

How to Get the Most out of Your Toastmasters Experience

“If you truly want to maximize your experience with anything, you have to be willing to give it your best effort.” – James Feudo

I always look back at the time I was involved with Toastmasters International with fond memories. I served as Club President with a great group of officers, Area Governor and mentored several people. I’ve earned awards, conducted speech contests and participated in a variety of Toastmasters related events. I’ve also had the pleasure of meeting some of the friendliest people (hundreds of them) both within my own clubs, through events at the district level and even on-line through [my blog](#), [e-zine subscribers](#) and other discussion groups.

I’ve also met my share of folks who have tried Toastmasters and have had a negative experience. Sometimes, they chose the wrong club and sometimes their expectations were off. But the good news (and often the bad news as well) is that your success as a Toastmaster really depends on only one person – you.

I’m often asked by people new to Toastmasters or considering Toastmasters for some advice as to how to make the most of the experience. I’ve put together a list of my favorite tips – most of which are relevant to even the most experienced Toastmasters:

1. Commit to speak at every meeting:

The one thing that helped me most with Toastmasters was speaking at every single meeting I attended. Now by speaking, I don’t mean only a prepared speech. Participating in table topics, giving an evaluation or presenting the timers report all count in my book. If you’re still a bit nervous, try a smaller role such as word of the day. Remember, the only way you can improve your speaking skills is to actually speak in front of groups.

2. Commit to earning your CC (Competent Communicator) or equivalent in your first year.

If you’re already a CC (or CTM), then commit to earning your next award within 12 months. I know of people who have taken several years to complete their first ten speeches as well as someone that completed over 40 Toastmasters speeches in nine months. Who do you think improved quicker as a speaker and got the most out of their experience?

Speeches are the backbone for your success – both within Toastmasters and outside of it. As much as some of the speech projects may seem a bit tedious, they give you challenges as a speaker that you ordinarily wouldn’t face. As I tell the people who take my speaking classes, speaking is like bodybuilding – you have keep at it and change up your routine if you really want to grow.

3. Become an officer:

Are all positions taken? Then volunteer to help out one of the officers. Help the VP of PR create a club newsletter, fill in for the sergeant of arms when he or she can’t make a meeting.

I served as President and V.P. of Education in my club. Those are my two favorite roles because they require you to meet all the members of the club. All officer positions can give you opportunities for [experience that you might not be able to get in your job](#). This all translates to valuable resume building experience.

If you really want to take it to the next level, try being a district officer. Division and area governors are great roles to help you decide if you can commit to an even bigger one.

4. Show up to meetings

You’re busy at work. You’re tired. It’s the finals for American Idol or the big game is on. It’s easy to find excuses to skip meetings – after all, you’re not getting paid for showing up and no one will yell at you if you miss a meeting, especially if you’re not signed up for a role.

Sure, you don’t want to tell your boss you can’t put the extra time in at work so you can go to Toastmasters. But, you don’t want to skip out on meetings just because you’re not in the mood. Improving your speaking and communication skills takes commitment so only miss meetings if you have a good reason. You’re away on business, you’re meeting with a client, you need to finish up something at work or your children are sick are legitimate reasons for missing meetings. If you find yourself looking for ways to get out of going to meetings, you may want to consider finding a different club or changing your goals about speaking.

5. If you’re new, get a mentor. If you’ve been around for a while, be a mentor.

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Mentors are an important part of Toastmasters – they help you learn how the club works, introduce you to other members and help you with your first few speeches. If your club doesn't have a formal mentoring program, ask an officer or experienced member (DTMs are great for this) if they could act as your member.

If you're an experienced member, be a mentor. The relationships you'll develop can last a lifetime. You're also helping out someone else which is always a great thing. Just don't overextend yourself – I once agreed to mentor four people and found that I couldn't keep up with their needs.

6. Get to know the other members of your club.

Everyone joins Toastmasters for different reasons and since each club is different, the benefits of knowing your fellow members differs. In a corporate club, you might have the opportunity to meet people who work in other parts of your company. In a community club, you might get to meet people that live and/or work near you (this was part of the reason I initially joined). In all clubs, you'll get to meet people with varying degrees of speaking experience that can share their stories with you or inspire you.

7. Visit other clubs:

Shortly after I gave my tenth speech, I was invited to visit another club in my area. With my own club, I could improvise a 7-9 minute speech without blinking. But visiting another club and talking to a sea of unfamiliar faces made me almost feel like I was back at square one. At that moment, I realized that I had grown comfortable with my club and hadn't pushed myself beyond my comfort zone. Sure, members come and go and we might attract as much as fifteen new faces on a guest night, but the room was still the same – as were many of the faces.

The best thing you can do to gently push yourself outside of your comfort zone is to check out another club. Sure, you can try speaking at Rotary, Lion or other service clubs, but this can be a big step with a different set of challenges that you need to make sure you're ready for.

8. Attend conferences:

I finally attended a district conference towards the end of my Toastmasters career. I wish I was able to attend more because it was fantastic. I met some great people and the workshops were very well done – some even rival presentations I've seen at National Speakers Association meetings. And region conferences tend to be even better with the international conference being incredible.

There are a lot of ways that you can become a better speaker through a program like Toastmasters. You may notice that all of these tips have something in common: they all require participation. Public speaking is not a spectator sport so if you truly want to be an effective speaker then it's time to jump into the game.