace and Pitch

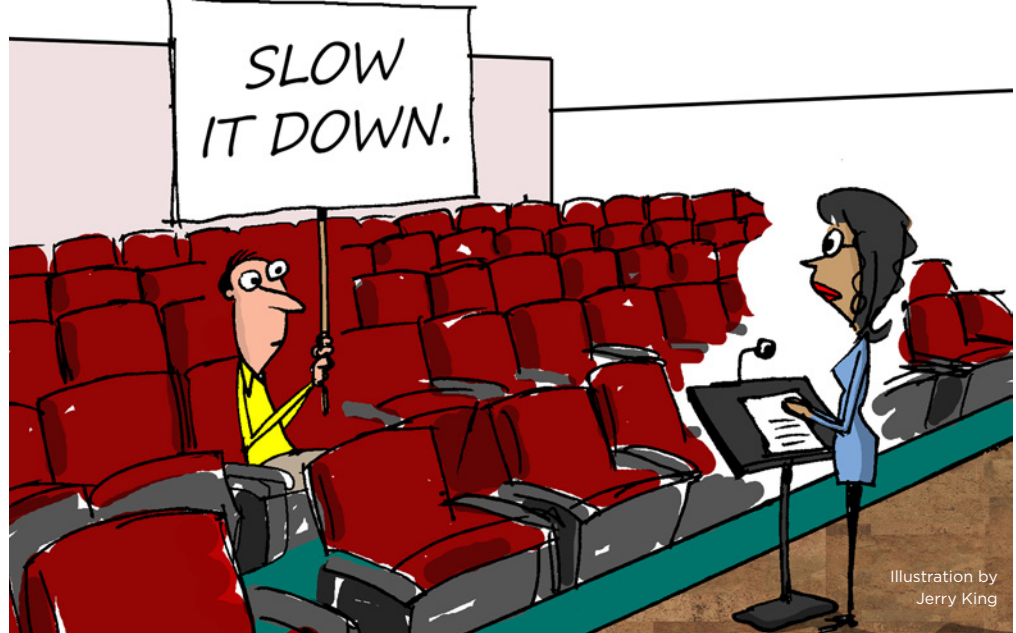
Solutions for your questions and queries.

By Bill Brown, DTM

Recently, a couple of our readers wrote in with questions about their speech delivery. Both have issues they want to correct.

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.



My speaking speed is often uncontrollable. How do I control my pace?

—Jegajothi Pandiyaraj; Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

This is an important question because a swift pace can negatively impact the effectiveness of your message.

It is common today for people to talk swiftly. In any group you will find those who follow easily when someone talks quickly, but also an equal number that do not. So, the first problem is that you risk losing a chunk of your audience.

However, a more significant issue is losing the emotional connection. Saying the words is only part of communication. How you say them drives those words home because that conveys emotion and moves your listener to take action. Emotion is primarily carried in vowel sounds, and when you speak swiftly, the vowel sounds are compressed, shortened, and do not contain much emotion.

To control your pace, I suggest that you do not focus on your speed. Instead, focus on communicating emotion. This can be done through volume, pitch, pace, and pauses. If you concentrate on effectively communicating the emotion of your message, you will focus more on helping your audience truly understand your message. And that, hopefully, will slow you down.

Additionally, practice varying your pace for effect. Use pauses and practice stressing the important words in your message. You can't do this without slowing down.

Another technique is setting a time limit. If a particular chunk of your message takes you 30 seconds to say, try saying it in a minimum of 40 seconds and get used to that pace.

I control the pace of my speeches by focusing on the drama of the message and using pauses. My suggestion is to start there and see where that leads.

Evaluators have told me the pitch of my voice rises at times. How can I prevent my voice from “squeaking” unnaturally?

—Phyllis Nielsen, DTM; British Columbia, Canada

Your problem is not one that I hear all that often, but it does happen. A number of years ago, I remember hearing a TV commercial where the spokesman finished with the line, “It’s the ultimate.” He squeaked on the first syllable of “ultimate.” So you are not alone.

I suspect that your squeaking happens when you are emphasizing an important word in your message. One way we emphasize is by raising our pitch. Let’s say that your effective pitch range is from 1 to 10, where 1 is a low voice and 10 is the high end. When you are emphasizing a word, you may raise your pitch to a 10. Your voice, however, may go into overdrive and jump to an 11 or 12, causing the squeak.

This could be caused by nerves, in which case more practice may help you. But let’s look at a couple of other techniques.

Hopefully, you can sense the situations where you squeak. If you can, try to pitch your voice a little lower. Aim for an 8 on that scale. This will still produce the contrast that aids in the emphasis but avoids the danger zone.

You could also work on emphasizing your points in another way. Instead of changing your pitch, give the word more volume. This would have the same emphatic effect but keep you in a safe zone to avoid squeaking.

Hopefully that gives you some direction. Let me know how that works out.

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



Foster Belonging and INCLUSION in Your Club

5 practical tips to implement throughout the program year.

By Kristin Arnold

July marks a fresh chapter in every Toastmasters year. Clubs welcome new officers and Districts install new leaders. It's a time brimming with optimism and opportunity—a perfect moment to reflect not just on goals and growth, but on the kind of environment being created for members.

Toastmasters talk a lot about leadership, communication, and club excellence—but at the heart of every thriving member's experience is a

sense of belonging. When members feel seen, valued, and included, they stay engaged. They speak up. They grow. So, how can leaders and members ensure that their clubs don't just run smoothly, but also feel welcoming and inclusive to everyone?

Here are five practical ways for club leaders to foster belonging and inclusion in Toastmasters clubs throughout the year.

1

Be intentional with member check-ins.

It's easy to assume everyone is doing fine, but assumptions don't build connection. Regular, intentional check-ins are a powerful way to show members they matter.

- **Early in the year (July–August):** Reach out to each member and schedule a short one-on-one conversation. Ask about their goals, challenges, and what they'd like from the club this year. This not only sets a welcoming tone but can also uncover hidden needs or talents.
- **Mid-year (January):** Plan a mid-year pulse check. It could be a survey or informal chats. Ask “How are we doing as a club?” and “What can we do to help you feel more connected?”

Check-ins aren't just for troubleshooting. They're for building trust before issues arise.

2

Celebrate what makes each member unique.

Diversity and inclusion aren't just about background or demographics, they're also about personality, communication style, and life experience. One of the simplest ways to foster inclusion is to celebrate that uniqueness.

- **At the first few meetings of the year:** Have a “Get to Know You” segment where members share fun facts, cultural traditions, or something they're proud of. Even long-time members can reveal something new.
- **Throughout the year:** Use Table Topics® to invite personal stories. Feature different members in newsletters or social media posts. Assign mentorship pairings that cross generational, cultural, or language lines.
- **At every meeting:** Kick things off with an icebreaker activity using conversation starter cards, which typically contain question prompts designed to spark meaningful conversations. Each question should promote inclusivity, curiosity, and connection, helping members discover common ground and celebrate differences.

The more we understand one another, the more we respect and connect.

3 Acknowledge diverse perspectives before conflict arises.

When we proactively recognize the value of different viewpoints, we build resilience against misunderstandings and tension.

- **Start of the year:** Encourage your club Executive Committee to discuss and define shared values that honor diverse voices. For example, create space for those who process ideas more slowly or who come from cultures where public disagreement is uncomfortable.
- **Before difficult decisions:** Whether it's changing the meeting format or planning a special event, ask "Whose voices haven't we heard yet?" and "What perspectives might we be overlooking?"

