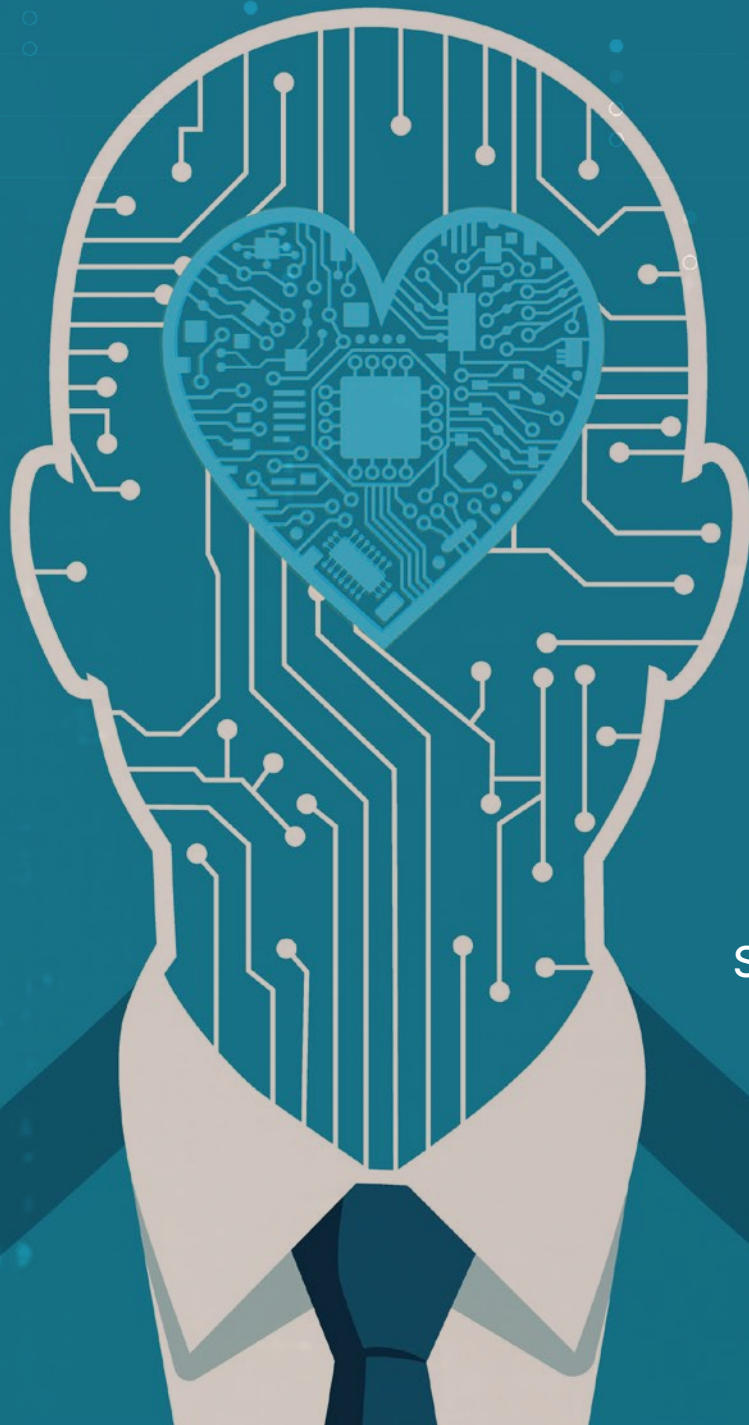


THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | JULY 2026

# TOASTMASTER®

## LEADERSHIP in the Age of AI



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How To Be  
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**TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL MISSION:**

We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



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Leadership has a way of challenging our assumptions.

We often step into leadership roles believing we have the answers—and that other people will naturally align with our approach. Then comes the moment, often the first of many, when we realize it's not that simple. Getting a team to agree with you and follow your lead can be one of the most challenging aspects of leadership.

Over time, I've learned that those moments of resistance are where the greatest growth happens—if we're willing to learn from them.

I remember vividly clashing with someone on my team. Our leadership styles were very different. Every discussion felt like hard

work. Every decision seemed more complicated than needed. I found it frustrating and, at times, disheartening.

Eventually, I reached out to a mentor. "What do I do? I've tried everything, and nothing is working."

His response surprised me.

"Approach this with empathy."

Empathy? That wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted a solution—something decisive that would fix the problem. But he continued:

"The movie going on in his head makes perfect sense to him."

That single sentence shifted my perspective.

It helped me see that the other person was just as committed, capable, and passionate as I was—but simply viewed the situation from a different perspective. In that moment,

I realized that forcing alignment wasn't leadership. Creating space for understanding was.

So I shifted my approach. Instead of trying to convince, I became curious.

"Help me understand your perspective. What does this look like from your side?"

It didn't always come naturally—but it changed how I led. That shift laid the foundation for something powerful: trust.

It didn't mean my team member and I always agreed. But it allowed us to find

common ground—and often, better solutions than either of us had considered alone.

This is where authentic, people-centered leadership takes shape. It's not about having all the answers. It's about creating an environment

where others feel heard, respected, and comfortable contributing.

It also requires vulnerability—not oversharing, but a willingness to acknowledge that we don't always have it right. Vulnerability isn't about sharing everything—it's about sharing enough to create connection and trust.

Leadership is not about certainty. It's about curiosity, empathy, and the courage to listen.

So here's my challenge to you: Where can you create more space—for understanding, curiosity, and trust—in your leadership today?

Because sometimes, the most powerful thing a leader can do is make space.

Moments of resistance are where the greatest growth happens.

**Aletta Rochat, DTM**  
International President



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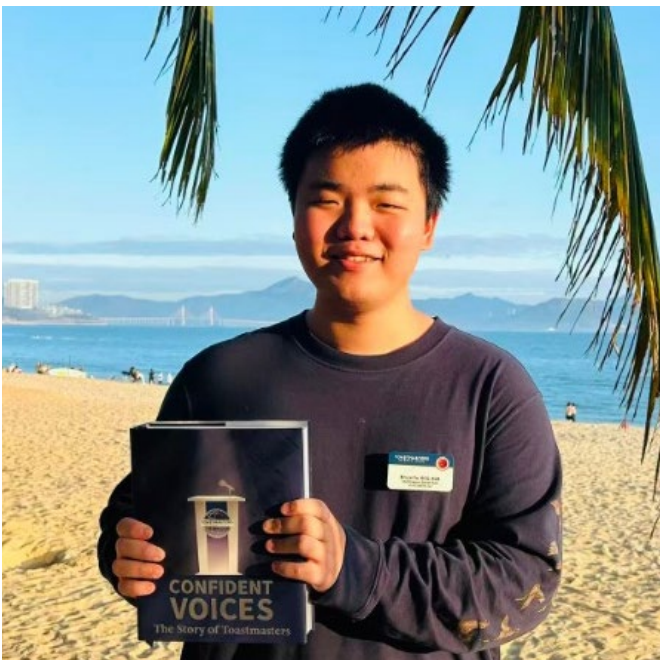


## Snapshot



Members of **WMC Toastmasters** in Manama, Bahrain, spent several months organizing a beach cleanup and blood donation drive to give back to their community.

