

THE MAGAZINE FOR COMMUNICATORS & LEADERS | APRIL 2014

TOASTMASTER®

What's Your Club Culture?

When learning is fun, achievement soars.

PAGE 22

Presenting in a
Second Language

PAGE 16

Taking the Pulse of Your Club

A culture of caring, service and integrity is critical to success. Build it and they will come.

BY CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG

Many factors influence a club's success: membership numbers, renewal rates and education achievements, for example. But an intangible and often overlooked factor may be the most essential contributor to a club's long-term success—its culture!

Culture, in this case, refers to the club's environment—that blend of location, members, values, customs and practices. The easiest way to describe it is to say, "It is the way we do things around here." Culture can be easier felt than measured, yet it's what causes members to remain active in their club. It's the magnet that attracts guests to come back and join. Isn't it time to take the pulse of your club's culture?

The Fun Factor

People do business with those they know, like and trust. There is a similar formula for popular clubs. Friendly and inviting clubs that provide an enjoyable experience and generate positive energy attract new members. Long ago, Toastmasters founder Ralph C. Smedley asserted that people "learn in moments of enjoyment." How fun is your club? Just because members have fun doesn't mean they aren't serious about improving their communication and leadership skills. When learning is fun, achievement soars. Club meetings and member experiences should be both fun *and* fruitful.





Friendly and inviting clubs that generate positive energy attract new members.

James Ware, an adult-learning expert and executive director of a research and advisory firm called The Future of Work ... unlimited, says, “Learning can be exhilarating, eye-opening and empowering.” But he adds that learning can be stressful and even threatening, because it can require changing long-held beliefs, mastering new skills, doing new things and facing the possibility of failing. “Making [learning] fun along the way increases the possibility that members will value it, enjoy it and feel good about themselves,” he says. “And if they experience those feelings, they will only want more.”

A Helping of Hospitality

First impressions count at Toastmasters meetings. How you greet guests speaks

volumes about your club and its culture. Do you shake hands, invite visitors to sign your guest register, issue them a nametag and introduce them to club leaders and other members?

Friendly and inviting clubs seat guests next to veteran members who then explain meeting procedures. Introductions are made early and guests are formally welcomed with applause. Gina Cefalu, ACG, of Danville Toastmasters club in Danville, California, relates a best practice from her club: “At the beginning of meetings, we engage in round-table introductions—everyone present, including guests, announces their name, where they live, how long they’ve been in Toastmasters. They also answer a question related to the theme of the

day—for instance, a favorite vacation spot or a New Year’s resolution.”

Time should also be allotted at the meeting’s end to answer guests’ questions and gain feedback about the club. A culture of caring is critical to the success of any club.

Do Your Evaluations Elevate or Deflate?

One telltale indicator of a club’s culture is the way evaluations are handled. If speech evaluations are negative, destructive or mean-spirited, guests and members alike will feel uncomfortable. They are less likely to take risks and try new approaches for fear of exposing themselves to criticism. When evaluations are supportive and encouraging, speakers are more inclined to



Members of the Tokyo Toastmasters club in Japan embrace diversity and celebrate each others' successes.

experiment. This doesn't mean telling a lie or giving only positive feedback, it means tempering the negative with positives and making sure critiques are constructive, with an eye toward helping speakers improve.

The Role of Club Officers

Officers are the leaders of Toastmasters meetings—they set the tone and establish the practices that define the club experience. Are your leaders professional? Are they personable? Do they work well together as a governing body? Teamwork bodes well for the entire club. When club officers show a genuine interest in visitors, these potential members feel valued and are more likely to join the club. Officers who model hospitality, generosity and friendliness set the best tone for a club, and all members can follow suit.

Good Will to All

Most clubs comprise a mix of men and women of different ages, professions, backgrounds and beliefs, yet the members all come together to improve communication and leadership skills. Each club is a treasure trove—all members have stories, experiences and special skills to share. All clubs can embrace membership diversity and prosper by

celebrating the different styles, backgrounds and sensibilities of its members. When recognition and appreciation are lavished on members for their achievements and contributions, more achievements ensue! Everyone wants to get into the act. Clubs that mute differences, overlook members and play favorites ultimately lose out.

Odile Petillot, DTM, past District 59 governor for continental Europe (which encompasses 17 countries and 10 distinct languages) well understands the value of diversity. A Toastmaster for 24 years, she views district conferences, speech contests and clubs with cultural diversity as opportunities to mingle with people from many different backgrounds, cultures and religions.

"These are laboratories where we can practice empathy and understanding," says Petillot, "and where members can open up, share their opinions, listen to other viewpoints, and discover other habits, traditions and ways of thinking and behaving."

