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Connecting Through Humor

I've recently started working in the Engaging Humor path in Pathways, and it has reminded me just how powerful humor can be—not only onstage, but in leadership and life.

For me, humor has always been a bridge. A way to connect, to lighten the moment, and to remind people (and myself!) not to take everything too seriously. One of my favorite ways to connect is with a bit of self-deprecating humor—it's honest, it's real, and it helps people relax.

I often tell the story of why I went to my first Toastmasters meeting: to run away from my kids! That always gets a laugh. But underneath the joke is something more meaningful. I was looking for something that was mine—a space to learn and grow. Recently, my daughter said, "Actually, you weren't running away. You were running toward something." She was right. And that simple, funny story became a doorway to something much bigger.

Humor can do that—it can open doors, shift perspectives, and bring people together. It creates what I like to call universal touchpoints: moments that remind us of what truly connects us.

At a recent District event, I saw this in action. The emcees used humor throughout—sharing how they were feeling, laughing at their own mistakes when they went off script, and keeping the audience fully engaged. The result? A room full of energy, warmth, and connection.

As Toastmasters founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley said, "We learn best in moments of enjoyment." A little laughter can lift the mood, spark engagement, and make learning feel effortless.

Humor makes us more relatable—and that's the first step to genuine connection.

But it's also important to use humor with care. It should never divide or demean. The best kind of humor brings people together. It's kind, inclusive, and rooted in empathy.

So go ahead, tell the story, make the joke, laugh at the moment you once wanted to forget.

Because the right kind of humor doesn't distract from your message—it helps deliver it.

Aletta Rochat, DTM
International President

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Snapshot



Members of **HCL Pandyas** in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, celebrate the club's sixth anniversary by hosting an outdoor meeting at Yanaimalai, a monument also known as Elephant Hill, located in Tamil Nadu.

Traveling Toastmaster



Shanid Thathamadathil, DTM, and **Shabuna Thandora**, both of Doha, Qatar, share the *Toastmaster* magazine with a parrot while visiting the Maafushi island in the Maldives.

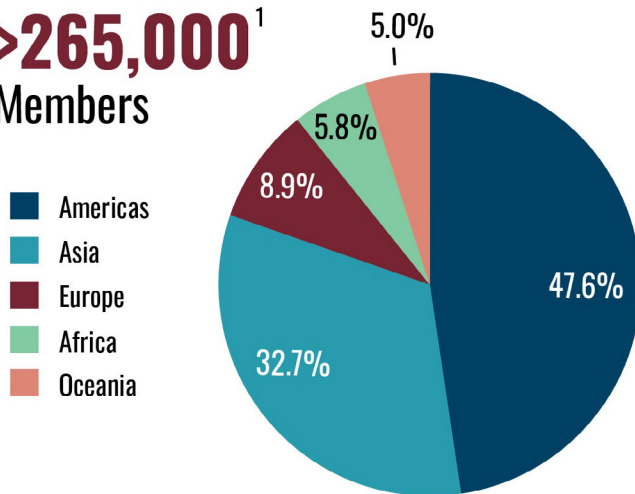


Atul Srivastava, DTM, and his wife **Manjari Srivastava**, both of Thane, Maharashtra, India, pose with their Toastmasters materials near the Iguazu Falls in Brazil.

Counting the Toastmasters Community

Check out our membership demographics from July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025. Toastmasters membership continues to reflect a well-educated, multilingual, and global community. This report is based on the latest Fact Sheet from the World Headquarters Research and Analysis Department.

>265,000¹
Members



3 out of 4
members reported a
decrease in their
fear of public speaking⁴

RETENTION RATE²: **52.6%**

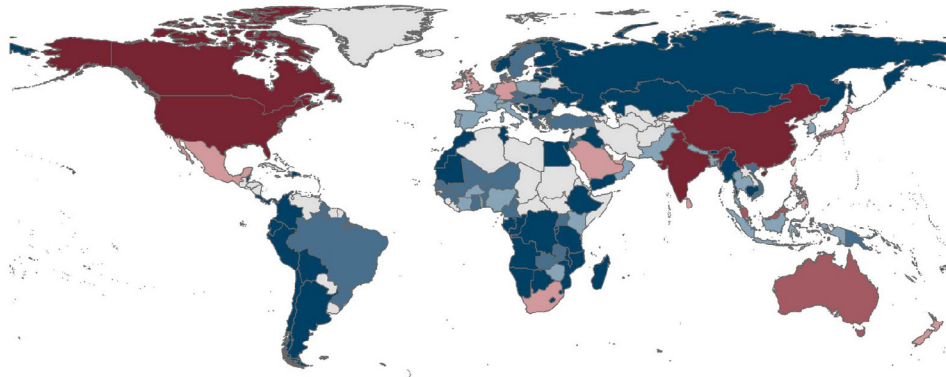
NEW MEMBERS³: **>89,300**

MEMBER TENURE: **~3.0 Years**

DEMOGRAPHICS:

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 49.1 Average Age | 8.7% are Students | 83.0% 4-Year Degree or Higher | 38.9% are Multilingual |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|

Total Clubs:



Club Type:



>13,800
Clubs

>950
New Clubs

149
Countries

1. Total membership for the October 2024 renewal period (includes dual memberships).

2. Retention calculations based upon renewing members in two consecutive renewal periods.

3. New member total denotes members whose original join date is during the 2024 to 2025 program year.

4. 74.90% of surveyed members reported experiencing less fear during public speaking compared to before joining Toastmasters.

Less Filler, More Substance

Learn speech strategies to avoid using crutch words.

By Yue Yin

Many people use filler words and phrases in everyday conversations and public speaking. Why does Toastmasters emphasize reducing this habit? Because the crutch words add no meaning to a speaker's message. When used frequently and excessively, filler words bring negative effects: They reduce the speaker's credibility and distract the audience from the main points of the speech.

Filler words can take many forms, including sounds (*um, uh, ah, er, hm*), words (*like, well, okay, so, basically, really, very*), and phrases (*you know, you see, you know what I mean, to be honest with you, in fact*).

People use these filler words for a variety of reasons: to buy time while figuring out what to say next, to hesitate due to uncertainty or lack of confidence, to make statements sound less direct, and to signal a shift or introduction of a new idea. People may also develop a habit of using their go-to filler words repeatedly and unconsciously.

Speakers are often unaware of how frequently they use crutch words, but listeners tend to notice and get distracted. Luckily, it isn't difficult to learn to omit these words or replace them with more purposeful strategies. Here are several strategies to help reduce their use.

Before the Speech

1. Plan your speech.

A formal speech should include a clear beginning, middle, and end. For example, you could start with an engaging introduction, such as a hook question, to capture the audience's attention. Then, include several key points, each supported by evidence or examples. Finally, conclude with a summary and a clear take-home message. When your speech is well planned

and organized, you're less likely to search for your thoughts while speaking, resulting in fewer filler words.

2. Practice your speech.

Rehearse your speech thoroughly if it is a prepared one. To help you memorize and internalize your speech, try breaking it into multiple sections to understand its logic and structure. If a particular section is challenging, revise or rehearse it until you feel comfortable saying it without using any crutch words. Write out your speech to reinforce memory, and practice in front of a mirror or with family and friends.

During the Speech

1. Manage your pace.

When you're delivering a speech, keep in mind the structure and major sections of your content. Slow down to give yourself more time to think, especially when transitioning from one point to the next. Whether it's a formal speech or an informal conversation, slowing down allows you to listen to yourself and make a conscious effort to reduce filler words. Your audience will also appreciate a slower pace, as it gives them time to process the information.

2. Incorporate pauses.

Use pauses instead of filling the silence with unnecessary words. Pausing not only helps eliminate fillers but also draws your audience's attention to the next point, increases their interest, and gives them time to understand what you're saying.

After the Speech

1. Identify filler words.

Recording your speech can help you analyze your speaking habits and identify the filler words you tend to use. Many digital tools like Zoom can generate a transcript automatically for you to review. You can use the search function in the transcript to count how often each filler word appears. Some artificial intelligence powered software can even count filler words for you.

When reviewing your transcript, a useful way to identify fillers is to compare a sentence with and without the word. If the sentence remains clear without it, then it's likely a filler word.

■ *Example:* In the sentence "I like to run every day," "like" is not a filler word. But in the sentence "I, like, run every day," "like" serves no purpose and is considered a filler word.

