

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | APRIL 2026

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## Conversations That Matter

As Toastmasters, you and I learn to communicate more clearly. While this has certainly strengthened my professional work, I've been surprised by just how powerful those skills have been in my relationships.

Many years ago, a fellow club member, Hugh, took the time to write me a handwritten letter of thanks. He has probably forgotten he ever sent it—but I haven't. I still keep a copy. That letter taught me an important lesson: Appreciation matters most when it's expressed, not just felt.

Before then, I often *thought* appreciative thoughts without ever saying them out loud. Now, I make a conscious effort to share them—through a call, a text, or a voice note. A few simple words can strengthen a relationship more than we realize.

A few simple words can strengthen a relationship more than we realize.

Another lesson came through observing how others communicate thoughtfully. A colleague, Mandy, once emailed to cancel an appointment at short notice. In her message, she proactively apologized, acknowledged that the change might disappoint me, and asked for my understanding. It struck me how respectful and human that approach felt. I've used that same structure many times since, and it's transformed how difficult messages are received.

Relationships are built one conversation at a time. Each interaction has the potential to strengthen trust—or, if we're careless, to strain it. Toastmasters has helped me become far more intentional about both my conversations and my relationships.

One of my mentors, Erich, shared advice that fundamentally shifted how I approach challenging relationships: *Lead with empathy*. Try to understand the situation from the other person's viewpoint. That single insight helped me replace defensiveness with curiosity, and certainty with openness. It reminded me that differing perspectives aren't wrong—they're simply different.

There have been moments when I didn't say the right thing, or when my words weren't received as I intended. Those moments—and the feedback that followed—taught me something

equally valuable: the importance of acknowledging when we get it wrong. A sincere apology, offered with humility, can repair more than silence ever will.

This journey of learning how to build stronger relationships will never truly be finished. And that's a good thing. Progress comes when we learn from others—and then put that learning into practice, one conversation at a time.

**Aletta Rochat, DTM**  
International President



14



18



22

## Features

14 COMMUNICATION:  
**How to Talk to Difficult People**  
 Tips for handling people with challenging personality traits.  
 By Jefferson Fisher

18 TOASTMASTERS NEWS:  
**Africa's Ascent**  
 The continent has soared in Toastmasters growth, visibility, and performance.  
 By Paul Sterman

22 SPEECHWRITING:  
**Do's and Don'ts of Using AI in Speechwriting**  
 Key rules for using artificial intelligence in speech prep.  
 By David Tobenkin

## Articles

10 INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:  
**Talking in Circles**  
 How communication varies by relationship, and why it's important to adapt.  
 By Greg Glasgow

12 INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:  
**What Does Your Body Language Tell Others?**  
 How to build connection through gestures and movements.  
 By Diane Windingland, DTM

## Columns

3 INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:  
**Conversations That Matter**  
 By Aletta Roachat, DTM

8 YOUR TURN:  
**Brushstrokes and Breakthroughs**  
 By Corey Barksdale

9 YOUR TURN:  
**Pathways, Pitfalls, and Perseverance**  
 By Leila Kubesch

26 5 QUESTIONS WITH:  
**Jefferson Fisher**

## Departments

5 Seen and Heard

6 Open Mic  
 Insights, inspiration, and interesting tidbits.



## Snapshot



Toastmasters from **District 82 (Sri Lanka, Maldives, and the British Indian Ocean Territory)** gather for the Division D and E Mid-Year Conference in November 2025. Over 280 Toastmasters and guests attended the event in Ratmalana, a suburb in the Colombo District of Sri Lanka. *Photo credit: Pixel Studio Photography*

## Traveling Toastmaster



**Shuhail Ikram and Imran Anas**, both of Geliyoa, Sri Lanka, stop for a photo at the Maldives sign at the Velana International Airport.



**Cindy Tsai** of Taipei, Taiwan, views the Taipei 101 skyscraper, a landmark 101-story building, with her copy of the *Toastmaster* magazine's centennial edition.

**CLUB EXPERIENCE**

# Celebrate Your Club's Anniversary

**T**ry out these festive suggestions to commemorate the occasion of your club becoming one year older.

## Celebrate the club's and members' accomplishments.

Take the opportunity to honor all your club has already achieved. Hand out ribbons and pins, and applaud members for completing learning paths in Pathways or reaching personal goals. Acknowledge the hard work of the club overall, and any designations earned or growth achieved throughout the year. Don't forget to go to Club Central and print your Club Anniversary Certificate.

## Hear from a charter member.

If possible, reach out to a current or past member who helped found the club. Ask them to speak about the process, and what the club was like when it began. Members can hear about what has changed, and discuss what has stayed the same over the years.

## Make your charter year the meeting theme.

Ask Table Topics® questions about the year your club chartered. For example, if your club was founded in 1992, you could focus on the Summer Olympic Games. Ask questions about favorite sports, the perfect Opening Ceremony, etc.

## Host an awards ceremony.

Base your club meeting off the Golden Globes or British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA). Give out trophies for various accolades and superlatives. Which member is most likely to go over time or most likely to give a speech about their pet? Keep it fun and lighthearted, and include everyone!

## Share your members' thoughts.

Ask members for the reasons they are glad they joined Toastmasters and why they are still part of the club. With their permission, share these responses on social media.

**TABLE TOPICS**

## Get to Know Your Members Through Table Topics

Boost community and encourage friendships in your club by using Table Topics® questions to learn more about each other.

1. If you had to choose one word to describe yourself, what would it be and why?
2. Share an interesting or fun fact about yourself.
3. What do you do for work, and what does your typical day look like?
4. If you could do any job regardless of money or talent, what would it be?
5. Describe your perfect day.
6. What is your favorite hobby, or what is one you'd like to try?
7. What is your favorite color and why?
8. What was a recent movie you really enjoyed?
9. What is a television show you recommend, and why?
10. What is your favorite book? Why?
11. If you could only listen to one song for the rest of your life, what would it be? Why?
12. Do you have any pets? If so, share a few fun details about them.
13. Describe the meaning behind your name.
14. Share a funny childhood memory.
15. What is your favorite holiday? Why?

## TOASTMASTERS HISTORY

## Spotlight on April 1933

Happy Birthday, *Toastmaster* magazine! The first issue of this venerable institution launched 93 years ago, in April 1933.

Magazine was an optimistic name for what was essentially a pamphlet, measuring only 3 ½ by 6 inches (9 x 15 cm). But it was a step up from its predecessor, *The Gavel*, a mimeographed newsletter that began in 1930. And the magazine grew into its lofty title—the *Toastmaster* has been continually published since 1933.

The first issue comprised short articles submitted by the 13 Toastmasters clubs at the time, detailing their happenings, and offering helpful tips and advice for other clubs. Clubs encouraged each other to hold inter-club meetings, discussed hosting high school speech contests, and relayed their solutions for timing lights.

There was also a Critique Sheet (an early version of a speech evaluation form), and a column dubbed “Gavel Splinters,” described as exploring “the good and bad points of International, with some occasional ‘backdoor’ philosophy.” There were also announcements such as this:

*Seattle Club: Mr. and Mrs. Seattle are Proud To Announce the Birth of Their First Toastmaster’s Club.*

For nine years, the magazine was published four times a year, until 1942 when it changed to a bimonthly publication and grew a bit in size. In 1946, the *Toastmaster* went to a monthly schedule.

