

## The Rostrum Club in Darwin and its magic autopilot

Rostrum Club NT 1 has a history lost in the depths of time. When I arrived 15 years ago, no one knew its origins and they have not come to light since. The only clue I had was the numbering in the minutes book, then approaching the 1000th meeting. Since then we have had nearly 700 meetings more, despite attendances thinning down repeatedly. So what keeps people coming to this club?

When a club member is rostered to perform a role, a sense of obligation makes him or her just that much more likely to attend. The autopilot in Darwin is a process that just keeps on cranking out rosters, with minimum effort to invoke maximum involvement of members. No matter how thin our membership gets, every active member is always assigned a fresh role every week. We have 12 roles to be performed at every meeting, which ensures that every attendee is rostered for at least one role which he or she is to prepare and present at the meeting. More than twelve people at a meeting is rare!

One of the burdens of rostering, both at Rostrum and at Toastmasters and elsewhere, is the politics, those implied requests for roles. Colonel Blimp only wants to be seen performing the chair, and won't come until he is rostered to perform the chair. Similarly the Vote Zombie doesn't want to be rostered for anything but the most menial role, but feels important when she is wooed by the Vote Stacker.

We get around this problem by rostering everybody through all of the roles in turn. This way, Colonel Blimp, having performed the chair once, is rostered for everything else -- until he has performed everything else. Similarly, the vote zombie is pressed to do more responsible roles, without recourse to the easy options, until he or she has begun to tackle the challenges that Rostrum has to offer. The roster must be remade every week to account for roles just performed.

How do we take account of everybody's feelings when rostering? We don't. The autopilot prepares priority lists, which recommend which of the members have the highest priority is to do each of the roles. Because it is completely impartial, nobody's feelings get hurt. But everyone is rostered, and people just keep on turning up at meetings, roles prepared.

How does it work? After every meeting, performance of each of the rostered roles is recorded in a database. Against each member's performances is an automated count of the most recent roles performed, with the most recent being numbered 01, the one before that being numbered 02 and so on. If you haven't performed a certain role for a particularly long history, say 13 performances, then we say that you have a priority of 13 to do that role.

That priority number is not quite the same as the date. Let's say that Busy Bee performs several roles at each meeting, meeting after meeting. Consequently her previous roles get numbered larger quite quickly, consequently she is that much sooner to be rostered to do them again. Colonel Blimp might be startled to find that Busy Bee has been rostered to do the chair three times to his once.

We have a little piece of software that sorts through the database to rank the people who have the highest priorities to do each of the roles, then prints out a priority list. From that point on, doing a roster is a mere doddle!

You want the software? No problem, you can have it. However, you do have to provide your own keeper of your database. This person must be obsessively reliable in the weekly duty of updating the database and cranking out the priority lists for the rosterer. And he or she in turn must be backed up by someone who (equally obsessively) will step in in their absence. Also, someone must reliably collect and back up the database versions to archive the history of the club.

Of course, for every club whose heart just keeps on ticking, there is at least one worker making it tick. But then, that little bit of software makes it that much easier to keep it alive.

Roger Clifton  
Club Coach, NT 1