

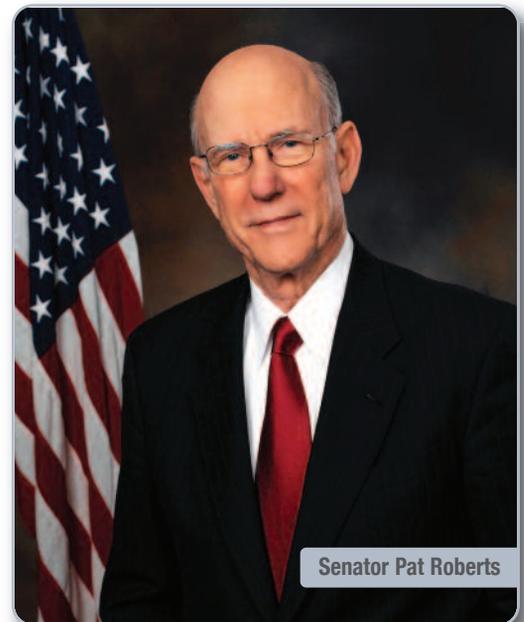


Politicians Tap Into Their Club Experience

By Paul Sterman

Lawmakers practice their leadership and communication skills every day.

For three decades, Pat Roberts has deftly navigated the byways of power and public service in Washington, D.C. The three-term United States senator from Kansas displays his communication skills in myriad ways, whether speaking in the Senate chamber on Capitol Hill, addressing his home-state constituents at community events or debating hot-button issues as a member of the U.S. Senate Financial Committee.





◀ City councilman Danny Nguyen (center) leads a meeting.

Yet there was a time when Roberts was a novice at public speaking – and Toastmasters provided his training. He first joined a club nearly 50 years ago, when he was a United States Marine stationed at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. The club was located at the military base. Later, when Roberts began his career in politics, he joined a club in Washington, D.C.



Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle

Toastmasters supplied a foundation of skills that greatly benefited him as a political leader. “The biggest thing Toastmasters will do for you,” says Roberts, “is that if you have something to say, then by golly, you feel you have the confidence to stand up on your own two feet and say it – and say it well.”

Other civic leaders say Toastmasters has helped them hone skills pivotal to their success. Toastmasters members ranging from high-powered professional politicians such as **Hawaii Governor Linda Lingle** (see article on page 12) to newly elected city council members credit their Toastmasters experience for helping them with not only giving and writing speeches, but also with campaigning and connecting to audiences in diverse settings.

Lingle says her Toastmasters training “helped me get elected mayor of Maui, and then to get elected governor of Hawaii.”

In her club, she notes, she received supportive feedback at a time when she was still developing her speaking skills. The lessons obviously paid off: The highly popular legislator, whose second four-year term ends this month, is known as an articulate and poised speaker, whether she is making a live TV appearance, participating in a political debate or promoting Hawaii as a travel destination.



Congressional Candidate Fred Johnson

Fred Johnson, who ran for a U.S. congressional seat in West Michigan in November, says when he gives a political speech or participates in a candidate debate, he employs speaking tools he honed in his clubs, such as precise body language, potent pauses and proper enunciation. “My Toastmasters skills have been indispensable to me,” says Johnson, whose home club is the Haworth/Holland Toastmasters in Holland, Michigan.

“Toastmasters helps people in every profession, but especially in politics.”

–Past International President Gary Schmidt

The award-winning history professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, was one of 81 semifinalists in this year’s Toastmasters World Championship of Public Speaking. He says he learned a great deal by competing at such a high level, adding that the storytelling techniques used by expert Toastmasters are crucial for someone in public service. Voters don’t want politicians to steamroll them with a long list of facts and statistics – they want you to make a human connection, says Johnson, noting that the best way to do that is to tell stories about real people.

Toastmaster Achieves Pioneering Feat

Danny Nguyen was elected in May to the City Council in Missouri City, an area just south of Houston, Texas. He is the first Asian-American councilman in the city’s history, according to the *Houston Chronicle* newspaper. Nguyen escaped communist Vietnam with his father at age 15, and then spent the next two years in refugee camps before arriving in Texas.

