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Expanding Your Capacity

In my leadership journey, one truth has remained constant: We all have 24 hours in a day. No more, no less. Yet the deeper we go into leadership—whether in Toastmasters or in life—the demands on our time, energy, and focus seem to multiply.

As our responsibilities grow, so must our capacity. I've learned that expanding capacity isn't about doing more—it's about doing what matters most, with intention.

For me, that means approaching the time I dedicate to Toastmasters with focus and clarity. It means asking myself, *What deserves my energy today?* rather than trying to do it all. Some days, that's easier said than done! When I feel that familiar rush of anxiety over my never-ending to-do list, I know it's time to pause, take a breath, and plan. Slowing down allows me to speed up later.

I remember one evening, after a particularly busy week, I sat surrounded by notes and unfinished emails. My mind was scattered, my attention pulled in every direction—and my productivity had vanished. I realized that scattered attention leads to scattered results. The moment I narrowed my focus to one task,

calm replaced chaos. Focus brings clarity—and clarity restores calm.

Another vital part of staying mentally strong is self-care. Paying attention to my own energy levels has become an essential leadership practice. When I notice that my energy is low, I make it a priority to recharge. My favorite way to do that is to get outside—whether for a walk, a run, or simply a quiet cup of tea in the sunshine. Those moments

in nature clear my head and restore my energy so I can return with renewed purpose.

And perhaps my biggest learning has been this: Done is better than perfect. Progress beats paralysis every time. Get it done, move forward, and accept that “good enough” is often exactly what's needed. I've also learned the value of connection. Leadership isn't meant to be a solo act, and there is real strength in

reaching out. Demands will always be high—but how we respond makes all the difference. When we combine focus, self-care, and connection, we create the resilience to meet those demands with calm confidence and clear purpose.

Expanding capacity
isn't about doing
more—it's about
doing what
matters most,
with intention.

Aletta Rochat, DTM
International President



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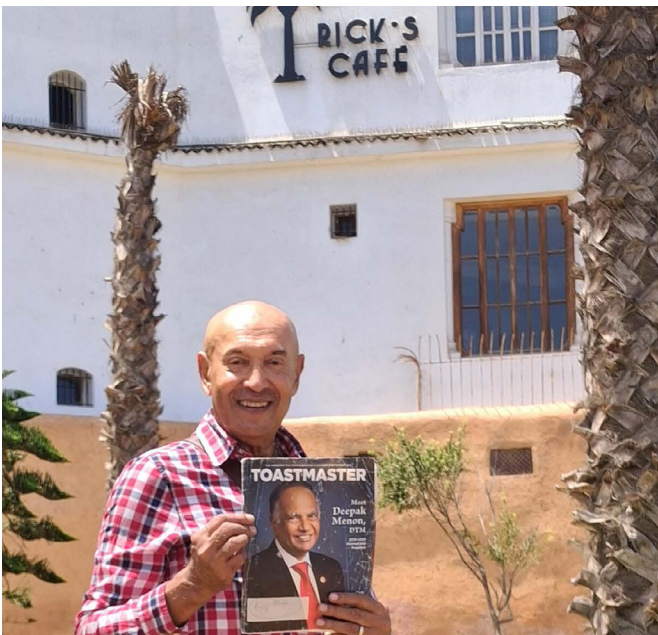
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Snapshot



Members of the **Calicut Toastmasters** club in Kozhikode, Kerala, India, celebrate Onam, a harvest and Hindu festival, during an outdoor meeting in Lakkidi, a hill station in Kerala, India.

Traveling Toastmaster



Lancy D'Souza, DTM, of Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, visits Rick's Café, a restaurant recreated from the 1942 film *Casablanca* in Casablanca, Morocco.

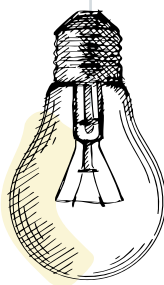


Ann Guintivano, DTM, of Carson, California, wears the 2024 Toastmasters International Convention shirt while visiting the Blarney Castle near Cork, Ireland.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Our stories can **spark action**, **shift mindsets**, and **ignite self-belief** in someone who’s waiting for just a little encouragement.”

– Aletta Rochat, DTM
2025-2026 International President



TOASTMASTERS TIP

Know when to step away from your **script**. Pay **attention** to your audience’s **reactions**. If people seem bored or disengaged, **adjust** your **approach** or move on to something new.

HISTORY THROWBACK

Spotlight on 1986

As we move forward into a new year, it’s also fun to look back. Toastmasters turns 102 in 2026, brimming with history and happenings. Take 1986, for example—40 years ago. The year featured some significant developments.

In August, [Ted Wood, DTM](#), was installed as Toastmasters’ International President, the first Black American in the organization’s history to hold that position. It underscored a period of change: The year before, Helen Blanchard, DTM, was selected as the first female International President, and Wood was succeeded by John Fauvel, DTM, from New Zealand, the first International President from outside North America.

Wood was praised for pushing the organization to think more globally and on a wider cultural spectrum. Toastmasters made pivotal strides in growth outside North America and the British Commonwealth.

He also saw the need for growth in underrepresented minorities, and he worked to bring more Black people into the Toastmasters community. His theme during his Presidential term was “Keep the Spirit Alive.”

A Maryland resident, Wood was a member for more than 40 years. He passed away in 2007.

Also in 1986, [Arabella Bengson](#) became the third woman to win the World Championship of Public Speaking®. (Women weren’t eligible to compete in the event until 1973, the year that they were officially allowed to become members of Toastmasters.) Bengson, a Filipino woman from Ontario, Canada, was the first non-native-English speaker to take home the prize.

Bengson has belonged to several clubs in Canada for many years. She has been an international speaker, coach, and ballroom dancer. She was also the first woman president of the Ontario Speakers Association, which later became the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers.

In a 2016 [Toastmaster magazine article](#), Bengson reflected on her championship-winning speech, which was called “We Can Be Pygmalion.”

“Like the story of Pygmalion [a figure in Greek mythology], who created a most life-like and beautiful statue, and breathed life into it through his caring. I think the universal message of my speech made it so well

received: ‘When we believe in others, and expect the best of them, they often exceed our expectations.’”

The 1986 International Convention was held in Reno, Nevada. The Golden Gavel winner was longtime television personality Art Linkletter. And, speaking of looking back, the themed celebrations at that convention included a Hollywood Nostalgia Fun Night.



Ted Wood and
Arabella Bengson

PROFILE

500 MORE?

After 500 lunches with strangers, this Toastmaster is hungry to continue.

By Laura Mishkind

In 2019, Nick Bendel set a goal to have lunch with [500 strangers](#) as a way to improve his social skills, meet more people, and attract opportunities into his life. In August 2025, he completed his quest. And yet, that wasn't enough. He decided to continue lunching with people he doesn't know.

"I met so many fascinating people during my 500 lunches—from chefs, chocolatiers, and comedians to priests, psychologists, and political prisoners—so why would I stop now?" Bendel explains. "There are still millions of remarkable people waiting to be discovered, and I can't wait to meet them."

"I learned so much from my remarkable lunch dates. Like everyone else, I'm a flawed human being, but with each stranger I meet, I become a little more intelligent, self-aware, and open-minded."

Bendel writes about his lunches on social media and enjoys sharing them, so much so that he is writing a book. "I had a very personal motivation, which was to create a permanent record of my life-changing adventure, which I can read whenever I want to reflect on the experience and re-learn the lessons."

Accomplishing these big goals has taught Bendel how to follow through on his plans. He says there are four keys to achieving anything:

1. Have enough time, money, and bandwidth to complete the goal.
2. Form new habits and new relationships.
3. Ignore self-doubt.
4. Make sure the goal aligns with your values.

"Achieving a big goal does wonders for your confidence and makes you realize how much untapped potential you have," he says.



Nick Bendel (on right) enjoys his 500th lunch.

Bendel has had 508 lunches at the time of this publication and is looking forward to many more. When asked who his ideal lunch date would be, he said, "I'd love to meet Esther Perel, the psychotherapist, because I'm fascinated by relationships, social skills, and human behavior. She'd have so much to teach me. If you're reading this, Esther—have your people call my people."

