

Toastmasters and the Competency Framework

By Nate Worrell, FSA, MAAA

You've just finished going through the competency framework self-assessment tool—now what? Well, there are tons of SOA-sponsored activities waiting for your discovery. For something different, why not try joining a Toastmasters club? This article looks at how Toastmasters will help with three of the competencies—**Communication, Leadership and Relationship Management & Interpersonal Collaboration.**

1. Communication—*Demonstrating the listening, writing and speaking skills required to effectively address diverse technical and nontechnical audiences in both formal and informal settings*

Toastmasters and public speaking go hand-in-hand. However, how can Toastmasters specifically address the competency as defined in the framework? Let's dissect the definition.

First, there are listening skills. Typical meetings require Toastmaster members to serve in various roles that exercise active listening. The "Grammarians" role, for example, listens for examples of both exquisite and sloppy vernacular. Every speech in Toastmasters has formal oral evaluation. In order to give constructive evaluation skills as an evaluator, active listening is imperative.

Writing skills are enhanced as they relate to speech craft. Beyond that, I suggest looking somewhere else to develop written communication skills, especially technical writing.

Speaking skills, however, are the modus operandi of Toastmasters.

In order to earn the "Competent Communicator" designation, a club member is required to complete

10 speeches. Each speech focuses on one particular component of public speaking. Examples include organization, hand gestures, visual aids, and word choice.

Another rewarding and often entertaining way Toastmasters develops speaking skills is through an exercise called "Table Topics". These are spontaneous one to two minute impromptu speeches which have the objective of increasing comfort of speaking without preparation.

Finally, to really add ice to your veins, there are speech competitions. These events really challenge your craft and courage as you go head to head with other speakers. It's great preparation to speak in a situation where what you say and how you say it directly influence your performance.

If you are looking to develop the highly technical speech or communication, there are probably better avenues. There's a high likelihood the local or company club is going to be a nontechnical audience. Right from the bat you'll be explaining what an actuary is anyway. Why not challenge yourself to keep your club members awake and interested as you deliver a speech on the inner workings of credibility theory?

Personal Story One—*In my valuation role, we had a significant swing in one of the numbers we report. There were numerous events that contributed to the result. To make matters more complicated, they all had varying layers of interaction which added a lot of noise. Using a technique I learned in Toastmasters about creating a single sentence at the focus of a presentation, I was able to communicate the relevant information to management without getting too caught up in the noise.*

2. Leadership—*Initiating, innovating, inspiring, creating or otherwise acting to influence others regardless of level or role toward a common goal.*

The value here is that Toastmasters can assist anyone at any level with leadership. Similar to the “Competent Communicator” there is a “Competent Leader” manual. Achieving this designation requires the participant to engage in several activities with particular areas of focus. ‘Motivating People,’ ‘Giving Feedback’ and ‘Planning and Implementation’ are just a few of the projects.

Beyond that, most clubs offer members opportunities to lead certain club events like membership drives or club contests. If the club you join has veteran members working on advanced manuals, you might get the opportunity to hear them conduct a seminar on leadership. Eventually, you may even conduct one yourself.

Nothing develops a skill like practice. By running for and serving as a club officer, invaluable leadership lessons can be learned, even if you are in an entry level position. As an officer one of your primary responsibilities is working towards the “Distinguished Club Plan,” in competency terms this is a “common goal.”

Personal Story Two—During my term as club president, I encountered a situation where there was a miscommunication between two other officers. As a result, one officer felt disrespected to the point of resignation and even threatened to leave the club. I had to intercede, listening to both sides of the story and working on a resolution. I was able to keep the member in the club and learned a valuable lesson about being aware of people’s circumstance. This instance of people leadership is something I would not have experienced in my daily routines.

3. Relationship Management & Interpersonal Collaboration—*Creating mutually beneficial relationships and work processes toward a common goal.*

One way to read this definition is networking. Joining Toastmasters will expand your circle of influence. It will be another handful of people to whom you will have the privilege of representing the profession. Maybe someone’s son or daughter will be a future actuary! If the club is sponsored by your company, it is a great way to get to know people from other areas of the business.

Another way some Toastmaster groups develop this competency is through a mentor program. Mentorships not only aid in helping development with respect to personal, career or speaking goals—they are a relationship. Either as a mentor or mentee, the experience will definitely strengthen the collaborative competency.

Personal Story Three—*There was an individual looking to change careers and become an actuary. It wasn’t until I met his mentor in Toastmasters that he had a contact in the profession. We met for coffee and ultimately he landed an interview.*

As far as the other competencies go, there are surely some indirect ways Toastmasters can touch each of these. However, the ones most directly impacted are **Communication, Leadership and Relationship Management & Interpersonal Collaboration**. Toastmasters will give you the opportunity to have hands on experience practicing and refining these competencies. ■