

The Purpose and History of the Organization “Toastmasters International”

By *Marianne Stiewi*

During my time serving as a students’ spokeswoman, our high school celebrated the 350th anniversary of existence with a big festivity and a special ceremony. At this ceremony some representatives of the state and federal departments would speak as well as the school’s director, one or two other teachers and me as spokeswoman. I do not consider myself to be shy, but that morning when I was heading to the lectern to speak to a crowd of about 300 students, parents and other visitors, I felt sick as never in my life. At that time I did not know that I was just suffering from the fear of public speaking.

The Fear of Public Speaking

Speaking nearly unprepared to a crowd of 300 people is certainly an exceptional situation, but many people experience the fear of speaking in less dramatic situations, like presenting themselves in job interviews, giving presentations, participating at meetings at work or even asking for a promotion. The fear of public speaking is wide spread: “Fear of public speaking – a cousin of shyness – scored number one in a Book of Lists index of Americans’ greatest fears, outranking death” (Frank and Corridan). Also, the fear of public speaking continues in private life, like feeling uncomfortable at parties making small talk with strangers or avoiding giving a speech to honor a friend or family member at a special occasion. Even the one-to-one communication with close friends and/or partners and family members can suffer because many people do not know how to express themselves.

According to many scientists and psychologists, the fear of public speaking belongs to an emotional disorder called social phobia. In one source it is defined as, “the fear of scrutiny, humiliation, and embarrassment in social situations that require speaking, eating, or writing in public. These fears may occur in discrete situations, or in most or all social interactions” (Gropper and Bindelglas).

Hall states that there are two possible reasons for the development of social phobia. The human brain produces neurotransmitters, which are chemical substances that transmit nerve impulses across a synapse, like norepinephrine, dopamine and serotonin. Experts believe that neurotransmitter-receptor abnormalities play a part in the development of social phobias (Hall).

Another reason is easier to understand. “Negative social experiences, such as being rejected by peers or suffering some type of embarrassment in public, and poor social skills also seem to be factors, and social phobia may be related to low self-esteem, lack of assertiveness, and feelings of inferiority” (Hall).

Today many people assume that taking a prescription medicine like Prozac is the easiest way to treat such disorders or inconvenient feelings, although these medicines are not proven to help in treatment of social phobia. The fear of public speaking is only one aspect of social phobia with more or less significant symptoms. “Though there are many treatments for shyness – from therapy to medication – for those afraid of public speaking, the cure is usually the poison: Feel the fear and do it anyway” (Frank and Corridan).

There is a whole industry that offers expensive seminars to train speaking skills or other aspects of self-improvement. There are also several books on the market, which are less expensive but still do not substitute the experience of public speaking. Another less expensive¹, but extraordinary effective alternative is to join a club of Toastmasters International.

¹The average fee for a one-year-membership at a Toastmasters club costs \$ 60, including fees for Toastmasters International and the local club.

How Toastmasters Works

Members of a Toastmasters club learn in a friendly and supportive atmosphere to speak to a group, to control symptoms of fear and to work with others together. A typical Toastmasters club is made up of 20 to 30 people who meet on a regularly basis (most of them once a week, some less) for about an hour or more. These meetings have a special structure.

Club Business

Usually a meeting starts with a short business session in which the club officers give reports and club business is discussed.

Prepared Speeches

In this part of the meeting two or more members deliver their prepared speeches. These speeches are based on projects from the Toastmasters International Communication and Leadership Program manuals. Each project addresses a different topic, like organization of a speech, voice, language, posture, gestures and so forth. An average speech out of the basic manual is about five to seven minutes; some speeches out of the advanced manuals can be up to 15 or 20 minutes.

Impromptu Speeches

Members present a one-to-two-minute-speech on an assigned topic.

Evaluation

Each prepared speaker is evaluated by another member who points out the strengths of the speech and gives some advice where and how to improve in a two-to-three-minute-speech. This part of the meeting also includes an evaluation of the meeting itself, and how well the leaders of the meeting handled their responsibilities.

Leaders And Helpers

Each meeting is led by several leaders and supported by some helpers.

The **Presiding Officer** (who is the president or one of the officers) leads the business part of the meeting.