He joined Toastmasters 10 years ago. “I was terrified to speak in public,” recalls Nguyen. But the constant

practice speaking and filling club meeting roles dramatically improved his confidence. When the 43-year-old commercial real estate developer ran for the council seat, he used his communication and leadership skills to connect with voters.

“People’s perception of you is based on how you present yourself,” he says. A member of the Articulators Club in Missouri City, Nguyen says effective campaigning “all boils down to the ability to speak – and, more importantly, to speak on your feet. Table Topics skills are extremely relevant to real-life situations, and they were very helpful in my political campaigning.”

With a sense of wonder and gratitude, he reflects on his dramatic journey over the past decade, from painfully nervous speaker to city leader. “I would not be where I am today without Toastmasters,” says Nguyen. “This has been such a transformation for me.”

Lawmaker Appreciates Laughter

Senator Roberts, a fourth-generation Kansan, is well-known in political circles for his good-natured sense of humor and droll wit. Voted “Funniest Senator” in 2005 and 2006 in an informal poll of Capitol Hill staffers, he says it was in Toastmasters that he realized how to employ humor in speeches. Perhaps more significantly – considering the sensitivities in politics – Toastmasters showed him “when to use [humor] and when not to use it,” adds Roberts, who joined the Capitol Hill Toastmasters in the late 1960s.

“If you can use humor to your advantage, it really throws your opponent off or makes your point,” Roberts says.

Lucille Kring, a former Anaheim (California) City Councilwoman who vied for a seat in the California State Senate in November, also points to the value of Toastmasters. In the mid 1990s, she joined the now-defunct Anaheim Board of Realtors club. She says Table Topics practice, in particular, was of great value when she later went into politics. Kring served on the Anaheim council from 1998 to 2002 and 2006 to 2010.

The benefits started on her first night as a council member, as members of the local media interviewed her before the city council meeting. Anaheim’s Public Information Officer stood nearby, watching protectively as the political newcomer fielded the queries.

When she was done, recounts Kring, the city official said to her, “I was going to help you with your delivery, but you don’t need any help.”



“So that was a real compliment.”

These days, Kring is constantly delivering speeches and says her oratory is free of distracting filler words like “ah,” “um” and “you know” – another bonus from her Toastmasters days.

Top Toastmasters Officers Have Also Thrived in Politics

A couple of Toastmasters International’s top leaders have an impressive background in politics: **First Vice**

President John Lau

and Immediate Past International President Gary Schmidt. In June 2009, Lau was elected a Supreme Council member of the People’s Progressive Party (PPP) of Malaysia, a component party of the Malaysian federal government. It’s a prestigious position: The Council is the highest decision-making body in the PPP, and members serve five-year terms.



Six months later, Lau also became party chairman for the state of Sarawak, one of the largest of Malaysia’s 13 states, where his main duty is to spur party growth. He regularly calls on his communication and leadership skills to give presentations, meet with groups and conduct one-on-one discussions with residents.

So far Lau has had great success: 40 new PPP branches have formed in the state. “Linking the people, the PPP and the Malaysian government is like building bridges,” he says. “The inspirational and persuasive skills I have learned in Toastmasters are of great help to me.”

Twenty years ago, Lau was working in the sales and marketing department of a German multinational company – a job that required him to give presentations to clients. Wanting to improve his speaking skills, he joined Toastmasters.

The organization’s emphasis on self-improvement and helping fellow members has enabled him to flourish as a Malaysian business leader and politician, he says.

“The communication and leadership programs in Toastmasters have groomed me to listen attentively to the people’s needs,” says Lau, DTM, a member of the Kuching Mandarin and Connections clubs, both in the city of Kuching in Sarawak. “[PPP] leaders need to maintain excellent contacts with the [party] members, the people, the press, the government and our leaders.”

