



Words Matter

Guidelines on using inclusive language in the workplace

May 18, 2018



Where ideas work

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These guidelines are a living document that will be enriched by continued feedback and conversations.

Using Inclusive Language in the Workplace

Inclusive language is language that is free from words, phrases or tones that reflect prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. It is also language that does not deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from feeling accepted. The use of inclusive language plays an important role in promoting higher employee engagement, superior customer service and increased productivity—all important aspects of a positive work culture.

Building and maintaining respectful workplaces is a shared responsibility in the BC Public Service. Paying attention to how language is used in the workplace is a key part of this responsibility.

Language is not always intended to exclude a person or a group, but it may unintentionally have that effect. Becoming conscious of how language impacts others can help prevent feelings of exclusion and discomfort in the workplace.

This guide sets out some key guiding principles and suggestions to support using inclusive language. This guide does not set out to be comprehensive or definitive because language is constantly evolving. Rather, the intention of these guidelines is to provide supervisors and employees with supports to promote a greater sense of inclusion and engagement in the workplace. You can build from these guidelines by remaining curious, seeking out information from diverse, thoughtful authors, and asking appropriate questions about what language might mean to others and inquiring into others' experiences, needs and concerns. In taking these steps, supervisors and employees can better reinforce inclusion and diversity in the workplace.

Having a curious and empathetic mindset to approaching the use of inclusive terms will be helpful to the application of these guidelines to various forms of communications. Honouring, welcoming and championing inclusion may entail seeking out unique points of view and perspectives. Talking about inclusive language welcomes diverse people into conversations and offers the potential to deepen understanding and connection.

This guide supports BC Public Service employees to model the use of inclusive language in the workplace and with citizens.

Respectful Workplaces

When employees are hired and take their [Oath of Employment](#), they are asked to officially commit to upholding the [Standards of Conduct for Public Service Employees](#), which address workplace behaviour and require all employees to contribute to a positive work environment.

The [BC Human Rights Code](#) protects a person from discrimination in hiring or on the job if the discrimination is based on one or more of the following protected grounds:

- Race, colour, ancestry, place of origin
- Political beliefs
- Religion
- Marital status
- Family status
- Physical or mental disability
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity or expression
- Age
- Conviction of a criminal or summary offence not related to the employment

Discrimination and harassment as related to any of the protected grounds violate the fundamental rights, dignity and integrity of an individual. There are policy statements about workplace behaviour and conduct that require all employees to behave respectfully, collaboratively and in ways consistent with the [corporate values of the BC Public Service](#). These policy statements and collective agreements include:

- [Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace](#)
- [Standards of Conduct](#)
- [Occupational Safety and Health](#)
- [BCGEU Collective Agreement](#)
 - Article 1.7, Article 1.8, Article 1.9, Article 32.15
 - Memorandum of Understanding #13
- [PEA Collective Agreement](#)
 - Article 1.09, Article 36.13

The BC Public Service has one overarching corporate value—integrity—and six core corporate values: curiosity, service, passion, teamwork, accountability and courage. These guidelines on using inclusive language in the workplace are an example of how public service employees demonstrate these values.

Guiding Principles

In using inclusive language, it is helpful to keep these principles in mind:

- **People first.** Many general principles provided in this guide involve seeing the person as an individual first and becoming aware of diverse audiences.
- **Words matter.** Not only do terms and expressions allow people or groups to feel excluded, but they can also convey or embed stereotypes, expectations or limitations.
- **Language changes.** All language changes to reflect the values of society. As language changes, so do the norms that deem what is socially and grammatically acceptable.
- **Mindset matters.** It is important to keep a curious and empathetic mindset. Most language has evolved to reflect the values and norms of the mainstream or dominant culture, and if a person is a member of that culture, they have had the privilege to feel included the majority of the time. That is not the case for everyone.
- **Inclusive terms.** Try to make your language and your message as inclusive as possible. For example, when speaking to an audience, make sure your speech relates to all your listeners and uses gender-inclusive language.
- **Use of generalizations or stereotypes.** No matter your audience, be cautious about making sweeping statements about any social group. This includes making personal assumptions based on gender, culture, ancestry, age and other categories.
- **Use of prejudiced language.** Take time to educate yourself about what words, phrases, or perspectives may offend your listeners. One goal of an audience-centered, inclusive speaker is to be cautious about prejudiced language or remarks.
- **Self-reflection.** Bring self-awareness to the times when you use words and expressions in writing. Think about your intentions for using a phrase, whether it has any origins, and whether there is a more inclusive way to state what you are trying to say.