The **Toastmaster** is the host of the meeting. He is responsible for the agenda, chooses a theme for the meeting and leads through the part of the prepared speeches. He also moderates the transitions between the different parts of the meeting.

The **Table Topics Master** assigns the questions for the impromptu speeches.

The **General Evaluator** introduces the evaluators for the speakers and gives an overall evaluation about the meeting, including some helpers' reports.

Number and kind of helpers vary from club to club. Some of these are:

Grammarians, who choose a word of the day and listen to good or improper usage of English language and grammar;

Listener, who listens carefully during the whole meeting and asks questions when he's called by the general evaluator;

Timer, who times the prepared speeches, table topics and evaluations and gives signals when the speaker reaches the estimated time or when he's going to exceed his time;

Ah-counter, who clicks the use of "Ahs" and other filler words;

Vote-counter, who collects the vote for best speaker, table topics speaker and evaluator.

Also, there are some leaders in the background who take care that the club and the meetings run smoothly and effectively. These are the President and the officers: Vice President for Education, Vice President for Membership, Vice President for Public Relations, Secretary, Treasurer (some clubs combine these duties) and Sergeant-At-Arms.

Each new member is involved step-by-step into being an active member. Usually new members start with taking over some minor helper duties like grammarian, timer and so forth and participate in table topics. As soon as they feel more comfortable, they give their first, so called “ice breaker” speech and work on the other nine themes of the basic manual. A mentor is assigned to each member to give some advice about speaking techniques or choosing a theme for the speech. Only the members themselves decide about the interval between the speeches. In average an interval of four to six weeks between the speeches works for most people the best.

After serving a couple of times as a minor duty holder new members later put on the hats as table topics master, toastmaster, evaluator and general evaluator, and some may even serve as a club officer. All these responsibilities and activities besides the speaking aspect also help to train leadership skills.

Every single Toastmasters club is embedded in the infrastructure of areas, divisions and districts of Toastmasters International. There are special events like speech contests that start on club level, and the winner participates at the contest the next higher level. Training is offered for new elected club officers to provide detailed information about their new responsibilities and club business. Conferences on area or district/division level are the environment for the speech contests above club level, and also offer some possibilities to learn or improve skills or to qualify for other duties within Toastmasters like judges and chief judges who rate the speech contests.

The Results of a Survey

While I was preparing to write about this subject I strongly felt that only describing how a typical meeting at Toastmasters goes on, or explaining the different duties would not give an adequate impression that a membership at a Toastmasters club can really help to overcome the fear of public speaking. Therefore I set up a questionnaire and asked the fellow toastmasters of my club for support. Fifteen of 24 members returned the questionnaire. According to the guidelines for statistical significance these answers/results are not representative or statistical significant, but they give some insights. I asked the members:

For how long they are members of Toastmasters;

About the reasons to join Toastmasters;

What has changed since they are a member;

To name benefits for professional and personal life that can be credited to Toastmasters; and

Whether they think Toastmasters can help everyone become a better speaker.

Duration of Membership

The range was from fairly new members (membership for only a few months) about more experienced members (membership for more than two years) to very experienced members with a membership about four years and more. Figure 1 shows this information.

