

# TOASTMASTER®

August 2010

## Speaking A Cappella –

How musicians  
communicate.

## Become a Better Conversationalist

## Make Them Laugh

Sure-fire ways to create  
a humorous speech.





## May Toastmasters Be With You ... Always

† Thirty years ago, *The Empire Strikes Back*, a movie sequel to *Star Wars*, was released. That movie told the next exciting chapter in the *Star Wars* saga. After an amazing two hours of cinema, the film unexpectedly ended with numerous questions left unanswered. Was Darth Vader really Luke Skywalker's father? Would Han Solo be rescued? Who was the other Skywalker? As a child, I was devastated knowing I would have to wait three long years until the next movie to learn the answers.

The future can be like that. Despite our best-laid plans or expectations, the journey is rarely what we would have imagined. Yet those unexpected moments are what make the journey so worthwhile.

Has your Toastmasters journey been what you expected? Mine has been much better than I ever anticipated! Fifteen years ago, I joined Toastmasters so I could deliver a speech without falling over from nerves. I never planned to become a club officer, or compete in speech contests, or attend a district conference. With encouragement from others and a keen curiosity, I took leaps of faith into the unknown. Those leaps have made all the difference in my life.

The future of Toastmasters International is very bright. In July, several changes commenced that will improve the services provided to all members around the world. All districts are now organized into regions; a new leadership role, called region advisor marketing, is in place; and the Board of Directors is reshaping into a more strategic governing body. The International Convention in August will have a new agenda for the first time in decades, which incorporates new International Speech Contest Semifinals, great education sessions and other innovative events.

Coming up ahead is an updated five-year strategic plan for Toastmasters, enhanced recognition programs for areas, divisions and districts, and a brighter spotlight on leadership. Technology will become an even greater focus in the year ahead, helping members to engage even more deeply in all facets of the Toastmasters program without the barriers of geography or time. The future is indeed bright.

We have dedicated and creative volunteer leaders at every level of our organization who work diligently to serve you. The professional and caring World Headquarters staff works every single day to serve you and make your Toastmasters experience better. Hundreds of thousands of people are waiting to take the leap of faith to join Toastmasters and need your encouragement and support to do so. What does *your* Toastmasters future hold?

Eventually, the *Star Wars* movies had a happy ending. Toastmasters members have a million blissful beginnings every day. The future is brilliant. Embrace the journey. May Toastmasters be with you ... always.

*Gary Schmidt*

Gary Schmidt, DTM  
International President

# TOASTMASTER

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#### The Toastmasters Vision:

Toastmasters International empowers people to achieve their full potential and realize their dreams. Through our member clubs, people throughout the world can improve their communication and leadership skills, and find the courage to change.

#### The Toastmasters Mission:

Toastmasters International is the leading movement devoted to making effective oral communication a worldwide reality.

Through its member clubs, Toastmasters International helps men and women learn the arts of speaking, listening and thinking – vital skills that promote self-actualization, enhance leadership potential, foster human understanding, and contribute to the betterment of mankind.

It is basic to this mission that Toastmasters International continually expand its worldwide network of clubs thereby offering ever-greater numbers of people the opportunity to benefit from its programs.

*Do you have something to say? Write it in 200 words or less, sign it with your name, address and club affiliation and send it to [letters@toastmasters.org](mailto:letters@toastmasters.org).*

### How to Apologize with Integrity

The article "How to Apologize Like a Celebrity" by Chris Witt (May) makes me think of what some other celebrities might do or say when they do something wrong. On the topic of truth and integrity, consider these insightful quotations:

The great American humorist Mark Twain said, "Always tell the truth. That way, you don't have to remember what you said." "The Buck Stops Here" was on the desk of Harry Truman, the 33rd president of the United States. "No legacy is so rich as honesty," wrote William Shakespeare. Oprah Winfrey once said, "Truth allows you to live with integrity. Everything you do and say shows the world who you really are. Let it be the Truth."

To me, the right way to say, "I'm sorry" is simple: 1. Sincerely apologize; 2. Tell the truth; 3. Learn from your wrongdoing; and 4. Move on.

Ching-Sung Chin, CTM • GEICO Toastmasters  
Chevy Chase, Maryland

### Talking About Family

Neil Chethik's article, "For Fathers: How to Communicate With Your Son" (June), was wonderful. For me, the timing was as fitting as could be.

My father passed away a decade ago and I have had some issues that I was not able to resolve before he died. But in recent years I have been better about some things surrounding our relationship. Last night I spoke as candidly as I have in some time with my father's only sibling, my aunt. She announced to me that she has primary progressive aphasia, and it is likely that by this time next year she will not be able to communicate with me at all.

Building upon this article and my conversation with her, I plan to learn what I can from her before the

chance passes forever. Thank you for the article. I will be forwarding it to others.

Alan Gurwitz • Community Toastmasters club  
Muskegon, Michigan

### Tell Him You're Proud of Him

What a great article by Neil Chethik ("For Fathers: How to Communicate With Your Son," (June). I immediately identified with the power in telling your son, "I'm proud of you." I am not yet a father, but I know how those four words can make me feel 10 feet tall and bulletproof!

I also loved the comment about how fathers and sons tend to talk easier side by side vs. face to face. I tend to engage face to face with my father, but it never goes as well as when we are side by side – watching a game, fishing or sitting at the bar. Rather than fighting it, I have learned to embrace it.

Thanks for the insight!

Ryan Jenkins, CC • Peachtree Toastmasters • Atlanta, Georgia

### Motives and Motivation

William H. Stevenson's article "History's Most Important Speeches" (May) was a revelation to me. Stevenson profiles the memorable oratory of such legends as Mahatma Gandhi, Susan B. Anthony, John F. Kennedy and Nelson Mandela. Each speech was about "an idea or an ideal such as democracy, justice or freedom." This vivid article caused me to question the often-used format of a particular Toastmasters speech: the motivational speech, in which the speaker describes overcoming personal adversity, and then urges the audience to do the same as a means of attaining success in life.

In the world of professional public speaking, this type of speech is most often used in a corporate setting, to stimulate employees to

work harder and increase company profits. What a contrast this purpose is to that of the great speeches of history – many of which have changed the world as the result of a call for justice. How many motivational speeches advocating personal success have stood the test of time and are included in history books?

Steven Montgomery • Metro New York Toastmasters  
New York City, New York

### A Round of Applause

I am not typically a letter-to-the-editor-kind-of-guy, but the quality and selection of the articles in May's *Toastmaster* demanded applause. I usually find interest in 20 percent of the articles, but this month found most an absolute delight.

Thanks to your crew.

Greg Pittenger • Dripping Springs Toastmasters • Driftwood, Texas

### Seriously, Though...

I just read Mr. Harrison's article "Turning the Tables on Table Topics" (February) in which he does a wonderful and clever job of telling us how to avoid answering Table Topics questions. In many clubs I see his advice being used again and again, which leads me to wonder if perhaps Table Topics has outlived its usefulness.

When I joined Toastmasters, Table Topics was considered an important and intentionally challenging aspect of the meetings, designed to prepare us for real-world impromptu situations. We were expected to take our questions and answer them to the best of our abilities. If, as Mr. Harrison suggests, our best approach to Table Topics is to pretend "You Came From Outer Space," then why even bother? We should either take the activity seriously or drop it entirely.

Bil Lewis, DTM • MIT Humor and Drama Club • Cambridge, Mass.

# Commencement Speaker Gains Education

“They’ll never pick me.” I repeated those words in my head as I wrote a commencement speech I never thought I would deliver. I had a lot to say, so I wrote it anyway. I was grateful to the University of Phoenix Online (administered out of Phoenix, Arizona) for the opportunity to earn my bachelor’s degree as an adult with a full-time job and a young family. It wasn’t easy. I worked hard, earned every grade and finally, finally, was finished! My target audience, the graduating class of 2006, was exactly like me. The speech was written for all of us. And guess what? They *did* pick me.

Panic set in.

One thing an online education does not prepare you for is public speaking. With an audience of 1,500 graduates plus 4,000 of their closest friends and family, I was jumping in with both feet. I was a nervous wreck.

I practiced and practiced. I recited my speech to my 4-year-old in the car, in the bathtub, wherever she would listen. She became my biggest fan. “Mommy, say your speech again!”

July 27, 2006, is a day etched into my memory. There I was, standing in U.S. Airways Center, home of the Phoenix Suns basketball team, performing a sound check. The stadium seats were high above me. The JumboTron hanging in the center of the cavernous arena flickered on and the screens displayed my 10-foot face on all sides.

## It’s Show Time!

The ceremony was ready to begin, so we all filed into the U.S. Airways Center toward our seats. Teetering in my heels, I tried not to fall down

the stairs. I sat with my fellow graduates and watched the first two speakers, but I can’t remember what they said. My hands were sweaty and my mouth was dry.