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

WORD OF THE MONTH

rejuvenate

[ri•joo•vuh•neyt]

Toastmasters love their words. We choose them carefully for speeches, monitor their use in club meetings, and select instructive ones for Words of the Day.

Here is an apt word of the month for a new year: *rejuvenate*. Hopefully the holidays and attendant vacations have left you rejuvenated for a fresh start—e.g., re-energized, restored, revitalized.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary has several definitions for this word when it's used as a verb, including:

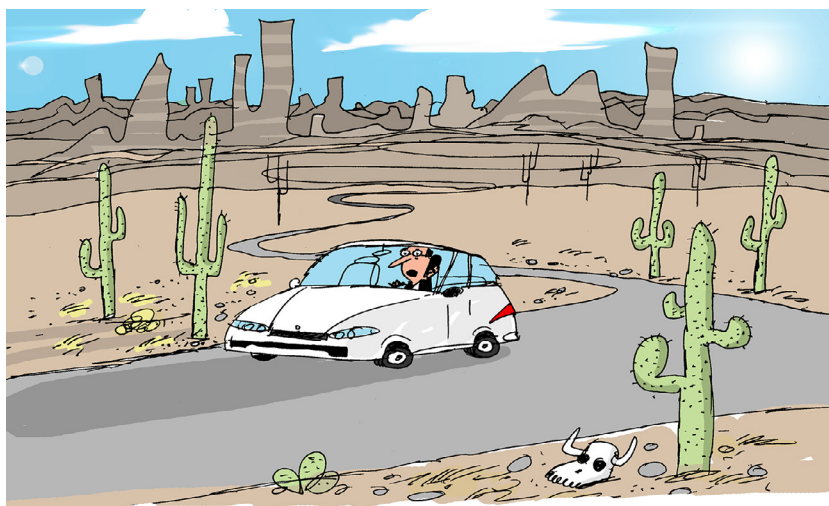
- a: give new vigor to
- b: to restore to an original or new state

Use it in a sentence? "Going to my Toastmasters club meeting tomorrow will rejuvenate my spirits."

And for good measure, here are a few synonyms: *revive, renew, refresh, replenish*.

Refresh your next club meeting with a healthy use of the word *rejuvenate*.

CARTOON



"I decided to drive around the block until I came up with a speech idea. It took longer than I thought."

More Than a Competition

Discovering the value of Toastmasters speech contests.

By Molly Hamilton



Molly Hamilton (second from the left)

Every Toastmasters speech contest comes with a touch of nerves, a hint of competition, and a whole lot of growth. Whether you're the one standing at the microphone or the one quietly timing behind the scenes, these events are a gold mine of experience, connection, and confidence-building.

I joined Toastmasters in 2010 and have been an avid contestant over the years. As someone who has come in last at the club level and progressed to one of the top eight in the World Championship of Public Speaking, I have learned the value of participating in speech contests.

Participating as a speaker in a Toastmasters contest is like putting your public speaking journey on fast-forward. I wrote my speeches, rehearsed them, refined them—and then rewrote them all over again. The process challenged me to dig deeper into my message, polish my delivery, and push past comfort zones I didn't even know I had.

I still remember my first contest. I had been a Toastmaster for only four weeks when the President of the Miracles Toastmasters Club in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, greeted me at the door and said, "We're having a Humorous Speech Contest today. Want to compete?"

I laughed and told him I was a new Toastmaster and didn't know what the speech contest was. He explained that all I had to do was tell a funny story for five to seven minutes. I thought, *I can probably do that*, and 20 minutes later, I was onstage telling a story about a houseboat trip where my sister, sister-in-law,

and mom thought it would be hilarious to prank our husbands on a different boat—only to discover the boat approaching us wasn't theirs.

To my shock, I won. I continued to compete every two weeks after that and made it all the way to the District stage.

Speech contests are a gold mine of experience, connection, and confidence-building.

To prepare for my speeches, I thought about the stories I wanted to tell and continued to dive into them in order to relive the experience. That kept my speeches lively, spontaneous, and full of energy. When I was enjoying myself, the audience couldn't help but have fun right along with me. A great lesson to learn early in my Toastmasters journey.

Life and travel took me away from Toastmasters for almost a decade after that. But in 2019, I decided to rejoin, and before long, I found myself back on the contest stage.

In 2020, I came in third out of three (yes, dead last) in a club-level contest. A year later, I came in second at the District level. And in 2022, I walked onto the stage of the World

Championship of Public Speaking—one of the proudest moments of my life.

That turnaround didn't happen by luck. I came in last in 2020 because I sang a song in my speech; it was too long and came across as a mini concert. Determined to improve, I applied every piece of advice I could find, sought guidance from a former World Champion, practiced every day for 11 months, delivered my speech to anyone who would listen, and visited more than 20 Toastmasters clubs for feedback.

Although I participated in many contests, the truth is I never entered just to win—though winning does feel good. I entered because the contests make me a better speaker. They pushed me to polish my delivery, refine my stories, and step outside my comfort zone. Every contest stretched me in a new way.

The International Speech Contest taught me how to craft powerful, inspiring messages. The Humorous Speech Contest sharpened my comedic timing and helped me connect to my audience through laughter. The Table Topics Contest kept me sharp on my feet, and the Evaluation Speech Contest honed my listening skills and ability to give constructive feedback.

Over the years, as a contestant, I've experienced every kind of result—last place, second place, first place, and everything in between. But every contest has been worth it. Because the real prize isn't the trophy—it's the growth, connection, and fun.

Molly Hamilton is the Club President of the MVP Advanced club in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Toastmasters' Second-Oldest Club Turns 100

How Anaheim 2 helped shape today's organization.

By Stephanie Darling

Toastmasters got a big membership boost on January 19, 1926, when the club that would eventually be known as Anaheim Club 2 held its initial meeting, at the Marigold Café in Anaheim, California. [The Smedley Chapter One Club](#), the first club of the organization, was slightly older, having debuted on October 22, 1924, in nearby Santa Ana.

It was a small leap numerically—from one club to two. Yet it signaled the potential of Toastmasters founder Dr. Ralph C. Smedley's pioneering program to teach essential speaking and leadership skills by practicing in a supportive club setting. Sparked by the hard work of Smedley One and Anaheim 2, and many other early clubs, the idea took off.

Anaheim Club 2 celebrates its official 100-year mark in January 2026. Festivities at January meetings include speeches, awards, special guests, fellow Toastmasters visiting from around District 100 (Southern California), and plenty of toasts, says Club President Al Batinga, who joined Toastmasters in 2010.

"We want to honor our long history and inspire the next generation of Toastmasters," he says, adding that paving the way for new professionals is important. "In the world of AI, communication and leadership skills will be more important, not less."

Anaheim members today carry on the vibrant vision of their predecessors. Membership length ranges from one year to more than 40 years and, as a community club, it represents a wide range of ages and perspectives that enrich club culture, says Dave Flores, DTM, Vice President Education and a former District 100 Director. Flores joined the club in 1983.

The Anaheim club grew from these same principles. Shortly after Smedley Chapter One began, J. Clark Chamberlain, an Anaheim

businessman, paid a visit to see what the Santa Ana group was all about. He came away so impressed he'd soon recruited 26 new members to launch a second club.

In the early days, the two clubs often met jointly. Smedley himself attended Anaheim meetings for a few months as a mentor.

Anaheim Club 2 members were early organizational leaders. Chamberlain was Toastmasters' first International President, serving for two one-year terms—from 1930 to 1932—and becoming the only International President to succeed himself. Anaheim club leader Paul Demaree took the position from 1932 to 1933. Their colleague Olin Price served as International President in the 1934–1935 program year.

Early details about the Anaheim club in Toastmasters records can make for fascinating reading. Like clubs now, they debated club procedures and activities. "Critics," now called evaluators, weighed in on speeches ranging from the history of the Boy Scouts to the specter of war. Like every club at the time, Anaheim 2 struggled during the Great Depression. One poignant speech honored the work of shoe repairmen as "the true friends" of those devastated by the times.



From left, Anaheim 2 Club President Al Batinga, member Anna Q. Nguyen, and Past Club President Tony Clement.



The second Toastmasters club receives its charter in 1926.

The club also emphasized speaking outside the club, noting that over several months in 1933, members made 71 community speeches.