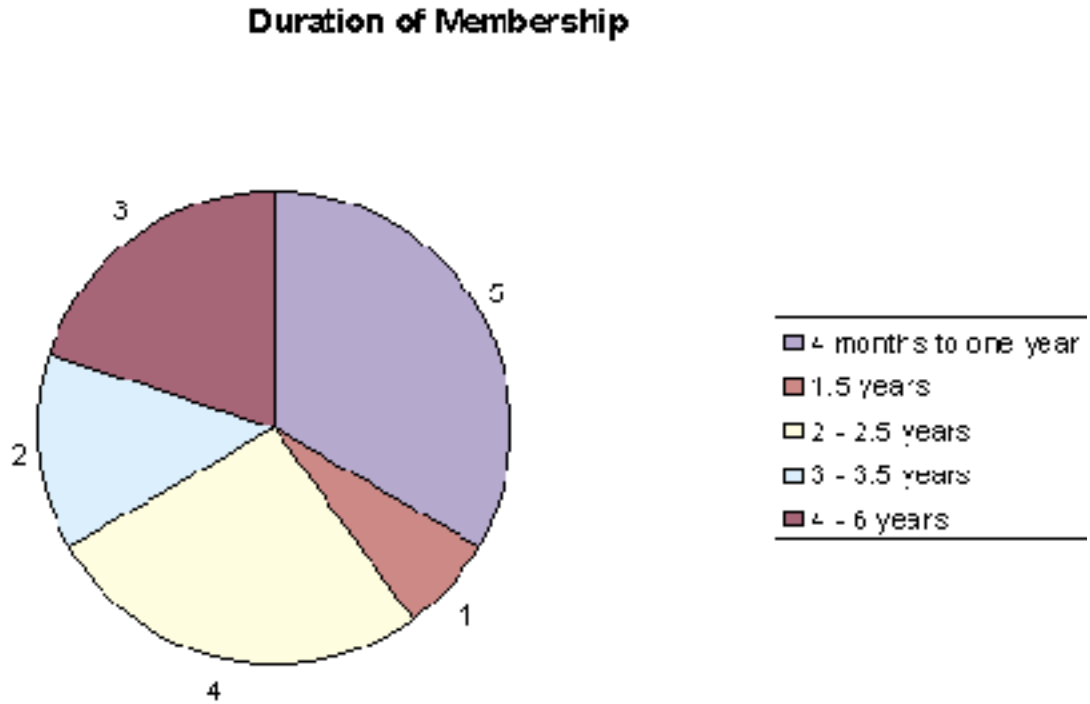


Figure 1 Duration of membership

There were five members being in Toastmasters for four months up to one year, one member for 1.5 years, four members for 2 – 2.5 years, two members for 3 – 3.5 years and three members for 4 – 6 years.

Reasons to Join Toastmasters

I asked the members of my club about the reasons why they joined Toastmasters. These are the results:

Reasons to join Toastmasters*

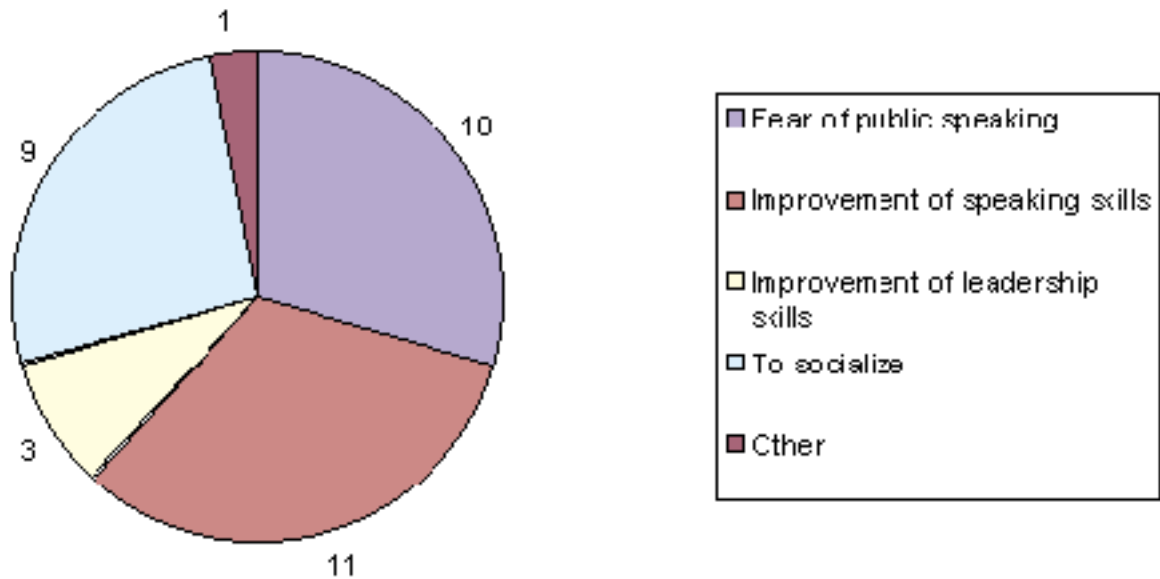


Figure 2 Reasons to join Toastmasters (*Answers were not limited to one)

The majority joined the club to lose the fear of public speaking (10 entries) and/or to improve speaking skills (11 entries) and/or to socialize (9 entries). Only three members wanted to improve their leadership skills, which indicates in my opinion that this skill is still regarded as not so important.