## Traveling Toastmaster



**Runfeng Bruce Yu** of Shenzhen, Guangdong, China, reads *Confident Voices: The Story of Toastmasters* while visiting Park Lane Harbour in Huizhou, China.



**Mandarr Agshikar, DTM**, and his wife **Minakkshi M Agshikar**, both from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, pose with their magazines next to a wax figure at the Madame Tussauds Bangkok museum in Thailand.

## LEADERSHIP

# 5 Strategies to Lead a Team Through Conflict

By Michelle Tillis Lederman

Team members look to leaders and decision-makers for creative solutions and answers to sensitive issues. Here are five ways to lead a team through a conflict:

- 1 **Let it go.** Ask yourself if the disagreement is worth the trouble of getting involved. If it's a trivial problem, ignore it. But if it's a larger problem, simply ignoring it won't work and could exacerbate a conflict.
- 2 **Listen and rectify.** If the people at odds believe the issue is important, but you or other team members don't see it as critical to the team's goals, then it may fall on you to simply be a good listener. Allowing both parties to vent and express their opinions often eases sore feelings.
- 3 **Make a decision.** If you are in a position that allows you to make a decision, then decide what needs to happen to end the dispute, and execute. If a quick decision is required, this could be the easiest solution. Be aware, however, that ruling in favor of one side over another without weighing input could lead to resentment.
- 4 **Reach a compromise.** To come to an agreement that both parties can accept may mean that people on both sides of a conflict will have to sacrifice one or more of their terms. Everyone may not be thrilled with the outcome, but they will need to understand and agree to the terms of the compromise.
- 5 **Work together.** Collaborate and brainstorm a solution that benefits both parties. If you have the time to work through it together, you will ensure that all are pleased with the solution and everyone leaves the table satisfied.

*Adapted from an August 2018 Toastmaster magazine article*



## PERSONAL GROWTH

# International Day of Friendship

Few things in life are as important as friendship. Friends are a foundation of our emotional life; they are a source of connection, conversation, humor, fun, encouragement, and support. Celebrate these bonds on July 30, the [International Day of Friendship!](#)

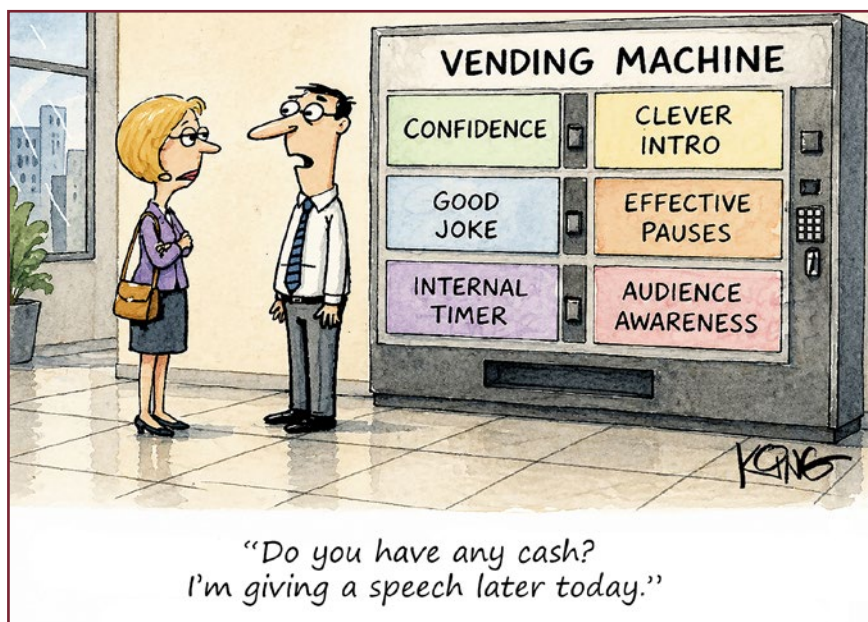
The spirit of the day rings particularly true for Toastmasters, who form friendships with fellow members around the world. Many meet up with friends, or make new ones, at the annual [International Convention](#) or other Toastmasters events around the globe.

And of course, many members develop friendships in their club. In a 2025 Toastmasters International survey, about 64% of nearly 225 respondents said they have several members in their club they can turn to when feeling lonely. About 60% said interacting with people in their club makes them “feel part of a larger community.”

The United Nations established the International Day of Friendship in 2011, celebrating solidarity among people—and countries—and promoting equality, tolerance, and respect for human rights.



## CARTOON



## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“The challenge of leadership is to be strong, but not rude; be kind, but not weak; be bold, but not bully; be thoughtful, but not lazy; be humble, but not timid; be proud, but not arrogant; have humor, but without folly.”

—Jim Rohn,  
entrepreneur and  
motivational speaker

# The Invisible Spotlight

Authenticity from within helped me connect with the audience.

By Nitin Narula



The first time I gave a speech in Toastmasters, I thought I had done everything right. I practiced in front of a mirror, imagined the applause, and felt prepared. I delivered every line as planned; the speech went smoothly and the audience smiled.

Yet when I watched the recording later, something puzzled me. The speech looked fine, but it did not feel alive. The words were right, but the connection was missing.

That moment changed how I thought about speaking. I realized that communication is not only about what happens onstage, but what happens within us while we are there—what we feel, what we think, the energy we bring. This is what I call the invisible spotlight: the quiet beam that shapes every word, gesture, and glance we share with an audience.

Before joining Toastmasters, speaking in front of others felt like stepping into a void. That lack of confidence followed me into conversations and other situations. I still remember my first Toastmasters speech evaluation, when someone kindly pointed out how I seemed afraid to take up space. But meeting after meeting, something began to shift.

Through the education projects, I learned to listen to myself and what I was feeling when giving a speech. That awareness helped me slow down and speak from a calmer, truer place. The longer you stay in Toastmasters, the clearer it becomes that speaking is an act of self-discovery.

Before speaking, notice your thoughts. Are you worried about making a mistake—or excited to share an idea? The difference is powerful. One thought contracts your energy, while the other expands it.

Our posture and breath often speak before we do. Taking a deep breath before speaking is not just calming; it is grounding. Physical awareness helps you move with purpose and express yourself naturally instead of performing from memory.

Emotional awareness deepens this connection. Instead of suppressing emotions, acknowledge them. Awareness transforms anxiety into focus, and fear into energy.

The longer you stay in Toastmasters, the clearer it becomes that speaking is an act of self-discovery.

This awareness is not limited to the stage—it shows up in work meetings too. I used to rush through updates, reading from my notes almost robotically, stumbling over words that sounded rehearsed but never quite right. I was so focused on getting it perfect that I forgot to actually engage with the people in the room.