What is Anaheim Club 2 like now, after so many years? It's still member-focused, challenging, and fun. The club meets weekly in person, a practice reinstated as soon as possible after acute COVID threats settled. There is an online option for members who can't make in-person meetings.

Very few things make it to 100 years these days, notes Vice President Public Relations Cristian Dubon. He joined the club in 2023 for many reasons, including hearing advice to join Toastmasters twice in one week, from a professional speaker and then a college professor.

Now, and over the club's long history, seasoned members have guided club success, Dubon says. "We have so many natural-born leaders ... people you want to be around to learn from," he says.

Toastmasters "is a long-haul engagement for me," he adds. "I've learned that repetition is the father of success. And I enjoy being in this club because it's so warm, accepting, and diverse."

Editor's Note: *The Anaheim Heritage Center, a branch of the Anaheim Public Library, houses a significant collection of Toastmasters records and artifacts, many dating from the club's earliest days. Anaheim Club 2 originally donated materials to the Anaheim Public Library in 1981, in advance of Toastmasters International's 55th anniversary. Current club member Cristian Dubon shared some of these for this article.*

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

Where Does Your Time Go?



Use an energy audit to pause, evaluate, and implement new habits.

By Ambeka Khadse

In our fast-paced world every minute is accounted for—weekly schedules, workplace demands, family support. In the midst of that chaos, how often do you check in on your own time and energy? If you're not operating at your best, how productive are you really? If your energy is low, how can you be effective?

How you manage your time, energy, and internal state shapes your career success just as much as any operational strategy. I have worked in corporate learning and development for 15 years, and have seen numerous individuals feel as though they were constantly running to keep up with work. Were they underqualified for the job? Did they lack motivation? No. It was about their ability to time manage and understand their energy zones. Once they gained that awareness, they could combine it with elevating their organization, asking for clarity on prioritization, and using their energy to perform more effectively on the job.

While many people focus on performance metrics, few regularly assess their own internal state. Self-awareness begins with a simple but powerful question: Where is my energy going?

This doesn't mean a week-long retreat or hours of journaling. It could be as practical as noticing how your mood shifts after back-to-back meetings, or how often you skip lunch to continue working. These small, unnoticed patterns accumulate, and so does the burnout they invite.

A Simple Practice

One effective practice is an energy audit. For one week, take a minute at the end of each day to jot down what (if anything) drained you today, and what (if anything) energized you today.

Patterns will emerge. Maybe a weekly team meeting is chaotic without a clear agenda. Maybe your best ideas come after your morning walk, but you've been skipping it to get to the

office earlier. Awareness is the first step toward intentional change.

At the end of the week, take 15 minutes to do a deeper dive of your energy:

- List out everything you do in an average week. Include sleeping, working, eating, exercising, socializing, etc.
- Approximate how many hours you spend weekly in each area.
- Put a star by all the activities you've listed that bring you joy and energize you.
- Put an X near all the activities that drain you and leave you exhausted.

From this analysis, lay out a productive day for you. What is the right balance of "need to do" and "choose to do" items for you this month? This may vary month to month or seasonally; it's a good idea to do a personal energy audit quarterly to see where your time and energy are going and if there are any adjustments you need to make.

Building Habits

Awareness is a valuable starting point, but awareness without action is just observation.

Turning awareness into meaningful change requires action. This doesn't have to mean grand gestures. It starts with small, intentional steps. When practiced consistently, these steps become daily routines, and over time these routines turn into lasting habits. Here are some examples:

Mental Well-Being

- **Awareness:** Noticing that you feel less overwhelmed or anxious on days that include physical movement.
- **Action:** Start a daily 5-minute stretch or walk. Set a daily reminder on your phone for a time that works—when you wake up or before bed or a 3 p.m. walk.
- **Habit:** Daily movement becomes second nature and helps manage stress.

Relationships

- **Awareness:** Realizing you haven't been talking to or spending time with friends or family often even though it brings you great joy.
- **Action:** Schedule calls as though they are meetings. We are more likely to speak with someone if it's already on our calendar. Maybe every Wednesday from 7-7:30 p.m. you "book" time with a different friend or family member.
- **Habit:** Those calendared communications become integrated into your week.

When we lose our grounding, we often become more stressed. Under stress, our brains resort to making decisions based on what we experienced in the past as that requires less cognitive load than diving into new data. But what we've done in the past may not always be the best way forward. Auditing your energy, creating new habits, and breaking out of the old ones allow for better focus.

When you are grounded, those around you feel it. Former U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams conducted a study that found workplace well-being is closely linked to employee health, engagement, productivity, and improved performance. According to an article on Indeed, employee wellness is also a key factor in attracting new talent, improved morale, and decreased stress and health care costs.

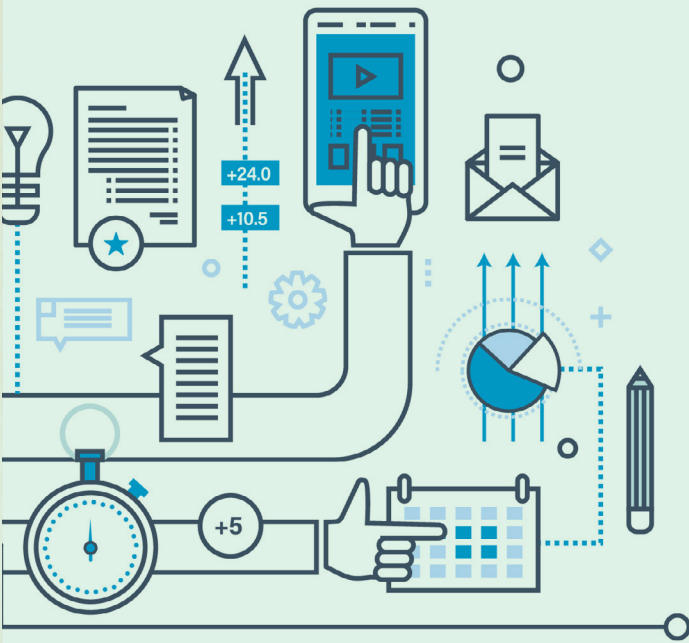
When you know where your energy is going, communication becomes clearer. Emotional tone stabilizes. When we operate from a place of awareness and care, we model those behaviors for others, creating a ripple effect to those we interact with daily.

Ambeka Khadse is a talent development leader, inclusion advocate, wellness enthusiast, and founder of [The Flourish Compass](#).

The Myth of MULTITASKING

Why doing more means accomplishing less.

By Joel Schwartzberg



Do you know someone who checks emails during meetings, writes reports while attending webinars, or keeps multiple documents and browser tabs open? Despite these distracting scenarios, multitasking is celebrated in job descriptions, cover letters, interviews, and performance reviews. It's presented as a superpower. After all, who wouldn't want to hire—or be—a worker who can juggle multiple projects simultaneously?

The problem: No one can.

What we call “multitasking” is more accurately described as “multi-taxing” because the brain can only store a finite amount of information and prefers to complete tasks before starting new ones.

“Don't try to multitask,” says Earl Miller, a professor of neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, during a presentation at the school's Radius program. “Many of you are probably thinking, *But I'm good at it!* Sadly, that's an illusion. You don't actually multitask; you task-switch. This wastes time, makes you error-prone, and decreases your ability to be creative.”

Cognitive Stresses

Research confirms that the brain doesn't manage separate tasks simultaneously but rapidly toggles between them. This back-and-forth switching may feel productive, but it comes with significant cognitive costs.

Sophie Leroy, dean of the University of Washington Bothell School of Business, writes in the [Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes](#) journal, “People need to stop thinking about one task in order to fully transition their attention and perform well on another. Yet, results indicate it is difficult for people to transition their attention away from

an unfinished task and their subsequent task performance suffers.”

Even a brief activity switch, like checking a Slack notification while drafting a proposal, can drain more cognitive energy than you think. A [University of California, Irvine study](#) found it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds to regain full focus after even a brief distraction.

We often compare the human brain to a sponge, but sponges get saturated—and so too do our brains. Having too much information leads to cognitive overload. Research shows that cognitive overload can reduce productivity, impair decision-making, hinder learning and recall, increase anxiety, and even diminish empathy.

