

the 10¢ decision

How small change pays off big

Team Guide to Exceptional Service



Choosing Words Wisely: Leveraging Language to Connect with Customers

Words, and how you say them, matter to your guests. Some words—both positive and negative—hold more weight than others. While it’s bad form to use “50¢” words to make yourself sound smarter or more sophisticated, choosing words wisely is one of the most valuable 10¢ decisions you can make. The language you use can have a profound effect on how your service is perceived. *Do you choose your words wisely? How often do you find the right words elusive, causing you to say whatever pops into your head at the moment?* Use the techniques from this chapter to help you decide which messages help create positive encounters that will be remembered and shared.

The Art of Careful Communication

My in-depth training in customer service and scripting for superior communication began three years after I left the chiropractic field and began a new career in an ophthalmology practice in Sycamore, Illinois, called the Hauser-Ross Eye Institute. The co-founders, the husband-and-wife team of Drs. Lynn Hauser and Neil Ross, were light-years ahead of their time when it came to customer service in a healthcare setting. Not only were they amazing eye surgeons, they also had a talent for knowing how to make a patient feel special. When I joined their staff, I was only 22 years old and I had so much to learn.

It was clear to me from day one that the expectations of the staff were crystal clear. Over the years, many referring doctors asked me, “How did they find such amazing staff to join their team?” And the answer was, “They hired good people and then taught them how to behave.” I don’t know how to say it any clearer than that. We worked

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hard to put processes in place that helped us pick the very best person for an open position, but the magic was in providing clear behavioral expectations right out of the gate. If a person couldn't deliver service in the manner that matched our culture, then their time on board was short.

I believe if you ask any of the staff members who worked there over the years, they would tell you that treating our patients right was one of the most important things in our day. We were taught how to say things just right, without sounding robotic. We were expected to treat each other with respect and speak in a courteous way, especially in front of our guests. We made it our management mission to create the "Disney World of Eye Care," which is saying a lot. What does it take to make someone *want* to go to an eye surgeon? Once during a video shoot, I interviewed a gentleman about his experience with us in order to use it as a testimonial. Without any prompting from me, he said, "I wish I had a third eye so I could do it all again!" Now that is quite a compliment. But it didn't come without effort.

The lesson that stands out above all the rest during my time at Hauser-Ross came about eight months into my employment. We were growing very quickly, and I was offered a chance to advance from a receptionist role to a hands-on assistant. I escorted patients to exam rooms and learned how to perform preliminary testing prior to the doctor's exam. As an eager student, I was always looking for ways to do more and attempted to be the most helpful ophthalmic assistant possible. One day after prepping a particularly challenging patient, I made the mistake of thinking it would be a good idea to warn Dr. Ross what he would face when he entered the room. I took a small yellow sticky note and wrote "FYI, this patient is a little snotty" and stuck it to the outside of her chart before placing it in the holder outside the door.

I laugh about it now, because why did I think needed to warn Dr. Ross about the patient when he was quite capable of handling any situation? Why did I choose those immature words? Didn't it occur to me that the patient might see the note at some point in the visit? Well, lucky for me, she never saw it. From down the hall I watched

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the doctor read it, pull it off the chart before entering the room, and slide it carefully into his lab-coat pocket.

The “teachable moment” came at the end of the day. That’s code for “learn what you did wrong and promise to do better next time.” All these years later, I can remember what he said to me almost word for word: “Laurie, I really appreciate you trying to warn me in advance what mood the patient was in. That is very helpful.” Since he started with a compliment, I was already standing up a little straighter and silently congratulating myself on what a fantastic help I was to him. That emotion was very short-lived, though, because of what came next. He continued, “However, it is very possible that the patient could have seen the note and, with the words you chose, it might have been offensive to her.” True. Calling someone snotty isn’t going to make them feel very wanted. “In the future, when you need to alert me to a situation where a person is angry or, as you say, ‘snotty,’ let’s use the word *concerned* instead. Around here, let’s make that our universal word for ‘unhappy,’ OK?” Embarrassed, I excused myself from his office and I *never* made that mistake again. I immediately started choosing words carefully, and overnight I saw the impact words could have in almost any situation. I had no idea that wordsmithing would become one of my superpowers.

