

Green Light, Red Light... Not Just a Game

By Gabriela

Did you ever play the game Green Light, Red Light when you were a kid? Green meant run as fast you could to the goal and red light meant stop. In Toastmasters, we use green, yellow and red lights to cue our speakers on where they are in the time frame of their speech.

At speech contests, there are two timers. They turn on the green light when the minimum time is reached during the speech. They leave it on until midway between the minimum and maximum time, then turn it off and turn on the yellow light. They leave the yellow light on until the maximum time is reached, and then they turn it off and turn on the red light. The red light remains lit until the speaker finishes speaking. From the time the green light comes on, one of the three lights remains continuously lit until the speaker is finished.

Why should it be done like this? I can think of three good reasons.

1. If the timer turns on a light and then turns it off after a few seconds, the speaker may wonder, "Which light was that he just turned off? Which light will be next?" This is distracting for the speaker. Leaving the light on solves this problem.
2. If the timer doesn't leave the light on until the next light, the speaker is pressured to look quickly at the light as soon as it comes on. This can distract the speaker and take away from the flow of her speech, her eye contact and her body language. It also draws the attention of the audience away from the speech, to the lights. There is no need to pressure speakers like this – they should be free to look at and take note of the light at leisure, naturally in the course of the speech. Leaving the light on solves this problem.
3. For these and other reasons, a quick turning off of the light can distract speakers. I witnessed a speaker who was obviously distracted by a light flashing off early. He lost his place in the speech and had to pause for several long seconds to recover his thoughts. Again, leaving the light on solves this problem.

So in conclusion, let us try to emulate the timers at speech contests, who leave the lights on from the minimum speech time until the speaker is finished. We can do this for speeches, table topics, and evaluations. This will help our speakers to avoid distraction, and will help our club to help us improve our skills.

(Note: This is an exhortation, not a prescription. The timer should accommodate speaker requests regarding lights.)