You probably experience cognitive stress whenever you try to read an email while someone talks to you. Personally, I've never been able to watch TV and write at the same time. One of those actions always suffers. And, often, both do.

Optimize Your Brainpower

The good news is that there are steps you can take to tackle, not juggle, multiple priorities effectively. Here are six strategies to mitigate cognitive load and boost your efficiency:

1. **Make prioritized to-do lists.** Don't just make a list—rank the items and organize them by urgency and impact. A short, prioritized list can help you focus more than a long, comprehensive one.
2. **Start each day with a plan.** Before opening your inbox, establish clear intentions and priorities for the day. Let your plan—not incoming messages—guide your attention.
3. **Time-block your calendar.** Schedule uninterrupted blocks of time in your calendar for focused work on single projects.

Keep your email closed, silence your phone, and protect that time with the commitment you'd give to a meeting with your CEO.

4. **Be fully present in meetings.** Give conversations and meetings your full attention. Put your phone out of reach, close browser tabs, pause notifications, and turn off additional monitors.
5. **Give yourself transition time.** When switching tasks, give your brain extra time to switch gears. A short break between tasks can help you reset your focus and transition more effectively.
6. **Unitask!** Focus on one task at a time. One of Leroy's recommendations is to resist the inclination to attend to multiple tasks simultaneously.

“We also have to reassure ourselves—in an interconnected world that demands our attention all the time—that if we don't respond right away, it's not the end of the world,” the business school dean says. “It is okay to take care of our attention first so we can engage with the world more fully and with more intentionality.”

Even with the growing body of research, it may be a while before multitasking is retired from workplace language and expectations. But that doesn't mean you need to wait. With this fuller understanding of multitasking, you can start accomplishing more by focusing on less.

Joel Schwartzberg is a presentation coach, executive communication specialist, and author of *The Language of Leadership: How to Engage and Inspire Your Team and Get to the Point! Simplify, Sharpen, and Sell Your Message.* Follow him on [LinkedIn](#).





Learn next steps to take after accomplishing your goals.

By Bill Brown, DTM

When you first joined Toastmasters, you had a goal. Maybe it was to get comfortable standing in front of an audience. Maybe it was to become a strong leader or a good speaker. Whatever it was, you knew Toastmasters could help you reach your objective.

For some of us, that original goal has changed. Maybe life has gotten in the way, and although you've delivered some speeches, you've recently slowed down. Or perhaps your situation has changed, and your goals have shifted.

Whatever your situation, the key question is: Where do you go from here?

If your journey has changed course since first joining, it's probably time to reassess your direction. Think about a small-town airport that has one flight out every day. That flight may only go to one destination, but it takes you to a major hub, with many flights going in countless directions. Every passenger is on their own journey.

This is similar to Toastmasters. You start with one path, but when you dig in, you find many different journeys to follow. And whether you want to set new goals, expand your original objectives, or need motivation to finish them, Toastmasters can help you.

Setting New Goals

Before thinking of what to do next, there is an important step to take: Congratulate yourself! Reflect on what you've achieved, take

pride in what you've done, and celebrate your accomplishment. Marking milestones in your journey helps you chart your growth, and is one of the reasons why goal setting is important in Toastmasters: It's a way to create tangible steps to get you where you want to go.

Once you accomplish a goal, or realize you need to reassess, you might be unsure of the next step. Rather than drifting, think about how you can keep growing and improving; in other words, think about what your next ultimate goal might be. Remember the old adage, "the one who aims at nothing hits it every time."

Toastmasters is a talent incubator. It provides a laboratory and a framework to create, explore, and develop the skills, techniques, and systems that you might need to achieve success.

How can you determine and create new goals to help you achieve your next ultimate objective?

First, consider goals that take advantage of your interests and ones that create feelings you enjoy. I enjoy the challenge of the speech contests, so many of my goals build toward that.

Second, Toastmasters offers opportunities for all types of objectives. You have the opportunity to build a network, to work on speeches outside of Toastmasters, and to share your expertise with others. You can explore new topics, or start and build a specialty club around your own interests. Think about what you enjoy doing or something you would like to try and set new goals around that.

Many projects within Pathways teach you about goal setting if you need help with that. You also have other club members and their expertise, and a practice field to create your future.

Expanding Your Objectives


There are other, more specific ways you can expand your objectives to further push yourself.

If you want to continue to improve your speaking skills, you could pick a second path to work on. Or consider competing in the speech contests—a truly exciting, but challenging, way to grow.

Mentoring others is another way to grow your speaking skills because it pushes you to examine a speech at a much deeper level. It's also a way to build your leadership skills. If you want to take mentoring seriously, look at the [Toastmasters mentoring program](#). This is a guided program that takes a deep dive into helping members and clubs.

There are other ways to grow leadership skills. There is the Dynamic Leadership path, but even if you are already working in that path, you can set an additional goal to take on a leadership role. If you haven't already, become a club officer.

After that, take on the role at the Area or District level. And you don't have to jump all the way into a Director role. There are many other ways to serve at this level. If finance is your area of expertise, consider becoming your District's Finance Manager. If Public Relations



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is more up your alley, consider becoming the District Public Relations Manager. There is also a slot for Administration Manager. All of these roles give you the opportunity to stretch your skills in new directions.

And if you want to take on a different type of leadership role, you can become a club coach. One of Toastmasters' goals is to have healthy, growing clubs, but some clubs need help in this area. A club coach helps to identify the clubs' problems and advises the leaders on what can be changed and adapted. Helping a struggling club grow stronger can be very satisfying and rewarding.

If you are the creative type and like starting a project from scratch, consider starting a new club. This could be a community club or a [specialty club](#). You can also start a corporate club if your company does not have one already. One benefit of starting a corporate club is that, as one of the key leaders, you would have a higher visibility with your corporate managers and executives.

When Momentum Breaks Down

But what if you are having a hard time achieving your goals or don't feel motivated to set new ones?

Analyze the reasons why. Where did your momentum break down? What would you do differently? For example, maybe you set too large of a goal and felt overwhelmed. Setting smaller milestone goals might help you stay on track.

If you are at a place where you need a new goal but are stuck, ask yourself, *How am I wired? What kind of goals work for me? What excites me?* Think about a past goal you achieved that you were proud of. How did it make you feel?

For example, I remember many years ago being on a backpack trip in the mountains of California. I wanted to hike to the top of a nearby peak, but halfway there, I gave up. That bothered me for eight long years. Then one summer I went back and knew I needed to try again. I started getting excited when I passed the section that intimidated me before. About an hour later, I neared the top and the exhilaration increased with every step.

As I made those final steps, I experienced something I will never forget: the entirety of Lake Tahoe, in all of its brilliant blue splendor, 2,000 feet below me. That is the feeling I want to re-create when I develop my goals.

What about you? What experience characterized your goal achievement? What excited (or scared) you? Think about that when you need some motivation to continue pursuing your goals or need a reason to set new ones.

Think back to that airport hub with many airplanes going in multiple directions. There are so many possibilities and different destinations.

Where do you want to go next? And how can you use Toastmasters to get you there?

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.

The Courage to GROW

Challenge yourself to broaden your life journey.

By Kristen Hamling, Ph.D.



We live in a world captivated by progress—faster technology, bigger goals, endless achievement. Yet the most profound form of progress is not always external but internal. Personal growth seldom occurs in comfort; it begins the moment we step into uncertainty—when we forget our lines in a speech, start a new life in a different country, or confront something painful we have long avoided.

Humans are wired for growth from the moment we enter the world. Despite being born with exceptional hardware—a remarkably capable brain—we arrive with minimal software. Neuroplasticity—the brain’s ability to grow and adapt—and resilience develop only when we purposefully seek opportunities to stretch ourselves across different areas of life. If we want a stronger brain, we must pursue personal growth with intention.

The Stoic philosophers were perhaps the earliest advocates of this idea—a view echoed by modern philosopher William B. Irvine in his book *The Stoic Challenge*. Irvine argues that adversity is not an obstacle but an invitation to grow stronger. Each time we tackle something new—from public speaking to learning a language—the brain strengthens its neural networks, turning effort into adaptability.

Here’s how three people focused on developing their growth and how you can begin your own personal growth journey.