By validating diverse perspectives up front, you reduce the chances of members feeling unheard or marginalized later.

4 Cultivate psychological safety in meetings.

Psychological safety—the belief that it's okay to speak up without fear of embarrassment or rejection—is essential in creating a welcoming environment.

- **At every meeting:** Start with a warm, inclusive tone. For instance, have the Toastmaster acknowledge that "every speaker brings something valuable, whether they're on their first speech or their 50th."
- **During evaluations:** Train members to [give feedback that's kind](#), specific, and focused on growth. You might even revisit the club's approach to evaluations during officer training or a special club workshop.

When people feel safe to share and stumble, they grow and they stay involved.

5 Make inclusion a visible, ongoing priority.

Belonging isn't a one-time event; it's a continuous commitment. Toastmasters clubs are uniquely suited to model this through leadership and communication.

- **Quarterly:** Schedule "Inclusion Spotlights" in club or District newsletters. Highlight practices or stories that reflect inclusive behavior.
- **Throughout the year:** Officers can model [inclusive language and behavior](#). This includes introducing pronouns, inviting diverse speakers, and rotating leadership opportunities.
- **During contests and events:** Consider logistics (location, accessibility, scheduling, language, etc.) to avoid unintentionally excluding some members. Even small choices can have big ripple effects.

Belonging and inclusion don't just *happen*—they're built through small, consistent actions by people who care. As Toastmasters, we already have the tools: intentional leadership, thoughtful communication, and a genuine interest in helping people grow.

As you step into this new program year, ask yourself, *What kind of experience do I want members to have?* Then lead with that intention. A club where everyone feels they belong is a club where everyone thrives.

Kristin Arnold is a professional meeting facilitator who challenges leaders and their teams to achieve extraordinary results—especially when the stakes are high. Find out more at extraordinaryteam.com.

Belonging and inclusion don't just happen—they're built through small, consistent actions by people who care.

SPOTLIGHTS ON INCLUSION

District 16 (Oklahoma) prioritizes belonging and inclusion in their clubs. On their blog, they regularly share leadership tips, positive examples of inclusion, and spotlights on member and club success stories. Here are a few standouts that align with some of the tips shared in this article:

ACKNOWLEDGING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

The District emphasizes the importance of active listening and embracing different communication styles to create inclusive environments. They encourage clubs to implement practices like "round-robin" discussions to ensure equal participation and to facilitate feedback sessions where members can openly share thoughts on inclusivity.

CULTIVATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

One club member said he initially felt overlooked due to his accent. After he shared his experience, his club launched listening workshops and invited him to lead a session on cultural storytelling. This initiative fostered a deeper appreciation for diverse backgrounds and strengthened the club's unity.

MAKING INCLUSION VISIBLE AND ONGOING

Las Americas Toastmasters Club launched the "Spotlight Voices" initiative to encourage members from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences, stories, and cultural traditions during meetings. The result? Stronger connections, increased attendance, and a more engaged membership.

Virtual Variations



How to adapt your speaking style whether onstage or onscreen.

By Faith Bradley

During the COVID pandemic, many of us learned and practiced speaking online—we were on the small screen, as was our audience. Today, while many presentations have returned to the in-person setting, many remain in the virtual format. You may find yourself presenting online at a club meeting, during a work presentation, or for a job interview.

Virtual presentations offer many advantages: They enable us to reach substantially larger audiences, and they save time and resources on travel. As a strategy consultant, I have delivered and attended hundreds of online and in-person presentations in the last five years.

Although the words remain the same in either format, you should make adjustments in delivery. When presenting in person, you pick up the energy of the audience, allowing you to deliver a richer, more dynamic speech. When you present online, you are a flatter, two-dimensional version of yourself and may be limited by the quality of your microphone.

The good news is that many of the skills we learn at Toastmasters for in-person speeches are directly translatable to virtual presentations. By making minor adjustments to what words you emphasize, what body language you use, and how you present yourself, you can adapt seamlessly between both platforms.

Here are the four areas I recommend adjusting when presenting on the small screen rather than the stage.

1. Vocal Emphasis

A virtual presenter's greatest enemy is not the distractions in the room—such as people chatting, outside noises, or flickering lights—but rather from the audience's distractions—email, pets, or online notifications.

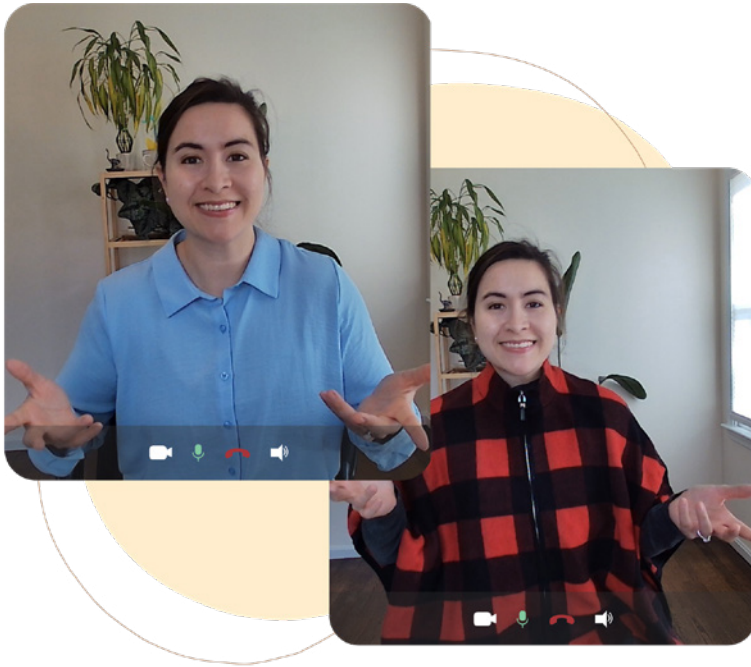
When presenting virtually, you have no way of knowing if anyone is watching or paying attention. The moment someone clicks a new

window to check their email, your voice is the sole tether to them. Use that tether to pull their attention back.

For in-person presentations, speakers often start slow and ramp up vocal variety as they lead up to the speech's climax. However, when presenting virtually, try flipping it around: add emphasis when you want the audience to start paying attention, such as at the hook of the speech; while transitioning to new, important topics; or when stating the big “so-what.”

For example, if I were presenting virtually to a group of prospective Toastmasters, I might transition to a new section by using more emphasis: “The most important step in your Toastmasters journey is to answer this question: Why do you want to join Toastmasters?”

By leading with strong vocal variety, you signal the audience to pay attention to what we're about to say.



Choosing solid colors and relatively fitted fabric will help showcase gestures and minimize distractions.

2. Body Language

In-person settings provide us with the freedom to roam the stage, bang our fist on the lectern, and point directly at the audience. However, in virtual presentations, the audience has a narrow field of view within a two-dimensional box. Despite the limitations of the screen, gestures are critical for conveying warmth, engagement, credibility, and charisma.

Keep the audience's experience in mind: consider what they see on their screen.

- **Keep gestures on screen.** One of the most common (and easiest) mistakes I see is when gestures go off screen. Often, virtual presenters attempt to communicate with their hands the same way they do in person. However, with the limited view, chances are the audience only sees the speaker's fingertips peeking from the bottom of the screen.

