



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Toastmasters—or, How I Learned to Stop Staring at My Shoes

by David Hippen

*Editor's Note: Last year, the SOA Board of Governors approved a set of initiatives proposed by the Business and Communication Skills Task Force aimed at creating more persuasive, articulate and business savvy actuaries. SOA member and market research identified these areas as the ones most in need of improvement. One initiative focused on getting more members involved in the highly successful Toastmasters International program. Since 1924, Toastmasters International has helped millions of men and women become more confident in front of an audience. Their network of clubs and their learn-by-doing program are sure to help you become a better speaker and leader. Visit [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org) for a list of clubs in your area.*

As I finished my last actuarial exam, part of my job duties included assisting Transamerica (L.A.) compliance analysts. 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 how I expected to use my new "extra" time. Success with exams can confer a false feeling of having done all that's needed to succeed at work, making other challenges seem less important. Besides, who needs to conquer the fear of having to stand up in front of people to talk?!

Thankfully, my friend was persistent and persuasive, so I slunk into the back at the next meeting. Despite my obvious nervousness, it was clear that this was a casual, comfortable place to eat my lunch. It was quite a change from "swallow-a-sandwich-and-study" lunchtimes I had endured for actuarial exams.

I went back to Toastmasters the next week. By the end of a 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 telling about myself for a few minutes.

Despite the simplicity of the process, I found myself working very hard to improve my speaking. The experience quickly began to transfer to communicating more easily at work. For many, finishing the FSA thrusts the new actuary into a new world of managers, most of whom look for the actuary who presents results well in English, not actuarial jargon.

Many financial reporting actuaries find that although exams and pre-FSA experience enable them to establish appropriate reserves, post-FSA positions require them to describe and defend them as well. When asked to report to the company financial reporting committee on my research regarding new FASB requirements, I was glad Toastmasters experience had taught me how to convert my nervousness into dynamic speaking. Also, explaining valuation results, e.g., to regulators or the board, is much easier after giving impromptu speeches in Toastmasters.

Toastmasters gave me good management training, too—a less known but equally important second goal of Toastmasters. Successfully completing terms in various club offices prepared me to better handle duties as an actuarial manager. Challenged to compete in club contests, it was great to win trophies and new friends at the same time.

When I took new jobs in new places, Toastmasters turned out to be a quick source of new friends. Now I can list more than FSA, MAAA after my name, having gone from CTM (Competent Toastmaster) through ATM-Gold (Advanced Toastmaster). 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! §

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