You can still read the [April 1933](#) issue of the *Toastmaster*, along with all issues of the magazine at [toastmasters.org/Magazine/Explore](http://toastmasters.org/Magazine/Explore).



## CARTOON



## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“  
Of all the talents bestowed upon men, none is so precious as the **gift of oratory** ... He who enjoys it wields a power more durable than that of a **great king**.  
”

—Winston Churchill

# Brushstrokes and Breakthroughs

How I turned art into a communication superpower.

By Corey Barksdale

**A**s an Atlanta-based African American artist, illustrator, and muralist, my work is all about bold color, movement, and storytelling. People often comment on the energy of the piece, but it took me quite a while to find my voice beyond the canvas.

I've spent decades telling stories through line, color, and form. But when it came to speaking about my work—whether to collectors, at gallery openings, or in front of a camera—I struggled. I could paint Atlanta's soul on a 20-foot wall, but I couldn't comfortably express that same passion in a five-minute talk. That changed when I joined the Gwinnett-Tucker Toastmasters Club, in Tucker, Georgia, in 2022.

Since then, I have developed speaking and leadership skills, and learned how to embrace discomfort. I now accept nervous energy and moments of doubt as part of my growth. Here are the four steps I took to find my voice.

## 1. Translate your art into a story.

The first thing I learned was how to take the emotion behind a painting and turn it into a verbal narrative. When I created "Atlanta Reflections" in 2000, I wanted to show Atlanta's culture, energy, and history all layered together. I wanted the colors and movement to reflect the rhythm of the city, the people, and the stories that make up Atlanta.

I had never practiced telling the story of my art, and I used "Atlanta Reflections" as the subject of one of my early Toastmasters speeches. I talked about the small apartment where I painted it, the masonite board I used, and how Atlanta became the heart of the piece. By breaking down my work

into personal milestones, I was able to turn my art into a story I could confidently speak about.

## 2. Use visual thinking.

Artists are visual thinkers. In Toastmasters, I learned how to apply that strength to communication. Rather than writing a speech word for word, I first sketch it out on paper using visual bullet points. This technique, known as mind mapping, involves creating a visual map of ideas or icons, or using cue cards with visuals, to guide my delivery.

I've also learned how to be more visual when communicating with others. For example, I use metaphors and similes to create imagery for my audience. I describe communication anxiety as trying to paint in the dark, and I explain leadership using mural techniques—layering, collaboration, and stepping back to see the full picture.

A picture is worth a thousand words—but sometimes those words still need to be spoken.

## 3. Practice live speaking like live painting.

Since joining Toastmasters, I have started doing live painting events during gallery talks and in front of corporate audiences. As the image unfolds on canvas, I speak about the subject, history, and emotion.

Through this process, I realized that both public speaking and live art

share similar principles. Both require you to prepare your materials, whether it's speech notes or paint brushes, and know what message you want to convey. Then, you have to trust the process. You won't always speak or paint perfectly but you have to keep going—even if you mess up. Lastly, you have to engage the audience; whether through color or voice, connection matters.

## 4. Lead like an artist.

Three years after joining, in July 2025, I became the Club President of the Gwinnett Harbingers Toastmasters Club in Lilburn, Georgia. Serving in this role has added another layer of growth. Leadership, like painting, requires vision and innovation. You must see beyond the blank canvas—or the empty meeting agenda—and create something that inspires others.

Through this role, I've mentored speakers the way I once mentored young artists, by listening to them, delegating, and celebrating their progress.

Whether you're painting, speaking, or managing teams, your voice matters. I once thought art and color were enough to speak for me. But in today's world, the ability to communicate about your work is just as powerful as the work itself. Yes, a picture is worth a thousand words—but sometimes those words still need to be spoken.

**Corey Barksdale** is an Atlanta-based visual artist and muralist whose work celebrates African American culture, history, and community. His work can be seen in murals, galleries, and public spaces across the United States. Learn more at [barksdaleart.org](http://barksdaleart.org) and [coreybarksdale.com](http://coreybarksdale.com).



# Pathways, Pitfalls, and Perseverance

How visiting clubs in 50 states helped me gain an education.

By Leila Kubesch

When I joined Toastmasters in 2014, I learned how to organize my thoughts, speak with intention, and deliver a message that landed. I found my voice and learned how to use it to amplify those who could not yet speak for themselves.

Despite that success, I struggled when Pathways became Toastmasters' education program. When print manuals started being phased out, I felt like someone had taken my favorite map and replaced it with a compass—one that didn't have directions. I logged in, clicked buttons, refreshed the screen, and stared at it aggressively, hoping determination might count as a navigation strategy. Eventually, I stepped away.

Two years later, determined not to be outwitted by a digital platform, I returned. This time, I set two ambitious goals for myself: Speak in all 50 states and finish one entire Pathways path. Fourteen months later, I completed both.

I selected the Strategic Relationships path, which felt fitting given how much of this journey involved navigating people, personalities, and platforms. As I worked through the path, I shared my projects and speeches with different clubs.

I visited clubs both virtually and in-person, and each club was unique. Some were specialty clubs. Others were advanced or restricted. Some clubs had clear processes for visitors, which meant learning the rhythm of the room before stepping in. Others welcomed me with great curiosity, treating my visit like a special occasion. I was escorted in, introduced with care, and escorted out

again. Each experience reminded me that Toastmasters is shaped by its members.

At each club, I shared my goals and reasons for setting them. Members responded with encouragement and followed up with me afterward. Support did not stop at applause or feedback forms. It showed up in messages, emails, and genuine check-ins. People remembered where I was headed and helped me keep moving.

I met incredible members who taught me that Toastmasters isn't about perfection. It's about progress, patience, and perseverance.

One unintended lesson that Pathways taught me was the importance of reading instructions carefully. Level 4 included the podcast project. I recorded a polished 25-minute podcast, edited it for hours, and felt proud of the result, only to discover it was designed to be 60 minutes long. After that, I triple-checked every assignment. When Pathways asked me to write a blog, I made sure it was not secretly asking for a novel.

Eventually, I completed Levels 1 through 5. Feeling accomplished, I logged into Base Camp to collect my well-earned certificate. Instead of it indicating I was 100% finished, I saw 91%. That is when



Leila Kubesch (on right) with her mentor A.J. Herran

I realized the final twist. I had to reflect. Reflection, it turns out, is Pathways' way of reminding you that growth includes looking back as well as moving forward.

Although Pathways challenged me, what kept me going was the people. I met incredible members who taught me that Toastmasters isn't about perfection. It's about progress, patience, and perseverance. I didn't just learn how to craft compelling speeches, I learned how to show up.

At the Peak Performance club in Loveland, Colorado, members taught me practical skills that transformed my virtual presence. One member volunteered hours of her time as a mentor, helping me improve my audio, lighting, background, and camera framing. She encouraged me to attend a conference. I flew out, and we met in person for the first time after months of working together online. Imagine that kind of support.

Toastmasters taught me preparation, professionalism, and how to create environments, digital or in person, where people can connect and thrive.

To anyone navigating Pathways: Keep going. Laugh through the technical glitches. Celebrate every login victory. And know this: Your voice is worth every click.

**Leila Kubesch** is a member of two Toastmasters clubs: *Competitive Speakers Cincinnati* in Blue Ash, Ohio, and *Peak Performance* in Loveland, Colorado. She is the author of *Tech-No to Tech-Pro: A Practical Guide to Digital Visibility Without Losing Your Humanity*.

