

Toastmasters: The Best Remedy for Public Speaking Anxiety

Given to Marketing division colleagues during an annual planning meeting.

When Anthem asked the question “What Makes You Most Anxious?” on its website, forty percent of the fifty-two hundred responders answered Public Speaking. In fact, it was the top answer. If I had taken the poll last year, I might have been in that forty percent. I recognized the need to do something about my anxiety, and my search led me to Toastmasters. As you know, Northeast Delta Dental started its own community club, Horseshoe Pond Toastmasters, last May. As Vice President of Public Relations of our Toastmasters club, I asked to speak to you briefly today.

Toastmasters is an international nonprofit organization whose mission is to help men and women to improve their oral communications. There are many other benefits to Toastmasters, but that is the heart and soul of their program.

What does Toastmasters offer?

Since 1924, Toastmasters has offered proven methods of polishing speaking skills. New Toastmasters receive membership packets that help them to complete ten speeches to earn their first credential--Competent Toastmaster. Members direct their own progress. That is, each member decides what to speak on and how often to speak. The topic of the first speech, the four-to-five-minute Ice Breaker, introduces the new club member to the other members. Each subsequent speech works on another facet of effective speaking, each built upon what you have learned in preparing for the previous speech. You can give two of the 10 speeches outside of a club setting if another member evaluates you.

Unlike a day or two of training on presentation skills, Toastmasters offers training that helps you progress incrementally over time, helping you establish new habits. One lesson focuses on body language, while in another speech we practice varying our vocal range. Unlike many training programs, costs of membership are modest. Dues for both Toastmaster International and our club total \$60 a year, payable at half-year intervals. Membership includes a well-written magazine.

One of the aspects of our meetings that members find particularly valuable is the feedback we get from other members. A club member evaluates each of our prepared speeches in both writing and orally, with the evaluator pointing out the strengths of our presentation and making at least one suggestion for improvement. Other club members are also encouraged to give feedback, usually in the form of brief notes. Where else can you speak and hear how you can improve the next time—in an extremely supportive environment? After all, we are all at the meeting for the same purpose!

This is the mission of every Toastmasters club: “to provide a mutually supportive and positive learning environment in which every member has the opportunity to develop communication and leadership skills, which, in turn, fosters self-confidence and personal growth.”

Toastmaster clubs have structured meetings with roles that rotate. For instance, each week a Table Topics Master calls upon those members who do not have speaking rolls to speak from one-to-two minutes on a topic the Table Topics Master assigns. Table Topics helps you think on your feet and formulate what you will say quickly.

Toastmasters was my solution, could it be yours?

If you had responded to the Anthem survey, would you have listed public speaking as a top anxiety producer? If so, you are just the person who needs Toastmasters. I've recently completed my first ten speeches to receive my Competent Toastmasters designation. Northeast Delta Dental has established a protocol whereby each of our employees who reaches this level of achievement will be awarded \$50 to defray the costs of membership and be recognized during the next All-Colleagues meeting. I can also continue to progress in Toastmasters. Speech manuals become more specialized. One of those manuals is on giving speeches related to public relations!

Are you too busy? Well, it's great to be at every meeting. I hate to miss one, because they are really a lot of fun! Our club meets weekly; some meet less frequently. But most of us must miss meetings from time to time. We schedule our prepared speeches in advance, so we don't miss those meetings, or those in which we have some other major role.

Our Toastmasters club is actively recruiting new members. It looks like our club will eventually be made up of more people who don't work here than do. And that's fine with us; but we think that our Club continues to be a terrific resource for our own employees. During the last few months, we've attracted a telecommuter working for Brio Software in California, the new director of the Concord Public Library, a Concord firefighter, and an employee of a local high-tech corporation. The best way to determine whether the Toastmasters experience is for you is to visit a meeting and check us out. We won't even make you speak! If you are not located in Concord, or you would rather attend a club near where you live, there are 25 clubs in New Hampshire, 11 in Maine, and 6 in Vermont. Learn more about Toastmasters and find a club on the Internet at Toastmasters.org