

Roy Sheppard: Comfortable with Chaos

Moderator, speaker and author reflects on his 35-year career.

BY JULIE BOS

As Toastmasters members well know, many people are paralyzed by fear when it comes to public speaking. Roy Sheppard, however, is not one of those people anymore. In fact, this upbeat and versatile professional actually thrives in front of an audience—whether it’s thousands of conference attendees, a classroom of graduate students, or BBC TV viewers and radio listeners.

An expert conference facilitator, moderator, speaker and media journalist, Sheppard has built a successful decades-long career sharing his unique talent with leading organizations around the world. He has moderated private conferences for the Olympic

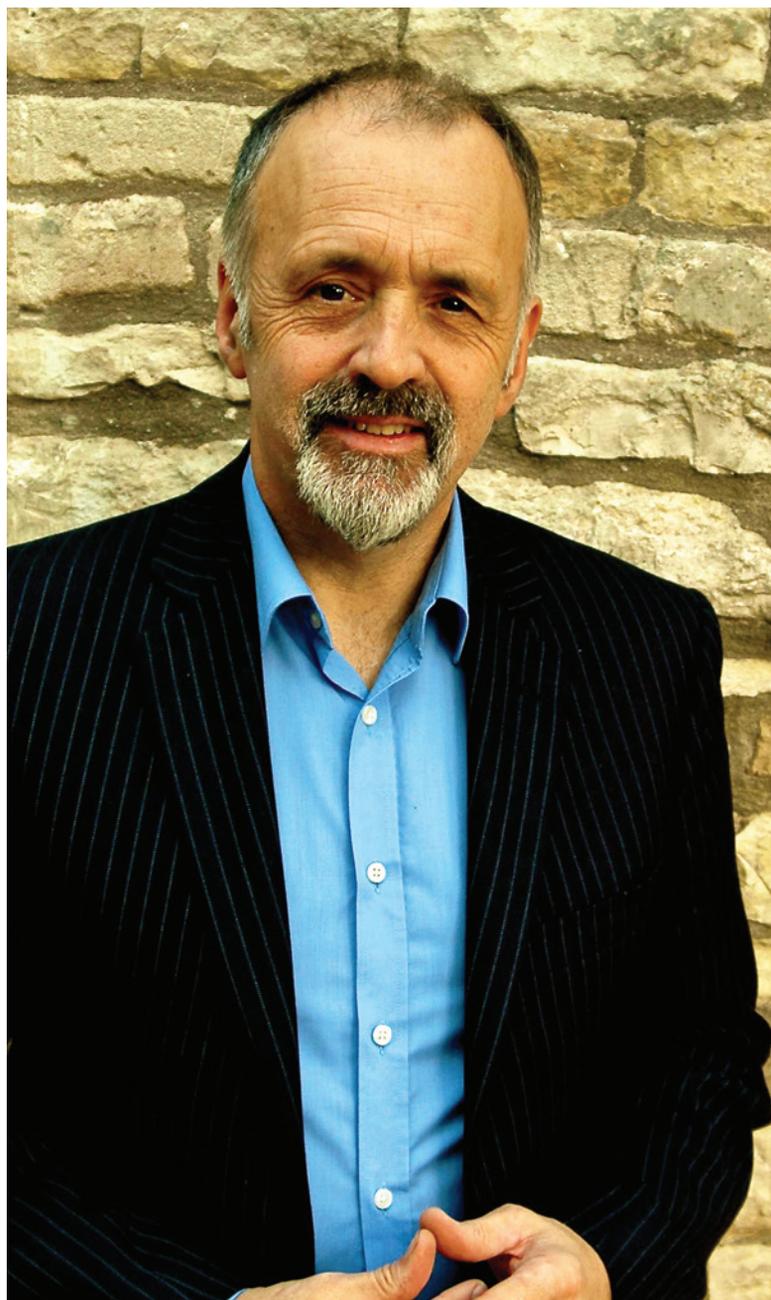
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— Roy Sheppard

Movement held in Beijing and Rio de Janeiro, as well as for the world’s largest trade association—the International Council of Shopping Centers—in Rome, Cape Town, New York, Dubai and Istanbul. He moderated the organization’s flagship event, RECon in Las Vegas, where more than 53,000 delegates have gathered.

Sheppard, who was actually exceptionally shy as a teenager, has written a number of books about relationships (including several aimed at teens), is a trained hypnotherapist (a skill that is surprisingly useful), and has worked as a visiting lecturer at management schools at Cranfield University and Henley Business School, part of the University of Reading, both in the United Kingdom.

Sheppard attended the 2014 Toastmasters International Convention, in Kuala Lumpur, at the invitation of his friend Robin Sieger, the keynote speaker.



Once a shy teenager, Roy Sheppard now moderates conferences and events around the globe.

How did you get started as a moderator?

Initially, I was asked to compère [host] a conference. I had no idea what to do, but all it involved was introducing speakers and not bumping into the furniture.

With all my years of doing live TV (in the days when things went wrong all the time), I learned to think on my feet and ad-lib. The more conferences I did, the more I got involved in the content. I am blessed with two particular gifts—thinking fast

and being genuinely curious and enthusiastic about everything.

I am fascinated by people and industries—so I built a reputation for being someone who really listens and understands what people are talking about. From that, it's easier to ask insightful questions.

What is the moderator's main role?

It's to bring people together and provoke meaningful, relevant discussions to help speakers and audiences gain value from attending an event, and it's to help achieve (or exceed) the stakeholder's objectives for an event.