# Talking in *Circles*

How communication varies by relationship, and why it's important to adapt.

By Greg Glasgow

**D**oes talking about an upcoming vacation with your spouse sound different than when you talk about it with your kids? What about with your boss or your friends?

Chances are there are differences in the way you communicate within each of your relationships, and there are good reasons for that, experts say.

## Roles and Functions

You play a different role in every relationship you are part of—protector and teacher to your kids, cooperative partner to your spouse, trusted confidant to your friends, “person who gets things done” to your coworkers—and those roles affect the way you communicate, says Diana Robertson, a communication skills trainer and former Toastmaster based in the United Kingdom.

“In business communication, we’re thinking more about the goals and purpose of what we say, but in personal relationships, you need to consider the needs both of the listener and the speaker,” she says. “For colleagues, the key need is to collaborate effectively, whereas with friends or spouses, the key need is often support.”

That might mean explaining rationally to your coworkers why a project is running late, for instance, and later venting to your spouse about a coworker who procrastinated or

the inflexible deadline that got you into that predicament. And you’re likely using very different syntax and intonation in each case.

“We make all these choices when we speak—how fast or slow, how loud or soft, how direct or indirect,” says Deborah Tannen, professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and author of the book *That’s Not What I Meant! How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*. “There’s the meaning of the words, but then there’s what you communicate in how you say those words.”

Those nonverbal elements can be just as important when building rapport or getting your meaning across, Tannen says. Leaving a long pause between exchanges could be perceived as disinterest or getting distracted, while a too-short pause could be seen as an interruption. To some people, personal questions are flattering and indicate interest, while others find them rude and intrusive. Does a louder volume indicate anger, or enthusiasm? These are all things to keep in mind when you’re looking to improve your communication skills within a specific relationship.

Relationships also come with power dynamics that affect the way we communicate. Coworkers communicate differently among themselves than with managers who determine their pay. The

same goes for children, who may use a completely different vocabulary and vocal inflection with their friends than they do with their parents.

It’s a dynamic Tannen sees play out often among mothers and daughters, where there is a thin line between caring and constructive criticism. A mom might advise her daughter on what to wear or whom to spend time with out of genuine concern, but a daughter might take those suggestions as criticism of her or her friends.

“From the point of view of the mother, here’s the person you most want to help, where from the point of view of the daughter, here’s the person you most want to think you’re perfect, because she knows you so well,” Tannen says.

## Check Your Filter

Ironically, it can be most difficult to communicate with the people you’re closest to. That’s because in conversation with friends and family, we tend to “filter” conversations according to what we expect to hear, says [Alice Shikina](#), a professional mediator and negotiation/communication trainer based in Oakland, California.

“You wear filters for your children, your spouse—the filter makes it so that what you expect your spouse to say is what you hear,” she says. “You’re not necessarily hearing what they’re

saying; you're hearing what you expect them to say."

For example, if your husband mostly talks about sports and his job, that may be all you subconsciously choose to hear. If he brings up a different topic, you may miss it altogether.

Filtering is made worse by distractions such as phones or television. When you're splitting your focus, you're even more likely to hear only what you expect to.

That's why it's more important than ever, experts say, to practice [active listening](#)—focusing solely and attentively on the person talking to you, eliminating distractions, and providing verbal feedback, such as paraphrasing or asking clarifying questions, to truly understand what's being said.

"An important part of it is to have the genuine intention to understand the other person," Robertson says. "Not just, 'I hear you, but I have a different opinion,' but trying to understand where the person is coming from before saying anything else."

The good news is that active listening is a skill that can be practiced, Shikina says.

"A good exercise to do with your spouse or your kids is to set aside five minutes every day, and you let me talk for a minute, then you respond back to me what it was that you heard, then we switch," she says. "There's no interrupting, you don't get to ask questions, you don't take notes—it's just listening and trying to process and remember everything that was said."

## Improve Your Skills

Another way to improve your communication skills is to take a close look at the relationships in which you communicate well, and look for aspects of those conversations that you can bring in to other relationships.

"You can absolutely have transferable skills," Robertson says. "It starts with the intention that you want to speak better at home or at work. It takes awareness, where you step out of yourself and just observe. How do you talk? If you're being supportive and listening actively, at what point do you stop? Are you triggered by something rude, or do you shut down?"

Once you've identified which relationships you communicate strongly in and why, look for concrete ways to bring those skills into other relationships. If you have an important meeting at work, think about how you would get your points across if you were speaking with your friends. Or explain to someone that you want to improve your communication skills with them. Ask if you can speak uninterrupted for a minute or two, then ask for feedback.

You play a different role in every relationship you are part of, and those roles affect the way you communicate.

It's also important to pay attention to the [communication styles](#) used by yourself and others, and to understand that they can be fluid depending on whom you're speaking with. A direct communicator at work might be a more supportive communicator at home, for example. Knowing your style in a given relationship and how it meshes with the style of the person you're communicating with can ease friction and keep the conversation flowing smoothly.

Just as important is knowing when *not* to communicate, Robertson says. Sometimes what you want to say isn't what the other person wants to hear.

"People tell me I'm an amazing communicator at work—that I'm super-supportive, super-kind," she says. "Then I come home, and my husband shares something that happened to him at work, and after we talk about it, I hear him say, 'You are the most coldhearted person.' It turned out that my natural way of approaching a conversation is that if people come to me with problems, I listen to them, I support them, and then I suggest a solution. In my husband's case, he never wanted a solution. He just wanted me to listen."

## The Toastmasters Advantage

Of course, Toastmasters have a built-in advantage when it comes to communicating across relationships—the training and feedback they receive from their leaders and fellow members.

"In addition to the different modules we have access to in Pathways, the most beautiful part of Toastmasters is that we are constantly getting evaluated, and we are constantly getting that feedback," says Monique Levesque-Pharoah, DTM, a longtime Toastmasters leader. "That feedback lets us know, how did our message land? Did we seem confident? How was our pacing? Did we hit the message that we wanted to hit? Once we get that feedback, we're constantly working to become better communicators."

Communication isn't always easy but paying attention to how you communicate with people in different relationships—being sensitive to your various emotional roles—may help you become a better communicator overall.

**Greg Glasgow** is a Denver-based author and freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the Toastmaster. His debut nonfiction book, *Disneyland on the Mountain: Walt, the Environmentalists, and the Ski Resort That Never Was*, was published in September 2023.

# What Does Your Body Language Tell Others?

How to build connection through gestures and movements.

By Diane Windingland, DTM

Most communication doesn't happen on a stage. It happens in meetings and one-on-one conversations. In these everyday interactions, people respond to body language instantly. Before you finish a sentence, your body language has already answered unspoken questions: Are you open? Are you confident? Are you safe to talk to?

Interpersonal body language includes facial expressions, eye contact, posture, movement, breathing, personal space, and stillness. These cues shape trust and connection, often more than words alone do. Let's look at how.

## Establishing a Baseline

When people talk about reading body language, it's easy to imagine decoding individual gestures, such as crossed arms, shifting feet, or averted eyes. And there is value in that approach. In *The Dictionary of Body Language*, retired FBI agent Joe Navarro identifies more than 400 behaviors from head to toe, each offering insight into thoughts, emotions, and intentions. But in everyday interactions, that's not how humans assess one another. We don't evaluate body language in isolation; we compare it to a baseline.