Then it was my turn. I took the long walk to the stage, then clenched the lectern. The frog in my throat croaked my beautifully rehearsed speech to the towering crowd and the 200 faculty members who sat onstage behind me. Despite flaws that only I noticed, my message came through: “My fellow graduates, did you get the piece of paper, or did you get something more?”

Afterward, I found out how important that speech was. Graduates approached to tell me how much they loved it; they felt I was talking about their own personal journey and the challenges they overcame to be at this ceremony. In my address, I had thanked the faculty and the families for their unwavering

skills, and most of all, the confidence to *deliver* a great speech. A Toastmasters club had been meeting in my office building, right under my nose, and I hadn’t joined. I finally did join Cosmopolitans Toastmasters in Murray Hill, New Jersey, and started working through my *Competent Communication* manual.

Thanks to the Toastmasters program and the wonderful support I received from my club members, as well as the amazing leaders I have met in District 83, the frog moved out of my throat by speech Number 6, and I haven’t heard from him since. In fact, at my last division contest, I fell down the stairs *twice* and still placed in the top three winning speeches!


My advice to new Toastmasters trying to get over their nerves is to practice your speeches, and to speak as often as possible. By the time you finish your CC, you won’t

**“The JumboTron screens displayed my 10-foot face on all sides.”**

support, and they appreciated my message too. I had connected with my audience. All the practice and anxiety generated by having to give this five-minute speech was worth it! I wouldn’t trade this scary experience for the world, and I would do it again... but not until after I joined Toastmasters.

Yup, you read that right. I did this crazy thing before I joined Toastmasters – and it’s the reason I joined. I knew I could *write* a great speech, but after going through this new and daunting experience, I realized I needed to develop the

worry about being nervous. Instead, you will focus on how to improve your presence.

Connect with your audience. They want you to succeed. Your negative mindset is the only barrier to overcome. 

**Rebecca George, CC**, is a member of Cosmopolitans Toastmasters in Murray Hill, New Jersey. Reach her at [rebeccadg@optonline.net](mailto:rebeccadg@optonline.net).

**Editor’s Note:** Have you ever given a commencement speech? Let us know at [letters@toastmasters.org](mailto:letters@toastmasters.org).

**English Toastmaster blends pop music success and public speaking skills.**

# Dec Cluskey and The Bachelors

Ask for advice from someone in show business and the last thing you expect to hear is that education is paramount. Talk to Dec Cluskey, though, and that's exactly what you'll hear.

"When people inquire about succeeding in the music industry, I tell them to focus on an education first," says the Toastmaster and member of the band Con and Dec The Bachelors. "I believe that if you want to get ahead in any career, particularly show business, education is your most important asset.

"When you're educated, you're able to control the business side of things and no one can take you for a ride."

Cluskey and his brother, Con, have successfully navigated the music business for many years. They co-founded The Bachelors, the first Irish band to top the charts in the United Kingdom. (When they first split with the third group member in 1984, they performed as The New Bachelors. Now the brothers perform as Con and Dec The Bachelors.) In one lineup or another, the "Bachelor" brothers have released more than 70 albums, charted more than 15 singles, scored a No. 1 hit, and amassed a number of gold and platinum albums. In 2008, a compilation CD, "I Can't Believe – The Very Best of the Bachelors," reached the Top Ten on the U.K. charts.

Returning to the topic of education, Cluskey says he's certainly received one from Toastmasters. Although he has performed all over the world, Toastmasters taught him a great deal about communication, he says, and that's made him better onstage.

"From the first moment I joined, I realized that the speaking content of our show could be improved dramatically," notes Cluskey, a member of the Eastbourne Speakers in Eastbourne, near Sussex in England. "Now, four years later, the talking part of our show is absolutely dynamite – thanks to Toastmasters. It's a great feeling to know that I can stand in front of an audience and not only kill them with my singing, but also with my talking."

## Singing the Praises of School

Those who approach Cluskey for tips on succeeding in the entertainment business are often taken aback by his emphasis on education. "Many people think of academics as the last thing they need," he says. "They think that to make it in show business you must be in the right place at the right time and have contacts and luck, but the truth is, to go the distance in this business an education is your best asset."

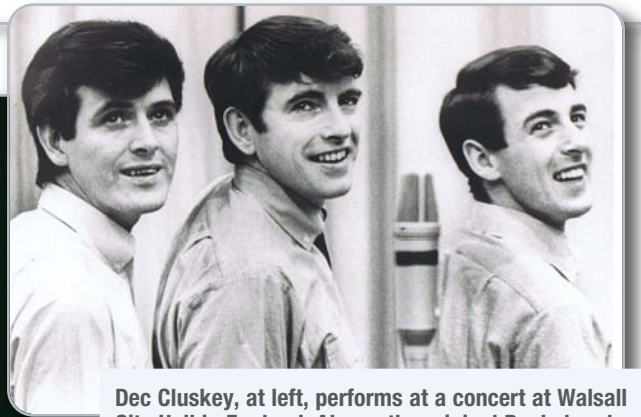
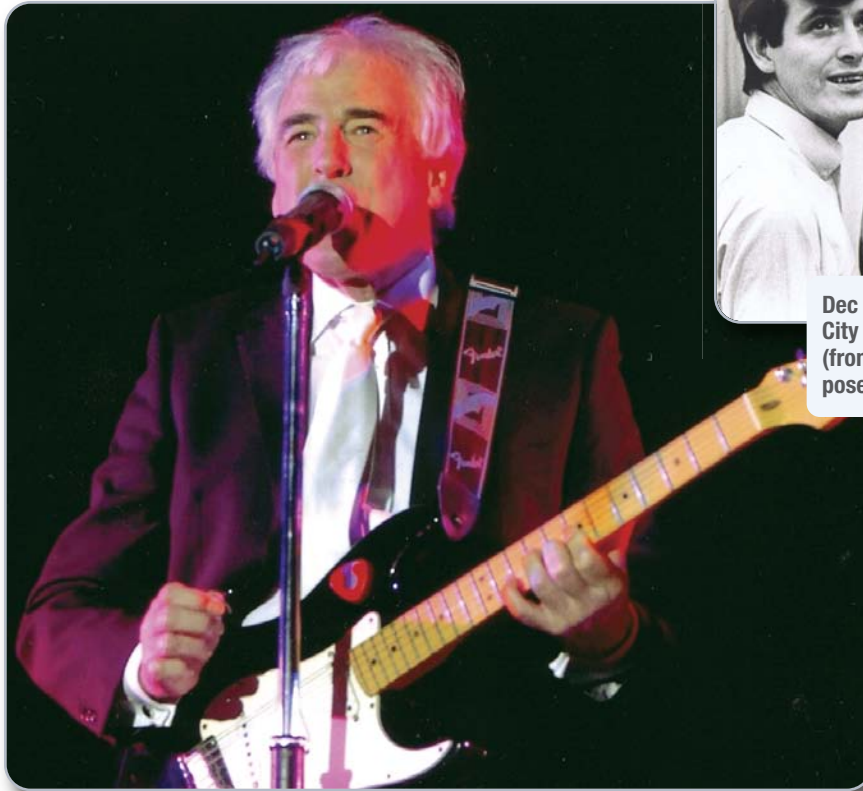
Cluskey grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and credits his mother for initiating his music career. "In addition to promoting my academic

education, my mother also insisted I play the piano, and I am so grateful for that. By the age of 12, for some unknown reason I had also decided to play the mouth organ, and I excelled thanks to my piano work."

He performed on his first radio broadcast, playing the mouth organ, when he was 12 and performed on *The Ed Sullivan Show* when Sullivan visited Dublin on St. Patrick's Day. By the time he was 15, Cluskey wrote and played the background music for a 26-week primetime Irish radio comedy series known as *Odd Noises*.

Dec and his brother formed a harmonica group called The Harmonichords in 1957. Eventually, they added vocals and guitars, grew hugely popular in Ireland and, in 1962, renamed their band The Bachelors – all of this while still in school. In 1963, when he was 21, Cluskey graduated at the top of his class with a degree in civil engineering. But he decided to pursue his singing career in England with the Bachelors, and the group hit it big with its song "Charmaine," which rose to No. 5 on the U.K. charts.

Cluskey decided to try Toastmasters in 2006 after a friend urged him on numerous occasions to attend a club meeting. "When it was suggested that I get involved in Toastmasters, I misinterpreted the message," he says. "I thought that Toastmasters was an agency and



Dec Cluskey, at left, performs at a concert at Walsall City Hall in England. Above, the original Bachelors band (from left, John Stokes, Con Cluskey and Dec Cluskey) pose for a promotional photo in the early 1960s.

played “I Believe” for the Pope and a crowd of 250,000.

As a tribute to his standing in British show business, Cluskey was chosen as a King Rat and Trustee of the exclusive entertainment charity, The Grand Order of Water Rats. Members include royalty such as Prince Charles, and Bob Hope, Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy were also members.

that I should get booked as an afternoon speaker. Then I finally attended a meeting, and once I understood the group’s purpose, I immediately thought that as a member of the show business community, I would show everyone what it’s all about.

