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We empower individuals to become more effective communicators and leaders.



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Growth Starts With Us

October 1 just passed. Dues came due. And in clubs across the world, many officers are now staring at rosters that might look thinner than they did in June.

Here's one possible reason. In the final weeks of the program year, some members join a second club, sometimes a third, to help push a club or their District to Distinguished status. It works ... for a night. The roster looks fuller; the numbers hit the mark.

But that's a rental member, not a full commitment. When those members don't renew in October, the club doesn't just lose a name off a list—it gains the added task of finding a replacement just to stay static, let alone grow. I understand why it happens. I just don't think it should be how a club or District becomes Distinguished.

So let's talk about what's real.

For most of my time in this organization, I kept two lives separate. There was my Toastmasters life, and there was my work life. Different rooms, different people, almost different versions of me. I didn't invite colleagues to my club. I didn't mention Table Topics in a work meeting about a data migration. I assumed the people around me either already knew what Toastmasters was, or wouldn't care.

I was wrong on both counts, and it cost me years of members I never tried to reach.

It's only in the last five years that I purposefully started mixing those worlds. And every time I did, something happened. Someone I worked with for a decade said, "Wait, you do that? I've always wanted to get better at this."

They didn't know. Not because they weren't interested—because I never opened the door.

You already have the confidence this program gave you. Use that confidence to encourage others.

That's the job now. Not waiting for October to fix itself. Not hoping the members who joined for June stick around out of habit. Going and finding the people who don't know we exist yet.

That might mean posting a TikTok video of your Ice Breaker, badly lit and real. It might mean creating a Meetup listing instead of a flier. Or it might mean finally telling the person at the next desk what you actually do on Tuesday nights.

You already have the confidence this program gave you. Use that confidence to encourage others. Every member you invite is a club beginning again.

Growth was never someone else's job. It was always ours. Let's get to it.

Stefano McGhee, DTM
International President



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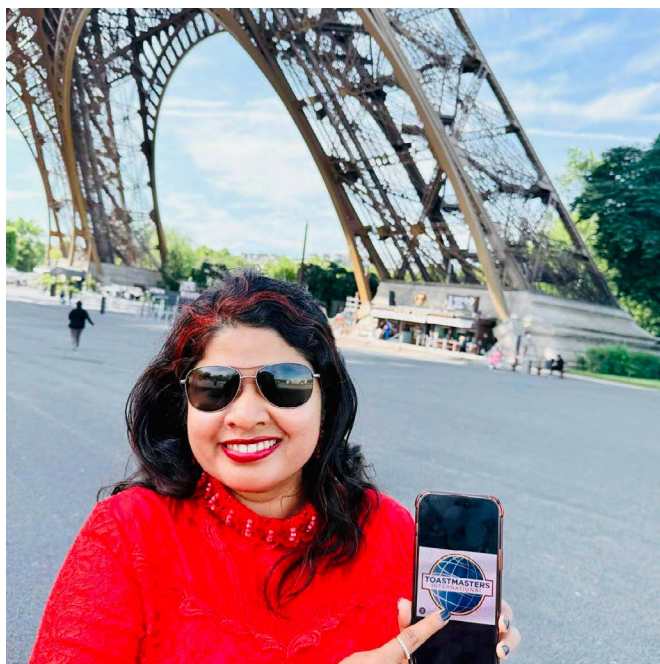
Insights, inspiration, and interesting tidbits.

Snapshot



Members and guests celebrate the 50th anniversary of the **Minutemen Toastmasters of Waltham** club in Massachusetts in April 2026. The club was chartered in March 1976.

Traveling Toastmaster



Midhila Grace Zacharia of Doha, Qatar, points to the Toastmasters International logo while visiting the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France.



Deepraj Nigam Unai of Nepal shows his Toastmasters spirit near Marpha, a village in the Mustang District (located in the Annapurna Conservation Area) in Nepal, in March 2026.

TOASTMASTERS NEWS

That's a Wrap!

The 2026 Toastmasters International Convention, held August 19-22 in Vancouver, Canada, attracted more than 1,629 members from 77 countries. Highlights included the Parade of Flags, the Global Celebration Reception, the Annual Business Meeting, six inspiring sessions, six Toastmasters workshops, a (very large) club meeting experience, and, of course, the World Championship of Public Speaking (see page 14 for more on this year's winner, Dirceu Da Silva).

The event concluded with the President's Inauguration followed by the President's Celebration with dinner and dancing.



TOASTMASTERS HISTORY

The Evolution of Speech Contests

The competitions have captivated members through the years.

The speech contest tradition started in 1931 as a high school competition sponsored by Toastmasters. After a few years, members wanted in on the action.

In 1937, the Inter-Club Speech Contest began. Competitors spoke at their club contest, then progressed to an Area contest, and then a District one. Winners there advanced to the International Contest, which was promoted as the high point of the International Convention.

The Inter-Club Speech Contest grew in popularity, and winners were awarded the Dunlap Cup (named in honor of William Dunlap, 1937–1938 International President, an advocate of the event). By the 1960s, the competition was known as the International Speech Contest. In 1976, the final round became known as the [World Championship of Public Speaking®](#). Over the years, winners have had widely diverse cultural backgrounds.

Today, more than 30,000 Toastmasters compete in a [variety of contests](#), including the Humorous, Evaluation, Tall Tales, Table Topics®, Online, and International Speech contests. Winners of the District-level International Speech Contest now proceed to the quarterfinal level. Top finishers advance to the semifinals, and those winners compete for the world champion title.



2019 World Champion of Public Speaking Aaron Beverly with Past International President Dilip Abayasekara

CARTOON



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Yes, I’m proud of the women in our organization, but I am even more proud of the diversity of our organization, the inclusivity of our organization, embracing everyone, every human being on the planet.”

—Lark Doley, DTM,
2018–2019
International President

CONNECTION

Without Sight

How I learned to develop presence as a blind speaker and leader.

By W.C. Blackmon, DTM



In March 2016, I was asked a question that initially caught me off-guard: “Why Toastmasters?”

When I joined the Early Bird Club, in Tallahassee, Florida, coworkers wondered what more Toastmasters could offer someone they already considered a strong speaker. Family and friends questioned what leadership lessons could still remain for me.

Their confidence in me was flattering, but incomplete. Beneath their questions lived three truths I knew deeply:

1. I did not want to be merely a good speaker. I wanted to be a great one.
2. I understood leadership as a lifelong discipline, not a finished achievement.
3. Within 15 minutes of attending my first Toastmasters club meeting, I knew I had found a place where both growth paths were possible.

As a totally blind speaker, communication has always been essential for me. Toastmasters, however, revealed something transformative: Presence is learned, practiced, and refined through collaboration. I learned that the full benefit of partnering with fellow Toastmasters begins with being completely open about my personal communication and leadership goals.

Having lost my eyesight at the age of 5, I was not familiar or comfortable with the body language that often develops naturally through visual learning. From my earliest club speeches, fellow members, including my first Toastmasters mentor, Vickie

Goodman, DTM, became my partners and guides. They helped me understand my posture and how my body moved while I spoke, identifying where gestures strengthened my message and where they distracted from it.

Fellow members even offered additional coaching, meeting with me outside of regular club meetings. They taught me how to anchor myself, how to use gestures that aligned with my words, and how purposeful movement could underscore transitions rather than pull attention away.

Despite being blind, I also developed tactics to connect with my audience beyond eye contact. For example, I learned how to establish physical markers in the speaking area to ground myself. From there, I practiced orienting my body toward different sections of the audience, turning deliberately at key moments, and holding my head and shoulders in ways that conveyed engagement and confidence.

Over time, eye contact stopped feeling abstract. Though I cannot see my audience, I learned how to connect with them fully, enabling listeners to feel acknowledged and included. I also received lots of good technical advice from members, including how to present myself more effectively online.

Through continued guidance from my peers, presence became something I embodied rather than something I worried about. My blindness was never allowed to become an excuse for delivering anything less than my best work. In Toastmasters, growth is expected, supported, and shared.

In addition, through mentoring members and chairing meetings, I learned to refine strengths that came naturally to me: listening deeply, being mindful, and understanding the needs and motivations of others. Toastmasters strengthened my ability to hear what was unspoken, sense the emotional tone of a group, and respond with empathy and clarity.

