

To the Journey: The Challenge to Change

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Introduction

How Does One Master Toast?

Rest assured; being a Toastmaster has nothing to do with bread. Toastmasters International is a worldwide non-profit organization that develops leadership, interpersonal communications, and public speaking skills through a learn-by-doing educational program, which is focused on practical experience and constructive feedback (both receiving it and giving it). It is *not* a class or a lecture, but an organized group activity in which all members help each other to succeed. This philosophy evolved over a century, thanks to the passion and dedication of a small group who recognized the need to establish these critical professional skills in an increasingly education- and business-oriented society.

Toastmasters tentatively began in 1905 as a personal project of Ralph C. Smedley, at the time an educational director for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Bloomington, Illinois. Smedley observed a need to develop competency in public speaking among the young men he encountered and organized a small club to serve this purpose, eventually naming it a "Toastmasters Club." Smedley and the other older men offered guidance and encouragement to help the young men gain confidence in speaking to the group. They also rotated positions conducting the meetings, giving speeches, and other duties to exercise leadership skills, a system that is still used in Toastmasters clubs today.



After relocating to California, Smedley formed several more Toastmasters clubs through the YMCA in various cities, using simple public speaking manuals he wrote and produced himself. The first lasting clubs were established in 1924, and the concept soon began to catch on, evolving and growing as more people gained interest. The modern-day Toastmasters International was officially incorporated in California as a non-profit organization in 1932 ("History"). In 2016, Toastmasters boasted a strength of more than 345,000 members worldwide, operating nearly 16,000 clubs in 142 countries ("Who We Are"), all following the core values of integrity, dedication to excellence, service to the member, and respect for the individual that embody Smedley's century-old vision.

A Quick Note on the Organization of the Organization

The rest of this book makes many references to different levels of the global Toastmasters organization. For clarity, here is a condensed overview of how it all breaks down:

- Club The heart of the organization, where the Toastmasters experience
 actually happens. A club may have between 8 and 40 individual
 members.
- Area A group of several clubs, usually in proximity to each other, which
 is overseen by an Area Director. These Area Directors make up the bulk
 of the District leadership team.
- **Division** A group of several **areas**, overseen by a Division Director.
- **District** The backbone of the global organization, the District provides leadership and logistical support for all the clubs in a geographic area. In the United States, a District will typically cover multiple states (except in a few cases that are limited to large metropolitan areas with a high density of clubs). In other parts of the world, a District might span several countries or even an entire continent!
- **Region** All Districts worldwide are grouped into 14 Regions, the elected representatives from which make up the International Board of Directors.
- **International** The entire organization is led by the Board of Directors and the elected International President.

Also worth noting is that every individual club is self-operating. The leaders of the club are members of that club, elected to serve as officers. Meetings are presided by members on a volunteer basis. In this way, every member has the opportunity to accrue leadership experience, as well as communications skills.

The Laboratory of the Toastmasters Club

There is no magic formula for success in Toastmasters. In the words of Dr. Smedley, his *Basic Training for Toastmasters*, which evolved into the *Competent Communication* manual in use today, serves as, "an introduction to public speaking, designed to help you progress systematically toward your greater personal development through the laboratory which is your Toastmasters club" (*Basic Training*). The Toastmasters program is not meant to serve as a goalpost, but as a platform to build toward a success of one's own design.

For most, the evolution of communication and leadership skills is a years-long process, and many do not stop even after they earn the highest title, the Distinguished Toastmaster award (one person I know is currently working on his seventh "DTM"). Toastmasters often find value in the club experience well beyond the educational programs; forming friendships and bonds with one's club members can be a socially fulfilling experience, one that some Toastmasters remain members exclusively to enjoy. A member of my club dislikes speaking and has never given a speech in the time I have been there, yet she has stayed a part of the club for ten years. Though it varies by club, the real experience of Toastmasters often exceeds what is described on paper.

There are three basic types of Toastmasters clubs: corporate clubs, which are sponsored by a company and typically open only to its employees; community clubs, which almost always have open membership to anyone over 18; and gavel clubs, which are less official variants for people in unusual circumstances (the most notable example being prison clubs, which aim to reform inmates by giving them skills to help them rejoin and succeed in the workforce). My research and observations focus mainly on community clubs, specifically those in District 8, Division C, in southern Illinois, where Toastmasters originally began in the early 1900's.

