

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU'RE NEW

HOW TO BE COMFORTABLE,
CONFIDENT, *and* SUCCESSFUL
IN NEW SITUATIONS

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ONE

SUCCESS STARTS WITH BEING NEW

To achieve almost anything in life you have to put yourself into new situations. To have a successful career, you often need to change jobs and join new organizations. You get promoted into new teams. Sometimes you're transferred to unfamiliar cities and countries. Outside of work, you're new every time you go back to school for more education or join a new health club to get in shape. You're often a newcomer every time you take up a new hobby, go on a vacation overseas, or check one more thing off your "bucket list."

In fact, it's nearly impossible to accomplish anything meaningful and important in life without at some point having to meet new people, learn new things, and take on new roles. And as a newcomer, how you think and act in those first few seconds, minutes, hours, and days matters. What you do when you're new often determines whether you will find the success, satisfaction, and happiness that drove you to be a newcomer in the first place.

The goal of this book is to help you become a more successful newcomer—across all kinds of new situations. We'll explore the science

of newcomer success and give you a set of strategies, techniques, and exercises to become:

- More productive and confident in your new role
- Better connected to new co-workers, classmates, group members, and neighbors
- Less anxious and awkward around strangers
- More willing to seek out those new experiences that make life interesting, rewarding, and fun

NEWCOMER SUCCESS: FIVE KEY SKILLS

I've been studying newcomer success for over twenty years. In the workplace, I have interviewed hundreds of new employees in a variety of roles, levels, and industries. I have observed newcomers while they work, and have talked to their managers. I've also asked newcomers to keep journals about their first few weeks on the job and have conducted newcomer surveys across many organizations.

Outside of the workplace, I've interviewed newcomers joining schools, churches, neighborhoods, theater groups, health clubs, and even rock bands. I've interviewed college students moving into residence halls, and senior citizens moving into retirement communities. I've talked with people taking classes on everything from swimming, guitar, yoga, and skiing to beekeeping. Through these interviews I've been trying to understand what successful newcomers do that allows them to have such positive, rewarding experiences. How do they get up to speed quickly? How do they integrate themselves into their new group? How do they get the information and advice they need to be productive in their new role?

I've discovered that the secret to newcomer success is no secret at all. It mostly comes down to our willingness and ability to do five key things:

1. Introduce ourselves to strangers.
2. Learn and remember names.
3. Ask questions.
4. Seek out and start new relationships.
5. Perform new things in front of others.

For most of us, these five skills are both the key to newcomer success and our greatest source of anxiety in new situations. For example, although we know that introductions are critical to getting connected, we are reluctant to approach and introduce ourselves to new people. We realize that remembering names creates a great “second” impression, but we discover we’re unable to recall names when we meet people again.

We know that asking questions is often the only way to get the information we need, but we hesitate to bother busy, important people. We understand that all work gets done through relationships, but we are reluctant to start and build new ones. Finally, we find ourselves anxious about performing our new role in front of unfamiliar people, even though we know that newcomers are expected to start out slow and make a few mistakes.

The Networking Event that Wasn’t

Does any of the following seem familiar?

You know you’re supposed to network, and this event is the perfect opportunity to build new connections. But as you walk into the room, you are overwhelmed by the unfamiliar crowd, and you desperately search the sea of strangers for a few friendly faces. Finding some, you go say hi, and spend the rest of the event huddled and chatting with those you already know, never really meeting anyone new.

Or you don't see a friendly face, and nobody approaches you to introduce themselves, so you end up on the sidelines staring at your smartphone. You pretend that you've got urgent email or text messages that you just have to respond to. That way you can justify why you're standing in the corner by yourself for most of the event.

Either way, as you leave, you decide that the meeting wasn't a good networking opportunity after all.

If you've had this experience, you're not alone. Columbia University researchers Paul Ingram and Michael Morris once organized a networking mixer for a group of executives. Over 95 percent of the attendees said that a primary reason for coming to the mixer was to meet and develop relationships with new people. Prior to the event, they asked each executive to identify which people on the invitation list they already knew.

As the executives arrived, each one was given a special electronic nametag, which allowed Ingram and Morris to track the movements and conversations of each executive over the course of the 80-minute event.