Leadership, I discovered, is less about being seen and more about being attuned.

I drew on all I had learned when I gave a speech to a Toastmasters Gavel Club in a Florida correctional facility. After I spoke, more than 30 men approached afterward to shake my hand, offer thanks, and share encouragement. It was a deeply meaningful experience.

Nearly a decade after I first became a member, I still smile when someone asks, “Why Toastmasters?”

Because I am still learning. Still refining. Still growing as a speaker, a leader, and a blind man committed to excellence.

After all, the best way to grow is beyond the limits we place on ourselves.

W.C. Blackmon, DTM, is a speaker, author, and music creator based in Tallahassee, Florida. A three-time Distinguished Toastmaster, he belongs to We Can Speak-Podemos Hablar Toastmasters Club, Transformation Toastmasters Club, and Talk of Tallahassee, all in Florida. Connect with him on LinkedIn or at wcbblackmon.com.

Making Moves in MOROCCO

How the country established and rapidly grew Toastmasters clubs.

By Stephanie Darling

In 2012, a group of motivated individuals moved to launch Toastmasters in Morocco. “Before 2000, the organization had limited visibility in North Africa, especially in Morocco,” says Hanane Bourehiyi, DTM, a charter member of the Rabat Toastmasters Club.

The group had been looking for ways to not only become better leaders and speakers but extend that opportunity to others. Their real impetus kicked in after an online meeting with 2020–2021, 2022 Toastmasters International President Richard E. Peck, DTM. He told them, “Leadership isn’t about being the center of attention, it’s about being the epicenter of action.” This became their clarion call.

Samir Chaqri, who lived in Morocco at the time, saw Toastmasters clubs as a bridge to learning critical skills.

“Our country’s education system doesn’t sufficiently emphasize communication skills, so many graduates and professionals struggle to express themselves effectively and build their personal brand to stand out professionally,” says Chaqri, who now lives in Canada.

So Bourehiyi, Chaqri, and others stepped into the “epicenter of action.” In 2017, they began promoting the club concept, leveraging social media, sponsoring open houses, holding community demo meetings, personally covering some meeting expenses, and even allowing guests to make speeches before joining a club to demonstrate Toastmasters’ unique value.

Yet club-building was an uphill climb. Chartering the Rabat Toastmasters Club, for example, took eight months. Even when clubs were chartered, they were undistricted and ineligible for official Toastmasters training, materials, or speech competitions. Club development was something of a do-it-yourself mission.

“One of our biggest challenges was that we started the creation of clubs without ever attending a Toastmasters meeting before,” notes Chaqri. “Our program knowledge was entirely self-acquired through Toastmasters’ online manuals and videos on YouTube.”

“Each club was working independently and were mostly focused on themselves,” Bourehiyi adds.

Still, the Casablanca Toastmasters Club chartered in 2017, followed by Rabat in 2018, ALC El Jadida Toastmasters in 2020, and Agadir Toastmasters Club in 2022. Bourehiyi realized joining District 107 would allow Moroccan clubs to “be fully part of the global Toastmasters family.”

The group of clubs reached out to then-District Director Cristina Juesas, DTM. The District responded warmly and formally proposed to the Toastmasters Board of Directors that Morocco be admitted to the District.

In 2021–2022, Morocco joined District 107 countries Spain, Portugal, Andorra, and Gibraltar.

Juesas said welcoming Morocco at first “felt like a leap of faith. Uniting cultures so distinct, countries separated by the sea and two continents,

communities that don’t share an easy path to one another—and yet, this is Toastmasters.”

Morocco’s actions likely spurred interest from nearby countries, adds Norberto Amaral, DTM, Immediate Past District Director, noting that Algeria and Tunisia joined District 107 after Morocco. With a surging interest in Toastmasters in the area, Amaral says the District goal is to reach 100 total clubs.

“It’s clear that the decision, bold as it was, was the right one,” Juesas says of admitting Morocco. “Its clubs have grown, Toastmasters presence has grown, and its members have stepped into active District leadership roles.”

Region 10, which includes District 107, is a massive expanse of diversity, representing seven Districts, 58 countries, and 43 languages. District 107 brings more than 2,000 members and 93 active clubs to the count, while Morocco is growing from five active clubs and 105 members.

“It’s a living example of what Toastmasters is truly about: the values of learning, fellowship, and the unshakeable belief that communication has the power to bring any two worlds closer together,” Juesas says.

Bourehiyi sees strength in the mix of cultures, many of which are so different from her own.

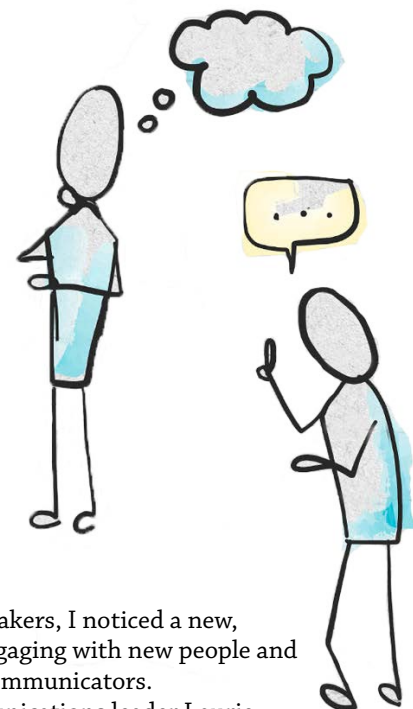
“We are different countries, different cultures, united by one mission,” she says.

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

Benefits of Diverse PERSPECTIVES

How surrounding yourself with different viewpoints strengthens your communication.

By Joel Schwartzberg



When I was 9 years old, my family moved from Long Island, New York, to Alief, Texas. Before the move, I imagined we'd be living the Texas lifestyle I'd seen on TV: riding horses, milking cows, and wearing cowboy hats while listening to country music.

To my surprise, there were no cows or horses in our neighborhood, the radio played plenty of popular songs like "Y.M.C.A.," and western wear was entirely optional.

What was new was the diversity of people around me. They reflected a much wider range of backgrounds than I had encountered before, including first-generation Indian and Vietnamese families, a thriving Mexican American community, many more Christians, and far fewer Jews. Everyone was kind and generous, even though our Long Island accents made us seem like transplants from another galaxy.

Growing up in Texas challenged my assumptions and broadened my perspective in ways that might never have happened had I stayed in my Long Island bubble. (It also neutralized my accent, which was a gift.)

1

You become a better listener.

Connections to new people become valuable when you listen to learn. That means being curious, listening without distractions, asking clarifying questions instead of making assumptions, and understanding the speaker's point of view before responding with your own.

"Listening is not simply waiting for your turn to talk. It is an act of respect," says Jackie Stavros, a management professor, consultant, and co-author of *Conversations Worth Having*. "When we tune in with genuine curiosity, we create the conditions for the other person to feel seen and heard, which changes the quality of the entire conversation."

Will Baker, director of the NYU Global Debate Fund, agrees that better listening leads to deeper understanding and richer conversations. "People are more open to your perspective when they feel heard themselves," he says.

When I started coaching speakers, I noticed a new, specific benefit of diversity: Engaging with new people and perspectives makes us better communicators.

Nonprofit marketing communications leader Laurie Beacham also sees diversity as a communication advantage. "Exposing ourselves to diverse groups of people not only makes us better neighbors, advocates, and people, but also better communicators," she says. "The more we listen to and engage with the world around us, the richer our own worldview becomes, and the more effective we are at influencing that world through communication."

Diversity goes beyond the obvious, visible categories. In communication, it takes many forms, including public speaking experience; life experience; cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious perspectives; gender and age differences; geographic and socioeconomic differences; and educational and professional backgrounds.

Here are five ways exposure to these types of diversity—and more—benefit communicators.

2

You check assumptions and reduce bias.

"Experiencing diversity is about more than hearing different voices," says Angela Kariotis, director of transformative learning at Brookdale Community College and a writer and performer who explores identity, culture, and communication. "It's about becoming the kind of person who can be changed by them."

That may make us think twice about communication shortcuts we sometimes rely on, like making broad cultural assumptions and using idioms not everyone understands.