Now, I pause, breathe, and let the moment guide me. I don't script every

word; I let the conversation unfold naturally. My points land more clearly, I connect with colleagues, actively participate in discussions, and feel lighter while speaking. That shift has transformed how I show up every day.

The invisible spotlight shines in your tone during a meeting, in your patience during a conversation, and in your confidence when you introduce yourself to someone new.

You can train yourself through small, mindful practices. Pause for a full breath between ideas. Record yourself and watch the recording once with sound and once without. The former helps you assess what your audience actually hears, including your clarity, tone, pacing, and meaning; the latter shifts your focus to what they see, like your body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and stage presence. Another practice: Before you speak, ask yourself, *What energy do I want to bring into this room?* These habits align your intention with your presence.

The next time you speak, take a moment to feel your breath, your heartbeat, and your thoughts. Then step forward—not to perform, but to connect. Because the most powerful speeches are not delivered from the stage. They are delivered from within.

**Nitin Narula** is Immediate Past President of the Danville Toastmasters Club 1785, an online club. He is a technology professional and an author who writes about the quiet spaces between culture, identity, and leadership. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).

# A WAVE of Success

How our club doubled its membership by using advice from a beloved fish.

By Suneet Singh



ART members at the 2026 District 60 Conference in Toronto, (from left), Michelle Allick, Suneet Singh, Dave Bachan, Matthew Milward

Sometimes life's best lessons come from unexpected places. My Toastmasters club benefited from the wisdom in *Finding Nemo*, the animated movie about a determined fish. We kept swimming until we knew who we were and where we wanted to go.

When I joined the online club ART Advanced Royal Toastmasters, I loved its relaxed vibe. However, when I became Club President in July 2025, we consistently had only eight or nine members at meetings, sometimes even fewer. We needed to increase membership but wanted to retain the small-club vibe we cherished.

The Club Executive Committee decided to first define and differentiate our club. *Finding Nemo* proved to be a guide. Yes, this is a movie about fish. But it's also about finding your own identity—something Nemo's dad, Marlin, does as he searches the waters of Australia looking for his son.

Since there are approximately 50 other online advanced Toastmasters clubs, we needed to search for our own identity. What made our club different? What was our unique selling point? How could we make being an online club work to our advantage?

First, we laid out our strengths. 1) We have seasoned members who are outstanding speakers and evaluators. 2) We have a collegial, vibrant atmosphere that encourages mistakes and allows people to be their true selves. 3) We offer Tag Team Table Topics, where we have both a speaker and an evaluator for each question.

Our initial thought was to lean on our members' sense of humor and promote

ART as a "fun" club. However, our members are also serious about gaining new skills and challenging each other to grow. Our goal is to have everyone who attends a meeting feel they have learned at least one new thing. So we decided to brand our identity as an advanced club that creates a fun learning environment.

What does this mean in practice?

- We regularly invite prominent speakers, such as District speech champions, International Speech finalists, professional speakers, and others to speak or evaluate. This allows us to hear speeches and perspectives at the highest levels of excellence. We also promote these events to the community to bring in guests and raise awareness.
- Besides following our regular agenda, we also host debates, panel discussions, workshops (on topics such as vocal variety and effective evaluations), and other creative events. We want to try fresh ideas that challenge our members.
- We also hear from people working in fields outside of speaking—for example, someone who worked for 20 years as a prison warden.
- We leverage social media. We regularly post about club activities, events, and member spotlights. We have two WhatsApp groups—one for members, which also serves to build camaraderie and friendship in an online club, and the other for people who have visited but haven't joined. It's a wonderful way for us

to engage and share club updates and ideas, and for them to share suggestions and feedback.

- We use the Distinguished Club Program (DCP) requirements to assess membership and strengthen the club. We survey members every six months to understand their needs and what they are interested in. And we continually check in as a group to evaluate: Are we shaping our identity the way we want to? How can we create the best membership experience? How do we push ourselves as speakers and evaluators?

Within a year, we doubled our membership, going from nine to 18. Have we finally found our identity? Not really! We continue to experiment, refine, and evolve.

I consider *Finding Nemo* the best strategy movie ever made, and it provided me with inspiration in this journey to regrowth. In the simple but sage words of Dory, the loveable fish who assists Marlin in their epic search, "Just keep swimming."

To learn more or attend a meeting, email [arttoastmasters@gmail.com](mailto:arttoastmasters@gmail.com).

**Suneet Singh** lives in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, and has been a member of Toastmasters for over five years. He served as an Area Director in 2025–2026, and received the District 60 2024–2025 Toastmaster of the Year Award.

# Packing Tips for Convention

Use these tricks to ensure a smooth journey ahead.

By Mackenzie Eldred

If you're headed to the Toastmasters International Convention next month in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, it's time to start preparing that packing list. If you're unsure about what to bring, you're not alone. Luckily, there are lots of tips and tricks (and fun stories) from others who have attended previously.

Consider what happened to 2024-2026 International Director Jenilee Taylor, DTM, of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. Before attending the 2019 International Convention in Denver, Colorado, Taylor gave a [TEDx Talk](#) where she explained "emotional glitter" as the element that draws people together and creates connection. In honor of her speech, she packed small bags of glitter in her checked luggage to share with leaders at the convention.

"This has become my personal rule: Everything I carry has a story, and every story is meant to be shared."

—WIKUM HETTIARACHCHI, DTM

On her flight, Taylor was questioned about the contents of her luggage. She explained that the "small bags of white, somewhat suspicious-looking substance

in my suitcase were, in fact, filled with craft glitter." When she landed, she found a police note saying her luggage had been inspected.

"That experience did leave me with a few very practical travel lessons, especially when it comes to convention travel," Taylor says. "If there's anything in your bag that might look questionable at first glance, make it easy to recognize. It makes the whole experience smoother for everyone, including you."

Read ahead for more packing advice from Toastmasters.

## Clothing

**Professional Attire** – Most attendees wear a form of business casual: Button-down shirts, blazers, slacks, skirts, dresses, and dress shoes all work well and can be dressed up or down. "Networking is one of the key advantages of a Toastmasters International Convention," says Denison Balfour, DTM, of Nassau, Bahamas. "So, professional business attire is best, with a light jacket."

**Casual Attire** – If you plan to go sightseeing or participate in one of the social activities, such as the Smedley Fund Morning Yoga, don't forget comfortable clothing or athleisure wear and athletic shoes. "It helps to bring pieces that are comfortable, easy to mix and match, and that you can wear more than once without overthinking it," Taylor says.

**Comfortable Shoes** – Convention involves a lot of walking and

standing, and Taylor points out that shoes are particularly important. "If they are not comfortable at home, they will not magically become comfortable at a convention."

International President Aletta Rochat, DTM, of Cape Town, South Africa, and Second Vice President Jean Gamester, DTM, of Cardiff, Wales, also recommend packing multiple pairs of black shoes to help prevent blisters and give your feet some relief.