2. Review feedback from your Toastmasters club.

The Ah-Counter in a Toastmasters club usually tracks and tallies each speaker's filler words, and sometimes even offers real-time reminders when a crutch word is used (e.g., ringing a bell). Reviewing the Ah-Counter's report after each of your speeches can help you identify your frequently used filler words and monitor your progress over time. Your speech evaluator might also note whether you used filler words.

With efforts before, during, and after your speech, you can significantly reduce your use of filler words. Doing so will make your speech more articulate, concise, and impactful—whether in public speaking or everyday conversations. Let's fill our speech with substance!

Yue Yin is a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois Chicago. She is a member of the Toastmasters at Purdue club in West Lafayette, Indiana, and can be reached at yueyin@uic.edu.

Toastmasters Skills on Trial

What it's like being an expert witness.

By Chris Arning



As I waited nervously outside a courtroom in Boston, Massachusetts, in June 2024, I knew practicing my speaking skills in my Toastmasters club had prepared me to step outside of my comfort zone in a big way.

I had been called as an expert witness in a case brought by my client, the Attorney General's Office of Massachusetts, against Uber and Lyft. My role was to help unpack the brand semiotics of the two companies, specifically dissecting their advertisements. Semiotics is the study of signs and meaning, dedicated to predicting the most likely interpretations of brand communication. In this case, how the businesses were classified would have an impact on how drivers should be compensated. Ultimately, the case settled in favor of my client and the drivers gained health benefits and an increased hourly pay rate.

Being an expert witness was a test of my speaking skills. While the bulk of my time was spent writing reports, my value to the client hinged on my performance on the stand.

Before testifying, I needed to establish credibility with the judge to be officially declared an expert in my field. This involved a direct examination requiring me to convey my authority in terms of qualifications, credentials, and command of the subject matter. Stage presence was vital and the poise, vocal variety, and use of gestures, eye contact, and pauses I gained through delivering Toastmasters speeches helped immensely.

Once determined to be a credible witness, I faced another challenge for my Toastmasters

skills: deposition. During deposition, the opposing counsel questioned me, and my side didn't get to ask any questions. I was recorded on camera and a court stenographer logged my every word. Anything I have ever said on video or in writing could be dredged up to trip me up.

Of course, as an expert witness, I was not on trial. I was there to help the court. However, any question asked by the opposition during the case could either be perfectly innocent or bait laid to entrap. I had to be aware if a question contained a false assumption or tempted me to stray outside my area of expertise. This slip could be used to erode my legitimacy.

If Toastmasters is a gym for public speaking, my training was good enough to withstand the pressure of the courtroom.

At trial, it's vital to maintain discipline and be consistent. The opposition quizzes each witness on their report and we are expected to know it back to front. However, there can be curveballs—an exhibit might be brought up as evidence to rebut a previous point.

Each question is also an opportunity to impress. I could pause as long as I liked, repeat the question, or talk my way into an answer

to buy time to think, all leading to smoother and more convincing testimony. I learned all of these strategies through Table Topics, which prepared me to expect the unexpected and to react in the moment. I had no reason to panic during my testimony when I was in Table Topics mode.

Knowing how to improvise also meant that I could be proactive and go on the offensive too. When I was asked about branding in the deposition, I grabbed the branded mug of the corporate law firm whose offices we were in and deconstructed the logo to show how brand image conveys product claims. This made my point while preventing the topic from becoming unduly complex.

If Toastmasters is a gym for public speaking, then having participated in hundreds of Table Topics, conducted countless evaluations, and delivered 50 speeches meant my training was good enough to withstand the pressure of the courtroom. After the trial, my client said that of the six expert witnesses, I was the most impressive on the stand. A British accent in the United States doesn't hurt either.

I would not have volunteered for this job had I not been a Toastmaster. I am grateful for this extraordinary opportunity. Being grilled under oath in a justice system tested my Toastmasters skills and took them to the next level.

Chris Arning is a member of Berkeley Square Speakers Toastmasters Club in London, England.



Crafting Your Speeches

Solutions for your questions and queries.

By Bill Brown, DTM

We've all had that experience. You sit down to write your next speech and are faced with a number of questions—from topic selection to organizing your points to deciding what information to include. Let's look at a few of these roadblocks.

Nothing exciting ever happens in my life. How can I find stories or topics to speak about?

My first reaction was, *Gee, that sounds like me.* Every contest season I struggle with this issue. I don't have awesome stories that could propel me to the big stage in the World Championship of Public Speaking.

But why is it important for you to have exciting topics? If you are going to speak professionally, you probably already have your topic. But if you are just looking to build your speaking skills, it is more important that you gain experience rather than entertain your club members.

When my wife was a Toastmaster, she expressed her frustration with topic selection. I asked her what she liked. She said, "Cats and flowers." I told her those were the topics for her next two speeches. She used them and had a fun time writing and delivering both.

Now, if you enjoy competing in the contests, topic selection is slightly more complicated, especially in the International Speech Contest.

I don't have one of those winner stories. It took me a while to realize that I wasn't going to win the big trophy. I did make it to the District level twice, though. In one of my contest speeches, I told a story about something that happened at my university over 100 years ago. It had a nice lesson, and it served me well. I learned a lot of performing skills on the District stage. It pushed me to grow.

It is always nice to receive accolades from your club members about your speech topic, but remember why you are in Toastmasters. As long as you are practicing your speaking skills, you can talk about any topic, even if it's not that exciting.

How factual should a speech be and what parts can be embellished?

The short answer is: It depends.

If you are giving a history lesson, facts are important. And someone in your audience is sure to know if you change something.

However, your task is to clearly convey a message. In a speech I'm writing right now, I am using a quotation that is quite convoluted. I decided to change some of the wording so that it still conveyed the original idea but was easier to understand. I didn't want to spend time explaining what the quote meant. That is a surefire way to lose an audience.

Additionally, in some of your speeches, your story is an illustration of a principle, and the exact details aren't important. In that case, feel free to change some of them.

In my District contest speech, there was a line where, after a campus building burned down, the university president said, "We will rebuild it, and we will rebuild it one brick higher." I created a dramatic scene that led up to his line. I described the students standing around the rubble wondering what was next. Then the president strode up, walked into the rubble, picked up a brick, held it high, and delivered his line. That sounded better than, "The university president said, ..."

In my other District contest speech, I told a story about something that happened to me at my university radio station. I was faced with a challenge to read something that was in a language I didn't know. I ran away from the challenge by saying, "Oh, whatever it is." Not exactly what you want to say on the air. In the story, I had my boss give me feedback and deliver the lesson: Accept challenges. That was a total fabrication, but it didn't matter, because it was a story, not a history lesson.

In this case, my experience was a framework for a lesson I wanted to convey. The only difference in the story was that one line. And I don't think my old boss would mind that I made him the hero of the story.

The bottom line is to stay true to the intent—just make it clearer.

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.



Illustration by
Jerry King

Using Humor at Work?

Do it strategically and you'll succeed, even with the boss.

By Don Colliver

Imagine you're standing at the front of your office conference room. Your team, your manager, and a member of your company's executive leadership team sit before you in the audience. You're presenting a status update, and midway through, you attempt a joke. You're greeted with ... silence. Oof!

Okay, you can snap out of your nightmare now. Using humor in work presentations can be a delicate balancing act. We've all known folks at work who joke too much, and we've all known folks at work who don't seem to understand the concept of humor. I've been guilty at both ends of the spectrum. However, after two decades as a corporate facilitator and professional speaker for Fortune 500 companies around the world, I've learned that workplace humor can be incredibly effective if used skillfully.

Perhaps you avoid using humor in work presentations because you worry that incorporating it will reduce your credibility with your peers and superiors. However, humor in presentations has been shown to increase audience connection, build trust, and release tension.

For classical rhetoric fans out there (you know who you are), Aristotle defined the three tools of persuasion as *ethos* (character), *logos* (logic), and *pathos* (emotion). Humor at work falls under *ethos*, because eliciting workplace-appropriate laughs can show your audience that your character is similar to theirs and you understand their point of view. This feeling of similarity increases your chances for persuasion and influence (according to good old Aristotle, anyway!).

Humor can help you flourish in your career, as well. A frequently cited survey by Hodge-Cronin & Associates found that 84% of

managers say that a sense of humor correlates with better work, and 98% prefer to have people with a sense of humor working for them.

So how can you embrace this humor superpower in your next business presentation to enhance trust, build connection, and maybe even get yourself a raise? Try these three tactics:

1. Own It

Many stand-up comics begin their sets making fun of their own obvious quirks and eccentricities. You can leverage this tactic as well in your work presentations. Making light of yourself serves two purposes: It shows your audience you're already aware of what they might be thinking of you, and, since we all have quirks and eccentricities, it shows that you're one of them (a fellow member of the human race). These two elements set your audience up to be more receptive to your message.