"Communication succeeds when we first notice and consider our assumptions, our emotions, and our audience," says Stavros. "Diversity strengthens that awareness so we can apply it before we speak."

Working with diverse groups also encourages you to see people as individuals rather than demographic categories, and consider your own perspective.

"Diversity doesn't require us to abandon our beliefs," Kariotis says. "It asks us to examine how we came to hold them."

3

You gain new perspectives.

Exposure to unfamiliar experiences introduces you to new ideas and ways of seeing the world.

“Diversity expands what we consider legitimate knowledge,” Kariotis says. “From oral tradition to personal narratives, diversity reminds us that wisdom is found not just in the words of those we consider wise, but in neighborhoods and communities we’ve never visited or learned from.”

Diversity in groups can improve decision-making by introducing a wider range of viewpoints and interpretations. Baker has seen this dynamic play out in competitive debate.

“When women and other underrepresented groups entered competitive debate in larger numbers, they introduced perspectives on poverty, disability, inequality, and feminism that challenged longstanding assumptions,” he said. “Those ideas enriched the discourse and started conversations.”

Stavros recommends drawing out fresh ideas through open-ended, curiosity-driven prompts that “invite stories, reflections, possibilities, and deeper meaning.” Good questions avoid yes-or-no answers and include inquiries like “What do you think?” and “How do you see it?”

“In diverse groups, a good question can build trust, surface wisdom that would otherwise never be heard, and move us from assuming we understand to actually understanding,” she says.

4

You communicate more clearly.

Using insider language, jargon, or acronyms can lead to confusion. On LinkedIn, I frequently see the acronyms CTA, CTR, CTF, CTT, CTI, KPI, ROI, SQL, CRM, and my favorite, TOFU (“top of the funnel,” if you must know), but I don’t always know what they mean.

Exposure to people outside your usual circles helps you spot these pitfalls before they confuse your audience. It can also introduce you to clearer ways to express your ideas.

5

You demonstrate greater empathy.

Empathy is a cornerstone of meaningful connections, and we convey it more effectively when we better understand the people we’re communicating with.

Research by [psychologist Adam Galinsky](#) and his colleagues shows that imagining another person’s point of view can improve your ability to interpret their intentions accurately and reduce biased assumptions.

The more you engage with people whose backgrounds, priorities, and experiences differ from your own, the better equipped you are to understand what matters to them and why.

How to Build More Diverse Connections

Opening yourself up to different people and perspectives isn’t hard, but it does require intention. You can build meaningful connections in Toastmasters clubs, where members often reflect a wide range of cultures, ages, professions, and levels of experience.

“When I moved from Pakistan to Missouri in 2019, I struggled with speaking in front of groups and understanding the local dialect,” says Waqas Ur Rehman, a public speaking coach for tech leaders. “But when I joined the Ozark Orators Club, the members were not only welcoming but genuinely interested in my background.

“I still love being part of a local Toastmasters club,” he adds. “Our cultural differences make our club stronger—they expand our knowledge, sharpen our communication skills, and deepen our appreciation for new perspectives.”

Attending District events, holding officer positions, and competing in speech contests can introduce you to Toastmasters from other clubs and communities, multiplying the benefits of diversity.

Just as I learned when I moved from New York to Texas, diversity delivers far more than new experiences. It teaches us to listen more carefully, question our assumptions more often, and communicate more effectively with a wider range of people. Those experiences won’t always happen by chance. You need to seek them out and make the most of them.

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](#).



Allies in Africa

Pioneering leaders team up to tout Toastmasters and Rotary.

By Paul Sterman



Aletta Rochat of South Africa, 2025-2026 Toastmasters International President

When Aletta Rochat, DTM, became Toastmasters' International President in 2025, she was the first person from Africa to ever hold that role. And when Olayinka Hakeem Babalola became Rotary International's President in 2026, he was just the second African to head up that organization since its founding in 1905.



Olayinka Hakeem Babalola of Nigeria, Rotary International's 2026-2027 president

The two history-making leaders are mining their cultural connection to highlight the bond between Toastmasters and Rotary and how each can benefit the other, not only in Africa but throughout the world. The two organizations formed a [strategic alliance](#) in 2019.

"Both organizations are built around transforming their members," notes Babalola. "Developing leaders while improving communities and changing lives."

Babalola lives in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. He began his one-year presidential term on July 1, 2026.

Rochat, a resident of Cape Town, South Africa, finished her term in August 2026.

At the invitation of Rochat, President Babalola spoke at a [collaborative Toastmasters program](#) on May 25, 2026, an annual celebration of African unity.

Praising the talent and leadership that exist in Africa, he expounded on how Toastmasters and Rotary are helping to improve people's lives.

The online event, called "Africa Leads the Way!," also featured African business leaders and officials from the South African Chamber of Commerce in the United Kingdom, where many people from Africa live and work.

In turn, Babalola has invited Rochat to speak and provide a Toastmasters perspective at the popular [All Africa Zone Institute](#) in Kampala, Uganda, to be held November 26-28. The event is the largest gathering of Rotary members on the continent.

"So we are really hoping that we can help each other in a very tangible way," says Rochat, who hopes there will be other opportunities for her and Babalola to collaborate in Africa—and for other Toastmasters and Rotary leaders to team up around the world.

Both organizations have a proven track record of helping people across the globe improve their personal and professional lives. Rotary has more than 1.2 million members around the world. Toastmasters can benefit from connecting with Rotarians and learning from their model of humanitarian service, says Rochat, noting that Toastmasters can use their public speaking and persuasive skills to impact their own communities.

Rotarians, who are dedicated to such efforts as fighting disease and providing clean water to poor countries, can learn from the leadership and communication skills practiced in Toastmasters. The

relationship is a mutually beneficial one, stress Rochat and Babalola.

"Together, our members gain both the ability to lead and the ability to communicate their vision clearly and effectively," says the Rotary President. "Toastmasters helps people find their voice, Rotary helps people use that voice to create lasting impact across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves."

"Together, we can develop leaders who not only speak well but connect well and serve well."

Early Rotary Experience

Rochat will always have a soft spot for Rotary. When she was 17, she participated in a Rotary International Youth Exchange program, moving from her home of South Africa to live with host families in North Bay, Ontario, Canada, for a year and go to school there. The experience was life-changing, she says, helping her build confidence and independence.

"I had the opportunity to share what it was like to be a South African with all these people," she recalls. "I mean, I remember volunteering to [talk to] any Rotary family in North Bay. I said, 'If you would like to have dinner with me, I'd love to come over and have dinner.' And in that way, I got to meet all these people and get a glimpse of what their lives were like."

"So it was incredibly enriching. It was an amazing experience. And that was all through Rotary."

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

The Power of Club Support

Honest feedback, flexibility, and encouragement helped me succeed on the big stage.

By Kristin Stinavage



When I walked onto the ballroom stage at the 2025 DONA International Conference, ready to present a 90-minute workshop to hundreds of doula birth professionals, I carried something unexpected with me: a serving tray.

Just before stepping on to the stage, I learned that I didn't have a lectern, and this tray was to be a stand-in as a place to hold my notes. But what I did have: months of preparation, honest feedback, consistent practice, and a Toastmasters club that showed up for me in every way that mattered.

My club, Toast of the Town Toastmasters in Seattle, Washington, was instrumental in making that presentation a success. Not just because they offered encouragement or told me I'd do great—which they did—but because they gave me exactly what every speaker needs: flexibility, honest feedback, and a community committed to growth.

When I started developing my DONA talk on culturally informed postpartum nutrition, I knew I needed more than solo practice in front of a mirror. I needed real people, real feedback, and real opportunities to refine my message.

My club instantly agreed to let me practice sections of my workshop as my club speech. When I needed to work on specific skills, members gave me detailed, actionable evaluations. When I recorded an early version of my talk (that I couldn't even bear to watch myself), fellow Toastmasters offered thoughtful

critiques that helped me see what I couldn't see on my own.

The evaluations I received were specific and honest. Members told me exactly where I rushed through content, when I lost eye contact, and how my notes were controlling me instead of supporting me. They pointed out the moment in my speech when the room's energy shifted, and helped me understand why. That level of detail transformed my preparation.

