THE VALUE OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE

In today's world, the need for businesses to embrace inclusivity is more important than ever. Research indicates that **by changing language and implementing self-awareness strategies, employers can make meaningful progress towards a more diverse and equitable workplace**. Creating a welcoming environment goes beyond hiring practices and involves using language that's sensitive to different cultures, genders, ages, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations and more.

By setting expectations around terms used in the workplace and understanding which words can cause offense or discomfort to others, employers can **create a culture of respect** for everyone on their team. In this article we'll explain why it's essential to use inclusive language when speaking or writing at work--from customer outreach to colleague interactions--so everyone feels included and like their ideas, suggestions, and presence are welcome no matter their identity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Language is not only a reflection of our values, but it also shapes how people think and interact with each other in the workplace. **The words we choose can either open up conversations or shut them down.** Unintentionally using language that reinforces oppressive systems or stereotypes can have a negative impact on team morale and productivity.

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Inclusive language is more than mere semantics; it promotes an environment of mutual respect and acceptance that allows everyone to feel like they belong and have a voice in the workplace. This approach can do wonders for fostering collaboration, creativity, and innovation while also strengthening business relationships with customers and partners.

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6 SIMPLE STRATEGIES

There are several steps employers can take to ensure they are using language that's respectful and sensitive to everyone in the workplace. Here are some tips for making sure your communication is inclusive:

1. EDIT YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Avoid making assumptions about an individual's identity or beliefs based on how they look or sound. We often naturally default to white, male, middle aged, middle class, able-bodied and straight when we think of a neutral audience, but most people don't fit all—or even some—of these identities. Before speaking or writing, consider if what you're saying may be interpreted as hurtful or exclusionary and make adjustments accordingly. By changing our assumptions, we can **create an open dialogue where everyone feels seen and valued**, which will build trust and help create a more collaborative work environment.

2. PLAY IT SAFE WITH PRONOUNS

Pronouns are a core part of our language. To ensure that everyone is included in conversations and meetings, **try to use gender-neutral pronouns like "they"** instead of gendered terms such as "he" or "she". This will ensure that everyone's pronouns are respected and valued, and will make it clear that your workplace is inclusive to all genders. Similarly, if you're unsure of a person's gender, opt for a non-gendered term such as "they" or use the person's name.

3. BE AWARE OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions are a type of **subtle, often unconscious discrimination** that can cause feelings of discomfort and alienation. Examples of microaggressions include making assumptions about an individual's background or culture due to their appearance, using language that implies someone's gender, race, or ability is less valuable than another's, and making jokes that target or belittle certain groups of people. Such language can have a detrimental impact on workplace relationships and lead to feelings of exclusion and alienation among employees.

4. DITCH ABLEIST LANGUAGE

The use of ableist language in the workplace can further alienate those who may have a disability or health conditions. This includes refraining from words like "lame," "insane," and "crazy," and instead utilizing terms that prioritize compassion and respect for all individuals, regardless of physical or mental abilities. Doing so will create an environment where everyone is respected and appreciated, leading to more productive collaboration between colleagues and a workplace culture where everyone can thrive.

As a bonus, **this method of communication is often more exact or specific**. For example, "we can improve on last year's event" is clearer than "last year's event was lame" which is imprecise.

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5. SPEAK UP

When someone in the workplace uses language that could be deemed exclusive or offensive, it's important to speak up and let them know why their words were problematic. By having these conversations in a respectful manner, **you can help** ensure that these types of phrases aren't used again.

6. IGNORE CRITICISM

Although some individuals may resist change, others will benefit from your efforts and be inspired to create a more equitable and diverse workplace environment themselves. By setting an example of using terms that are sensitive to different cultural backgrounds, genders, religions, sexual orientations and more, you are making it clear that everyone is valued and included.

It is also important to remember that **even if not everyone agrees with your decision to use inclusive language, in the long-term it will create a workplace environment where everyone feels respected and appreciated.**

THE VALUE OF BELONGING

In a culture of belonging, employees are encouraged to bring their most authentic selves to work and unlock their full potential. Belonging isn't just beneficial for employees, but for organizations, too. Specifically, creating a sense of belonging in the workplace can offer the following advantages:

- Improved employee performance
- Boosted employee engagement
- Reduced employee absenteeism
- Decreased employee turnover
- Enhanced workforce experiences
- Strengthened workplace culture
- Elevated employer branding

Employee belonging impacts wellness and happiness, but also affects engagement, motivation and retention. That's why many organizations rethinking their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts often add a renewed focus on belonging. And it all begins with language.

Inclusive language is essential for creating **a safe and productive work environment** where everyone feels welcome. By making small changes in our conversations—from editing assumptions to speaking up when we hear offensive words—we can create an inclusive environment that will lead to more **meaningful collaborations, better customer relations, and improved morale**. It may seem overwhelming to be aware of all of the exclusionary language we regularly use, but the first step toward a more inclusive workplace is to try. Through this method of communication, we can ensure that all voices are heard and respected in the workplace.

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