How to do it:

Start by writing down 10 things that would be immediately obvious and unique about you to your particular audience. A useful (but scary) question you can ask yourself is, *What do people make fun of behind my back?* Perhaps you're known around the office as a bit of a stickler for the rules. You could say, "You may think of me as a pretty by-the-book guy, but I can get a little crazy sometimes. In fact, just last night, I drank a glass of milk that was one entire day past its expiration date!"

If you can poke fun at yourself, you show your audience that you embody the self-esteem and executive presence required to take yourself lightly, and maybe even get a laugh out of the deal. A caveat here, however: While making fun of your

personal quirks can be very effective, never make fun of your message or your subject matter expertise, or you risk undermining your presentation.

Another way to own it is by delivering what is known as a "dad joke," which is typically a pun or an inoffensive, corny joke that a goofy father might say to embarrass his kids. For example, when I speak at cybersecurity tech conferences, I sometimes use this dad joke to connect with my audience: "Why couldn't the government catch the hacker? Because he ran-some-where. (Get it? Ransomware?)" A groaner like this is clearly not intended to elicit an authentic laugh from your audience due to the actual content. Instead, dad jokes like this receive giggles because you show you're willing to be the focus of the laughter for a moment as the "bad joke teller." It doesn't affect your credibility with your content, it just shows that you're confident and comfortable enough to connect with your audience by having some fun at your own expense.

2. Hack It

"Hack" is a derogatory stand-up comedy term for overused and cliché topics or comedians. In stand-up, you absolutely *don't* want to be labeled a hack or do hack material. But when it comes to work presentations, leveraging familiar, shared experiences can be a safe and effective way to utilize humor.

As with all good presentations, the first step is always knowing your audience well. Carefully research your meeting attendees' priorities, problems, and long-term objectives, and then drill down to find experiences or frustrations that you share.

Leveraging this shared background for laughter is called “affiliative humor,” which celebrates inclusivity and connection.

But do your research carefully. Treating a seemingly shared subject lightly can backfire if some audience members have had a different or even traumatic experience with the topic, or aren’t aware of it. You can risk appearing tone-deaf or not reading the room. For example, I originally included a joke about Chuck E. Cheese, an American children’s restaurant, in my education session at the Toastmasters 2023 International Convention. Luckily, constructive feedback during rehearsals helped me realize that many of the international attendees would not get the reference, so I cut the joke. However, the well-considered, lighthearted reference to a shared, low-stakes frustration can be an effective way to prime your audience to embrace your message.

How to do it:

Before your next work presentation, jot down five low-stakes frustrations that you’re sure you share with everyone in your audience, like parking, traffic, or travel. Pick the most innocent, lighthearted frustration and mention it as you begin your talk.

For example, when I’m speaking at conferences at the sprawling Mandalay Bay Convention Center in Las Vegas, I can garner an easy, familiar laugh from my audience by referencing shared Vegas annoyances, like the endless lunch lines at the Mandalay Bay food court, the long walks from the hotel to the conference center, and, of course, that wicked Vegas heat.

While you won’t necessarily garner a room full of belly laughs, you will bring about smiles and nods of recognition from your audience, and that recognition of familiarity was the goal all along.

3. Personalize It

Particularly long or [data-dense presentations](#) pose a special challenge in keeping your audience engaged. Luckily, some strategic humor can give your audience a break from your information overload, allow them to reengage with you as a presenter, and provide a much-needed laugh for everyone.

One tactic that works particularly well in such grueling yet necessary data marathons is the “calculated personal digression.” In one data-heavy software presentation I observed, the savvy speaker had planted a photo of his two cats in his PowerPoint deck during a transition between his presentation points. He feigned surprise (poorly), quickly introduced us to his cats, shared how they helped him with his presentation, and then went on with his talk. With this calculated personal digression, the presenter provided his audience a quick diversion from his data and gave everyone a reason to smile (unless they were dog people, of course).

How to do it:

Dropping a cute photo of your pets or kids into your data-dense slide deck seems simple enough, but the trick with the calculated personal digression is

brevity. Explain your photo with three short sentences at most and then briskly continue on with your talk. You want to give your audience a playful data break, not an extended personal monologue.

They will appreciate the moment of levity, and it may even be the most memorable part of your talk.

Let’s return to that imaginary scenario where we first began, with you standing at the front of your office conference room facing your team, your manager, and your executive leadership. But this time, you’re enjoying smiles, nods, and maybe even some laughs, because you’ve just employed one of these humor tactics in your status update presentation.

Now, make that scenario real. Incorporate some solid humor strategies into your next work presentation, and your audience (and maybe even your boss) will thank you for it!

Don Colliver is a corporate trainer, trade show presenter, and bestselling author living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. He teaches teams to communicate more effectively so they can exceed their goals. Reach him at doncolliver.com.

**Humor in presentations
has been shown to
increase audience
connection, build trust,
and release tension.**



Pointers From a Popular Podcaster

Practical, tactical communication takeaways from Matt Abrahams.

By Stephanie Darling



Matt Abrahams, Toastmasters' 2025 Golden Gavel honoree, has spent his career teaching people to *Think Fast, Talk Smart*. That grabby, slightly ungrammatical title* graces one of his [YouTube](#) videos (which has more than 48 million views), as well as his [podcast](#), which reaches listeners in 98 countries. An iteration of the phrase serves as the title of his book, *Think Faster, Talk Smarter*.

Think Fast, Talk Smart: The Podcast launched in 2020, via the Stanford University Graduate School of Business (SGSB), where Abrahams lectures on strategic communications. The podcast is titled after a talk he gave in 2014 to Stanford alumni—the one that became the YouTube blockbuster. Today, after 219 episodes, the podcast continues to emphasize spontaneous speaking, along with new content that covers a broad range of communication topics. The podcast team digs for unique traditional and emerging subjects for Abrahams and his impressively eloquent guests to dissect.

The program is designed to give listeners two or three “practical, tactical communication tips to practice right away,” says Abrahams. Another staple: At the end of each episode, he asks guests whom they admire as communicators, and to give three ingredients in their recipe for successful communication. The answers spark fresh ideas, actionable research, dynamic discussion, encouragement, counterintuitive advice, laughs, and surprises.

Abrahams delivered his Golden Gavel speech in August at the Toastmasters 2025 International Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The annual Toastmasters honor goes to someone who has made a prominent impact in the fields of communication and leadership.

Abrahams, who shared his own communication recipe and top practical

insights in a recent interview, clearly loves talking about communication-related issues. That enthusiasm shines through in the podcast.

Key Podcast Themes

The speaking themes that come up most often on the program will be familiar to Toastmasters. “Across all our episodes, three things have come in loud and clear,” says Abrahams. “First and foremost—your audience is paramount. Many of us think success is just broadcasting out an idea; that’s not success. Success is when your audience receives, understands, and appreciates your message, although they don’t have to agree, or be influenced by it.”

The second critical theme is focused listening. “I borrowed this advice from my colleague Collins Dobbs: Give yourself a slower pace, mental space, and the grace to hear and connect with the other person(s).”

Abraham’s third point: Whether negotiating, persuading, or having an everyday conversation, “Communication is a creative act. It’s always done in collaboration with others.” As the saying goes, “It’s never all about you.”

The Swiss Army Knife Tool

There’s more to know about listening, Abrahams says. “Many of us listen for the top line, to get the gist of what’s being said. Then we begin to rehearse, judge, and evaluate. I recommend people listen for the bottom line, because it requires a deeper level of attention.

“I always listen to paraphrase, whether I actually do it or not,” Abrahams adds. In fact, he calls paraphrasing the “Swiss Army Knife of Speaking” because it’s the best, most basic tool to get people on the same page in understanding the message.

Non-verbal clues are also important.

“A colleague once asked me for feedback on

a meeting and I started in on negatives, because it hadn’t gone very well,” Abrahams says. “What he wanted in that moment wasn’t feedback but support. Had I noticed how he [exited through] a back door, spoke slowly, and didn’t make eye contact [with me], I would have caught on that his words weren’t congruent with the need.”

3 Surprising Tips

Among his many fascinating podcast guests, Abrahams credits three fellow educators for giving him deeper, even surprising, insight into successful communication.

First is Michele Gelfand, Ph.D., an SGSB colleague who is known globally for her negotiation expertise, especially where culture is concerned. “Michelle helped me realize how important the mindset we bring to communication is,” Abrahams says. “She likes to say, ‘Mind your metaphors.’”