The Power of Purpose

Angie Palmer, DTM, founding President of Earthlings Toastmasters Club and District 89’s 2021–2022 Toastmaster of the Year, began her personal growth journey at just 17. When she was told she could not be promoted within a Japanese hotel company because she

did not speak Japanese and because she was a woman, she refused to accept those limits.

Palmer moved to Japan, learned the language, and immersed herself in a wide range of roles to expand her experience. Those actions changed her life.

These early experiences built Palmer’s resilience, which helped her transition from bustling Hong Kong—a city of almost 8 million people—to a small town in Central America of just 30,000. During the COVID pandemic, Palmer founded Earthlings Toastmasters, an online club connecting members across borders.

“Growth requires accountability and sacrifice,” she says. “It’s not about accumulating wealth, but experiences, it’s a process, not an outcome.”

As Palmer’s story illustrates, personal growth frequently begins with courage—often in defiance of what others tell us we cannot do.

Curiosity as a Compass

Well-being researcher and professor Aaron Jarden believes [curiosity](#) is one of the most powerful foundations for

“Growth is a process of learning what works, what doesn’t, and why.”

—OLYA AMELINA

growth—a concept echoed by psychologist Todd Kashdan, Ph.D. In his book *Curious?*, Kashdan calls curiosity “the engine of growth and self-understanding.”

Jarden and his family treat curiosity as a ritual. Each year, during an annual camping trip in New Zealand, they hold a major check-in, asking questions like: Are we on the right path? Are we being challenged, or are we stuck in a rut? Are we one year stronger?

Jarden’s family ritual demonstrates that curiosity—not perfection—may be the antidote to stagnation. When we remain curious, we approach life as learners, not critics. It transforms uncertainty from a threat into a teacher.

Jarden also recognizes that growth is not always safe or easy. It requires energy, pacing, and support. “If you can’t afford to push too far, that’s okay,” he says. “Growth must fit your context. Keep things simple and realistic—that’s what sustains it.”

The Courage to Rebuild

For Olya Amelina, a health and performance coach in Germany, growth was not optional. Before burnout and depression struck, Amelina worked hard as a business development director in the hotel technology industry. Running on “ambition and coffee,” she eventually began to feel empty. Persistent neck pain set in, and she described her world as having turned “gray.”

Her doctor suggested antidepressants, but Amelina wanted more than symptom relief; she wanted understanding. She began researching what the body needs to thrive and slowly realized how unbalanced she had become in the male-dominated, performance-driven corporate world.

Determined to heal, she traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, to study health coaching and immersed herself in new experiences that encouraged self-trust. “You have to learn about yourself as much as you learn about another person,” she says. “Pause and look at yourself exactly as you would someone you care about.”

She even began “dating herself,” committing to her own well-being as deeply as she did to others. Burnout, though painful, became her

turning point. “Burnout triggered a beautiful development in me,” she says. “It helped me learn about myself and take risks.”

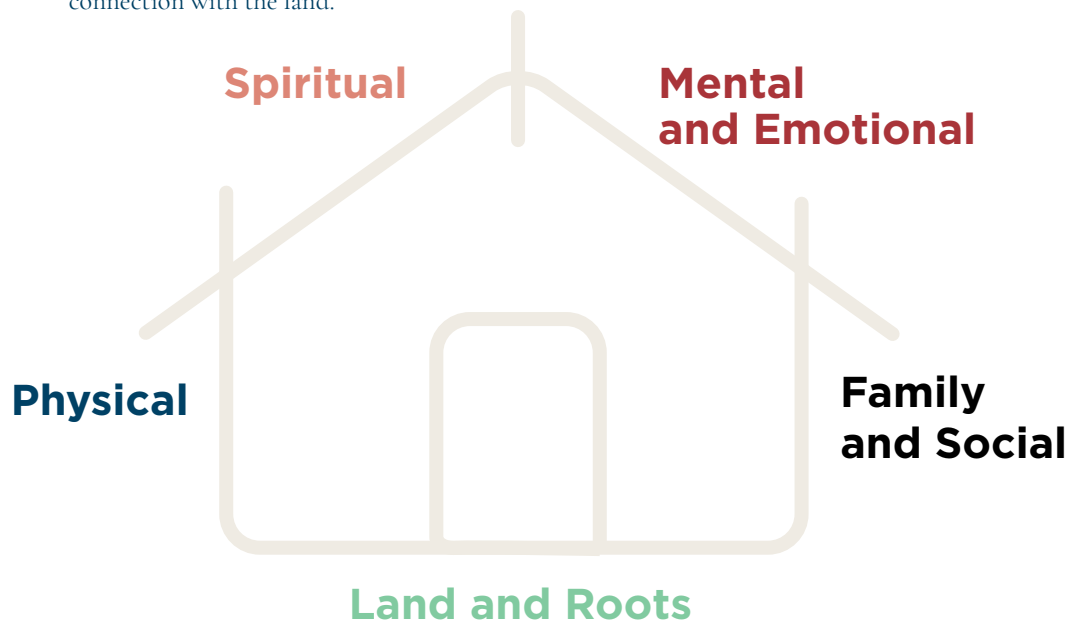
Amelina now helps others restore balance through structure and routine—eating and sleeping well, checking in with others, preparing rather than overworking. “Don’t strive for perfect,” she says. “Strive for better. Growth is a process of learning what works, what doesn’t, and why.”

Balancing Personal Growth

In New Zealand, we strive to shape our education and health systems around “Te Whare Tapa Wha,” a Māori model of well-being developed by Sir Mason Durie. The model envisions a house where each wall represents a side of well-being: mental and emotional, physical, family and social, and spiritual. This model supports personal growth because each type plays a key role in developing different skills and boosting your well-being.



Depiction of **Te Whare Tapa Wha**, a Māori well-being model that represents the four dimensions of well-being (physical, mental/emotional, family and social, spiritual) and the importance of connection with the land.



Mental growth: The process of learning new facts and skills.

Social growth: The art of remaining connected to the people who matter, even amid differences and conflict.

Emotional growth: Learning to notice, name, and tolerate feelings so they inform rather than hijack our choices.

Spiritual growth: The process of clarifying what is worthy of our commitment, whether grounded in faith, philosophy, or a sense of purpose.

Physical growth: This process focuses on the whole system. Sleep, movement, breath, and nourishment regulate the nervous system so that your mind, relationships, values, and feelings have a stable place to land.

Personal growth isn't a checklist so much as an ecology. You can focus on one domain, but any real change tends to ripple through the others. For example, I experienced the ecology of growth firsthand during menopause. I realized how much confidence I had lost. My changing body felt like a new house—one that required different care. I had never set foot in a gym; I had always preferred the outdoors. Yet at 52, I discovered my body needed new

forms of movement. My personal trainer encouraged me to try things I never imagined possible—including lifting about 441 pounds (200 kilograms) with my legs.

That physical strength rippled through every part of my life. I became more confident in my clinical work, less fearful of injury, and more adventurous again. Strengthening my body strengthened my spirit and mental health. It sharpened my attention, lowered my anxiety, and lifted my mood so my problems felt less catastrophic.

Practices like mindfulness, therapy, journaling, volunteering, or strength training rarely work in isolation. Each one engages multiple systems at once, gradually retuning how we feel, relate, make meaning, and live in our bodies.

The Inner Work of Growth

For many, the path to growth is complicated by early responsibilities that shaped who we are, including our strengths and our struggles.

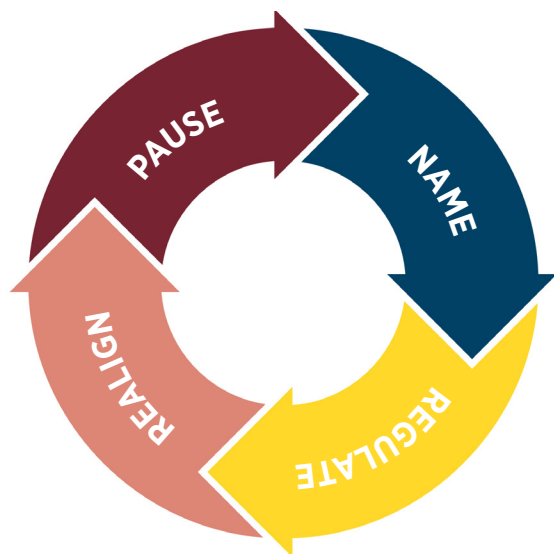
If you grew up as “the responsible one”—the fixer, caregiver, emotional anchor—you likely developed extraordinary qualities: leadership, resilience, and social intuition. But those strengths may have come at a cost. You may prioritize others' needs above your own or see asking for help as a weakness. You might be hyper-independent, perfectionistic, or a people-pleaser—patterns that once kept you safe but now may limit your

potential. Luckily, self-leadership can help you overcome this challenge.