They found that, despite the executives' intentions to meet new people, most of them spent the event with people they already knew. They rarely approached and introduced themselves to strangers, and those who did meet new people were introduced by someone familiar to both. What was Ingram and Morris's advice for those looking to meet new people at networking events? Don't bring your friends along.¹

In other words, the key to successful networking often is overcoming your reluctance to approach and introduce yourself to new people—a fundamental newcomer skill. This book can help. In Chapter 5, we'll dissect and analyze the social dynamics surrounding introductions, and we'll explore why it causes so much anxiety. We'll also review specific strategies and exercises to help you:

- Approach strangers with less anxiety
- Confidently introduce yourself

- Make a good first impression
- Engage in small talk that helps establish a positive relationship
- Leave the introduction with permission to approach people later for help, advice, and fun

What's Her Name Again?

While newcomer success often starts with the ability to proactively introduce yourself, how you think and act the second time you meet someone matters, too. Has the following ever happened to you?

You see her all the time. Maybe it's a co-worker, a classmate, or a mother standing on the sidelines at your kid's soccer game. The first time you met her you exchanged names and had a really nice conversation, and it's clear that she is someone you'd like to know better. But the next time you meet she calls you by name, and you panic because you can't remember hers. You reply with an enthusiastic but somewhat lame greeting like "Hey, how are you doing?" and try to pretend you know her name.

You continue to meet from time to time and have friendly interactions, but you become more and more uncomfortable because you still can't recall her name. Admitting it now would really be awkward. The crazy thing is that you can remember almost everything else about her except her name. Your greatest fear is that someday you'll run into her while you're with another person, and you'll be expected to introduce them to each other.

You'd like to get to know her better, but the whole "name thing" makes you reluctant to take things further. So you stick to quick pleasantries, avoid her when you are with another person, and hope she doesn't notice.

If this sounds familiar, it's hardly unique. Approximately 80 percent of the people I've interviewed say they are bad at remembering names.

Many can point to newcomer situations in which they've been anxious and reluctant to interact with people they've recently met because they can't recall their names.

Most people fear the embarrassment of blanking on someone's name. The British gaming company Ladbrokes conducted a survey of 2,000 people and found that the respondents' number one most embarrassing moment was forgetting the name of someone they were introducing. Their number three most embarrassing moment was getting someone's name wrong.²

But there is hope. In Chapter 6 we explore why most of us are bad at recalling names, and what you can do about it. We'll examine the neuroscience of memory and learn why the way we process and store peoples' names can cause problems with recall. We'll also look at the social dynamics of introductions, which often prevent us from even hearing, learning, and memorizing a person's name in the first place. More important, you'll find a variety of techniques you can use before, during, and after introductions that will help you:

- Learn and memorize the names of new people.
- Confidently recall their names when you meet them again.
- Avoid embarrassment when you don't remember a name.

Time Flies and It Seems Too Late

Many people I've interviewed say the newcomer success they care most about is being successful in a new job. Thinking back to the last time you joined a new organization, does any of the following ring a bell?

You're a few weeks into your new position, but you still don't know everyone. Your boss gave you a whirlwind tour the first day, but the introductions were so fast you barely got to know anybody. You'd like to ask certain key people for help and advice, but you're reluctant to approach them. Either you were never introduced to them in

the first place or they always seem busy, and you don't want to impose or interrupt their work. Besides, now that several weeks have gone by, you feel you should already know the answers to some of your questions.

You thought by now you'd have made a few new friends at work, but so far it's been mostly minor chit chat with random people. Lunch is still uncomfortable—sometimes you are invited to join the “lunch bunch,” but often they leave without you. Looking back, you wish you had asked more questions and worked harder to make new friends, but it seems too late and awkward to do it now.

I've heard variations of this story from dozens of newcomers. Some of the underlying frustration and regret was caused by managers who didn't take the time to properly introduce the newcomers to others in the office. Some of it was caused by co-workers who weren't welcoming and accepting of new people. But some of it was the result of the newcomers' reluctance to ask questions and develop new relationships.

When I've asked newcomers “If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?” by far the most common answer I've received has been “Ask more questions.” In Chapter 7 we'll explore why we're reluctant to ask questions of relative strangers, especially busy, influential people. We'll analyze the social dynamics surrounding question-asking and review several techniques you can use to:

- Be more strategic and proactive in asking questions.
- Approach and ask questions with less anxiety.
- Ask questions in ways that create or maintain a positive impression.

Newcomer success also happens through relationships. We need them to learn new roles, acquire information and advice, be accepted by the new group, and build the influence we need to achieve our goals.

