

Public Speaking Success at Toastmasters

By Diane Russell

We've all been there. You've been called upon to present something for your business. You were asked to speak at a wedding. Or maybe you had an important point to raise at town meeting. Think back to how you felt. Were you confident, comfortable and in command of the situation? Good for you! In all honesty though, you can likely recall that feeling of anxiety taking hold. You may have had butterflies in your stomach – perhaps sweaty palms or rapid breathing. Here's the problem: when you're accompanied by these symptoms of uneasiness, you can't deliver an effective presentation.

You could, of course, decline participation in any public speaking activity. But why, when you can learn to speak with confidence AND have fun in the process? Toastmasters can help! This International organization has been going strong since the 1920's, and has a mandate: to foster good communication and leadership skills for anyone expressing an interest. Several Toastmasters clubs are located in Vermont and the Upper Valley, and all are welcoming new members.

Many courses can tell you how to become an effective speaker however, Toastmasters has a better way: learn by doing. An atmosphere of professional camaraderie makes the Toastmasters club a unique learning environment: informal, yet dedicated to learning. Upon joining (for a nominal fee of under \$70/year), new members receive a variety of manuals and resources on communicating. They also receive monthly copies of "The Toastmaster", a magazine that offers current insights on speaking and leadership techniques.

Protocol is the same at all clubs. New members are introduced to the art of public speaking by working through a standardized manual at their own pace, with every successive project building on skills previously learned. After completing ten basic speeches, participants can select from "advanced" manuals, encompassing projects from sales presentations, persuasive speaking, conflict resolution, and many more. Every prepared speaker is assigned an evaluator, who will point out the speaker's strengths as well as offering one or two suggestions that could add value to the next presentation. This evaluation process is especially beneficial to those whose careers involve giving presentations, as the workplace setting does not often allow for constructive feedback.

Meetings offer additional means of gaining experience in leadership and communication. Those not wishing to prepare a speech can take on diverse roles aimed at developing skills and building confidence when addressing an audience. Someone is always invited to share a joke or a quote with the club, or introduce a word and show how to use it effectively. Every meeting provides an opportunity to serve as chair. Once a few speech projects have been completed,

members are encouraged to evaluate someone else and give them some points to ponder. We even offer members a chance to perform a short, impromptu speech—because the ability to “think on your feet” is invaluable! Those wishing experience in leadership can work from project manuals geared to providing this; and members are always welcome to serve on the club’s executive committee.

Who could benefit from joining Toastmasters? In a nutshell: almost everyone; especially those in the business community who must be skilled at motivating, persuading, and communicating. In my club, we have a wide variety of occupations: educators, coaches, a builder, medical personnel, business people, plus some retirees, just to name a few. Some came to the club with absolutely no public speaking experience, others had plenty. “With my work, I’m increasingly in front of a microphone addressing 100 people” says Michael McCann, a consultant and coach to business leaders, based in Hanover. “I’m now comfortable with that. A couple of months ago, I was asked on very short notice to do a presentation of a manual I was working on. Because Toastmasters has helped me with organizational skills as well as speaking, I was able to put something together in 15 minutes. Two years ago, I would have taken 4-5 hours to organize it, and 5 years ago, I would have said ‘I can’t do it’”

Mary Smith, a self-employed financial planner based in Hanover, echoes this sentiment. “I had no experience in public speaking, but had to give seminars as part of my job” she says. “When I first started, I was petrified. I wasn’t at all effective. A year or two after starting Toastmasters, I had to give a seminar for 65 people. I just walked up and started speaking--no fear. Afterwards, my daughter (who was in the audience) told me ‘Mom, you’re a completely different woman because of Toastmasters!’”

What if you lack the confidence or skill to speak to any audience -- even a small one? “You have to remember” says Michael McCann “that when you give a speech at Toastmasters, everyone in that audience wants you to succeed, and they’re there to support you”. Even accomplished speakers can improve their performance at Toastmasters-although many continue simply because the meetings are so much fun.

My own journey with Toastmasters began 5 years ago in Southwestern Ontario. I had given a few group presentations -- adequately -- as part of an executive committee for my profession, but felt there was room for improvement. A colleague recommended Toastmasters. After attending one meeting, I was eager to join. The club welcomed me, and I noted plenty of support and a healthy dose of applause for all meeting participants. With this degree of encouragement, I actually enjoyed completing the requisite speech projects. Naturally, when we relocated to Vermont, one of the first things I did was to find another Toastmasters club so as to continue the experience. My chosen club, Toast of the Valley in Lebanon NH, has proven equally welcoming as my former club in Canada, and I’ve even made some new friends in the process!

There are currently 10 Toastmasters clubs operating in Vermont and the Upper Valley. Toastmasters International maintains a user-friendly website (www.toastmasters.org) with a link to "find a club". Here, meeting locations and times are listed, as well as contact information. The website also offers information on Toastmasters' history and strategy for skills improvement.

Your success in business is based upon how effective you are, both as a leader and a communicator. Business environments are competitive; thus, candidates with strong speaking, organizational and motivational skills are afforded a clear advantage. Interested? You'll be most welcome at any club you choose!

Be our guest! Contact any club for further information:

Berlin, VT	(802)476-0908
Burlington, VT	www.tmbtv.com
Lebanon, NH	(802)457-4517
Manchester, VT	(802)442-5552
Middlebury, VT	(802)388-9871
Montpelier, VT	(802)229-6633
New London, NH	(603)763-3204
Royalton, VT	(802)763-7821
Rutland, VT	(802)236-5409
Taftsville, VT	(603)298-5437

www.uppervalleytoastmasters.org

Diane Russell is a member of Toast of the Valley club, Lebanon, NH. She and her husband ran a successful dental practice in Southwestern Ontario before relocating to Vermont in 2004. Diane "retired" from practicing dentistry in order to pursue other interests, including outdoor recreation, writing and speaking opportunities. She currently volunteers at VINS, Montshire Museum, Quechee Library, Woodstock Historical Society, and Pentangle Arts. Diane and her husband Tom currently reside in Woodstock, VT. She can be contacted at russcar2000@adelphia.net