The support and feedback I received from fellow members were essential to my being able to give the presentation. Preparing for a 90-minute workshop with interactive activities and scenario-based learning required a different kind of practice than a standard club speech. My club adapted. They understood that sometimes growth means doing things that aren't traditional. That willingness to be flexible while maintaining high standards made my preparation possible.

Club members didn't just attend meetings—they invested in my development. They stayed after sessions to discuss my approach. They celebrated progress and challenged me to do better.

When I practiced in front of coworkers or family, or ran through sections on Zoom, I knew what to focus on—because my club had already shown me where the gaps were.

I used to think I was a naturally good speaker because I'm comfortable with impromptu conversation. Toastmasters taught me I was wrong. I'm actually better at structured speaking—

something I learned only after I understood how to truly use feedback.

On the day of my DONA presentation, I didn't get anxious when I had to improvise with a serving tray instead of a lectern; I didn't get rattled after walking through the projector light while managing slides; I was able to adjust my pacing based on the room's energy.

When a conference attendee came up to me afterward and said I helped them finally understand some difficult concepts and gave them a framework they could actually use, I felt the significance of that accomplishment. But I also knew I hadn't done it alone.

Toastmasters didn't teach me to be perfect. It taught me to prepare well, to seek honest feedback, and to lean on people with a growth mindset who are willing to help.

My club gave me flexibility, honest evaluations, and a community of people who genuinely cared about helping me succeed.

The support from Toast of the Town members made me realize that Toastmasters isn't just about individual achievement—it's a community that makes growth possible.

Kristin Stinavage lives in Seattle, Washington. She is a postpartum doula and nutrition expert, as well as a professionally trained chef with a degree from the Culinary Institute of America. Learn more at kristinavage.com.

Meet the 2026 **World Championship** *of Public Speaking Winners*

Get to know your top three finishers and the support systems behind them.

Attendees at the Toastmasters 2026 International Convention in Vancouver, Canada, savored opportunities as wide open as the mountains that formed a scenic backdrop to the event. And the three winners of the World Championship of Public Speaking® delivered speeches as expansive as the peaks themselves, stretching from decision-making advice, to hurtful words and family ties, to grace under pressure amid a disastrous fire.

The event is the final stage of the International Speech Contest, which opens with competitions in Toastmasters clubs around the world. Winners advance through the Area, Division, District, quarterfinal, and semifinal contests.

Read ahead to learn about the top three finishers from this year's convention.





Dirceu “Didi” da Silva

By Laura Mishkind

Dirceu “Didi” da Silva’s championship speech, “Best Decision Ever!” ended on a cliffhanger. Did his basketball fall through the net or bounce off the rim? Even after taking the title of World Champion of Public Speaking, he isn’t sharing the results of his championship game from years ago.

His reasoning for keeping the secret? “This really stuck with people just because of the curiosity. It’s not a deeply emotional story, but curiosity made it so that people would remember it.” Plus, “some of the magic will go away if I answer that question.”

On the final stage, da Silva of Rotterdam, Netherlands, walked the audience through a few critical seconds on the basketball court and tied the story into a lesson about decision-making. From deciding whether or not to take the shot to hesitating on a study-abroad opportunity, the 2026 speaking champ highlighted why it is so important to take hold of our lives and make a decision before it is made for you.

“Decision-making is a very relatable topic,” da Silva says. “We’re making decisions all day long. It’s a huge part of life. And sometimes we worry too much. *I hope I don’t make the wrong decision.* And when you’re stuck in that loop, in that mindset, sometimes people don’t make a decision at all.” Which leaves the issue entirely beyond your control.

Training and Speaking

He brings this lesson to his work as a corporate trainer as well—often in workshops for teenage students. Da Silva focuses his curriculum on communication and other soft skills and enjoys the opportunity to make an impact. He’s been working in the training space since he was 19 years old.

But according to him, public speaking and training are two very different things. “They have the same elements,” da Silva explains. However, when he got started as a trainer, he says, “It was just based on, ‘You know a lot about this stuff, so go train other people.’ That was definitely not the right way to train. So I started focusing on the skills I needed to not just transfer

knowledge, but also make people want to use that knowledge.” He joined Toastmasters because he needed stronger public speaking skills, not because he was nervous onstage.

“Sometimes when I speak, I have a lot on my mind, and I go from here to there. It’s very unstructured. I joined Toastmasters to bring more structure in the way that I communicate, and I’ve loved it ever since.”

While he was improving his skills, da Silva also admits that he’s very competitive, so as soon as he learned about speech contests, he wanted in. During his first year as a Toastmaster in Sprekershaven Toastmasters Rotterdam, he signed up for the Dutch-language contest (he couldn’t compete in the club contest since he hadn’t completed enough speeches yet).

A year later, in 2015, he advanced to earn third place at the District contest level. And in a full-circle moment (and a great decision), da Silva says that 2015 speech was the first draft of the speech that he ultimately took to the World Championship stage. Of course, it has seen many iterations over the years and been refined and modified to make it an original speech he could share with the world.

A Network of Support

Da Silva was inspired to use the “Best Decision Ever!” speech by [2025 World Champion](#) and good friend Sabyasachi “Saby” Sengupta. The two officially met at the 2015 District competition in Lisbon, Portugal. They both competed and then went on a road trip to support that year’s first-place finisher.

In the car they talked about their mutual desire to become the World Champion of Public Speaking, and every year they continued to check in with one another to see if they were both competing. “We were always supportive, but also keeping each other sharp,” da Silva shares. “I knew if Saby was also competing that I had to bring my A game.”

When Sengupta took the title in 2025, da Silva admits that he thought his friend would be too busy to help him. But Sengupta reached out to see if da Silva was planning to compete, and offered up his help, assuring him he was never too busy for a friend.



That support became vital to da Silva's success. Talking to someone who had been through the entire speech contest process helped him maneuver the mental hurdles that came after advancing to each level. "The mental support is maybe even more valuable than just feedback on speeches," da Silva explains.

Another fun tie-in for the friends is this year's win means two years of back-to-back winners from the same region, District, and even small country. "I'm really proud I could contribute to that result," da Silva says.

However, it also created some nerves. Da Silva thought that statistically, there was no way this could happen, which increased the pressure. But Sengupta helped him block out what he perceived as expectations from others and reframe it to see that everyone was excited and supportive of their Netherlands representative.

Beyond his World Champion buddy, two other coaches supported da Silva every step of the way: John Zimmer and Presiyan Vasilev.

Da Silva and Zimmer met at a District speech contest, where Zimmer took first place, and da Silva second. After that, the two stayed in touch. Last year, Zimmer, a 2013 and 2018 semifinalist, coached Sengupta, and this year, he offered his help to da Silva, providing creative suggestions that made a big impact.

Vasilev, the 2013 World Champion of Public Speaking, coached da Silva prior to 2020, when da Silva took a break from competing. The two later reconnected, and Vasilev provided guidance with sculpting the speeches. Da Silva says the 2013 champion is a wordsmith, and the two different types of coaching styles complemented each other well and helped him succeed.

His wife and four children also served as a great support system and inspiration for his speech topics. "If I look back at all the speeches that I've done, not just for Toastmasters, but also outside of it, most of it is just my personal life. And a lot of them involve either my wife or my kids."

Stories of the Everyday

When he first started competing, da Silva initially felt discouraged after noticing that the winning speeches

were often about extraordinary events, and he hadn't climbed Mount Everest or jumped out of a plane or survived a tragedy. It wasn't until he heard future coach Vasilev's winning speech about changing a tire that he felt inspired.

"I started challenging myself, thinking *You don't have to have this extraordinary experience in your life to be able to tell a speech and inspire people. You just need ordinary events that everybody can relate to*," he elaborates. "That's the secret: Turn everyday things and ordinary things into extraordinary stories."

Now that da Silva's speech has had the ultimate impact and won him the World Championship of Public Speaking title, he is actually a little disappointed he can't keep competing in Toastmasters speech contests. For years he has used the competitions to level up his speaking and storytelling skills. But now he'll shift his focus. He says, "I think it's up to me now to focus on helping others, whether it's coaching or inspiring."

His first step will be trying to accept many of the invitations to visit clubs and connect with Toastmasters around the world. Then he wants to explore if he can make a business out of speaking beyond his trainings.

