

THE ROLE OF THE TOPICS MASTER

Your responsibility is to present the session in such a way that people look forward to speaking. Most people are usually terrified of the Table Topics session, especially the new members or those who are not confident about getting up and speaking ad lib. This is mainly due to the way the session is presented and run. Prepare for your role in such a way that you get people overcome this fear and stigma around Table Topics.

The main aim of the Table Topics session is to get people who have not spoken at the meeting or performed any type of role (Such as Grammarian, Time keeper, Toastmaster, Evaluator etc) to be able to participate in the meeting by way of speaking. Remember, Toast Masters is a speaking club, so everyone should have an opportunity to speak at the meeting. Let them know at this point that guests are welcome to participate.

How you present the session is up to you but make sure you plan properly so that the session is organized and the people know exactly what expected of them and exactly what is going to happen. Planning for this role should be done at least a few days prior to the meeting and NOT ON THE NIGHT. Remember, this is a leadership role and you should accept this responsibility. The leadership skills that you will be practicing are planning, organization, time keeping (Make sure that the session is timed) and facilitating. If the session is a failure, you have not succeeded in your role. You should have already received the agenda for the meeting and will know what the theme for the evening is going to be. If not, contact the Toastmaster and find out what it is.

Once you have been introduced by the Toastmaster, state the purpose of the Table Topics session. (To give everyone the opportunity to speak at the meeting) Then ensure that you present it in such a way that people feel relaxed about participating. Try to make people feel at ease rather than apprehensive or fearful about speaking. Tell them that this is a fun session. That they should not feel afraid or shy about participating as it is the same for everyone. No one is absolutely relaxed when called on to do an impromptu speech. Those who seem to be better at it are those who have practiced a lot. They also had to start somewhere and more than likely it was a session just like this. Let them know that impromptu speaking is a good skill to master. And the best way to master it is to "Do it". They will learn nothing about this skill by simply observing. Get them to feel that we want to help them and we are not there to "Put them on the spot".

Let them know that this is not a contest, that they are not being evaluated or judged. There is no right or wrong way to respond to the question or topic given. It is purely off the cuff and what they feel at the time they have to speak. It's their thought and feelings about the topic at that moment in time. Tell them not to dwell too much on the actual topic or question but to speak on anything that comes to mind at the time. Give some examples to relax them ahead the session and to reiterate that it is a fun session with no rules. (If, for example, the question is "what was your worst holiday?" You could respond by saying you cannot remember your worst holiday but can certainly remember your best holiday, and then speak about that. If possible, tie it back to the question at the end. "So I believe in recalling my best holidays and not the worst ones")

("What were you doing on this day in 1966?" You can respond with "Well I was not even born yet but I am sure that my Dad was doing something on that day. Knowing him, it was probably....." Show them that there is always a response to any question or topic; it's up to them to be creative)

This confirms what you said earlier about there being no set rules for their response to the question or topic and that this is a fun session. Make sure the questions or topics encourage them to speak and also that it gives them a few options. If possible tie the questions or topics in with the theme of the evening.

Once you have introduced the session and set the scene, let them know exactly how the session is going to run. That it will be timed. Green on 1 minute, yellow on 1.5 mins and red on 2 mins. Encourage them to try and speak until they get the green light. Once there try to carry on to the red. This will give them experience at talking ad lib for longer as well as learning how to end a talk when required.

One way of running this session is to use a system which nominates them to speak rather than requesting volunteers. One example is writing down numbers on small pieces of paper, which are folded in half. Make sure that you have planned for the correct number of speakers according to the time allowed for the session. Ask all of the people who have not participated in the evening so far to raise their hands. Then place a piece of paper in front of each one. You can also have some blanks, which means that that person will not be speaking. Explain that those with numbers on their paper will be speaking and that you have the topics according to each number. Explain that you will be calling out the numbers in no particular order, when their number is called you can give them the topic. This is not the time to ask if everyone is OK with speaking. Remember, we want them to speak. Rather congratulate those with numbers and tell them to "Go for it!"

Thank the speaker when they finish speaking and lead the applause. KEEP APPLAUDING UNTIL THEY SIT DOWN. At the end of the session thank everyone and congratulate them on a great session.

YOUR JOB IS TO "MAKE THE SESSION HAPPEN" – ENJOY!

Ray Patterson
www.raypatterson.co.za