Eighteen years later, when I resigned my position to start my professional speaking career, I was given a chance to see my personnel file for the first time. I turned the pages one by one, going backward in time through annual evaluation pages, copies of certificates of achievement, and random notes about a variety of things related to my long employment. But at the very bottom of the file, taped to a piece of typing paper, was that sticky note. Next to it in Dr. Ross’ instantly identifiable handwriting was the date that it happened and the simple notation: “Spoke with Laurie about this, she seemed to understand.”

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Scripting for Superior Communication

Scripting for superior communication means using the right word at the right time for a desired result. Avoid the robotic: “Do you want fries with that?” Instead, put words together in a professional, thoughtful way that communicates great service.

An often-overlooked technique in customer service, scripting can make a big difference in the impression you give your guests. It

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involves small, simple changes in word choice that create a big difference in perceived service levels. For example, a customer at a retail location asks where a certain item is located. The response could be, “It’s over there in aisle three.” The better, scripted response is, “I’d be happy to show you. Please follow me.” The difference is that we feel totally engaged with the person who used the more service-oriented scripted response.

Just because you’re following a script doesn’t mean that you stop being present in the conversation or sound so orchestrated that you are a word-for-word responder like an audio recording that says the same thing every time. Scripting simply means finding words and phrases as sentence starters that connect and engage with the person you are communicating with, rather than choosing words that agitate or are disengaging.

Although I give credit to learning scripting at my job in eye care, I was actually exposed to the concept at a much earlier age when my father taught me the “IBHT Attitude.” My dad would come in from a night of farming, go upstairs to take a shower, and then settle into his La-Z-Boy in the living room. On more than one occasion, he would turn to me and ask, “Pumpkin, will you run upstairs and get my slippers?” Boy, did this drive me crazy. Dad was just upstairs, why couldn’t he remember to get the slippers himself? One day I decided to educate my father to that fact. I said, “Dad, you were just upstairs. Why didn’t you get your slippers yourself?” He then

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proceeded to teach me the best four words I've ever learned in my life. He explained, "Laurie, I'm your dad, and when I ask you to do something, you would be much better off saying 'I'd be happy to.' I will feel better about asking you, and you will feel better about doing it." I didn't understand at the time; I just went and got his slippers without fuss. But the IBHT lesson remained with me. Years later, when I started working at the eye clinic and was taught the concept of scripting, I recognized the technique as a "slipper moment" and changed words in my sentences to communicate better.

Just like the words I'd be happy to send a favorable message, listen to the difference between these scripts.

Version 1: *It's going to cost you about \$259 for this.*

Version 2: *The fee for that service is \$259.*

Version 1: *Unfortunately, he's not here right now.*

Version 2: *Mike's not available at the moment. May I leave him a message, or is there something I can help you with?*

Version 1: *If you want to wait over there, the manager will be with you in a minute.*

Version 2: *If you'll please make yourself comfortable in this area, we'll escort you to the conference room as soon as possible.*

Though the end result is no different between version 1 and version 2, the way we feel about the customer service differs vastly.

Taboo Words and Phrases

Another area that falls under the topic of scripting is my taboo-word list. These are words that your team should avoid using. Of course, the list varies among industries. Here I've chosen my top five universal taboo words and provided replacement words or phrases.

1. No

The first taboo word is "no." Replace it with the word "*actually*." When somebody asks, "Can I expect to receive that order tomorrow?" and you reply, "No, it's not going to be here," it comes across as rude. If

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you respond instead, “Actually, it’s due to arrive on Friday,” it sounds courteous. When a restaurant patron asks for salad as a substitution but that isn’t allowed, a server might be heard saying, “No, we don’t allow any substitutions.” Instead, consider saying, “Actually, the meals are served as listed, but I can add a side salad for just \$1.99 more. Would you like that?”