"I've been asked as a keynote speaker on many different occasions, but it was never my core business, and now I want to explore those aspects," da Silva shares. "I can see myself actually never getting tired of standing on a stage. I cannot imagine getting tired of that. I'm really looking forward to the next phase and whatever it may bring."

Laura Mishkind is associate editor of the Toastmaster magazine.





Gurmeet Singh Gurcharan Singh

By Laura Amann

Despite the words that followed him for much of his life, in taking home the second-place trophy, Gurmeet Singh Gurcharan Singh proved he was good for something—namely public speaking.

His speech title, “Good for Nothing,” came from the words he first heard from a teacher, after he received a disappointingly low test score. Onstage, Singh demonstrated how his teacher had looked at him and slowly spat out the words she would continue to tell him over the years, “You are ... good ... for ... nothing.”

Years later, his girlfriend told him the same thing, and one day he found himself saying those scornful words to his grandfather, the gentle man who raised him. Seeing how his grandfather didn’t let those angry words affect him, much less define him, changed Singh’s view.

He realized that one phrase can “shape us, hurt us, and ultimately teach us something about ourselves.” In fact, the words meant to hurt him actually led to something more meaningful. The school detentions he received for his poor grades were also where he met his best and lifelong friend, Sam. The girlfriend who didn’t appreciate him opened space in his life for him to meet his wife, Angelina Ha.

Delivering such a personal and vulnerable speech was his way of expressing his deep regret in never being able to apologize to his late grandfather, who died in 2009, while also showcasing the impact he made on his life.

His grandfather had taken on the role as father figure after Singh’s own father died when he was only 5. Having immigrated to Malaysia from India as a child, his grandfather had grown up poor, but he worked hard to provide for his family, saving money when he could, even if that meant compromising his own needs.

Singh credits him for “teaching me about life,” from a young age into adulthood, disciplining him, comforting him, and celebrating with him.

“My hope is that others will realize that we always have people in our corner who will root for our success,” he explains. “We are never really good for nothing, because we have always been good for someone.”

Singh, who lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is a member of Elite Toastmasters Club. He joined Toastmasters in 2010 at the encouragement of his brother, who thought it would be a way for him to overcome his shyness. Despite his initial nerves—he couldn’t finish his first Table Topics® speech—he

quickly embraced speech contests as a way to challenge himself to deliver better speeches.

He also jumped into a variety of club leadership roles, and steered his struggling club toward an increase in membership when he was Club President in 2013. But it is the speaking aspect of Toastmasters that has his heart.

Singh credits Toastmasters with helping him overcome his fear of public speaking and giving him the confidence to transition from a chef to a corporate trainer. Toastmasters also led him to discover his love for storytelling. When he first began giving speeches, he focused on becoming a better speaker, “but I soon realized that people don’t remember speeches, they remember the stories that make them feel something.” Once he uncovered that truth, storytelling became his passion.

Sam and Angelina were not just subjects in this speech—both were instrumental in helping Singh prepare for the contest, listening to his speech numerous times and offering their support. On the day of the contest, his wife and son were in Vancouver to cheer him on, while Sam watched from Australia, where he currently lives.

Since he began competing, Singh’s goal has been the same: delivering a better speech than the last. For people considering competing, he advises, “Do not go into the competition hyper focused on winning it; instead, deliver a better speech than your last one, while being proud of sharing a message that you feel strongly for.”

Asked what he will do next, Singh simply replies, “aim to deliver a better speech tomorrow.”

Laura Amann is managing editor of the *Toastmaster magazine*.





Aaron Samson

By Paul Sterman

On January 7, 2025, Aaron Samson found himself trapped in a terrifying situation: holding on tightly to his father-in-law—who had Parkinson’s disease—as a wildfire raged around them in the Southern California mountains. One of the most devastating wildfires in California history, the Pacific Palisades inferno killed 12 people and destroyed nearly 7,000 structures.

What happened next changed the veteran Toastmaster’s life and became the impetus for a captivating speech that won him third place in the 2026 World Championship of Public Speaking.

In his speech “The Chain,” Samson spotlighted those who stood tall in the crisis, focusing on the unsung actions of people who helped save others—people and pets—even at risk to themselves. Sharing his personal experience, says the Berkeley, California, resident, was “a way for me to honor the heroes of the story.”

Samson, who joined in 2014, belongs to the Puc(k)sters Toastmasters Club in San Francisco. He has excelled in the International Speech Contest, having advanced to the semifinals three times and the final round twice.

A father of three, including two teenagers, he has worked in technology, youth safety, and consumer brands for companies including Meta, TikTok, and Mattel. He is now a keynote speaker who helps parents, educators, school leaders, and teens understand how social media and AI compete for young people’s attention.

“Toastmasters has made me a much more effective communicator throughout my career,” he notes. “Whether I was presenting to executives, pitching an idea, leading a meeting, or speaking to a large audience, I used many of the same skills I developed through Toastmasters: storytelling, structure, audience awareness, and the ability to think on my feet.”

On the January morning chronicled in his speech, Samson was in Southern California helping to care for his father-in-law, Dr. Ronald Carlish. As the day progressed, towering flames spread up the mountains in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, situated above beach cities like Malibu and Santa Monica. The two men evacuated Carlish’s home—which later burned down—and soon found themselves in a potential life-or-death setting.

During his speech, Samson strode forcefully around the stage, recreating the drama and intensity of the situation. His voice, too, conveyed urgency. He recalled shepherding his father-in-law—who was pushing a walker but showing grit—on the smoke-filled hillside and flagging down a stranger named Jeff, who gave the two men a ride even with fire flanking his car.

Samson’s videos of the dramatic fire went viral and he drew widespread media attention, interviewed by outlets such as the *New York Times* and *People* magazine, as well as by CNN anchor Anderson Cooper.

He says his Toastmasters training served him well in such moments.

“Toastmasters is constantly preparing you to speak extemporaneously, especially with Table Topics,” Samson explains, adding that he also benefited from doing the Level 3 Pathways project Prepare for an Interview.

Sadly, three months after the fire, his father-in-law, his Parkinson’s disease worsening, passed away at 83. “I was very close to him,” Samson says.

Looking to the future, he is eager to expand his speaking career, using his platform to help parents, educators, and teens. And he wants to spread his enthusiasm for speaking, and speech contests, to fellow members.

“I’m passionate about speaking and storytelling, and I hope to share that passion and encourage more Toastmasters to compete.”

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





Championship Memories

Finalists reflect on their most memorable moments in the contest.

By Toastmaster magazine staff

Presenting on the World Championship of Public Speaking® stage is, of course, an unforgettable experience. But as anyone who has competed at that level will attest, the lasting memories encompass so much more than the contest itself.

We reached out to some International Speech Contest finalists from the past five years to find out what they remember most from the experience. Their responses are touching, humorous, and thoughtful. And perhaps not what you would expect.

After the top three [winners] were announced and I was not one of them, I stood up to hug my wife, and then my mentor. When I turned around, I had 25 people standing behind me. I thought they had made a mistake and wanted to speak with one of the top three. I soon realized, to my surprise, that they all wanted to talk to me. Hearing each one of them share how my speech impacted them brought tears to my eyes. It was an incredible moment.

Taylor Candella

2025 Finalist ♦ 2024 Semifinalist

Having my wife in the audience, listening to both my speeches about our family, and her giving me feedback while preparing for my finals speech.

Boon Kiat Ang, DTM

2025 3rd Place Winner

It was when Jim Key, DTM [2003 World Champion], handed each of the finalists a personal letter reminding us of how proud we should be of ourselves.

Marc Williams, DTM

2024 Finalist ♦ 2023 Finalist ♦ 2014 Finalist

Without question, the most memorable part of the experience was standing on the World Championship stage in front of nearly 2,000 people and feeling completely supported. As speakers, we often imagine large audiences as intimidating. What I experienced was the exact opposite. From the moment I stepped onto the stage, I felt surrounded by encouragement. Every laugh, every applause, every moment of engagement felt like the audience was willing me to succeed.

[We] represented countries, cultures, and backgrounds from around the world, yet we were united by a shared belief in growth, communication, and the power of a message. Looking back, what I remember most is not the verdict, not the placement, not the title. I remember standing on one of the world's biggest stages and feeling at home.