Relationships are also the key to newcomer satisfaction. The Gallup

Organization has conducted thousands of company surveys with millions of employees. They found that one of the strongest predictors of job satisfaction is how strongly an employee agrees with the statement “I have a friend at work.”³

Though we make friends throughout our lives, only a few people I’ve interviewed consider themselves extremely good at developing relationships. In Chapter 8, we’ll do the following:

- Explore why we’re reluctant and awkward about starting new relationships.
- Investigate the science of relationship development (from acquaintances to friendships).
- Discover several strategies that will help you move beyond the initial introduction and develop meaningful relationships.
- Find ways to practice and get better at starting relationships and “fitting in.”

The Reluctant Participant

Finally, here’s one more situation common to newcomers:

You’ve walked, driven by, or seen an advertisement for classes or lessons in something you’d really like to learn or do. Maybe it’s public speaking, sales strategies, cooking, or aerobics. Maybe it’s photography, dance, yoga, or a foreign language. You really want to take the class, but you’re reluctant to go.

You know it’ll be awkward to meet the instructors and other participants, but you’re mostly worried about performing in front of other people, many of whom are probably more experienced and skilled than you are. You’ll be embarrassed when they find out what a total beginner you are. You tell yourself you should have started doing this long ago, when you were younger. Instead of taking the

class, you stay away, convincing yourself that you really didn't want to learn that skill, sport, or hobby anyway.

This is a common story, and all of them seem to result from the teller's reluctance to be seen by others as an awkward, mistake-making, less-than-perfect newcomer. At work it can keep you from taking on new roles, developing new skills, or presenting your best ideas. Outside of work, it can simply keep you from trying new things—so you lose out on all the good things that come with new experiences.

In Chapter 9, we'll explore the science of newcomer performance to:

- Understand why we are anxious and reluctant to perform in new groups.
- Develop strategies to move from a focus on “being good” to a focus on “getting better.”
- See the value and benefits of approaching new situations with a “beginner's mind.”

Of course, there are other things you need to do to be a successful newcomer. You need to establish credibility and build trust. You need to negotiate responsibilities and role expectations. You need to attend orientations and training sessions. If you're a new leader, you have to create a shared purpose and generate early wins to create momentum for change.⁴

In this book, I focus on these five newcomer skills because I believe they are the fundamental skills required for newcomer success. The more confident, comfortable, and willing you are to perform these five basic skills, the more successful you can be as new leaders, team members, students, neighbors, volunteers, parishioners, tourists, and any other newcomer role you decide to take on.

Think of these skills as equivalent to catching, throwing, and hitting in baseball, or scoring and passing in soccer. They are the foundational

skills that make all other newcomer and new leader success strategies possible. For example, you often can't establish credibility and trust without first introducing yourself. You can't build networks without being able to start and nurture new relationships. You can't hit the ground running without asking questions and learning to perform your new role. And it's hard to get people to follow you if you can't remember their names.

Most managers (and writers of newcomer books) assume you're already good at these five key newcomer skills, and therefore tend to ignore them. They expect that because you've grown up, gone to school, and interacted with hundreds of people over the years, you're already a master at making introductions, remembering names, asking questions, and so on.

My interviews with newcomers tell a different story. Most of us don't consider ourselves exceptionally good, or even good, at these critical behaviors. Our reluctance or lack of confidence in one or more of these skills is often at the heart of why we don't put ourselves out there and create the newcomer success we desire.

Unfortunately, these five newcomer skills also are not things you typically learn in school, or even in training classes at work. Think about it. Have you ever taken a course on making introductions? Been taught how to consistently remember names? Received coaching on how to confidently ask questions? Been taught how to start relationships and make friends? Or "learned how to learn" to perform new roles and tasks?

We value people who can quickly get up to speed, but organizations rarely spend any time actually teaching their employees how to make introductions, remember names, ask questions, develop relationships, or perform new tasks. Usually you have to figure these skills out on your own.

NEWCOMER ANXIETY IS NORMAL

As we will see in Chapter 3, being a little nervous in new situations is completely normal. Much of our anxiety surrounding these five key newcomer skills comes from two sources. First, we're genetically hard-wired to be nervous around strangers. Second, we learn at an early age to fear and avoid unfamiliar people.

From a genetic standpoint, newcomer anxiety is the evolutionary outcome of having distant ancestors who lived in a prehistoric world where meeting strangers was often a rare and dangerous event. It was also a world where getting excluded by one's group and sent out into the wilderness alone was practically a death sentence. As a result, we've evolved to have a natural fear of both strangers and social rejection.

