



Take  
the

# Plunge!

By Leanne Cusumano Roque, CL

## What's stopping you from trying new experiences?

*"If you play it safe in life, you've decided that you don't want to grow any more."*

- Shirley Hufstедler  
First U.S. Secretary of Education, 1979-1981

**Y**ou have read all the suggestions in *The Toastmaster magazine* and in the *Communication and Leadership manual on taking risks and trying something new in your speeches*. You have seen other speakers use the techniques successfully and been enthralled by their speaking ability. So what is stopping you from doing the same? Chances are, you do not feel comfortable trying new techniques. Here is your passport to success:

### Why Should You Take a Risk?

Why did you join Toastmasters? You probably joined because you wanted to grow as a speaker. To accomplish this goal, you needed to do something different. Scientists have found that if you keep doing the same things, you are literally incapable of growth. The Society for Neuroscience reported in a 1997 briefing titled *Brain Work-Outs* ([apu.sfn.org/content/Publications/BrainBriefings/work.outs.html](http://apu.sfn.org/content/Publications/BrainBriefings/work.outs.html)) that:

*"Environments that offer exposure to complex experiences boost the components that process information in the brain. Brain cell survival increases, the neural appendages that receive communication signals grow and the connections between cells multiply."*

In other words, you get smarter as you experience more. Many people are hesitant to undertake new experiences because they consider them risky. But you joined Toastmasters to learn new skills, right? Then take some risks!

### Why Aren't You Taking More Risks?

We believe an action is risky if we attach some kind of fear to taking that action. This can be fear of failure, fear of rejection or fear of change.

Our perception of risk is highly personal. Ask your friends and colleagues for examples of actions they think are risky. One person will tell you that changing jobs is risky. Another will tell you that staying in his current job is risky. Our fears are unique to each of us.

For example, someone in your club may be quite comfortable using jokes in her speeches, but she never uses props. You, on the other hand, enjoy including props but cannot imagine telling a joke. Both of you are afraid of looking foolish.

The good news about fear is that you can extinguish it and expand your speech techniques in the process.

### Just Do It!

The first step in solving any problem is recognizing that there is a problem. Examine the speeches you have recently delivered. Did you try anything new? Ask your fellow Toastmasters how they perceive you as a speaker. Do they hear good, but very similar, speeches from you? Or do they hear you deliver speeches that reflect a stretch on your part, even if they flop?

If you are not taking risks, determine what would make you more comfortable doing so. For example, how did you gather your courage to join Toastmasters? Did you know someone who was already a member? Did you read everything you could find about the organization? Did you just go with your gut feelings? How you handled this risk, or any other, is a good indication of what you need to do to feel comfortable before taking a risk. Once you know what you need, set a goal that involves risk for you and do what you can to get ready before taking that risk.

Up to this point, you are simply preparing. You will come to a point at which you must, as the Nike commercial says, Just Do It! Taking the first step, no matter how small, reduces your fear of failure and increases your comfort with risk-taking. So:

- Determine what makes you more comfortable with risk-taking.
- Set a goal that is a risk for you.
- Do what you need to do to become comfortable taking that risk.
- Just Do It!

### How To Encourage Others

Once you become comfortable with trying new things, you will want to help others in your club, area or division do the same. Why? Because an organization that helps people take risks without fear of repercussion can be phenomenally successful. Jack Welch, the former CEO at General Electric (GE), understood this when he created "Work-Outs" at GE. Thomas A. Stewart described in an

## A Risk-Taker?

# Who, Me?

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- Address an ethical issue with a boss, knowing that doing so could destroy the business.
- Leave a very comfortable job to be a supervisor, a position I had never held and for which I had received no formal training.
- Give birth to a child at home, not in a hospital.
- Give a storytelling speech about the highly emotional event of my first child's birth, which included his needing oxygen and being transported to the hospital.
- Deliver another child at home.
- Leave my well-paying, secure, good-advancement-opportunities job to start my own business.
- Change careers from lawyer to coach.