It may also be helpful to ask:

- Does the individual or group have preferred terms?
- Does the language reflect the diversity of the intended audience?
- Is reference to a person's gender, culture, ethnicity, age, etc. relevant?
- Am I staying open and curious, and encouraging others to do the same?
- Is there a need to consult a formal style guide such as [The Canadian Press Stylebook](#), [APA Style](#), or other resources such as [Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples](#) for guidance on written communication standards?

Unconscious Bias and Embedded Metaphors

Many metaphors and sayings in the English language have become so frequent that a person may not realize their origins, and they can reinforce a stereotype or bias and marginalization without realizing it. Unconscious bias and embedded metaphors may also be reinforced through popular culture and media, therefore blurring the distinction between inclusive and non-inclusive language.

When metaphors or comparisons are used, consider whether a stereotype or a negative view of a social group is inadvertently being promoted. For example, “welshing on a bet,” or “being gyped” are inappropriate for use as they promote negative stereotypes about identifiable groups. The English language often embeds gender assumptions and stereotypes, and it is best to replace these with more inclusive terms.

Likewise, cultural metaphors and comparisons often misrepresent cultural practices. Be mindful of terms and phrases that may be considered cultural misappropriation. For example, it is inappropriate to use the phrase “low man on the totem pole” to indicate hierarchy, or the term “pow-wow” to mean talk. Cultural objects and ceremonies have specific sacred meanings and uses unique to Indigenous Peoples and should be used only in that context.

A Closer Look: Inclusive Language and the BC Human Rights Code

As previously noted, the [BC Human Rights Code](#) protects a person from discrimination in hiring or on the job, if the discrimination is based on one or more of the following protected grounds:

- Race, colour, ancestry, place of origin
- Political beliefs
- Religion
- Marital status
- Family status
- Physical or mental disability
- Sex
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity or expression
- Age
- Conviction of a criminal or summary offence not related to the employment

This protection is intended to ensure equal access to employment opportunities and fair treatment in the workplace. Under the human resources policy on [Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace](#), discrimination and harassment as related to any of the protected grounds violate the fundamental rights, dignity and integrity of an individual.

The following sections provide general principles for how inclusive language can be used to avoid discrimination in relation to the various protected grounds covered by the Code.

Culture and Ancestry

Cultural labels, names and expressions can be created and used to portray certain groups as inferior or superior to others. Preferred terms change as language evolves and as awareness increases. It is important to respect a group’s or an individual’s preference about how they wish to be addressed and referred to.

As a general practice, it is important to be cautious about referring to a person’s race, ethnicity or country of origin unless it is relevant to the communication. For example, “Tara is a Chinese employee” can be rephrased as “Tara is an employee.”

Here are some of the key ways to be inclusive:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
Capitalize the proper names of nationalities, peoples and culture. For detailed guidance on capitalization of proper nouns, consider using a formal style guide.	Some examples include: <u>J</u> ewish, <u>I</u> ndigenous people, <u>S</u> ikh, <u>C</u> aucasian, <u>M</u> uslim, <u>I</u> nuit, <u>A</u> rab, <u>A</u> sian, <u>C</u> ree, etc.
Be cautious about racial, cultural and other identity references that are not necessary, or assume similarities and affinity.	Instead of saying, “Have you met Dan? He’s Asian too. You two would get along,” consider saying, “Have you met Dan? He’s new to the team.” Avoid making assumptions about people and assuming that they share personal traits, interests or similarities based on their gender, race, culture, class, heritage, status or appearance.
Consider when terms such as “visible minority” and “woman of colour” are relevant.	Terms such as “visible minority” and “woman of colour” have often been used in writing and discussion; however, they are becoming less used. Before using such expressions, carefully consider if they are as relevant or current as in the past, or if a better expression or more specific identifier is available.
Be cautious about introducing or describing someone by their race, culture or ancestry.	Consider whether identification based on race, culture, or ancestry is relevant. Culture is a very fluid and dynamic concept that may not reflect the complexity of individual identities. Whenever possible, allow a person to introduce aspects of their identity that they choose to share.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

When references are relevant and necessary, find the appropriate, widely-accepted terminology and use the language preferred by the individual or group concerned.