However, our prehistoric brains don't work so well in a modern world where we constantly find ourselves surrounded by unfamiliar people. Scientists estimate that for much of history, humans were newcomers only a few times in their entire life, and probably met or were aware of only a few hundred people. Today we move in and out of newcomer situations all the time, and meet hundreds and perhaps thousands of new people every year. But we still carry our inherited fears into everyday newcomer situations that are significantly less dangerous and life-threatening than they were thousands of years ago.

When we were very young we also learned to be nervous around new people. Some of us observed, copied, and internalized our parents' anxieties and assumptions about strangers. Some of us came to associate the presence of strangers with abandonment, especially when our parents left us with unfamiliar babysitters and daycare providers. Some of us probably had some less-than-positive early experiences meeting new kids and adults that reinforced our natural fear of strangers.

But most of us were also taught to fear and avoid unknown people. From an early age we're told "Don't talk to strangers." Many are taught to yell "No!" and run away from unfamiliar adults, especially those who approach us when we're alone or without "safe" adults present.

However, when we grow up and become adults ourselves we're suddenly encouraged to put ourselves out there, meet new people, and try new things. Ironically, this requires us to approach and interact with the same kinds of adult strangers we were supposed to avoid our entire childhood.

GETTING BETTER THROUGH REFLECTION AND PRACTICE

Despite what nature and nurture has taught us, we can overcome our anxieties and become more confident, comfortable, and successful newcomers, but it takes reflection and practice. In Chapter 4, we'll learn that one way to do this is to recalibrate our prehistoric brains by reflecting upon our fears and anxieties in new situations and compare what we worry might happen with what actually does happen. Throughout this book I provide exercises and thought-provoking questions to help you stop overestimating social risk and become more comfortable introducing yourselves, asking questions, and so on.

The other way to reduce our anxiety and reluctance is to improve our performance, and that only happens through deliberate, mindful practice. Have you ever wondered why over the course of our lives we can introduce ourselves to thousands of people, remember hundreds of names, ask countless questions, make tons of friends, and yet still be awkward and reluctant each time we perform these basic newcomer skills? The reason is that we mostly do these things mindlessly and never take the time to pay careful attention to our performance, figure out how we can improve, and experiment with new approaches.

For each of the five newcomer skills, I provide a set of techniques and exercises to help you deliberately, mindfully analyze and improve your performance through practice. Most of these techniques, exercises, and games can be added to your regular daily routine. Because you see and interact with strangers almost every day, you'll find countless opportunities to practice, observe, and refine your skills. Many of these opportunities offer you a relatively safe and low-risk way to practice, so you

can become confident and better prepared for the newcomer situations you most care about. All it takes is a sincere, personal commitment to improve.

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

After this introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 we'll see how frequently we move in and out of newcomer situations and understand why getting better at being new can be such a benefit. In Chapter 3 we'll examine how evolution and social learning has set us up to be nervous in new situations; and in Chapter 4, you'll see how self-reflection and practice are the keys to getting better at the five newcomer skills.

Then, over the next five chapters, we will systematically focus on each of the newcomer skills:

1. Introducing yourself (Chapter 5)
2. Remembering names (Chapter 6)
3. Asking questions (Chapter 7)
4. Starting new relationships (Chapter 8)
5. Performing in new situations (Chapter 9)

In each chapter, we'll examine:

- Why the skill is important to your success
- Why it causes so much stress and anxiety
- How to get better and more comfortable doing it
- How to find or create opportunities to practice

I suggest that you first read through each skills chapter to get the big picture. Then, ask yourself whether you find that specific skill a challenge or a major source of anxiety when you find yourself in new situations. Over the next few days, mindfully observe and reflect upon both your performance and the associated emotions you experience in new

situations. Based on what you discover, you may decide to tackle a particular skill first. Or, you might decide to start with the chapter and skill that you:

- Think will give you the biggest “bang for the buck” in terms of overall improvement.
- Feel the most comfortable thinking about and practicing right away.
- See the most opportunities for practice in the next few weeks.

Of course, you may decide to tackle them in the order presented. It doesn't really matter where you begin.

Finally, in Chapter 10, we will explore ways to “give back” and help others become more successful newcomers. We'll round out the book in Chapter 11 with some final words of advice and a few success stories to motivate you to “get out there” and become a better, more confident newcomer.

In addition, please check out the book website at www.whenyoure-new.com for more newcomer resources and practice tips.

Ultimately, the key to becoming a better newcomer is to stop seeing “being new” as something you fear and endure, but as an interesting challenge you can learn to improve through reflection and practice.