Do the last two while pregnant with my second child.

I took all of these actions. Each was a risk for me, and yet I do not think of myself as a risk-taker: I faced resistance, internal and external. I always felt fear. Still, I wanted a hand in crafting my reality. So I prepared, I investigated options, I learned, I talked to lots of people. And then, I did it.

I would be a very different person today if I had not taken these actions. By addressing the ethical issue with my boss, I held fast to my moral compass. By becoming a supervisor, I learned that growing is more important than stability for me. By having my children at home, I learned how strong I am, mentally and physically. By sharing the story of my child's birth, I learned what a powerful connection with others I can create through storytelling. By starting my own business and changing careers, I felt the great joy of doing work that I love, on my terms. In each case, I took life as it came and asked, What can I do?

We all have tremendous potential. Where does your potential lie? What risks can you take to turn your potential into reality? Take even a small risk. Do it today!

August 12, 1991, *Fortune* magazine article how Welch brought together employees at all levels to brainstorm ideas, remove unnecessary work and resolve problems. He “made it plain that it’s ‘a career-limiting move’ to obstruct the efforts of a Work-Out team,” thus making it safe to take risks, the article says.

Welch reinforced this culture by instructing his operating managers, in a January 14, 1992, memo, to “just be sure we don’t punish shortfalls against stretch targets – doing so will guarantee we never reach them.” He also made changes to his staff based on this philosophy, explaining in the same memo that “four out of five officer changes [he made] were for value shortfalls, not numbers.” GE has established a worldwide reputation as a successful business. A large part of this success is caused by its ability to create group support for taking risks that further organizational values.

Management expert Jerry Harvey explains the power of group dynamics in his tale, *The Abilene Paradox*. At a family gathering, one family member suggests taking a trip to

Abilene. Although privately none of the members wants to go, each agrees in turn to take the long trip. No one enjoys the trip, and upon returning home they come to the realization that the first family member suggested the trip, and they each agreed to go, simply because they thought the other family members wanted to make the trip.

Dr. Harvey’s book, *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*, contains a detailed description of the paradox, but the lesson for Toastmasters is clear: No one is getting what they want if everyone is telling each other that they are giving fantastic speeches while secretly wishing their own speeches were better and others’ speeches were more of a stretch. As Dr. Harvey points out, this is an easy trap for groups to fall into, since each group member is trying to accommodate other group members.

To avoid the paradox, you can take a number of steps. First, follow the advice in “Evaluate to Motivate,” an excellent training module on how to give evaluations. It’s part of Toastmasters’ *Successful Club Series*. This module emphasizes the need to provide meaningful feedback to

speakers. As part of evaluations, Toastmasters should let fellow speakers know when they could take more risks, and recognize them when they do so.

Of course, you have to set an example. As you take risks, tell others about it and seek feedback. Your openness will make others feel more comfortable, thereby reducing their fear and helping them to be more adventurous.

As a group, you can go even further in creating a positive environment for venturing beyond what's comfortable. Hand out stickers every time someone takes a risk, include their name in your newsletter or create an annual Best Risk-Taker award. Again, be sure to reward any appropriate risk-taking, regardless of success or failure. People often learn the most from their failures – they are opportunities to determine which paths are dead ends. As Thomas Edison so memorably described his attempts to invent the light bulb: "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

So what steps can you take to encourage risk-taking?

- Help the individuals in your group understand the value of trying something new.
- Discuss your organizational values with your group and

with your officers to accurately identify the arenas in which risk-taking is acceptable.

- Establish the ground rules.
- Create a safe place for members to experiment.
- Reward the risk-taking, regardless of success or failure.
- Encourage other members and officers to use these steps to encourage a culture of "comfort-zone expansion."

If you take more risks and create an atmosphere in your club where it's safe to fail, you will be amazed at how you and your fellow Toastmasters will grow. You will enable yourself to do things you thought were impossible. And once you can do those, you will set your sights on new "impossible" tasks. ■

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