“But quite the opposite occurred. They showed *me* what it was all about.”

Giles Robinson, a fellow member of the Eastbourne Speakers club, says Cluskey’s speaking abilities have improved since he joined Toastmasters.

“As a result of his show business career, he was already familiar with dealing with big audiences, but developing his ability to speak to smaller groups in a less showbiz-way has really improved, and he recognizes that,” says Robinson. “Dec is full of humor and always looks to enjoy himself. He has more than a touch of blarney, which carries him through on many occasions.”

### Giving Toastmasters His All

Soon after becoming a member, Cluskey immersed himself in

**“It’s a great feeling to know that I can stand in front of an audience and not only kill them with my singing, but also with my talking.”**

**Dec Cluskey**

Toastmasters. Besides serving in various leadership roles, he shares his entertainment experience by giving presentations on subjects such as effective microphone techniques.


“Dec is a confident, proficient and amusing presenter and is very good on stage,” says Gordon Piggott, another member of the Eastbourne club. “He provides expert evaluation that is refreshing, because it comes with a show business twist.”

Over the years Cluskey has shared the stage with many show business legends, including Judy Garland and Sammy Davis, Jr., and has played on the recordings of a variety of artists, including the Rolling Stones. Cluskey is especially proud of the time in 1983 when he

For Cluskey, one of the best things about being a Toastmaster is the exposure to like-minded people.

“The hidden benefit of Toastmasters is who you get to meet and learn from. Through the organization, I’ve learned a lot by listening to other members.

“It’s a tremendous education.”

To learn more about Dec Cluskey and his music, visit [www.thebachelors.co.uk](http://www.thebachelors.co.uk). 

**Julie Bawden Davis** is a freelance writer based in Southern California and a longtime contributor to the *Toastmaster*. You can reach her at [Julie@JulieBawdenDavis.com](mailto:Julie@JulieBawdenDavis.com).

# SPEAKING A CAPPELLA





## When the music stops, how well do performers communicate?

By Patrick Mott

*It's no secret that classical musicians are among the most sublime communicators of ideas and emotions. Whether singers or instrumentalists, they use their art to reach parts of the human mind and soul that mere spoken language cannot.*

But what happens when you take away this most potent of all communication tools? When the scores are put away and the violin cases are snapped shut, do musicians suddenly turn into shrinking violets and stammering wallflowers? Or do they continue to blossom as witty, precise, natural and engaging conversationalists and speakers?

The answer can be as complex as the nature of music itself, according to a handful of prominent professionals whose daily work involves the writing, performing, conducting or discussion of classical music.

"In my own observation, it really runs the gamut," says Grant Gershon, the music director of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. "The musicians I know can broadly be broken down into two categories. There are those who express themselves clearly and have a natural performer's instinct to make verbal connections the same way they make musical connections, and who seemingly use the same part of the brain to do that. But I also know musicians for whom music might actually have been a substitute in their early development for verbal skills. Some of them would rather do anything imaginable than [verbally] introduce a piece of music they're about to perform or banter with the audience."

Peter Schickele is not one of the latter group. A well-known and well-loved American composer of legitimate modern classical music, Schickele is best known for his fictitious brainchild P.D.Q. Bach, supposedly the last and least talented of the children of Johann Sebastian Bach. In the service of his loopy creation, Schickele has composed an equally loopy body of comical "classical" music and has traveled extensively, performing it with various ensembles and soloists as "Professor" Peter Schickele, the greatest living authority on P.D.Q. Bach.

Schickele admits to being a lifelong ham – "my mother said I was a born performer and that I started entertaining people when I was 18 months old" – who relaxes when he's in front of an audience. "I was that annoying

young man who would deliberately fall down a flight of stairs to shock people – if there was carpet on the stairs."

### **Educational Programs Aid Communication**

Schickele acknowledges that many musicians use their art as a kind of substitute for verbal skill, but adds that "these days, more so than 50 years ago, musicians are often involved with educational programs or outreach that requires them to talk." And, over time, they improve.

Operatic soprano and educator Carol Vaness was involved in just such a program in the early years of her professional singing career. Vaness, who began singing in 1979 with the New York City Opera and has since performed on the greatest opera stages of the world with such legendary singers as Luciano Pavarotti, today is a professor of music at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music.

"Speaking, if you're an outgoing blabbermouth like me, well, it doesn't scare me," she says. "And I don't need a script mainly because I began my career with a group called Affiliate Artists, based out of the San Francisco Opera. It was an outreach program where they wanted everybody to enjoy the arts, regardless of whether or not you had a lot of money... We did what were called 'informances' and we became adept at emceeing, interviewing and being interviewed."

Not everyone has found it so easy. Vicki Bentley, a violinist with the Springfield (Ohio) Symphony Orchestra and a Toastmaster for nearly 10 years, says such programs helped her hone her verbal communication skills. Heavily involved in charity work, Bentley said she always found nonverbal communication through the performance of music to be almost second-nature, but that speaking came a bit harder.

"I find it more difficult to communicate verbally," she says. "Sometimes I tend to get a little bit misunderstood. But musical communication on a nonverbal level comes naturally to me."

“Communication happens at many levels, and Toastmasters is all about those different levels and the details that are involved. So much of communication is non-verbal, and the language of music is universal. Music can reach the parts of the brain at the most basic levels, which is something speech can’t do.”

Still, she says, bridging the gap between verbal and nonverbal communication has made her a better

**“When the scores are put away and the violin cases are snapped shut, do musicians suddenly turn into shrinking violets and stammering wallflowers?”**

speaker and a better musician. She says she recognizes singing as a particularly refined amalgam of the two: “Music and language are a conjoined effort. They enhance one another. That’s why singing is so effective in teaching. The words teach, and the song helps you to remember.”

### **Making the Leap**

Elan Chalford, a violinist who lives near Tampa Bay, Florida, and a Toastmaster for nearly 12 years, views speaking and playing music as a dexterous mental leap. The two activities involve two different parts of the brain, he notes. When you’re in front of an audience talking and performing music, the key skill that’s needed “is to be able to move back and forth between those two parts of the brain,” Chalford says. “It’s a lot more difficult than people might think. When I started doing it, I could feel a resistance, a kind of wall I had to pass through. But the more you do it, the better you get at it.”

Chalford says Toastmasters has greatly improved the speaking part of his presentations. “After I had been with Toastmasters for a while,” he says, “when I was with any band on stage and something needed to be said, I could easily step up to the microphone and say something, whether it was a question of filling time or introducing a tune.”

Most classical musicians are highly trained and well-educated, says Gershon (who is also a pianist and vocalist, in addition to his role as a choral conductor), “and it’s a lifelong learning process. The amount of training that goes into being a musician is really extraordinary, and the greatest and most interesting musicians are always the most well-rounded and have the best sense of how their music fits into the culture at large.”

Are singers better than instrumentalists at expressing themselves verbally simply because they deal with words set to music rather than notes alone? It may be more complex than that.

“Singing,” says Vaness, “requires a great ability to think fast and re-create a feeling – for example, within the throat or how you take a breath – a physical sensation. There’s a great deal of immediacy.” Beyond the merely

physical, however, singers, even if they aren’t naturally comfortable in front of an audience, prepare themselves in such a way that they end up looking as if they’re good at it. “Part of our job is to be actors,” she notes.

Gershon agrees that singers tend to be “more showy” on stage than instrumentalists, but “with

vocalists it’s not only that they’re using their voices to express themselves, they’re also used to confronting an audience – looking right at them and seeing their faces. Instrumentalists are used to performing sideways, almost ignoring that the audience is there.”

Or they may shrink into the background, fading into clichés. Jokes about musicians in the various sections of a symphony orchestra are legion, and generally reflect common assumptions about the players’ personalities: Brass players have big egos, double reed players are shrinking violets, percussionists are anarchists, and so the stereotypes go. To some extent, it’s true that when someone is in effect buried inside a large orchestra, smooth repartee may not be that musician’s stock in trade.

“Orchestral musicians have to, by definition, be good listeners,” says Jim Svejda. “And if you’re playing in an orchestra’s fiddle factory [the extensive violin section] you don’t exactly lose the will to live – I’m being a bit facetious here – but you do lose a bit of individuality.”

### **Talking on the Radio**

Svejda (pronounced SHVAY-da) is perhaps the best-known classical music disc jockey in the United States. He appears regularly on KUSC-FM in Los Angeles and is the host and producer of the nationally syndicated radio series, *The Record Shelf*, which is carried by nearly 200 public radio stations. He has interviewed hundreds of classical musicians on the air and says that the more he interviews, the fewer he can pigeonhole as being eloquent or tongue-tied.

“It’s really case by case,” he says. “Some musicians are incredibly eloquent, like [the American composer] Ned Rorem. But with other musicians you can understand why they chose music as a means of

communicating, because they find it very difficult to put a sentence together.”