On a trip to Springfield, Illinois, I took a slight detour to a small farm town called Waverly, the birthplace of Toastmasters International's founder, Dr. Ralph C. Smedley. In the town park is a simple but apt memorial to a man who touched countless lives through his passion for helping people to improve themselves. The legacy of Toastmasters has far outlived its creator, who died in 1965. To this day, every club, no matter the type, follows the same format based on Smedley's original design for the first Toastmasters clubs.



The Typical Club Meeting

The club president calls the meeting to order with a tap of the gavel. After a few opening remarks, he turns control of the meeting to the Toastmaster of the Day, who acts as a sort of master-of-ceremonies and presides over the meeting. (For clarity, for

the remainder of this section, the term "Toastmaster" will refer to this meeting role.)
The Toastmaster then calls on other functionaries to introduce themselves and explain their roles. At minimum, this generally includes the Timer, Grammarian and/or Ah-Counter, General Evaluator, and Table Topicsmaster.

The Timer not only records the speaking times, but also makes sure each section of the meeting is completed in the allotted time to keep the meeting on track. The Grammarian presents a word of the day, which each member is challenged to use when speaking. The Ah-Counter, which is often combined with the Grammarian role, notes each usage of verbal pauses and filler words or phrases: "ah," "um," "like," "you know," and so forth. The General Evaluator oversees the evaluation portion of the meeting and gives feedback about how the meeting has been conducted.

After each role has been introduced, control of the meeting passes to the Table Topicsmaster. Table Topics is Toastmasters' brand of impromptu speaking. The Topicsmaster presents a prompt, on which the member called upon must give a one- to two-minute improvised speech. In most clubs I have visited, this is done in the simple format of choosing a member and reading from a script, or perhaps asking the person to pick a number. Some people find this activity to be the most challenging form of speaking; others consider it quite fun. Either way, it is an effective exercise in communicating without preparation.

Once Table Topics are completed, the Topicsmaster returns the lectern to the Toastmaster. In clubs with longer meetings, a break will often be called either at this point or after the prepared speeches. In every club that I have visited, nearly all members spend the break socializing with their club mates, and the few exceptions are usually speakers taking a last look at their notes. (Even seasoned enthusiasts cram for a speech now and then!) The Toastmaster introduces each speaker with the title of his or her speech, the goal to be achieved, and some biographical information about the presenter. In some clubs, the Toastmaster will ask the person assigned to evaluate the

speaker to read the objectives of the specific project (each of which is designed to develop a particular skill, such as organization or handling a question and answer session).

The highlight of the meeting is, of course, the speeches themselves. Each new member starts with projects designed to establish the fundamental skills of public speaking, including speech writing, research, vocal variety, eye contact, body language, use of visual aids, and others. Through these projects, speakers gain a greater sense of self-awareness about how they communicate with an audience (whether that's an audience of one or one thousand). The program recognizes achievement with educational awards at each stage of development. I received my first Toastmasters award, the Competent Communicator, at our Halloween party meeting, to reward giving my first ten speeches.



As they progress, members move on to more advanced projects, which specialize in different areas of expertise – storytelling, public relations, informative speaking, video communication, and many others. This makes for a diverse array of speeches on a wide variety of topics, often reflecting the interests, experiences, or values of the speaker.

Unlike Table Topics and evaluations, these speeches are thoroughly prepared ahead of time (or should be, at least). Not only can the information presented be useful, but the speeches are also entertaining for the audience, and for longtime members it can be very fulfilling to watch someone who at first struggled to get words out develop into a confident speaker.

Vern Boeckmann, a member of the O'Fallon Toastmasters club since 1973, described his proudest achievement in the program as, "The look of the newbie Toastmaster when they get the confidence to stand up and look their audience in the eyes, as they smile and they know they've really accomplished something in their own mind – and I've been able to help them do that" (qtd. in Chohan and White 141). If I had to sum up my impression of Toastmasters International, both as a member and as an observer, I would describe it as an organization whose members are most proud not of what they have achieved, but of what they have helped others to achieve.