Setting up the camera so your whole torso is visible enables you to gesture while staying onscreen. If you are unable to position the camera optimally before the speech, take note of where the camera's boundaries are and raise your gestures into view.

- **Rein gestures into a single plane.** When you present in person, reaching toward the audience can be an effective way to add variety to gestures. However, in a virtual setting that creates a visual effect of oversized hands looming over the audience. Instead, keep gestures close to your body and move them up-down and left-right, but not forward-back.

3. Clothing Colors

Clothing is an often-overlooked aspect of presentation preparation, but it can impact the audience's perception of the speaker. While dress code is likely similar for in-person and virtual presentations, some attire looks better on video than others.

- **Clean lines complement gestures.** You worked hard preparing your speech, voice, and gestures, so pick clothing that doesn't distract. Fitted fabric and solid colors that contrast with the background helps your gestures to better stand out on video.
- **Avoid distracting clothing.** Clothing with a lot of patterns, high contrast colors, sheer material, or shiny material takes the focus off of you. These types of fabrics can create a shimmer effect on video, which can be distracting to your audience.

By making minor adjustments to what words you emphasize, what body language you use, and how you present yourself, you can adapt seamlessly between both platforms.

4. Visual Aids

Whether designing slides or visual aids for an in-person or online setting, visualize the audience's experience by considering these three questions:

1. What can my audience easily see during my presentation?
2. What do they need to learn during my presentation?
3. How complicated or surprising is the information I'm presenting?

Once you answer those questions, design elements will become more obvious.

- For an in-person presentation, select a font size that is large enough for the person in the back to read easily.
- For virtual presentations, try to find out how most attendees will be joining. If the majority will be watching on their phones, use larger and simpler visual aids. If most will be on a computer, reduce the font size or add more details, if needed.

The core principles of effective delivery remain the same between virtual and in-person presentations, however, by making a few adaptations, you can better engage your audience and make a lasting impact, whether on the stage or online.

Faith Bradley is a member of the Voice of Franklin Club, a hybrid club based in Massachusetts. She works as a healthcare strategy consultant at Fletcher Spaght (FSI) and regularly presents online and in person to corporate clients.



TWO HEADS ARE BETTER: THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

Everyone wins when individuals team up and tap into each other's talents.

By Caren S. Neile, Ph.D.

“As you navigate through the rest of your life, be open to collaboration. Other people and other people's ideas are often better than your own.”

Those are not the words of a business guru, although they could be. Instead, it's a quote from internationally acclaimed TV and film actor Amy Poehler—who knows a thing or two about collaboration. She once belonged to an improvisational comedy group, where she depended on her fellow actors to help create the scenes in which she performed. Now Poehler relies on screenwriters, directors, camera operators, makeup artists, and many more. In fact, you might say she's the ultimate collaborator.

We've all heard the clichés: Two heads are better than one. No man is an island. There is no “I” in team. And yet, somehow we forget that we usually do better when we don't choose to go it alone.

“We know that collaboration is a critical competitive advantage in today's economy—there is simply too much complexity and change for individual expertise to be sufficient,” writes Shani Harmon in a 2024 *Forbes* magazine article.

Collaboration is no great mystery. It simply means that two or more people or entities work together toward a common goal. As you might imagine, collaboration takes many forms. One is *team collaboration*, when individuals combine their different abilities and experiences in pursuit of a shared goal. Say you're working on a Toastmasters project that requires outside funding, but you don't know how to accomplish this. Why reinvent the wheel? Look for people in your club or Area with fundraising skills.

Another collaborative form is a *strategic alliance*, like the relationship formed in 2019

between Toastmasters and [Rotary International](#).

Network collaboration occurred in 2023 when Carlos Millones, DTM, brought together his Toastmasters and Rotary clubs for a specific purpose: to conduct a [weekly youth program](#) for young children in Lima, Peru. Other models include *cloud collaboration*—sharing and editing documents uploaded to the cloud—*video collaboration*, which is accomplished through video conferencing, and *internal collaboration*, where members or employees of the same organization work together to solve problems, achieve shared goals, and boost overall effectiveness.

The very qualities that organizations look for in a successful collaboration—a wide array of skills and approaches—can also create massive challenges.

Monique Levesque-Pharoah, DTM, a longtime Toastmasters leader at all levels of the organization, has a great deal of experience with collaborative problem-solving. When the Canadian served on the Toastmasters International Board of Directors (2016–2018), she was part of the [International Disciplinary Committee](#). Levesque-Pharoah headed a subcommittee that proposed creating a District-focused committee to resolve or mediate member conflicts.

The group's work led to an organization-wide initiative, approved in March 2022, calling for District leaders to work together to resolve disciplinary-related conflicts.

“As a certified mediator, I was honored to contribute to this effort, bringing together a team of experienced leaders with a passion for conflict resolution,” says Levesque-Pharoah. Clearly she assembled the right people for the job.

Benefits Abound

Collaboration sounds like a win-win, right? Think of the mutual benefits: an additional number of people to work on projects, the enlargement of networks for the parties involved, the enhanced scope of capabilities in an increasingly complex work environment.

For a collaboration to be successful, make sure everyone understands their own and their team's roles. “Collaboration improves when the roles of individual team members are clearly defined and well understood—when individuals feel that they can do a significant portion of their work independently,” write Lynda Gratton, a professor of management practice at London Business School, and Tamara Erickson, the author of multiple books about the workforce, in a *Harvard Business Review* article.

Millones, the Toastmaster and Rotarian from Peru, has seen the importance of this advice firsthand. When his Lima Toastmasters Club and Rotary Club of Lima teamed up to create a weekly youth program, it required each team member's focus on their own particular task.

Over four months, they planned and executed the visit of then-Toastmasters International President Matt Kinsey, DTM; coordinated all aspects of the visit and the

presentations made in the Lima Rotary facility; and held an online meeting with all South and Central America Toastmasters clubs.

In the end, the collaboration was a big success. “We learned, contributed, and shared while having fun. Purpose pointed the way,” says Millones, District 21’s 2022–2023 Toastmaster of the Year.

On the Same Page

In collaborations, it’s also important that everyone agrees on the plan. When Levesque-Pharoah served as District 64 Director in 2009, leaders worked together so effectively that five out of the six Districts in the region became Distinguished.

“I often likened our teamwork to a flock of geese in flight,” says Levesque-Pharoah, a member of the Vital Words and We Believe in Winnipeg Toastmasters clubs. “Geese take turns leading, allowing others to rest while keeping the entire formation moving forward. Their V-shaped formation enhances efficiency, enabling each bird to track and support the others.

“Our District 64 team embodied this perfectly—whenever someone felt fatigued or uncertain, another leader stepped up to take the front, giving others time to regroup.”

Such coordination was only possible, of course, when everyone was flying in the same direction.

Collaborator Beware!

Are there potential pitfalls to collaboration? The irony is, according to Gratton and Erickson, that the very qualities that organizations look for in a successful collaboration—a wide array of skills and approaches—can also create massive challenges. Think of the differing personalities and egos that may exist in any given group of people, like introverts and extroverts, accountants and human resources gurus, or baby boomers and Generation Xers.

Think of the various work styles and cultures there might be, the array of past experiences. It stands to reason that such amazing diversity in a team might also threaten effective collaboration.