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In so many ways being a moderator is the direct opposite of being a speaker. As a speaker, the spotlight is on you. People are there to listen to you. As a moderator, you put the spotlight on the panelists.

Great speakers often slave over speech structure, their points and each word. In Toastmasters, you're taught how to do that incredibly well. And you then deliver the talk the way you decide. You have control. By contrast, moderators have no control over what is said, or by whom. Thankfully, I'm comfortable with chaos.

Metaphorically, speakers, certainly advanced Toastmasters, are like exquisitely trained classical musicians. Being an experienced moderator is more like playing jazz—it's all about improvising. Even so, you can't improvise unless you are a skilled musician.

How do you prepare for the role?

In the weeks, or even months, before major international conferences, I have long, detailed discussions with the stakeholders (clients, producers and organizers). I absorb

vast amounts of information about the company, the industry, the people and the challenges they face, all while building trust with the speakers. I listen to everyone. And I usually pick up additional insights at receptions and dinners the night before an event.

How do you put speakers at ease onstage, and bring out the best in them?

Trust is at the heart of it. Ahead of time I help them clarify and streamline their messages so they realize my job is to make them look brilliant.

In 1994, you sought training as a hypnotherapist. Why?

I was working a lot as an interviewer on national radio and BBC television in the U.K. I became increasingly frustrated with how one-dimensional journalistic interviewing is. It focuses on the narrative, and doesn't explore deeper emotions. I never wanted to go into practice as a therapist, but the training taught me how to understand people better. It gave me the ability to tap into how people think in very different ways. It was a profound shift for me.

Do hypnotherapy skills help you as a moderator improve audience understanding and engagement?

Absolutely. When it comes to speakers and panelists, I seem to notice seemingly insignificant things. But when these clues are pieced together you can gain deep insights. This makes for more “real” interviews.

I have become very attuned to the energy in a conference room, too. It's an important component of an audience's

engagement. When I sense energy is leaking from the room, I use techniques to pump more in, without coming across as a TV game-show host.

Tell us about a challenging situation that you turned into a great experience for the audience.

One incident comes immediately to mind. I was in The Hague in the Netherlands for Symantec, the anti-virus company. I'd interviewed the company's CEO in front of 1,700 people. Afterward, a woman from another global technology company gave a presentation. Halfway through, she froze. She didn't forget her presentation—she mentally left the building. All that was left was this shell of a human being. Because of my [hypnotherapy] training, I knew instantly what had happened—she had “switched.” I'd seen it before.

It's freaky. When people are traumatized, they “power down” like a switched-off robot. So in front of all those people, I went up on stage, signaled to get the sound guys to cut my microphone so no one heard what I was saying to her, and with my back to the audience I managed to “get her back.” She snapped out of it. I asked her if she was ok, and she said she was. Her mic was back on for everyone to hear her say, “Why are you here?” She had no idea why I was on stage in front of her. It was an extremely weird experience!

What advice would you give a Toastmaster preparing to be a moderator?

Stop thinking like a speaker. Don't talk too much. I can't emphasize that enough. I've seen too many inexperienced people (usually speakers or consultants) ask questions that are longer than the answers. They wrongly believe they are there to impress the audience. By being more low-key, they actually end up being more impressive!

It's also not the moderator's job to have an opinion. Make others look good by drawing

out opinions and insights from speakers, panelists, other contributors and the audience.

What is the biggest challenge you have ever faced?

My teenage shyness was totally debilitating. Thirty-five years later, as someone who has earned his living as a performer on radio, TV and on stage all this time, I think I may have over-compensated.

What impact did your severe shyness as a teenager have on you, and how did you overcome it?

I couldn't talk to girls, which was a huge problem. As bizarre as this sounds, I was given a job as a disc jockey (DJ), and I had to talk in public (British DJs talked, American ones mixed music). Interestingly, I still couldn't talk to girls, but because I was a DJ, lots of girls started talking to me.

What is your greatest accomplishment?

The books I've written for young people. Really. This was brought home to me when I read the last line of my first review

for the British paperback version of my book *All About You: Cool Life Secrets. The Truth about Romance, Self-esteem, Health, Happiness and Inspiration for Teen Girls*. A 27-year-old woman wrote, "I don't have a child but I'm saving this copy for if I ever have a daughter. It's a treasured memento." I found my eyes welling up over that.

What advice do you have for young people today?

I speak at high schools and universities, often for free, weaving stories—many of which feature myself as an idiot who has made some very dumb decisions in my life. The students like to hear that! But it also helps the audience be more receptive to what I have to say. (Tip to speakers: Share stories where you are not the hero. Audiences will warm to you more.)

I created a concept called your *emotional core*, which is about how to develop your emotional strength, flexibility and stability to create a firm foundation for your future life. Those emotional "muscles" are self-esteem, happiness, attitude and

kindness (starting with being kind to yourself). One part is how you can train that internal critical voice, which, if left unchecked, can become a tyrant crushing your ambitions and making you feel bad about yourself.

Train that voice and you increase your ability to be upbeat in a downbeat world. Happiness is a choice.

What did you think of the 2014 International Convention?

It was absolutely brilliant. There was a wonderful, welcoming community of like-minded people who are making a difference while at the same time developing really valuable life skills. I genuinely wish I'd known about Toastmasters early in my career. I'm sure it would have had a profoundly positive impact on my professional life. 

Learn more about Roy Sheppard at www.facilitator.expert.

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