

This is an example of a typical 1200 word magazine article.

CONTROLLED FAILURE

By
Kyle Word

In Jerry Seinfeld's 2002 documentary "Comedian," there is a painful scene in which, while on stage, the veteran performer completely forgets what he's about to say. For several minutes the camera focuses on him as he tries to remember what comes next. In the DVD commentary, Seinfeld shrugs it off: "I'm not bombing, I just don't know what to say." He went through this comedy gauntlet to develop new stand-up material after his wildly successful TV sitcom ended.

Seinfeld knew from experience that he had to go through a painful "growing pains" stage to return to the top of his form as a standup comedian. In the same way, veteran Toastmasters must often endure pains to reach their potential as successful speakers. They have to "fail" in front of a crowd before they can succeed. I believe that Toastmasters should occasionally plan to fail. Every so often, they should give a speech at their club meeting that falls flat, bombs and flops – and they should do it eagerly.

A working definition of "failure" is in order. When new Toastmasters perform their Icebreakers, they often "fail" to give a good speech due to nervousness or lack of experience. They "succeed," however, by showing the courage to stand up and speak in the first place. (In our club, we tell them that if they don't become physically ill during the Icebreaker, it's a successful speech.)

Jane Herman, coach, speaker, and author of "Take Control of Your Life," puts it this way: "Accept that failure is a natural part of the process of learning anything. If you aren't willing to make mistakes, or 'fail,' then you basically aren't willing to learn and grow."

For veteran Toastmasters who may have given dozens or even hundreds of speeches, "failure" is more problematic. They have often developed a set of skills and a style that showcases their strengths as speakers. Any flaws they have are minor.

I suggest that veteran Toastmasters should occasionally choose projects and presentations that they may feel uncomfortable performing. By working on their weaknesses, they may "fail" a particular project by not presenting to their normal high standards, but they will "succeed" in expanding their repertoire of techniques and improving as speakers.

Weightlifters use the principle of "lifting to failure" to increase their strength. With the help of a spotter, they lift a weight numerous times until they can't perform another rep. By doing this, they rupture the muscle fibers; nature overcompensates, and the fiber is made stronger. Toastmasters can use this same principle by "speaking to failure" -- exercising speaking and thinking techniques that they may have neglected. By improving these "muscles," Toastmasters become stronger speakers, often adding new skills or even increasing their current strengths

While we want to build on our natural assets and abilities, by speaking to failure veteran Toastmasters can also develop skills that might not come naturally. In my club, Cindy is a long-time member. She has a natural theatrical flair, often giving presentations in costume, speaking with various accents, or cracking jokes that showcase her quirky sense of humor.

In her capacity as a safety official for a major hospital, however, Cindy presents to doctors, hospital administrators and government officials. Her naturally theatrical style would be inappropriate. Acknowledging

her discomfort with serious speeches, and knowing her audience, Cindy often practices technical presentations at club meetings, using a straightforward, businesslike style. By using the club as a laboratory, she has developed the ability to make dry technical information more palatable for her business audiences.

Veteran Toastmasters can also use failure to rekindle their interest in the Toastmasters program. We often reach a plateau in our development when we don't use our abilities to their fullest. By challenging ourselves as speakers, we can break through the ennui that often afflicts experienced Toastmasters. The Toastmasters program is designed to help speakers of all levels help themselves, and by using the program, experienced Toastmasters can rediscover the desire that made them join in the first place.

Potential and new Toastmasters often experience trepidation when they first start the Toastmasters program. Likewise, veteran Toastmasters – who might have long ago conquered their fear of speaking in public – face challenges when they try something new. Veteran Toastmasters have in many cases worked hard to make their “butterflies fly in formation.” They can find it unsettling to suddenly experience nervousness. While focusing on developing new skills, they may have to relearn the techniques they used when they first started in Toastmasters.

Toastmasters who are trying something new may also feel vulnerable. We feel pride when we do something well, and it's a blow to the ego when an evaluator makes a laundry list of suggestions for improvement. If we have gotten glowing evaluations for a long time, it's an adjustment to suddenly hear comments that are not as complimentary. If we keep the end in mind – our goal of overall improvement as speakers – it's easier to accept the feedback we need to reach that goal, without feeling bad about it.

Toastmasters learning new techniques may also face resistance in their club. Other members may not understand why you're doing something different from what's worked before. There may be an attitude of “if it ain't broke, don't fix it.” Communicate to the other members what you're doing, and why. Not only can they support you in your quest for new skills, you may also inspire others to experiment and grow.

Like the weightlifter mentioned above, we as Toastmasters have “spotters,” a support system to help us achieve our goals. It's called the club meeting. The club meeting is the place where you can try new techniques in a “mutually supportive atmosphere.” There are some conditions that make the club meeting even more rewarding:

Environment. Is your club committed to personal growth? Sometimes a club can become distracted from its mission. By introducing the idea of trying new things in your speeches, you may be the spark that will ignite a renewed commitment to improvement; that environment will in turn make it easier for you to improve.

Encouragement. It takes a lot of courage to appear vulnerable in front of others. With the club members supporting you, your journey to improvement will be that much easier. Cultivate a culture of encouragement by supporting others who are trying to reach their own goals.

Evaluations. Proper feedback is a must when you're trying something new. Neither “whitewash” nor overly critical evaluations are helpful – but an honest, thoughtful evaluation can move you closer to your goals. If evaluators know your plan in advance, that they can give you constructive feedback you need to reach those goals.

Jerry Seinfeld toiled for several months to develop his new act, performing on any stage where he could try out material. Some of his performances went better than others, but by staying focused on his main goal the whole time, he shrugged off “failure” and kept working his way forward. Ultimately he had enough material for his act, and the film concludes with Seinfeld striding triumphantly onstage in front of a packed theater.

Jane Herman put it in perspective: “Anything worth doing is worth doing badly. If you have the attitude that you can't do something unless you can do it well, or perfectly, then you will never take a step. Take a step.”