



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

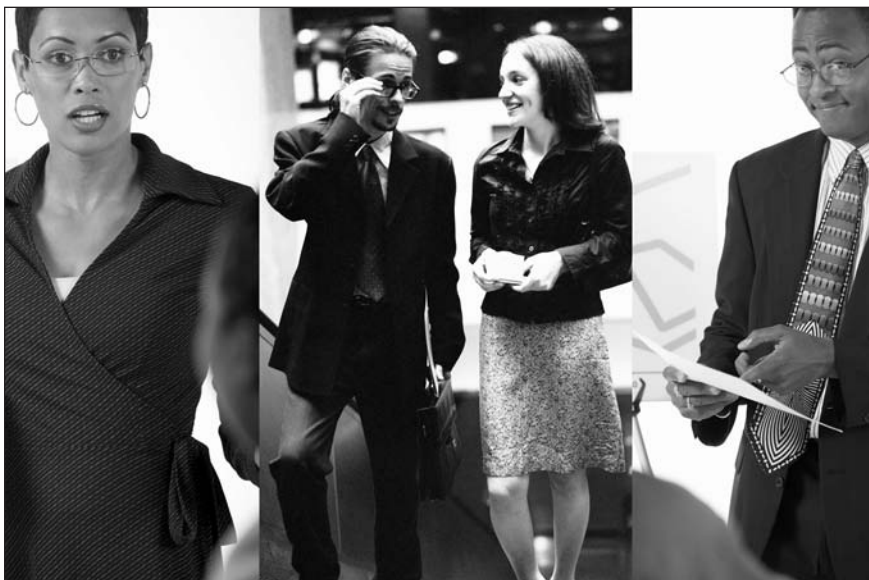
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# Toastmasters—How I Learned to Stop Staring at my Shoes

by David Hippen



*Editor's note: The SOA Business and Communications Skills Task Force recently approved going forward with a publicity campaign for Toastmasters International.*

**A**s I finished my last actuarial exam, part of my product support duties included assisting the compliance analysts with state filings. One of the analysts told me about the Toastmasters Club that met weekly during lunch. She said she thought I would like it, and invited me to a meeting.

Although finishing the exams freed up my study time, Toastmasters wasn't first on my list of priorities. Success with exams can confer a false feeling of having done all that's needed to succeed at work, making other (i.e., non-actuarial) skills seem less important. Besides, I thought, "Who needs the fear of standing up in front of people to speak?!"

Thankfully, my compliance friend was persistent and persuasive, so I quietly slunk into the back at the next meeting. Despite my initial nervousness, it quickly became clear to me that this was a casual, comfortable and interesting place to eat my lunch. It was quite a change from the years of "swallow-a-sandwich-and-study" lunch breaks I had endured while preparing for actuarial exams.

I went back to Toastmasters the next week. By the end of the second meeting with this friendly group, it no longer felt like being with a bunch of strangers. The club treasurer disclosed that semiannual dues were very minimal, so I decided to sign up.

Upon payment of dues, Toastmasters International sent me a manual with simple guidelines for preparing speeches. It looked pretty easy—and it was! Before long, I agreed to give my first speech, called the "Icebreaker," which consisted of talking about myself for a few minutes.

Despite the simplicity of the process, I found myself working very hard to improve my speaking skills. The experience quickly began to transfer to communicating more easily at work. Stepping back, I now realize that many new actuaries are thrust into situations where other managers expect well-organized presentations in English, not actuarial jargon. Without my participation in Toastmasters, I too would have faced this awkward situation.

One early benefit of Toastmasters training was the increased ease with which I conversed with regulators on compliance issues (which serendipitously delighted my

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club sponsor, the compliance analyst). Impromptu speaking is often required of actuaries, and the subject is not always one of our choosing. Toastmasters provides members ample opportunity to improve impromptu speaking skills.

The multiple speech projects in the basic Toastmasters manual helped me focus on many different aspects of prepared speeches. Once I was comfortable with the basics, I progressed to advanced speech manuals, which permitted me to choose projects that fit my career goals as well as my job. Later, this translated to helping improve my presentations at Society of Actuaries meetings as well as company marketing, communication during a project and investment committee meetings.

Toastmasters gave me advanced management training, too—the less-known but equally important second goal of Toastmasters. There are a number of projects in the leadership track designed to grow the Toastmaster’s management abilities. In addition, once comfortable with some of the speaking basics, the logical next step was to accept the responsibilities of club officer positions. I learned how to function as a leader as well as a treasurer.

Challenged to compete in club contests, I learned it was a great way to win trophies and new friends at the same time. Winning a contest is not only a great ego booster, but it also gives the winners the opportunity to go on to contests with other club winners from the surrounding area. This naturally broadens your learning, and presents new networking opportunities as well.

When I moved to new actuarial jobs in new places, Toastmasters turned out to be a quick source of new friends. Whether moving or not, I highly recommend it to anybody. My experience with four separate clubs (L.A., St. Louis, Tallahassee and Pittsburgh) has been consistent—the atmosphere is supportive, positive and progressive.

Try it—I think you’ll like it! □