2. Busy

Another taboo word at one office where I worked was the word “*busy*.” Our manager thought this word felt too blunt, and she was right. Listen to how this sentence sounds: “No, I can’t put your call through to Mike; he’s busy right now.” That makes the customer feel pretty low-priority, doesn’t it? Compare that with this revised statement: “Actually, Mike is currently assisting other customers. May I put you through to his voicemail so he can get back to you as soon as possible?” There’s a huge difference in how the words feel to the listener.

3. There’s nothing we/I can do

Next is the expression “*There’s nothing we/I can do.*” That’s like throwing gasoline on a fire. There is *always* something more you can do. You can listen, empathize, or redirect. An equally irritating partner to this statement is “*That’s our policy.*”

In both cases, being able to redirect a person or explain the situation with more palatable words can make all the difference. For example, a teacher might say, “The grade has already posted and there is nothing more I can do.” Or he could say, “Actually, your son earned a D- on the test; however, there’s an extra-credit opportunity coming up next week. I suggest he do that to try to raise his semester grade.” The responsibility is shifted from teacher to student, where it rightfully belongs.

Another example of this issue is a park district that had installed new playground equipment that included a small rock-climbing wall. In the first week, several children fell off the wall and received minor scrapes. The board decided to have the staff place a sign on the wall that said, “No Climbing.” When parents started to complain,

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the staff got into the habit of saying, “I’m sorry, that’s our policy.” This doesn’t really help when a parent is confused about why an apparatus designed for play isn’t allowed to be used. I coached them to change the sentence to, “We have found that a few children have been slightly injured from crawling too high, so we are encouraging kids to play with the other new pieces of equipment until we are able to install the foam mat below.” We can accept the rules better if we understand why they exist.

4. Honey/Sweetie/Toots or any other term of endearment that is not earned

Adding on a quick little endearment at the end of a sentence with customers has its proper place and time for use. Where it doesn’t work is when no relationship has been established and the service provided uses the over-the-top familiar tone to go with it. Examples like, “What can I get for you today, hon?” or “Sweetie, you just let me know if you need anything” are agitating to most customers. Training oneself to stop saying them when it is habit can be hard, but the difference is very noticeable.

5. Sorry

The final suggested word swap is, in my opinion, one of the most valuable to learn. Stop making unnecessary “*sorry*” statements. Many companies are quick to say “I’m sorry” because they believe the statement comes across as great service. That’s not true. For example, a travel advisor hears from a client upon return from their trip that it did not meet their expectations, and the advisor says, “I’m so sorry you had a bad trip.” If it isn’t the fault of the advisor, then I suggest changing that sentence to: “I’m certainly disappointed to hear that. Tell me what happened.” This simple change shows empathy without absorbing unnecessary blame.

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I urge you to save your “sorries” for when an apology is owed. I’m amazed at how often I see “sorry” signs that could be worded differently. Several years ago, I was in an electronics store with a choice of four cash registers to ring up purchases. Two of them were open with no waiting. The fourth lane had a sign on it that read, “Sorry for the inconvenience. This register temporarily closed.” First, I noticed the sign was a professionally printed one, so there was nothing temporary about the situation. If it had been printed on a piece of typing paper with marker, I might have believed them. But it wasn’t. This sign was used daily and put in front of any register they didn’t want to use as a way of saying, “Nope, not using this lane.”

“Sorry” is the first word on the sign. Way back in their subconscious minds when customers see “sorry,” they may feel slighted rather than served. The sign should read, “We would be delighted to help you at any one of our open registers.” See how much better that sounds?

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Do you have any “sorry” signs up right now in your place of business? What about verbal “sorries” to customers? Several years ago, I did a training session at a hospital. Twelve different groups of employees attended. During each session, I asked this question: “How many of you say ‘sorry’ to a patient or family member every day at work?” Nearly all the hands went up in every class. That means that this organization says “sorry” more than 9,125 times per year to their patients and patients’ families. Great service? No.