Richard Schwartz, Ph.D., founded the Internal Family Systems (IFS) psychotherapy model that views people's minds as a system of parts. At our best, these inner parts operate under calm leadership—what IFS calls the “Self.” Self-leadership allows you to step back, notice what's driving you, and choose a response that aligns with your values. You learn to recognize which “parts” of your mind are loud (the inner critic, the fixer, the avoider), how they're affecting your behavior, and what each part is trying to protect you from.

Once you identify this, there are four steps you can take to rebalance yourself: Pause (create space between impulse and action), name (identify your dominant thoughts or feelings and what could be causing them), regulate (breathe, walk, stretch), and realign (choose the next step that is consistent with your values). When you do this consistently, growth in one domain cascades into the others—clearer thinking, steadier emotions, better relationships, renewed meaning, and healthier habits.

Personal growth is rarely about willpower alone. After returning from Istanbul, Amelina began teaching others practical skills to pursue their goals. In the process, she discovered her creativity, something that corporate life had muted. She founded a studio with the belief that creativity can repair what stress fractures. Today she guides women through a reflective practice in which they photograph themselves in front of a mirror. “The camera is behind the mirror,” she says. “Women can truly see themselves from different perspectives.” The result is clearer self-perception, less distortion from social media and others' expectations, and a gentle rebalancing across the five domains of growth.



The Strength of Connection

As Palmer and Amelina both discovered, growth can also be frightening. It demands vulnerability and a willingness to lose control. We risk mistakes, failures, and even embarrassment. That's why we need support and accountability throughout the process.

Social connection, mentoring, and healthy relationships are essential resources for growth. As a trauma psychologist, I've learned that social support is one of the most stabilizing forces in any growth journey. We are built to take setbacks and adapt, but we rarely do it well alone.

Research confirms this. In a [landmark study](#), participants standing beside a friend perceived a hill as less steep than those standing alone. Social connection doesn't just make us feel better; it changes how we see challenge. When we feel supported, life's hills literally look smaller.

Leading Ourselves Forward

Growth is a deeply personal experience. It is rarely linear. It bends, pauses, and sometimes doubles back.

For Jarden, the next step might be ballroom dancing—a playful extension of the curiosity he's cultivated for himself and his family. For Palmer, after decades of outward achievement, the challenge now is inward. “Less can be more,” she says. Through risk and mistakes, she has learned humility and the importance of solitude. “Time alone,” she reflects, “is the next stage of my personal growth journey.”

For Amelina, growth continues through creativity in her studio, which helps more and more women rediscover who they are and see themselves anew. And for me, writing this article has reminded me to invest more time in my own family domain—cooking, playing, and reconnecting with the simple joy of presence.

Ultimately, personal growth is *prosocial* because it becomes a way of giving back. As Palmer puts it, “True growth doesn't begin with achievement—it begins with humility.” In many Eastern philosophies, growth is not an individual conquest but a relational duty—first to oneself, then to family, community, and country.

We are not just passengers in our lives; we are leaders of our internal systems. When we learn to guide ourselves with calm, curiosity, and compassion, we do not just grow—we evolve into the kind of people who make growth possible for others.

Kristen Hamling, Ph.D., is a registered psychologist in New Zealand who specializes in trauma, resilience, and well-being. With over 25 years of clinical experience, she integrates psychological science with storytelling to help people and organizations grow through challenges.

Mental Workout for **SPEAKERS**

To achieve your goals, strengthen your mindset with a fitness routine.

By Sarah Centrella



~~*I can't handle this!*~~
How can I handle this?

We're taught from a young age how important physical fitness is. If you've ever trained for a marathon or worked to build muscle at the gym, you know results don't happen overnight. They come from consistent reps and dedication to achieving a new outcome.

However, we're not taught how to train our mind. Think of your brain as another muscle in your body that needs to work out to improve its performance. Just like those other muscles, your mental strength grows when you put in the work.

This is what I call mental fitness—the ability to train your thinking so you can achieve anything you want.

Here's the problem: Most people set a goal, like becoming a TEDx speaker. They start putting in the work to become a great speaker, believing that effort alone will get them there. But then doubt creeps in and the negative self-talk takes over. Their mind starts listing all the reasons why they'll never stand on that stage.

What they don't realize is that effort and action are not enough. If your mindset isn't aligned with your desired outcome, you'll sabotage your success by believing those negative thoughts. This happens because most people have never intentionally trained their thinking. They operate on autopilot, guided by an inner dialogue of fear, doubt, and anxiety, and then wonder why, despite all their hard work, their outcomes still fall short.

Why does this happen? Imagine you are driving and come to a fork in the road where you must turn right or left. Your goal and all your efforts point to the right, but your

programmed GPS keeps rerouting you left. Your mind is that GPS. It is programmed to tell you all the ways you could fail, to convince you that your goals are out of reach and your efforts will never pay off. That programming undermines your confidence and, over time, can even cause you to give up on your dreams.

Your brain doesn't know
the difference between
imagining success and
actually experiencing it.

But when your mindset is strong and aligned, you believe in your ability to succeed, so you show up with confidence, communicate with clarity, and bounce back quickly when things don't go as planned.

What Is Mental Fitness?

I've been a full-time life coach and an executive coach for over a decade, and I've helped clients around the world learn to control their thoughts and thus change their mindset.

I use the term “mental fitness” to describe a workout that trains your thinking, allowing you to get what you want and stop getting what you don't. Sounds simple, right? The tools to accomplish this kind of mental training are actually not complicated, even though they aren't always easy.

Just like physical fitness, mental fitness requires a consistent routine, ideally done daily.

Your Mental Fitness Workout

1. Warm-Up: I Am Statements and Power Mottos

Start by telling yourself the outcomes you want. This is how we retrain our mental autopilot. These are what I call “I Am Statements” and “Power Mottos.” I Am Statements emphasize your capabilities, and Power Mottos help you reverse a negative belief.

You can train your mind to believe you can accomplish your goal by telling yourself things like: *I am a great speaker and getting better all the time. I always reach my goals. I am capable of anything I set my mind to. I am ready for success. I will be a powerful TEDx speaker.*

Think of this practice as “playing offense.” It's a daily mental workout where you choose the thoughts you want. Start first thing in the morning by running through your list of I Am Statements and Power Mottos as you get ready and say them out loud to the mirror. At first, you won't believe them, and that's the point. These statements are creating the next version of you, the one who is already all these things.

Your mental fitness goal: Repeat these statements and mottos as often as possible throughout the day. Record them in a voice memo and listen while you drive or walk the dog. Keep at it until they become the thoughts that auto-populate in your mind.

When you do this consistently, you begin showing up with more confident energy and the



~~*I'm not good at this.*~~
What am I missing?

negative inner dialogue fades. With this mental training and intentional focus, every talk you give improves, and soon more doors open for you as a speaker.

2. Strength Training: Mental Tennis

Mental Tennis is a term I use to describe how you can quickly flip negative thoughts into empowered, positive ones that focus on your desired outcomes. Imagine your mind as a tennis court, with negative balls being hurled at you all day long. They sound like: *You're not good enough. Other people do it better. You're not ready yet.*

Instead of letting those sabotaging voices land, hit the ball back by telling yourself the opposite: *I am good enough. I can do this; I keep getting better! I am ready!*

This tool is what's known as playing defense. It teaches you to protect your I Am Statements and Power Mottos so you can keep building belief in yourself and stay aligned with your goals and actions.

Your mental fitness goal: Each time you notice a negative thought, or one rooted in doubt, fear, stress, or anxiety, hit it back with the opposite. Practice this daily, and you'll start to see results quickly.

3. Recovery: Daydreaming

Athletes use visualization every day as part of their training and mental focus.