One of Svejda’s favorites over the years, for both musicianship and eloquence, is Daniel Lewis, a former professor of music at the University of Southern California (USC) and the now-retired conductor of USC’s celebrated symphony orchestra.

“He’s one of the great conductors of his time,” says Svejda. “And [at USC] he had one of the great musical programs anywhere. He could communicate with anyone and get the ideas through to them. It was no accident that his kids on a given day could outplay just about every professional orchestra in the world.”

Such communication is not easy, says Gershon.

“For conductors, it’s very important to express yourself clearly and succinctly, because time is money in a rehearsal, and people are there to sing and not be lectured to,” he says. “But you also have to communicate the emotions of the music and give the context in which the music was created. In a nutshell, you have to be able to inspire verbally, in as efficient a manner as possible. It’s a challenge.”

Finding comfort with speaking may be easier for the modern conductor, says Schickele.

“The old European conductors didn’t talk too much,” he says, “and their musicians didn’t want them to. They preferred them to say what they had to say in a concise manner, or with body language. These old conductors were almost considered godlike. But back then they didn’t have to do fundraising events and talk to people about money. Conductors today do. And in some cases it’s become popular for conductors to talk directly to the audience.”

Still, to hear musicians at their most engagingly vocal, catch them after work.

“[There’s] nobody like orchestral musicians for great stories,” says Svejda. “They watch the conductors and the soloists and the singers and are firsthand witnesses to the most outrageous things that happen. It’s great people telling great tales.”

Says Schickele: “One thing that always impresses me is that people have this idea of musicians as stuffed shirts, humorless kinds of people. In fact, symphony orchestra members make up one of the greatest repositories of jokes in the country. They are tremendous fun, socially.”

**Patrick Mott** is a Southern California-based writer and a regular contributor to the *Toastmaster*.

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# Three Keys to Effective Leadership

† Leadership is one of those concepts that is discussed, analyzed and taught endlessly, for good reason: It's critical to getting things done.

A few years ago, I took on one of the biggest leadership challenges I've ever faced when I agreed to be the host district committee chairman for the 2007 International Convention in Phoenix, Arizona. Even though I had been a district governor and international director, this was leadership of a different type. Instead of a year or two of regularly scheduled events and responsibilities, this was a 16-month period focused on – and leading up to – a grand finale: the Toastmasters International Convention.

My role consisted of a lot of planning, organization and meetings. But everything came together as it should, and my team of more than 300 volunteers worked smoothly, accomplishing its mission to support many of the events during Convention. Three critical success factors helped. I'm certainly not the first to discover these, and some would say there are many more than three. But these are the attributes I could not do without as a host district committee chair.

## Delegation

This trait doesn't always come easy to leaders, but it's one I learned through my experiences in the Toastmasters leadership ranks. If I had tried to manage our efforts during every event of the 2007 Convention on my own, and single-handedly recruit the 300-plus volunteers involved, it would have been impossible. I would have failed miserably, and the Convention attendees would have noticed.

So I delegated the different functions – dinners, Hall of Fame, contests, education sessions – to various committee chairs. Those 16 leaders made it all work.

I delegated, but I also empowered those committee chairs to lead their teams in their own way. By choosing capable people to help, I found it easy, later, to trust them to do their jobs effectively.

I also learned to accept offers of help. Several people were generous enough to say, "If I can do anything, don't hesitate to ask." And instead of saying, "That's okay, I've got it under control," I was able to take them up on their kind offers.

I learned that even those who don't offer are usually more than willing to help if you just ask them.

## Communication

An effective leader needs to be an effective communicator. In planning my committee's participation during Convention, I needed to communicate with individual volunteers, World Headquarters staff and especially with my committee chairs – either individually or as a group. E-mails were flying back and forth between all these entities and myself for months. The result was that everyone understood exactly what was happening and could see the progress we were making. Regular and consistent communication among everyone concerned is a crucial activity that supports anyone in a leadership position.

A note about e-mail: It should not be depended upon as a sole means of communication. If you need to know something and aren't getting the response you need, pick up the phone and call. Sometimes

computers go down, browsers act up, messages float around the Internet for days before landing in an inbox, or people just aren't reading their e-mails. Failing to receive an e-mail reply is no excuse for missing the answers you need.

## Appreciation

This is the easiest and most enjoyable leadership responsibility. As we worked toward the start of the Convention, I tried to thank my committee chairs in every e-mail I sent out: Thanks for attending the meeting. Thanks for getting the information to me. Thanks for all you're doing. I tried to provide snacks for every meeting, having discovered long ago that if you want good attendance – food works!

Appreciation goes a long way toward keeping a team motivated and happy. Everyone likes to be appreciated; even if it's not why we do what we do, we love it just the same.

There are many other qualities a good leader needs: integrity, kindness, listening skills, fairness, having a vision, the ability to motivate—the list goes on. But if you're leading a team, and you can delegate the tasks so that the workload is shared; if you can communicate what the end result needs to be and how to get there; and if you will appreciate your team members at every opportunity, you will be an effective leader. †

**Dee Dees, DTM**, served on Toastmasters' Board of Directors in 1994-1996, and is a member of Gilbert Toastmasters in Gilbert, Arizona. Contact her at [deedees@lifestorylady.com](mailto:deedees@lifestorylady.com).

## Contest participants share sure-fire ways to create a humorous speech.

**T**he Humorous Speech Contest is a popular Toastmasters event. Who doesn't like listening to a funny speech? A problem that clubs often face is persuading members to participate as speakers. Toastmasters who are happy to take part in the International Speech Contest all too often will pass on performing a humorous speech, saying, "Oh, I can't think of anything funny to talk about."

# Make Them Laugh

By William H. Stevenson, III

The truth is, humorous topics are *everywhere!* We've gathered a few pointers from recent participants in Humorous Speech Contests on how to come up with a funny topic and develop that idea into a speech.

### The Funniest Subject: You

Comedians have always known that if you poke fun at yourself, people will laugh. Often all you need to do is exaggerate actual events a little, and sometimes the simplest ideas are the funniest. In the 2009 District 30 contest, Bruce Jin of Saturday Morning Workout Toastmasters in Aurora, Illinois, gave a speech about his name. "In Chinese my name, Jin Yu, means 'goldfish,'" he explains. "When I tell people stories about my name they laugh. So I made a speech about it."

Jin's speech began with recollections of his boyhood. "I asked my Mom: Why did you not name me Shark? Or Dolphin? Some big fish?" His mother told him to count his blessings. She could have named him Crawfish. When Jin moved to the United States, he found that his name caused problems. "When someone called out, 'You, Jin!' I thought, No, its Jin Yu." At the end of the speech he recounted how he gave in to the inevitable and changed his name, choosing something similar – Bruce Jin.

You don't need a funny name to poke fun at yourself. "Finding ideas is not that difficult," says Nga Nguyen of Harris SpeakEZ club in Melbourne, Florida. "As Toastmasters,"



she says, “we like to talk, and we forget how to listen. Just watch how people around you go about their business. The ideas are everywhere.”

Nguyen got the idea for her most recent humorous speech on a trip to the mall, where she noticed how obsessed contemporary culture is with looking young. To turn this idea into a speech, she made herself the subject of most of the jokes – focusing on how she went to ridiculous lengths to turn back the clock.

Her “Prime Time” speech was organized using the classic framework of introduction, main ideas and conclusion, with three ludicrous “how-to-look-young” ideas supplying most of the laughs. “People got a kick out of my idea on how to create an instant facelift,” recalls Nguyen. “I showed them how I tie my hair into a pony tail with a hair tie, and then pull the hair really tight, to create the effect of a facelift.” Nguyen’s careful speech construction illustrates one of the benefits of entering Humorous Speech Contests: They challenge Toastmasters

to craft well-organized speeches with transitions so smooth and effortless that the audience hardly notices.

### **Use Battle of Sexes for Comedic Barbs**

Personal experience is a rich vein of topics that everyone can mine. The battle of the sexes has always supplied material for comics. Angie Palmer, a Toastmaster in Ohio, exploited this theme in a speech on the idiosyncrasies of her marriage. “It just came naturally,” she says. “It’s the day-to-day life, like seeing how my husband stacks dishes in the sink so he can put more in there instead of washing them. Plus, he made fun of me during the previous Humorous Speech Contest, and I thought it was about time for me to put him on the spot.”

Without her husband’s speech to goad her on, Palmer might never have tried her hand at competing. “That was my first attempt at a humorous speech,” says the Chinese native. “I never thought I could do it because jokes are so culture-specific. But I decided to

# A Fast and Fun Humor Resource

If you're looking for tools to help with your humorous speech – or just something to put you in a funny mood – try the Museum of Humor at [www.museumofhumor.com](http://www.museumofhumor.com). The Web site was developed by humorist Malcolm Kushner, author of the book *Successful Presentations for Dummies*.

While the site's dated graphics could use an update, it offers a wealth of resources and even a free e-zine, offering funny quotes to use in your presentations.

