#WordsAtWork

Building inclusion through
the power of language

aurecon

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AUSTRALIA

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Inclusive language enables everyone in your organisation to feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance.

Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion (or exclusion) at work.

The way we speak to each other creates a culture in which everyone can feel valued, respected, and one of the team (included), rather than under-valued, disrespected, and out of place (excluded).

What is Inclusive Language?

Put simply, inclusive language is effective language – it is respectful, accurate and relevant to all.

Respectful

Inclusive language involves knowing about and showing respect for all members of our team and workplace.

Accurate

Inclusive language gives a more accurate view of the real world by reflecting social diversity rather than perpetuating stereotypes. It avoids making false assumptions about (or stereotyping) people based on their age, cultural background, disability, gender, Indigenous background or sexual orientation and gender identity.

Relevant

Inclusive language reflects Australia's diversity, is meaningful to a wide audience, and enables everyone to feel that they are being reflected in what is being said. To feel included, we need to 'see' and 'hear' ourselves reflected in the language used at work.
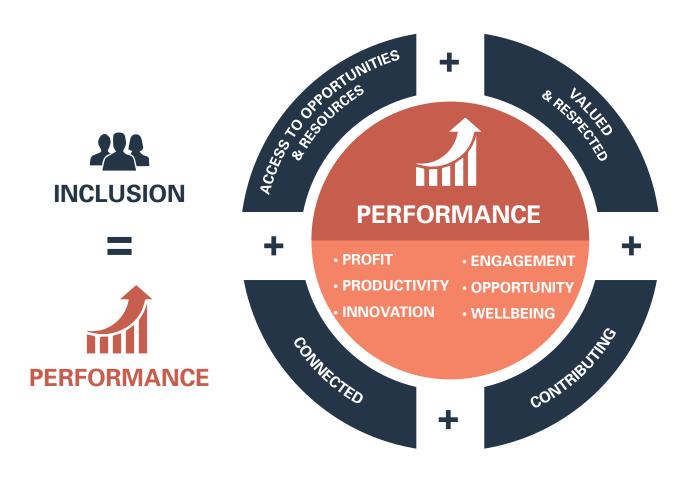
Why Language Matters

We know from research that inclusive cultures are high performance cultures – they deliver greater performance and productivity.[1] How we speak to and about each other influences how we treat each other, and so it also builds our workplace culture.

Speech is a form of action. Whether we like it or not, our words have consequences. They can include or exclude, even if we do not intend them to. Studies show that:

- Non-inclusive language contributes to and continues stereotyping[2]

- Non-inclusive language harms people who witness it as well as the intended targets[3]

- When used in job interviews, non-inclusive language results in applicants from excluded groups finding the position less attractive, and experiencing less motivation and identification with the position than those who are exposed to inclusive language[4]

- Non-inclusive comments in the workplace can have an insidious effect on individuals from the excluded groups, impeding their advancement at work by presenting them as incompetent and not suitable for leadership roles[5]

- Frequent non-inclusive experiences at work have just as harmful effects as more intense but less frequent experiences (e.g. sexual coercion and harassment)[6]

- Non-inclusive jokes can lead to toleration of hostile feelings and discrimination against people from excluded groups.[7]

INCLUSION

=

PERFORMANCE

ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITIES & RESOURCES + **VALUED & RESPECTED** +

PERFORMANCE

- PROFIT
- PRODUCTIVITY
- INNOVATION
- ENGAGEMENT
- OPPORTUNITY
- WELLBEING

+ **CONNECTED** + **CONTRIBUTING** +

Imagine a world in which sexist language was replaced by racist language.

Instead of saying **'chairman'** or **'you guys'**, people would use **'chairwhite'** and **'you whiteys.'** People of colour would hear 'all whites are created equal' – and be expected to feel included. Substituting **'white'** for **'man'** makes it easy to see why using **'man'** for all human beings excludes. If we cringe at **'you whiteys'** and would protest such terms, why don't we work as hard at changing **'you guys'**[10]?

Busting the Myths

"That's so PC!"

People are too sensitive

Inclusive language is not about being 'politically correct' – it is about using language which is respectful, accurate, and relevant to everyone.

The way we work has had to change over time to keep pace with many social, economic, and technological shifts. Inclusive language at work is just one more tool organisations can use to respond to these shifts and deliver better business outcomes.

It can be difficult to 'walk in somebody else's shoes' and understand why they may feel excluded by particular words and phrases.