The hospital was in the middle of a remodel. The sign in the lobby and the message on the radio ad they ran said, “Sorry for the mess.” I encouraged them to change the ad to say, “Guess what? We’re renovating to help serve you better.” Since that session, I’ve asked many audiences the same question, “Do you say ‘sorry’ to at least one customer every day?” Because the response has been an overwhelming “yes,” it made me realize what a big deal this is.

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We build rapport by making a connection with our words. When appropriate, adding a little creativity and some humor can also build a connection. The formula is quite simple: Creativity + Humor = Connection.

For example, the management team at Kampgrounds of America (KOA) took action on this idea immediately after our training session. I've learned that those in the tourism industry use a lot of sorry statements. It's the nature of the beast, I guess. Throughout their locations, they were using several "sorry" signs. But by doing slight "10¢" wordsmithing and adding a dash of humor, those apologies can create a new emotional reaction. Here are the replacement signs they implemented immediately:

Broken-toilet sign: *Plungers Needed: Interested parties apply within.*

Change machine that is out of money: *Selfish Change Machine. Machine is not in the giving mood. Currently only taking money.*

Out-of-order washing machine: *Don't Pick This One! Machine not living up to its full potential. Please use another.*

See how using slight humor is better than the sorry word?

While grocery shopping, I spotted a Planters® peanut display with a pad of coupons attached to it. Consumers were supposed to rip off the top coupon for \$2 off their purchase. When all the coupons were gone, the remaining card read in large capital letters, "Sorry! All coupons have been depleted." What made the message even worse was that there were five of the empty displays lined up next to each other. So, when I came around the corner pushing my shopping cart, all I saw was Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! all over the place. I wrote a letter to Planters explaining all about word swapping for better connecting. I encouraged them to use humor and change the display to read "Nuts! Your neighbor beat you to it!" I've never heard back from Planters (not even a case of cashews as a "thanks for the idea" gift).

What about the use of "sorry" in your email correspondence or your outbound voicemail message? After two days away at a continuing-education event, do you reply to your stacked-up emails by saying,

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“I’m so sorry I didn’t respond sooner to your email”? Instead, you could say, “It’s Monday and I am happy to be back in the office after an educational symposium. I’m ready to provide you an answer to your question.” The word choice in the second example conveys a totally different emotion. It implies that your absence actually served your customers well, rather than inconveniencing them.

Does your standard outbound voicemail say, “Hi, this is Jackie Larson of JL Realty. I’m sorry I’m not here to take your call right now. Please leave your name, number, and the time of your call and I will get back to you as soon as possible”? You have just missed a chance for a 15-second commercial. How much better would it be if instead it said, “Hi, this is Jackie Larson, and I’m out helping people just like you find the perfect house to buy. Please let me know that you have called, and we will get started helping you next!” Beep.

There are two times when I believe a sorry statement is highly appropriate and should be used. First, when an apology is owed to the guest. If we have made a mistake or there is an oversight, we need to validate the concerns with regret. The second time it is good to use sorry is when you want to express a true sign of empathy. “I’m sorry you are going through this.” Or “I’m sorry to hear about your loss” are both excellent examples of the proper use of the word. The sorries I am suggesting that you remove are the unnecessary, habitual ones. Once you’ve raise your awareness of the sorry statement, you will realize how prolific it is in service industries. Take a tour of your building and look for the “sorry” signs. Revise what you say to convey the information without the apology. Discuss how often and in what situation you find yourself apologizing to your guests. When you determine that an apology is owed, find the best way to say it. If you decide an apology isn’t owed or it’s just a habit, start creating your list of replacement sentences.

Be Specific in Your Word Choice

A colleague of mine from my eye-care days recently shared with me that her biggest lesson about word selection is one that has stuck with her for the rest of her career. As a medical scribe, she went with the doctor to every room and completed all the charting in real time.

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When it was time to escort a patient to the next step of the process, she was responsible for communicating what to expect. One day, she said to a patient, “If you would like to stay right here, someone will be in to get you shortly to perform that test.” Overhearing what she said, the doctor pulled her aside to quietly provide her with a “teachable moment.” He said, “When you use the word ‘someone,’ it’s not specific enough. It sounds like anyone off the street could just come in and do the task. I want you to say a ‘technician’ will be here shortly to perform that test.” By simply replacing that one word, more credibility is given to the position and the communication is much more professional.