“Members of complex teams are less likely—*absent other influences*—to share knowledge freely, to learn from one another, to shift workloads flexibly to break up unexpected bottlenecks, to help one another complete jobs and meet deadlines, and to share resources—in other words, to collaborate,” the co-authors note in the *Harvard Business Review* article.

“I often likened
our teamwork to a
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Geese take turns leading,
allowing others to rest
while keeping the entire
formation moving forward.”

—MONIQUE
LEVESQUE-PHAROAH, DTM

Their suggestions to address these challenges include:

1. **Start at the top, by modeling cooperative behavior among top leadership.** This is huge, because when bosses buy into a practice, they boost morale and engagement by demonstrating that they are serious about it.

2. **Encourage training in your company in relationship skills, such as communication, conflict resolution, or assertiveness.**
3. **Recruit or train “ambidextrous” leaders who are both task- and relationship-oriented.** We all know of people hired because they are adept in their field, but they can’t communicate effectively with others.
4. **Employ “heritage relationships,” by building teams out of people who already demonstrate that they know and trust one another.** Gratton and Erickson note that people tend to best collaborate with those who are most like them. Think about it: Friends can bring a wide variety of skills and knowledge to the table.

Collaboration can energize people. It’s engaging, challenging, and full of possibilities. Incidentally, improvisers like Amy Poehler rely on a strategy known as “yes, and ...”—that is, accepting and building on what their partners offer onstage. It just may be worth a try in all aspects of our lives.

Caren Schnur Neile, Ph.D., *collaborates as an author, teacher, and storyteller in Boca Raton, Florida, and has presented at three Toastmasters International conventions. Contact her at cneile@fau.edu.*



TIPS ON MAKING COLLABORATION WORK

A 2024 *Forbes* magazine article offers strategies for working together successfully.

1 Enter a collaborative relationship with the attitude that everyone can succeed.

In other words, your gain does not mean someone else's loss. By definition, competitors work at cross-purposes, so each one may possess only part of the necessary skills and information to get the job done; by working together, everyone succeeds by using their individual skills to help the team.

2 Patience pays off.

"I have learned through the years that sometimes collaboration feels like it can slow down a process or an outcome, but when it happens [successfully], it's everyone's success, and therefore all the sweeter," says Monique Levesque-Pharoah, DTM, a former member of the Toastmasters Board of Directors. "When people can see their personal contributions to the overall outcome, it builds capacity for future leadership."

3 If you're unsure, ask.

If you're feeling disrespected or otherwise unsure of what someone or something means, "ask first and react later," says Shani Harmon, author of the *Forbes* magazine article on successful collaborations. This will prevent unnecessary misunderstandings that naturally arise from a clash of cultures, corporate or otherwise. Someone from another team didn't run an idea by you before sharing it with the group? Try to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the chain of command is different in their organization.

4 Keep communication clear and positive.

Find out whom you report to, and what the best channels and strategies are for getting your suggestions and advice heard.

5 Standardize the use of technology.

This advice applies not only to platforms and apps, but also to rules surrounding the use of artificial intelligence. When it comes to technology, consistent standards and protocols are important to successful collaboration.

How to Interview for a Job—In Person and Online

Tips to look, sound, and deliver your best.

By Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM

Strong interviewing skills are more important than ever to help you stand out in today's challenging job market. They enable you to communicate your relevant strengths and ensure you have the information needed to make an informed decision.

Whether you interview in person or online—or both—the proper preparation, delivery, and mindset will go a long way helping you land the right job.

Preparation

“Preparation is critical for three reasons,” says Paul Binkley, Ed.D., career development manager at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. “It helps you reduce anxiety and stress, put your best foot forward, and get the information you need.”

Do your due diligence.

Preparation for a job interview begins long before you apply for a position. It's important to reflect on your strengths, weaknesses, values, interests, and priorities before you start your job search.

Keep those things in mind when considering opportunities. Also, conduct research on the job and organization before you apply. Review its website and dig deep, including reading the organization's press releases and reports.

If you're invited for an interview, it's time to revisit your research and do even more.

See if you have any connections who work there—or used to—to learn inside tips. You want to know as much about the organization as possible.

Be sure you ask the person who schedules the interview about what type it will be, the structure, and what you can expect overall. Will

the interview be in person or online? If online, will you meet with a person, or will it be a video interview (also called a one-way), where you record your answers to pre-set questions for later review.

If the interview will be live (as opposed to recorded), will it be with one person or multiple people? Will you have a series of interviews with a combination of people? If you can, find out interviewers' names and titles so you can research them and understand their roles.

Develop potential answers.

It's also time to reexamine the skills and experiences requested in the job description. Prepare examples of how you've demonstrated each one.

“Writing out the answers is key,” says Binkley. “But don't try and memorize your answers word by word. If you try, you're going to be so into the words, you'll forget the message you're delivering.”

Don't use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to write out your answers for you. “The interviewer wants to hear your answers to find out what you think and about your experience,” says Heather Campbell, Ph.D., head of career services at Central European University in Vienna, Austria. “Any indication that you are being helped by AI in your interview will not only result in not getting the job, but may give you a bad reputation at that organization generally.”

Based on your research, brainstorm all the questions you could be asked. “If you have tried to anticipate a variety of questions, you are less likely to be surprised,” says Campbell. She also recommends practicing your hardest questions even more.



Practice.

Use techniques for structuring your answers like STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) or CCAR (Challenge, Context, Action, Result). Campbell says she prefers the CARL method (Context, Action, Result, Learning) “because it includes talking about how you have developed as a person and how that might affect your future work.”

For more practice, ask for a mock interview at your alma mater's or community job center. Or see if your club can lead an interview-focused Table Topics® session or if a fellow member or friend can help you practice. At a minimum, say your answers out loud, whether in an empty room or in front of a mirror.

Do a dry run.

If you're [interviewing online](#), make sure your computer is fully charged. Have a backup plan—like a fully-charged phone—in case your computer crashes. Minimize anyone else using your home Wi-Fi network at the same time.

Understand what's visible in your background. Arrange the best camera angle and lighting. Be in a quiet space or have quality earphones to minimize noise.

For an in-person interview, know where you're going and how you'll get there. Test the route out ahead of time. If driving, plan where to park. Be sure you arrive early, but don't check in for the interview until 5–10 minutes before it's scheduled.

By preparing, you will lower your anxiety and nerves. This will allow you to focus, minimize distractions, and adjust more easily in the moment.

“If you have tried to anticipate a variety of questions, you are less likely to be surprised.”

—HEATHER CAMPBELL

Delivery

For any interview, dress appropriately. Always choose professional attire unless you're instructed specifically to dress a certain way or you know the industry and are confident of interview expectations.

Have the questions you want to ask written down and something on which to take notes. Consider writing a short, bulleted list of the key areas you want to highlight about yourself to ensure you cover everything.

Do what's necessary to put yourself in a calm, focused mental state [before the interview begins](#). This will help you slow down when speaking, be in the moment, and be aware of interviewers' verbal and non-verbal cues. Whether online or in person, eye contact is important.

Binkley says not to overthink it if something unexpected happens—like a cat strutting in your background if you're online. Use your Toastmasters experience to refocus. “Things happen,” says Binkley. “It's how you react that makes all the difference.”

In person.

