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Remembering Names and Faces: an Essential Skill for Administrative Professionals

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The ability to remember names and faces is a great skill for any administrative professional to possess. It can enhance your interpersonal skills and increase your credibility.

Most people have a problem in this area. How often have you heard someone say, “I recognize your face, but I can’t recall your name?” You have no doubt voiced it yourself. But I am sure you have never heard the opposite, when on meeting you for the second time, they say, “I remember your name, but your face doesn’t do anything for me!”

Why do most people find the name far easier to remember than the face? Well, obviously, it is because the face is visual. I get to see your face; I only get to hear your name, and clearly, our sense of sight is our strongest sense. But there is more to it than that. At the root of the problem is the difference between recognition and recall.

Think back to your high school or college days. We were given two types of tests. One was a direct recall test. It might ask, “What is the capital of California?” - followed by a blank. This question required you to search your mind and enter the correct answer. This was sometimes very difficult, depending on the question. But there was another type of question we were given that many of us preferred. It asked, “Which of the following is the capital of California? A series of choices followed this question – a) Los Angeles, b) San Francisco, c) Fresno, d) Sacramento, etc.



Why was the multiple choice easier? Because you only had to recognize the city, just like you have to recognize the face of the individual. But the name remains a recall task. You must search your mind and find that vague and nebulous information – their name—a much more demanding task.

In the short article, I'll give you seven simple steps that you can employ to make the remembering of both the face AND the name a recognition task.

1. Hear The Name

It may seem like common sense that you must hear the name, but as Mark Twain once said, "Not everything this common sense is common practice." In a communication sense, we are generally more interested in what we have to say than what other people are saying. Consequently, when we meet someone for the first time and they announce their name, it often fails to register because we are preparing our responses rather than listening to their message.

Very often, we cannot recall the name because we never knew it in the first place! Not that the person we were first introduced to did not say it loudly and clearly, but because we weren't listening. It's for that reason, for example, that at our public seminars, we have long abandoned the process where the procedure of having everyone stand up and tell the group who they are, where they're from and why they're here. Why? Because as we go around the room, with everyone announcing their name rather than listening, everyone is preparing their statement. They are getting ready to say something witty like, "Oh, hi there!" So it goes in one ear and out the other.

When you're introduced to someone, try to focus more on what they're saying and what your responses are going to be. Not always easy to do, but with a little practice, you can learn to do so.



2. See the Name

Again, get your sense of sight involved. Research has shown that whether you see something with your eyes or in your mind's eye, it is the same thing. So SEE the name in your mind's eye in big block letters; Smith, Jones, Douglas in big block letters. SMITH, JONES, DOUGLAS.

You might comment, "OK, I can see Smith, Jones or Douglas; I can spell those names, but what about a name like Pierzchalski, I haven't got a clue how you spell it?" Well, the simple answer is you don't need to spell it correctly - spell it phonetically. The important thing is that the next time you see Mr. Pierzchalski, you call him that and not something else. If it is important for you to know how to spell the name, ask them how to spell it. People who have labored with a difficult name their whole lives often have worked out ways to help others spell or even recall their names. Pierzchalski might say something like, "Think of someone skiing off a pier," that will help you remember it.

3. Comment on the Name

It's not always possible, but when possible, draw your attention to the name by commenting on it. It might simply be asking them if they are related to someone with that name or perhaps commenting on the derivation. By focusing your attention on the name is going to help you remember it.

4. Use the Name

Even in the briefest of conversations, you can use it at least twice. Say something like, "It's good to meet you, Sally," or "Bob, you are with the FBI." Repetition is a crucial principle in memory. When you have met a few new people at a business meeting or cocktail party, when you have a moment, run through the names in your mind.

5. Substitution

In many ways, this is the most crucial step because it is here that we make the name visual. The idea is to come up with something concrete you can see in your mind with that same name. If the person's name is McDonald, you might see the golden arches; if their name is Taylor, you might see someone sewing, or Arnold, perhaps the golfer Arnold Palmer, or "Arnold the Pig." But the idea is in step five to have something that you can see in your mind's eye.

