

GARY: the power of persistence



What is my name, Gary?

Once I worked with an elderly man named Gary, who had an intellectual disability and appeared to be developing some form of dementia. Perhaps he had always functioned this way; no one gave us reliable information about his history or condition. In such organizations, people rarely investigated the details. We were often told almost nothing about those we supported, while their official charts sometimes seemed to describe entirely different people.

Gary was severely disoriented and required constant care. After getting lost several times during walks, he had to be held by the hand both inside and outside the program.

Yet his memory worked in surprising ways. Gary remembered an astonishing number of bands and singers from the 1960s and 1970s and could sing many popular songs. At the same time, he could not remember the name of a person who had worked with him for six months.

When I began working with Gary, I decided to find out whether he could learn my name.

Every morning, I greeted him with the same words:

“Hi, Gary. How are you? My name is Dana.”

The following morning, I asked:

“Gary, what is my name?”

Embarrassed, he answered:

“Honey, I forgot.”

“My name is Dana. Gary, what is my name?”

“Dana.”

An hour later, I asked again.

“Gary, what is my name?”

“I forgot, honey.”

“My name is Dana. Please try to remember. I’ll ask you again later.”

I repeated the question every morning and several times throughout the day. Gary was not distressed by it. He wanted to remember, even though the answer kept disappearing.

After approximately two weeks, I asked once again:

“Gary, what is my name?”

“Dana.”

I could hardly believe my ears. An hour later, I repeated the question.

“Dana,” Gary answered.

Then I was away for a week. When I returned, I asked him again.

“Gary, what is my name?”

“Dana.”

He never forgot my name again.

Involving Gary in activities

Before this, Gary spent most of his day sitting and staring into space. Sometimes he examined his glasses, moving them closer to his face and then farther away. His main subject of conversation was lunch.

Gary used to bring his lunch from the group home in a beautiful metal container. He worried about its safety and checked it repeatedly to make sure that everything was all right. Gary had no relatives and had lived in the same small group home with ten or twelve other adults for twenty-five years. It was his beloved home, and the food container was a part of that home and of his life.

After Gary learned my name, I felt inspired. I began involving him in educational and developmental activities. He learned to assemble structures from small colored pieces, carefully placing them onto vertical rods. This required concentration, coordinated hand movements, and persistence.

Gary no longer spent the entire day staring into space, examining his glasses, and discussing lunch. He became an active person. He enjoyed doing things, revealed unexpected abilities, and began showing new sides of his personality.

That was why the prospect of losing him was especially painful. I had seen how much more he could do when someone expected something from him and persistently gave him the opportunity to learn.

Unwanted information

One day, I was called into the office. The program director was there with several people I did not know. They asked me how Gary was doing.

I enthusiastically described his progress. I told them that he had learned my name, was participating in developmental activities, and could still acquire new skills. As I spoke, I gradually realized that no one in the room was pleased by what I was saying.

They quickly thanked me and dismissed me from the meeting. I could not understand what had gone wrong.

Only later did I learn that the meeting had been arranged to decide Gary's future. Staff at his group home had repeatedly complained that he required too much assistance and had become impossible to manage. The proposed solution was to remove him from the home where he had lived for twenty-five years and transfer him to a higher-care institution or nursing home.

Naturally, no one said openly, "We want to get rid of Gary." Formally, they were discussing the level of care he required. They expected me, like the others, to describe his confusion, dependence, and difficult behavior. My report was supposed to support the transfer.

Instead, I told them that Gary was not hopeless. He could remember, learn, participate, and develop. My words contradicted the case they had already prepared.

Their dissatisfaction suddenly made sense. Gary's progress was not the information they had invited me to provide.

Did it matter?

Gary required constant attention, and caring for him was difficult. The employees were poorly paid and carried considerable responsibility. Transferring him elsewhere would make their work easier.

But it would not make Gary's life easier.

I never learned what happened to him after that meeting. It would have been very sad if they succeeded in moving him to another institution. Gary loved the group home where he had lived for twenty-five years. He loved the people who shared that home with him. Even the metal container that carried his lunch each day was precious because it was a small part of that home and of the life he knew.

Gary had shown that he could still learn. He remembered my name, became involved in meaningful activities, and changed from a man who sat staring into space into an active person.

But did any of that matter to the System?