**Cultural Attire** – Opening Ceremonies and the Global Celebration Reception are perfect occasions to represent your country. If you're from a country with a rich cultural heritage, pack





representative clothing. Snap a photo next to your country's flag as well.

"I bring unique cultural or traditional attire for the Opening Ceremonies, proudly showcasing Toastmasters' rich diversity," says Wikum Hettiarachchi, DTM, of Harrington Park, New South Wales, Australia.

**Formal Attire** – If you are attending the President's Celebration, you'll want to pack something slightly fancier. Most attendees dress in cocktail party attire, and some even don tuxedos and ballgowns.

"Pack your favorite evening wear, including shoes, jewelry, accessories, and makeup, to shine and dazzle, but comfortable enough to dance the night away," says Balfour, who has been to several conventions.

**One More Tip** – Convention centers and hotels are notoriously cold, so pack some nice jackets and/or sweaters you can put on and take off as needed.

## Medical Items

Anything can happen when you are traveling. Rochat and First Vice President Gauri Seshadri, DTM, of Bangaluru, Karnataka, India, always bring a small medical kit with them when they travel.

This kit could include pain medicine, throat lozenges, allergy medicine, stomach remedies, and Band-Aids or moleskin for blisters.

Keep in mind that you will be around people from all over the world, many of whom traveled long distances, so you will be exposed to new germs. To build your immune system, consider packing

vitamins, electrolyte packs, sanitizer, and wipes. Probiotics are also a great way

to help digestion acclimate to local water and food, says 2024-2026 International Director Viola Lee, DTM, of Shenzhen, Guangdong, China.

"For those on prescription medication: Pack sufficient for the entire trip, with at least one to two days extra, depending on the travel distance," says Balfour. "A weekly medication organizer works wonders!"

## Gifts

One of the best parts of the convention is interacting with people from around the world. To celebrate this global connection, many attendees bring small items from their home country to share with others, such as postcards, pins, snacks, candies, or spices.

"I love to bake, so I often take a few dozen mini rum cakes, labeled with a Bahamian flag, to share with Toastmasters I connect with," Balfour says.

Sharing small gifts is also a great way to jumpstart conversations. For example, Tom Hobbs, DTM, of Denver, Colorado, always brings a small yellow figurine with him. "He fits in a pocket, always smiles, and seems to meet people before I do," Hobbs says, who has given out hundreds of the figurine to others.

Other attendees often bring small souvenirs from their home country, including stuffed animals or pins. Gamester says a District leader gave her a statue of Ganesh to put on her desk for good luck.

"This has become my personal rule: Everything I carry has a story, and every story is meant to be shared," says Hettiarachchi, who brings special gifts and small memorabilia.

## Toastmasters Skills and Connections

Part of the fun of attending convention is using your Toastmasters skills to help you navigate your journey. That might mean using listening skills to connect with others quickly, leaning on your Table Topics® experiences to strike up conversations, or increasing your understanding of other cultures.

It also means that if something goes wrong during your trip, there are plenty of people who can help you. When Hobbs was traveling to the 2014 International Convention in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, his luggage didn't arrive until the end of the week. "Local Toastmasters immediately stepped in," he says. "They helped me talk with the hotel manager, who loaned me a formal jacket and tie."

"That experience reinforced that Toastmasters is truly a global support network", Hobbs says.

Regardless of your travel experience or what you pack, the memories you make and the people you'll meet will be worth it.

"During our travels, we often met fellow Toastmasters in airports and transit hubs," Hettiarachchi says. "What began as chance encounters quickly turned into shared journeys exchanging information, sharing taxis and meals, and telling stories along the way. Whenever Toastmasters gather, conversations spark, perspectives expand, and the ideas that emerge are always better and brighter."

**Mackenzie Eldred** is assistant editor for the *Toastmaster magazine*.

# Taking the LEAD

Learn how to successfully navigate stepping into a leadership role.

By Greg Glasgow



Stepping into a leadership role after years of working toward it can be one of the biggest milestones in your professional—or Toastmasters—career. But it can also be one of the most intimidating, thanks to a mix of impostor syndrome, dealing with new responsibilities, and adapting to new working relationships with coworkers who are now subordinates.

Luckily, there are ways to navigate this change successfully.

## Beware the Impostor

For many people who get promoted into leadership roles, impostor syndrome—the fear that you don’t really know what you’re doing and will soon be found out—shows up early and can take time to overcome, says Maureen Zappala, DTM, a Toastmasters Accredited Speaker and expert on this dynamic.

“People with impostor syndrome feel like, ‘I got the success, the position, the assignment, the title, because of luck or timing,’” she says. “Those things can come into play, but the bigger picture is that we did a lot to ensure our success. We just don’t always believe it.”

Zappala explains that impostor syndrome doesn’t come from a lack of confidence; it’s a self-imposed limit that can keep people from reaching their potential or attempting to move to higher levels in an organization.

“People who get impostor syndrome are successful, they’re competent,

they’re regarded as being at the top of their game,” she says. “Doubt can set in when your role becomes something new, something unfamiliar, maybe less structured or choreographed. It’s normal and natural to feel uncertain in that situation.”

The best way to overcome this syndrome? Just keep swimming, Zappala says.

“Do the best with what you’ve got, and trust the process,” she says. “Ask for help

around you. Trust your background, your character qualities. Your technical skills might need to be developed in some areas, but your character qualities are part of you. Are you curious? Are you flexible? Are you responsible? Are you dependable? Those things will help carry you over that transition.”

Other workplace experts say that asking questions—particularly well-thought-out, open-ended questions—can help you overcome impostor syndrome. It’s likely that no matter what level you are at, your coworkers will understand that you don’t know everything when you start in a new position and will be willing to help. Asking questions also shows that you want to learn, and can help you form friendships with coworkers and team members.

## New Working Relationships

Another challenge that new leaders face, especially if they are moving into leadership at the same company where they have worked for a long time, is the transition from coworker to supervisor or manager.

“For people who are first-time leaders, there is often this difficult dynamic where they’ve just stepped up from the level they were at, and maybe they’ve stepped up to lead people they have been friends with,” says Aneeta Rattan, professor of organizational behavior at London Business School in the United Kingdom. “New leaders can fall into the

trap of trying to continue that friendship style with their former peers, who might now be a level below them, or might now be their direct reports. But that doesn't work anymore, because your former peers now see you differently."

Leaders who rise through the ranks often have an advantage, Rattan says—knowing how people at the level below them think and feel gives them valuable insight into the inner workings of the company and what type of management style is likely to produce the best results. But it's imperative, she says, for new leaders to quickly set boundaries and model their preferred way of interacting with their new subordinates.

"When your peer gets promoted, you're waiting for them to give you a signal of what the new relationship will be," she says. "There doesn't need to be a big conversation. The leader has to sit down with themselves and think through how they build belonging and how they're going to navigate these relationships and adjust them. Then they can signal that through their behavior."