If you have never heard of anyone or anything with that name, then again, deal with it phonetically. If you meet someone with the name Skilton, will become a skeleton, Burcher could become butcher, and Zirkel becomes a circle. There is no name that you cannot deal with phonetically. With some names, you may have to break them into two syllables, but it is still simple.

6. Identify a Feature

Step number six is to identify a feature. This might be the most challenging, yet with a little practice, it will become second nature. No two faces are exactly alike, and that's why this step is not really that difficult when you know how. But you must learn to really look at faces. You need to identify what makes one face different from another.

To be proficient in remembering names and faces, it is important that you can identify what specifically makes one face different than another.

There are seven major facial features you can look to in establishing differences:

1. Facial Shape
2. Eyes
3. Eyebrows
4. Nose
5. Jaw and Chin
6. Lips and Mouth
7. Hair

7. Apply the "Mental Slap"

What on earth is the "Mental Slap?"

The story is told that when the great philosopher and teacher Aristotle, upon presenting an important idea, the crux of his argument, would reach across the desk and slap that student as hard as he could!

For what purpose? Because he found that not only did his pupil remember this rather traumatic event, but he also remembered the thought or concept or idea that came at the same time. What we need to do here is likewise make the association of the pictorial substitute for the name

and the feature in a startling or even absurd manner – “The Mental Slap.” In other words, in this vital step, we absurdly associate the substitute we created in step five with the feature we identified in step six.

Let me give you an example: some years back, I met a man named Strembitsky. At that time, I had never met anyone with that name, nor had I heard it before. It was new to me, but it was vital for me to remember Dr. Strembitsky’s name.

As I was being introduced to this fellow, I was thinking to myself, “What is a possible substitute for “Strembitsky?” Well, years ago, I had learned to ski downhill, and at that time, I was taught, as all novice skiers are, a simple turn called a stem Christie. That popped into my mind. Stem Christie wasn’t dead on, but it was close enough to remind me of Strembitsky; if when I look at this man’s face, this image of stem Christie comes out, I know I could remember it.

Looking at this man’s face, I now tried to identify a feature, maybe one that might remind me of the idea of skiing or ski jumps or stem Christies, well, but he didn’t. It seldom works out that way.

What he did have, however, was a fairly wide mouth; that was the feature my eye travelled to. What did I see in my mind’s eye as I attempted to form the association step seven demands?

I absurdly associated that wide mouth with my substitute, stem Christie. Seeing that wide mouth being held open by a little miniature ski. The idea being the next time I see him, I will see that large mouth being held open by a ski; the ski will remind me of stem Christie – Strembitsky!

You may be thinking, “Wow, step seven is four steps.” No, it’s really not; it’s a process. With practice, you will find that your mind will skip through the process. In fact, the steps are far less linear than I have made them appear; the order may change, or two steps may seem to happen simultaneously. Remember, all you need is a cue; all you need is some short clue, and your mind will fill in the rest.

Internalize these seven steps and try to apply them consistently. You may not want to start with new hirers; instead, pick up a People magazine or a Cosmopolitan magazine – look at the names of the people you don’t know, create a substitute, look at their face, and identify a feature.

If you dedicate ten minutes a day for three weeks, I guarantee you will become known as someone who never forgets a name.

Good luck!

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About the Author

Dr. Paul Douglas is an internationally acclaimed speaker and consultant to scores of major corporations, universities and governments. He is a Certified Management Consultant (CMC) and holds a Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com.), Master of Business Administration (MBA) and a doctorate (Ph.D.) in business administration and organizational psychology. He has worked with more than 100,000 administrative professionals throughout the world over the past fifty years.

Paul is the founder of the Annual Administrative Professionals Course, North America’s longest running program for administrative professionals. He has authored seven books and numerous articles, AV programs and webcasts for administrative professionals. P.A. Douglas & Associates Inc. (padouglas.com) is the leader in administrative professional training and professional development.