

## Language Considerations Guide: What Can I Say?

*Words Matter, Context Matters*

### Questions for Consideration:

- **Is it asset-based?**

- Asset-based language: prioritizing language that focuses on strengths
- *Example:* Instead of saying “non-English speaker”, say “Spanish-speaker or emerging bilingual”

- **Is it inclusive?**

- Inclusive language is language that avoids the use of certain expressions or words that might be considered to exclude particular groups of people, especially gender-specific words, such as “man”, “mankind”, and masculine pronouns, the use of which might be considered to exclude women
- *Example:* Instead of asking “Is your wife joining you at the company event?”, ask “Is your spouse, partner or significant other attending with you?”

- **Is it person-first or person-centered?**

- Person-first or person-centered language is a communication approach that emphasizes describing individuals by their personal characteristics or identities before mentioning their disabilities or conditions. It describes what a person has and not who a person is. By centering the person before the condition, it promotes respect and dignity.
- *Example:* Instead of saying “A person is an addict, ” say “A person who is in recovery.”
- *Example:* Instead of saying, “ A homeless person, ” say, “A person who is experiencing homelessness.”

- **Is it humanizing, dignified, respectful language?**

- The use of humanizing, dignified, respectful language reduces harm and stigmatization of historically oppressed and marginalized communities. It prioritizes understanding and addressing people and communities based on their lived experiences and preferences rather than solely relying on formal academic or socially conventional information. Respect people’s names, pronouns, and cultural practices. Creating a safe space where everyone feels valued, seen, and heard fosters a sense of belonging and allows for an authentic environment.
- *Example:* Queer or Gay- could both be respectful in some situations and/or offensive in others.



- **Have you educated yourself?**

- The meaning of some words change over time. What may have once had a positive connotation, may now have a negative connotation. Some words have a history and may exclude or offend someone. To continue your learning, engage in conversations with colleagues, attend workshops, or training sessions to keep learning and stay up to date.
- *Example: Woke - originally this word came from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to mean waking up to issues of social justice, but now there is momentum growing of individuals using the word to degenerate people who disagree with their beliefs.*

## Context Matters

According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, context is defined as *"the situation in which something happens and that helps you to understand it."* What this means is how we decode messages can change based on who we are with, where we are, what is happening around us, our opinions and beliefs, our shared values and experiences, our non-verbal cues... the list goes on. **Context is something internalized and hard to explain to others from a different background.** We use context to help decipher interactions or ideas without being conscious we're doing it.

If you're still a little confused about how context can cause miscommunication, here's an example:

*In some cultures, an offer of coffee after a meal is considered a polite way to indicate to the guests they should leave soon. In other cultures, an offer of coffee, at a similar occasion, is an act of kindness or an invitation to the guests to stay longer. If people from different cultural backgrounds (let's say the host is from Culture "A" and the guests are from Culture "B") are unaware of these differences, it could easily lead to an awkward situation.*

## Facilitating Equity of Voice in Decision-Making

An inclusive decision-making process involves creating an environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. The leader is responsible for ensuring that everyone has an equal voice, that all ideas are heard, and that the group stays on track toward achieving its goals. Questions to consider asking:

- Whose view is being centered right now?
- Whose voice has been included? Whose voice is missing?
- Who benefits most from this decision?
- Who is harmed by this decision?
- Do I have all the necessary information to make this decision?
- After the decision is made, are there opportunities for honest feedback or additional information to improve the process or product?



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## Navigating Sensitive Conversations

Often our intent is good, however, the impact of our words or actions may not be received as we intended. The impact you have on others is more important than your intention. If your impact is far from what you intended, it is your responsibility to learn why and how to adjust your behavior so the impact of your words and behaviors match closer to your intention.

**OUCH:** When someone says something that is insensitive to you:

- State your feelings & the impact.
  - *Example:* "I would love to meet your boyfriend/husband."
- Start with an "I" statement
  - *Example:* "I am frustrated (feeling) because this is an assumption people often make - that I'm straight or that I want to be married."



**OOPS:** When you say something that is offensive to someone else:

Accept, Acknowledge, Apologize, Adjust

- **Accept** - "I appreciate you telling me."
- **Acknowledge** - "I didn't mean to offend you."
- **Apologize** - "I'm sorry I said that."
- **Adjust** - "I will remember this and never do it again."



*Allow people the grace and the space to make mistakes and learn.*



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