Taking pride and joy in one's club members seems to be a universal among Toastmasters. For part of my observation, I visited the Knowledge Speakers Club in Chicago. I did not receive as warm a greeting as I am accustomed to from Toastmasters, probably because I walked into their upscale downtown law school rather bedraggled and dripping with sweat after a mile-and-a-half trek (thanks to a debacle with the Chicago public transit system). Nonetheless, the club officer who greeted me was polite and welcomed me to the meeting. After a brief set of opening remarks, they jumped right into their three prepared speeches, all newer members working in the initial *Competent Communication* manual.

The first speaker delivered a thorough presentation about Behavioral Economics to complete the sixth manual project, "Vocal Variety." The speech did not quite suit the goal of the project, but it was informative (I know now what Behavioral Economics is!), objective, and interesting nonetheless. The second speaker perfectly fulfilled the seventh project, "Research Your Topic," with a detailed account of a lecture she had

attended and what she learned from the research that presentation motivated her to do. The third speaker, doing "Persuade With Power," gave a compelling speech to motivate the audience to join a cooking class offered by a highly acclaimed Italian restaurant in Chicago. We then moved on to the speech evaluators.

I imagine Ralph Smedley must have recognized that the ability to give effective, constructive feedback is a rare and undervalued skill, because the Toastmasters organization incorporates this process wherever possible. Each speech is assigned an evaluator, introduced by the General Evaluator, who must deliver a two- to three-minute evaluation in front of the club.

The ideal is that each speaker receive a balanced, encouraging evaluation with practical suggestions to help him or her improve. However, as I learned during my years volunteering as an editor for several small online publications, giving constructive critiques can be a tricky process. Sometimes an evaluator is too kind, overly praising a speech without giving any true feedback, good or bad. Though I have very rarely seen this in Toastmasters, an evaluator can also be unfairly critical or judge the speaker instead of the speech (which is both a faux pas and a highly ineffective teaching method). In my experience, however, the majority of evaluations in Toastmasters fall near the ideal.



When each speech evaluation is complete, the General Evaluator gives feedback about the entire meeting (and, in some clubs, evaluates the evaluators) before returning the floor to the Toastmaster. In many clubs, he or she will then present awards to the best Table Topic, best evaluator, and best speaker, as determined by a ballot vote of the audience (including any guests who are not members). Though this may seem competitive, it is all in good fun and actually seems to promote a spirit of camaraderie.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Toastmaster has completed his or her role and relinquishes control back to the presiding club officer, who may give a few closing remarks before calling an official end to the meeting with another tap of the gavel.

This is the format followed by my club, as well as most others I have observed. Some clubs may change the order of activities or forgo non-essential portions for the sake of time. The Knowledge Speakers club, which meets during lunch hour, omits the awards and general evaluation, and has a very shortened version of Table Topics. But even among clubs that follow the standard format to the letter, each presents its own unique identity.

Some Toastmasters clubs are more professional; others are more exciting. A club's atmosphere seems to depend largely on the personalities of its members and how they interact. My club has a number of lively, outgoing people who bring smiles to everyone's faces at every meeting. Members can motivate their club mates through their own successes, or they might keep things interesting by always coming prepared with fascinating speech topics. How every member's personality synergizes to produce the atmosphere of the club ties back into the leadership element of Toastmasters.

In fulfilling a role within the group, the individual has the opportunity to influence the others – and a responsibility to do so in a positive way. The early levels of the Toastmasters leadership path consist of performing a function for the club. This provides an educational experience, but it also allows each member to showcase his or her talents if the people filling these roles are challenged to go beyond the basic format and develop more creative approaches. This is probably most notable in the role of the Table Topicsmaster.

When I visited the Collinsville Toastmasters Club in late November of 2016, the Topicsmaster presented a sort of role-playing game, in which each participant was assigned at random the identity of a famous person and a situation to pretend to be in as that person. By luck, this gave me the easiest improvisational speech ever, as I was assigned to be Hillary Clinton and the situation was, "Why are you crying?" The little games that Topicsmasters choose in this manner often reflect their personality and interests. For example, I once brought in a box of novels and asked each member to pick one without looking. Tucked into each book was a brief summary of the plot and a question based on some element of the story, from which my club members could clearly glean my love of reading.