Preferred terminology depends on the preferences of the individual or group, and may change on the basis of location. For example, in the United States, “African-American” is used; in Canada, some people in African-Canadian communities prefer the term “Black,” while others prefer “African-Canadian.”

Indigenous Peoples

As a commitment to reconciliation, developing literacy with language that more accurately reflects Indigenous people is core to building cultures of reconciliation.

There are three distinct groups of Indigenous Peoples in Canada: First Nations (status and non-status Indians), Métis and Inuit. “Indigenous Peoples” is commonly used as a collective term for all of the original peoples of Canada and their descendants. “Indigenous people” with a lower case “people” is simply referring to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples. If a person is working with a specific group that identifies as First Nations, Inuit or Métis they are encouraged to use the more specific name rather than the broader term.

It is usually preferable to refer to a particular First Nations group by its chosen name for identification, such as: Nisga’a Nation, McLeod Lake Indian Band or Westbank First Nation. When a particular group is referred to by its chosen name, many groups dispense with the use of the term “First,” as in Kwakiutl Nation instead of Kwakiutl First Nation. It is helpful to be aware of the following terms:

- **Indigenous** is a general term and is a preferred term in international writing and discussion that is gaining broader acceptance in Canada. In Canada, Indigenous collectively refers to people who identify as First Nations, Métis or Inuit. More specifically:
 - **First Nations** describes people who identify as First Nations, which have distinct cultures, languages and traditions and connections to a particular land base of traditional territory. For guidance on names and locations, consider [this information](#).
 - **Métis** is a French term for “mixed blood,” which refers to the specific group of Indigenous people who trace their ancestry to the Métis homeland and are accepted members of the Métis community.
 - **Inuit** refers to a group of people who share cultural similarities and inhabit the Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Russia and the United States of America. Inuit is a plural noun, and the singular is Inuk. Also note that “Inuit” means “people,” so it is redundant to say “Inuit people.”
- **Indian** in reference to an Indigenous person is a historical misnomer with negative meanings for many Indigenous people as an imposed term. Use of this term should be avoided unless it is part of a historical reference, part of a legacy term, or used in reference to a government policy or classification (e.g., “Indian Act,” “status Indian,”

“the Musqueam Indian Band”). While there are some status First Nations who prefer this term, “Indian” is considered an “in-group” term for their use (see next section).

- **Aboriginal** may be used in reference to First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. However, it may no longer be the preferred term as language use is changing and more are embracing the term “Indigenous.”
- **Eskimo** is a historical misnomer with negative meaning for many Inuit and should be avoided. There are a large number of Inuit living in B.C.

For further reflections on these terms, consider [this information](#).

In-Group Terms

In-group terms are terms that are accepted and used by members of the same group, but are most often not appropriate for use by people who are not members of the group. In-group terms often form as an act of resilience and re-appropriation. This may occur in many groups. For example, the term “Indian” may be used as an in-group term, often among older First Nations people. Often the terms “Aboriginal,” “First Nations,” “Native” and “Indigenous” are used interchangeably, sometimes by members of the Indigenous community. However, people are encouraged to recognize that these terms carry different meanings to different people. For instance, Indigenous people may use in-group terms that are unsuitable for those outside of that group to use. When dealing with specific people or groups from the Indigenous community, it is always best to find out what term they prefer.

Some Indigenous people identify more closely with their tribal or linguistic group designation (e.g. Interior Salish) and prefer the use of the name of the community. Try to identify the tribal affiliation or community, and use Indigenous spellings for the names of communities. For more information, refer to the [Pronunciation Guide](#).

Here are some of the key ways to be inclusive:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
Be mindful with the term “Indigenous Peoples.”	<p>“Indigenous Peoples” refers to the Aboriginal population in Canada collectively, including First Nation, Métis and Inuit.</p> <p>“Indigenous people” with a lower case “people” is simply referring to more than one Indigenous person rather than the collective group of Indigenous Peoples.</p> <p>In Canada, there is a shift towards the use of “Indigenous” as the collective term, but “Aboriginal” may still be used. E.g. “Aboriginal and treaty rights” in the Constitution Act, or the “Aboriginal Peoples’ Television Network.”</p>
Understand that Indigenous Peoples come from different nations with distinct languages, cultures and customs. For guidance, consider this information.	<p>The specific nation, community or band should be used when possible. You are encouraged to use the spelling that the Indigenous group prefers.</p>
Be cautious about vocabulary and usage, especially that which ascribes ownership.	<p>Instead of describing Indigenous Peoples as “belonging” to Canada, as in “Canada’s Indigenous Peoples,” it is more respectful to say, “Indigenous Peoples living in Canada.”</p>
Capitalize formal titles and maintain consistency. For detailed guidance, consider using a formal style guide.	<p>When it is a part of a person’s title, capitalize “Chief,” “Hereditary Chief,” “Grand Chief,” and “Elder.” For example, “Elder Vera Snow will be attending the event.” Capitalization is also necessary when referring to “Nation” or “Nations.”</p> <p>Capitalization is not necessary when the term is not a part of someone’s title. For example, “She is an elder.”</p>

