

## SIX TIPS FOR OUTSTANDING EVALUATIONS

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Even seasoned Toastmasters may feel a pit in the bottom of their stomachs as they stand before a group to give an impromptu evaluation of a well-rehearsed speech. Evaluating speeches is part of being a Toastmaster. A poorly delivered evaluation can damage relationships and decrease membership. Strong evaluations energize speakers and build club membership.

Unlike manual speeches, where we put a great deal of time and thought into our words and delivery, evaluations are given off the cuff and can be a source of concern and anxiety for those giving them. Our club teaches its members to use a "formula" evaluation.

- ❖ Step One: Emphasize an area where the speaker did well.
- ❖ Step Two (often overlooked): Suggest a way to improve the speech.
- ❖ Step Three: Come full circle, and again point out something the speaker did well.

The formula approach is a solid foundation upon which to build your evaluation skills. The key words are "foundation" and "build." But wouldn't you like to go a step further and really wow your audience? To make your evaluation shine, heed these six steps:

### **1. Bring your personality into your evaluation.**

Perhaps in your club you're known best for your quietly persuasive manner of speaking. But when asked to evaluate a humorous speech, you strive to be lighthearted and jolly, aiming to match the tone of the speech. Your words fall flat. Why? Because you're not being yourself.

If you try to be someone you're not, the audience picks up on this, and your evaluation loses credibility. Being yourself means knowing and using your strengths. Instead of following the speaker's style, know the strengths of your own personality and don't be shy about using them.

For example, my strength is humor. I'm not afraid to bring lighthearted and respectful humor to my evaluations, even when critiquing speeches of a serious nature. Close to Halloween, I started an evaluation with an eerie cackle, warning the speaker to "Be afraid. Be very, very afraid." Everyone laughed, the speaker most of all. Using humor works for me because my club's members are familiar with this side of my personality.

Take time to discover your strengths, and then use them in force. Be loud. Be calm and reflective. Just be yourself. Club members pay more attention when they know it's you speaking and not someone trying to impersonate an evaluator.

### **2. Don't be afraid to make suggestions for improvement.**

This is important. Suggesting ways to improve is not the same as telling speakers what they've done wrong. I've witnessed otherwise top-notch evaluators skip this step or, worse, perform it incorrectly.

Learning to make uplifting, positive and specific suggestions for improvement is for the betterment of the club, the evaluator and the speaker. Toastmasters is a learning environment. Speakers attend meetings because they want to know how to improve. Don't let them down. Give them something to work on for next time.

Not pointing out something a speaker needs to work on weakens your credibility as an evaluator and may earn you the label of a "white-washer." Don't be an evaluator who stands "before a speaker and says, "Your speech was perfect. You did everything just right. I can't think of

anything I'd change." Well, maybe the speech was nearly perfect. But even the best speakers can do better.

You'll be seen as a skilled evaluator if you point out areas for improvement. A caution: Limit yourself to two suggestions. That's all a speaker can focus on at one time. Pointing out more will only lead to a deflating evaluation, which is contrary to Toastmasters' purpose.

If you've been in your club for a while and have heard previous evaluations of the speaker, you already have some sense of his target areas for improving. Be sure to comment on these, especially if there is still work to be done. "Tom, you've improved greatly in making sustained eye contact. You're looking out at your audience more often than before. Allowing your eyes to roam across the entire room, rather than focusing on the people sitting in the first three rows, would improve your eye contact even more."

### **3. Spot the non-obvious.**

Make it your goal to spot, then to state, what may fly below the radar for others. If in competition three evaluators before you praised the speaker's eye contact and use of gestures, think how you'll stand out when you rise and announce, "What I enjoyed most about this speech was the courage it took to give it. Karen took the emotional topic of her grandfather's illness and gave us a comical look at the grieving process. Karen took the risk of creating a humorous speech out of a serious topic, and her speech was the stronger for it. I applaud her courage."

How do you spot the non-obvious? Start by looking for what you think the speaker was trying most to convey and comment on it. Did the speaker present a moral message? If so, state what meaning the message had for you. Was she practicing a speech for an upcoming sales event? Tell the speaker why her words moved you to purchase her product or caused you to decide not to buy it. Let her know you focused on more than the basics of voice inflection and strong organization of material in listening to her speech.