First, take a look at the Museum of Humor's "Resources" page that takes you to various Web sites offering amusing cartoons, widgets and information. To get there, click "Resources" at the left side of the museum's homepage screen. The resources you'll find range from odd news to an anagram generator. The generator is particular fun, as you can type in any word and generate a list of anagrams from its letters. For example, type in "speaking" and a list of 100 anagrams appears, with dandies such as "Ask Peg In" and "Apes King."

The site also offers a rhyme generator. One click takes you to **Rhymezone.com**, a fruitful spot for helping you create wordplay, witty tunes and snappy remarks.

People can do some pretty funny things, so if you're looking for anecdotes to share about human behavior, this online museum – with its variety of odd news links – can lead you to a wealth of stories.

The resources page is just one part of the museum. If you want to learn more and see examples and tips from the humor professionals, take a trip to the site's library... by clicking the "Library" button on the left side of the homepage screen. Articles, sample sitcom scripts, interviews, how-to tips and plenty of research are available. There are even some free books to download.

For some extra fun, try the "Exhibits" link from the homepage. There, you'll find a generator that can convert any number into its weight or size in penguins. Be advised that the penguins are metric. See, that's funny. And you can be funny too! See it for yourself at the Museum of Humor.

give it a try and I'm glad I did. I went all the way to the division contest."

John Zimmer, an attorney in Geneva, Switzerland, also draws on marital dynamics for material. In the 2009 Humorous Speech Contest, he playfully offered a strategy for men facing an angry wife: Use the Toastmasters evaluation technique. The next time your wife rails at you, Zimmer suggested husbands should calmly evaluate her "performance" – taking notes, offering positive reinforcement and pointing out ways she can improve. This "reasonable, analytic approach" will completely take the sting out of her fury, he concluded.

The speech went over so well that Zimmer won the contest for District 59. He also won the district contest in 2008, with a speech that included an Arnold Schwarzenegger impersonation.

When it comes to delivering humorous speeches, Zimmer recommends choosing topics that audiences can identify with, such as relationships, raising children, financial issues, moving to another home and awkward travel experiences. But be aware that these topics are common. "The challenge is to come up with a unique angle," Zimmer says.

## Comedy in Current Events

American humorist Will Rogers found his best material by reading the morning paper. He said a joke can be half as funny but still get a laugh if it's true. Toastmasters can use topical humor, too. In the fall of 2009, Canadian

Toastmaster Peter Roundhill of Seymour Speakers in Vancouver, British Columbia, saw the approaching Vancouver Olympics as an opportunity for a humorous speech that was too good to miss.

From behind the lectern he donned a fake pig's snout and delivered a pun-filled speech titled "The *Olimpigs* are coming!" He promoted a suspiciously similar sporting event soon to take place in the city of *Hamcouver* featuring ice *boggy* games and *pigure* skating competitions. Roundhill's offbeat style made him the winner of his district contest. How did he get the idea for the speech? "I like cartoon-drawing," he says. "In August of last year I started to work on ideas for a pig-themed cartoon. The club contest was in September so I decided I would try out some of my humor in the contest."

As Roundhill's example shows, combining personal interest with a topical subject can result in a very successful speech. Steve Cerve of the Talk of Lincolnshire club in Carol Stream, Illinois, is another member who went that route. "My speech was about my old car," he says. "My wife and kids have been pleading with me for years to get rid of it and they really put the pressure on me during the recent Cash for Clunkers program. So my speech was about the little quirks of my car, and how I had become so emotionally attached to it that I couldn't trade it in."

Cerve ended his speech in a memorable fashion. After concluding that Cash for Clunkers just wasn't for him, he ripped off his shirt in Superman fashion to reveal a T-shirt underneath with a big red heart that read: *I Love My Clunker!*

Cerve has given many humorous speeches since joining Toastmasters in 2003. “All of my speeches are based on personal stories that I’ve shared with family and friends,” he says, “events that occur at home, at work or on vacation. If something funny does happen, make a note of it, so you don’t forget what it was. Then you can begin to craft a story around it. My stories have one theme – like the one about my old car – and I’ll limit the story to three or four main points so I don’t get too detailed and overwhelm the audience.”

### Show Them You’re Funny

Anything can be funny if you give it a twist. One way to do this is to use visual aids. Peter Roundhill donned a plastic pig snout, Nga Nguyen twisted a hair tie and Steve Cerve wore a customized T-shirt.

A humorous speech can be organized entirely around visual aids. Bob Chikos of Crystal Lake Toastmasters in Crystal Lake, Illinois, gave an award-winning speech on an unusual subject. “I really am a map nerd,” he says. “I’ll gaze at maps of a random state and dream about how I would change things if I drew them.” At the start of his speech Chikos unveiled a colorful series of posters to illustrate his plan to improve the United States by re-drawing its state borders. For example, he would donate a bit of West Virginia to Maryland to keep its panhandle from falling off and create the new state of Yoopee from Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.

Chikos finds his best ideas come when he goes for walks. “I don’t take a radio or an iPod,” he says, “but I do take a mini tape recorder. The solitude, combined with the oxygen intake, is a breeding ground for ideas.”

### Chuck the Joke Book

Good humorous speeches don’t come from the Internet or joke books. A familiar joke isn’t funny. And if *you’ve* read it or heard it, chances are that people in the audience have too. Imagine giving a humorous speech and then sitting down and watching the next speaker give a speech with the *same* jokes. I’ve seen this happen. “I never use a joke book,” says Angie Palmer. “The most successful part of the speech, in my opinion, is in the originality.”

“I didn’t need a joke book,” adds Roundhill. “Things just kept popping into my head. Once I started thinking about pig jokes and porcine word puns, they just kept coming.”

### Keep it Clean

None of the speakers interviewed for this article use “blue” humor, profanity or jokes that might be in questionable taste. Humor of this sort really has no place in Toastmasters or a speech contest. Although it’s acceptable for a speaker to make gentle fun of an ethnic group




she or he belongs to, anything beyond that is risky. The fundamentals of telling a joke – timing, set-up and delivery – are the same whether the gag is clean or dirty. The speech competition gives everyone a chance to develop these techniques in a non-threatening environment.

### Reap the Rewards of Contests

The benefits from Humorous Speech Contests are many. For one thing, they’re fun. They are also challenging, offering speakers the chance to use their skills and imagination to craft and deliver the sort of speeches that will afford instant feedback. Humor is a tool worth honing, because it adds great value to speeches.

The skills developed in these contests can be applied in settings outside of Toastmasters, as Melanie Ghazarian of the Conejo club in Thousand Oaks, California, discovered. “I give sales presentations at work,” she says. “When you are the first presenter after lunch it can be a challenge to keep the audience awake. Using humor helps.”

Enjoy yourself trying a few of these techniques. Many subjects can serve as fodder for your material. There are also many ways to construct and deliver your speech. Don’t be afraid to try storytelling narratives and parodies of serious speeches – just two of the forms that can shape and organize a really funny presentation. And when you take part in a Humorous Speech Contest, you’ll realize that all the effort was worth it. These events give us a chance to have fun, experiment and discover a style that works. 

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**William H. Stevenson, III**, is a freelance writer in Huntsville, Alabama. He has been a member of three Toastmasters clubs in the Huntsville area. Contact him at [whsteve3@aol.com](mailto:whsteve3@aol.com).



## How to make a comedic connection.

# Delivering Cross-Cultural Humor

In an increasingly divided world, humor may be the last bridge that unites all of us, regardless of demographics. As Toastmasters, we are fully aware of the power of humor. However, if you have spoken to an audience in a different country or from a different culture, you know how challenging it can be to find appropriate humor that connects with the audience.

As a professional speaker from Singapore who addresses culturally diverse audiences on a daily basis, I feel your pain. Fortunately, through several years of experimenting, I have discovered two key strategies that can help you make audiences anywhere laugh:

### 1 When speaking in a different country, tell stories about personal encounters with residents there.

It helps if these stories are self-deprecating in nature. Not only are such anecdotes funny, they involve your audience, which makes them feel important. When I addressed a French company, I opened my keynote with a story about meeting a French girl who greeted me by putting her cheek forward. Wanting to reciprocate her openness, I kissed her... directly on the cheek! In that moment, I realized I had misinterpreted the intent of her proffered "air-kiss" greeting.

In a slightly surprised tone, she asked if this was how Singaporean men said hello. In order to save myself from embarrassment, I had

to say yes, and kissed her other cheek. The French bosses loved the story so much that they were howling in laughter for a good 30 seconds. Because the joke was on me, it created a strong rapport with the audience, and I had an easy time convincing them about my message.

### How to apply this lesson:

If you have been invited to speak in a different country, make it a point to arrive early so that you can interact with people and experience what they are experiencing. Take note of the situations you get yourself into. "What if nothing interesting happens?" you ask. Impossible! Pay attention and you will find plenty of examples to talk about.