For example, taking the metaphor of a battle into a negotiation influences the entire exchange. With that attitude, “I’m not going to see [negotiation] as a problem to be solved or even a dance, where we take turns sharing,” Abrahams notes.

“We need to be conscious of how we approach conversation—because that influences, even in subtle ways, the words we use, how long we speak, how well we listen.” Abrahams found Gelfand’s perspective a potent reminder that mindset always matters.

A second colleague, Valerie Fridland, Ph.D., a neurolinguist at the University of Nevada, Reno, surprised him with her judicious support for filler words like “ah” and “um.” One of her points that Abrahams found particularly interesting was the way filler words are often used by adults when explaining a new or complex idea to very young children.

“As kids we learn that whatever follows that ‘ah’ or ‘um’ will be relevant or interesting or important. That’s why we’re so attuned to them,” Abrahams notes. However, as adults we get frustrated hearing one filler word after another, without receiving the key details we’ve come to expect.

Fridland, he adds, makes a good case for how a thoughtfully placed “ah” or “um” can subtly yet unmistakably signal there’s more to say or hear from the conversation.

Abrahams is also intrigued by conversational turn-taking, a topic studied by his colleague [Alison Wood Brooks](#), who teaches at the Harvard Business School.

“She taught me there are two kinds of turns, supporting and switching,” he says of this third speaking surprise. Supporting conversations involve one topic. The first speaker might say, “I just read the best book ever,” while the responding speaker might ask, “What’s the title? What’s it about?”

A switching conversation changes the topic. The response to the book comment might be, “I prefer tennis to reading.”

Each style is likely to make a significant difference in the experience for both speakers.

“If all I do is support you, it feels like I’m dodging and don’t want to be part of the conversation,” Abrahams notes. “If I keep switching it feels like I’m self-serving and ignoring your needs.”

Research like Brooks’ favors a mix of styles, with slightly more supportive turns, so that people feel good about the conversation and create connections, Abrahams says.

“Success is when your audience receives, understands, and appreciates your message, although they don’t have to agree, or be influenced by it.”

—MATT ABRAHAM

Closing Thoughts

In keeping with the *Think Fast, Talk Smart* podcast’s traditional ending format, Abrahams lists these top ingredients for his communication recipe, noting he sneaked in more than three.

- Understand your audience; craft a clear speaking goal for them.
- Use a speech structure, such as problem/solution/benefits, or “what, so what, now what,” so listeners can easily follow your points.

- Develop a speaking presence that’s engaging, authentic, and clear.
- As for admired speakers, Abrahams lists former first lady of the United States Michelle Obama as a favorite, regardless of politics.



ON AIR

“She’s warm, articulate, confident, competent, and has great presence. When you think about effective public speaking, I think she does many things right.

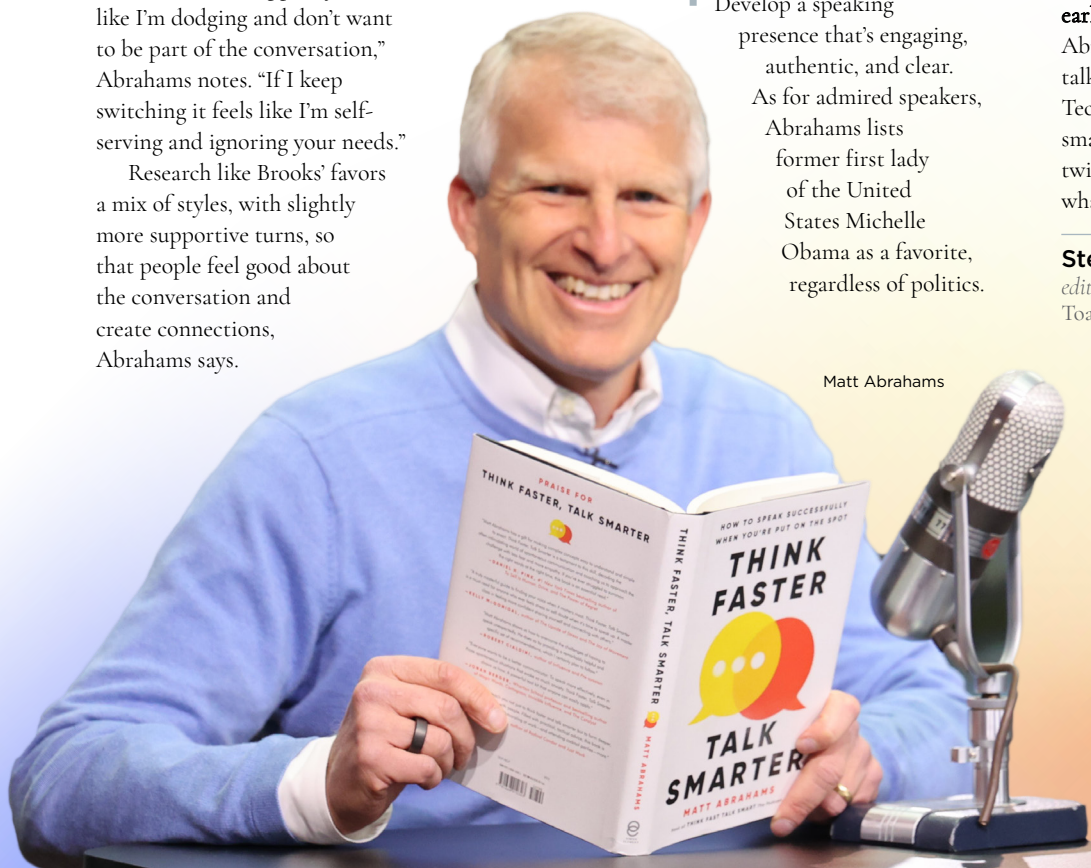
“And, as a person fascinated by spontaneous speaking, I feel like the late comedian Robin Williams had a black-belt ability to speak in the moment every time you saw him. It was a gift, and I would have loved to learn what was going on in his head when he spoke.”

* Oh, and what about that grammar error noted earlier in this story?

Abrahams knows his advice to “think fast, talk smart” isn’t quite grammatically correct. Technically, it should be “think fast, talk smartly.” However, he likes the tiny linguistic twist as a way to draw a little extra attention to what he’s saying.

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

Matt Abrahams





HOW TO BE FUNNY ACROSS CULTURES

What makes them laugh in one country might flop in another.

By Dean Foster

“When in Rome ...” the saying goes, so if you use humor in your global presentations (and who doesn’t?), that means adapting your humor to the culture in which you are presenting. Language, technology, and presentation style are all affected by culture, which will determine whether or not your audience perceives what you are saying as funny (even if you didn’t mean for it to be) ... or not.

Let’s look at some ways you can adapt your language, the use of technology, and your style to guarantee your comedic success anywhere in the world!

Do You Speak My Language?

Let’s say you’re an English speaker presenting in a country where you know the majority of audience members are likely non-native speakers of English. Your words, both spoken and written, should be in the form of “global English,” which scrubs out local idioms, spelling, and pronunciation that an English-speaking presenter might use. For example, Americans in the United States might say, “Give me a ballpark figure,” which means “Give me an estimate.” Indians might say, “Can we prepone the meeting?” which means “Can we move the schedule to an earlier time?” These phrases are not easily understood outside of their culture and need to be avoided.

If you’re in a country that predominantly speaks a different language than you do, you might even be speaking through a translator, who may or may not have the same delivery skills as you do. Under these challenges, the worst thing you can do is deliver a joke. What makes the joke funny

is often dependent on the listener understanding the subtle twists of language or cultural context. Many non-English speakers may miss the joke if they are not familiar with the language. Instead of relying on a joke, tell a humorous story that relates to who you are and the purpose of your talk.

As an intercultural consultant, my presentations are about understanding cultural differences, which provides me with lots of opportunities to talk about how I’ve misunderstood cultures, often with humorous outcomes. I was once discussing in Israel how different cultures interpret hand gestures differently. I demonstrated that while the thumb-to-forefinger sign means “Okay” in some countries, it is considered an obscene insult in Brazil. A similar gesture in Italy, with the palm held upward, means “Come on, get real.” When I asked the audience what it meant in Israel, someone shouted, “All of the above, plus ‘Hey, hurry up!’” The rest of the audience laughed in agreement. The story and the audience response worked far better than any punchline to a joke that I could provide.