When meeting in person, take your résumé, cover letter, and any other relevant materials with you. If you're interviewing with multiple people at one time, start and end each response by looking at the person who asked the question. In the middle, look at others to engage them and see how they're responding to what you're saying.

Online.

There are two main kinds of online interviews—one with people in real time, and one using video. For both, remember to look at the

camera; this will create the effect of having eye contact with your interviewer. Consider taping a note next to your camera with a smiley face to help you remember.

When speaking to people in real time, have the camera situated so you can look at it and see how the interviewers are responding to your answers. “Be yourself and be natural,” advises Binkley. It's also important to be more expressive online, he adds, because you can't convey nonverbal cues as effectively as in person.

A growing number of organizations are using video/one-way interviews to screen candidates. If assigned this type of interview, be sure to ask about time limits and how many chances you'll have for each response.

Binkley says video interviews can be awkward and more stressful because you're not interacting with anyone. “You're given questions and you record yourself answering,” he says. “Sometimes you'll only get two or three attempts to give an answer. Oftentimes, there's a timer on the screen.”

Don't be fooled into thinking artificial intelligence will help you ace the process.

“You see a lot of misinformation out there about ‘beating the computer’ when it comes to

job applications and interviews,” says Campbell. “But I do not know of any organization that has delegated recruitment decision-making to AI.”

Instead of worrying, Campbell recommends you try to understand the interview approach and think of the message you are trying to deliver. “In terms of interviews,” she says, “the AI program [will] be looking for things like keywords in your answers, length of answers, clarity of answers. ... These are all things that a human will be looking for too. So, as ever, make sure you talk slowly and clearly, structure your answers, and don't ramble.”

Mindset

Remember, a live interview is a two-way street. You're interviewing the organization just as much as they're interviewing you. Be sure to ask questions and get the answers you need to determine if this opportunity is right for you.

Recognize that in most cases, just like when you're giving a speech, people want you to do well. To ensure the job and organization are a fit, be [authentic](#).

“I think what many people forget is that, be it online or in person, there is the human element of interviewing,” says Campbell. “Remember, interviewers are just people, and you are just having a conversation.”

THE PATHWAYS LEVEL 3 ELECTIVE PROJECT

“Prepare for an Interview,” is a good resource for tips on identifying your personal strengths and presenting yourself effectively in any type of interview.

Jennifer L. Blanck, DTM, has more than 25 years of career development and advising experience. She is a member of 5-Star Toastmasters Club in Arlington, Virginia, and AAMC Toastmasters in Washington, D.C., and a regular contributor to the Toastmaster magazine. Learn more at jenniferlblank.com.

Do what's necessary to put yourself in a calm, focused mental state before the interview begins.

How Clubs Can Help Job Seekers

Draw on your fellow members for a professional boost.

By Paul Sterman

Searching and applying for a job is one of the most challenging things you can do. Why not lean on your Toastmasters club for help? Clubs can use a variety of skill-building activities to help job seekers.

Tailor your Table Topics.

A job interview is all about speaking on the spot. Fortunately, Toastmasters has an activity for that very skill! Use a Table Topics® session for interview practice. Think of general questions that interviewers are most likely to ask. *Tell me about yourself. What achievements are you most proud of? Describe a challenge and how you handled it.* [Practicing spontaneous speaking](#) is a big help for the real thing.

Invite an outside expert.

Bring in a guest speaker who has experience interviewing people. For example, a local company's human resources manager, or an organization's vice president, or a career coach—all can offer job-search tips from their perspective. Have them touch on what impresses them, what to avoid saying, and hiring mistakes they commonly see.

Do a “speed-round” interview session.

This activity gets everyone involved. Arrange chairs in pairs of two, so club members are facing each other when they sit. One will ask a general interview question, and the other will answer. Then they'll switch. Each respondent speaks for five minutes.

After 10 minutes, all the members seated on one side move to the next chair, while the other side stays put—creating a new pairing and new opportunity to practice.

Support fellow seekers.

Form a group for members currently looking for a job to support each other. They can meet for coffee, provide tips, and offer support during a process that can have many ups and downs.

Practice interviewing online.

Today, job interviews often take place online as well as in person, so it's important to be comfortable with both formats. If your club is hybrid, give speeches and take on meeting roles online in addition to in person to increase your confidence speaking to a camera and an audience.

Hold an open house.

Present an [open house](#) aimed at job seekers. Your event's prepared speech can be given by someone who has successfully leveraged their Toastmasters skills to land a new job or promotion. Or go the other way: A member who hired someone based on their communication skills delivers the speech. The meeting's Table Topics can be interview questions. Leave time at the end for networking!

And remember: Toastmasters International has [templates for fliers](#) you can use to advertise the event in your community and online.

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

Why GREAT

TEAM S

Don't Happen by Accident

Uncover the secret to group activities and lasting collaboration.

By Mackenzie Eldred and Laura Mishkind

What comes to mind when you hear the term “team building”? Do you groan at the thought of sharing a “fun fact” about yourself? Are you excited at the idea of a work outing to play mini-golf?

While having fun—forced or otherwise—with your fellow club members or work colleagues isn't a bad thing, it doesn't necessarily constitute team building. True team building focuses on connection before content, a concept created by author Peter Block. It's about interacting on a deeper level than simplistic icebreakers or whacking golf balls together.

When engaging in a carefully planned team-building activity aimed at creating trust and finding commonality, participants can build relationships and learn more about each other.

The quote “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation,” often attributed to Greek philosopher Plato, explains the benefits of these activities perfectly. In other words, talk doesn't matter much unless the interaction is meaningful and authentic. Humans are much more likely to be open and vulnerable in an emotionally safe environment.

By interacting with others in a thoughtful, but low-stakes activity, you can build bonds and encourage collaboration, ultimately leading to a stronger team.

The Value of Team Building

Training sessions can be a fruitful source of team building. While it takes effort to create purposeful trainings, the payoff is worthwhile. The stronger relationships developed through such sessions lead to [better collaboration](#) and more trust among the group. More trust results in better, more efficient decision-making and communication.

“When I envision ‘team building,’ I see a safe, creative time where we can start to learn—outside of our work or Toastmaster role—who we really [are]. It can be bonding, and it can also be very revealing to everyone participating!” says Cindy Laatsch, DTM, who has served as a facilitator at Toastmasters' District Leader Training. “We start to find our common and connecting threads, which can continue to develop the team's relationships in the future.”

For example, perhaps team members are asked to break off into groups for an activity, and each group has to work together to create a structure with building blocks. (See the sidebar on team-building activities.)

This exercise involves communication and teamwork.

Seeing how you react in team-building activities builds greater self-awareness. And knowing how you are likely to react in any given situation can help you communicate your needs. Laatsch explains, “Being self-aware—especially when feeling in conflict—can allow you to refocus your energy. A team-building activity—even if it feels prescriptive—can give us time to bleed off our internal stress and choose to refocus on the task at hand.”

Seeing how others navigate a group activity opens your eyes to how they see the world and therefore, expands your own understanding of your perspective. You can see yourself through



someone else's eyes, unlock your personal thought patterns, and better understand your own strengths and weaknesses.

Laatsch says another benefit of team building is that when you know someone better, it's easier to choose to be kinder, more forgiving, and more supportive. All feelings that can help prevent future conflicts.