This might mean changing your communication style from friendly and informal to more professional, declining invitations to happy hours and other social events, and setting boundaries on what topics are and are not acceptable to talk about at the office.

"Toastmasters is the lab of leadership. It's where you learn the skills that you can use out in the real world."

—MAUREEN ZAPPALA, DTM, AS

## Multilevel Thinking

As much as new leaders need to think about their relationships with the people they oversee, it's equally important that they curate relationships with others at their level and above as they establish themselves in their new role, Rattan says.

"I tell people to make sure that any chance they have to interact with individuals who are more senior than they are, don't just have that interaction, but try to have a memorable conversation with them," she says. "Say you're at a meeting, but it hasn't started yet, and you find yourself sitting next to a senior leader—don't just talk about the weather. Seize the opportunity and be prepared with a meaningful question. Meet them with a more meaningful engagement than what they might expect someone more junior to talk about."

Rattan also advises new leaders to quickly find colleagues they connect with and ask those people for recommendations of others they might get along with.

"Sometimes we can be very reticent to ask for that type of advice, because we don't want to feel like we're asking to use their network, but you're not asking them for anything instrumental," she says. "You're asking people, 'Given what I'm working on now, in this role, is there anyone you think I should connect with?' They might say, 'You know what, four years ago, so-and-so was in your role, and they have had a star trajectory since then. I think you will really get along.'"

## The Toastmasters Leadership Lab

Whether you are currently in the running for a leadership position or see such a role on the far horizon, getting involved in leadership in your Toastmasters club can be a great way to learn and practice the skills you'll need to move to a higher level.

"Toastmasters is the lab of leadership," says Zappala, who has been a club and District officer. "It's where you learn the skills that you can use out in the real world. It's where you learn to get familiar with being uncomfortable."

Toastmasters also helps you build relationships and communication skills that can help when the stress of a new leadership position starts to get the best of you, says Rattan, who has seen many of her students join Toastmasters to advance their careers.

"One of the things I understand from my students about Toastmasters is that it can really build your confidence and clarity, and it also connects you to a community," Rattan says. "If you're in an early leadership position and all that wonderful work you did learning how to present effectively starts to get interrupted by nerves and anxiety and stress, you have a community you can reach out to and say, 'I could really use a coffee catch-up with a few people.' That's an invaluable asset."

Stepping into a leadership role comes with many challenges, but being aware in advance of the problems that can arise—and knowing how you will address them—goes a long way in making the transition smoother and easier to handle.

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

# The **UNSUNG HERO** of Toastmasters

Discover the value the Immediate Past President can provide a club.

By António Mendes, DTM



Since joining Toastmasters in 2014, I've worn almost every club officer hat. I've had the honor (and occasional headache) of being Club President four times—once at the Almada Communication Leaders club and three times at Setúbal Toastmasters Club, which I also helped charter. Add to that two stints as Area Director, one as Division Director, and earning the Distinguished Toastmaster designation.

But here's the twist: The role that taught me the most about clubs, culture, and continuity wasn't the title of Club President. It was the humbler, quieter, often overlooked role of Immediate Past President (IPP).

The IPP is like the airbag in a car—you don't notice it until things go wrong, and then you realize it's the difference between a smooth transition and a leadership crash.

The IPP's job can be summed up in three major missions:



## Keeping the ship steady during leadership change.

When a new committee begins their term, they're usually bursting with enthusiasm and ideas, some of which are brilliant, and others which simply may not be feasible. The IPP steps in as a bridge between past and future. They're the person whispering, "We tried that last year, and no, it did not end well," or "Yes, that's a tradition. Please don't cancel it." It's like being the club's living FAQ page.



## Guardian of culture and values.

Toastmasters isn't just about speeches; it's about living the core values: integrity, respect, service, and excellence.

New leaders may be energetic, but sometimes they don't fully grasp the club's identity and nuances. That's where the IPP comes in, reminding everyone that a club is more than just an agenda—it's a community. Think of the IPP as the keeper of family recipes. Without them, the club risks forgetting who it is and starts serving fast food instead of Grandma's cooking.



## Mentor-in-chief.

The IPP doesn't boss around the new President. They provide calm, pressure-free guidance. It's leadership without the stress of holding the gavel. Done right, it builds confidence, prevents ego conflict, and creates smoother teamwork.

My own journey has been full of examples of why the IPP matters. In 2023, the Setúbal Toastmasters Club was struggling with membership retention, but we noticed Ana Natario had the potential to be a great leader. I worked alongside her, like a shadow, and encouraged her to become the 2023–2024 President. Our membership improved. When I became the Club President the following term, she

showed me just how powerful the IPP role can be. With an engaged IPP, the atmosphere was lighter, friendships grew, there were fewer mistakes, and the club's culture flourished. Today the club has 35 members.

I'm convinced that the IPP role is not just a polite add-on to the leadership chart. It's a cornerstone of a thriving club. Without this role, transitions risk becoming chaotic, values get diluted, and the club's unique spirit can fade. With it, members inherit stability, culture, and continuity—a foundation that allows creativity and growth to blossom.

Toastmasters is a place to grow as communicators and leaders. But we don't grow in a vacuum—we grow in clubs with history, traditions, and people who care. The IPP is the silent guardian of all that, ensuring that when we say, "Where Leaders Are Made," we're not just talking about building up leaders, but also about keeping their legacy alive.

So, the next time you see an IPP quietly sitting in the corner of the Club Executive Committee meeting, don't be fooled. They may not hold the gavel anymore, but they just might be the reason the club survives to tell its next great story. After all, every superhero needs a cape, and in Toastmasters, sometimes that cape looks a lot like the title of Immediate Past President.

**António Mendes, DTM**, is a member and Past President of Setúbal Toastmasters Club in Setúbal, Portugal.

# Make the First 30 Seconds Count

First impressions matter ...  
be sure you're making a positive one.

By Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS



Author Lauren Parsons

At a recent civic event, I watched a young leader step up to speak after several senior officials—including the city's mayor—had already addressed the crowd. She gripped the lectern, and then her legs began to shake as she raced through her prepared speech at a pace that made parts almost impossible to follow. Every word, every movement, radiated tension—visible, palpable, and rather distracting.

And yet, the audience felt something else too: compassion, and quiet admiration for the courage it took to stand up there at all.

She's not alone. I've watched speakers rush their opening so fast their words blur together. I've seen eyes fixed on the back wall, never quite meeting the people in the room. I've heard apology after apology before a single idea has been shared.

In every one of these moments, the same thing is happening: The speaker's presence—or the absence of it—is communicating something before a single meaningful word is spoken.

Leadership presence is not reserved for the stage. It is practiced in everyday moments—whether you're delivering

a speech at your Toastmasters club, presenting at work, or speaking up in a meeting. And the first 30 seconds matter, because they shape how people receive *everything* that follows. Will they lean in or tune out? Trust your words or hold back?