**2 Pay attention to the country's idiosyncrasies.** Another effective way to milk humor in a cross-cultural setting is by observing the country's idiosyncrasies and then playfully poking fun at them. Take the United States, for example. There's a stereotype of young Americans having very little geographical knowledge of the rest of the world. So when I delivered a speech in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I opened by recalling a conversation I had with an American college student. He was curious about where I came from. When I told him I was from Singapore, he thought that it was part of China. When I said it wasn't, he apologized and corrected himself – "I am sorry; I meant India."

The story generated a huge amount of laughter. I tried the same technique in Guangzhou, China. One of the more well-known aspects of Chinese culture is that they are open to eating a variety of animals – dogs, cats, snakes, rabbits and so on. So I told this joke when I spoke to an audience in Guangzhou:

*"Do you know why Adam and Eve cannot be Chinese? Instead of eating the apple, they would have eaten the snake!"*

Even more effective is poking fun of your own country's reputation. Many people still perceive my country, Singapore, as extremely strict. Remember Michael Fay, an 18-year-old American expatriate student who was convicted of vandalism in Singapore in 1994. He was fined \$2,200, and sentenced to four months in jail and six strokes of caning.

In my division-winning speech in a Humorous Speech Contest in Philadelphia, I started off like this:

*"Good morning, my name is Eric and I am from Singapore. (In whisper) It's true. We do cane people. (Laughter from audience.) But seriously Singapore is a fine city. You get fined for anything. (Laughter.) We collect about 5,000 fines every day and 40 percent come from international tourists. Now you know why we welcome you with open*

arms. (Laughter.) Welcome to Singapore! That's \$500, thank you very much."

#### How to apply this lesson:

I find speaking to local residents particularly useful when using the idiosyncrasy strategy. Ask them about the perceptions and peculiarities of their countrymen. What are they notorious for? For example, in Singapore we are well-known for pressing the "Close" button in an elevator when we see someone rushing in. In fact, the faster the person rushes in, the faster we press the button. Singaporeans all know this, even though we will never admit it. Hence, to milk the humor out of this truth, you can either turn it into a question ("What button do Singaporeans press when they see someone running into the elevator?") or share a story about how

someone tried pressing the "Close" button when you scrambled into the elevator. Either way, it will work.

As always, there are some rules of thumb to adhere to when you deliver your funny lines, regardless of what country you speak in or which strategy you employ:

- **Always test your jokes or funny stories with the locals or the representative group first.** If they find your bit funny, chances are the audience will feel the same way. If possible, make sure your joke or story has a point behind it. So even if the audience doesn't laugh, your material still serves a purpose.
- **Make sure that there is no jargon or acronym in your set-up or punch line.** Every word that you use must be easily understood by your foreign audience or

they won't be able to appreciate your joke.

- **Speak slowly and clearly so your audience can understand you.**

If you want to be a humorous speaker, find as many opportunities as you can to test your material. Get feedback from your audience and then refine. Repeat the process until you are satisfied.

I look forward to hearing you speak in Singapore some day! You can count on me to give you the loudest laugh. 🗣️

**Eric Feng, ACS**, is a member of the Braddell Heights Advanced Toastmasters Club in Singapore and a professional speech coach in Asia. In 2009, he was also the District 80 First Runner-Up in the Humorous Speech Contest in Macau. Reach him at [www.ericfeng.com](http://www.ericfeng.com).

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Make a great first impression,  
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# International Meet & Greet

**Y**ou never have a second chance to make a first impression. Research shows that lasting impressions are made within the first eight seconds of meeting someone. Those first few seconds can determine whether you *form* a new relationship or *lose* one depending on the other person's perception of you. In an international organization such as Toastmasters, cultural differences will likely be a part of many of your encounters. Let's explore the rules for verbal introductions, handshakes, eye contact, body distance and the exchange of business cards.

## Introductions

Customs vary widely among countries and even among regions of the United States. Let's start with the task of introducing two people. Which person do you introduce first? In the U.S. and in most other countries, we address the most respected person first, typically the person with more authority, the one higher up in a corporation or simply the older person. If we were introducing Toastmasters Club President Jane Doe to new club member John Smith, we would speak to the president first: "Jane, I'd like to introduce you to John Smith, a new member who learned about the club through our Web site. John, Jane Doe is our club president and, like you, she is a martial artist."

The introductory sentence is followed with a few words about the person. The purpose is to provide the individuals with some details that they might have in common. Perhaps they attended the same school, lived in the same city at one time or have the same hobby.

When possible, people participating in an introduction should stand.

## Handshakes

At the conclusion of the verbal introduction, the two individuals being introduced extend their hands. "Handshakes vary by culture, according to values, communication style, gender and the nature of the relationship," says Hilka Klinkenberg, founder and president of the New York City-based Global Coaching and Consulting Group, which consults and trains on cultural business issues.

To offer a proper handshake in the United States, you position the palm perpendicular to the floor with thumb open, clasp the other person's hand and hold for approximately three seconds. "Generally, we pump the hand two or three times," says Klinkenberg. "However, in France and Germany, one pump is considered appropriate."

Other countries have differing customs regarding handshakes. Some handshakes are considered inappropriate in the United States yet appropriate in other countries,

according to Klinkenberg. For example, a soft handshake, or one involving fingers only, is appropriate in some Asian countries.

People who travel around the U.S. notice regional differences between the East Coast and the West Coast. East Coasters are more formal, with a firm handshake grip, whereas West Coasters are more casual, with a lighter handshake. West Coasters often hug business associates as well, which is not considered appropriate in other parts of the world, especially between a man and woman. In a number of cultures, especially in the Middle East and Russia, handshakes between men and women are discouraged.

## Face to Face

In the U.S., eye contact is important, and people who don't look others in the eyes may be considered untrustworthy. In Japan, a handshake may include a bow with eyes cast downward. "In Japan, eye contact by a subordinate could be considered a sign of aggressiveness," says Klinkenberg.

Smiling is normal when greeting someone in most Western cultures. It indicates that the individuals are happy to meet one another. However, in certain cultures, such as Germany, a business introduction is done with a "polite smile that is somewhat restrained,"



according to a representative of the German Consulate.


The suitable distance between two people talking varies by culture as well. In the U.S., most people stand 24 to 30 inches apart to maintain a comfortable distance. However, in Brazil and Russia, the distance shrinks to about 10 inches. Wherever you travel, make it a habit to note how far apart other people stand so you know what is considered an appropriate space between business people in that part of the world.

### **Business Cards**

After introductions and handshakes, it's customary in most cultures to exchange business cards. Once again, you should pay attention because variations exist. In the

U.S., business-card exchanges have become informal, oftentimes with little attention paid to the exchange protocol or the contents on the card. But paying attention to these can, in many ways, make the exchange more efficient for both people involved. It's a good idea for a person offering his or her business card to point the card with its letters facing toward the receiver, so that person can read the card easily. The business card should be accepted with two fingers holding the card on the edge and not covering information, so it can be easily read. In Japan and China, though, a business card is usually presented and accepted with two hands.

Whether greeting a prospective club member, meeting someone at

the Toastmasters International Convention or introducing business colleagues, the first few minutes set the stage for the relationship. Learning and observing cultural customs will help you avoid making awkward mistakes. "As you travel the world, pay attention to the way individuals act, and respond accordingly," concludes Klinkenberg. 

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Become  
a Better

# Conversationalist

By Patricia Fry, ATMS

**“A conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That’s why there are so few good conversations: Due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet.”**

Truman Capote

**How to talk to anyone any time.**

**D**o you ever feel awkward during conversations with neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances or even family members? Join the crowd. Many people feel uncomfortable while trying to form a connection during verbal exchanges – making a point or recognizing what others mean can sometimes be tricky.

If your attempts at personal conversations are less than satisfying, you may wonder, “Is it them or is it *me*?” Don’t worry – natural communication doesn’t always come naturally, but as experts tell us, it can be learned. One place that helps is Toastmasters. While the Toastmasters *Competent Communication* manual focuses on public speaking, many assignments in the *Competent Leadership* manual can help you practice one-on-one communication.

You can also learn the art of small talk by improving your impromptu speaking skills, which will ultimately make you more comfortable with everyday communication. For extra practice, you can hone your conversation skills by speaking with members and guests at club meetings.

Here are some tips to help you be more effective at everyday conversation and experience more satisfying interpersonal communication. They include helpful hints for short-circuiting other people's annoying habits of sabotaging otherwise perfectly good conversations.

### To Become a Better Conversationalist:

**1 Express a sincere interest in the other person.** In fact, if possible, learn a little about this person before you have the opportunity to engage in conversation. Dale Carnegie said, "It's much easier to become interested in others than it is to convince them to be interested in you."

**2 Ask meaningful questions.** See if you can get this person to tell you what they think about a topic, event or news item, or how they feel about it. Ask open-ended questions – the kind that must be answered with more than a *yes* or *no*. Instead of asking, "Did you enjoy your cruise in Alaska?" try this: "What was your favorite port and what made it special?" or "Which excursion would you recommend in Juno?"