What Has Changed?

I also asked my fellow Toastmasters what has changed since being a member.

What has changed?*

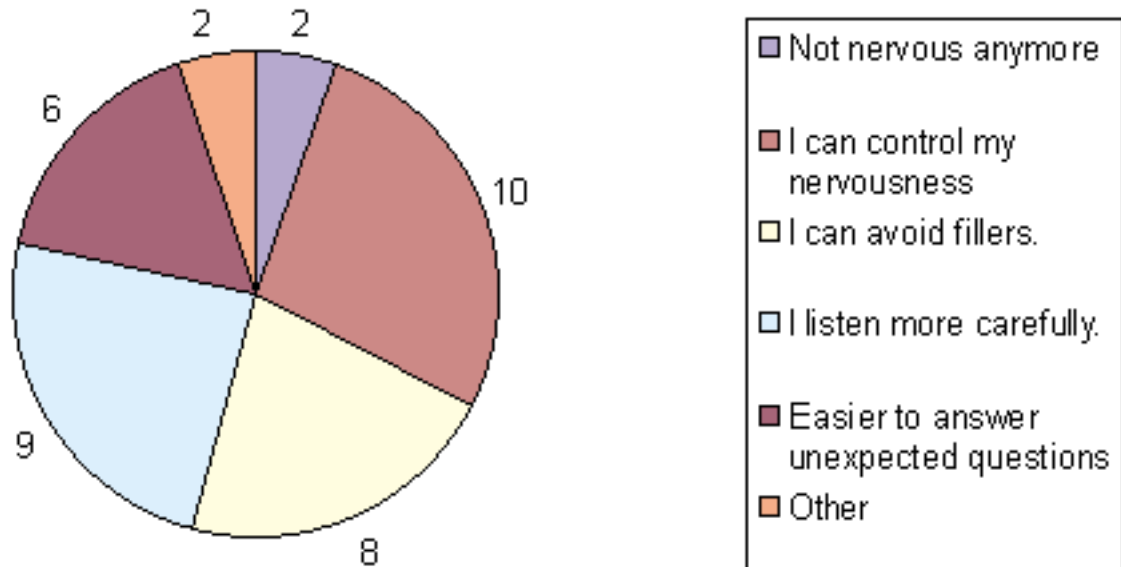


Figure 3 What has changed since being a member of Toastmasters

*Answers were not limited to one

Only two members answered that they are not nervous anymore about giving a speech. The majority (10 members) answered that they are still nervous, but can control it. Eight members stated that they are able to avoid fillers like “Ah”, nine members answered that they listen more carefully, and six members stated that it is easier to answer unexpected questions. Toastmasters does not claim to make everyone a perfect speaker, but that there is a realistic chance for everyone to work on skills and improve. And the result of this survey emphasizes this statement.

Benefits to Professional Life

I asked what benefits for professional life could be credited to Toastmasters. The majority answered that they have “more confidence speaking up in meetings,” or “helps me give presentation at work,” or experienced “better group speaking ability” (responses to a questionnaire conducted by the author). Other answers stated:

- to feel more comfortable and confident when dealing with supervisors and/or customers;
- to ask for a promotion with a positive result;
- to have a better presence at meetings;
- to stay focused on the topic of a meeting or project;
- to develop a more risk-taking behavior;
- to be a better listener, able to give constructive feedback.

Benefits to Personal Life

I also asked whether being a member of Toastmasters has given some benefits to private life. Some people felt that their social skills were developed. Other emphasized on the social events we offer in our club, as we are a singles-club. Further answers included meeting “lots of lifelong friends,” or “I am starting to listen better,” or “stronger listening skills,” or “express myself better”. Not surprisingly the benefits to professional life seemed to my fellow toastmasters more important. Still the majority indicates that there are benefits to private life too – although these aspects seem to be subtler.

Can Toastmasters Help Everyone?

Fourteen members answered the question “Do you think Toastmasters can help everyone becoming a better speaker and/or leader?” with “Yes” and one with “No”. The one who answered with “No” wrote, “Toastmasters can only help those people who have a genuine desire to overcome their fear, and put effort into learning new skills” (response to a questionnaire conducted by the author).