Identifying Unique Skill Sets

It's important to understand what each member's unique strengths are and how they can contribute to the team's goals. Having a diverse set of skills within a team can promote new ways of thinking, lead to creative approaches, and increase productivity.

Observing a group engaged in an activity can help reveal each person's strengths. For example, members often take on specific roles when working together. "You can see who has a natural tendency to lead. Some can strategize well, some can convince, and some can execute well," explains Raj Bansal, DTM, a Past Region Advisor from Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

Laatsch suggests that activity facilitators not only watch what roles each person takes on, but also how each member approaches the activity and whether they choose to work together or alone. "Each of these observations can give insight into a person's preferences," she says. "Knowing personal style can go a long way to effective, supportive, and collaborative teams outside of the team-building activities."

Observing your fellow team members can help you understand their communication and work styles. It also helps members learn how to work together and use their unique skill sets to complement others. For example, if one member is more comfortable working with data, another member who is skilled in storytelling can help present the information in a way that is easy to understand.

"Working together and allowing everyone to bring their own gifts—we can create what I like to call The Whole Brain!" says Laatsch. "A team—[at] work or Toastmasters—can be much more meaningful when it's made of people who bring different ideas and 'ways of being' to the group."

How to Start a Team-Building Activity

So you want to bring your team together to identify their strengths and weaknesses and learn to complement one another's abilities. But where do you start? When designing activities for District Leader Training, the World Headquarters Training Team says the first thing they do is define the purpose of the training.

Before jumping into planning activities, the Training Team starts with the question, "What do you want the attendees to know, feel, do, or do differently as a result of participating?" They emphasize the importance of being clear about the desired outcome of the team-building activity.

Chad Littlefield, speaker, author, and founder of [We and Me](#), a team-building-focused organization, explains that people should relate to each other in a purposeful way; otherwise, no progress or connection will be made.

No matter what the team's goal is—whether it's finding a solution to club members not renewing, or helping your company increase communication between departments—team-building activities must be focused on connecting before anything else.

According to Littlefield, there are three ingredients to create connection:

1. Connect to each other—ideally by breaking out into smaller groups.
2. Connect to the purpose of the gathering.
3. Give people the choice to be authentic and vulnerable—don't force people to dive deep on personal opinions.



Once you understand what the purpose of your activity is and how to create connection, you can design an intentional opening question to ask participants. Littlefield recommends avoiding basic questions. Don't ask, "What's your favorite color?" Instead, connect your question to the purpose of why the group is there. If you're planning to redesign your club website, ask, "What website did you see recently that stood out, and why did you like it?"

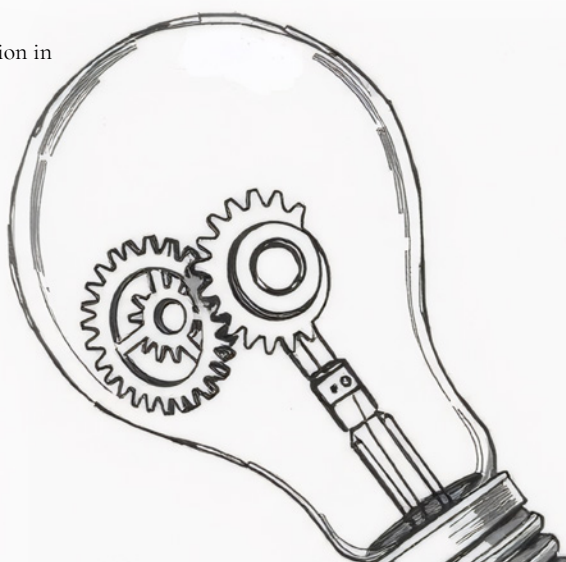
The benefit of these types of questions is to get attendees thinking about their shared goal right from the start. It prepares the group to dive into the work.

Bansal, who has facilitated at District Leader Training, says he likes to ask people to share something that has provided them with accolades or praise. It allows people to open up and can give some insight as to what they feel their strengths are.

Once teammates have responded to your initial intentional question, it's time to dive into the deeper work. Whatever activity you choose to conduct, make sure it can bring about the desired outcome. If your goal is to enhance communication, ensure that the activity requires members to talk to each other. If your purpose is to promote creativity, consider an exercise that encourages members to think outside of the box.

Conducting the Debrief

After completing a team-building activity, members should conduct a debrief. During this step, the group reflects on the experience and considers how the team worked together, what challenges they faced, and what they learned. By debriefing in a safe and supportive space, Laatsch says, members can continue to improve the group dynamics.



According to the Training Team, debriefing is important because it allows participants to reflect on their actions, identify behaviors that affect the group's performance, and helps the team apply new insights to future situations. "For most individuals, 'ah ha' moments and significant insights about how their behavior affects team dynamics and performance do not arise while they are participating in the activity, but rather during the reflection process," the Training Team says.

By reflecting on an activity and what was learned, participants can also gain an awareness

for others and discuss what each person's work style is and how to adapt and work together going forward. This can help ensure that each member is contributing to the team and engaging with the group.

This step encourages teams to reflect on their work as a group and uncover new ways of working together. Whether the team completed the activity successfully or faced many challenges, the debrief helps members improve communication and team-building skills.

Continued Effort

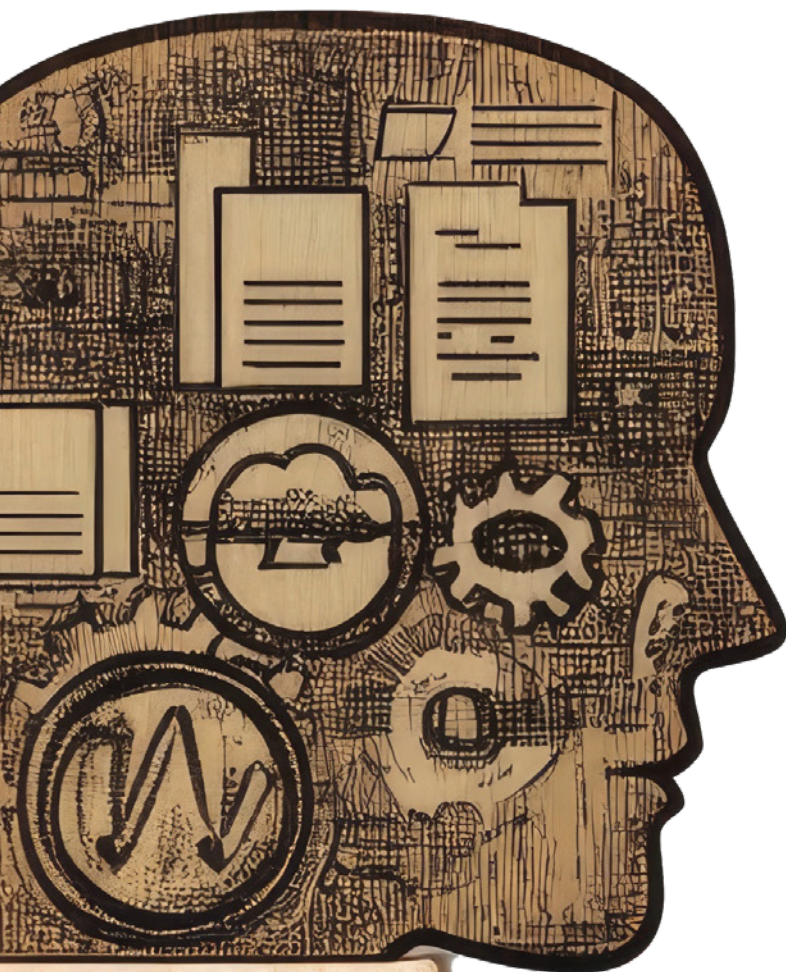
According to the World Headquarters Training Team, team building is an ongoing process. Members should continue to focus on building strong relationships and forming connections with each other after their event or activity. The work doesn't end just because the activity did.

