

# Career Coach: The power of using a name

By Joyce E. A. Russell

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*“A person’s name is to him or her the sweetest and most important sound in any language.”* – Dale Carnegie.

Recently, I was in several situations where I was once again reminded of the power of using someone’s name when interacting with them.

In one situation, a friend was in a rehab hospital, not getting particularly great personal attention, until his spouse reminded him that he, the patient, had not been very nice to the people who worked there. “Do you even know the names of the people who are helping you?” she asked him. “No, why should I learn their names?” he replied. She gave him some tips on how just by learning and using their names, he might get better care. Sure enough, it helped.

In another situation, I overheard someone talking to a customer service rep and they were incredibly polite and respectful, using the person’s name throughout the conversation. Needless to say, the conversation went really well for both parties.

Why is it so important to use people’s names? A person’s name is the greatest connection to their own identity and individuality. Some might say it is the most important word in the world to that person.

It is the one way we can easily get someone’s attention. It is a sign of courtesy and a way of recognizing them. When someone remembers our name after meeting us, we feel respected and more important. It makes a positive and lasting impression on us. To not remember a name, especially when someone has had to repeat it several times, is to make that person feel slighted.

There are many reasons and excuses people give for not remembering names (bad memory, poor listening, not paying attention, self-absorption, age). Perhaps you believe you are “not good” at learning or remembering other’s names. This may be true, but it doesn’t mean you can’t improve.

Here are some tips for remembering people’s names:

**Make it a commitment.** Suppose you start a new job with a number of new faces. What can you do to learn and remember them all? Set goals for how many people you will meet each day to learn their names. When someone tells you their name, listen and repeat it back to them.

**Practice.** It is okay to say, “Your name is Chuck, right?” They will correct you if you are wrong, and will be flattered if you are right. Colleagues often ask me how I learn names so quickly. I work at it and I practice. I ask them to say their names the way they want them pronounced, and then I try to use their names every time I see them.

**Learn and use first names.** Use their names every time you see them. Repeating their name in every situation helps you to remember it. Greet them by their name. You can also go up to them and reintroduce yourself since they will generally repeat their name once you have said yours.

**Ignore the name tag.** For some folks, name tags help. For me, I find they are a crutch. If they exist, they I will keep looking at the name tag and never learn the person's name. You have to figure out if name tags help or hurt you in learning or using their names.

**On the phone, ask for the name early.** Write it down, and then continue to use it during the conversation. It is especially important to use their name at the beginning and at the end of a conversation with them.

**Use names when e-mailing.** It shows that you have taken the time to make a personal connection to them.

**For difficult names, ask for a pronunciation.** Even if you have known someone for a long time, just ask “Have I been saying your name correctly?” This is important to show that their name matters to you. Then, make sure to keep pronouncing it correctly. Sometimes, they may have taken an “English” name to make it easier on others to refer to them (if they are from another country). I have still found that it is important to try to refer to them by their given name since this is the name that means the most to them, and they will appreciate your taking the time to learn how to say it. If you have real trouble understanding their name, ask them to spell it out since this might also help you to remember it.

**Use the name they have given you.** Do not call them by a nickname unless they have agreed to this. I always ask “And you like to be called Michael, not Mike, right?”

Before going to a meeting, review who you will be meeting with, including their names, what they look like, and something personal. This will help you to better connect with them.

Remember, people want to be treated as human beings, not objects. Using their name is the fastest and most reliable way of building rapport and creating a good first impression. Everyone has a name — use it to better connect to them. You will notice a difference in your relationships.

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