When telling a story—or even just an anecdote—however, be sure that it doesn’t poke fun at the culture of your listeners. You wouldn’t intentionally do that, but unless you are sure your story could not be interpreted as doing so in other cultures, you might mistakenly and inadvertently cause unintended offense.





For example, I recall telling a story of how glasses of sake were continually being refilled by very gracious Japanese hosts of Western guests at a dinner in Tokyo, only to find out the next day from the very hungover guests that they continued to drink the sake because they didn't know how to refuse it without offending their hosts. Outside of Japan, this story as presented would resonate with many audiences. However, in Japan, this story would need to be reversed so the joke was on the Western guests who didn't understand the cultural obligation that the hosts had to keep the sake flowing when a cup was empty.

Always make sure that your stories and anecdotes cannot be interpreted as offensive in any way by any cultural audience. The best way to ensure that you are not being disrespectful and that your audience understands your language is by testing out your presentation with individuals from abroad ahead of time.

The Challenges of Technology

Good presenters today must be comfortable presenting in traditional face-to-face formats, as well as in virtual formats. We need to be skilled using a variety of virtual platforms, ranging from Zoom and Webex-type webinar platforms to technologies specific to social media, like Instagram and YouTube. These virtual technologies offer the opportunity to present to groups both large (broad audience) and small (targeted audience) around the world, and often to listeners comprising many different cultural groups. However, virtual presentations pose many challenges, especially when trying to incorporate humor.

First, presenters need to be comfortable using their technology—from microphones, lights, and cameras, to the platform they choose to deliver their speech on. Always practice your presentation beforehand so that the technology becomes your friend, not your enemy. The last thing you want is to get flummoxed in your presentation because of a tech glitch you cannot solve.

Second, virtual audiences often do not provide the same feedback to the speaker that in-person audiences do. Because of this, it is essential that every story, especially when it involves humor, is pre-tested in a live setting before you use it in a virtual environment, and especially when crossing cultural lines.

Presentations with images and written words (e.g., PowerPoint) must also be culturally appropriate for everyone in the audience. Be sure to review all graphics and text for cultural appropriateness. Despite your best intention, any glaring, culturally inappropriate graphics or text will immediately distract from and undermine the quality of your humor. For example, while a graphic of an attractive female in fashionable dress might work in a presentation in Italy, it would be offensive, if not blasphemous, in Saudi Arabia.

Symbols can have powerful religious or political meanings that may be best to avoid in your presentation, and colors may carry different connotations in other cultures as well. For example, red typeface has a negative connotation in Korea, but signifies wealth and health in China. Even the degree to which text and graphics are used varies culturally. In Asia, for example, the use of symbols, numbers, graphs, and pictures is much more effective than text or words on a screen. However, in continental Europe, the use of bullet-pointed, logically connected text that represents concrete ideas leading to a final conclusion is highly effective.

A Matter of (Presentation) Style

You've worked hard at developing your presentation persona, your personal presentation style, and your "speaker brand." But your style—or certain aspects of it—may be problematic in some cultures.

Good global presenters are aware that different cultures value different presentation styles and try to be flexible in their delivery to meet these cultural requirements. This doesn't mean you need to change drastically or give up your authenticity. And it certainly doesn't mean you have to behave more like the culture of your audience if it directly challenges your beliefs, personality, or comfort



zone. But it does mean that small adaptations to your style can bring big rewards, especially when it comes to humor.

Some cultures, for example, value participation and audience involvement. They eagerly respond to invitations for comments, thoughts, and engagement. In fact, in cultures such as Nigeria, South Africa, India, Israel, Brazil, and many others, you may not have to solicit their involvement, as they will eagerly jump in with questions, thoughts, and ideas, whether you ask for them or not. Other cultures, such as Japan, China, and Indonesia, might be very reticent to offer opinions and questions, and expecting audience involvement in these cultures during your presentation might not work.

When incorporating humor into your speech, it's important to be aware of how it will come across to your audience. For example, making yourself the object of what is funny—as opposed to making someone else the object of what is funny—can be a very effective way of telling a humorous story in Latin America, where it will elicit empathy for your travails. However, making yourself the object of the joke in Germany might be interpreted as making yourself look foolish, and elicit more pity than empathy.

Humor that is based on sarcasm can be valued for its sharp-edged cleverness and even abrasiveness, successful in cultures such as France, Russia, India, and others. However, it more likely would be seen as

hurtful, and unfunny, in much of Latin America and the Middle East. Humor that is based on irony works well in Great Britain, Ireland, and Australia, but would not be recognized as funny in Germany.

How can you adapt to these expectations while remaining authentic to yourself and your personal presentation style? Recognize where your style might differ from that of your audience and identify what small changes you can make to accommodate these expectations. In most cases, you'll find that even when your presentation style differs from that of your audience, the differences are not that unfamiliar.

It's funny how culture plays a crucial role in determining what's funny—and what's not. As presenters, we can learn to be effective in telling a joke or funny story in our home country, but it takes skill and practice—and cultural knowledge and awareness—to ensure the success of a humorous anecdote or story presented to an audience in another country. For those of us who earn a livelihood presenting today, this is no laughing matter.

Dean Foster has been providing intercultural consulting for global organizations for over 30 years. He has worked in over 100 countries, is the author of six books, including the soon-to-be published *Business Beyond Borders*, and is the host of the podcast, *Oops, Your Culture's Showing!* Learn more at deanfosterglobal.com.



Sing It Loud, Speak It Clear

Why singing is the secret weapon for confident communication.

By Jillian Mitchell



Most people think singing is just a talent—you've either got it or you don't. But what if singing isn't just about talent? What if it's one of the most powerful tools for training your speaking voice?

Singing can strengthen, tone, and stretch your voice, much like a workout does for your body. If you use your voice for anything (work, relationships, simply getting through a Monday), singing might just be the most overlooked tool in your vocal toolkit.

The Science Behind It

Let's start with the basics: Your voice runs on muscles, just like the rest of your body. Vocal folds are folds of muscle tissue surrounded and supported by muscle systems that can be trained. Think of it like this: If speaking is walking, singing is running, and running makes you a stronger walker. With this lens, singing doesn't just make you sound nicer, it builds vocal strength, flexibility, and stamina.

5 Ways Singing Helps Your Speaking Voice

Singing demands more from your voice—range, breath, stamina, precision. All of that makes you a stronger, more engaging speaker. Singers, actors, voice coaches, podcasters, and preachers know this. But you don't have to be a professional speaker to benefit.

Here's what singing does that your daily conversations don't and why your speaking voice will thank you:

- **Builds breath support:** Singing teaches you how to control airflow. Instead of shallow chest breathing, you start to use your

diaphragm to sustain phrases. That support leads to more grounded, confident speech.

- **Sharpens your articulation:** When you sing, you're forced to hit every consonant and vowel clearly or you'll sound muddy. That muscle memory helps you speak more crisply, especially in high-pressure situations like interviews or presentations.
- **Expands your vocal range:** Most of us only speak within a narrow range. Singing pushes you to explore highs and lows, increasing your vocal flexibility. That makes your speaking voice more dynamic and expressive.
- **Improves pitch control:** Monotone speech puts people to sleep. Singing helps you become more aware of pitch and intonation. You learn how to emphasize words and vary your tone—skills that make your voice more engaging.
- **Builds stamina:** Talking for hours can wear you out if your voice isn't conditioned. Singing trains your vocal folds for endurance, so you can speak longer without fatigue or strain.

Bonus: It's actually fun. And unlike most vocal tips, this one might stick.

The Real Payoff: Presence and Expression

This goes beyond mechanics. When you sing, you tap into the emotional power of your voice. You learn how to stretch a phrase, express a feeling, and control pacing—all essential tools for public speaking, storytelling, and even casual conversations. It brings alignment between your body and your message.

I've seen it over and over—once people unlock the emotional side of their voice through singing, their speaking changes too. It becomes more confident, more connected, more *them*.

Think of someone you know with a magnetic speaking voice. Chances are, they're not just talking—they're present, fully and authentically expressing themselves. That kind of presence comes from vocal confidence, and singing can build it.

When you sing, you
tap into the emotional
power of your voice.

Singing and the Brain

Singing does more than work out your voice, it changes your mood too. When you sing, your brain releases feel-good chemicals like endorphins and oxytocin, which help reduce stress and boost your mood. It also activates the brain's reward system, giving you a natural lift similar to what you'd get from exercise or your favorite meal. Even better, studies show that singing—especially in groups—can increase feelings of connection and emotional well-being. So whether you're singing in the shower or with a choir, you're giving both your brain and your mood a healthy workout.