They imagine themselves crossing the finish line or scoring the winning goal, and they tap into the feelings that come with those wins. You can use this same tool to manifest your own goals and dreams even faster.

Before your next speech, spend a few minutes daydreaming about the outcome you want: your words flowing smoothly, the audience fully engaged, the applause at the end. Allow yourself to feel the excitement, adrenaline, and achievement of nailing it onstage.

Your brain doesn't know the difference between imagining success and actually experiencing it, so use this to your advantage. The more vividly you see it in your mind ahead of time, the more natural, easy, and powerful it will feel when you're onstage.



What Sabotages Mental Fitness?

Just as junk food and skipping workouts hurt your physical fitness, there are habits that sabotage your mental strength:

- Negative self-talk (*I'm terrible at this.*)
- Comparison (*They're so much better than me.*)
- Overthinking every mistake
- Inconsistency in your practicing routine

The antidote is awareness and practice. The more you catch yourself in these patterns and use your tools, the stronger your mindset becomes.

If your mindset isn't aligned with your desired outcome, you'll sabotage your success.

Mental fitness isn't just a false belief or another trending hashtag. It's a practical, no-nonsense way to retrain your thinking so you can start creating the results you want in every area of your life. It stops the cycle of manifesting what you don't want and builds the momentum to shift things in your favor.

With consistent practice, these mental workouts strengthen your self-confidence, belief in yourself, and ability to stay focused on what matters most. In today's world, mental fitness isn't optional. It's a survival skill. The ability to recognize, redirect, and strengthen your thoughts will transform everything: your career, your relationships, and your personal goals.

And just like physical fitness, it comes down to reps. The more you practice, the stronger you get. When you are committed to building your mental fitness, everything in your life will begin to positively shift.

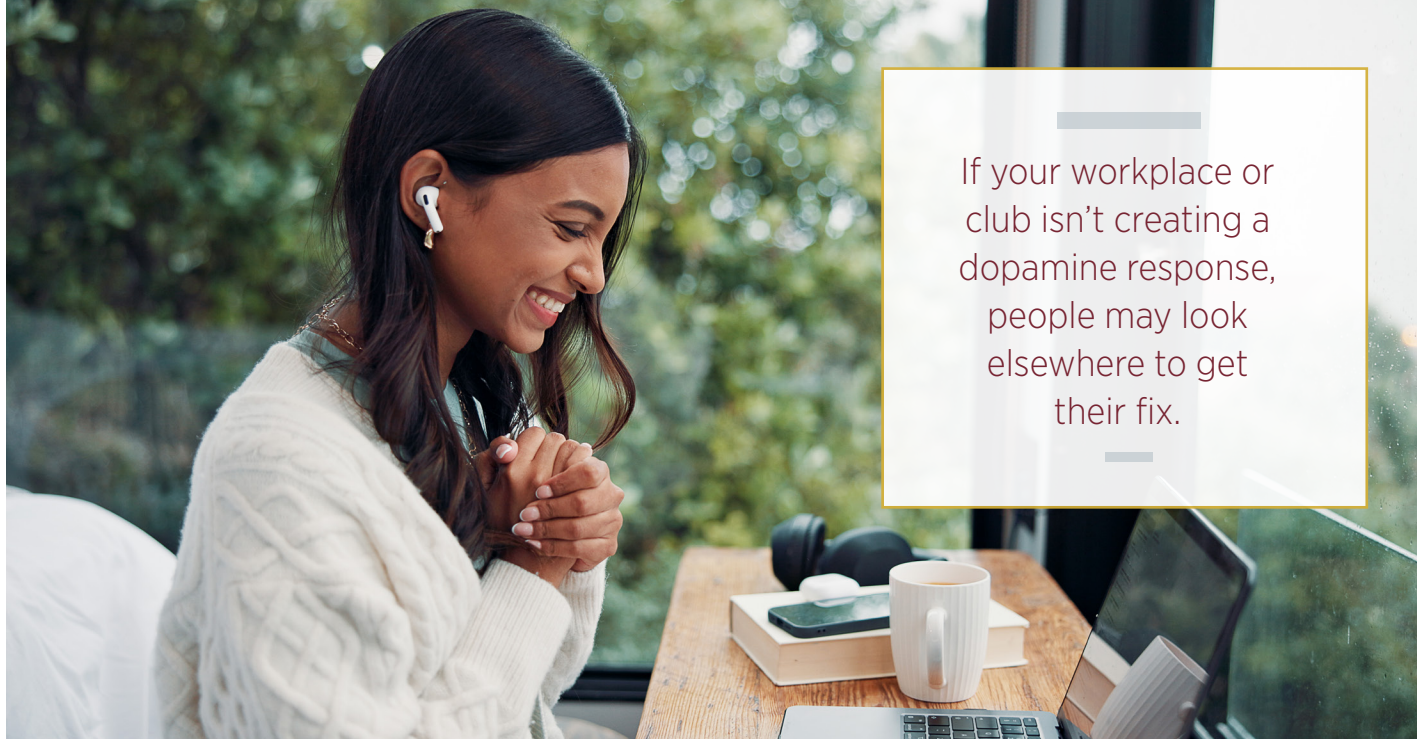
Sarah Centrella is a life coach, executive coach, keynote speaker, and the author of four books, including the recently published *Think It*. She also hosts the podcast *The Sarah Centrella Show*. Learn more at sarahcentrella.com

Giving Meaningful **PRAISE** That Lands

How to thank people in a way that resonates.

By Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS





If your workplace or club isn't creating a dopamine response, people may look elsewhere to get their fix.

Successful Toastmasters clubs and professional teams thrive on a secret ingredient: appreciation. Yet, why does praise so often fall flat? That sincere “thank you,” meant to uplift, can misfire if it’s not delivered in a way that truly resonates with the recipient.

In my work with executives, one of the most frequent requests I get is to help organizations create a positive team culture. I’ve seen firsthand what an underutilized tool effective praise can be. Appreciating people’s work is a powerful, cost-effective means of boosting both morale and performance. If you want rapid improvement and more bang for your buck, look no further.

Whether you’re chairing a club committee, mentoring a member, leading a workplace team, or even trying to improve personal relationships, learning to speak each person’s language of appreciation ensures your praise doesn’t miss the mark.

Why Appreciation Matters to People

Feeling appreciated is a fundamental human need. We wither without it. Receiving praise literally elicits a dopamine response in the brain, creating feelings of pride and pleasure. Those feel-good emotions build on each other and become almost addictive, which then creates repeat behavior. It’s such a strong motivator, we’ll do anything we can to get our next hit.

Leaders can leverage this fact by ensuring they build a culture of positive feedback by offering consistent, meaningful praise. If

your workplace or club isn’t creating this dopamine response, people may look elsewhere to get their fix.

The challenge is, most of us notice when things go wrong more than when they go right. Missed deadlines and mistakes grab our attention, while people quietly doing excellent work can go unnoticed. So it’s vital that leaders become skilled at catching people doing things right and making acknowledgement a regular habit.

However, [effective praise](#) needs to be more than a basic “thanks!” It should be timely (don’t wait weeks or months to offer your praise), specific (state exactly what you notice/appreciate), and genuine (people can smell insincere praise a mile away). Offering timely, specific, and genuine praise offers three major benefits:

1. It boosts the recipient’s satisfaction and well-being in the moment.
2. It motivates them to repeat the behavior.
3. It builds emotional credit for when constructive feedback is needed.

Why Appreciation Matters for Organizations

Nearly half of professionals say they’d work harder if they felt more recognized, yet 82% feel under-appreciated by supervisors. This disconnect lowers morale, effort, and retention.

Unrecognized employees are more likely to resign, or to actively disengage—rowing the boat in the opposite direction.

In Toastmasters, where roles are voluntary, underappreciation often leads to burnout, withdrawal, or reluctance to step up in the

future. Conversely, when volunteers feel seen and celebrated, they’re energized to keep contributing.

Here’s a key truth all leaders need to understand—people do more of what they’re praised for. Rather than micromanaging or pointing out mistakes, highlighting positives makes your team go the extra mile.

