

# Round-robin Evaluations

Maximize feedback and give advanced members an edge.

BY LINDA ALLEN, ACS, CL

**W**hen I was invited to participate as a storyteller for a Christmas event, I jumped at the chance. After I recovered from my excitement, I realized storytelling was out of my comfort zone.

I went to my Toastmasters club to prepare for the new experience. I practiced my story, and the members used round-robin evaluations to help me. With this group evaluation method, every audience member is invited to offer brief comments to the speaker, and each person tries to point out something different. Our club uses this type of evaluation often to coach members for contests and other opportunities, and it's been very successful.

I practiced my stories several times in my club using this evaluation technique. I gained confidence from other members' ideas. One member suggested I try to own the stage by expanding my gestures. Another noted that one of my gestures did not match my words, while other audience members didn't notice the mismatch. The round robin helped me to step out of my comfort zone with confidence, and at the Christmas event I entertained audiences ranging from preschoolers to grandparents.

### Hearing from Varied Listeners

While evaluations for manual projects concentrate on core elements of good public speaking, round robins focus on the details and subtleties. The value of this technique is that the speaker receives diverse feedback. Each evaluator notices something different, which gives the

speaker an understanding of how a larger audience might interpret his speech.

Advanced Toastmasters clubs use round robins as a regular part of their meetings to help speakers prepare for high-stakes speaking events. The format varies from club to club.

My club uses the "PIE" evaluation method: praise, instruction and encouragement. We praise the good points, offer recommendations and encourage practice. We limit comments to a minute or a minute and a half for each member, and vary the advice. This reduces repetition and saves time.

The On Broadway Toastmasters club of Denver, Colorado, uses a similar format: commend, recommend and commend—but with three separate rounds of evaluations. In the first round, evaluators comment on what they found valuable, and what was effective in the speech. In the second round, evaluators recommend one thing to make the presentation even more effective. The round robin concludes with a final round of commending remarks for the speaker. "Even the 'commend' rounds can help you identify and uncover areas that worked for your audience. Often, these are things you didn't realize were effective or meaningful," says David Dye, CC, CL, a member of On Broadway Toastmasters.

### Advanced Prep

The Prep Squad club in San Ramon, California, is an advanced specialty club that uses the round-robin method to prepare speakers for contests and more challenging speaking opportunities. Members are eligible to join if they have at least an ACB award. Speakers provide copies of their speech to the audience so they can follow along and jot notes. A round robin follows with in-depth feedback, including comments about alternate

phrasing, organizational changes, gestures and visual aids.

"Any member can jump in to offer a suggestion or contradiction. While this might not sound very Toastmaster-like, we don't hesitate to interrupt, build on, modify or contradict each other's comments," says club member Dennis Dawson, DTM.

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"Having the freedom to interject when the point first arises enables us to synthesize suggestions that would not occur to us as individuals."

Later, the speaker gives a revised speech, incorporating changes or practicing specific areas of concern.

Next Step Toastmasters in Santa Clara, California, attracts speakers who want to win speech contests and use their Toastmasters skills in their careers. Next Step incorporates the traditional Toastmasters club format with speeches followed by the standard two- to three-minute evaluation. A second evaluation period ensues with multiple one-minute evaluations.

The Evening Stars club in San Francisco, California, is for speakers who want to experiment with new and creative speaking styles in a safe environment. Members also try out pitches for startup companies and experiment with new approaches. Three or four evaluations are given immediately after the speech, with

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*In round-robin evaluations, all audience members provide feedback to the speaker.*

each evaluation typically lasting two minutes. Evening Stars includes Table Topics, but only after speeches and all evaluations are complete.

“Speakers very much value getting more than just one perspective on their speeches. Evaluators sometimes disagree with each other, which leads to fantastic discussions,” says Birgit Starmanns, DTM, a member of both Next Step and Evening Stars.

### Filtering Feedback

With so much feedback in a round robin, the speaker can become overwhelmed by suggestions. “One recommendation is to make sure speakers understand that feedback may be contradictory. It is up to the speaker to filter comments they receive, and to remain open to perspectives they had not considered,” says Dye. “This is true with all feedback, but especially so with round robins.”

Another suggestion is to give each audience member an evaluation page from the *Competent Communication* manual so that each member evaluates the speech from a different speaking skill. Having the written comments to take with him allows the speaker to consider his speech from many perspectives.

Round robins have led to success in contests. Seven of the eight members of Prep Squad have placed in the top three at district-level contests, and one continued to the International Speech Contest Semifinals at the International Convention. My fellow club members Shelley Stutchman, CC, and Linda Pope, CC, won first place in our district’s Table Topics and Humorous Speech contests, respectively, in November 2012. Stutchman credits round robins for enabling her to see what she could not see on her own. Pope says the series of round robins created

subliminal reminders for her during her winning speech.

Speakers aren’t the only ones who benefit from a round robin. Audience members can develop keen listening and observational skills and learn to give constructive feedback. As an audience member, I learn from watching and listening to speakers as they improve, and I apply suggestions from other evaluators to my speeches.

The greatest reward of a round robin is being part of a speaker’s success story as she tries new ideas and expands her potential. It’s a win-win experience for both the speaker and the audience. **T**

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