Not only that, but music in general impacts the nervous system in powerful ways. Want to energize your voice before a talk? Try a hype playlist—something upbeat and rhythmic to



boost alertness and confidence. Feeling nervous? Slow, calming music can help you breathe deeper and steady your nerves. Many speakers find that starting with calm music, then switching to energetic tracks, creates the perfect mental and vocal state.

Getting Started

I can hear it already: “But I’m not a singer!” Good news: You don’t have to be. This isn’t about being the next Adele. You don’t even need to sound good. You just need to do it.

Start in low-pressure places. Sing in the shower. Hum along to the radio. Belt it out in the car with the windows up. Put on your favorite playlist and see what happens. It’s not about performance, it’s about consistency. Think training, not talent.

When you’re ready, try this short daily routine. Five minutes. That’s it. (And if you’ve been doing vocal warm-ups regularly, you’ve already got one foot in the world of singing.)

- **Lip trills or humming (1 min):** Gently buzz your lips like a motorboat or hum on a comfortable pitch. This warms up your vocal folds with minimal strain.
- **Yawn-sigh (1 min):** Start on a relatively high note. Fake a yawn, then let your voice slide down in pitch. This helps release vocal tension and connects breath to voice.
- **Simple scale (1 min):** Sing “do-re-mi-fa-sol” up and then back down on a comfortable pitch. Keep it light, relaxed, and don’t push. As you move through the scale, avoid the instinct to physically lift or drop your body with the pitch—it can create unnecessary tension. Instead, stay neutral and steady.

Fun fact: Your vocal cords move horizontally (front to back), not up and down. Keeping that visual in mind can help reduce strain and improve control.

- **Sing a few lines from a favorite song (2 mins):** Something in your range—think of The Beatles’ song “Let it Be,” a hymn you grew up with, even “Happy Birthday.” Pick the part you know best. Focus on clear words and steady breath, not sounding impressive. Aim your breath at the roof of your mouth for a consistent sound. And definitely focus on having fun! A positive mindset equates to a relaxed, open voice.
- **Keep going if the mood strikes.** But if not, you did your five-minute workout. Nice job! I’ve worked with lawyers, teachers, and engineers who started with simple lip trills and now speak with confidence and presence. Their secret? Short daily practice, not marathon sessions. And never skip the warm-up—singing without it is like trying to sprint without stretching. It makes for a frustrating practice.

Singing isn’t just about talent, music, or adopting another hobby, it’s voice training, breath control, and expression. It’s how you connect your body to your message. If your voice is a tool, singing is how you keep it sharp.

So sing. Boldly, regularly, imperfectly. Your speaking voice will get stronger, clearer, and more confident—just like your legs get stronger with running. It’s not magic. It’s muscle memory. And it’s totally within reach. Your strongest voice might be hiding in a simple melody. Go find it.

Jillian Mitchell is a vocal coach, recording artist, podcast host, and all-around voice advocate. She is the founder of Voxsana, an online platform dedicated to voice empowerment. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, with her husband and two children.

If speaking is walking,
singing is running, and
running makes you a
stronger walker.

Corporate Clubs Get Creative

Gaining executive support is a key to success.

By Emily Sachs, DTM



Around the world, leaders of corporate Toastmasters clubs are finding novel approaches to expand the reach, reputation, and ranks of their clubs, largely by partnering with executives and influential managers.

A prime example: At BNY, an international financial services firm, the nine corporate Toastmasters clubs co-sponsored a global open house headlined by the company's CEO himself.

The event attracted more than 2,000 attendees online and in person at BNY's New York City headquarters. Talk about having the support of top leadership!

The Corporate Element

Corporate clubs have long been an integral part of Toastmasters. Around 3,500 [corporate clubs](#) are chartered today, and they comprise close to 25% of Toastmasters clubs globally, according to the World Headquarters Research and Analysis Department.

Corporate clubs provide a space where participants can build critical workplace skills outside of their core job responsibilities. Members come for the speaking and leadership development, but they stay having also built

their time-management and active-listening skills, along with their ability to tactfully deliver and graciously receive impactful feedback.

"This is the opportunity to practice those transferable skills that stand us in good stead when we're in social circumstances, when we're in work meetings, when we're [conducting] interviews," says Past International President Pat Johnson, DTM, the go-to guru on corporate clubs in Toastmasters. (Read more about Johnson on page 23.)

Business Benefits

Unlike community clubs, corporate clubs typically have built-in advantages such as free meeting spaces, remote-meeting and conference-call technology, and learning and development budgets that not only cover membership dues but also everything from photocopies to food.

Far from being for the stuffy-and-suited with speeches limited to "shop talk,"

25%
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**Around
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The event was so impactful that within a week, the host club in New York City had 24 new member applications.

corporate clubs offer their members a place to be creative and take risks without the possibility of missing a sales goal or botching a critical project. Club meetings offer a break from the norm, with job titles dropped at the door.

“Toastmasters is a chance for you to interact with folks of all levels and all parts of the organization that you wouldn’t normally talk to as part of your job, or be in touch with as intimately,” says Lance Kotler, a vice president at BNY and the Vice President Membership of BNY Mellon Toastmasters in New York City.

Indeed, Kotler’s own network now extends to the company’s CEO, Robin Vince. It all started when another member of the club happened to mention Toastmasters to Vince. Think real-world Table Topics®. Only this didn’t end with applause but an invitation to visit the club.

After further discussions with staff and club leadership, the visit from Vince was turned into a Q&A led by Vice President Education Gouri Mukherjee, a director at BNY. Vince shared valuable insights about his approach to public

speaking, such as consistently improving by seeking input on each performance.

“He’s media trained, he does [public speaking] all the time. He has so much exposure and practice,” explains the club’s President, Laura Sullivan, a vice president at BNY. “One of the things he was saying was, always ask for feedback and have that open feedback loop.”

The event was so impactful that within a week, the host club in New York City had 24 new member applications and was fielding interest from employees in other locations who were considering chartering their own clubs. The New York City club has also continued to host other BNY executives in a similar format, most recently featuring the chief financial officer.

Documenting Success

Stephen Krutzfeldt, DTM, a Minnesota-based technical consultant, chartered DocuSign SE Toastmasters online in 2022 to build on his prior growth in another corporate club. His idea to start the club didn’t exactly catch fire. In fact, recalls Krutzfeldt, several of his remote peers joined at the outset just to support him.

However, within two years, several of those club members, now stronger speakers and leaders, ended up being promoted to new roles at DocuSign. The common thread of Toastmasters participation did not go unnoticed by executives, who had observed Krutzfeldt presenting certificates and ribbons to members when the company had occasional in-person work events for the all-remote teams.

Krutzfeldt’s own impromptu speaking muscles were put on display when he was asked to give executives a brief unplanned overview of Toastmasters. It went well enough that they asked for a formal meeting to learn more and explore expanding the Toastmasters corporate program across the division.

“It was all sort of word of mouth there at first and it just compounded,” he says.

In 2025, following a plan designed by Krutzfeldt, DocuSign added 120 solution consultants across the United States as members of the DocuSign club. Because the group is so large, these 120 members are divided into six sub-groups that meet twice a month and periodically as a full club. The idea is that these additional participants will remain in the program at least until they each complete Level 1 in Pathways.

"It was a great exercise to be able to basically package up the idea, identify what are the [key performance indicators] that our leadership team is looking at and how Toastmasters would align with them, and then pitch that," Krutzfeldt says.

So far, all of the participants have completed their Ice Breaker speech and many have completed their second speech. Some were apprehensive before it began, telling Krutzfeldt that they didn't need help with public speaking or it wasn't a required skill for their role.

But many of them have now changed their tune. Not only are they getting to know each other as individuals outside of their jobs, he says, but they are also bonding as a group and creating a buzz about the organization in internal work chats and social media posts.

Joining at John Deere

A trusted recommendation was how Sushil Pawar, DTM, first learned about Toastmasters. One of his graduate business school professors at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, in India, challenged every student to join Toastmasters and treat it as an executive leadership program.

It took him four years to follow the advice and join a club. But once he joined the John Deere Pune Toastmasters Club in India, he became a quick believer. "To speak like a leader, you need to have your communications pace,

speech, and volume be moderated, as well as pinpointed to the situation that you are in," Pawar notes.

As he developed his leadership abilities, Pawar observed that the club was growing too large to accommodate the number of members looking to connect with others during the isolating early days of the pandemic. Pawar, now District 125 Director and a product manager at another company, used his time at John Deere to advocate for forming what eventually became three additional clubs under the same corporate umbrella. And as Club Growth Director in 2023–2024, he chartered 22 clubs, the majority of them corporate.

