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# What Has Toastmasters Taught Me?

by Gaia Dong

**E**ver since graduating from university and starting my career, I have been feeling the pressure to improve my communication skills:

“In order to succeed in Corporate America, you have to be good at talking to people,”

“A real leader is a great communicator,”

“Being an actuary, you need to be able to explain technical concepts to non-technical people.”

These words have echoed through my New Hire orientation, my one-on-one meetings with my boss, my mid-year review and many more occasions. Yeah, yeah, yeah! I get it—speaking skills are key to climbing to the top of the corporate ladder, and people who do not speak well instead end up doing most of the work. But English is even not my native language, so how could I survive? When puzzling over this question, I observed how people around me speak and noticed that people who have spoken English for their entire life are not necessarily articulate. This gave me hope that there might be some way for me to improve and develop my speaking skills. After discovering a Toastmasters club at my company I decided to attend a meeting.

Sitting at my very first meeting as a guest, introducing myself and confessing why I wanted to join Toastmasters, I was very happy to hear almost everyone in the room shared the same reason for joining the Toastmasters meeting—we all wanted to improve our public speaking skills. Many people said they were not good at public speaking, so they were here! I felt this could be my safe haven. However, when the meeting moved on to the speech portion, I realized those people were not telling the whole truth. Most of them spoke very well. They had great gestures, powerful voice, nice flow and effective body movements. I did not understand why they were still there until later. These Toastmasters’ extraordinary speaking skills intimidated me very much, but they were very friendly, supportive and encouraging, and I decided to join.

Preparing for my first icebreaker speech was not that bad; after all, what I needed to do was to give a speech on who I was and how I came to be there.

I wrote down the entire speech and memorized every word. However, standing in front of people and delivering the speech was a different story. I was very nervous, rigid and fearful. My arms suddenly became a burden and I did not know where to put them. The light in the room suddenly became brighter and started burning my eyes. My audience turned into scary authorities, even though they all had smiling faces. I was so scared to look at them. Every eye contact became a brain eraser. Every time I looked into my audience’s eyes, their eyes became laser guns, shooting right into my eye balls, streaming into my brain cells and disturbing my normal brain waves, causing my mouth to stutter and my brain go blank. My adrenaline level shot sky high. When I practiced on my own at home, I functioned well, but at that moment, standing in this corporate room, facing 10 people who gave me their full attention, it was like putting a machine into a highly magnified field, the program was running on a short-circuit. I knew I failed. If it had been a class presentation and I were the teacher, I would have given myself an F. Even now, I do not remember how I got back to my seat. I felt embarrassed, nervous and frustrated.

But to my surprise, my fellow Toastmasters gave me very encouraging feedback. They complimented me on not using notes, making eye contact, and being passionate about my dream, though my body movements were a bit conservative. They looked forward to hearing more speeches from me. Phew—it went better than I thought! I was very grateful to my fellow Toastmasters for their 200 percent support and tolerance.

With the encouragement and support of my fellow Toastmasters, I got better over the next few speeches, even though I was still nervous. My mentor at Toastmasters, Doreen, told me that confidence was the key to becoming a successful speaker, and I needed to talk from my mind instead of reciting words that I memorized. I noticed that some people are just natural speakers, like Doreen and Michael, my other mentor. It seems like some people are gifted with perfect tone, and others are perfectly coor-



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minated. Nevertheless, people like me who don't naturally speak well can still improve through practice. My nervousness was due to inexperience and a lack of self-confidence. In Toastmasters, I have been fighting these problems by giving speeches and practicing in front of people. It is a challenging albeit exciting process. By the time I finished my first 10 speeches, I had gained a lot of confidence and became less nervous.

When I started the advanced manual, I had come to enjoy giving speeches. After getting nervousness out of the way, I was able to become aware of my gestures, vocal variations, body movements and facial expressions. Moving my arms and body became more natural. Looking into my audience's eyes became a comforting and exciting experience. Sometimes I make eye contact to seek confirmation, sometimes to test my audience's response and sometimes to stimulate my audience's emotions! Lights in the room become spot lights—I felt like a little performer, standing at the little podium, enjoying the attention given by my fellow Toastmasters. The whole experience of getting my audience's emotions involved in my speech and being the center of attention is so powerful and thrilling. Giving

a speech is not an ordeal any more; instead it has become a pleasure.

Toastmasters has been the most supportive and tolerant place for me to make mistakes and learn from my mistakes and from others. We come to meetings for the same reasons, and the support and encouragement we give one another bonds us together. I have made friends at the club who care about my growth. Doreen, for example, has encouraged me to take acting classes and write more. I feel very lucky and am proud to be a member of our club. I also became a club officer this year, helping my club thrive as well as develop my own potential. Toastmasters meetings have taught me far more than simply how to improve my public speaking skills; they have helped me talk to my inner-self, understand myself better, explore my performing interest and potential, make new friends, and, finally, write an article about it for *The Stepping Stone*.

If you want to polish your public speaking skills, hone your leadership skills and have mentors who care about your progress, go to [www.Toastmasters.org](http://www.Toastmasters.org) to find a Toastmasters club near where you live or work. ●