Tales of Two Tongues

A vast amount of clubs are bilingual today. Many divide each meeting's time between English and another language, whether it's French or German, Japanese or Spanish, Tamil or Afrikaans, Mandarin or Cantonese

Chinese. In the San Francisco Bay Area, District 4 hosts one division-level speech contest where members compete in one of three rooms, speaking in Vietnamese, Japanese or Mandarin Chinese. At the district level the following month, the winner's speech is given in English.

Petillot is a founding member of the first bilingual English-French club in Paris. The club's eclectic mix—with French residents wanting to learn "the American way," English speakers improving their French, expatriates and immigrants—fosters an environment for learning about other cultures.

For Canadian David Rowley, ACB, of Montreal's HEC Toastmasters club, diversity is also the order of the day. "Our club was founded by MBA students who come to study at Hec Montreal business school from around the globe," he says. "Last year's club president was from Austria, and is now working in Italy." Its membership also includes French Canadians, English Canadians, Americans and immigrants from Africa and Asia. As such, says Rowley, "We are lucky, because there is no single dominant culture." Together the members are forging their own club culture, whether they are speaking English or French.



Accent-uating Native Tongues

Last year, the MIIS Toastmasters club at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, in Monterey, California, held a speech symposium to showcase the diverse languages spoken by members. The club's hosting institute is ranked as one of the best

Culture is the magnet that attracts guests to come back and join.

translation and interpretation programs in the United States. District 4 Public Relations Officer Will Heilbut, CC, CL, a student at the institute, says, "The speech symposium had seven speeches delivered in four languages (Russian, Spanish, English and Mandarin). All speeches were simultaneously interpreted into and out of Mandarin, English, Japanese, French and Spanish."

The club invited other clubs in the community to participate, and recruited their evaluators. All evaluations were given in English and interpreted into the four other languages. "We not only highlighted the language diversity of our club and our school, but also the complexities of working with an interpreter," Heilbut says. "It was interesting to experience how the

communication process changes when a speaker's vocal variety and body language does not match with the speech content and vocal variety coming through the headsets. It challenged our evaluators in a completely new way."

The event was enriching for members and guests, and it had great public relations value too, as it coincided with the club's 25-year anniversary.

Milestones, Rules and Rituals

The Toastmasters experience is full of milestones to celebrate, and rituals to observe. Many clubs decide that each member who completes an Ice Breaker speech receives a membership pin to acknowledge their achievement. Similarly, a ribbon and short ceremony celebrate members' achievements after giving their 10th speech.

All clubs have anniversaries of their formation. Are you celebrating yours? Reach back and invite charter members to return. Invite spouses, partners and loved ones to join in the festivities surrounding your club's anniversary or its achievement of President's Select, Select or Distinguished status each year. These events build pride, boost member's self-esteem and show the power and glory of the Toastmasters

experience. Invite recent guests to hear testimonials so that they may feel the confidence that is exuded by club members.

While all clubs are guided by operational bylaws, clubs can also create their own rules of engagement for members and meetings. For instance, some clubs pay the attendance fees for officers who attend semiannual district conferences. Others cover the cost of a club president's breakfast at semiannual leadership events. Clubs that meet over a meal at a restaurant sometimes establish the custom of treating a first-time guest to a meal. You can bet it leaves a nice aftertaste in the visitor's mouth.

When a new member joins Tokyo Toastmasters in Tokyo, Japan, he or she is inducted in a ceremony in which the new

member reads a customized version of the Toastmasters Promise aloud, followed by other club members from Japan, Korea, India, the United States and other countries who also read it out loud. This sharing of vows, not unlike in a marriage, bodes well for all parties.

Winners of the Best Table Topics or Best Speaker contests are sometimes awarded a club trophy for the duration of the event, but some clubs give them the option of bringing the trophy to work for the week—or until the next meeting—to showcase a member's success to co-workers. This practice also ensures the member's return to the next meeting, if only to return the trophy, or perhaps to defend his victory! It offers recognition for a job well done, and helps the recipient feel valued.

Tools

How can you assess your club's culture? Among the best resources to guide you is the Moments of Truth self-evaluation tool. Use this tool (Item 290 in the Toastmasters Online Store) to work through a checklist of features to determine your club's performance and practices. It will help you identify areas for improvement in operations and efficiency, and even in friendliness—all key elements of a club's culture.

The late New York City Mayor Ed Koch was known to always ask his constituents, "How am I doing?" You, too, should be asking this question about your club. Ask new Toastmasters and veteran members about their experiences. And don't underestimate the value of your guests' observations. Visitors arrive with fresh eyes, and it's essential to your club's future to appeal to these guests. Welcome them and meld your club culture with what's important to them—not just to sustain your club, but to grow it too. ■

CRAIG HARRISON, DTM, PDG, of *Evening Stars* club in San Francisco, has founded a variety of specialty and advanced clubs in his 21 years of membership. Find free resources at his website, www.SpeakAndLeadWithConfidence.com.