Toastmasters has strong brand recognition in India, Pawar adds, so he finds that most corporate decision-makers have heard of it. Still, he says it helps to present them with a value proposition rather than relying on qualitative selling points such as increased confidence or improved time management.

Toastmasters is an organizational win, but corporate clubs need a strong internal supporter to not only push for the program, but to also convince managers to allow for dedicated time for the club. Pawar has seen companies that supported charters and sponsored memberships initially, but then struggled to provide the long-term backing needed to keep the program going.

"Toastmasters is a chance for you to interact with folks of all levels and all parts of the organization that you wouldn't normally talk to as part of your job."

—LANCE KOTLER

Corporate Toastmasters "are employees first and members later," Pawar says. "We need to make sure that this becomes part of their employment. Integrating Toastmasters into the work culture helps employees see its value as part of their professional growth, making the time investment more natural and rewarding."

But if companies do understand this and commit to a Toastmasters program, benefits abound for employers and employees alike.

At DocuSign, notes Krutzfeldt, several of the original club members are now taking leadership roles in their District.

"They're Toastmasters, do or die. All day long," says Krutzfeldt, who himself served as a Division Director. "They've been great advocates."

Emily Sachs, DTM, is a freelance writer in Brooklyn, New York. She is the Immediate Past District 119 Director and a regular contributor to the *Toastmaster* magazine. She originally joined Toastmasters as a member of a corporate club.



The Expert on Corporate Clubs

Past International President Pat Johnson, DTM, has a wealth of insights.

Pat Johnson, DTM, could fill a book with all she has learned about corporate Toastmasters clubs over the last 40 years. In fact, she wrote the [definitive book](#) on corporate clubs.

Johnson, Toastmasters' International President in 2010–2011, believes there is no more perfect union than that between Toastmasters and companies eager to develop leaders.

And corporate clubs aiming for success just need to search the leadership ladder, looking upward.

"There's nothing more powerful than [having a company leader], even if it's the branch manager or the COO or CEO ... come in and speak in favor of the Toastmasters program for their employees and recognize the transferable skills," Johnson says.

Clubs that work well with their workplace have the eyes, ears, and especially the attention of decision-makers. This can prove invaluable when it comes to everything from recruiting new members to getting recognition for club accomplishments and officer efforts.

"We have to have accountability in the organization or we become invisible," Johnson says.

Clubs without an official sponsor would be wise to connect with an influential manager. Johnson suggests that clubs go even further by presenting regular updates to key leaders, with metrics such as meeting attendance, number of prepared speakers, number of officers who attended trainings, and members who participated in District events or served on District committees.

"If I'm getting reports every three months, I'm not going to quickly forget that," she notes.

Other ways to gain internal visibility:

- Encourage members to invite their managers to observe when they deliver a speech at a meeting.
- Notify managers when their employees have delivered an Ice Breaker speech, completed a Pathways level, or won an award or speech contest.
- Create an Honorary Toastmaster award and present it at a regular meeting to an invited executive within the company or a board member.
- Encourage members to include their Toastmasters participation in their annual performance reviews as an example of training and personal development.

The average corporate club lasts only two years, Johnson says. Yet Toastmasters also has longstanding corporate clubs that have been active for decades. She suggests that Districts appoint a corporate liaison to visit clubs and that sponsors and mentors consider staying on even after their term of service has ended.

And don't be afraid to adjust terms to better match the environment—instead of calling it a club, call it a "program." A speech is a "presentation." A meeting is a "session." And Pathways is the "curriculum."

Toastmasters is "complex from the outside because we've got all this 'weird' language and ways of doing things," Johnson explains, "but it's all protocol that extends way out into the world and it still has applicability."

—Emily Sachs

"This is the opportunity to practice those transferable skills that stand us in good stead when we're in social circumstances, when we're in work meetings, when we're [conducting] interviews."

—PAT JOHNSON, DTM



The Next Chapter



To be a successful writer, become a strong speaker.

By Andrew Miller and Walter Blackmon

Should professional writers be great speakers? Of course. Every Toastmaster would agree that effective speaking is important in every profession, and writing—fiction or nonfiction—is no different. That’s why when the president of the Tallahassee Writers Association, M.R. Street, asked the two of us—both Toastmasters in Tallahassee, Florida—to attend one of the group’s meetings and discuss Toastmasters.

She felt the skills Toastmasters teaches could help aspiring authors market their work, speak to large groups, and communicate with other writers.

She was right. Toastmasters provides training that can help writers make a breakthrough. When someone asks, “What’s your book about?” a crisp response could be pivotal to finding an agent or landing a contract. Authors must be able to describe their work clearly and energetically.

The Table Topics® format is excellent practice for that critical “elevator speech.” If you can’t speak confidently off the cuff about your writing, you might not find an audience for that great work of art. And you won’t be very engaging if your explanation is riddled with “ahs,” “ums,” and “you knows.”

Whether you’re working on an informative article, a novel, or a short story, you gain vital information from speaking with people. You must ask good questions, and, most importantly, listen to and understand what has been said. You learn these skills in Toastmasters.

Clubs for Writers

A number of Toastmasters clubs are specifically designed for writers. One is the [Authors and Aspiring](#)

[Authors club](#) in Las Vegas, Nevada. Their agenda evokes the feel of a critique specifically for writers. The Table Topicsmaster is the “Short Story Master,” speakers are “Published Writers,” and evaluators are “Book Reviewers.”

Members of the online club start the meeting by posting “writing wins and struggles” in the chat. Table Topic questions relate to story structure and how to behave at a book signing. At a recent meeting, members held a round-robin evaluation of a book excerpt read aloud by an aspiring author.

Charter member Rhonda Green, DTM, says, “When it comes to speaking, as with most things worth doing, there is no replacement for experience. This is what you get with Toastmasters: practice, practice, practice—plus meaningful feedback.”

Green also belongs to [Writers Ink Toastmasters Club](#), an online group based in St. Peters, Missouri. The club teaches writing skills and focuses on the business side of authorship: editing and production, marketing and promotion, publishing and distribution. Several times a year, they hold workshops and

present topics such as how to get started in writing, selling your work, types of publishing, and building your audience.

In 2005, Michelle Gilstrap, DTM, and Barbara Schiffman founded [Toastmasters 4 Writers](#) in the Los Angeles, California, area to teach screenwriters how to pitch their plays. Their goal was to help aspiring authors communicate better with producers and agents.

Today the club helps prospective writers, including novelists, screenwriters, and journalists, build self-confidence in front of

Tashi Browne, DTM, says her written words are most compelling when based on her inspirational speeches.



Bonnie Schroeder, a member of Toastmasters 4 Writers, signs a book for a fan.

“After speaking [about the book] at a local bookstore and library, I received many positive comments. I attribute that to my time in Toastmasters.”

—LINDA FOLSOM

audiences, hone their speaking skills, and network. Meeting themes are designed around different genres, such as romance, crime, or mystery. Table Topics focuses on storytelling, round-robin evaluations, or playful prompts for two people. Toastmasters 4 Writers recently hosted workshops for authors on public speaking, being interviewed, and using digital media to promote their work.

[Rough Writers Toastmasters Club](#), in Long Beach, California, was co-founded in 2015 by Susan Cameron, DTM. Instead of discarding your speech after presenting in your club, Cameron encourages members to convert their speeches to short stories or essays.

The Rough Writers website includes writing tips as well as essays based on a writing prompt. The club has published [three anthologies](#) of short stories based on members' speeches.

[Readers and Writers Toastmasters club](#), established in 2005, is for those who want to learn about writing, publishing, and marketing. In a typical meeting of the Redlands, California, club, an aspiring author reads part of a work in progress, and members provide feedback.

Writers in Toastmasters

[Alex Kiester](#) always wanted to be a writer but was mortified about the idea of speaking to agents or interacting with large groups. After attending her first Toastmasters meeting in 2017, she realized she could learn this skill.

Her experiences in the South Austin Toastmasters, in Texas, enabled her to “dream bigger.” In 2019, she published her first audiobook, *In Her Skin* (about a woman terrified of public speaking), and when it came time to doing media promotion for the book, she was Toastmasters-ready. Practicing in her club gave her the comfort level to deal with media and publicity commitments, she says.

Now, notes Kiester, who has since written a novel, “if I miss a few Toastmasters meetings, my ‘public speaking muscle’ begins

to atrophy. Then I know it's time to exercise it again.”