Derek Lott, DTM

2025 Finalist

"I Savored every bite of it."

SPEECH CONTESTS

In my semifinals speech, “The Pudding Principle,” I shared my experience of being in the hospital and not being allowed to eat for days in case I needed surgery. It was torture, so I was ecstatic when the doctor informed me I could [finally] eat. I only got a single cup of chocolate pudding, but because I hadn’t eaten in so long, that pudding was the greatest thing I had ever tasted. I savored every bite of it.

Winning the semifinal was an incredible experience; I felt like a celebrity. I couldn’t walk without someone shaking my hand or taking a picture or congratulating me. When I finally made it outside, it was the most beautiful summer day. I sat down at a little table ... took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and just basked in the incredible feeling I was experiencing, a huge smile on my face. After a couple of minutes, I opened my eyes and there was a young woman standing over me with wide eyes, and she said, “That was a chocolate pudding moment, wasn’t it?” Favorite moment for sure.

Stefano Cossalter, DTM

2024 Finalist ♦ 2020 Semifinalist

There was a quiet moment when I knew I had 1,700 people in the palm of my hand. That’s a rush.

Fursey Gotuaco, DTM

2024 Finalist ♦ 2022 Finalist ♦ 2020 Semifinalist

Standing onstage and being able to posthumously thank my mother for all her encouragement and inspiration.

Luisa Montalvo

2024 World Champion of Public Speaking

♦ 2019 2nd Place Winner

From meeting the finalists for the first time, to drawing our speaking order, to cheering each other up backstage, to sharing a message from my heart ... there are plenty of moments. But I would say one thing, the support from the Toastmasters World Headquarters Team. The way they tirelessly find ways to ensure the contestants are well prepped, answering so many questions, and also just being an amazing cheerleader for all the finalists, that to me is memorable too!

Mas Mahathir bin Mohamad

2025 2nd Place Winner ♦ 2022 3rd Place Winner

♦ 2024 Semifinalist ♦ 2020 Semifinalist

The conga we did with all the [other] finalists, and the briefing of the finalists when [1995 World Champion] Mark Brown walked in.

Sabyasachi Sengupta

2025 World Champion of Public Speaking

Making friends from around the world while having a chance to make the world better through my message.

Kin Ng, DTM

2021 Finalist ♦ 2020 Semifinalist

For me, the most defining moment came in 2018 in Chicago when I lost at the semifinals. That was my third time competing, and I felt absolutely dejected and embarrassed, not only for myself but for my District. And while I was sobbing uncontrollably, my mentor Jacklyn Payne came over and whispered in my ear to stop crying and go congratulate everyone in the room. And then she said something that has stuck with me to this day: “Act like a champion!” It made me realize how much success I had had up until that point, and that I should conduct myself in the proper manner and not feel sorry for myself. That has stuck with me to this day.

Roger Caesar, DTM

2021 3rd Place Winner

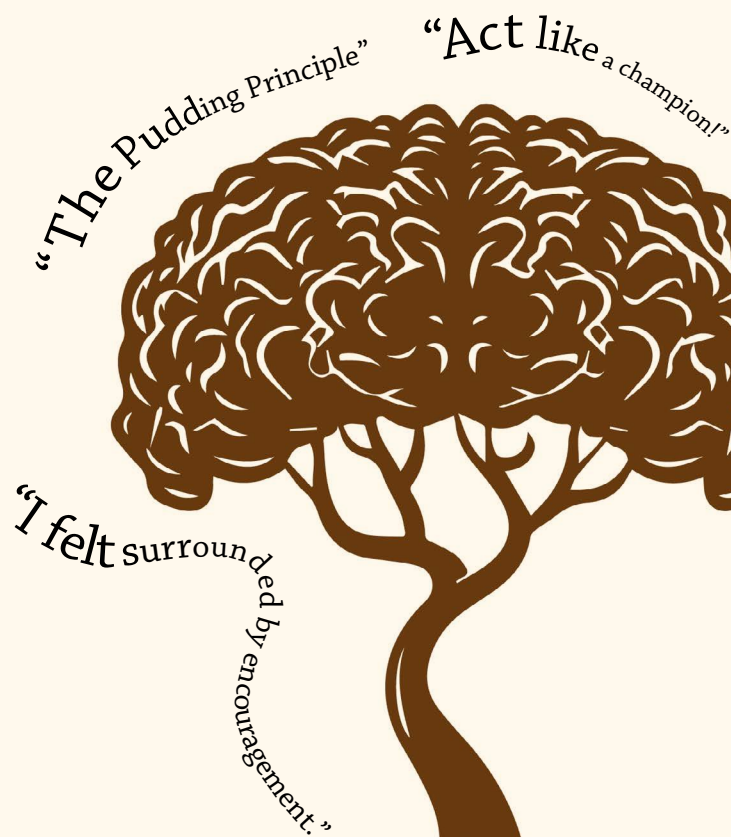
♦ 2018 Semifinalist ♦ 2016 Semifinalist

♦ 2015 Semifinalist

I was blown away by the hundreds of people that reached out afterward to tell me how my speech affected them, touched their hearts, or changed their minds.

Stephen Chin, DTM

2021 Finalist





More Than Words

How bilingual clubs build confidence across cultures.

By Diane Windingland, DTM

When you visit a bilingual Toastmasters club, you may hear the familiar rhythm of a club meeting: introductions, prepared speeches, evaluations, Table Topics®, a timer's report, and applause. But you may also hear something else—a member pausing to find the right word in another language, a speech evaluator focusing on the speaker's gestures when he does not fully understand what the speaker said, or an Ah-Counter teaching the group that “muletillas” are Spanish “crutch words,” similar to filler words.

That was my experience when I visited the Bilingue Toastmaster Club, an online Spanish-English club based in Chula Vista, California. The meeting was easy for me to follow, partly because it was mostly in English and partly because the Toastmasters structure was familiar. Still, the bilingual moments changed the feel of the meeting. One speaker moved between English and Spanish. Table Topics questions were given in both languages. One respondent began in Spanish and then switched to English.

For me, the result was not confusion. It was curiosity. The language elements added a spark to the meeting.

And that spark reflects something larger happening across Toastmasters. According to the Toastmasters

International Research and Analysis Department, an estimated 17.2% of current clubs have members using more than one language. That does not mean those clubs are formally bilingual or multilingual, but it does suggest that language diversity is already part of the Toastmasters experience for many members.

For members who want intentional practice across languages, bilingual clubs offer something distinctive: a place to build communication skills, stretch language ability, and connect across cultures.

Many Ways to Be Bilingual

Bilingual clubs do not always speak “half in one language and half in another.” Instead, clubs may mix up language use throughout the meeting. Members may give speeches in one language and evaluations in another. Each club adapts the Toastmasters framework to the needs of its members.

At Hamburg International Speakers in Hamburg, Germany, members use German and English. According to founding members Max Ansorge and Markus Krause, DTM, the Toastmaster, General Evaluator, and other meeting leaders use the same language throughout the meeting. Prepared

speeches and Table Topics may be in either language, and evaluations are given in the language of the speech. Members are encouraged to choose the language that challenges them, but once they choose, they try to stick with it. If they slip into “Denglish”—a blend of Deutsch (the German word for German) and English—the Grammarian may mention it.

“By avoiding all-German or all-English meetings, we prevent the club from effectively becoming two separate clubs under one name, with members attending only meetings held in their preferred language. Instead, whenever you attend a meeting, you will also be exposed to the language you find more challenging,” explains Krause, the Club President.

At Habla Hispanic Bilingual Toastmasters in Perth, Western Australia, the language balance looks different. Taka Daimaru, a Japanese member of the club, says meetings are approximately 80% English and 20% Spanish. The club primarily gives native Spanish speakers from countries such as Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, and Argentina a place to practice English, while also giving non-native Spanish speakers like Daimaru a platform to practice Spanish.

At Machida Bilingual Toastmasters Club in Machida, Japan, Yasunobu Higuchi, DTM, the club's Vice President Education, describes a flexible English-Japanese approach. Members may choose which language to use and give prepared speeches in either language, with evaluations usually conducted in the same language as the speech. Translation or explanation is provided when needed. The club conducts business sessions and greets guests in Japanese, including at nijikai, or after-meeting social time.

