



## Online Presenters Toastmasters

Skills for Better Webinars & Online Events

# Strategies for Effective Evaluation

Have you ever been shy to sign up for that open evaluator role at next week's meeting?

Have you ever given an evaluation and secretly wondered whether you were focusing on the right things?

Have you ever unintentionally made a speaker upset or self-conscious based on what you said during an evaluation?

If we're being honest, most Toastmasters can probably answer "Yes" to each of these questions, even if the events occurred in unintentional or subconscious ways.

Being an evaluator is one of the most challenging and rewarding roles in Toastmasters. However, we must make a conscious effort to hone our skills and conduct ourselves according to the values of our organization. Members need highlights to recognize what a speaker did well, constructive criticism on what can be improved, and positive reinforcement to try again and again. Oh by the way, you have to accomplish all of that in two-to-three minutes with just a few minutes of preparation time.

## The Purpose of the Evaluator

Fortunately, Toastmasters International provides us with a clear purpose statement for evaluators.

*“Your purpose as an evaluator is to provide honest reaction in a constructive manner to the person’s efforts, using the evaluation guides provided. You are not a judge or an authority on speaking or leadership. When you evaluate, you are simply giving your own reaction to the person’s speaking or leadership efforts. An evaluation is an opinion, nothing more. This opinion should mention the effect on you, what the speaker or leader did well, areas where the speaker or leader could improve, and specific recommendations for improvement”*

— Toastmasters International, 2011, p. 3

Let’s build a giant vacuum to suck up all of the air pollution over the world’s major cities and spew it out into space!

Let’s fire people from cannons on the outskirts to major hot spots in the city to reduce car traffic during rush hour.

I bet you have an opinion about these last two statements. That’s right, an evaluation is merely an opinion. Since you have opinions about things, you too can be an evaluator. In fact, anybody can be an evaluator! The first problem is solved. You should never be afraid to sign up to be an evaluator.

## **The Components of Evaluation**

One might look to the skies on a dark, clear night, place a fist under the chin, and ponder what goes into an evaluation. Thankfully, we once again have clear guidelines on what is to be included in a Toastmasters evaluation. An evaluation is a two-to-three-minute speech. Therefore, it should have a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. Within the body of the evaluation, you should always include these components (Toastmasters International, 2011).

- What the speaker did well
- Areas in which the speaker can improve
- Specific recommendations for how the speaker can improve

## What to Focus On

A more nuanced portion of evaluation comes in deciding what to focus on. With so many distractions in the world today (*What should I wear? Which Disney Princess am I? LOLcats?*), it is extremely important to focus on the right things during an evaluation. This article comes with a superb built-in table summarizing precisely what should be commented on and avoided during an evaluation.

Focus On	Avoid Commenting On
The stated project objectives	The many other things that could be said
The personal goals of the speaker	The person themselves
Concrete, observable behaviors	Your assumptions about the person or behaviors

First, every Toastmasters project comes with a clear set of objectives. As the evaluator, your responsibility is to assess how well the speaker achieved these goals. These are well-documented, so you only have to take a glance at the evaluation sheet prior to the speech.

Second, it is a good idea to talk with the speaker beforehand. You can find out any specific goals the speaker has for improving their speech and then focus your evaluation on those. For example, the speaker may be trying primarily to work on a specific aspect, such as gestures, filler words, or vocal variety.

Third, make sure to focus only on what is observed, not your personal assumptions. For instance, “I noticed that you were rocking back and forth during the speech” (an

observation) is acceptable, whereas “You were rocking around because you are a nervous ne’er-do-well” (an assumption) is not acceptable. You don’t really know why someone exhibited a certain behavior during a speech and should never make assumptions related to that. The person may have had to go to the bathroom really bad, but was holding it in while the previous speaker went over time by 10 minutes, causing them to rock back and forth while they earnestly tried not to spill on themselves during their own speech. Focus on what you see, not your assumptions about what you see. Now you know what to focus on and knowing has been said by a 1980s cartoon to be half the battle.

## **How to Be Kind**

A yet more nuanced factor of evaluation is making sure to provide feedback for improvement, while maintaining good feelings and relationships with our peers. When we offend people during an evaluation, it’s often because we have made an assumption about them or their behaviors. It is essential to focus on the objectives of the speech and behaviors that can be observed. Never pass judgement on the speaker themselves or comment on any conclusions you personally make inside your own head about the speaker. Instead, focus on making constructive suggestions for future improvement. Remember that everyone is at a different point along their Toastmasters journey. Our purpose is to continually improve through practice. Being mindful about of your purpose as an evaluator and the feelings of others helps ensure that you will not offend a fellow Toastmaster or start World War III by accident.

## **How to Add Value**

While it is important to be kind and considerate in your delivery, it is equally important to provide value in your evaluation. Take special note that *evaluation* even has the word “valua” in it, which is pretty darn close to the word “value.” The key to providing a high-value evaluation is not just observing areas for improvement, but providing specific, feasible recommendations for how speakers can improve in the future. Here are a couple examples.

- “I noticed that you were rocking back and forth during your speech, which became a bit distracting for me. The next time you speak, **try taking the stage with a firm, comfortable stance with your legs shoulder-width apart and your back up straight.** This may help keep you centered as you make your introductory statement.”
- “I noticed that you used a very similar tone of voice for your grandmother whether she was baking cookies or saving your life after the stove caught fire. I imagine that the fire would have been a stressful emergency. Therefore, the next time you tell this story, you might **try to change your tone of voice to express the intensity of emotion** that your grandmother felt during this moment.”

Do you see the bold text? That signifies the value-added portion of these example statements. Without specific suggestions like these, an evaluation may have “value,” but it most certainly does not have value.

## **Bonus Strategies for Evaluation**

In addition to the fundamentals of evaluation, it is often helpful to apply specific strategies in different situations. Many such strategies have been developed and they come with more acronyms than my editor would allow me to list in this article. Here are a few places where you can find helpful evaluation strategies.

- Use the excellent Pathways evaluation resource format (Toastmasters International, 2016)
- Generally, it is preferable to give bad news first, followed by good news (Legg & Sweeny, 2014)
- Seek out one of the many alternative frameworks for structuring evaluations, which are well-documented (Denno, 2018)
- Look back fondly on a summary of all the tips included in this article and share them with others (Quick, 2019)

The idea behind applying a strategy is that you go into your evaluator role with a clear understanding of what you are paying attention to. For instance, the Pathways format (you excelled at, you may want to work on, to challenge yourself), HSF

(heard, saw, felt), and GLOVE (gestures, language, organization, voice, enthusiasm) will yield drastically different feedback, because they focus the evaluator on different aspects of a speech. Strategies like these help us focus our evaluations on the most important aspects for the current situation.

## **The Evaluation Audience**

Lastly, let's consider one more question. Who is the evaluation for?

If you said, "the ants crawling out of the crack in one corner of the wall and traversing the carpet to steal the donuts on the table in our meeting room," you have not taken this question seriously and have instead opted to humor yourself.

On the other hand, if you said some combination of the speaker, the evaluator, or everyone present in the meeting, you have proven yourself a serious professional with regard to the posed question. Indeed, the evaluation is not just for the speaker, but for everyone! Therefore, it is recommended that you:

- Prioritize items that will help all members learn and improve in your oral evaluation speech during the club meeting
- Share personalized, detailed feedback in a private follow-up conversation with the speaker

## **Unleash Your Inner Evaluator**

You see, it's just like the sappy ending to a movie from a few decades ago. The tools you needed to be an effective evaluator were inside you all along. Don't hesitate, go forth and evaluate!

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