



Using Inclusive Language in Meetings

Incorporating inclusive language when facilitating requires education, mindfulness, and practice. Use these guidelines to speak more inclusively and make your meetings more welcoming and productive.

6 GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

1. **Put people first.** Use person-first language. When describing others, start with the word “person” or “people.” For example, say “a person with diabetes” versus “a diabetic.” At first, this may seem like a minor or unnecessary distinction. It isn’t. Adopting person-first language acknowledges the complexity of personal identity and recognizes that each person is so much more than any one of their identity descriptors. In other words, saying “a person with” maintains that the descriptor is just one aspect of that person’s identity (just as you would say “a person who likes to cook” or “a person with brown hair”). Additionally, only include identity descriptors of people when they are relevant to the current discussion
2. **Use universal phrases.** Avoid idioms, acronyms, jargon, and cultural phrases that may not make sense to all people. For instance, consider the American phrase “hit it out of the park,” the British phrase “throw a spanner in the works,” or the Australian phrase “it’s chockers in here.” All three are in English, yet none translates well outside of its native national culture. In a professional setting, phrases like these may impede effective communication and make people feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, confused, or excluded.
3. **Recognize the impact of mental health language.** When we describe everyday behaviors, moods, and personality characteristics using terms related to mental health diagnoses (for example, bipolar, PTSD, ADHD, or OCD), we minimize and deprecate the very real and serious impact these conditions have on people. Avoid using these terms unless they are medically diagnosed and shared with you personally. Even then, they probably won’t be necessary or relevant to the conversation at hand. For the same reason, steer clear of derogatory terms that stem from the context of mental health such as schizo, spaz, paranoid, crazy, or psycho.

4. **Use genderless language.** Discontinue the generic use of “man” or “guy” to describe people, as in “mankind,” “policeman,” or “you guys.” Those terms reinforce a culture that exclusively favors men. Replace these with terms that are gender-free, such as “humanity,” “police officer,” and “everyone.” When choosing a pronoun for an unknown person, choose the singular “they,” instead of “he” or the clunky “he/she.” Doing so acknowledges the full spectrum of gender identities, including individuals who are nonbinary.
5. **Be thoughtful about the imagery you use.** Be sensitive in your use of symbolism. Take into consideration that some descriptors hold negative connotations for others and can therefore be offensive. Examples include the words “black,” “dark,” and “blind” as in “a black mark,” “dark day,” and “blind spot.” Avoid this pitfall by expressing ideas literally when possible, for example, “It was a sad day,” rather than, “It was a dark day.”
6. **Clarify if you aren’t sure.** As meeting participants get to know you better, they may choose to share aspects of their personal identity with you. Most people are happy to walk you through the language that makes them feel properly respected. Clarify with them if you’re not sure. As you get to know others and feel comfortable with them, share your self-descriptors and pronouns. They are likely to share theirs with you too.

Excerpted from *The Inclusive Language Handbook: A Guide to Better Communication and Transformational Leadership* by Jackie Ferguson and Roxanne Bellamy. Copyright 2022 by Jackie Ferguson and Roxanne Bellamy. All rights reserved.