Along the same lines, for those of you who are in healthcare, remember not to call patients by what they need, such as, “Hey, we got a Pap in room two.” There’s not a Pap in room two. Theresa Lansing is in room two. Instead, use a phrase like: “There’s a patient who needs a Pap test in room two.” Small change in word choice, big change in how it’s perceived if it’s overheard.

I remember reading an article years ago about a man visiting a café and ordering the blue-plate special, which was a pork chop. It came with a choice of potato or vegetable, but the server forgot to ask him which side he wanted. He started to read his paper as she walked away. Then she turned and yelled, “Hey, pork chop!” He, of course, didn’t realize she was talking to him, so he glanced over his shoulder to see just who this pork chop guy was. When he turned back around, she pointed to him and said, “Yeah, *you*, pork chop... potato or green beans?” She was calling him “pork chop” because that’s what he had ordered. His point in the article was that we should call a person by name or at least come back and refer to him as “sir” or get his attention in some way. Calling him “pork chop” certainly isn’t the path to excellent customer service.

Remember, if scripting isn’t used, you and your co-workers will bring your own personalities and previous experiences in communication to the position. If you naturally excel at this skill, you’re all set. But years of training have taught me that many need help with this concept.

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Use Words to Reframe Your Position

Reframing issues, a specialized topic in communication, helps restructure thinking and address problems. Because mindsets are powerful and influence future choices, behaviors, and word selection, successful reframing puts your organization in a favorable position through accurate communication. When should you consider reframing your issues? When the public perception of a situation is skewed or when false information is floating in your marketplace, consider reframing.

Domino's Pizza provides a well-known example of reframing. For years, they had a reputation for subpar pizza. A few years back they tackled the issue head-on in their advertising, which said: "We want to make our pizza taste better." They called it as people saw it, which was a very bold move. It was also a great way to reframe how consumers felt about the product. Most of the time, thinking in advance about framing the issue pays off. If there's a false rumor surrounding your organization, especially if there may be truth to the gossip, you need to take a stand for your position.

Rumor has it the other fun thing they started at Domino's is taking "special requests" when you order your pizza. My teenage daughter, who is an aspiring artist, was the first to alert me to this new craze. She talked me into adding to the digital order form: "Draw a picture of a dog and give him a cute name." When the pizza arrived, she raced to the door to find out if it actually worked. There on the inside of the lid was one of the worst stick-dog drawings ever, complete with a dog tag that said "cute name." Since that time, I have done a little online research on this concept and, sure enough, there are hundreds of examples of funny requests carried out by Domino's employees. What a great way to reframe their reputation.

To reframe an issue and avoid pitfalls, begin by asking these questions:

- What is the issue?
- Who's involved?
- What led to the problem?
- What's the best solution?
- Does the public need to know about this?
- How will public opinion be different after we reframe?

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While this may seem like a management and business-owner problem, frontline staff can play a large role in keeping these issues from evolving. Sharing inside gossip at neighborhood parties with friends and family exacerbates the rumor mill. Like the old game of telephone, the retelling of data is rarely exactly the same. By the time it has passed between several people, the message becomes unrecognizable from the original.

Though this is certainly easier said than done, remember that what goes on at work should stay at work. Before you open your mouth, consider the image your words might send to the community. If a friend asks, “How are things going at work?” and you respond, “Man, I’m telling you, things are so messed up over there. I don’t know how much longer we can even keep the doors open,” you just pushed yourself one more millimeter closer to being out of a job. Instead, reframe the issue in positive language. Say something like, “Well, things have been stressful lately, but I really believe in the work we’re doing. I’m hoping the new management will make things easier.”

When you reframe your image, remember to choose words to your advantage. As a team, discuss whether you need to reframe current issues in the marketplace. If you do, then develop a deliberate campaign to improve your image.