This is particularly the case for those of us who have not experienced exclusion. This means we are less likely to recognise words, phrases and incidents that involve bias, stereotyping or exclusion.[8]

But as writer Jarune Uwujaren puts it, "Making a conscious decision to avoid particular words and phrases is not about coddling people or shielding them from offense – it's about chipping away at the idea that alienating people through language is acceptable in the first place."[9]

There are more important issues

Talking about language might seem small, but changing our language is an easy way to create productive workplace cultures which are inclusive of everyone.

The way we talk about people reflects our workplace culture, and inclusive cultures drive business performance and employee wellbeing.

Unconscious bias can also be expressed through language. So by changing our language we can start to dismantle these biases.

Five Steps to Inclusive Language

1 Keep an open mind

We all come across new information, people, and ideas that challenge our own personal ideas of what's normal – language is no exception.

Be open to changing what you have always thought is 'normal', respectful and appropriate to say

✓ **Be open to learning** and understanding about workplace language, conversations and banter which can (even if unintentionally) exclude

✓ **Try to stand in someone else's shoes** and see it from their perspective

✓ **You don't have to have all the answers** or be perfect – just be open to change and willing to continue learning

2 Focus on the person

Focus on the person first, rather than the demographic group they belong to.

✓ **Only refer to an individual's age, cultural background, gender etc. if it is relevant.** Often it is not necessary to differentiate or single out people based on their age, cultural background etc. For

INSTEAD OF

> 66 Jonah, who is confined to a wheelchair, is new to the team and is interested in leading this project 99

TRY

> 66 Jonah is new to the team and is interested in leading this project 99

INSTEAD OF

> Disabled employees

TRY

> Employees with disability

Person-first language is widely accepted in Australia

INSTEAD OF

> 66 It's great having Jenny Lui in the team as Asian people are so good with numbers 99

TRY

> 66 It's great having Jenny Lui in the team as she has excellent accountancy skills 99

Try not to stereotype individuals from particular groups, even when the stereotype is a positive one (e.g. suggesting that a particular group are gifted in a particular area). This oversimplifies individual characteristics and ignores the diversity within groups and society more broadly.

3 Consider context

Context matters – language that may be fine outside of work can be non-inclusive at work.

AVOID – Receptionist Advising Manager of My Arrival

> That girl is here for your 9am meeting

TRY – Friend Greeting Me Outside Work

> Hey girl! How're you doing?

4 If in doubt, ask

You don't need to know all the answers. If you're not sure what terminology someone prefers, just ask them.

✓ **When using language about a group of people, it is best practice to defer to people with lived experience.** DCA recommends contacting organisations who make up and represent given diversity groups (e.g. Australian Employers Network on Disability, Pride in Diversity)

✓ **As language is constantly evolving, it may be necessary to seek advice** or more information for situations that are unclear.

5 Keep calm & respond

Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to. If you are called out for not being inclusive, here are some useful ways to respond, especially if you 'didn't mean it like that!'

✓ **Getting called out doesn't mean you need to defend yourself** – trivialising someone else's feelings *(e.g. "You're over-reacting!")* doesn't help build inclusion.

✓ **Instead of attempting to justify your actions** (e.g. *"I was only joking"*) try focusing on understanding the other person's perspective.

✓ **Say something like, *"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to offend you."*** If you're confused about their reaction ask, *"Could you explain why what I said was wrong?"*

" KEEP CALM AND RESPOND "

The courage to call it

It can be challenging to confront non-inclusive language, especially when it's coming from powerful or influential people in your organisation. In fact, research suggests we confront it less than half the time we encounter it.[11] But doing so can increase our confidence and promote inclusion at work for all. When we confront someone about their language, not only are they less likely do it again, they are also more likely to change their views on what is appropriate behavior – as are any bystanders.[12]

1 Start with yourself

✓ **Pay attention to your everyday language** and be conscious of how bias may (unintentionally) affect what you do and don't say

✓ **Remember, we all make mistakes** – so if you catch yourself out just apologise, learn from it, and try to avoid doing it again

✓ **Share your experiences** – be open with others about your experiences and what you've learned about the impact of biased language

✓ **Create new habits** – using inclusive language requires breaking old habits. Research shows we need to make conscious deliberate language choices (particularly when time is tight) otherwise we default to words and phrases we have used in the past.[13]

2 Say something – *directly*

✓ **If you hear someone using language that excludes others, say something.** Speaking up is a way of changing culture, and culture changes slowly and often involves lots of small steps

✓ **Focus on the behaviour and avoid labelling,** name-calling, or using loaded terms (e.g. calling someone sexist or racist)