Make a point to ask valid questions while drawing out those longer answers. James Nathan Miller reminds us, "Questions are the breath of life for a conversation." I once had a colleague who took this advice to a serious extreme: Upon leaving a conversation with him, you felt as if you had been interrogated. He typically bombarded you with questions and barely gave you time to respond. If you did respond, he didn't seem to hear you – he just continued his machine-gun barrage of random questions.

**3 Give compliments.** There's always a reason to say something nice, and there's no better way to attract the undivided attention of someone than to issue a flattering remark. In a casual setting, admire a friend's appearance or home, compliment the food she prepared or praise her work on the elementary school carnival. In a business atmosphere, check some of your colleagues' bios and, when you have the opportunity for one-on-one conversations, say something complimentary about each person's achievements.

**4 Listen.** How many times do you catch yourself paying little attention to what's being said because you are so busy planning your next comment? While

conversations occasionally are one-sided, most of the time we strive to give and take – that is, speak and then listen. Respond and then listen. A big part of successful communication is responding appropriately, and how can you do that when you didn't hear the previous comment?

Remember, Toastmasters founder Ralph C. Smedley said, "Whatever your grade or position, if you know how and when to speak, and when to remain silent, your chances of real success are proportionately increased."

**5 Avoid debates.** Sure, there are times and situations that may call for friendly debates. But do avoid turning a friendly conversation into a nasty debate. One way to do this is to graciously allow other people their opinions. Also, stay away from historically volatile topics. You know what they are: religion, politics and any other controversial topic that you are passionately for or against. English statesman Robert Bulwer-Lytton once said, "The true spirit of conversation consists in building on another man's observation, not overturning it."

**Tip:** In conversation, avoid using *but*. It tends to negate what came before it. Use the gentler *and* instead. Rather than saying, "He is a good athlete, but he could try a little harder," try this, "He is a good athlete, and he could try a little harder."

**6 Keep up to date on current events and issues.** When it comes to one-on-one communication, it is better to know a little about a lot of things than a lot about one or two things. In fact, you've probably noticed that your brilliant friends and acquaintances who have just one area of interest and expertise are some of the dullest conversationalists you know.

**7 Use humor.** Nothing breaks the ice in communication faster than a little tasteful humor. Try incorporating your natural wit into conversations. Tell a cute story – keep it brief. Smile while speaking. Nothing lightens up a conversation like a genuinely warm smile.

**8 Model someone whose communication skills you admire.** I especially love talking with certain people. It just seems as though our conversations flow so nicely; they're interesting and constructive. These are the people I want to chat with, because spending time with them makes me feel good. They know how to communicate effectively. And I always work to sharpen that set of skills so I can have the same effect on others. Perhaps you know people in this category. If so, do as I do: Communicate with them often. Observe, listen and learn.

As a result, I have learned to focus on the following for really effective conversations:

- Make eye contact.
- Speak clearly.
- Use vocabulary that is familiar to the person or group you are talking with.

### Handling the Poor Communicator:

**1 His communication is tied to his ego.** We all want to be heard, understood and believed. We tend to converse better with like-minded people. And this is especially true of the guy or gal who brings too much ego into the conversation. This person might try to monopolize the conversation. He will boast. He may even attempt to engage in a debate as a way to show off. He doesn't want to hear what anyone else has to say. He may feel inadequate discussing subjects outside of those related to his own accomplishments as a college football player in 1983, for example.

*What to do?* After listening politely and making appropriate comments, attempt to distract, diffuse and challenge him by asking, "What do you think about the college football team line-up for *this* season?" or "What impact did football have on your life as an insurance agent?" or "Would you recommend that parents support their kid in sports when the child doesn't have much ability?"

**2 She talks on and on and on.** We've all been in conversations where someone is bent on stealing the show. Even when you get a chance to share an incident from your life, this person chimes in with a story of her own. I have a friend who does this incessantly. She rarely even comments on your news or story. Even if you're speaking with another person in the group, you can count on this woman to interrupt with something from her own experience, as if this is more important than what anyone else has to say. And to her, you can bet that it is. If you were to give her a quiz later, focusing on details of everyone else's contributions to the conversation, she would fail miserably. She doesn't care what you have to say. She is a one-sided communicator.

*What to do?* You can give up and just listen to her. You can interrupt her. Sometimes, I actually call my friend on interrupting me and say, "I wasn't finished with my story." If this is someone you know well, and you know you can safely share a frank conversation, consider a gentle intervention – simply tell her that she is a good storyteller – *and* that she needs to practice listening sometimes.

George Bernard Shaw once said of someone who was monopolizing a conversation: "The trouble with her is that she lacks the power of conversation but not the power of speech." Remembering this will help put a smile on your face as you listen and nod. The same is


true of Truman Capote's quip: "A conversation is a dialogue, not a monologue. That's why there are so few good conversations: Due to scarcity, two intelligent talkers seldom meet."

**3 He doesn't contribute to the conversation.** I think that many wives see this fault in their husbands. One of my friends "re-trained" her husband to be a better conversationalist. She sat him down and said, "We're getting ready to retire and I need someone who will talk to me. So when I say something to you, you need to respond." She worked with him in real-time communication. She would say, "It's a beautiful day outside. I'd like to drive over to the nursery and pick out a new azalea for the front yard." If he just grunted, she would say, "Okay, it's your turn to speak." He got the idea and they are both happily communicating in their retirement together.

Another way to draw people out is to ask questions pertinent to their life or interests. Then let them respond fully. Some people are hesitant speakers. Others readily speak over them because they are slow to respond and speak haltingly. You can help bring these timid conversationalists into the conversation by giving them more time and encouragement to respond.

### And of Course, a Last Word ...

These conversation tips should help you enjoy many happy chats in the future. Like anything, however, you need some practice before it becomes perfect. As a final thought, I suggest the following:

- **A good place to practice your conversation skills is at your Toastmasters meetings.** Strive to speak one on one with at least one Toastmaster or guest at each meeting. You might even ask them to rate your conversation skills or to critique your effort.
- **If you have a Toastmasters mentor, ask him or her to assist you in honing your communication skills.** For most Toastmasters, everyday conversations are even more important to their careers and relationships than public speaking. We should strive to master this area of communication.
- **Learn from the best.** As William Shakespeare said, "Conversation should be pleasant without scurrility, witty without affection, free without indecency, learned without conceitedness, novel without falsehood." 

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# Is Your Busyness Your Fault?

† During my speaking engagements, I ask a simple question: “What makes you busy?” The answers have convinced me that taking control of your “busy” at home presents a set of challenges different from those you must face on the job.

Home responsibilities as a working parent – single or married – will tip you into the “busy danger zone.” If you’re trying to do it all at home, take heart! With a little planning and tweaking of your at-work strategies, you can transform your *crazy* busy to a *designed* busy at home.

## Round Up the Troops

The best way to make a change in the tone of your home is by setting realistic goals. Is your household in chaos? Shoot for ordered messiness. You don’t have to be a dictator, killjoy or tyrant to institute a less busy, more peaceful home. It begins with a mandatory household meeting. You gather with all the household members, including your partner, housemates, children and boarders. Tell everyone something they’d like to hear: “We’re going to have a family meeting so that our lives will be more fun.” It’s mandatory attendance. Don’t worry if you get lots of sighs, gripes and eye rolling.

This meeting can be the start of you getting some help from the members of your household. Tell them why you need their help: Your busyness around the house is starting to take its toll in a major way – but if everyone pitches in, it won’t be so bad. Promise them that you’re asking for these changes with only one goal in mind – a happier home.

## Sacred Schedules

Another order of business for the family meeting is for each person to map out his or her schedule for the next six months (or year). This is important because you’ll not only give each person a voice, but you also teach valuable life skills. Each person needs to list every important, save-the-day event he or she has coming up, as well as all the regularly scheduled activities. Don’t forget to produce everyone’s sports schedules.

After individual schedules are made, get everyone on the same page, literally. Post a master calendar in the kitchen so each family member gets a better view (and sense) of working together as a team.

## Feeding Time

Start by having a whiteboard on the fridge with the week’s menu and prep assignments posted. In the beginning, a parent will have to be the menu dictator until the entire family starts taking initiative and responsibility. For example, the whole chicken can be washed, seasoned and put in the oven by a teenager; the frozen veggies can be microwaved by a pre-teen; the rice directions can be followed by your mate; and even a young child can concoct a dessert with flavored yogurt and fruit. In the summer, you can teach everyone the basics of grilling, and winter time is perfect for an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink soup in the slow cooker.

## Online Time

Institute rules that apply to such activities as surfing the Internet, gaming, instant messaging, e-mailing and social networking, whether

on a desktop, laptop or handheld device. House rules apply to everyone. A few examples include: “No electronics during meals”; “Black screens from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.”; or “30-minute online shopping sessions.”

## TV Time

Do we really have to watch reruns of *Two and a Half Men* or *The Office* every night and have the nightly news as background noise for dinner? Turn off the tube.

