

Speak More Confidently - The Toastmasters Way

Many of us know that it is absolutely important to be able to speak clearly, correctly and confidently if we wish to perform well in our career and be considered for a promotion into leadership positions. From my interactions with many working professionals, I believe that not many of us know how to go about it in a structured, cost-effective and sustainable manner. Let me share my personal experience.

After years of exploring different ways of improving my communication skills, including attending short courses, workshops and seminars conducted by professional trainers, a radio personality and well-known motivational speakers, I have concluded that the Toastmasters (www.toastmasters.org) is arguably the most structured, cost-effective and sustainable way to develop our communication skills. What is the difference between attending such courses and the Toastmasters way?

For example, when you attend a short three-day effective communication skills course, you will likely be learning about the essentials of public speaking such as capturing audience interest, eye contact, correct posture, voice projection and use of appropriate language within the limited duration. In a class size of about 25 participants, if you are lucky, you might probably get one opportunity to practice your delivery and receive feedback from the facilitator. During this compressed period, you will be fully focused on learning and your motivation would be high with the encouragement of your fellow participants. After you complete the course, you will feel "high" for days and weeks especially if you get to practice what you have learned during the course.

However, over time, you will gradually lose your "high" and the same bad habits (e.g. lack of eye contact or monotonous vocal delivery) that you had before you attended the course would most certainly reappear and you will feel that you have not improved much. This was my personal experience for several years after attending those short courses, workshops or seminars. I am not saying that there is no value in attending them. They are useful when we need a refresher or a booster dose. But they do not sustain your improvement in the long term.

On the contrary, the Toastmasters educational programme is a highly structured and yet flexible learning programme that caters to your individual needs. The mission of a Toastmasters club is to provide a mutually supportive and positive learning environment in which every individual member has the opportunity to develop oral communication and leadership skills, which in turn foster self-confidence and personal growth. In addition to improving your communication skills, the Toastmasters is also a great platform to network with like minded people and develop your leadership credentials through serving in various capacities. For example, you can serve as a club officer to organise regular chapter meetings and help members with their educational goals. Or with more experience, you can serve as an Area Governor where you oversee 4 to 5 clubs and meet the needs of club members.

In Singapore, there are about 200 toastmasters clubs, mostly community-based or corporate clubs. The local Toastmasters community in Singapore is part of a global non-profit Toastmasters International organisation founded in 1924 by an American educator, Ralph Smedley. Let me give three ways on how the Toastmasters programme will help you improve sustainably.

1) Master the Basics, and then Specialise

When you first join as a Toastmaster, you will receive two manuals, Competent Communication and Competent Leadership (more on this in the second point). The Competent Communication manual covers the basics of public speaking and contains detailed guidelines on the first 10 speech projects that a new toastmaster will deliver. Each project is designed to develop one aspect of your speaking skills and builds on the previous one. You will learn speech organisation, speech purpose, proper word usage, body language, vocal variety, speech research, effective use of visual aids, how to speak persuasively and how to inspire others. Each project speech is approximately 5 to 7 minutes long to keep the club meeting within a reasonable length and the same principles in delivering a 5 to 7-minute speech will also apply to a longer speech of 30 to 40 minutes.

Once you have completed the 10 speech projects, you will receive the Competent Communicator award. You then proceed to choose six from any of the 15 Advanced Communication manuals to further develop your

speaking skills. Depending on your area of interest, you can specialise in "The Entertaining Speaker", "Speaking to Inform", "Facilitating Discussions", "Technical Presentations", "Public Relations", and "Communicating on Video", "Storytelling" or "Management Speeches". Each Advanced Communication project will test your speaking skills and is progressively more demanding than the preceding one and requires more preparation time. If you read the manuals thoroughly and diligently prepare each project speech to meet the required objectives, you would have acquired the necessary skills of a highly competent communicator.

2) Learn by Doing

In a Toastmaster chapter meeting, there is no instructor, teacher or trainer. Instead, all members "learn by doing" and observing others. The more experienced toastmasters serve as project evaluators and provide feedback on the prepared speeches, both verbally and in written form. Some serve as mentors and provide guidance to the newer toastmasters in preparation of their first few speeches. Members also take turns to assume different roles in a meeting, such as the Toastmaster of the Evening (i.e. emcee), Language Evaluator or Ah Counter. Each club is managed by an elected committee comprising of seven club officers who are responsible for the efficient running of the monthly chapter meetings and meeting members' needs. In this way, everyone whether a new or experienced toastmaster, learns together. All the different meeting roles or assignments that a member undertakes will be recognised as part of his Competent Leadership accreditation.

The pace of improvement is entirely at the discretion of the individual member. If you wish to accelerate your learning and personal development, you may choose to deliver prepared speeches on a more regular basis. You may also volunteer as a project evaluator or language evaluator once you gain more experience. The mantra of "practice makes better" is part of the Toastmasters experience.

3) The Toastmasters Family

Many people join a toastmasters club to improve their public speaking skills and after achieving their desired goals, including the highest Distinguished Toastmaster (DTM) award, still remain in the Toastmasters community to serve others. This is because of the deep friendships forged among fellow toastmasters through years of learning and benefiting from the contributions of others. I find toastmasters are generally very helpful people and would not hesitate to mentor a new member or take on a meeting role when asked. Help is always available as long as you approach a fellow toastmaster and ask for it. It is this culture of reciprocity, teamwork and support for one another's growth that makes the Toastmasters community feel very much like a family. In one toastmasters club that I co-founded 11 years ago, some of the members even go for supper together after a chapter meeting ends at 10pm. They simply enjoy the fellowship and want to stay connected even after 3 hours of meeting.

So hesitate no more. If you are keen to improve your communication and leadership skills, sign up today to join one of the 200 toastmasters clubs in Singapore. Make the decision today and you will certainly be on your way to be a confident speaker and competent leader.



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