As we interact with someone, we subconsciously learn what is typical for them: how animated they usually are,

how quickly they respond, where they hold tension, whether they gesture freely or sit still. This baseline becomes our reference point.

When someone suddenly behaves differently, our brain flags the shift. Something feels "off." That doesn't mean the person is being deceptive. It simply means their internal state has changed.

This is why consistency matters in interpersonal communication. Trust builds when nonverbal behavior is relatively stable and aligned with context. When someone deviates from that behavior frequently or without explanation, especially under pressure, it can unintentionally raise questions about their confidence, comfort, or credibility.

## How to Project Confidence

In interpersonal communication, confidence rarely looks like bigger gestures or stronger eye contact. It shows up as steadiness, through measured movements, balanced posture, and gestures that match the message, say body language experts.

Visible hands, a neutral stance, and a relaxed face tend to communicate openness. In contrast, rushed gestures, constant shifting, or tension in the jaw or shoulders can unintentionally suggest anxiety or defensiveness.

Awareness is what makes the difference. Most people don't need to

add new behaviors. They need to notice the ones that appear under pressure, such as crossing arms, frowning the brow, tapping a foot, filling pauses with movement or sound, or rolling the eyes—often perceived as disrespectful.

As awareness increases, confidence becomes easier to project without effort. Small adjustments, such as grounding your stance or pausing before responding, can change how others experience you.

## When Body and Words Don't Align

[Rochelle Rice, DTM, AS](#), of New York City, is a speaker and educator who focuses on movement. She describes one of the most common interpersonal disconnects she sees: people who want to appear friendly and confident, but whose bodies tell a different story.

She points to something simple yet powerful—smiling without engaging the eyes. A polite smile paired with tense eyes or shallow breathing often signals insecurity, fear, or lack of confidence, even when the words sound positive.

Rice, a Certified Speaking Professional from the National Speakers Association, cautions against pasting confidence on top of anxiety. Rather than "fake it till you make it," she encourages people to work from the inside out by cutting

down on their nerves and anxious thoughts. Nonverbal communication becomes most effective when the body and mind are aligned, when the signals you send are congruent with how you actually feel.

## Grounding: A Practical Starting Point

One of Rice's simplest and most practical tools is the idea of grounding. When nerves spike, attention tends to rise to the head. Grounding brings awareness back down.

Her advice is deceptively simple: Feel your feet.

By shifting attention to the feet, or when seated, the pelvis, you can regulate the nervous system just enough to slow things down. This grounding helps reduce visible signs of anxiety, such as facial tension, rushed speech, or restless movement.

Breathing plays a similar role. A slow inhale through the nose and a relaxed exhale through the mouth sends a calming signal, not just to yourself, but to the person you're speaking with. Interpersonal body language is contagious; calm invites calm.

## Slowing Down Without Checking Out

In conversation, speed often masquerades as engagement. But Rice notes that constantly filling space, jumping in quickly, interrupting, or rushing to respond can signal agitation rather than confidence.

She encourages a subtle internal shift she calls "pulling in." It's not withdrawal, but restraint: allowing a pause, letting the other person finish, and resisting the urge to respond. That small slowdown changes posture, breathing, and facial expression, often making someone appear more credible and easier to trust.

## Posture: Confidence Without Dominance

Posture is another interpersonal cue. Years of device use and remote work have left many people with rounded shoulders and a forward-jutting head, a stance that can unintentionally signal fatigue or defensiveness.

Rice, a member of Bryant Park Toastmasters Club in New York, New York, emphasizes simple alignment: shoulders gently back, chin drawn slightly in, head stacked over the spine. This posture opens the chest and allows fuller breathing. The result is a presence that feels confident without being overpowering, open but grounded.

## When Body Language Crosses Cultures

While many nonverbal cues feel intuitive, they are not universal. Intercultural trainer Syed Zafar, co-author of *Crossing Cultures With Grace and Humor*, and a member of Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas, shows how easily well-intended body language can be misread across cultures.

He points to eye contact as a prime example. In the United States, steady eye contact signals confidence, honesty, and engagement. Avoiding it can raise suspicion. But in more hierarchical cultures, like China or India, prolonged eye contact with elders, teachers, or managers may be perceived as disrespectful or challenging. Respect is communicated by lowering the gaze rather than holding it.

Silence is another frequent point of misunderstanding.

In some cultures, a pause before responding reflects thoughtfulness and respect. In American settings, silence is often uncomfortable and can be mistaken for uncertainty or lack of

preparation. Zafar notes that this difference requires conscious adjustment, especially in professional environments where speed is prized.

Even smiling can create confusion. Americans often smile freely at strangers as a sign of friendliness. In many other cultures, smiling is reserved for close relationships. An American's open smile may be perceived as superficial or overly familiar.

Nonverbal cues do not exist in isolation, notes Zafar. Their meaning comes from cultural context. Rather than reacting instantly to what we think we see, he suggests slowing down interpretation using the DIE model for intercultural communication:

- Describe what you observed, without judgment.
- Interpret multiple possible meanings.
- Evaluate only after considering cultural context.

This brief pause helps prevent misinterpretation and supports more respectful, accurate communication, especially in diverse workplaces and Toastmasters clubs.

## Treating Others as They Would Like to Be Treated

Both Rice and Zafar point to the same underlying principle: awareness. Effective interpersonal body language isn't about mastering a checklist of gestures. It's about awareness—of yourself, and of others.

When you are at ease in your body, you permit others to relax as well. When you recognize that your own nonverbal habits are culturally shaped, you become more curious and less judgmental. And when your body aligns with your words, trust follows naturally.

Interpersonal body language may be subtle, but its impact is profound. Long before you finish a sentence, your body has already spoken. The question is: What story is it telling?

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**Diane Windingland, DTM**, is the author of *The Clarity Code: How to Communicate Complex Ideas with Simplicity and Power*. Learn more at [virtuallanguagecoach.com](http://virtuallanguagecoach.com).



# How to Talk to Difficult People

Tips for handling people with challenging personality traits.

By Jefferson Fisher



Jefferson Fisher

**D**ifficult people are everywhere. In fact, we're sometimes unknowingly the difficult ones ourselves.

But some people are particularly challenging—they often appear oblivious to the impact they have or the tone they convey, or they use certain tactics to exert their power or need for control. When you run into someone with a challenging personality trait, the key thing to remember is that it is impossible to try to control *them*. Instead, you have to learn to control *your* responses.

Here are some of the more frustratingly tricky personality behaviors and traits, and how to respond to them.

## The Insulter and Belittler

People with this toxic personality trait use phrases and words that cause pain, doing things like:

- Disparaging your intelligence (“I can’t believe you even thought that.”)
- Making a patronizing, dismissive remark (“Nice of you to show up.”)
- Offending you to make a joke (“I’m just joking!”)

### *How to handle it:*

**Option 1:** Make them say it again. It may seem counterintuitive, but I assure you, it works. After their insult or belittling comment, ask them to repeat it.

- “Can you repeat that?”
- “I need you to say that again.”



## INSULTER

People insult you to get a reaction. They're looking for a hit of dopamine from your response. But when you ask them to repeat it, you take all the fun out of it. The words feel almost too silly to say again. Instead, the person tends to either adjust or edit their response, or walk it back altogether. Best of all, you stay grounded and unfazed.

