

June 1, 2009

Fellow Toastmasters,

It is a fact that each year, we in district 65 witness the closing down of several TM clubs. On an average, about four clubs closedown each year, mainly as a result of low membership and/or disinterest in the program. In some years we lose more than four clubs and in some years less. This roughly translates into about 4% to 5% of the clubs in the district, with a district club base of about 100 clubs. We know for a fact that district 65 have lost 20 clubs over the past five years.

So the questions we need to ask are; (1) why do clubs close down and (2) what can we do to prevent it and/or reduce the number of clubs closing down?

When the club membership is allowed (voluntarily or involuntarily) to perpetually stay around 10 or so members or even drop below 10 members for a consistent period of time, the handwriting so to say, is on the wall. It then becomes a matter of time for club to closedown. However in some instances, low membership clubs opt to continue to function in a mode of perpetual denial and/or hoping for the membership to increase by itself. In either case, the current membership suffers and they hang-in there, out of loyalty and commitment.

Clubs generally close down for the following reasons:

1. Low membership and as a result, unable to sustain itself.
2. Weak club leadership and untrained club officers. (Sometimes one officer holds two or more positions, each year)
3. Members lose interest due to routine and monotonous club meeting programs
4. Remote and/or not easily accessible club locations, time and day of the meetings, and frequency of the meetings, all contribute towards closing down of clubs
5. Cliques in the club
6. Members are neglected and made to feel unimportant and therefore dispensable
7. Unfriendly club environment, lack of club meeting protocols, and internal squabbles and politics.
8. Other reasons

What can be done to prevent the clubs from closing down?

1. Every meeting must have a built-in membership building campaign element. In other words, membership campaigns must be an on-going part of club program, irrespective of the size, performance, or the past history of the club.
2. Make every member feel that he or she is an important part of the club membership and his or her success is a priority and tied to the club's strength and performance.
3. Make every club meeting creative, innovative, and exciting. Have a different theme for each club meeting and a printed agenda of roles and responsibilities. Have the club

secretary post the minutes of the meeting on the club web site for those members who could not attend the meeting.

4. If a member does not show up for two consecutive club meetings, the VP Education or the VP Membership, must give a call (not e-mail) to find out the reasons, and if the club membership can help in any way.
5. Have fun in the meeting and constantly create a warm environment of learning, camaraderie, and fellowship.
6. Give equal time and equal opportunities to ALL members (new, not so new, and veteran members) to excel in their personal and professional goals.
7. Provide the necessary presentation tools (flip charts, projectors, video taping, etc.) to make the speech and presentations, closer to the "real" world; supported by excellent evaluations and genuine display of support.
8. Make every member feel that the club really cares for his or her success and membership. Do not take a single member for granted.

For those who say that we have "tried all this" before and it has not worked, etc. To them I say, you may not have tried it hard enough or long enough or more often. There are no silver bullets. Here is an analogy. Just about 30 years ago, General Motors [GM] had 51% of the market-share, over 450,000 employees, building 4.2 million vehicles each year, with revenues of \$105 billion and profit of \$1.5 billion. This year (2009), GM's market-share is just about 23%, have less than 92,000 employees [a loss of 80%], producing 2.9 million vehicles, with revenues of \$149 billion and a loss of 31 billion! What happened? Among other things, the company and the leadership lost its focus, compromised on quality and took its customers for granted. A Toastmasters club is not GM. However, a club and its leaders can lose focus, compromise on quality meetings and take its members for granted. Membership to a Toastmasters club is what profitability is to GM.

No member or club president wants see his or her club closed down. There are emotional and psychological attachments with a club. Members in a given club become like a family or part of a household. No district governor wants to lose a single club on his or her watch. **Every effort must be made by the district leadership to help and sustain these clubs and a specific plan-of-action put in-place, for each of the low membership clubs, in order to boost their membership and turn them around.** However, a time comes in every club's life, to make the tough decision - to continue the resuscitation week after week and year after year, or pull the plug. **A club struggling with perpetual low membership has a demoralizing effect on its members.** Only the club members can honestly decide the faith of their clubs and make the tough decision.

Currently in district 65, there are approximately as many clubs with under 10 members as clubs with over 20 members! Ironically, many of the under 10 member clubs have been in that status for several years.

It goes without saying that healthy clubs have round 20 members; healthy clubs are better performing clubs; healthy clubs are attractive clubs; healthy clubs are generally distinguished clubs; and healthy clubs are fun clubs.

First impressions are strong, lasting, and decisive impressions. The club "environment" is the single most important factor in the decision making process of a prospective toastmaster. The \$64,000 question needs to be asked? All things being considered, which club will a prospective toastmaster join? A club with 10 or less with stagnant membership or a club with 20 or more with vibrant and growing membership?

I wish "charter-strength" success to every club in the district.

Best regards,

Sam  
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