The good news? Presence is not a personality trait you either have or don't. It is a set of skills you can develop starting right now.

## Presence Begins With Preparation

The first 30 seconds do not begin when you open your mouth. They begin long before that.

It's not just about planning and rehearsing your content. It's also your physical presentation, the introduction you've set up for the person introducing you, and what you do in the moments just before you begin speaking.

## Personal Presentation

Whether you like it or not, how you dress matters. Your clothing, shoes, and accessories reflect the image you portray. There is no one right way to dress, but I recommend creating your own personal

rules to reflect the brand you want to be remembered for. For example, I always aim to look sharp and professionally dressed, wearing a blazer and closed-in shoes (most often in my signature blue and white brand colors).

## Prime Your Introduction

Whether you're being introduced at your Toastmasters club, presenting to a team at work, or speaking at a community event, the moments just before you stand up are shaped partly by someone else—and that matters more than most speakers realize.

Set your introducer up for success. Make sure they have the title of your speech or presentation and a sentence or two of relevant context to guide the audience, and they know how to correctly pronounce your name. Nothing undermines a warm introduction like the introducer stumbling over your name or turning to you mid-sentence for help. When they can introduce you with confidence, the audience arrives ready to listen before you've said a word.

Professional speakers know this well. I always travel with a printed copy of my introduction—even when it's been emailed in advance—because getting

that handoff right sets the scene before I walk onto any stage.

The same principle applies at your next club meeting or work presentation. A confident, clear introduction primes your audience and creates a seamless transition to your speech. It is a small detail with a big impact on those all-important first moments.

### Find Your Energy

People don't just hear your words. They feel your energy. Be sure to manage your mental state and physical presence before you begin. Just as athletes prepare before competing, develop a routine that sets you up physically, mentally, and emotionally. Perhaps this means doing some vocal warm-ups, loosening your jaw, slowing your breathing, relaxing your shoulders, and standing in a tall, expansive posture.

Just prior to my [TEDx Talk](#) at TEDxOneonta, I was waiting in the wings, feet firmly planted, arms raised in a V-for-victory pose, breathing deeply. Channeling the energy I wanted: centered, passionate, and relatable. Mentally, I was picturing myself walking out onto that red circle and delivering a successful speech. Emotionally, I was thinking about how grateful I felt to have this opportunity to be of service.

Choose the energy you want to bring. Is it warmth? Authority? Calm? Urgency? Your audience will sense that energy before they fully process your words.

The same is true for club speeches, work meetings, and sales calls. Before you step into the room, join a Zoom call, or begin a one-on-one conversation, pause and ask yourself: *What energy do I want to bring?*

### Nail Your Opening

Pausing before you begin speaking is one of the most powerful things you can do. Connect through confident body language and purposeful eye contact before you speak verbally.

I like to stand up, pause, smile, and make eye contact around the room for a moment before I begin. That pause gives you a chance to truly connect with the room before words kick in—to feel people's energy and let them feel yours. Internally, briefly remind yourself that you are confident in your content, focused on your purpose, and genuinely connected to your audience. If you begin by scrambling for exact words, worrying about how you look, or being solely focused on yourself, it is much harder to connect.



When I gave my [Accredited Speaker presentation](#) in Anaheim, California, in 2024, I also deliberately slowed down my opening remarks. In addition to giving me time to connect with the audience, this pause reminded me that as a New Zealander speaking in America, I needed to enunciate clearly and allow the audience time to adjust to my accent.

Be crystal clear on your ideal first line. But be prepared to change or add to it on the day if appropriate. Avoid going into "robot mode." I've seen speakers doggedly stick to their script rather

than acknowledging something that has just happened in the room. It creates a disconnect. When you're both well prepared *and* able to adapt in the moment, that's where the magic happens.

There is no single right or wrong way to open a presentation. But early on, you must help the audience understand why they should care.

This framework helps you shape a powerful opening:

True presence is not about being perfect. It's about being authentic in the moment.

Lauren Parsons receives her Accredited Speaker award from then-International President Radhi Spear in 2024.



- Why this topic?
- Why this topic for this audience?
- Why this topic for this audience, at this time?
- Why this topic for this audience, at this time, from this speaker?

It is your job to help your audience care about your topic, even if they know nothing about it beforehand. If your first few sentences answer those four questions, you will create a compelling reason for people to lean in and listen. It's not about you. It's about them.

## Be Authentic

One of the biggest traps speakers fall into is performing rather than being present. If you focus simply on looking polished, sounding clever, or projecting what you think looks like confidence, you are posturing rather than connecting.

True presence is not about being perfect. It's about being authentic in the moment. It requires letting go of the need to impress and instead adopting an attitude of service.

In my experience, that shift is everything. The more focused I am on myself, the more pressure I feel. The more

focused I am on serving the audience, the more grounded and effective I become.

So rather than asking, *How do I come across well?* ask, *How can I best serve these people right now?*

Start every speech with intention, authenticity, and service. Prepare well. Connect with your audience. Ground yourself to be calm and fully present. And open strongly by hooking your audience.

When you do that, those first 30 seconds become far more than a first impression. They become the foundation for trust, engagement, and influence.

And whether you are stepping onto a conference stage, leading a team meeting, introducing yourself at a networking event, or beginning an everyday conversation, that kind of leadership presence will always make a difference.

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**Lauren Parsons, DTM, AS**, is an award-winning wellbeing specialist, NZ 2023 Keynote Speaker of the Year and NZ Educator of the Year 2023/24, 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](https://laurenparsonswellbeing.com).

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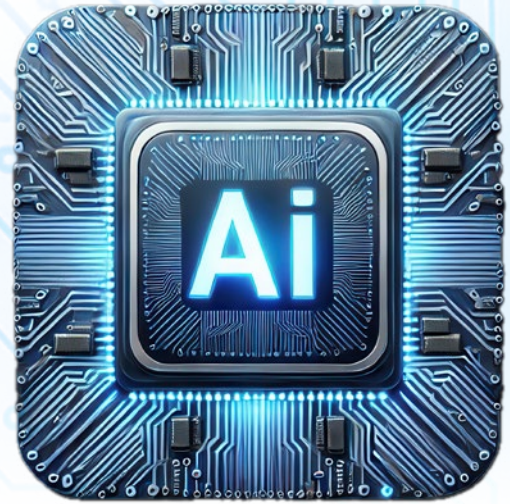
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# Leading in the Age of AI

Amid technology shifts, managers and executives must hone their interpersonal and coaching skills.

By Dave Zielinski



The artificial intelligence (AI) revolution is rewriting the playbook for what effective leadership looks like around the world. As more companies implement next-generation AI tools to create new efficiencies, reduce costs, or boost productivity, leaders increasingly find they're managing automated systems as often as they're overseeing human workers.