Practice Without Perfection

For many members, the first benefit of being in a bilingual club is language practice. But the deeper benefit is gaining courage.

Bilingual clubs offer members a place to build communication skills, stretch language ability, and connect across cultures.

Joining a bilingual club can improve confidence in using a second language. Simone Nash, DTM, of DTM Day One Toastmasters Club, an advanced online club in China, says the club gave her more confidence speaking Mandarin fluently. She had learned Mandarin elsewhere and was nervous about participating but found the bilingual club environment encouraging. Her advice to others was simple: "Just do it."

Hamburg International Speakers takes a self-paced approach. Ansoorge notes that the club does not push anyone to use the language that is harder for them. "When they are ready, they are ready," he explains. If members try the more difficult language, the club celebrates the attempt. The goal is not perfection; it is progress through "friendly and constructive feedback."

That kind of support matters because speaking in a second language can feel vulnerable. You risk hesitation, grammar mistakes, pronunciation errors, and not finding the word you need.

Yet in a bilingual club, those moments become part of the learning process. During my Bilingue Toastmaster Club visit, one evaluator acknowledged that he was not proficient in Spanish, but he could still understand much of the speaker's message through gestures and delivery.

That is a powerful reminder for any Toastmaster: Communication is larger than vocabulary.

Language and Social Links

Bilingual clubs also help members build connections and offer learning opportunities that go beyond language. When Daimaru joined Habla Hispanic Bilingual Toastmasters, he was preparing to move from Albany, Western Australia, to Perth. He discovered the club through a Facebook ad before it chartered and thought it might help him make his first friends in the city. It did. After he joined, the club expanded his network quickly and he received invitations to parties and home gatherings.

Spanish also opened doors for him beyond the club. In Perth, Daimaru found a strong Spanish-speaking community and even joined a running club where members speak Spanish. As a Japanese speaker of Spanish, he stood out, but that difference became a point of connection rather than a barrier.

Bilingue Toastmaster Club



His experience also changed his understanding of the phrase “Hispanic culture.” As Daimaru pointed out, there is not just one Hispanic culture. Members of his club come from several Latin American countries, each bringing distinct cultural perspectives. Through the club, he is learning Spanish and also learning about Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, and more.

My own assumptions were challenged when I visited the Bilingue Toastmaster Club. I expected a Spanish-English club to be mostly Hispanic and Anglo members. Instead, I found a different mix: Several attendees had Indian roots and now live in various parts of the U.S.

That is the hidden gift of bilingual clubs. They do not always connect the people you expect. They connect the people who show up willing to learn.

Hamburg International Speakers was built with that purpose in mind. Krause, one of the founding members of the club, explains that many newcomers arrive in Hamburg and take German classes, but do not have Germans to practice with. At their Toastmasters club, newcomers can talk with German speakers or listen until they are ready, while German native speakers who need English for their job can practice in a safe environment.

Benefits abound. The Hamburg club founders note that members have formed friendships, discovered career opportunities, and shared celebrations. “Most importantly, every week we broaden our horizons by learning about different countries, cultures, and perspectives,” says Ansonge, one of the founding members.

Once a year, the Hamburg club stretches beyond bilingual into multilingual with what members call a “Tower of Babel meeting.” Members give speeches in their native languages, including not only German and English but also French, Russian, Polish, Arabic, Finnish, Spanish, Portuguese, and Chinese. Ansonge emphasizes, “You do not need to understand every word to receive a message.”

For a visitor, that may be the biggest lesson. You may not understand everything in a bilingual club. But you may understand more than you expect—a gesture, the expression on someone’s face when a word finally comes to them, or the applause that follows.

Bilingual clubs are not without challenges. Members have different fluency levels. Clubs may need bilingual officers or mentors to help with meeting roles. Guests may worry they will not understand enough. Some people may speak too quickly. For a visitor who speaks only English, accented English or quick language shifts can take extra concentration. If you are in a hybrid or online club, I found that turning on closed captions in Zoom helped me catch words I might otherwise have missed.

Start Where You Are

If you are curious about visiting a bilingual club, the advice from members is consistent: Start where you are.

You do not have to give a full speech in another language during your first visit. You can listen, introduce yourself, answer a Table Topics question in the language you know best, take on a small meeting role, or ask how guests usually participate.

When asked what he would say to someone with very limited language

ability who was nervous about visiting a bilingual club, Daimaru borrowed a famous line from former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

A bilingual club is not just a place to practice another language. It is a place to practice being brave in another language.

In the process, you may gain more than vocabulary. You may find friends in a new city. You may gain confidence at work. You may reconnect with heritage, culture, or community. You may discover that even when words are imperfect, connection can still be clear.

And as you learn to say hello in more than one language, you may discover that your voice can reach further than you imagined.

Diane Windingland, DTM, is a communication coach from Spring, Texas, and a member of Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas, and PowerTalk Toastmasters in Minnesota. Learn more at virtuallanguagecoach.com.

Hamburg International Speakers celebrates the 10th anniversary of its kick-off meeting.





Is Your Club Hidden in Plain Sight?

Why your digital presence matters just as much as your physical one.

By Yves Tan, DTM

You've spent weeks perfecting your Toastmasters club meeting flow. Your Table Topics® are electric, your evaluators are insightful, and the energy in the room—or the Zoom gallery—is palpable. But the seats are half-empty. You wonder: *Why aren't guests coming to meetings?*

The hard truth is that potential members often don't find clubs by walking past a community center banner. They find them by typing “public speaking near me” into a search bar. If your club doesn't appear in search results online, people may not know it exists.

The Digital Podium

Luckily there are a variety of ways to help you boost your presence on search engines—popular tools to start with include Google Business Profile, Bing Places, Apple Maps, and region-specific tools on platforms like Baidu in China, Yandex in Russia, and Naver in South Korea.

These digital profile tools serve as localized business directories that map out physical locations, operating hours, contact information, and user feedback directly to search algorithms. They also can direct AI-driven answers to questions, such as “Where can I practice leadership in London?”

A verified map profile or local business listing captures active search intent. It connects you with the person who has decided they need help with public speaking and is actively looking for a solution. By maintaining your digital profiles, you ensure your club is the top answer in search results and AI responses.



Blueprint for Digital Growth

Growing your digital profile requires deliberate action. Here are steps members can take to boost their club's online visibility:

1 Claim your club profile on major online platforms relevant to your region. To take ownership, search for your club on your chosen platform, click "Own this business," "Claim this listing," or similar prompt, and complete the verification prompts. Verifying ownership grants your club exclusive control over the displayed information—address, phone number, website link—protecting it from inaccurate edits.

To ensure a seamless handover during leadership transitions, always register these accounts under a generic club email address rather than a club officer's personal account. Additional administrators can be added later to share the management workload.

2 Centralize clear contact information. Keep the barrier to entry low for prospective members by ensuring your club's name, address, and contact information are consistent across the internet. Always include comprehensive meeting details, such as the day and time you meet, exact room or online meeting instructions, and a direct link to your website or social media channels. Whichever digital profile platforms you choose, make sure your club's contact information and meeting details are impossible to miss.

3 Use social media platforms purposefully. While your profile on local maps and search engines tells people where you are, maintaining social media accounts demonstrates that your club is active. A social media page with no photos looks like a stagnant organization. By uploading images of smiling members, the handover of ribbons, or a vibrant meeting setup, you show that your club is an active, living community.

Use LinkedIn to target corporate professionals, Instagram or TikTok to showcase visual energy for younger demographics, and Facebook for community updates. Clubs don't need to have an account on every platform. It is far better to master one or two platforms where your target audience spends their time.

4 Showcase member success through reviews. Visibility is only half the battle; the second half is trust. The fastest way to demonstrate that your club helps members conquer their anxiety and improve public speaking skills is through online reviews. Ask members to write specific, short testimonials detailing their transformation journey rather than just leaving star ratings.

Toastmasters value feedback. Think of online reviews as public evaluations. A profile with 10 five-star reviews from members describing how the club helped them is infinitely more persuasive than a generic marketing flier.

A New Leadership Frontier

Managing your club's digital presence isn't just a technical task; it is a vital leadership responsibility. By optimizing your club's local search profiles you are building a lighthouse. You are ensuring that when a nervous professional or a shy student finally gathers the courage to search for help, your club is the one standing there, visible and ready to welcome them into the world of human conversation.