**Option 2:** Go silent for 5-7 seconds. Say nothing. Oftentimes, in the quiet of your silence the other person hears their words echo back to them. They extended themselves and now feel overexposed when you refuse to give their words something to grab onto. Most of the time, your silence will cause them to either preemptively apologize or rephrase their words to more reasonable, less insulting ones.

**Option 3:** Ask a question of intent.

- "Did you want that to embarrass me?"
- "Did you intend for that to hurt me?"
- "Did you mean that to sound short/rude/offensive?" (works well for email)

Your question is focused on the motivation of their hurtful remark, again exposing the true nature of the situation. Most of the time, people aren't willing to admit they wanted to cause pain, and these questions force them to clarify the purpose of their words, keeping you in a position of control.

### The Interrupter and Talker-Over

Talking to someone who interrupts you or dominates the conversation can be one of the most frustrating parts of trying to communicate. These people tend to:

- Jump in to share their own thoughts before you've even finished yours
- Cut into the middle of your sentence while you pitch an idea
- Talk without taking a breath so no one else can contribute at the meeting

#### How to handle it:

The first time they interrupt, *let it go*. Let them keep talking. If they felt what they had to say was so important, odds are they weren't going to listen to you anyway. And some people who are neurodivergent need that runway to get out a thought. Better to let someone interrupt you than cut them off with, "Excuse me?! I was talking!" Oof. That escalates the situation, and you don't want that.

If the person interrupts again, say their name. People react to their name the way dogs react to a whistle. Our ears perk up and we want to pay attention. Next, use a phrase that aligns their need to be heard with your need to finish, phrases like:

- "Doug, I can't hear you when you interrupt me."
- "Linda, I can't hear you when you talk over me."



## ALWAYS RIGHT

By using their name, you're signaling that if they want you to listen to what they have to say, they're going to need to wait.

### The Always-Has-To-Be-Right

You know the type. Everything they say is pure gold (in their eyes). Every idea they have is the only, and best, idea anyone at the meeting could have. This type of person finds every and any reason to put your thought down and elevate their own.

#### How to handle it:

It's hard to be around someone who always has to be right. If you find yourself getting nowhere in a conversation with them, try asking one of these questions:

- "What information would you need to change your mind?"
- "What would you need to hear to have a different opinion?"

These questions will show you whether the person is merely holding their belief out of conviction, stubbornness, or ignorance. It also reveals their level of emotional intelligence in being able and open to changing their mind if given different information. And if their answer is "no" or "none," you know this person will remain a dead end.



## GASLIGHTER

### The Passive Aggressor

Passive-aggressive comments tend to come out of a place of unvoiced expectation or frustration. Rather than being direct and going through the front door, people with this personality trait prefer to go through the fire escape—never saying what they truly mean and leaving you to figure it out. Look for comments like this:

- “Must be nice to have all that free time.”
- “Nice of you to care for once.”

#### How to handle it:

Don’t make the mistake of trying to meet passive aggression with *active* aggression, like calling them out or making an equally disrespectful comment. That will only make them clam up even more. Instead, try some of these responses:

- “Sounds like there’s more to that.”
- “Seems like you have a reason for saying that.”
- “Should I read into that?”

These responses indicate you’re opening the door for them to say more; you’re allowing them the chance to release their pent-up frustration or expectation. You’re also making sure they know their passivity didn’t go unnoticed, and chances are, they’re going to think twice before trying to sneak a passive-aggressive comment past you again.

### The Gaslighter

Gaslighting is someone’s attempt to have you question your reality, experience, or perception. There’s a difference between gaslighting and lying. Lying is attempting to divert truth (e.g., “I didn’t eat the cookie.”), whereas gaslighting is attempting to force you to doubt your reality (e.g., “There was never a cookie.”) If you’ve ever walked away from a conversation thinking to yourself, *Am I crazy?*, chances are you were being gaslit. Here are some common phrases of gaslighters:

- “You just don’t remember correctly.”
- “You’re making this up.”
- “That never happened.” (when you know it did)

#### How to handle it:

When this happens, anchor yourself. Rather than trying to convince them your memory or perception is valid, it’s better to remain true to your own memory and stay grounded.

- “I remember things differently.”
- “That wasn’t my experience.”

Calmly repeat these words as often as needed until the other person realizes that you won’t be moved off your own truth. You’re not pushing back or accusing. You’re only sticking to your reality.

### The Narcissist

It sometimes takes a while to realize you’re talking to someone with a narcissistic personality. You keep thinking that if you could just explain something to them, they would understand why what they said or did was wrong, they’d apologize, and everything would all be okay. In reality, the interaction is more like a carnival game. It looks beatable. It looks straightforward. But it’s not. It’s rigged.

No matter how well you explain or how empathic of an approach you take, the narcissist will twist it back to you for another round of “you never ...” and “you always ...” When you get put in this position, remember you’re playing a game of praise or provoke.

If you’re not feeding their ego by giving them praise, narcissists will provoke and start an argument just to upset you, and that’s because they delight in your frustration as much as they delight in your praise. It’s about

their ability to influence and control your emotions, regardless of which emotion it is.

**How to handle it:**

**Option 1:** Don't engage.

If you don't want to get cut by their words, don't put your energy within reach. The key here is to give short, neutral phrases:

- "Noted."
- "That's good to know."
- "I get it."
- "I can see that."

**Option 2:** Rein in your expectations.

That is, don't look to receive something the other person is incapable of giving. If you're looking for validation, whether it's respect, empathy, or even basic decency, you're going to be disappointed. People cannot give you what they cannot give to themselves. So reinvest your energy elsewhere. Detach yourself by recognizing that their words are their projections and not your reality.

**The One-Upper**

This trait is a personal pet peeve. No matter what you share, this person has done it better, faster, or more often. When someone one-ups you, it's a reflection of their insecurity. They feel they are lacking in some way, and in order to feel important or worthy, they must up the ante to compete. For instance:

- After you share your new business venture, Bob adds, "First one, eh? I remember my first one. Now I've launched and exited six."
- As soon as you mention your normal weekend activities, Cheryl name drops that she was having dinner with a millionaire.

One particularly frustrating aspect about one-uppers is that they don't always do it consciously. But when they do, the conversation no longer becomes about connection but about comparison.



**ONE-UPPER**

**How to handle it:**

First, refuse to feed the behavior. Don't try to one-up their one-up, or it becomes a measuring contest that nobody wins. Second, redirect their attention to their real meaning. Ask an open-ended question like, "What was your favorite part?" or "What did you learn?" Getting them to reflect on the deeper meanings of what was important to them helps redirect them from the comparison game. And third, continue sharing your point or story before the interruption. You can calmly bring it back to you with, "For me, it was ..."

At the end of the day, people who one-up you reveal whom you can share meaningful things with and whom you can't. Keep this in mind to gauge and decide how much you want to share with them in the future.

You will always find difficult and tricky personality types wherever you are. Remember that you can't control them, and you won't change them. But when you control your response, you'll always change the conversation.

**Jefferson Fisher** is a trial attorney, a communication coach, and the author of [The Next Conversation: Argue Less, Talk More](#). He's also the host of [The Jefferson Fisher Podcast](#), and a keynote speaker. Learn more at [jeffersonfisher.com](http://jeffersonfisher.com).