- Make rules for hours of operation. TV can’t be the background soundtrack for your home life!
- Leverage viewing time as a reward for chores done by teens and children.
- Make family night at the movies an event. Get a brand-new DVD that everyone can agree on, prepare some movie munchies and have fun.

## Quiet Time

Often you think you need a week’s sleep when all you need is a long bath with some quiet in the house. A quick recharging of the batteries ensures you’ll be much more present for the rest of the night.

This is an edited and condensed excerpt from Connie Merritt’s book *Too Busy for Your Own Good: Get More Done in Less Time –With Even More Energy* (McGraw-Hill). †

**Connie Merritt** is a nurse, life coach, business owner and frequent speaker. She will present an education session on the topic of time management at the Toastmasters International Convention in August.





# Consider the Interview

By Dianne Morr, ATMB

*I love to interview all kinds of fascinating individuals. It's fun to get to know people, and a great way to gather speech material. By learning some simple interviewing techniques, you can draw on other people's experiences and expertise to add substance to your speeches.*

New Toastmasters often worry about finding enough topics to give the 10 speeches that are required to earn the Competent Communicator award. But once you get past your Ice Breaker, you don't have to solely rely on your personal knowledge and memories for material. You can use the interviewing process. I fell in love with interviews in high school and have enjoyed conducting them ever since.

As a child, I was told that I shouldn't ask people questions.

My mother said it was impolite. So no matter how curious I was, I kept my questions to myself. But in high school I was assigned to be the roving reporter for our school newspaper. Asking questions was my job! What fun. I interviewed everyone from random freshmen to the new principal and that handsome senior actor.

The secret to setting up an interview is this: All you have to do is ask. Most people are flattered by the request. They usually think,

"It's about time someone asked for my opinion!"

This is how you do it:

## **Select Your Interview Subject**

That's not difficult – we all know someone who has an interesting story to tell. But if you want to branch out, consider the senior citizens you know or members of your Toastmasters club. If you are lucky, your club might have a member like the late Dorothy Heinz, a longtime member of my former club, the

**How to make the most of a valuable resource for speech content.**

Naperville Toastmasters in Naperville, Illinois. Dorothy delighted us with travelogues of her trips to South Africa, Vietnam and Laos. Equally enthralling were her memories of serving as a U.S. Navy nurse in the South Pacific during World War II, as well as her expertise as a graphologist (hand-writing analyst) and palm reader. Interviewing someone like Dorothy is a pleasure and an honor.

If you interview a fellow Toastmaster, don't simply write down seven minutes of her story and repeat it. You need to make it *your own* speech by reflecting on what you learned from her and what her wisdom gives to the audience. Use these guidelines for an effective interview:

- **Consider your current speech project when you choose your interview subject.** For Speech 4 in the *Competent Communication* manual, "How to Say It," you might look for someone with a story on foreign travel, sports or music that lends itself to colorful vocabulary. For Number 8, "Get Comfortable with Visual Aids," it would be great to talk to an artist and show examples of his work during your speech. Speech 10, "Inspire Your Audience," cries out for someone who has acted courageously or inspired you personally.
- **Explain that you are working on a speech for Toastmasters when asking for the interview.** Try to name the specific subject or story that you would like to talk about.
- **Watch the clock.** Ask for a convenient time to interview your subject and be specific about how much time you'll need. Aim for 30 minutes. If the conversation is flowing and you both have time, you can continue to talk – but a 30-minute commitment is easier to make than an open-ended appointment.

- **Compose a list of questions, starting with general information and working toward more specific details.** Make your questions open-ended. If the questions can be answered with a *yes*, *no* or other one-word answer, the interview will be short and possibly wasted. For example, if you ask a photographer, "When did you take up photography?" you may hear, "In high school." Instead

**"The secret to setting up an interview is this: All you have to do is ask."**

ask, "How did you become interested in photography?" You might hear a story that starts with, "When I was 15, my grandfather showed me pictures he took on a cruise to Alaska. I was amazed by his shots of leaping whales..."

- **Make it a conversation, not an interrogation.** Do you remember playing "20 Questions" on car trips in the days before vans came with video players? That's not what you are striving for in your interview. Try for some relaxed give-and-take as you talk with your subject.

- **Listen carefully.** Something you hear may spark an excellent follow-up question.

- **Try not to rush.** Allow your subject time to ponder a question – even after answering it. If you pause for a moment, another thought may come to his mind that will offer great insight or fascinating detail.

- **Take notes, even if you're recording your interview.** Take advantage of free conference call services that are convenient to use and allow you to record your call. You can find them by typing "free conference call" into your Web browser.

Even though you'll have the words recorded, taking notes will help you absorb and remember the high points of your conversation.

- **At the end of your interview, ask if your subject wants to add anything else.** Some of the best responses are to questions you didn't even ask! I remember interviewing a college football player who surprised me.

He said, "I give all the credit for my success to my mother. She raised my brother and me by herself and she is always there for us." It was such a sensitive and gracious statement to come from a young athlete.

- **Close by asking your subject for permission to contact them with other questions that may arise while you're working on your speech.** You probably won't need to do that, but it's nice to leave the door open.

- **Always send a thank-you note.** Your subject will be delighted to know how much you appreciate the experience.

That's it! Your interview is done. You're on your way to writing and delivering your speech, and one step closer to your CC award. And the best part is, you've enjoyed a meaningful conversation with a new friend and introduced that person to your Toastmasters club. **T**

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## Clothing Catalogs:

# Authentic Authenticity. Order Now!

What are “performance chinos”? How do you “field test” a coat? What is a “barn jacket”?

I receive a good many clothing catalogs in the mail and this is how the sellers describe the merchandise. I wonder: How does a pair of pants “perform”? Hopefully, like a pair of pants: a garment with two legs, one zipper and a belt loop to keep me from getting arrested for indecent exposure. That’s about all the performing I want my pants to do. So before I buy “performance chinos” I want to make sure they don’t come with any surprises. The last place you want surprises is in your pants.

Then there’s that “field-tested” coat. Apparently, they want to reassure me that I can wear this coat in a field and be confident it will stand up to whatever the field dishes out. Which would be... *what?* Fields don’t do much. They just sort of lie there. Grow a little grass, sprout a few flowers, get a little wet from the morning dew. Doesn’t have to be much of a coat. And yet they tell me it’s built to withstand hurricane-force winds, pelting rain and freezing temperatures. I don’t know about you, but when the weather’s that bad I don’t go out in a field.

And how about the “barn jacket”? These catalogs go to people like me who live in residential neighborhoods. We don’t have barns. We have garages. I understand that “garage jacket” doesn’t have quite the same allure. You don’t really need special clothing to go get a rake. But what’s so appealing about a barn, anyway? It’s full of messy hay bales, greasy

machinery and the acrid smell of cow manure. Ask anyone who really owns a barn to show you the jacket he wears in there and you will very quickly lose your appetite and fashion inspiration.

Notice a theme emerging here: outdoors, earthy, rugged – evocative of a time when people really did live in fields and have barns and needed pants that could “perform,” since they only had one pair, and if your pants wore out you basically faced the wilderness in your underwear. I see two possible reasons for this. One is that we’re all a little ashamed of being so thoroughly domesticated, and wearing clothes like these makes us feel rougher and tougher. The other is that these clothing manufactures are watching the world economy and realizing that the prospect of us all going back to cave dwelling is not so far-fetched. In which case they’re saying, “You may not need field-tested mountain pants with fleece insulation, water-repellant material, and 17 pockets... *now*. But you will!”

One catalog even offered a customer testimonial about an über-rugged raincoat: “I have worn this every day and have not gotten wet.” Great. Was it raining?

They also push another theme: *not new*. Clothes these days have to look like they’ve been worn before you wear them. One catalog described this broken-in look as “island wash,” which I take to mean: “If you got marooned on an island with brand-new clothes, this is what they’ll look like after a month. May I take your order?”

What’s wrong with new? The only thing I can think of is that these are vacation clothes, and most people vacation near the water, which is where the rich people live – all the time. So their clothes are naturally weathered and faded. Thus, if I’m strolling along in my island wash duds I can say, “See, I fit right in here. I’m not a tourist from Parsippany, New Jersey. I’m a rich person. I have to be. I paid \$150 for a T-shirt.” New also makes it look like you’re trying to look good, like the guy in high school with the shiny shoes who played loudest in the marching band.

You also see words like “expedition,” “cargo” and “trek,” as if you’re outfitting yourself to summit Mount Everest. What’s that all about – especially when you’re going to Disney World in an air-conditioned van with built-in DVD, hands-free parallel parking and individual cup holders?

Well, if this is what people want, I’m going to start my own company: The Authentic Lived-In Catalog. I’ll write copy that extols the virtues of the well-worn look; I’ll offer a huge selection of men’s and women’s clothing; I’ll talk about the fashion allure of time-tested value, and I’ll claim a level of authenticity no one else can match. For while others are selling new clothes that merely look worn, mine will really be worn – right from the Salvation Army Store. **T**

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