Political Belief

This ground protects a person from discrimination on the basis of their political belief. A person's political belief should not determine how they are treated by others. This means recognizing the difference between respecting a person regardless of their political belief, and allowing personal judgment to shape actions and the way someone is treated.

Here are some key points to keep in mind:

- People come from different backgrounds and may be influenced by a number of factors such as their upbringing, culture and parental views.
- Being respectful does not mean that a person needs to agree with an opinion; it means that a person needs to be considerate when others express their opinions and vice versa.
- If engaging in political activities, employees need to be aware of their responsibilities under the [Standards of Conduct](#).

Religion

This ground protects a person from discrimination on the basis of their religion or faith. Religious accommodation in the workplace may include at least the following considerations subject to operational and workplace requirements:

- Changing schedules to accommodate days of religious observance.
- Making changes to dress codes or uniforms to accommodate an employee's religion or faith.
- Providing menu options to accommodate religious dietary restrictions in the event that food is being served in the workplace.
- Adopting a spirit of participation and inclusion by respecting different cultural, religious and spiritual celebrations.

Here are some key points to keep in mind:

- Religion is a personal issue. An individual may have little or no religious affiliation and/or may not wish to be part of certain religious celebrations.
- A person should not make assumptions about how another individual may or may not practice their religion.
- It is inappropriate for a person to try to force another individual to accept or comply with a particular religious belief or practice.
- Consider rephrasing statements such as "oh my God" to "my goodness" or "oh my gosh."

Respecting a person's religious beliefs also means using language that is inclusive and appropriate. For example, instead of asking a person of Jewish or Sikh faith their "Christian name," the use of the term "first name" prevents any misunderstanding and acknowledges that people have different beliefs.

Marital or Family Status

Marital and family status can cover a range of family forms, including lone parent and blended families, as well as families where the parents are in a common-law relationship.

While it may not be necessary to apply marital status titles such as Mr., Mrs. and Ms. when addressing or referring to individuals, some generations are more formal and may be offended if people who don't know them well don't use their title.

Regardless of the gender of two people in a couple, the neutral term "spouse" can be used to indicate marital status. The term "partner" is also neutral but does not typically indicate marital status and is more commonly used by people who are in a relationship.

Adoption is a part of many families. Questions about adoption may arise from curiosity, but can have an uncomfortable effect on someone. It is best that communication around adoption emphasizes similarities among families rather than differences.

Here are some of the key ways to be inclusive:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
<p>The question of marital or family status can be avoided by using names only in both written and oral form.</p>	<p>In the workplace, people usually refer to each other by their first names, with no title indicating marital or family status.</p> <p>When dealing with a member of the public, especially if an employee does not know the person, it may be more appropriate to ask how the person would like to be addressed first rather than using a pre-fix such as "Ms." or "Mr."</p>
<p>When a person identifies as married or in a relationship, refrain from making specific references to gender (such as referring to their "wife" or "husband") if unknown.</p>	<p>Instead, consider using gender neutral terms such as "spouse" or "partner." The person will also often refer to their spouse with the term they prefer.</p>
<p>If necessary, it is preferable to refer to someone's "birth parent" rather than "natural parent" or "real parent."</p>	<p>The terms "natural parent" or "real parent" imply that an adoptive family is unnatural or not real.</p>

Disability

When speaking to or about a person with a disability, it is important to focus on the person and not on their disability. Not all persons with disabilities will have strong preferences about language, and there is not always consistency about preferred language between different people. An effective way to determine a person’s preferences for what language they are comfortable with is to ask them in a discrete way that does not draw attention to them. Some people may be more comfortable sharing information about their disabilities than others. Be sensitive in your use of language to the fact that chronic conditions and disabilities, including mental illness, are both visible and non-visible.