That momentous shift means leaders need to develop new types of technical acumen as well as become more proficient in human-centric skills. The age of AI, leadership experts say, demands an entirely new breed of leader, a perspective some organizations are overlooking.

"Too often companies are focused on building the technical skills to use AI tools but don't pay enough attention to the leadership side of the equation," says Kevin Tamanini, vice president of professional services and customer success for Development Dimensions International, a global leadership development firm headquartered in Pennsylvania. "AI transformation isn't just a technical shift, it's a people shift too."

## The Impact of AI

Artificial intelligence is one of the fastest-growing technologies in recent history. Research from global

management consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that 88% of organizations were using AI in at least one business function in 2025, and 62% were scaling or experimenting with AI agents, the newest form of "agentic" AI. In this type of system, autonomous agents can execute tasks and projects from start to finish—creating websites, for example—with minimal involvement from humans.

"In this new environment, human-centric skills aren't 'soft' extras—they become the core of the job."

—SARAH MARIS

Leaders from the front lines to the executive suite require new technical literacy in how AI tools work and best fit into redesigned workflows. Additionally, experts say, leaders also need to become fluent in skills like change-management and creating psychological safety for workers, to prevent their fear of being replaced by AI from impacting morale, productivity, or innovation.

As managers use AI tools to conduct tasks like creating drafts of documents, making employee schedules, collecting

data for performance evaluations, or reviewing vendor contracts, it frees up capacity for them to focus on other tasks. But as the time required for such transactional work diminishes, leaders must place a renewed emphasis on human-centric skills, like the ability to coach employees, handle conflicts and problems AI isn't equipped to address (such as aberrations with particular customers), and provide reassurance as AI changes the nature of employee jobs and career paths.

Senior leaders also need to learn how to build a framework of rules required to minimize the ethical, legal, and financial risks associated with AI, leadership experts say. That includes ensuring employees develop the necessary critical thinking skills, because they'll need to make sure the outputs created by AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini are accurate, bias-free, and not overly generic or simplified.

"In a new world where autonomous AI systems make real-time decisions, leaders need to ensure that the right humans are in the loop at the right time, and then need to foster a culture that does not tolerate AI slop," says Sarah Maris, senior manager of technical learning content for Udacity, a provider of e-learning solutions. The term "AI slop" refers to low-quality or inaccurate content produced by AI tools.

## In the Middle

The role of middle manager also is shifting from executor to “orchestrator” as AI becomes more prominent in the workplace, says Michael Yaziji, a professor of strategy and leadership at the International Institute for Management Development, in Lausanne, Switzerland, who specializes in AI.

“As AI handles more of the routine management tasks, managers will shift into becoming curators of AI-generated insights and the bridge between data-driven outputs and human judgment,” Yaziji says.

For example, marketing managers have historically spent much of their time manually gathering market intelligence on competitor pricing, product positioning, and related issues. With AI tools now at their disposal, their time has shifted from the gathering process to evaluating information that those tools automatically gather and synthesize overnight, Yaziji says.

“That requires a different kind of critical thinking,” he says. “It’s no longer ‘Can I find the answer?’ but rather it has become ‘Is this AI-generated

answer actually right, and does it fit our strategic context?”

Front-line managers are also seeing their responsibilities shift more toward “exception handling” and human connection, as AI either replaces employees or takes over aspects of their jobs, Yaziji says.

Senior leaders need to learn how to build a framework of rules required to minimize the ethical, legal, and financial risks associated with AI.

“They’ll increasingly be managing the ‘boundary cases’ that AI can’t resolve,” he notes. “That includes cases like the angry customer whose situation doesn’t fit the algorithm and the production line anomaly that requires judgment rather than mere pattern matching.”

## New Premium on Interpersonal Skills

Maris, of the e-learning company Udacity, says that what once were considered nice-to-have skills have become imperative for leadership success in the age of AI. The ability to be a strong communicator is pivotal.

“In this new environment, human-centric skills aren’t ‘soft’ extras—they become the core of the job,” she says. “Leaders must double down on creating authentic connection with people, because AI isn’t able to navigate things like political standoffs or rebuilding team morale after a tough financial quarter.”

Yaziji agrees that leaders need to adapt to a changing work landscape.

“Managers’ primary value in the past was their cognitive and operational acumen, but AI is rapidly commoditizing those technical skills,” he says. “They now need to provide what AI can’t, and that’s advanced people skills.”

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**Dave Zielinski** is a freelance writer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and a longtime contributor to the *Toastmaster magazine*.



## AI for Speakers

Plenty of AI tools are available to help improve public speaking skills. The technology has made significant inroads into the speaking industry, highlighted by new AI-powered software that assists with creating drafts or outlines of speeches; provides real-time speech translation and captioning for global audiences; generates slides or images for use as supporting visuals; and acts as a virtual coach by providing feedback on speech pacing, volume, reducing use of filler words, and more.

AI-driven speech training tools can simulate audience presence and interaction, allowing Toastmasters to practice things like responding to difficult audience questions during or after a presentation. While such tools can’t replace the value of coaching and feedback from experienced Toastmasters, they can serve as useful supplements to help speakers practice and refine essential communication skills at their convenience.

—Dave Zielinski

# Will AI Slow the Development of Tomorrow's Leaders?

Although the use of artificial intelligence can have many benefits, experts say one area where its impact may not be as positive is in how it influences the development of future leaders around the globe.

Research shows more organizations have begun to replace entry-level job roles with AI tools, using the technology to replace many of the tasks typically assigned to young workers like writing basic computer code, compiling reports, summarizing survey data, and more. Leadership experts say the trend could result in denying early-career workers opportunities that are critical to learning a business from the ground up and developing foundational leadership skills that they can refine over time.

A 2025 report from global consulting firm Korn Ferry found more than four in 10 companies plan to replace certain job roles with AI, with a focus on entry-level, operations, and back-office positions. Experts say that as AI takes over the work of entry-level staff, companies miss chances to begin cultivating managers who could otherwise build interpersonal agility by working with others, practicing navigating human complexity, and making decisions with limited or imperfect data.

Sarah Maris, senior manager of technical learning content for e-learning provider Udacity, says the traditional work of entry-level jobs is an essential training ground to learn the nuances of an industry and gain invaluable experience. "But if we offload that work to an algorithm, we have to ask ourselves: How are the next generation of leaders supposed to develop the judgment required to oversee systems and people?" Maris says.

What can organizations do to counter the trend? Maris says one step would be to redesign entry-level job roles to focus on judgment-first tasks that intentionally develop the expertise no AI tool can replicate. Other leadership experts say companies can do things like allow AI to take over some repetitive or low-complexity tasks within entry-level roles but not entire jobs, and invest in structured mentoring programs for emerging leaders.

—Dave Zielinski





# Resist Your REGRETS

How to stop apologizing for yourself in presentations and what to do instead.