The Toastmasters experience is one of give-and-take. As my mentor, the teacher who introduced me to Toastmasters, is fond of reminding us, "You get out of it what you put into it." It is a gradual, effort-dependent program shaped by the individual's motivation and self-discipline. I feel that I have gotten far more than I realistically expected out of my time in Toastmasters, and this is due to the amount of time and passion I have put into it. That is not the case for everyone, however. Research done by Toastmasters International shows that clubs average a membership loss of 40% each year (*Achieve Success*). This suggests that a significant number of people do not feel that they are getting sufficient value for their money.

Is this a problem with the program itself, or with the public's expectations of it? The possible results of joining Toastmasters – better communication skills, more self-confidence, leadership qualifications - are well publicized. However, the process by which these goals are achieved is often explained only after a new member joins, and can seem confusing, daunting, or overwhelming to someone completely unfamiliar with how Toastmasters works. Also, while the tasks needed to receive each educational award are clearly outlined, the paths to an individual's personal goals must be determined not by the organization or the club, but by that person's own understanding of self.

With realistic expectations, consistent effort, and a firm goal in mind, I believe that anyone can benefit from and succeed in the environment that Toastmasters presents to explore one's abilities and challenge oneself to new achievements.

Beyond Public Speaking

On April 1, 2017, the Toastmasters of District 8, Division C in Southern Illinois hosted our first Division Conference. Conferences are an opportunity for Toastmasters

from different clubs to meet, socialize, and have fun learning together. The event typically includes speech contests, educational workshops, social activities, and at least one keynote speaker.

At District conferences, the keynote speaker is often a dignitary from Toastmasters International, such as a member of the Board of Directors, but at smaller conferences and leadership institutes, the keynote speaker is usually a member of the community. For our Division C Conference, we were fortunate to hear from a former Illinois Teacher of the Year who had served as a representative of the United States Department of Education at the International Summit on the Teaching Profession, as well as numerous other impressive achievements, including being a top-ten finalist for the Global Teacher Prize, often unofficially termed the "Nobel Prize of Teaching." To hear his presentation was a privilege, but the success of the conference was a truly rewarding experience because of my extensive involvement in planning the event.

The leadership element of Toastmasters is often overshadowed by its greater renown as a program dedicated to helping people who struggle with public speaking. Though this is certainly true, and the organization has consistently demonstrated great success in this area over its ninety-year history, Toastmasters who pursue higher levels of leadership often tout this aspect as the more rewarding, and the one that has had a greater positive impact on their lives.

To earn the Distinguished Toastmaster award, a member must show competency in communication and progress through multiple levels of leadership positions. The first occurs at the club level, and involves filling meeting roles, assisting with and planning club events, and mentoring new members. This stage establishes a foundation of basic leadership skills, such as organization, teamwork, and self-confidence. The advanced levels require more involvement in the greater Toastmasters organization, beyond the club. He or she must also complete the High Performance Leadership program, which involves directing a team through the entire process of developing,

planning, and completing a goal-oriented project of significant scope (such as the Division Conference described earlier). All of this is in addition to the speeches required to progress through the program.

In short, the leadership element of Toastmasters takes a bit more dedication than just showing up and giving a speech. It is a significant investment of time and effort, and can become a source of stress if not managed wisely; however, it can also be a unique and deeply gratifying endeavor, and perhaps even a career booster.

The Identity of a Toastmaster

Who is Toastmasters for?

The Stereotypical Toastmaster is not a common one in the minds of the public. I have often found that the average person has never even heard of Toastmasters and repeatedly need to explain that it is not, in fact, a cult that worships toast. (Although claims that we worship feedback may not be entirely unwarranted.)

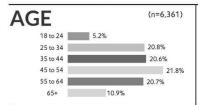
Among people who are at least tentatively familiar with the organization, however, the name "Toastmaster" does occasionally conjure a certain image of middle-aged men in business suits, sitting at a meeting table surrounded by flowcharts and quarterly financial projections, and actually *enjoying* themselves as if they suffer from some kind of corporate Stockholm syndrome.

