A Guide to Inclusive Language

Language, of course, is a large part of how we communicate and express ourselves in any social context. But it is not neutral: rather, it is heavily dependent on the identity and the personality of the communicator, as well as the culture of the social situation in which it is used – for example, at work. As such, language carries the potential to either create, or destroy, a sense of belonging.

In our latest Guide, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Consultant Geff Parsons explains why language is so important in the context of D, E & I and how to use our words in an inclusive way.

So what do we mean by "inclusive" language?

Put simply, inclusive language is language that does not make the audience – whether targeted, incidental or tangential – feel excluded, or what we might call "othered". Instead, it acknowledges and respects everyone, without making them feel in some way "inferior" for being different from the contextual majority in any particular way.

Inclusive language therefore implies a sensitivity to how one's words can affect others, and accordingly the intentional use of terms, phrases and tones which avoid the likelihood of exclusion. At its most basic level, it involves eradicating discriminatory or potentially exclusionary language – such as sexist, racist, ageist, ableist or homophobic – from one's vocabulary.

Why does inclusive language matter?

In any context – and certainly in workplaces – excessive homogeneity creates an environment that is, at best, static; or sometimes even backward- rather than forward-looking. It is the enemy of innovation, creative problem-solving and robustness.

The antidote to this is to introduce diversity (whether demographic or acquired through experience), of thought, perspective, experience and heuristics – and, CRUCIALLY, to ensure that those points of difference are integrated into the relevant environment (such as a workplace team) through inclusive practices.

Central to this is fostering inclusion safety, which is the launching pad for the full psychological safety which has been proven to drive high-performing teams, and which all organisations should therefore crave. And core to creating that is using language that neither makes any individual or group feel unacknowledged, disrespected, left out, ostracised, unwelcome, attacked or unsafe (even inadvertently), nor perpetuates harmful stereotypes, especially about those with characteristics falling outside the majority in that social context.

As such, inclusive language matters not only to the wellbeing of the persons hearing it, but also to the robustness and success of the team in which they participate – by reducing susceptibility to 'groupthink', encouraging innovation, facilitating risk-awareness, and boosting staff engagement, with consequential improvements in staff productivity, utility and retention.

How to practice inclusive language

Some basic principles are worth adopting in order to encourage one's use of inclusive language. These include:

▶ becoming aware (through self-reflection and/or feedback) of one's own biases, prej udices and default assumptions, which can subconsciously dictate the language we use. As humans, we all have these hardwired into our brains – so a conscious effort to apply 'System 2' thinking, in order to counteract them, allows us to avoid using language which embodies them;

▶ being curious about, and open to, others' different perspectives and experiences;

▶ avoiding using a tone which reflects a negative judgment based purely on others' difference from yourself or from the contextual majority;

▶ speaking about a person's characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation) only when it is relevant to the discussion – otherwise, leaving it out; and

▶ seeking to address people in a way which does not make them feel disrespected – for example, by enquiring how they prefer to be addressed.

Some practical do's and don'ts

An exhaustively comprehensive list of do's and don'ts is not possible – but also should not be necessary if one bears in mind the principles listed above, and takes a second to pause and engage one's conscious mind before speaking. This is a sound approach to avoiding inadvertently exclusionary language.

For example, in the context of gender, avoid defaulting to male or heteronormative terminology as the norm, or making assumptions about a binary gender.

So, for instance:

▶ rather than "ladies and gentlemen", just say "everyone"; and

▶ instead of assuming gender (e.g. "what does your wife do?"), use "partner" unless and until the correct term has been established through dialogue.

Similarly, in the context of people with disabilities, avoid using language which implies that they are somehow inferior or need to be "fixed". For example, rather than saying "wheelchair-bound", say "wheelchair user".

And, when using what many may think are everyday or throwaway expressions – especially pejoratively – stop and think of the adverse impact that may have on people within earshot, and then find a better way to say it.

For instance, there are many better ways of commenting negatively on quality without saying something as potentially exclusionary as "that's so lame" or "that's so gay".

Pronouns

At the heart of inclusive language is prioritising respect for the person(s) with whom you are communicating. One way to show that respect is, as mentioned earlier, enquiring how they prefer to be addressed – including what pronouns they use.

A useful approach to this is simply to share your own pronouns ("Hi, I'm Geff, and I use he/him pronouns"), which empowers the other person by giving them the opportunity to do so too – if they so wish (because disclosure must always be voluntary).

Especially if you are in a position of authority, you can also share your

pronouns on platforms (e.g. social media), systems (e.g. HR) and communications (e.g. email signatures) to help remove any residual stigma about that within your own sphere of influence, thereby encouraging others not to make inappropriate assumptions about someone's gender identity.

Conversation starters

Sharing pronouns at the start of a dialogue is one of many practical ways to avoid using exclusionary language. Others might include phrases like:

▶ "It would be great to get to know you better! So how do you prefer to be identified / addressed? I want to ensure I use terms that don't make you feel uncomfortable."

▶ "I would really love to know more about that (e.g. someone's background, culture, ethnicity, ability, gender identity, etc). Would you mind helping me to understand it a bit better?"

Be aware that disclosure requires trust, and therefore – depending on personalities and the broader social context – this may take some time and a few iterations. Be patient! – your outreach is itself a valuable component in building the trust required.

When you get it wrong

To err is human. Indeed, fundamental to a psychologically safe environment is that well-intentioned mistakes are not only inevitable, but should actually be welcomed – as learning opportunities.

So, when (not if, because it will happen!) you make a mistake by using exclusionary language, that is OK – provided that you take ownership of it, apologise and make amends for any adverse impact, and commit to learning so that it is not repeated.

Importantly, though, this commitment must be bi-directional; inclusion safety is a two-way street. That means not only that the person who made the mistake must learn from it, but also that the other person should help and allow them the space to do so. Grandstanding or shaming must be avoided at all costs. That does not change behaviour: it either entrenches it, or at best undermines potential future engagement – both of which are disastrous to individual wellbeing and team dynamics. As famed psychologist Daniel Kahneman said, "true intuitive expertise is learned from prolonged experience, with good feedback on mistakes" – so take care not to kill future learning opportunities by unnecessary point-scoring.

Conclusion

In the end, inclusion is about respect – and making the effort to use inclusive language is a primary way to deliver that respect. Aretha Franklin put it aptly in her most famous song, when she sang "R-E-S-P-E-C-T: find out what it means to me" – it is incumbent on all of us to discover from our colleagues and co-workers how they define it, and to ensure we use the inclusive language necessary to deliver that respect to them.

About the author

Geff (he/him) is now CEO of The Inclusion Imperative, a DE&I consultancy business, through which he uses his experience, knowledge and skills to help improve the standards of DE&I, and especially LGBTQ+ inclusion, in other organisations, through speaking, training, coaching and mentoring engagements.
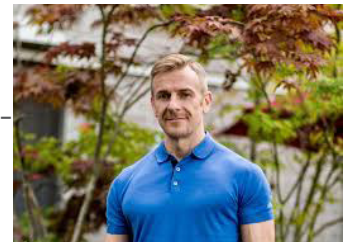
Prior to his retirement from the world of financial services at the end of February 2022, Geff, who identifies as a cis gay man, was a Managing Director at Macquarie Group (based in London, covering all of EMEA), where he also chaired or co-chaired the LGBTQ+ network, Pride, for 8 years.