

Respect. It begins with you.



Words matter. So do attitudes and behaviors.

The words we use and the ways we act can unintentionally hurt, mock or alienate another person.

Sure, it can be difficult to know the exact right words to use. Words sometimes mean different things to different people in different regions or contexts. Language changes with time. And individuals within groups sometimes use different words to describe or reference themselves. And, yes, it tends to be difficult to identify or admit our own biases, especially the ones we carry subconsciously. But everyone has them.

Understanding this, it's important to be aware of the weight our words and actions carry, even subtly or inadvertently, so we can genuinely show one another respect. To communicate with care:

- 1. Put the person first.** Choose words with sensitivity, ensuring that the individuality and humanity of people are respected. Keep in mind, a person's skin color, age, disability, mental health condition, etc., does not define the person. So, for example, don't say she's bipolar or she's poor, rather say "she is living with bipolar disorder" or "she is living in poverty". Also, avoid using words to describe people that are generally used to describe "things". For example, a person is not oriental, but a rug might be. The person is East Asian, such as a Chinese or Japanese person. Likewise, a person is not "mixed," but rather biracial or multiracial.
- 2. Share only relevant characteristics.** Remove details – such as a person's race, religion or sexual orientation, etc., – that are not important to the context of what you're sharing. For example, if you got a deal on a new TV, does it matter if the salesperson was white, black or Asian? Does the person's age matter? Probably not. So, why mention it if you got terrible service?

3. Avoid language that attaches judgment or shame, or forces others to make assumptions. For example, when referencing a neighborhood, describing it as a “ghetto” implies its residents lack the standards of manners and ethics. Instead, cite the neighborhood, district or area, and if necessary or relevant describe its conditions. Remember, precision is preferred, because people have a different understanding of a concept, based on their own point of reference and experience.

If you use slang, slurs, stigmatizing or otherwise disrespectful words, simply remove these words from your vocabulary. Ask yourself how you would feel or what you would think if someone described you or a loved one in that way?

4. Follow the person’s preference. If you don’t know or are unsure, ask. For example, people from or whose ancestors were from a Spanish-speaking land or culture might prefer Hispanic, Latino, Latina or Latinx. However, people from Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands generally self-reference by their specific origin, e.g. Cuban, Puerto Rican or Mexican American.

5. Beware of your microaggressions. These are everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that demean people by suggesting they don’t belong or invalidating their experiences. For example, complimenting a coworker of Thai descent for speaking “good English” sends the message to the coworker that he is not a “true” American. Another example, having a negative view of an assertive female boss, but admiring the same characteristics in a male boss communicates that you believe women should be passive and men should be decision makers.

6. Know and face your own biases. Have you examined your biases? We all have them. Our brains create categories to make sense of the world. But the values we place on different categories are learned. Discrimination often stems from fear and misunderstanding. What are you afraid of? For example, ask yourself if you:

- See things as simpler if you know less about them?
- Prefer those most like you?
- Favor information that supports your opinions and existing beliefs?
- Hold and/or act on assumptions based only on appearances and first impressions?
- Gravitate toward things and ideas you already know you like and are interested in?

If you answered yes, educate yourself. Read books and articles, watch shows and ask people to learn about the unique perspectives of others.

For more information and resources on diversity and inclusion, call your Employee Assistance Program at 800-354-3950.

Sources:

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