I will admit that, like most stereotypes, this does have some small basis in fact. From when it was founded all the way until the 1970's, Toastmasters was indeed a male-only organization, and most of its leaders were older men. This is, however, a wholly outdated perception; today, the majority of Toastmasters are women. The popularity of Toastmasters in its early years is largely attributed to young professionals wanting to get an advantageous start in their careers.

This is still a popular reason for joining Toastmasters, but far from the only one. A motivation that I have heard often is a desire to overcome severe social anxiety. Many people who are not native speakers of English see giving speeches as a fun way to improve their proficiency in the language. People from all walks of life are drawn to Toastmasters for a variety of reasons unrelated to their professions.

TOASTMASTERS DEMOGRAPHICS

November 2015 Member Survey Results





Sampling

A simple random sampling method was implemented to select a representative sample of Toastmasters members for the online survey.

A total of n=6,150 members completed the survey, giving the results a +/-1.2% margin of error with a 95% confidence interval.

GENDER (n=6,369) Female 51.5% Male 48.5%

(n=6,345)

21.6%

Survey Response Rate

101 Countries Participated

EDUCATION

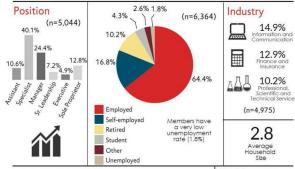


Highly Educated

Toastmasters members are a highly educated population. Over 75% have at least a Bachelor's degree or higher and nearly all members (95.0%) have attended college.



EMPLOYMENT



High Earners

(n=5,793)

Approximately 26.7% of members earn \$100,000 or more and 41.1% earn more than \$75,000 per year.



INCOME <\$20k 16.1% \$20k to \$34k \$35k to \$49k 12.5% 11.8% \$50k to \$74k 18.5% \$75k to \$99k 14.4% \$100k to \$149k \$150k to \$199k 5.6% >\$200k 4.5% Annual Household Income in \$USD

LANGUAGES

Hello! 83.7%	¡Hola! 5.6%		नमस्ते! 4.6%	Bonjour! 4.4%	Multilingual Approximately 24.1% of members speak more than one language proficiently.
English	Spanish	Chinese (Mandarin)	Hindi	French	(n=6,108)

WHERE LEADERS ARE MADE

Every member considers his or her experiences in Toastmasters to be a journey – one of self-discovery and personal growth. Some have been on this journey for decades, and my own Toastmasters journey has been short in comparison. My first experience with organized public speaking came in third grade. Unlike most of my classmates – and, indeed, most adults – I had no particular fear of public speaking. I did get nervous before a speech (and still do!), but it was the type of adrenaline-induced nervousness that comes mingled with excitement. I enjoyed public speaking the way other people enjoy riding roller coasters – which I'll admit that I fear the way other people fear public speaking - and I carried that joy with me throughout the rest of my school years.

During my junior year of high school, a new teacher at the school, whom I later learned had been a member of Toastmasters since 1975, decided to start a Youth Leadership Program, a course sponsored by Toastmasters International to educate young people in public speaking. The Youth Leadership Program mirrors the regular adult club process, helping students learn by doing. This was my first experience with Toastmasters.

I finally joined my former teacher's own Toastmasters club, St. Clair Toastmasters, just after my twenty-third birthday. Since then, I have had the opportunity to serve as a club officer and district officer, assist and lead teams in planning large events, and develop my public speaking skills to get an even greater joy out of it than I did in school.

This book originally began as a college paper, for which I was assigned to research and observe a specific subgroup of people within society. Toastmasters was

the first thing that came to mind. Before finalizing my choice, I spoke with one of our highest district officers, who happens to be a member of my club, to gauge the level of support I could expect to receive. She was quite enthusiastic, and I expected that, once word got out, at least a few Toastmasters would eagerly volunteer to be involved with my research project.