Ways to offer praise and affirmation include:



Public recognition – in person, at a formal event, or through a staff-wide email



Private recognition – in person, by email, in a card, or with a sticky-note on their desk



Tangible recognition – an award, certificate, plaque, gift, or bonus



Benefits – extra time off, improved flexibility, or a nicer desk or workspace



Job-specific recognition – extra responsibility, leading the next project, or a promotion

Understanding people's preference for public versus private recognition is key. If I call Jenny to the stage at the big annual meeting to give her a surprise award when she hates being the center of attention, she'll dislike the experience immensely.

Conversely, if Mark prefers public praise and I send him a handwritten note, he may feel that I didn't really mean it because I didn't present it in front of his peers.

Speaking the Right Language

More than 30 years ago, Gary Chapman's book [*The 5 Love Languages*](#) began transforming personal relationships with the concept that people give and receive love differently depending on their personality. Later, Chapman and psychologist Paul White's book [*The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace*](#) adapted those concepts to the workplace, identifying five languages of appreciation and encouragement to create healthy work relationships, and thus happier and more productive teams.

Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace

1. Words of Affirmation – using words to affirm people
2. Acts of Service – taking on a task or project for someone to alleviate their load
3. Tangible Gifts – physical tokens of gratitude
4. Quality Time – giving someone your undivided attention
5. Physical Touch – appropriate gestures like high-fives or pats on the back

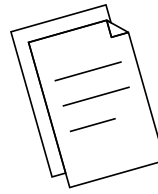
The challenge is, we all naturally (unconsciously) offer praise and affirmation in ways that *we* prefer to receive it. The golden rule says to treat people how you'd like to be treated.

The platinum rule is even better: Treat people how *they* want to be treated.

For instance, if you give a gift without a card to someone who craves affirming words, your attempt may fall flat. A long email of praise won't mean much to someone who'd rather you helped them out. And sending someone home early for the day will disappoint them if they'd really prefer an afternoon tea so they can spend quality time with their colleagues.

Here are several ways to speak each language.

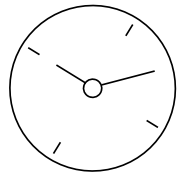
Words of Affirmation



- Leave a sticky note of appreciation on someone's desk.
- Send a thank-you card in the mail.
- Highlight great work in club emails.
- Forward positive feedback to their manager or supervisor.
- Post praise on social media.
- Record and send an audio message of thanks.

Acts of Service

- Help set up for a club event or meeting.
- Cover a role to give someone a break.
- Make or bring someone their favorite hot drink.
- Assist with a task they're struggling with.
- Set up tech for hybrid meetings.



Tangible Gifts

- A voucher for a favorite cafe or store.
- A book they've been wanting to read.
- Personalized desk decor or stationery.
- Their favorite snack or drink.
- A framed quote that inspires them.

Quality Time

- Catch up over coffee or lunch.
- Hold a no-agenda chat just to listen.
- Host a fun quiz or game night.
- Plan a shared meal or club social.
- Co-plan a special meeting or event.

Physical Touch

- A high-five to celebrate success.
- A congratulatory handshake or pat on the shoulder.
- A hug for a close colleague.
- A massage voucher for someone you know will appreciate it.





**Be genuine and specific
when expressing appreciation.**

Discovering People's Preferences

The best way to find out a person's preferred "language"? Ask.

Try questions such as: What's the best recognition you've ever received? How do you prefer to be thanked—publicly or privately? Do you prefer tangible gifts, acts of service, verbal praise, or spending time together?

You can also use a brief questionnaire to learn what each team member values.

I provide clients with a "Getting to Know You" questionnaire, inviting them to share fun facts—such as their favorite café, song or artist, ice cream flavor, store, or charity—along with how they like to receive recognition (e.g., publicly or privately, through words, gifts, time, or acts of service) and who they most appreciate receiving it from.

One of my long-term consulting clients, a New Zealand accounting firm, adopted this tool as part of a wider leadership and well-being program. At an all-team training day, I saw the impact firsthand. The practice manager, Jane, stood up and presented Alex, a team member, with a generous, beautifully curated gift basket.

He was gobsmacked—not just by the gift's size, but by how thoughtfully it included his favorite snacks, brands, and other items. Jane later shared her amusement, saying that although Alex had filled in the questionnaire just weeks earlier, he clearly didn't expect his

employer to take such detailed notice—let alone act on it.

This wasn't a one-off gesture. Over the next six months, I worked with the firm to embed appreciation into their leadership approach. When we repeated their survey, staff satisfaction scores nearly doubled, and all other engagement and well-being metrics improved across the board.

The takeaway? When you ask about—and follow through on—how people like to be appreciated, it's more than thoughtful. It becomes a powerful catalyst for motivation, loyalty, and culture change.

Foster a Culture of Appreciation

Peer-to-peer acknowledgement often has the greatest impact. When praise flows laterally as well as downward, it creates a healthier culture. Try these habits:

- Add a regular "high-five" segment to meetings.
- Invite people to share peer praise—make it easy by having thank you notecards available.
- Create a monthly award for staff to nominate each other.
- Share "wins of the week" both internally and on social media to congratulate people.
- Thank others for their help or ideas.
- Acknowledge behind-the-scenes work.
- Send an encouraging message.

In one Toastmasters District, a Division Director began each meeting with two minutes of "gratitude moments." Members named someone who'd supported or inspired them, creating a ripple effect of appreciation that trickled down to the club level.

Whether you're a Toastmasters leader or a workplace professional, learning to appreciate others meaningfully is one of the most impactful tools you can develop. Even small, well-timed gestures can ripple into lasting loyalty, pride, and connection.

Remember:

- People do more of what they're praised for.
- Affirmation must be timely, specific, and genuine.
- Ask people how they like to be recognized.
- Tailor your praise to match their language of appreciation.

When you speak someone's language of appreciation, you show that you see them—not just for what they do, but for who they are.

Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS, is an award-winning well-being specialist, New Zealand's Keynote Speaker of the Year and Educator of the Year 2023, TEDx speaker, author of *Thriving Leaders*, *Thriving Teams*, and host of the *Thrive TV Show*. She is a sought-after speaker who helps organizations create a positive, energized team culture where people thrive. Visit laurenparsonswellbeing.com.

5 QUESTIONS WITH...

Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS

Monthly advice from an expert.



More about
Lauren

Hometown:

Palmerston North,
New Zealand

Number of years in Toastmasters:

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Profession:

Keynote Speaker

Hobbies:

Reading historical
fiction, running, hiking,
gardening, theater, time
with friends and family,
and playing board games
(especially Articulate)



This month we're talking to Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS, an award-winning well-being specialist, leadership speaker, and author. Lauren helps busy leaders ditch the overwhelm by mastering self-leadership, and equips organizations to create a positive, energized team culture where people thrive.

Here are some of her insights on how to reset for the new year.

What is your favorite way to mark a new year?

Hosting friends for a dinner party, cooking outdoors over an open fire, then settling in for some board games. I delight in the laughter and connection that board games create!

What is a tradition in your family?

Every night, we share a highlight of the day at dinner. It's a non-negotiable. No one leaves the table without asking and answering, "What was the best thing about your day?" It's a simple gratitude ritual that sparks joy and builds optimism.

What are your thoughts on New Year's goals and/or resolutions?

I'm not a fan of the typical New Year's resolutions like "I should get fit" or "I must eat better." (1) They're based in a sense of guilt, (2) They're so non-specific that they don't create meaning or motivation, and (3) They often backfire, due to the lack of a specific plan. A different approach? Focus on how you want to feel—then find sustainable, enjoyable ways to make that a reality. Things like my "snack on exercise" approach, which I shared in my [TEDx talk](#).

What is the best way to avoid overwhelm and set yourself up for success in the coming year?

Get crystal clear on what truly matters—your "rock" priorities rather than the pebbles and sand. Once you know what is most important, set strong boundaries. Be prepared to say no. Overwhelm often stems from too many yeses. One of my rocks is staying fit and strong, so I prioritize early morning runs with a friend—and say no to other things so that can happen.

What's one small habit that's made a big difference for you?

Definitely my morning routine. The way you start your day determines the outcome of your entire day. Mine starts with four minutes of uplifting music, diaphragmatic breathing while stretching, and focusing on what I'm grateful for and what I'm looking forward to each day.

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