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# Forming a naming policy

A Wisdom Central Response

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by Mark L. Vincent, PhD, CCNL

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**Question:** *How should we approach the possibility of naming a facility or scholarship in accord with a donor's wishes?*

**Response:** A quick search for naming policies yields a great variety of possibilities and applications. Normal approaches can be observed among the following organizational groupings:

- *Public Institutions*—typically named after public or historically celebrated figures.
  - Examples: Ronald Reagan Highway, Queen Elizabeth Hall Library
- *Businesses*—If named at all, typically named after the founder or a mash up of founder's names.
  - Examples: Turner Network Television (Ted Turner), A&M Records (Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss)
- *Congregations*—Often named after a person or place in scripture, and sometimes named after a person regarded as a saint or a place in the history of the people who worship there. Mosques are often given names descriptive of the building. Rarely is a congregation named after a founder or donor.
  - Examples: Beth David (House of David), Zion Lutheran, St. Peter's Episcopal
  - Examples: Moti Masjid (Pearl Mosque)

Congregations, however, often name a room or an article of service after a person significant to its history or who contributed significant money to make it possible.

- Examples: Smith Memorial Library, Johnson Chapel

- *Nonprofits*—Frequently name facilities and scholarship funds after those who contributed the money.
  - Examples: Widener Library (Harvard), Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center

Rather than debate whether or not it is appropriate to name a facility after a person, an organization is better served by articulating yet again its mission/vision and guiding values as the means to flesh out its own policy for naming conventions. The following considerations might also be useful:



1. **Buildings/scholarships etc. will be named something.**
2. **Not everything needs to be named via a gift.**
3. **Names that provide opportunity to tell the story of the organization's mission and/or people who have served it are among the most desirable.**
4. (For many nonprofits and religious organizations) **It is often considered inappropriate to name something after a donor in honor of their gift.**
5. **The privilege of naming something is easily understood if the gift is for half or more of the cost of establishing it.**
6. **The privilege of naming does not imply the privilege to direct the use of the gift.**
7. **It is reasonable to offer multiple levels of naming, such as naming a facility but also providing opportunity to name a room because the cost of its furnishings were contributed by someone. It is unnecessarily complicating, however, to break naming privileges into smaller units (i.e. The Jones Memorial Urinal).**
8. **Naming does not have to be perpetual.** Refurbishing a room, a major overhaul, or even a need to rebuild is a natural and reasonable time to revisit a name. It is also reasonable and natural to start the process with the person(s) or their heirs to see if they wish to continue their support.

**Additional information and examples of naming policies can be retrieved from the following links:**

[Pinellas County](#)

[Mcgill University](#)

[New Trier School System](#)

[Association for Healthcare Philanthropy](#)



## **About the respondent:**

Mark L. Vincent is a lifelong student, practitioner and educator of organizational design and development, organizational leadership, the intersections of faith and money, and most especially group process and problem solving with executives and boards.

As CEO of a firm established to help organizations and their leaders discover clarity and implement solutions, Mark is frequently involved with businesses, nonprofits and ministry organizations, guiding leadership transitions, untying organizational knots and moving forward in mission. He also spends significant time mentoring executive leaders and organizational development professionals.

Mark serves on the board of Engineered Pump Services, Inc. and the Christian Leadership Alliance, regularly instructing at its annual Nonprofit Leadership Academy and teaching executive leadership for its CCNL program.

Mark is married to Lorie, a sixteen-time cancer survivor. Together, they wrote *Fighting Disease, Not Death: Finding a way through lifelong struggle*. They call Wisconsin home, but divide their time with family in several locations.