Laura Crockett, DTM, who writes historical fiction and nonfiction, has a similar story. When she admitted to being nervous about speaking to a group of Princeton University alumni, her mother said, “Join Toastmasters.” After six months, she had the confidence to begin her lecture series.

“Thanks to Toastmasters, I did not embarrass myself or the organization I represented,” says the member of #SeriouslyFun Toastmasters, in Granada Hills, California.

Tashi Browne, DTM, a resident of Guyana, was interested in public speaking before becoming a writer. She joined Toastmasters in 2014 and published *Stifle Those Limitations: Believing in Possibilities* in 2024. She credits Table Topics with helping her give clear, thoughtful answers to questions about her writing pitches. Pointing out the relationship between speaking and writing, Browne says her written words are most compelling when based on her inspirational speeches.

“Toastmasters developed my self-confidence through writing and speaking in a profound way,” says Browne, a member of the Cacique Toastmasters Club in Georgetown, Guyana. “It's more than standing in front of a room; it's about writing to connect.”

Linda Folsom, author of the novel *Away With Words*, credits the Toastmasters 4 Writers club with improving her writing and speaking skills. Club members provided feedback on her manuscript and her pitches.

“After speaking [about the book] at a local bookstore and library, I received many positive comments. I attribute that to my time in Toastmasters,” she says.

Another member of that same club, author Bonnie Schroeder, understands the value of confidently reading aloud in front of an audience. She remembers one event, a book



Author and Toastmaster Alex Kiester

reading, in which an author stumbled and stuttered so badly he had to hire someone to read his work aloud.

Toastmasters can help with all aspects of the writing business—motivation, feedback, connecting with agents, and ultimately, dealing with the public. A Toastmasters club tailored to writers can provide writing and speaking support equal to or sometimes greater than traditional writing groups.

Folsom, of Toastmasters 4 Writers, knows that well. She belongs to one of those writing groups in addition to her Toastmasters club.

“Most of those groups don't focus on communication skills,” she says. “Someday, those writers, although talented, could have trouble describing their work to an audience.”

Andrew Miller is a member of *We Can Speak—Podemos Hablar* Toastmasters Club in Tallahassee, Florida. He is a retired biologist who volunteers in prisons, restores antique stained-glass windows, and writes. His website is andrewcmiller.com.

W.C. Blackmon, DTM, is a motivational speaker, author, and recording artist. He was profiled in the [May 2022 issue](#) of the *Toastmaster* magazine. Blackmon is a member of three Toastmasters clubs in Tallahassee, Florida, and helps individuals in prison through *Toastmasters Gavel Clubs*. His website is wcblackmon.com.



Add Humor to the Occasion

Top tips for toasts and tributes.

By Paul Sterman

We've all been there. In the audience, at a special occasion, watching someone step up to the mic to deliver a toast or tribute. A well-meaning soul whose speech, unfortunately, goes badly awry.

A best man at a wedding, perhaps, who launches into a risqué riff in front of Nana and Papa Joe. Or a maudlin parent who talks on and on, and then some more, while you cringe, and pray the appetizers are on their way.

Carol Leifer has been there too. The longtime stand-up comedian saw a wedding toast bomb so badly it inspired her to write a book. Aptly titled *How to Write a Funny Speech ... for a Wedding, Bar Mitzvah, Graduation & Every Other Event You Didn't Want to Go To in the First Place*, it's a sort of guidebook to help lessen the pain—and up the fun—of special occasion speeches.

She co-authored it with Rick Mitchell, a veteran comedy writer. The two are hoping their experience in the laughter business will help others avoid what befell the father of the bride whose toast debacle Leifer witnessed. Instead of talking about how his accomplished daughter found the love of her life, dad basically delivered a reading of her resume. *She went to an Ivy League university. She graduated with a 4.0 grade point average. She was at the top of her medical school class. Etc., etc.*

Leifer says the speech became the talk of the line at valet parking when the wedding was over. Someone was overheard saying, "Was this a wedding or a job fair?"

Ouch.

Some of the book's top tips are ones Toastmasters know well. For instance: Keep

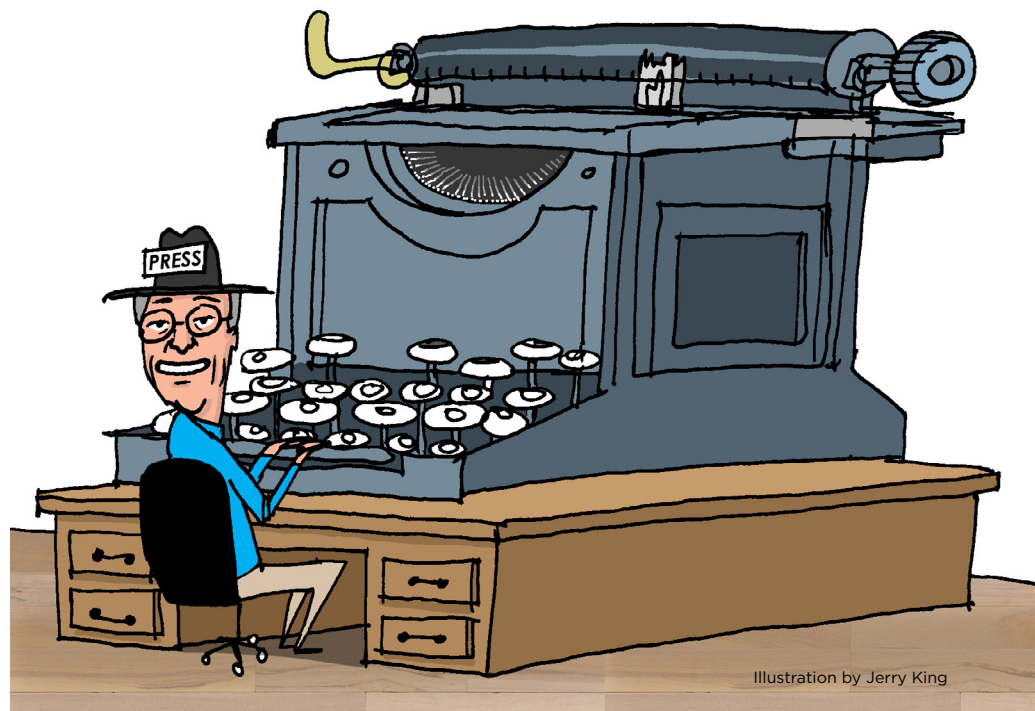


Illustration by Jerry King

it brief. The Los Angeles-based Leifer says no wedding toast should be longer than five minutes. Otherwise, it becomes a crowd killer. As she says in the book, "There's a reason 'More is more' did not become a saying."

Also important when delivering a toast: Don't over-indulge beforehand. Toasters might have one drink to settle their nerves, Leifer told me, "but then they feel so comfortable that they have another one, or seven.... It can really ruin an event."

Profanity can be a crutch, something Carol Leifer learned early in her stand-up career from comedy star Jay Leno.

Leifer is an influential figure in the comedy world. She started doing stand-up nearly 50 years ago, at a time when few women were performing in that medium. I remember watching her perform stand-up bits on the *Late Night With David Letterman* show.

She also built a successful writing career, working on such iconic television comedy shows as *Saturday Night Live*, *Seinfeld*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

While humor can liven up and lift a toast, Leifer and Mitchell also warn about using it intelligently. It's unwise to employ profanity or raunchy jokes at family celebrations, they note, where children and grandparents are usually on hand. If you're not sure what humor might offend, run it by someone beforehand.

Profanity, says Leifer, can be a crutch, something she learned early in her stand-up career when comedy star Jay Leno brought it to her attention.

"He came into the Improv [a comedy club in Los Angeles] to see me as a young comic," Leifer recalls. "And after my set, he talked to me at the bar and said, 'I think you have a lot of talent, I think you can go a long way, but you're cursing a lot in your act. And I think with cursing, you win the battle but lose the war.'"

Today, nearly 50 years after she first began hitting the stand-up stages, Leifer still loves the craft of writing jokes and performing comedy in the clubs, adding that "there's nothing like a new line working and feeling fresh."

In terms of toasting, Leifer notes that delivering a concise, funny, from-the-heart toast is a gift to those asking you to speak. I hope some day I'll be giving this gift—in the form of a wedding toast to my now-18-year-old daughter. In the weeks leading up to the big event, I'll be in the Toastmasters club, working on my material, fine-tuning my lines, and pleading for lots of feedback.

Paul Sterman is senior editor, executive & 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.

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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