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defeats the purpose of Toastmasters.

Let’s Evaluate to Motivate – Not Deflate

What’s the hardest thing about making a Basic Manual speech? Many say it’s deciding what to talk about. Articulating a controversial opinion to a roomful of people can feel like undressing in public.

Whether we’re giving formal evaluations or off-the-cuff feedback, we have a responsibility to respect the speaker’s perspective even if – maybe especially if – it is at odds with our own. If we fail to show that respect, we betray the speaker. I know. I once experienced that betrayal.

If there’s a typical Toastmaster, I don’t fit the profile. I’m older, and I’m not climbing a corporate ladder. So why did I join? I sold a book of juvenile nonfiction to a small educational publisher. That meant I had to promote it — speak in schools and libraries, and do book signings. Me speak? I once refused a leadership position in an organization because it meant regularly addressing the group.

Though desperation brought me to Toastmasters, I felt immediately at ease. My Ice Breaker was a breeze. Almost. My evaluator did say it would have been nice if I’d remained at the lectern a tad longer. Oops! I not only forgot to shake the Toastmaster’s hand, the gremlin that commandeered my body whooshed me to my seat so fast I don’t remember sitting down. Stay at the lectern? I’m happy I stayed in the building.

The second speech was harder. It required talking in earnest on a topic I felt strongly about. That smelled like controversy. Sharing opinions on hot topics with people outside my inner circle is as uncomfortable for me as telling them how to vote, or which church to attend.

So what could I talk about? My diverse club represents various races and nationalities; and in the Chicago area where I live, even suburbanites and city-dwellers often seem as far apart as Mars and Jupiter. Selecting a topic everyone relates to – and that offends no one – is difficult at best. With much trepidation, I decided to come out against television sex and violence. I relaxed when I looked at the audience – people challenging themselves and cheering others for doing the same. They didn’t care what I said, only how I said it. My speech’s objectives were to convince the audience of my earnestness, sincerity and conviction, and to control my nervousness. All that should have mattered was to achieve those goals to the best of my ability.

My evaluator treated me kindly. He told me what I did well, and offered suggestions for improvement. His critique was accurate, and he delivered it as a mentor, not a tormentor. Then fellow members passed me written words of advice and encouragement. One member’s words stunned me: “You’re talking censorship. That’s bad.” Just that. No hints on a better presentation, no tips on controlling my trembling knees, only repudiation of my speech’s content.

I doubt a club exists with so homogenous a membership that no one ever disagrees. And most of us would find such a club unrelentingly boring. Fulfilling the Basic Manual’s requirements sometimes means delving into provocative topics and attempting to persuade our audience to see things our way. But a Toastmaster’s task isn’t to debate issues or enlighten those with opposing views. Our mission is to coach fellow members as they strive to become the best speakers they can be. How dare one member call another member’s opinion “bad”!

I’m evaluating at my next meeting. What if my speaker makes a rousing plea for decriminalizing spousal abuse? I’ll try to treat it as a science fiction story – suspend my own opinion, and ask only that the speech be logical within its own context. Does it have a beginning, a middle and an end? Did the speaker make eye contact? Later I might tell my husband I think the speaker’s speech was utterly outrageous and absurd, but at the meeting I’ll try to remember that attacking someone’s opinion defeats the purpose of Toastmasters.

Norma Lewis is a member of Des Plaines Club 1645-30 in Des Plaines, Illinois.