**NARCISSIST**



**INTERRUPTER**



**PASSIVE AGGRESSOR**

# Africa's Ascent

The continent has soared in Toastmasters growth, visibility, and performance.

By Paul Sterman

When Rozy Rana, a Nairobi resident, first joined Toastmasters, in 2005, there were only two clubs in Kenya. There were barely a handful in all of East Africa. But she was instantly captivated by the Toastmasters program and knew that had to change.

She and other passionate leaders led the drive to build clubs and enthusiasm. It took time, training, and persistently steering past hurdles, but by the end of the 2010s, East Africa was on a roll. Between 2017 and 2019, it tripled its amount of clubs, from 17 to 51. Comprising Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, the East Africa Territorial Council became District 114 in 2020.

“Toastmasters fever here was at its peak,” says Rana, DTM, the founding chair of the Territorial Council.

The turnaround in East Africa mirrors the larger transformation of Toastmasters throughout the continent over the past 15 years. Africa has become one of the fastest-growing regions in the world.

West Africa, for example, had 76 clubs in 2014; by 2024, that number had skyrocketed to 312, a staggering 310% increase. Southern Africa went from 125 clubs in 2011 to 155 in 2014, and then reached 245 clubs by 2024, a 60% jump in that 10-year span.

By comparison, all other Districts in the world had a cumulative growth rate of minus 3.1% over that same 2014–2024 period.

In 2024, not one but two Districts in Africa reformed, having each hit the 250-club mark. They split into four Districts across Southern, Western, and Central Africa.

“People often underestimate Africa, but we know the talent, courage, and commitment that lives here.”

—ALETTA ROCHAT, DTM

Reasons for this dramatic rise include greater visibility, changing demographics, and plain old passion and enthusiasm—members sharing a strong belief in the benefits of Toastmasters.

Rana, a member of Eazy Speak Toastmasters Club in Nairobi, recalls the exhilaration of working with other leaders to bring Districthood to East Africa.

“We were so psyched up. We ate, drank, and breathed Toastmasters,” she says.

## Proud People

African Districts, spread across Region 11, have succeeded not only with growth but with performance; they have consistently thrived in the Distinguished District Program. Toastmasters leaders on the continent are quick to note that much of this success has occurred with considerably less resources than other countries.

Excitement and pride have surged along with the climbing numbers, especially as Africa has been spotlighted on the Toastmasters stage. The continent has enjoyed more international representation from World Champions of Public Speaking, Region Advisors, and International Directors. In the past 10 years, there have been eight Region Advisors and three International Directors from Africa, including current Director Patrick Oluyide, DTM, of Nigeria.





In 2021, [Verity Price, DTM, AS](#), of Cape Town, South Africa, became the first African to win the World Championship of Public Speaking.

(The following year the title went to [Cyril Junior Dim](#), who was living in Poland but was born and raised in Zimbabwe, and his championship speech highlighted his African identity.)

Then in 2025, South African Aletta Rochat, DTM, became the first African member installed as the Toastmasters International President.

“Everything I learned in Toastmasters started in South Africa, and I am a product of the beautiful people here,” says Rochat, an 18-year member. “People often underestimate Africa, but we know the talent, courage, and commitment that lives here.”

### **An Influential Visit**

Toastmasters leaders point to a 2010 visit from then-International President Pat Johnson, DTM, as a catalyst for the subsequent upswing in Southern Africa. Progress in the region had been slow or sporadic for many years, but when Johnson came to South Africa, she talked about the untapped potential of the region, motivating District leaders to create ambitious multi-year plans and collaborate more effectively than before, says [Frank Tsuru, DTM](#), of Zimbabwe, Region 11 Advisor in 2021–2022, and International Director in 2023–2025.

For most of Africa’s history, South Africa—where the first club on the continent formed in 1950—was the main hub of Toastmasters activity there. But after Johnson’s visit, leaders were determined to invest effort in other countries too, places where communities of clubs had yet to blossom.

“We were almost like missionaries,” Tsuru recalls with a smile.

### **New Leadership**

Another key to success in Africa has been changing demographics. When Tsuru became the District 74 (Southern Africa) Director in 2018, he was 27 and the first person of color to hold that position, a milestone that inspired a new generation of leaders.

“I think a lot of people saw themselves in me, whether they were people of color or whether they were young,” Tsuru says, noting that Africa has a very young and diverse population.

Since that time, District leaders in Southern Africa have represented a mix of races and ages. The Director of District 129 (also in Southern Africa), Ravin Papiiah, is an Indian Mauritian and the first person from the island nation of Mauritius to hold a District Director position in Africa.

International President Rochat says African leadership “transformed completely. When I first joined, leadership positions were still largely held by white people. And then as these young leaders like Frank came in and there were a couple of others and Andrew [Frank’s brother, Andrew Tsuru, DTM, of South Africa, was 26 when he became the District 74 Director]. Suddenly, everybody came in. And if you look at the leadership now, it’s young, it’s vibrant, it’s mostly people of color, and they are just on fire.

“I love working with them because they’re just so enthusiastic.”

### **West African Surge**

As with Pat Johnson’s visit to South Africa, a 2013 visit from then-International President John Lau, DTM, at a Toastmasters conference in the country of Togo helped spur growth in West Africa, say leaders there.



Cyril Junior Dim, a Zimbabwe native and 2022 World Champion of Public Speaking; Dunstanette Macauley, DTM, of West Africa, Past District Governor and Past Region Advisor; Verity Price, DTM, AS, of Cape Town, South Africa, 2021 World Champion of Public Speaking.

[Dunstanette Macauley, DTM](#), a Toastmaster in Togo since 2009, says Lau could see the enthusiasm of West African members, how they “were burning with fire for Toastmasters.” Lau was very supportive of their efforts, and just a few months later, West Africa became Provisional District 94 and then a full District in 2016.

Toastmasters like Macauley, who served as the 2018–2019 Region Advisor, and Nadine Mbikina, DTM, the 2023–2024 District 94 Director, helped blaze trails in the area. Growth was particularly intense in French-speaking countries such as Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, and Togo, Macauley notes.

People in French-speaking countries “found the answer to their longing for self-development and public speaking,”

she says. “Toastmasters was what they needed, and there was no stopping them. While the English-speaking countries slowed down, the French-speaking countries could not stop growing. Our District is now about 90% French speaking.”

In 2024, with the amount of clubs ballooning, District 94 reformed into Districts 94 and 130. The latter covers Western and Central Africa and includes such countries as Cameroon, Congo, and Nigeria.

The momentum keeps going, adds Macauley, who sponsored the first English-speaking club in Togo. Sierra Leone, which had been the only English-speaking country left in Africa that didn’t have a Toastmasters club, is now on the verge of opening two clubs.

Macauley, a Past District Governor who splits her time between Togo and New York, has been a fervent advocate for Toastmasters. Seeing the expansion of Toastmasters in her area of the world has made all her efforts more than worthwhile, she says.

“I have received a lot of return on my investment in Toastmasters.”

Meanwhile, Rana, the East Africa leader, says she and her fellow members are ecstatic about the prominent role Toastmasters now has on their continent—and sees more growth and success still ahead.

“Africa is the new frontier,” she says.

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



# Southern Africa's Recipe for Growth

**T**oastmasters in Southern Africa is a shining example of what can be achieved if you believe. For the first decade of the 21st century, District 74—which started in 1978—experienced no net growth in clubs. It had 125 clubs in 2000, and despite small drops and increases in intervening years, 125 was still the club count in 2010.