The United Nations definition of people with disabilities includes “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” A person can be born with a disability (congenital) or they may acquire a disability through age, illness or accident. Furthermore, a disability can be visible (e.g. use of a wheelchair due to spinal cord injury) or non- visible (e.g. mental illness) or occur only periodically (e.g. seasonal).

Terminology about a disability can vary depending on the degree of the impairment. For example, being hard of hearing is different from being deaf. Having low vision is different from being legally blind. Also, just because a person has one disability does not mean they have another. For example, if a person has difficulty speaking, it doesn’t mean they also have an intellectual or developmental disability.

Finally, having a disability is not the same as being sick. Many employees with disabilities are physically and mentally healthy.

Here are some key ways to be inclusive:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
“Person with a disability” is a preferred term.	The use of the word “handicap” is considered offensive, and the preferred term is “person with a disability.”
Consider people first.	Instead of saying “disabled employee,” consider saying “employee with a disability.” The latter approach emphasizes that individuals with disabilities are people first, and are not defined by their disability.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Generally, frame a disability and most medical conditions as something a person has rather than what they are.	For example, “She has a disability” not “She is disabled”, “He has arthritis” not “He is arthritic”, “She has epilepsy” not “She is epileptic.” For certain sensory conditions, people may prefer more direct language. For example, “He is deaf” rather than “He has deafness” or “She is blind” rather than “She has blindness.”
Be mindful when referring to groups.	Be cautious about referring to a group of individuals as the “disabled.” Instead, use references such as “employees with disabilities,” “people with quadriplegia,” and “employees with a developmental disability.
Be cautious about using language that suggests weakness or infirmity.	Instead of saying “an employee confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair-bound,” it is more appropriate to say “the employee uses a wheelchair”. People use mobility or adaptive equipment as tools for greater independence.
Be cautious about portraying a person as “courageous” or “special” just because they have a disability.	Describing a person with a disability as “courageous” or “special” because they have “overcome” a disability implies that it is unusual for people with disabilities to have talents and the ability to contribute in society.
If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologize and move on.	Persons with disabilities are generally willing to educate others about their needs and preferences. A person may say the wrong thing, but apologizing for mistakes and exhibiting a commitment to learn are positive steps.

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression

Sexual orientation and gender identity or expression have different meanings, and are subjective and circumstantial to the individual. It's also important to note that LGBTQ2S+ is an acronym that represents many, but not all, groups specifically. The acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning and two spirit people, and the "+" recognizes that there are many more identities as well.

Language can take on unnecessarily gendered forms, which includes words, phrases and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between women and men, or exclude, trivialize or diminish either gender or sex. For example, "the best man for the job" can be replaced by a variety of terms and phrases such as "the best person" or "candidate for the job." Similarly, "manpower" can be replaced by terms such as "workforce," "personnel," "staff" and "human resources."

One of the greatest opportunities to encourage and demonstrate inclusion is around the use of third person pronouns ("he/she/they"). By choosing to use the gender-neutral pronoun "they," which is already becoming a more common occurrence in written and spoken language, one is able to signal acceptance and understanding.

A part of understanding the complexity of gender identity is recognizing that there are differences between sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. The use of language is evolving to be more inclusive and go beyond simple binary gender (male/female only).

It is helpful to be aware of the following terms and their definitions:

- **Cisgender** refers to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.
- **Gender expression** refers to how a person publically presents their gender.
- **Gender identity** refers to a person's internal and external experience of gender which may be the same or different from their sex at birth.
- **Sex** refers to the external physical characteristics used to classify humans at birth. AFAB - Assigned female at birth. AMAB - Assigned male at birth.
- **Sexual orientation** refers to whom one is sexually and/or romantically attracted.
- **Transgender** is an umbrella term to describe a wide range of people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differ from the sex they were assigned at birth and/or

the societal and cultural expectations of their assigned sex.

Language has been shaped to imply a gender hierarchy. This is evident in how a person might compose their writing and how they use gendered pronouns. As language changes, so do the norms that deem what is acceptable. There is a shift away from practices such as gendered language (e.g. terms like “fireman” and the universal “he” to stand for all genders) and “heteronormative” language (e.g. language that reinforces the attitude that heterosexuality is the preferred way of being) toward terminology that is more inclusive (e.g. using “spouse” instead of “husband” or “wife”). Another change that is happening is the shift towards language that acknowledges a broader variety of gender identities.