I've had speakers approach me later with tears in their eyes to tell me how much my evaluation meant to them. They could tell that I gave them my full attention. And all I did was listen.

### **4. Evaluate outside the speech.**

Good evaluators pay attention to more than just the speaker. The minute you walk through the meeting-room door, start taking in details that you can refer to in your evaluation. Take mental notes or jot them down. Pay attention to chatter, opening remarks, prior speeches.

I participated in a district evaluation contest last December. During opening remarks, the Toastmaster for the weekend noted what a diverse group we were, and how the diversity of our clubs and our members brought richness to the Toastmasters experience. I referred to the Toastmaster's opening remarks in my evaluation of our target speaker the next day. I complimented the speaker on finding and selecting a speech topic that was appropriate and informative to all our district members. Not an easy task, given the group's diverse makeup. By pulling in comments other speakers made early in the session, I added to my credibility as an attentive evaluator.

### **5. Pay attention to nonverbals.**

Nonverbals are the fine points in your evaluation. Although they may go unnoticed if the evaluation is performed correctly, they will leave gaping holes in your evaluation if neglected. As a Toastmaster, you should be well aware of most of these. They are:

- ❖ **Eye Contact** - It should be strong. Scan the room while giving an evaluation in the same manner you do when presenting a speech. The speaker you're evaluating will receive the majority of your attention, but do not look only at him. The other club members are there

to learn and benefit from your evaluation too. I try to look directly at the speaker as I make a major point: "Even though Linda gave a persuasion speech, her words took on a storybook quality and really captured my attention." I then scan the room as I offer examples to back up my statement. .

- ❖ **Smile** - If you appear to be enjoying giving an evaluation, people will enjoy hearing it. In addition, this helps you relax. Speak up, and speak clearly - No matter how great your evaluation, if we can't hear or understand you, your message is lost. .
- ❖ **Gestures**- They're just as effective in evaluations as they are in speeches. Use bold gestures to emphasize your points, and place your hands at your side when not using them otherwise.
- ❖ **Vocal variety** - Again, remember to bring in your personality with your vocal variety, and let us see the individual behind the evaluator.
- ❖ **Note cards** - These are perfectly acceptable for an evaluator to use to keep on track. Don't rely heavily on them, but don't be afraid to use them.

## **6. Visualize Success.**

Visualize yourself giving a winning evaluation. You've heard this before, but for those of you who have heard about visualization, yet haven't tried it, here's another chance: Give it a go. It works.

There are as many different ways to visualize success as there are people. Play with different scenarios and techniques until you find what works best for you. I'll share my technique to get you started.

Whether preparing for a speech or evaluation, I start my visualization process no less than a week before the event. For a week, I visualize myself confident and smiling in front of my Toastmasters group. I may picture a guest or two in the audience, and I see them studying me intently, wondering if they might ever be as gifted a speaker as I am. I imagine myself throwing my arms open wide in gesture, as I make a compelling point, and my smile widens as I draw the crowd into a joke and make them laugh. I am always sure to visualize the congratulatory remarks and handshakes I receive at the end of the meeting.

When do I perform these visualizations? Usually, every time I think about the upcoming evaluation, I go through a quick, positive visualization about it. The reason I do most of my visualizing during the week before a speech is that it is most on my mind then. If you want more structure, use the time you spend brushing your teeth or taking a shower to visualize your success. By the day of my speech, my visual image of myself as a strong, intelligent and amusing evaluator is firmly in place. I'm looking forward to translating my vision into reality and giving an inspiring evaluation. More than half the battle of giving a positive evaluation is won before I ever set foot inside the meeting-room door, because I have already visualized my success.

Providing skilled and useful evaluations will build club membership, and it is essential in helping your club members improve their communication skills. Evaluating more than just the standards of eye contact, gestures and voice inflection shows club members that you as an evaluator - and as a person - care about their speech, their success, and about them. Start using these guidelines as you prepare for and give your next evaluations. Over time, they will become second nature, and you will surely deliver that winning evaluation.

*Dena Harris, CTM, is a member of Rocking Hammers Club 4327-37 in Wentworth, North Carolina.*