The best example I have ever seen of reframing an issue was at the America’s Brewpub in Aurora, Illinois. Walter Payton, the famous Chicago Bears running back, was a co-owner in the establishment, which was a local favorite hangout. In 1999, when word of his terminal cancer spread through the region, the rumor started that the restaurant was closing down. Because we really liked the place, we hurried up and made a trip there just in case it was true. On each table was a sign in an acrylic, self-standing frame that hit every component of a reframing campaign. I was so taken by how well done it was, I asked our server if I could have a copy of it for my

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files. I knew one day I would include it in a book on the power of words. It read:

Why Walter? Is the question asked by most people. We don't really think people expect an answer. But we at America's Brewpub think we have one.

There is a tremendous shortage of "donor organs" available in this country. Attempts to raise the public awareness of the need have always fallen short.

Walter's illness has raised public awareness to an all-time high. We are convinced that by the time Walter gets his transplant and fully recovers from this ordeal, the donor registration throughout the country will be at the most efficient level in history. And that because of this availability...waiting times will be considerably reduced.

We do not know of any other person who could accomplish so much in such a short period of time.

Sign your donor card (back of your Driver's License) here at the Roundhouse and have a manager sign as your witness and we will give you a \$10 gift certificate.

Just tell your server you would like to have a manager witness your donor card and we'll take care of the rest.

Thanks for your support, America's Brewpub

We signed the back of our license that night. Not for the \$10 gift card, but as a small sign of support for the cause. Walter passed away in early November of that year, but the restaurant continued on for several more years. Today it is owned by a different group of people, but the point is, the doors are still open.

What did this reframing accomplish? Several things. First, it showed that no one ever gave up hope on Walter. Second, because the restaurant gave us a coupon and invited us to return, it sent the message that it wasn't closing its doors anytime soon. This simple

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“10¢” note to reframe our thinking put the only possible positive spin on a horrible situation—and hopefully encouraged others to become registered organ donors like we did. It was a valuable lesson that words matter.

Tone That Connects

Not only do words matter, but the tone that we use when saying them certainly makes a difference too. We all have heard the old adage *It's not always what you say, but how you say it!*

At the chiropractic clinic where I worked, I had a colleague named Donna who excelled at her responsive communication. She had a warm tone to her voice and a genuineness to her personality that set her apart from the rest of us. As a lifelong local, she knew many of the patients and had connections to them. I noticed that when we had to converse with a patient about something sensitive, like an unpaid bill, she had an ease about her and changed her way of communicating. In my training, I refer to this as using “the backyard tone.” Instead of being formal or strict about policies and using words like, “Mr. Jones, we show you have \$257 due on your account, and I will need you to pay that today before your care begins,” Donna would say it like this: “Hank, it looks like I have to ask you for about 257 bucks today. Can we make that work?”

Can you hear the difference those small changes make? The second one sounds like something you would say to a friend at a backyard barbecue, and it works! Nobody ever said no to Donna.

Today, I use that tone in many of my own business dealings. Just the other day, a complete stranger called to talk to me about something that could have been awkward. But instead, I did “The Donna.” I used a tone of familiarity and chose words that kept the dialogue very light and conversational, like we were old friends just chatting at a party. It made such a difference to the flow of the call, and the result was a positive one.

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The impact of our word choices cannot be underestimated. If you don't have a training program available to help you in choosing the right words for your position, I encourage you to reach out and ask for guidance from either a mentor inside the business or from a supervisor. If you are reading this and know that you already excel at verbal skills, consider being a mentor to others who may not be as fortunate.

When the lessons on body language are combined with influential word choices, your service levels will be unbeatable.

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Discussion Questions

What key phrases are in need of a word replacement for better results at your organization?

Are you allowed to change words and phrases as you see fit, or do you need management approval?

As an individual, are there certain words you use with frequency that should be taboo?

Is your team guilty of calling customers by what they need instead of by their name?

Are there issues that need reframing in your company? Or, if you are an individual reading this book, do you have personal-mindset issues that need reframing in order for you to grow in your position or be happier in life?

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