My guess proved correct; I received extensive support from our district leadership, as well as others. However, I could not have guessed how deeply the process would affect me, nor the impact my work would have on the people with whom I spoke. I conducted interviews with all three of the top leaders in the district, who opened up to me and shared very personal insights into how Toastmasters has changed their lives for the better, helping them out of dark and dire circumstances. In hearing their stories, and those of others in the district, I was naturally compelled to reflect on my own Toastmasters journey.

Though my introduction to Toastmasters began in my junior year of high school, through the Toastmasters Youth Leadership Program, my path to membership in the adult organization is a long and painful one. Shortly after I graduated high school, I developed a chronic, often debilitating medical condition that would worsen over the next several years. Combined with other unfortunate events beyond my control, I was left unable to continue my education, a loss more painful than even the worst of my physical suffering.

In spite of this, I never gave up on my dreams or my passion for learning. I participated extensively in the EdX program, an initiative by some of the most renowned universities in the world to expand access to education by offering free online classes. I took several volunteer jobs as a writer and editor for websites (having the talent but lacking the credentials for paid work), and started writing a novel. I taught myself new languages and new skills, my favorite of which is metalcraft for jewelry making.

However, all of this I did from home, over a prolonged period of unwilling but near-total social isolation, which gradually began to take its toll. Eventually, I realized that, while many of my linguistic abilities had improved dramatically, my verbal communication skills had atrophied to the point where getting out a simple bit of small talk to the checkout lady at the grocery store was a laborious and often humiliating affair. When I reached my lowest point, I resolved to take back control of my life, to *live* in spite of all these setbacks, and to start working toward the goals I had been forced to set aside. One of my highest priorities was to regain my confidence and communication skills, and I knew exactly where to start.

Though I had a good idea of what to expect from the Toastmasters educational program, I quickly realized that what Toastmasters offers on paper does not at all convey the profound impact it can have on one's whole being. My Toastmasters club was where I made my first friends as an adult, and as I became more comfortable around them, I also began to overcome the shame I associated with my condition.

I found the strength to advocate for myself as a patient, fighting against the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination that women – particularly young women – suffering from reproductive disease face from the medical industry, and I finally received the treatment I had sought for five years. Today, I am free of my pain and have the chance to *live* for the very first time, and my experiences in Toastmasters played no small part in that achievement.

I learned in the course of my research project that I am not alone; many Toastmasters have similar stories of overcoming hardship and regaining lost confidence. My Toastmasters journey may have begun on a dark and lonely road, but it also reminded me that the most challenging paths are often the ones that bring you to the best places.

Being able to communicate effectively is an oft-overlooked but critical skill. Most people are satisfied with achieving basic competence in speaking and spend their whole lives dreading the idea of getting up in front of a group and saying something. Who wants to go through life with that kind of fear? I enjoy public speaking, which is a great advantage, but I also want to be able to do it *well*. There is a difference between being able to talk and being able to speak. (We all know someone who is all too confident in the former and not nearly proficient enough in the latter.)

The key difference, to me, is that speaking has a specific purpose behind it, and I have found that this is the source of my passion for public speaking. My public speaking niche, I've learned, is educating people about issues that need to be brought to light, because I believe that silence – especially when prompted by fear - is the mortal enemy of positive change.

By finding a purpose in my speaking, I am now more excited than nervous before giving a speech, and I hope to reach a level of competence where I can make the audience as excited as I am about my topic. As with any other skill, to be a great speaker requires practice, dedication, and a willingness to learn. In my experience, the most valuable component of the Toastmasters program is the variety and quality of the feedback I receive, and, from this, I am able to identify my weak points and focus on improving them to reach my goals.

A Three-Woman Team of Leaders

Who would have thought that Toastmasters loved to talk? The 2016-2017 District Leadership Trio for District 8, which oversees all clubs in eastern Missouri and most of southern Illinois, were kind enough to do interviews with me about their perception of

Toastmasters as an organization and what their experiences with it have meant in their lives. District 8, centered in St. Louis, currently boasts over one hundred clubs in two states, with a membership of approximately two thousand individuals. To say that my interview subjects have shown exceptional leadership ability – even by the standards of an organization whose tagline is "Where Leaders Are Made" – would be a drastic understatement, and what I learned from these highly experienced Toastmasters was both eye-opening and touching.