Preferred Pronouns

It is important to be aware that a person who is transgender or non-binary (someone who does not identify as exclusively male or female) may have had a difficult lived experience. Language is important when speaking about gender identity because it facilitates respect by allowing people to use language that describes their identity. Respect can be demonstrated by asking appropriate questions about what language means to any given person, and inquiring appropriately into experiences, needs and concerns. Balancing a practice of using non-gender based language (e.g. “they/them/their”) and being sensitive to a person’s specific needs will serve one well. Ultimately, making a person’s gender a non-issue should be the goal.

Some people experience gender as non-binary; that is, some people have an experience of gender as being more than the two options of male and female. Some individuals experience their gender as both, or neither, male nor female. Further, some may use a variety of terms to describe their gender identity, and may include the following:

Examples of Gender Terms		
Agender	Androgyne	Bi-gender
Genderqueer	Gender Diverse	Gender Fluid
Gender Neutral	Gender Non-Conforming	Gender Variant
Intergender	Neutrois	Non-binary
Poly Gender	Third Gender	Two Spirit(ed)

Regardless of a person’s gender identity, gender can be very important to someone’s sense of self. To use language that is not inclusive to someone’s sense of self can cause the person to feel disrespected and unwelcome. You may want to consider privately asking about the preferred term(s) used by an individual. However, when referring to someone whose identified pronouns are unknown, it is usually preferable to use non-gender based language as in “they/them/their” (e.g. Jaspreet has an assignment they are working on).

Be aware that some people may object to plural pronouns with singular antecedents, such as “Each employee decides their own learning goals.” It’s important to note that all language evolves, and what was previously considered grammatically incorrect, such as split infinitives as another example, can become grammatically acceptable. This is becoming the case with the use of “they” to replace the singular gendered pronouns “he” and “she.” When referring to the general population rather than a specific individual, an easy and inclusive approach that can be applied is to use all plural forms. The example above could be changed to, “Employees decide on their own learning goals.”

Gendered Exemplification

Exemplifying a gender involves using more examples involving males than females, repeatedly placing terms for males before females, and basing examples on stereotypes. One way to avoid gendered exemplification is to use equal examples that include different genders in work materials. Also, instead of using a female’s name to represent a nurse and a male’s name to represent a doctor in an online learning course example, try switching these names around to avoid reinforcing gendered assumptions.

Gendered Pronouns

A gendered pronoun is a pronoun that references a person’s gender, such as “hers/his,” “he/she,” “him/her,” or “herself/himself.” Pronouns in English originally developed around binary gender norms (male/female) and may not match a person’s gender identity or expression. It is more inclusive to use the gender neutral pronoun “they” in written communication. Further, many non-binary and gender fluid persons prefer the gender neutral pronoun “they” in reference to themselves.

While it was previously acceptable to use the male pronoun “he” to stand for all genders, this is no longer the case. Likewise, terms such as “man” or “mankind” no longer reflect the full spectrum of humanity. The use of the male universal pronoun causes confusion as to whether the language is meant to encompass all genders or just men. It also marginalizes women and other genders that are less likely to identify with this type of language.

In the past, people often feminized certain nouns when a female was involved, and therefore “actor” became “actress,” “poet” became “poetess,” and “host” became “hostess.” Feminized nouns may also hold a negative connotation; such is the case with “mistress” and “master.” Using the regular noun to refer to an actor, poet, host and master regardless of a person’s gender reinforces equal ability of any gender to hold that role.

Likewise, one needs to be mindful about the use of masculinized nouns, most commonly used in job titles that reinforce that the norm to hold the role is a male. An inclusive approach is to replace identifiers such as “policeman,” “fireman,” and “chairman” with non-gendered titles such as police officer, firefighter, and chair or chairperson.