So there was plenty of skepticism when 2011–2012 District 74 Governor Erich Viedge, DTM, announced his new vision for the District: attaining 250 clubs by 2016.

Current International President Aletta Rochat, of South Africa, was Division Governor at the time. She remembers thinking, *Why on earth would we be even thinking of doubling the size of our District in four years?*

What was needed, says Viedge, was a belief shift. You have to believe you can achieve big-time results for your District. It doesn't matter what kinds of obstacles you face—lack of funds, entrenched ways of doing things—you *can* change your situation, he stresses.

And “if you're not changing it,” he adds, “you're choosing it.”

Viedge challenged leaders to up their game. A premium was placed on creative problem-solving. For example, the District established corporate-focused events to provide skills training and pitch the benefits of Toastmasters to companies in the area.

Corporate clubs would become a big part of the District's renaissance, with prominent companies such as Old Mutual, Standard Bank (the largest bank in Africa), and Vodacom sponsoring clubs in Southern Africa.

District 74 went from the 46th-ranked District in the world all the way up to 8th by the end of the 2011–2012 program year, upping its growth by 12%, the highest ever achieved by a District up to that point, says Rochat, a longtime member of Cape Town Club. And, impressively, it was done the same year that Toastmasters raised its dues.

Viedge, she says, “changed my belief in what was possible.”

Aiming for 250 clubs sparked greater ambitions and energy, as did the new wave of Toastmasters leaders. And District 74 did eventually reach that high-water mark, leading to its 2024 reformation into Districts 74 and 129.

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

# DO'S and DON'TS of Using AI in Speechwriting

Key rules for using artificial intelligence in speech prep.

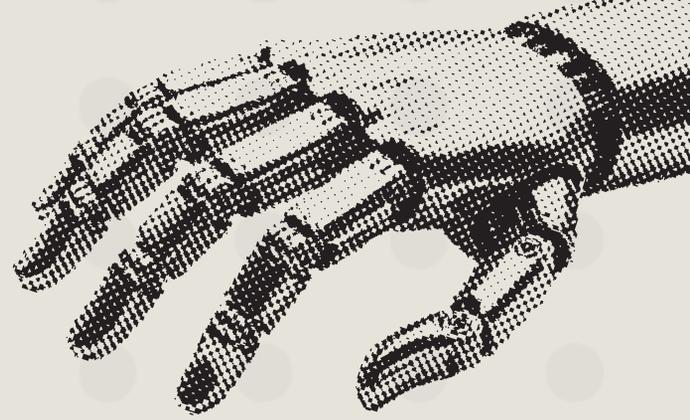
By David Tobenkin





HELP ME ORGANIZE THESE SPEECH NOTES.

AI



**G**enerative artificial intelligence tools like OpenAI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, Microsoft's Copilot, and Google's Gemini, are rapidly becoming essential speech preparation weapons in the arsenal of speakers. They can expedite conceptualizing and organizing speeches, and provide content ideas that speakers likely never would have considered.

But they are tools that also must be used thoughtfully and with some caution. Learn how you can use AI to help you plan and prepare your speeches.

## ✓ DO'S

### Do Use AI for Research and Brainstorming

AI excels at research, and rapidly finding facts can give speechwriters content options. Using AI can allow you to hop over the blank-page phenomenon—those times when you struggle to commit initial thoughts to paper or computer—in a matter of seconds.

Toastmasters International President-Elect Stefano McGhee, DTM, uses AI to enhance his speeches in Toastmasters and in his position as senior director of technology operations at Harvard Business Publishing.

For speeches that need factual support, McGhee, a member of Network Voice Club in Weymouth, Massachusetts, finds AI helpful in finding data that supports or contradicts the premise of a speech. It can even make sense of conflicting data if you continue asking it for more explanations about the discrepancies, and if and how those can be reconciled. (See the Don'ts section for why you always need to confirm accuracy of any of AI's findings.)

AI works on prompts—continually refined commands—to brainstorm

content, perform research, and organize your points. McGhee points out that ineffective prompts are unclear or too general, like, "Help me make my speech better." Specificity is key in effective prompting.

Good prompt creation largely determines how helpful AI will be, says Diane Windingland, DTM, a professional speech coach and owner of [Virtual Speech Coach](#).

She notes that the more specifics you provide on what you want to include, the better it can help you brainstorm and discover helpful additions. "You probably want to give the context of the speech, the audience that you will be speaking to, why you are speaking on this particular topic, any points you definitely want to cover, anything you definitely don't want to cover, how long the speech is going to be, and the level of interactivity."

For help understanding how to create prompts, Windingland, a member of Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas, and PowerTalk Toastmasters in Minnesota, recommends referring to a prompt-creator method outlined by Mark Craddock in the article ["The Art of Prompt Crafting."](#)

Windingland explains, "He starts out with, 'I want you to become my prompt creator. Your goal is to help me craft the best possible prompt for my needs. ChatGPT, you will follow this process,' and then he gives this whole process."

### Do Write and Speak Conversationally to AI

There's no need to be formal and exact when asking a question—you'll get better results if you "talk" to it as you would to a coworker or friend.

Speech-to-text conversion tools, like Microsoft Copilot's speech-to-text function, make it easier to write in conversational tone.

McGhee has asked AI for help brainstorming speech openers and endings. "I'll actually turn on speech-to-text and say to Copilot, 'I'm trying to put together this presentation. It needs to be about 10 minutes long. Here's the subject I'm talking about.'" The tool provided some suggestions that he could then incorporate.

### Do Use AI for Organization

AI also excels at organization. It can take your speech ideas and refine them into a workable outline.

For one speech, McGhee put in his rough draft and asked AI to help him organize the speech, as well as provide suggestions for timing.

"And it broke it up into a nice little outline and had a little summary. And I'm like, 'Okay, that's great. I remember hearing on the news at some point that there was a study out there that talked about one of my points, and it seemed to support it. Can you find that study?'"

The AI tool found the study he was interested in and he was able to incorporate it into the speech.

McGhee says further prompts can add suggestions for engagement. ("How could I add some audience participation or interactivity, such as two or three interactive exercises?") or an emotional appeal ("I really like making an emotional appeal to people about what it feels like to do the right thing. So can you tell me where I can use that skill of mine to really push on the points that I want?")

### Do Use AI to Find Blind Spots and Gauge Audience Response

An understanding of the audience is key to tailoring an appropriate speech, McGhee says. Your prompt can ask AI to determine what a critical audience



would think of a speech, and if all your points are relevant to the topic. A further prompt can ask AI to help with proposed responses to such questions, McGhee adds. “I’ll ask it, ‘Please critique the speech.’ ‘Is anything boring?’ ‘What are the things that people might find to be problematic or missing from my speech?’”

McGhee also uses AI when he knows there may be valid counterpoints in his speeches. He asks it to find the answer to fill in that hole.

AI has returned very valuable results. McGhee recalls prompting for any additional information he could add to a speech he would give in Saudi Arabia on why corporations in the kingdom would benefit from having a Toastmasters club in their company.

AI responded, “‘The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a five-year plan on how to bring Saudi Arabia to the next level, Vision 2030, emphasizing human capital development and a thriving future economy. You should incorporate that and talk about how developing

leaders helps the kingdom.’” McGhee says, “Sure enough, when I arrived, they were talking about that initiative at the conference, so I added content to cover that point.”