By Joel Schwartzberg

Consider your immediate reaction to this line: “I’m sorry, but ...” Do you sense bad news is coming or that the speaker is about to under-deliver? That’s not a message speakers want to send, but many do it instinctively and needlessly.

Regretful phrases like “I apologize ...” and “Please excuse/forgive ...” may seem polite, but they usually backfire, making you sound less credible and confident. It’s your job to manage your regret, not your audience’s job to accommodate it.

“Regretful language in a speech can torpedo your credibility,” says Carmen Cusido, communications specialist and adjunct professor. “Instead of reinforcing your key message, you waste time asking for forgiveness.”

“Words communicate who you are and build audience trust in what you say,” says public speaking trainer and Toastmaster Minson Vo. “If those words make you sound less confident, people will see you that way.”

## The Language of Regret

Using phrases of regret may sound more like admissions of weakness. Some examples:

“I apologize in advance for using jargon.”

**Translation:** “I know this will confuse you, but I’m using it anyway.”

“Please excuse me if I mispronounce any names.”

**Translation:** “I didn’t care enough to learn them properly.”

“Forgive the tiny text on this slide.”

**Translation:** “I know this is hard to read but deal with it.”

“I apologize in advance for the curse words. That’s just how I speak.”

**Translation:** “I can’t control what I say.”

“Credibility is earned before people speak, but confirmed as soon as they open their mouths,” says Robert Begley, Toastmaster and founder of Speaking With Purpose. “A statement like ‘I didn’t have time to prepare’ immediately undermines that credibility and may invite the audience to look for more flaws.”

Monica Federico, a career and leadership coach in the United Kingdom, says using regretful language can diminish your confidence. “You’re reinforcing to yourself that you’re not doing a good enough job. Then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—you start believing your narrative of inadequacy, which seeps into everything else you do.”

At this point, some presenters push back: “But that’s how I talk. Shouldn’t I be authentic?”

Authenticity matters, but being authentic doesn’t require announcing flaws your audience may never notice.

Cusido, the communications specialist, draws a distinction between authenticity and insecurity. “Authenticity is a proactive choice to be honest and vulnerable in service of your message. Expressing regretful accountability is a reaction to your insecurity that can erode your authority,” she explains.

“Being authentic doesn’t mean oversharing,” says Federico. “Always consider if what you say is helping your audience understand your message or only helping you feel better about a flaw.”

## Spotting More Red Flags

When you rehearse or record yourself speaking, also listen for these more subtle, but still unnecessary, apologetic sentence-starters:

- “For what it’s worth ...” (If it’s worth saying, why downplay it?)
- “Needless to say ...” (If it’s needless, why go there?)
- “To be honest ...” (Were you not being honest before?)
- “As you know ...” (Why state the obvious?)

# Sorry

These phrases also chip away at your authority and credibility. “Regretful phrases at the start of a presentation squander the audience’s precious first-impression window,” Begley says. “Every word you say should serve your message.”

## What To Do Instead

The good news is that you can break your overreliance on regretful language with adequate preparation, replacement tactics, and strategic editing.

**Prepare thoroughly.** Be proactive, not reactive. Schedule plenty of time to check your material, finalize it, and practice it. Remember, the more you *prepare* now, the less you’ll *repair* later.

Cusido says adequate preparation may include a mindset shift. “When I first entered the workforce, I often apologized when presenting ideas because I assumed others knew more than I did. A supervisor coached me to match my speaking confidence to the confidence I demonstrated in my work. The apologies disappeared as my speaking confidence increased.”

**Replace sorry with silence.** When you’re tempted to fill space with a disclaimer, pause. Say it in your head if you must, then move on. It’s okay to

feel nervous (even experienced speakers still do). The key is not to call attention to that anxiety. Recognize that mistakes may happen no matter how much you prepare—not because you’re a poor presenter, but because you’re human.

“Practice in front of as many people as possible,” Vo, the public speaking trainer, recommends. “When you feel you’re about to apologize, be silent instead. Over time, that replacement will feel natural.”

**Cut what you’re not ready to convey.** Instead of apologizing for incomplete or unclear material, cut it. You’re better off holding back content than presenting it weakly or confusingly. If you can, add the missing points in a follow-up communication. If sharing unready content is unavoidable, make confident remarks to guide and support your audience as you proceed.

**Don’t sacrifice confidence for care.** Sharing apologies and regrets may feel like you’re caring for your audience and preparing them for what’s to come, but if they sense you lack confidence in your presentation, they will lose confidence in it as well.

Though regretful phrases may come from the best of intentions, they elicit more sympathy than support. If you avoid overthinking your impression, stay positive, and do the best job you can, there’s nothing to apologize for.

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**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](#).



# 5 QUESTIONS WITH... Dilip Abayasekara, DTM, AS

Professional leadership advice from an expert.



This month we are talking to Dilip Abayasekara, DTM, Toastmasters' 2005–2006 International President and an Accredited Speaker. A former college professor and administrator, he served as the Host District Chair of the 2025 International Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is a longtime inspirational speaker, coach, and mentor, as well as a pastor.

More about  
Dilip

### Hometown:

Lancaster, Pennsylvania

### Number of Years in Toastmasters:

28

### Profession:

Pastor,  
speaker, and trainer

### Hobbies:

Reading, writing, singing,  
and taking walks  
in the open air



### What is your best piece of leadership advice?

Leadership is not a position. It is an attitude of service and an opportunity to raise the performance of your organization and the individuals in it.

### What have you learned about yourself as a leader over the years?

I have gone through a process of self-discovery, including self-evaluation in human behavioral analysis. I've learned that my leadership strengths are as an influencer, persuader, and inspirer, and my weaknesses include tendencies toward missing details, wanting to be optimistic rather than logic-based, and making decisions without consulting others. Among the things I discovered, and am still discovering, is that I need to harness the power of collaboration, consulting, and listening to others.

### Why should members volunteer to serve as club and District officers?

Club and District leadership roles are the portals to learning leadership. Occasionally I hear members say they joined Toastmasters to learn to speak better, not to learn leadership. But my leadership experience has given me more opportunities to speak to diverse audiences; it has not only developed my leadership skills, but it has also improved my communication and public speaking skills. Beyond that, it gives me the satisfaction that I am contributing to the success of my club and District.

### When you coach speech contestants, what is your main goal?

To bring out the speaker's authentic voice and allow the speaker to connect with the audience with the special magic unique to each person. Of course, as a coach, I guide the speaker to have solid speech structure, one clear central idea, and a specific purpose with which they guide their listeners. However, the speech content is entirely the speaker's. I want their light to shine, not mine.

### What leadership principles are you able to apply to your work as a pastor?

I found that Toastmasters training is ideal for pastors. Much of what I learned about communication, speech construction and delivery, team building, mentoring, and leading by example were transferable skills for the ministry. I would say Toastmasters fosters the servant leadership model. That is the same type of leadership pastors are called on to exhibit in their work—self-giving, compassionate, and bringing out the best in people.



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