Bansal says, "Through [the] team-building process, we in Toastmasters realize that as a team we can achieve more and have fun as well."

Mackenzie Eldred is editorial coordinator, and **Laura Mishkind** is associate editor, for the *Toastmaster magazine*.

"A team—[at] work or Toastmasters—can be much more meaningful when it's made of people who bring different ideas and 'ways of being' to the group."

—CINDY LAATSCH, DTM





Team-Building Activities to Try

The World Headquarters Training Team designs several team-building activities for District Leader Training and Mid-year Training. These activities can also work for club members, club officers, and even teams outside of the organization. By participating in the following exercises, you can help strengthen your team, improve communication, and foster collaboration.

Pair and Share

The Pair and Share activity is best introduced at the start of a meeting as an icebreaker or incorporated into the debrief portion. During this activity, participants briefly talk one-on-one to share insights and get to know one another better.

Facilitators can print out cards with questions on them or display a few questions to answer on a slide at the front of the room. If using

cards, participants select a card and find a partner. They take turns reading and responding to the question or statement on the card they're holding. After each partner has shared, switch cards and find new partners, repeating the process three or more times.

The questions should relate to the upcoming exercise and the desired outcome of the event. Ultimately, Pair and Share should allow team members to feel comfortable sharing personal experiences, knowledge, and insights with others.

Building Blocks of Communication

The Building Blocks of Communication activity is used to enhance communication among team members. This exercise highlights challenges teams may face due to a lack of effective communication, different perspectives and work styles, and time constraints. Through this activity, members can identify ways to overcome and prevent these challenges.

To begin the activity, members are divided into groups, and each group is split into two teams. Both teams receive an identical set of blocks, with the first team receiving a built structure and the second team receiving a set of loose blocks. The goal is to help the second team build an exact replica of the structure using only communication and gestures.

The activity is divided into eight 90-second rounds. During each round, one member from each team is sent to a designated area where they will discuss how to build the structure. After 45 seconds, the

members return to their teams. The member helping to build the structure must relay the information to their team. They will have 45 seconds to share the information, strategize, and begin building. During each round, different members from each team will meet to share information until each member has gone at least once.

After the eight rounds, the teams compare their structures and engage in a debrief. Discuss what happened during the activity and what they noticed. After the debrief, the teams will have a chance to apply what they learned by completing the activity again. This time, the teams will switch roles and have new structures to build within six rounds.

At the end of the activity, teams participate in another debrief and reflect on what they did differently the second time and what they can take from the experience. By participating in this activity, members can learn active listening techniques, how to adapt to different work styles, and how to understand different viewpoints.

Leading From Your ZONE OF GENIUS

Understanding where you and your teammates excel makes less work of work.

By Katie Stoddart

Have you ever wondered why certain activities fill you with joy and make time disappear, while other activities fill you with dread and boredom? How is it that some things come so easily to you, and others feel like a drag?

It's surprising how different this is for everybody. What's a piece of cake for you is somebody else's nightmare, and vice versa.

The activities that come naturally to you are in your "Zone of Genius." This term, coined by Gay Hendricks in his book *The Big Leap*, describes the sweet spot where your talent and your joy meet: the activities that you love *and* are very good at.

As a high-performance coach and trainer, I have found this concept to be a twofold magic tool: It has helped me to discover my own Zone of Genius (in-depth teaching, speaking, and coaching) and given me a framework I can use to support my clients to find their Zone

of Genius so they can thrive in their careers and businesses.

In addition to exploring the four zones—Incompetence, Competence, Excellence, and Genius—let's examine the pitfalls of the Zone of Excellence, discover how you can find your Zone of Genius, learn how to support your team to work from their Genius, and figure out what you can do when something falls in your, or a team member's, Zone of Incompetence.

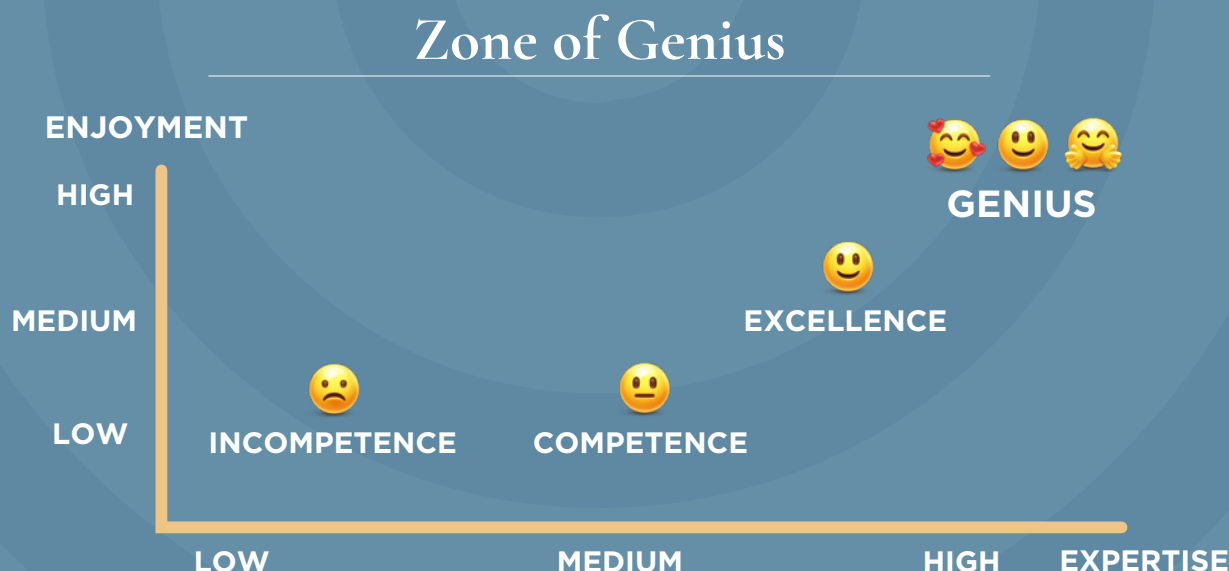
The Four Work Zones

If you look through the tasks you do every day in your work, you will notice that they fall into four distinct categories. Hendricks named these categories based on expertise versus enjoyment.

- **Zone of Incompetence:** You have no knowledge (and often therefore, no enjoyment) in a particular area or activity. Enjoyment is low and you struggle to get

into a flow, as the challenge is too high, and skills are unfamiliar.

- **Zone of Competence:** You have some knowledge and experience in an area. You are a step above your Zone of Incompetence, yet the output of your work is still average as you have not yet developed expertise.
- **Zone of Excellence:** You are highly skilled in and greatly enjoy an activity. You can easily get stuck in this Zone, as you are rewarded for the work you do, and yet, it's not what you love doing the most.
- **Zone of Genius:** You hit that sweet spot where you are highly skilled and love what you're doing. This feels easy and natural, and you believe you could spend all day immersed in the activity.