The third-highest ranking officer in the District is the Club Growth Director, my dear friend Elaine Curry, who is a member of my own club, St. Clair Toastmasters, along with her husband, Lemont. She has served as our club president and has copious experience with public speaking, having worked as a minister for many years before joining.



As Club Growth Director, she coordinates efforts to charter new clubs and provides assistance to clubs that are struggling to maintain membership. Elaine proclaims that she has gained much during her six years as a Toastmaster:

For me, the greatest benefit has been the number of people that I've gotten the chance to meet, as well as the development of the skill of communication. We all think that we don't need it. A lot of times, the first impression is – people say, 'Oh, I don't speak in public. I don't need it.' I have learned, through my journey, that's not true. We all can use help when it comes to communicating effectively, and I have no problem talking to somebody about that, spending time – more

than one meeting – and letting them know just how important it is for us today to be able to communicate effectively.

Elaine's passion for Toastmasters is obvious; she shares how much she enjoys the opportunity to talk to so many different people, as well as her appreciation for the structured learning program that the organization presents. She recalls that she was surprised by how much she could learn even as an experienced speaker, and how that lesson has influenced her leadership style. "I'm a strong advocate of letting people know," she says, "you can never stop learning."

The second-highest office in the District is the Program Quality Director, filled by Kathryn (Kat) Mokriakow. She happened to be visiting my club when I gave my very first speech and has become a mentor and good friend over the course of my Toastmasters journey. It is her responsibility as Program Quality Director to oversee the educational efforts, officer training, contests, conferences, and other special events throughout the District.



"The culture of Toastmasters is one of camaraderie," Kat states. "Any time someone is not sure of themselves, in either just speaking in a group or even a singular conversation with someone one on one, they have an opportunity to come to Toastmasters and practice those things and get a little bit more comfortable."

Kat joined Toastmasters to conquer the fear of people that she developed as a result of an abusive relationship. She found difficulty in rejoining the workforce after the isolation of her marriage, and recalls that she was lucky to have gotten her first jobs through a temp agency without having to go through an interview, which she felt

completely unable to do. It was through one of these jobs that she went to her first Toastmasters meeting. "Quite often throughout my life, I have been invisible," Kat explains. "People didn't notice me. They didn't really make that connection with me. So whenever I heard about Toastmasters in the company, I decided to go, and I decided that I never wanted to leave." She has now been a member for more than ten years.

During her Toastmasters journey, Kat has discovered things she never imagined she was capable of doing. She shares that her first goal was simply to be able to talk to someone and to be treated like a friend. She achieved much more than that; she has become a strong and confident leader in Toastmasters, though she admits that she still gets slightly nervous when she has to stand up in front of people and talk.

Toastmasters was an integral part of the very challenging process of rediscovering herself after a traumatic experience, but through this Kat has learned an invaluable lesson: "I can do things beyond what I ever dreamed possible for me."

The top dog in the District Trio, as it is often called, is the District Director, Lora Mather. Lora is the only one of my interview subjects with whom I was not previously acquainted, though I had briefly met her husband (also a Toastmaster) at several events, and she knew me by reputation. The Director has ultimate responsibility for making sure everything in the District, from club growth and education to finances and public relations, runs smoothly and in accordance with the standards set forth by Toastmasters International.



Lora describes the culture of Toastmasters as one of mutual support for personal growth and development, which is inclusive and respectful of all persons. Lora relates how she first joined Toastmasters during a period of loneliness and isolation following her move to the St. Louis area in 1995. A therapist suggested that she find a way to make friends to help with the depression she suffered during this period, and Toastmasters provided that opportunity. Even after she felt better and became more settled in her new environment, she stayed in the program for the people she came to think of as her most trusted friends.

Lora has benefitted from Toastmasters in other ways as well; she has gained a greater sense of self-acceptance and self-confidence. She states that this comes from "... knowing where I fail, knowing where I succeed." This is supported by the organization's educational programs, which focus almost perfectly equally on overcoming personal weaknesses and developing personal strengths. Lora describes her proudest achievement in the program as her role in helping several elderly members finish their Distinguished Toastmaster awards – a longtime goal – near the ends of their lives.