Yves Tan, DTM, is an SEO strategist and founder of Cloud Captor Technology, leveraging a decade of experience to build high-conversion online strategies. A veteran Toastmaster, he specializes in search engine optimization, agentic AI workflow automation, and scaling digital visibility for modern companies and communities. Connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).

Executive Presence: MAKE IT VISIBLE

These 3 steps will help you send the right signals as a speaker and leader.

By Diane Windingland, DTM

Executive presence is often described as something intangible, an elusive quality that some people seem to possess naturally. Yet in meeting rooms, presentations, and club environments, executive presence is rarely mysterious. It is visible.

Before you complete your first sentence, your audience is already drawing conclusions. Do you appear confident? Grounded? Trustworthy? These judgments are not formed solely from your words. They are shaped by the signals you send with your body, your voice, and your facial expressions.

Through years of coaching leaders and participating in Toastmasters clubs, I have found that executive presence consistently shows up in three observable dimensions: stillness and command of space, voice and gravitas, and visual and behavioral alignment.



1

Stillness and Command of Space

In high-stakes situations, many speakers attempt to project confidence by adding more—more energy, more movement, more words. Yet presence often increases when you subtract.

Stillness is not rigidity. It is control. A grounded speaker does not sway or pace aimlessly. Instead, they establish a base position: feet planted shoulder-width apart, one slightly ahead of the other. Shoulders are relaxed. Spine is upright. Hands are visible. From this position, movement becomes intentional rather than reflecting nervousness.

Strategic movement enhances presence. When you move to emphasize a new point, step toward the audience to underscore importance, or use the stage as a timeline to illustrate progression.

Stillness also appears in the pause before speaking. Confident leaders do not rush to fill silence. They take a breath. They make eye connection, not just eye contact. They begin deliberately.

In Toastmasters, the meeting environment offers a valuable laboratory for practicing this. Try delivering your opening sentence after a full, two-second pause. Notice how the room settles. Notice how your breathing steadies. Often, doing less communicates more authority than doing more.

2

Voice and Gravitas

If stillness establishes visual authority, voice reinforces it.

Your voice is a leadership signal. Gravitas is not about sounding impressive. It is about sounding deliberate.

Pace plays a central role. Many speakers speak faster under pressure, unintentionally signaling nervousness. Slowing down does not mean dragging your words. It means allowing your audience to process your ideas in real time. When you approach a key point, pause and reduce your pace slightly. When moving through familiar or transitional material, you may increase it modestly. Vary rhythm with intention.

Consider how a well-placed pause before a key phrase increases anticipation, and how a pause afterward allows the idea to settle. In club speeches, this technique is especially powerful during transitions, rhetorical questions, or emotional moments.

Filler words—“um,” “uh,” “you know,” “like”—often appear at the start of new thoughts. Replacing them with silence signals thoughtfulness rather than uncertainty.

Projection and breath support also contribute to vocal authority. Speaking “from the belly,” with breath driven by the diaphragm rather than the throat, allows the voice to carry without strain. Good posture supports this naturally. When you stand tall, your voice gains resonance.

Tone and inflection matter as well. Upspeak—the rising tone at the end of declarative sentences—can undermine authority by making statements sound like questions. For example:

“I’m confident this strategy will work?” (Voice rises at the end.)

Even if the words express certainty, the rising tone introduces doubt.

Now compare that to:

“I’m confident this strategy will work.” (Voice falls at the end.)

The downward inflection signals conviction. The words are identical. The signal is not.

For Toastmasters members, vocal awareness can be strengthened through speech evaluations, recording practice sessions, or simply asking a trusted club member for feedback.

When your pace, pauses, and pitch align with your message, your audience hears confidence.

can unintentionally signal defensiveness or discomfort.

Gestures, when used purposefully, reinforce clarity. Show “three priorities” with three fingers. Map a timeline across the stage so the audience sees the past on their left and the future on their right. Compare two ideas with your hands positioned side by side. When your gestures and message align, comprehension improves for your audience and for you.

Eye contact transforms an audience from a faceless group into individuals. Instead of scanning the room, practice “serial conversations.” Hold eye contact with one person long enough to complete a thought—three to five seconds—then shift naturally to another. This creates connection and allows you to read reactions in real time.

Facial expressions must align with content. A warm smile at the start creates a sense of approachability. Raised eyebrows can signal curiosity. A more serious expression communicates gravity. Misalignment weakens credibility: smiling while delivering difficult news, rolling your eyes in frustration, or lifting your chin in a subtle display of superiority.

Leadership alignment is visible. When your posture, gestures, voice, and facial expressions match your message, trust increases.

Bringing It Into Your Club

Toastmasters offers an ideal environment for practicing executive presence because it combines structure with psychological safety.

Consider incorporating the following into your next speech:

- Establish a grounded base position before beginning.
- Open with deliberate eye connection and a measured pause.
- Mark transitions with intentional pauses rather than filler words.
- Use gestures that visually reinforce your message.
- Record a meeting or speech and review it—not for content alone, but for visual and vocal alignment. Notice your pacing, posture, and expressions.

Executive presence does not require a dramatic transformation. It requires awareness and alignment. It is not reserved for CEOs or keynote speakers. It is available to anyone who is intentional about the signals they send.

Stillness communicates control. Voice communicates deliberateness. Visual alignment communicates authenticity.

When your physical presence, vocal delivery, and emotional expression work together, you project leadership—not by performing confidence, but by embodying it.

3

Visual and Behavioral Alignment

The third dimension of executive presence lies in alignment between message and expression. Posture communicates before words do. An open posture—

uncrossed arms, shoulders relaxed, chest open, hands visible—signals receptivity and confidence. Closed-off body language—folded arms, hunched shoulders, hands hidden—

Diane Windingland, DTM, is a communication coach from Spring, Texas, and a member of Frankly Speaking Toastmasters in Spring, Texas, and PowerTalk Toastmasters in Minnesota. Learn more at virtuallspeechcoach.com.

5 QUESTIONS WITH...

Richard E. Peck, DTM

Cultural awareness insights from an expert.



When welcome mats were rolled up in 2020, then-International President Richard E. Peck, DTM, got creative with his club visits. To provide a sense of connection and to better understand members' needs, he launched an unprecedented [virtual world tour](#), and visited online clubs in 143 countries. This month, we asked him about the global aspect of Toastmasters and his unique perspective on the value of an international community.

More about
Richard

Hometown:

Seymour, Connecticut

Years in Toastmasters:

20

Profession:

Senior project engineer

Hobbies:

Studying world cultures,
traveling, cooking,
and drag racing



What stands out to you about Toastmasters International's culture?

According to UNESCO, culture is the collective beliefs, values, customs, and practices that characterize a particular group or society. It shapes how individuals perceive the world. With that in mind, the overall culture of Toastmasters is that of betterment. This is exemplified through individual growth and a commitment to helping others reach their goals.

How does interacting with members from different cultures make someone a better communicator?

Our words and body language, as well as the messages we try to convey, are not always interpreted as we intend. If we do not take the time to really understand the individuals that we are interacting with, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a strong connection.

How has the international nature of Toastmasters enriched your life?

It has not only provided me with the opportunity to understand the world around me better, but to understand myself better. It has helped fuel my passion for understanding cultures and what makes individuals unique. Toastmasters has allowed me to develop the skills to become a truly global citizen and cultural ambassador.

What are the biggest benefits members gain from our cultural diversity?

Their journey is unique to them, and there is a community there to support them along the way. Our differences shouldn't separate us, they should unite us. Cultural awareness is bidirectional; not only do we need to understand what we see and hear, we also need to understand how what we say and do is perceived. Finally, through online platforms the world has gotten a little smaller and our ability to make an impact has gotten greater.

How can members take advantage of Toastmasters' global network?

Take a virtual world tour! I'm not saying to visit 143 countries like I did, but rather use [Find A Club](#) to find clubs anywhere in the world that are meeting in a hybrid format and ask if you can join a meeting. Immerse yourself by taking a role and ask members to tell you about themselves and their country. No passport needed, no lost luggage, only a time zone to overcome.

Struggling to fill roles?

Show your members what's **in it for them!**





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