PIP Knows His Public Service

Toastmasters Past International President Gary Schmidt, DTM, is not a politician himself, but he is well-versed in the world of politics. He served as a top aide to two United States senators from his home state of Oregon: Mark Hatfield and Gordon Smith. Schmidt says his Toastmasters training helped him develop skills in areas such as speechwriting, impromptu speaking and leadership, which led to increased professional success.

“Every leadership role I’ve had in Toastmasters has helped me in my role in politics,” Schmidt says. “Toastmasters helps people in every profession, but especially in politics. Leadership is an essential component in public service and as many people have said, you can be a communicator and not a leader – but to be a leader you have to be a communicator.”

Schmidt, a longtime member of the Clackamas Stepping Stones club in Clackamas, Oregon, says Toastmasters taught him that speeches should be written with directness and economy of language, streamlined messages, lively phrasing and snappy pacing.

This was a huge help when he started writing speeches for Senator Hatfield. “I knew how to craft a speech



Gary Schmidt, PIP 2009-2010

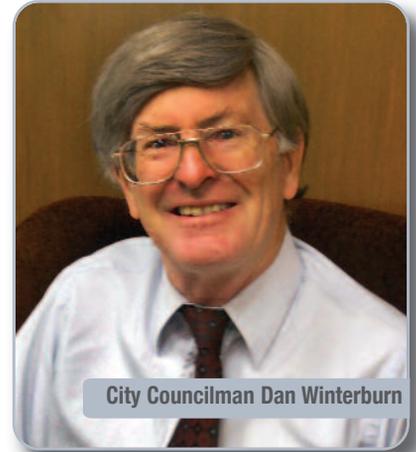
that is well received by the ear,” he says. “The typical speechwriter writes for the eye; they are really good writers but not necessarily speakers... A more effective speechwriter writes for the ear – he knows that a speech is heard.”

Now the public affairs manager for Clackamas County, Schmidt also benefited from Table Topics. He recounts an event – what he refers to as his “worst speaking experience at a town hall meeting” – where he was representing Senator Hatfield and an audience member asked him a question. “I wasn’t sure of the answer, so I panicked and tried to make it up. That was a bad mistake. They called me on it. I learned a lesson from that experience: You have to speak about what you know.”

With the help of Table Topics practice, he became more confident in those types of situations, developing a clear, effective approach to answering questions off the cuff. “You keep your cool, calm down, take a breath, take a moment to pause and think about what the appropriate response is. Then you address the question.”

Toastmasters Campaigns Pay Off

Dan Winterburn, DTM, says his experience campaigning for various Toastmasters offices throughout the years was a big asset when he campaigned for – and won – a seat on the Jacksonville City Council in Oregon. It helped him with campaign strategies and with training and leading his campaign team. The listening skills he developed also helped him connect with voters, says Winterburn, a member of the Rogue Valley Toastmasters in Medford, Oregon.



City Councilman Dan Winterburn

“You listen to people to find out what their needs are, what their concerns are,” says Winterburn. “As you get to know people, you get a feeling for their community, just like you do when you give a speech to an audience.”

The Toastmaster says his speaking skills set him apart from other candidates in the community forums: By giving well-organized presentations, he made maximum use of the five minutes allotted to each candidate.

Now those speaking abilities are paying off at council meetings. When a difficult issue will be discussed, Winterburn takes plenty of time to prepare his remarks and explain his decision to audience members. “It’s much like preparing a speech for your club,” says the councilman.

Mr. Roberts Goes to Washington

In the late 1960s, Pat Roberts went to Washington, D.C., to work as an administrative assistant for then-Kansas Senator Frank Carlson. He soon joined the newly formed Capitol Hill Toastmasters, a group of mostly high-level congressional staffers.

In Toastmasters, Roberts says he learned something very valuable about speechwriting: “You learn how to be succinct.”

“Toastmasters keeps you on your toes,” says Roberts, 74, who served eight terms as a congressman before being elected to the Senate in 1996. “If you want to be a good communicator – and lord knows we need that in our country – then I think it would be very helpful to consider joining Toastmasters.” 

Paul Sterman is an associate editor of the *Toastmaster* magazine and a member of Le Gourmet Toastmasters in Costa Mesa, California.