### Do Use AI to Experiment and Enhance

So what should you do with the time that AI saves? That time should be used to experiment with creativity and nuances of expression, Windingland says.

“Sometimes I will incorporate an existing story or topic or point into a new speech, and I will have ChatGPT help me enhance it,” she explains. “I might want it to be funnier. I might want it to give me another way to say this kind of thing.”

It sometimes can help to break speeches down into different segments, such as beginning, middle, and end and prompt for specific results for each, Windingland says. For example, copy just the first three paragraphs of your speech into an AI tool and prompt it to enhance your opening hook. Then share

your conclusion and ask it to incorporate that hook into your closing statement. Adding that blocking can result in better tailored and more accurate results.

### Do Consider Training AI With Past Speeches

McGhee notes he has uploaded the scripts of past speeches he has given into an AI bot to give the tool examples to understand his personal style.

“I may grab my last three speeches and just add them as links and say, ‘I’ve attached some speeches that give you examples of what I like to talk about and how I talk,’” he says. “It picks up on things like, ‘Oh, you like to use a little humor here and there,’ or ‘Oh, you like to tell some stories about this.’ It sometimes will then say in a future AI session, ‘You know that story you talked about in this speech. You could bring that in here, and that would be awesome.’ I’m like, ‘I didn’t even think of that!’”

“AI is a copilot; you’re the pilot in command.”

—STEFANO MCGHEE, DTM



TASK DETAILS? YES. PERSONAL SECRETS? NO.

AI

## X DON'TS

### Don't Have AI Write the Speech

AI should not write your speech. Doing so removes your personal insight and experiences and deprives the audience of your perspective and experiences. “AI can’t provide that originality,” says McGhee, who gives roughly 20 speeches per year in his professional and Toastmasters capacities and usually uses AI to help prepare.

Think of AI as a tool to help support you when you’re stuck. For example, rather than prompting “I need an intro for this speech,” try “I’m struggling with how to say this” or “Will this paragraph make sense for my audience of X?”

Additionally, unmodified content generated by AI can also be, well, off ... “The language is too flowery, and the humor might not land,” Windingland says. AI often tends to eliminate drama, controversy, and the unexpected—content that may prove interesting and memorable in a speech—instead tending to agree with the prompter, she notes.

Generally, AI-generated content should be reworked to make it more in line with how you think and speak. This also helps address another pitfall: plagiarism. Other speakers around the world could be writing a speech on a similar topic and use a similar prompt, resulting in similar AI responsive suggestions.

The consequences for plagiarism in a professional context can be severe, including, in some cases, termination from positions or a lawsuit. Ensuring AI-generated content has been rewritten and amended can avoid this outcome.

Windingland and McGhee both say you do not have to disclose to the audience that AI was used in brainstorming or preparing the speech, but do disclose if AI actually did write some of the speech or if you are quoting AI-generated words.

### Don't Share Excessively Personal Content

Be careful sharing personal and sensitive data with AI. There is a distinction between sharing your content with club members or coworkers, and sharing with a much wider, potentially worldwide audience in perpetuity. It may be worthwhile to initially keep the most sensitive personal information out of the speech and add it in only after AI has contributed its speechwriting role.

### Don't Forget to Check the Accuracy of AI Results

Speakers must research each and every fact in their speeches to ensure that they are true. AI tools often tend to be biased toward agreeing with users’ proposals and sometimes generate false answers. AI also responds to prompts with extraordinary speed, which can eliminate the key step of thinking through the content in your speech, misleading you into mistakenly thinking all content is accurate.

Before incorporating any type of information you receive from AI into your speech, you should always check the key facts with [trusted sources](#), such as academic journals and ideologically balanced news sources, which have professional editors and fact-checkers who ensure accuracy and authenticity. To ensure the AI tool is using reliable sources, prompt it to include a list of articles and links where the facts came

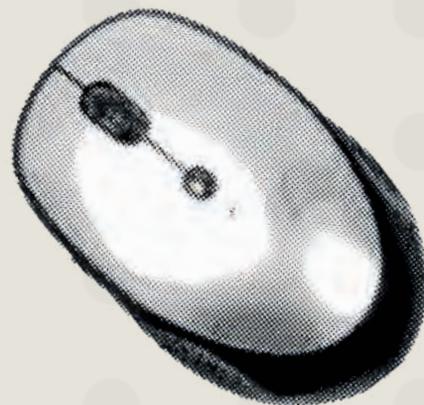
from. Then confirm with that source that the points are correct.

Windingland says that ChatGPT, when prompted to pull quotes from survey responses for a story she was writing, delivered seemingly impressive results: “I couldn’t believe how good they were. But when I checked it, none of the quotes were what people had written. It ended up being a big waste of time because I had started writing the story based on the quotes. If you want something verbatim, you have to say, ‘I want it verbatim; do not change [or make up] the quote.’”

AI is a tool to support you, and using it as a crutch only hurts you. You join Toastmasters to learn a skill that is translatable and usable.

McGhee says he thinks of AI as a friend who makes suggestions, not all of which are good or will be used. “You may not like any of the ideas it generates,” he says. “You may say, ‘Hey, I need five more ideas,’ or you may decide you have a better idea. AI is a copilot; you’re the pilot in command.”

*David Tobenkin is a freelance writer based in the greater Washington, D.C., area.*



# 5 QUESTIONS WITH... Jefferson Fisher

Interpersonal communication advice from an expert.



This month we're talking to Jefferson Fisher—a communication specialist and trial attorney, who focuses on transforming conversations. He is the author of [The Next Conversation: Argue Less, Talk More](#) and the accompanying workbook; a communication coach; and the host of [The Jefferson Fisher Podcast](#).

Here are some of his tips on how to have more effective conversations.

## What are some nonverbal cues people can use to show they are really interested?

First, make eye contact. No one wants to be in a conversation with someone whose eyes are scanning the room. Second, show a genuine reaction. Don't try to force a reaction if it isn't genuine, because people can tell the difference. For example, no one has to teach you what a fake laugh sounds like.

## What are some tips for talking to someone you completely disagree with?

Go higher. We usually only focus on whether we agree with their point. Instead, go higher and focus on their perspective. Think macro, not micro. You can try using phrases like "I see things differently" or "I agree that's a perspective."

## It's tempting to want to "win" an argument, but how can we reframe that concept, in ourselves or others?

When I can feel the pull of wanting to win an argument, I often tell myself: *There's something here for me if I just listen.* It helps get me into a mindset of having something to learn versus something to prove. If I hold onto the idea that there's something for me in every little conversation, no matter how brief—something to add to my life, my perspective, my knowledge—better outcomes tend to happen.

## What is a communication habit people can make to lessen conflict in a relationship?

If you're having a disagreement, use the phrase, "I could have done that better" or "I could have said that better." For one, it's always true. We all can do better. Second, it's a great way to show you want to remedy the situation without escalating an argument over who caused the rift.

## What are some good tips for making small talk or striking up a conversation?

Ask, "Do you have anything you're excited about coming up?" When you ask someone something like, "How was your weekend?" they usually feel what they did wasn't exciting enough to share, which is why you may get back a vague "it was good" answer. But asking what they're excited about or have coming up makes it easier to think of something and less intimidating to share freely.

More about  
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### Hometown:

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### Hobbies:

Finding new music, eating  
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reading historical fiction,  
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