Here are some of the key ways to be inclusive:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
Be cautious about making assumptions.	All people do not look a certain way or come from the same background, and many may not appear "visibly trans." Rather, one should assume that an audience <i>might</i> include transgender people.
Gender identity or expression and sexual orientation are different.	<p>Gender identity refers to a person’s internal and external experience of gender which may be the same or different from their sex at birth.</p> <p>Gender expression refers to how a person publically presents their gender.</p> <p>Sexual orientation refers to who one is sexually and/or romantically attracted to.</p>
Take the time to listen if the preferred pronouns are not known.	Double checking the use of terminology and language descriptors confers respect and can contribute to the development of most relationships. If the pronoun that a person prefers is not known, listen first to the pronoun other people use when referring to that person. If you accidentally use the wrong pronoun, apologize immediately and sincerely, and then move on.
Be considerate about names.	Respect the name a transgender person is currently using. For some people, being associated with their birth name is a source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind. If you happen to know the name someone was given at birth but no longer uses, refrain from sharing it without the person's explicit permission.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES	
Respect a person's privacy	Some people feel comfortable disclosing their status to others, and some do not. Knowing a transgender person's status is private and it is up to them to share it.
Respect terminology.	Transgender people use many different terms to describe their experiences. Respect the term (transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.) that a person uses.

Here are some examples to pay attention to with some preferred alternative terms:

WORD OR PHRASE	ALTERNATIVE
Whoever gets promoted will have his or her pay increased.	Whoever is promoted will get a raise.
Each employee should read his packet carefully.	Employees should read their packets carefully.
Invite your boyfriend or husband.	Invite your partner or spouse.
Cleaning lady, policeman, chairman.	Cleaner, police officer, chair or chairperson.
Sexual preference.	Sexual orientation.

Age

A person should be mindful about the connotations that could arise when referring to age, as both younger and older people may perceive their age as a systemic barrier to being included in the workplace. By avoiding terms and phrases that may stereotype individuals or groups on the basis of their age (e.g. language that implies that a particular age group is more or less able), inclusive terms and phrases are sensitive to the entire age range. Further, demographic terms such as “older” and “younger” are relative and should be used only when relevant within a clear and specific context. For example, “You look good for your age” can be rephrased as “You look great” and “You’re how old?” can be rephrased to “I’m very impressed by your knowledge/experience.”

The term “elderly” can imply a stereotype and caution is advised when using it to refer to an individual. When referring to the entire population of older people, the use of the term “elderly” may be appropriate as in “the impact of prescription drug costs on the elderly,” for example. However, providing more specific information is more respectful and arguably more helpful, as in, “the population above the age of 65 reports experiencing...”

An exception to negative connotations around the descriptor “elderly” is in the case of Indigenous Peoples where the term “Elder” is considered an honoured title for someone who holds both age and wisdom. First Nations, Métis and Inuit elders are acknowledged by their respective communities as an “elder” through a community selection process. Gender and pre-determined age are not factors in determining who is an elder in Indigenous communities.

Similarly, instead of using phrases such as “young and vibrant team” or “mature workforce,” consider using phrases that are more inclusive such as “effective and vibrant team” and “experienced workforce.”

Here are some of the key ways to be inclusive:

WORD OR PHRASE	ALTERNATIVE
The elderly, aged, old people.	Older person, older people, older citizens, older adults.
Young and vibrant team.	Effective and vibrant team.
How would you feel about managing older / younger people?	What skills do you have to enable you to effectively manage a team?

Promote Respect in the Workplace

Language is not always intended to exclude a person or a group, but it may unintentionally have that effect. Becoming conscious of how language impacts others can help prevent feelings of exclusion and discomfort in the workplace, which can lead to disengagement. Challenge yourself to use these guidelines when communicating in the workplace. It may require some preparation, but taking the time to recognize that all audiences are diverse creates a respectful workplace for everyone. A person may say the wrong thing or be unsure about what to do in a given situation, but apologizing for misunderstandings and mistakes, and exhibiting a commitment to learn are steps in the right direction. Likewise, being understanding when language is accidentally misused can be encouraging for those who are learning. Accept sincere apologies and feel free to acknowledge others' efforts to be inclusive. Through a collective effort to keep these day-to-day guidelines in mind, supervisors and employees can reinforce inclusive language that celebrates and supports diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

To help employees, supervisors and managers build and maintain respectful workplaces visit [Working With Others](#) on MyHR, which includes helpful advice and services on items such as:

- Learning about proactive approaches to building respectful workplaces.
- Understanding how best to address specific workplace situations.
- Leading people successfully in the workplace.
- Receiving proactive feedback and a safe space for reflection on how to leverage strengths, identify areas of development and create a pathway to success.
- Training on employment conditions and agreements, including the Standards of Conduct and Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace.

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Where ideas work

Useful Links:

@Work: <https://gww.gov.bc.ca>

MyHR: www.gov.bc.ca/myhr