The Danger Zone

The biggest obstacle to working in your Zone of Genius is getting stuck in your Zone of Excellence, also known as the Danger Zone.

In your Zone of Excellence, you deliver high-quality work, you are praised for what you do, and you find some satisfaction in it. Yet, over time, it gradually feels like a burden, and eventually you realize you would rather do something else entirely.

One way to identify if you are primarily in your Zone of Excellence is to ask yourself: *If I had all the time and money in the world, would I still want to be doing this activity?*

If the answer is no, then you are probably doing it because you are getting paid for it, you have experience in it, and you're good at it.

Often, the Zone of Excellence corresponds to activities you didn't naturally like at first, but came easily to you. You continued to train and became very skilled (going from Competence to Excellence), yet, it's not what you want to be doing.

This was exactly how I felt when I started my career. I had learned math and physics, trained, and began working as an engineer. At first, I quite enjoyed it, and did well. With time, though, it became obvious this wasn't something I truly cherished, and I was only doing that job because it was what I had studied and learned.

After realizing my interests were related to psychology and self-improvement, and my Zone of Genius was around coaching and training, I pivoted my entire career and launched my business as a coach.

Your Zone of Genius

If you feel stuck in your Zone of Excellence, and want to uncover your [Zone of Genius](#), you can make note of which activities you enjoy most, what you loved doing when you were younger, and what comes easily to you.

Often, you don't need to change your whole career as I did but rather implement small changes that will help you discover where you truly thrive.

As you reflect on how to spend more time and energy doing the work or activities you truly enjoy and excel in, you might wonder if it is sustainable, or even realistic, for you to spend most of your time in this Zone.

This question often comes from the belief that work should be hard, and it can be challenging to let go of that belief and allow yourself to enjoy your work more. Realigning your work with your interests and skills, and outsourcing (or eliminating) the tasks that you don't enjoy, will make you 10 times more productive. When you love what you are doing, the quality of your output is significantly better and you are more motivated to work longer hours if need be.

The aim is to gradually increase the time you spend in doing work that you truly enjoy and excel at. You can do this by:

- Discovering your Zone of Genius
- Making a list of activities you want to reduce or stop
- Gradually eliminating or outsourcing some of these tasks
- Reviewing the impact this shift has in your career or business

Note that this is a gradual and iterative process. If you have your own business, it's about building the capacity to outsource. If you are an employee, it comes down to having honest conversations with your manager and team, or changing your job or position.



Zone of Genius: Audit



Ideally, you want to aim to spend at least 50% of your working time in your Zone of Genius. Remember it's not just about having more fun in your work (though that will be the case too!), it's about delivering high-quality outputs. Your performance will skyrocket when you are working in this Zone.

Leading Your Team Toward Genius

As a leader, how can you support your team to discover their Zone of Genius, and help them prioritize it?

A great place to begin is by [assessing the strengths](#) of a person and noticing where they truly thrive. Do their eyes shine when they are giving a presentation, brainstorming ideas, or putting together a plan of action? What do they seem to love doing most, and when do you feel that their output is truly outstanding?

As a leader, you have two great ways to go about discovering someone's areas of strength:

- Take note of what you have noticed about them and make your own evaluations.
- Ask them to go through a strength test and have a direct conversation about what they feel they are best at and what they love most in their work.

Once each team member is aware, you can support them in thriving. This is when the strategic element comes in: rearranging people's work so that they spend more time in their Genius.

This works for future team members as well. You will have greater success hiring someone who is naturally passionate about their field than someone who just has experience in it.

When you love what you are doing, the quality of your output is significantly better.

Making this perspective shift creates a higher-performing team and allows them to thrive in their work. It also makes it easier for you as a leader; you won't need to "push" so much for results because your team will be naturally motivated by their own interests.

If you want to take it a step further, you can analyze the over-arching strengths of the team. What makes your team thrive? What do they excel at doing together? What activities bring

the most synergy to your team?

By understanding and working with everyone's Zone of Genius—from the leader to each team member to the entire team—you are truly setting yourself up for success!

It's easy to believe that work only counts as work if it is painful. It isn't natural to love Monday mornings, or to thrive in our work. Yet, the most successful business owners in the world share this one belief: "If you love what you do, you'll never have to work a day in your life."

What would happen to you, your team, your career, and your business, if you started to embrace this motto, and worked from your Zone of Genius?

I invite you on this journey.

Katie Stoddart is founder and CEO of *The Focus Bee*, a high-performance organization. She is an award-winning transformative coach and leadership facilitator; the host of the weekly podcast [The Focus Bee Show](#) and the author of *The Magic of Focus*. She lives in Stockholm, Sweden. Learn more at: [linkedin.com/in/katiestoddart](https://www.linkedin.com/in/katiestoddart) and katiestoddart.com.

You will have greater success hiring someone who is naturally passionate about their field than someone who just has experience in it.



Outside the Zone of Genius

Of course, there will always be activities that need to be done but don't fit within the Zone of Genius.

If your team is working from their Zone of Genius the majority of time, I've found it's easier for them to tackle other, less enjoyable activities. The less appealing tasks provide variety and help people appreciate time spent in the Genius.

However, motivation dwindles over time if people are mostly working in their Zone of Excellence (or Competence), and that's often when people want more bonuses and greater pay, as then their [motivation is mostly extrinsic](#).

It's only worth it for a team member to overcome their Zone of Incompetence if they're interested in learning that particular area or activity. It's possible that a Zone of Incompetence becomes a Zone of Genius with training and experience. However, if someone has already tried mastering an area and still can't seem to improve (or enjoy it), then it is best to minimize or eliminate these activities. [Strength-based leadership](#) has been shown to bring out much better results in teams and in the work.

—Katie Stoddart



WISE WORDS

on Leading Others

With new Toastmasters officers starting their terms in July, it's a good time to **reflect on meaningful words and insights about leadership**. These quotations from leaders around the world and throughout history offer succinctly expressed inspiration on the topic.

"Leadership is not about being in charge. It's about caring for those you are in charge of."

— Simon Sinek, leadership expert, speaker, and author

"Think about saying yes before you say no. What would it mean if I said yes? What doors would open?"

— Morag Mathieson, DTM, 2023–2024 Toastmasters International President

"A coach is someone who can give correction without causing resentment."

— John Wooden, famed college basketball coach

"The world is changed by your example, not by your opinion."

— Paulo Coelho, Brazilian author and lyricist

"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."

— Shirley Chisholm, first Black woman elected to the United States Congress

"I learned to always take on things I'd never done before. Growth and comfort do not coexist."

— Ginni Rometty, former president and CEO of IBM

"It's a strange thing, leadership. We spend years trying to prove we're ready for it, only to discover—once we have it—that the real task is learning to make space for others. I learned that in Toastmasters."

— Philip Davis, DTM, prime minister of The Bahamas

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

— Helen Keller, American activist for disability rights

"Lead from the back—and let others believe they are in front."

— Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa

"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."

— Thomas Edison, inventor, founder of Edison General Electric

"The well-balanced, intelligent speaker is the natural leader in any group of which he is a part."

— Dr. Ralph C. Smedley, founder of Toastmasters International



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Author/Book Websites

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Online Course

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



CLIENT SPOTLIGHT - BO BENNETT, DTM

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

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

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

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

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