Lora has served in district leadership positions several times during her twentyyear tenure in Toastmasters, and her experiences have touched her life in many ways. For the first fifteen years, she attended club meetings alone as a personal hobby; however, an incident several years ago prompted her husband, David, to join her.

One night, while they were out to dinner with friends in Chicago, David began choking. Luckily, his wife had recently watched another Toastmaster give a demonstration speech on how to perform the Heimlich maneuver (using a Winnie the Pooh stuffed animal as a visual aid) and was able to use it on her husband. In our interview, Lora used this story to emphasize that what one can learn from other speakers can make a difference in one's life just as much as the Toastmasters program itself.

In the process of interviewing these three incredible women, I gained a great deal of insight into both the long-term benefits of Toastmasters and the places where my own journey may take me in the years to come. The experience proved to be a positive one for my subjects as well. At the Division Conference two weeks after our interview, District Director Lora Mather came up to me and thanked me profusely for the opportunity, which she said made her think about her accomplishments in the program from a new perspective. In this, she summed up the experiences of all three interview subjects (as well as my own experiences) perfectly: "I have found lasting leadership, learning, and friendship in Toastmasters."

Taking Your First Step

Tips for Getting Started

If you have decided that Toastmasters sounds like it might be for you, your first step will be to research the clubs in your area, decide which ones might work with your schedule and goals, and then visit the club as a guest. It is common to visit several clubs to get a feel for the people, style, and atmosphere of each one. There is no limit to how many clubs you can join, so don't worry if you find several that you like!

New members will usually be assigned a mentor, an experienced Toastmaster who will guide them into the program. Don't be intimidated if the program seems complicated to you; plan on taking it one step at a time.

Here are some tips to help you get the most out of your early Toastmasters experience:

- **1. Be Active.** The people who get the most out of Toastmasters are the ones who are dedicated and give their best effort to the program.
- **2. Don't be intimidated.** We are all here to learn in a positive, supportive environment.
- **3. Listen.** Knowing how to speak and knowing how to listen go hand in hand. Toastmasters may seem like a lot to take in, but if you do a lot of listening and observing in your first few meetings, you'll have it down in no time.
- **4. Make mistakes.** In Toastmasters, failure *is* an option. Many valuable lessons come from making mistakes.
- **5. Get to know your Fellow Toastmasters.** Why not take the chance to make some new friends? You may also find your club experience more fun and fulfilling.

Remember, Toastmasters is a learn-by-doing program. It is not a class or a study group; what you will get out of it depends on what you are willing to put into it. If you

feel that the time is right to take the first step, visit http://www.toastmasters.org/find-a-club to set forth on your own Toastmasters journey.

On a last note – if there are no clubs near you or you can't find one that suits your needs, you can also start your own club! You can form a club in the community or, with support from your management, create a corporate club within your organization. For more information, visit http://www.toastmasters.org/start-a-club.

Notes from the Author

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To My Fellow Toastmasters

Please feel free to share the download link/webpage for this book with other Toastmasters or for any Toastmasters marketing efforts. However, please respect all applicable copyright laws and ownership rules, and do not, under any circumstances, modify the document in any way. In accordance with Toastmasters International bylaws, you also may not derive any financial gain from this work.

About the Author

Eileen Murphy had her first experience with Toastmasters through the Youth Leadership Program in 2009. She joined her first Toastmasters club in late 2015. Almost immediately, she was drawn into the leadership element of the program, serving as a club officer after just six months. A member of her club, who shall not be named (because I would probably type Eileen by accident), recommended her to serve on a district conference committee, which opened the door to a whole new realm of possibilities in Toastmasters and beyond.

Eileen is currently the Public Relations Manager for District 8 and is predicted (jokingly) by district leaders to serve as International President by 2025. For the moment, however, her long-term Toastmasters goal is to establish a partnership program between Toastmasters and other non-profit organizations, similar to the one that currently exists with corporate businesses, to help them better communicate with the public about their causes.

For questions, please email Eileen.murphytm@gmail.com.

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