

Toastmasters International

TEXT & PHOTO: STEPHANIE JOHANSSON

Get an inside look at a club putting people's careers on the fast track by focussing on communication and leadership skills

"OKAY, THE TABLE topic for tonight is story endings. Your last sentence is 'Farewell and good luck, the Martian said as he boarded his ship and disappeared.' You have two minutes. Go."

DO YOU FREEZE?

For some of you, holding an impromptu speech without any notes or preparation may sound like a nightmare. There is a group for you. Toastmasters International is a club for people wanting to brush up on their public speaking skills.

The club, which prides itself on helping its members become better communicators and leaders, was the brainchild of an American named Ralph C. Smedley. He officially started the non-profit organisation in California in 1924.

Toastmasters has grown into an international organisation with more than 300,000 members in 15,000 clubs in 80 countries worldwide. Eleven clubs operate today in Sweden; six of them are in Gothenburg.

This evening I join a meeting of West Toastmasters, a branch located at Astra Zeneca just outside of Gothenburg. It is guest night and several new faces are here to listen, learn, and maybe even join. Like every meeting, this one begins with a welcome from the club president followed by the Toastmaster's overview of the evening's programme. Then come the scheduled speeches, Table Topic speeches, all of which are timed, followed by the evaluations by fellow members.

The guest speaker tonight is Elizabeth Nostedt, a Canadian Toastmaster who started the first club in Sweden when she moved here. Like the majority of members, she joined to help her career.

"I wanted to give better presentations. A colleague of mine was a member and after seeing the changes in her, I got inspired and realized if this person could be better, I could be better too."

Tonight Nostedt is holding a speech about how to be a good leader. It is evident that she has worked her way up through the ranks. At Toastmasters, members advance to the next level after completing a certain number of presentations. They achieve Bronze, Silver and Gold status before becoming a "Distinguished Toastmaster".

Nostedt, a Distinguished Toastmaster, points out that the club is more about making personal improvements than about a ranking system.

"People come to Toastmasters to improve their presentation skills, or overcome nervousness, but they stay



Elizabeth Nostedt, a Canadian Toastmaster who started the first club in Sweden.

because of the personal development – becoming more confident and more organised," she adds.

The club must be doing something right. The Toastmasters European website shows more than 20 listings for "Prospective Clubs" across the continent just waiting for approval, including one in Stockholm and another in Malmö.

The existing Toastmasters clubs in Sweden, both English and Swedish-speaking, are located in Stockholm, Linköping, Malmö, Borås and Gothenburg.

"Some are very business oriented, perhaps holding debates, and other clubs are like this one at Astra Zeneca, full of a lot of young people, and many women," explains Susan Cornell, one of this club's founding members who was recently named "Toastmaster of the Year" at the European Conference in Nuremberg.

Men and women, young and old, career beginners and business professionals, locals and expats – everyone who comes to Toastmasters has one thing in common – bettering oneself.

I decide I just may try some self-improvement. After attending a few meetings, perhaps I could even tell an impromptu story about a Martian I met one evening. ■



For more information on Toastmasters in Sweden, go to www.toastmasters.se. There you can also read about the European Wide District Conference being held in Gothenburg in May 2007.