

# History



## A basement brainstorm

When people hear the word “basement” they’re more likely to picture mold and spiders than the birth place of a global communication and leadership training organization. But a basement in a YMCA in Santa Ana, California, is exactly where, in 1924, Ralph C. Smedley held the first meeting of what would eventually become Toastmasters International.

Smedley began working as director of education for a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) after he graduated from college. He observed that many of the young patrons needed “training in the art of public speaking and in presiding over meetings” and Smedley wanted to help them. He decided the training format would be similar to a social club. During the early 1900s the word “toastmaster” referred to a person who proposed the toasts and introduced the speakers at a banquet. Smedley named his group “The Toastmasters Club” because he thought it suggested a pleasant, social atmosphere appealing to young men.

When Smedley started the Toastmasters group at the YMCA in Santa Ana, California, members practiced speaking skills in a supportive, informal atmosphere. The seedling club blossomed. Word spread about Smedley’s YMCA experiment and soon people in other communities and even other states began asking for permission and help to start their own Toastmasters meetings. By 1930 the burgeoning clubs had established a federation to help coordinate activities and provide a standard program. Toastmasters became **Toastmasters International** after a speaking club in New Westminster, British Columbia, Canada, expressed interest in joining the organization.

A series of rented office spaces in Southern California served as Toastmasters International’s “home office” until 1962. That year the staff moved into its first World Headquarters building in Santa Ana, not far from the YMCA where the first Toastmasters club met.

Over the next three decades the number of Toastmasters grew, and so did the need for a larger staff to service them. World Headquarters relocated in 1990 to its new building in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, about 20 miles south of Santa Ana. See our [timeline](#) for a detailed account of Toastmasters' history.

The evolution of its educational programs and resources are a big part of Toastmasters International’s success and growth. Training has expanded from the 15-project manual *Basic Training for Toastmasters*, developed by Smedley, to include other materials to help members develop skills in listening, giving feedback, decision-making, delegating and mentoring.

With 12,036 clubs and more than 250,000 members in 106 countries, Ralph Smedley’s “basement brainstorm” continues to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.