

Assessing Your Evaluations

By John Spaith, ACG

Greetings fellow Toastmasters and those who've happened to pick up this magazine. I'm excited today to share some of the things I've learned about evaluations because, you see, when I first joined Toastmasters there were some things I needed help with from from my evaluators and..."

If you give yourself four seconds to read the above out loud, you'll get a flavor for how fast I spoke when I joined Toastmasters. This wasn't stage fright. I just naturally talk too fast and worse, never realized it. After four years in Toastmasters I would still be Fast Johnny were it not for my stern but kindly evaluators who kept saying, "John, slow down. John, slow down. John, slow down."

A wise Toastmaster once said that if you give a speech without getting an evaluation, you might as well have given it to your car. Getting a bad evaluation can be even worse. I take evaluating others very seriously because I know first-hand just how important they are. Here, I'll share my evaluation techniques, as well as some common evaluation mistakes.

Good and Bad are Real

When you're watching someone give a speech, there are so many things to look for: Organization. Emotional appeal. Audience interaction. Vocal variety. Gestures. You have to listen, watch and take notes all at once. You shouldn't be thinking about sugar-coating your feedback because you're too busy. When I evaluate, I just write a column that says "good" and one that says "bad".

I know "bad" is a bad word in Toastmasters – to the point that I realize I risk getting kicked out for suggesting this. Certainly never tell someone they did badly! I find that writing the word *bad* on my private notes, which I never share, focuses me on being brutally honest and quick when the speaker is talking.

And it reminds me that even the best speeches have something broken in them, much better than the wishy-washy "suggestions" suggests. I've seen evaluators write out way too much in the middle of the speech they're evaluating, no doubt preparing what they're going to say later, only to miss bigger blunders the speaker makes.

The Spaith Five Box

When I take notes during the speech I'm evaluating, I divide the paper into thirds. In the top third I jot down the key outline points of the speech as it goes along (whether or not the speaker made them clear). I divide the middle third into two boxes, the left side being "Content Good" and the right side being "Content Bad."

Content Bad does not mean “Speaker hates President Bush but I love him. I’ll tell the speaker he’s wrong.” In the Content section, I refer to fundamentals of speaking, such as organization, flow or character development. If you disagree with a speaker philosophically, that has nothing to do with the evaluation of his speech. The bottom third is split between “Delivery Good” and “Delivery Bad.” Because this system gives me five boxes in total and I’m egotistical, I’ve named this the Spaith Five Box.

“Your job is to help the speaker. If you have an ego to satisfy, give a speech of your own.”

Keeping the outline is helpful because sometimes I get so frantic in noting minutiae of a speech – such as an odd hand gesture – that I miss bigger structural flaws in it. By keeping the outline, I have something on paper to help refresh my memory. For example, suppose a speaker claims upfront to have three main points. I question that assertion and check to see if he really has four main points, or spoke 80 percent of the time on only one point. By keeping an outline of what the speaker really talks about, not just what he says he will, helps me double check this.

One of my biggest weaknesses is that I focus too much on content and not enough on delivery. So halfway through a speech, I’ll look at the Spaith Five Box and make sure that the number of notes on content and delivery is reasonably balanced. If not, I change my focus. Usually I’ll have three to five comments in each of the content/delivery good/bad boxes by the end. This gets paired down to the critical points in the next stage.

Take Time to Prepare

Take a few minutes after the speech to organize the giant jumble you have into something coherent before delivering your evaluation. Circle the three good and three bad points and review the outline for structural problems. Most importantly, this is when I apply the sugar-coat layer: “Bad” turns into “suggestions.” Try to make real suggestions for improvement other than just pointing out problems. And do your best to avoid some common mistakes:

• Common Mistake: No Suggestions for Improvement

John, your speech was so good, Cicero would bow down before you. Perfection! There was nothing wrong with it!

I admit that I’ve never seen white wash laid so thick, but I’ve seen close. Don’t do it. Think of it like this: If the evaluators in my club never prodded me to slow down, I’d still be Fast Johnny. Where would you be without people telling you where you need to improve, never mind Toastmasters? I’m all for sugar-coating feedback, but getting an evaluation with no ways to improve is worse than giving a speech to your car. Your car won’t tell you that you’re Cicero, will it? Someone once told me when you see a speech you think was perfect, imagine you just paid \$10,000 to hear it. I guarantee you’ll find something to improve.

- **Common Mistake: Regurgitation Evaluation**

John, in your speech today you had three points which I'm going to repeat. Then you told a joke that I'm going to repeat and a story I'm going to repeat. I'm not going to do anything more than repeat what you've said. Thank you.

How many times do you get an evaluator who really does no analysis of a speech, but gives it back in book-report form? Unless the speaker got hit in the head during the break and is suffering amnesia, they don't need this. Say why and how a speech was and wasn't effective.

In particular, new evaluators tend to regurgitate. I'm guessing because they're not confident yet. Just because you're new doesn't mean you can't have an opinion. I've given the speech that inspired this article six times to five different clubs. The best feedback I received was from someone who was at his second meeting and wasn't a member yet.

- **Less Common Mistake: Brady Bunch Evaluation**

John, your speech about your trip to Hawaii reminded me of the Brady Bunch episode where they went to Hawaii. Remember how Peter found the haunted Tiki and Alice hurt her back on the surfboard and... Three minutes pass. Anyway that was a great episode, wasn't it?

When I gave this presentation across my area last year, some clubs nodded their heads sadly at this point and others gave me confused looks. I hope you're confused. Making this mistake means you are not evaluating the speech at all, but instead talking about yourself or the Brady Bunch or anything but the speaker. I've never seen a full three-minute digression, but I have seen it take half an evaluation.

While this is a less common mistake, it's more obnoxious than the two above. Being too nice and the regurgitation mistakes are motivated by the understandable fear of hurting the speaker's feelings. The Brady Bunch Evaluation is motivated by wanting to talk about yourself. Your job is to help the speaker. If you have an ego to satisfy, give a speech of your own. If your ego is boundless, name an evaluation scheme after yourself and publish it in the *Toastmaster* magazine.

- **Worst Mistake: Too Harsh**

Though it may not be as common, the worst mistake by far is being too harsh in an evaluation. The horror stories of speakers never returning or even running out in tears float around this organization. This goes beyond just the evaluator's target. I know a guest who was so turned off by a brutal evaluation one member gave another that she almost didn't join Toastmasters, fearing that this was typical. You're better off talking about Brady Bunch for three minutes than tearing someone to pieces.

As the saying goes: When in doubt, omit. Avoid mentioning anything outside the speaker's control. When evaluating newer speakers, don't forget the sheer terror you probably felt when you were in their shoes. For something embarrassing that absolutely needs to be called out (think of a fly being unzipped), mention it to the clueless party in private. The human ego can be a

fragile thing, especially when publicly humiliated. Fortunately, most Toastmasters realize this. I estimate I have seen more than five hundred evaluations, of which only about five were too harsh.

I'm sure there are fantastic evaluators who disagree with much of what I've written. That's fine. I hope that you can incorporate at least some of what I've shared here. When you evaluate this article, please don't be harsh!

I've been helped enormously by all the feedback I've received over the years. Evaluation is ultimately not about ego or Spaith Five Boxes and is not an analytical exercise for its own sake. It's about helping all the Fast Johnnys, Slow Billys, and Mumbling Sallys be better speakers than they were before.

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