A Brief History of Toastmasters International

Ralph C. Smedley worked at the beginning of this century for a local YMCA club as director of education. He quickly realized that these boys needed some training in communication. He founded a club to create a friendly, but still realistic environment, where the boys could practice in giving speeches and evaluating them as well as presiding the meetings. He called this club “The Toastmasters Club” because the meetings were set up as banquet with toasts and after-dinner speakers. Smedley organized other Toastmasters clubs in other cities whenever he was transferred in the following years. But unfortunately these clubs only blossomed as long as he was a member.

Finally, the YMCA director arrived in Santa Ana. Once more he organized a Toastmasters club, holding the first meeting in the Santa Ana YMCA basement on October 22, 1924. In Southern California’s optimistic climate, the concept caught on. Men from neighboring communities sought out the group and liked what they saw. Smedley was quick to help them organize their own Toastmasters club. The new clubs were united in a federation designed to coordinate their activities and ensure uniform methods. (Biography of Dr. Ralph C. Smedley)

This federation was incorporated as Toastmasters International in 1932, and in 1941 Smedley resigned from YMCA and opened a little office in Santa Ana where he and his secretary handled club business. Since he started the club in Santa Ana, Smedley also wrote manuals for Toastmasters and several books about public speaking and parliamentary procedures, and was editor of *The Toastmasters Magazine*. The membership of Toastmasters International increased rapidly after the end of World War II, but it was not open for women until 1973. During the last two decades the need to communicate effectively raised and so, not surprisingly, every year more people decide to join a Toastmasters club to improve their speaking skills.

At the August Board of Directors meeting in Chicago, Illinois, 1998-99 International President Terry Daily, DTM, reported the organization’s progress during the past year. During 1998-99, Toastmasters International recorded its highest membership numbers ever: 175,846 members in 8,801 clubs in 70 countries (as of June 30, 1999). He said TI also “chartered 680 new clubs, which is almost two new clubs per day, making it the third best year ever in term of club growth. (*The Toastmaster*, November 1999) The growth of Toastmasters International regarding the number of clubs is shown in figure 4.



Figure 4 Total Number of Clubs
 (“View From Top”, *The Toastmaster*, October 1999, 25)

More than 1,000 major organizations, government agencies, military forces and so forth sponsor in-house Toastmasters clubs for their employees. There are also specialized groups like clubs for senior citizens, singles, handicapped people and bilingual groups.

I joined a singles Toastmasters club in November 1998 to improve my English and to socialize. I attended a district meeting two months later and was amazed and impressed how strong and effectively volunteers run this non-profit organization². I also find the whole concept (the structured meetings and the manuals with different objectives) very convincing and effective. I watched members who once avoided attending family celebrations because they were afraid they had to deliver a little address growing into self-confident people. Being a member now for over one year, I delivered recently the 10th (and last) speech out of the basic manual and also served as a club officer. During my research for this paper I read a short notice that even now some educational organizations take the Toastmaster concept to teach language. Whether someone is afraid of public speaking, or wants to improve his leadership or social skills, or just wants to add some entertainment and excitement to her or his life, I would recommend joining a Toastmasters Club.

²Toastmasters International does not employ paid promoters or instructors. It has no salaried staff except the executive director and the people who work at the world headquarter in California.

Works Cited

Frank, Christina; Corridan, Kara. "Scared speechless: how I stopped being shy. (joining a public-speaking group) (includes related articles on medication to cure shyness and speech-making techniques)." *Redbook*, Vol. 185, 05-01-1995, 98(6).

Gropper, Michael; Bindelglas, Paul. "Fear of scrutiny, humiliation & embarrassment." *Jerusalem Post*, 03-26-1999, p. 8.

Hall, Lynn. L. "The Things That Go Bump in the Mind." *FDA Consumer*, Vol. 31, 03-01-1997.

"Biography of Dr. Ralph C. Smedley".

<<http://www.toastmasters.org/smedley.htm>>, reprinted with permission from *Orange Coast Magazine*.

"Making Dreams Come True". *The Toastmaster*, November 1999, 14.

"View From The Top". *The Toastmaster*, October 1999, 25.

Survey conducted by the author