✓ **Try appealing to their better instincts** (e.g. "*I'm sure that you didn't mean to suggest that women can't be effective leaders in our organisation*", "*It doesn't seem like you to say something like that*")

✓ **While you can't control other people's behaviour you can make your views very clear and set limits** (e.g. "*Perhaps you haven't thought about it before but telling jokes like that can offend people – please don't tell these sorts of jokes around me anymore*")

✓ **Keep it simple** (e.g. "*Do you really think that?*", "*No, I don't think about it that way*", "*I don't find that funny*", "*That comment sounds like a put-down of Indigenous Australians. Is that what you meant?*")

✓ **If you are not comfortable saying something in front of other people, consider saying something when you are with the person one-on-one** (e.g. "*Can we please have a quick chat about the comment you made earlier? It might not have been a big deal to you but…*")

3 Say something – *indirectly*

✓ **If you don't feel comfortable saying something directly, try the indirect approach** (e.g. "*Wow!*", "*Ouch!*", "*Hey, let's keep it professional, ok?*", "*Now that the biased part of the conversation is over, can we move on?*") While not as effective as a direct approach, it does at least show that you have noticed the language is not inclusive and you are uncomfortable with this.
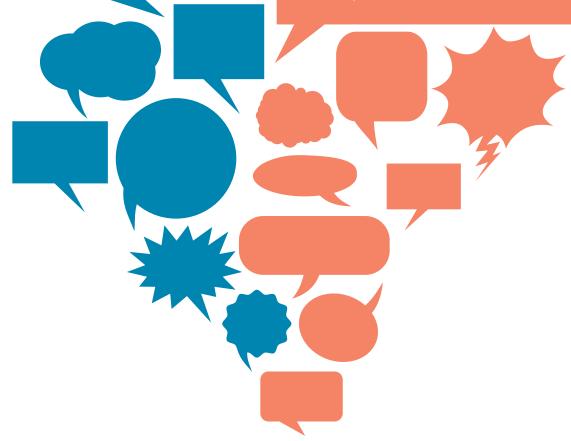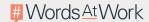
How to Use this Guide

This Guide is a starting point for learning about inclusive language and communication. We have tried to avoid creating lists of 'good' and 'bad' language – instead, we explain why and how some language can include or exclude, and provide guiding principles and some examples.

For further information, see the Guides for each diversity dimension (i.e. age, cultural background, disability, gender, Indigenous background, sexual orientation and gender identity)

The information provided is not meant to cover all situations. Where you are not sure, contact organisations which make up and represent given diversity groups (e.g. People with Disability Australia, National LGBTI Health Alliance).

Sources

The following sources of information were drawn on to develop this Guide:

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Endnotes

[1] See DCA's B*uilding Inclusion: An Evidence-Based Model of Inclusive Leadership* research report for a research review.

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[3] S.R. Chaudoir and D.M. Quinn, 'Bystander Sexism in the Intergroup Context: The Impact of Cat-Calls on Women's Reactions Towards Men,' *Sex Roles*, 2010. DOI 10.1007/s11199-009-9735-0

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S.L. Bem and D.L. Bem, 'Does Sex-Biased Job Advertising "Aid and Abet" Sex Discrimination?' *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 3, 1973, pp. 6-18.

[5] J.C. Becker and J.K. Swim, 'Seeing the Unseen: Attention to Daily Encounters with Sexism as Way to Reduce Sexist Beliefs,' *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2011, pp. 227-242.

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[6] V. Sojo, R.E. Wood and A.E. Genat, 'Harmful Workplace Experiences and Women's Occupational Well-being: A Meta-Analysis', *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2016, pp. 10-40.

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The researchers found that sexist joking reinforces existing prejudice, so that if someone jokes about women and is not pulled up on this, staff who are opposed to gender equality interpret this as social sanction for their own views and behavior – even if the original joke tellers themselves are not actively opposed to women and gender equality.

[8] M.L. Inman and R.S. Baron, 'Influence of Prototypes on Perceptions of Prejudice,' *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, vol. 70, 1996, pp. 727-739.

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[9] J. Uwujaren, '3 Common Complaints about Political Correctness (That Completely Miss the Point),' *Everyday Feminism*, 27 October 2015, para 38.

[10] S. Kleinman, 'Why Sexist Language Matters', *Alternet*, 11 March 2007. Referring to Hofstadter's (1986) parody of sexist language, 'Person Paper on Purity in Language.' Available at:

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