

*Speech is a form of action and words have consequences. They can include or exclude, even if we do not intend them to. Using non-inclusive language can be a form of bullying or discrimination. It is very important that we are all conscious of our language.*

## Studies show that:

- How we are described by others has an enormous impact on our health and wellbeing, as well as on how likely we are to seek health care when necessary. Inclusive language improves the health of our families and communities.
- Non-inclusive language harms people who witness it as well as the intended targets
- Frequent non-inclusive experiences at work have just as harmful effects as more intense but less frequent experiences (e.g. harassment)

## 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 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 need to have all the answers or be perfect – just be open to change

### 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.

**Instead of** - Disabled employees **Try** - Employees with disability

- ✓ 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.

**Instead of:** "It's great having Jenny in the team as Asian people are so good with numbers"

**Try:** "It's great having Jenny Lui in the team as she has excellent accountancy skills"

### 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 old bird is here for your 9am meeting”.

**Try – Friend Greeting Me Outside Work** “Hey you old bird! How’re you doing?”

### 4. If in doubt, ask

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

- ✓ When using language about a group of people, it is best to ask people with lived experience and/or organisations who make up and represent given diversity groups (e.g. Australian Employers Network on Disability, Pride in Diversity)
- ✓ As language is constantly changing, you may need to get advice or more information for situations that are not clear.

### 5. Keep calm and 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 trying to defend or excuse 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?”

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*It can be challenging to confront non-inclusive language. In fact, research suggests we confront it less than half the time we encounter it. 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 behaviour – as are any bystanders.*

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## Three steps to confronting non-inclusive language

### 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 have 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 short) otherwise we default to words and phrases we have used in the past.

### 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 do not 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 not comfortable with this.

## Myth Busting

### “Sexual orientation is not a workplace matter”

The argument that a person’s sexual orientation is not a workplace matter is common, but flawed. A person who is heterosexual brings their orientation to work every day, and is free to discuss this openly without fear of discrimination. Even something as simple of describing what we did on our weekend can reveal personal information (‘My husband/wife and I went out for dinner’, ‘I went camping with my girlfriend/boyfriend’).

### “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.

### “That’s so PC!”

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.

### “People are too sensitive”

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.

### “Why should some people receive special treatment?”

Using inclusive language is not about giving some people special treatment, it is about ensuring everyone has their needs met. By dedicating a small amount of energy to changing language means that the specific needs of those most vulnerable will be met. Language can unintentionally discriminate against individuals, and inclusive language is working towards ensuring that Bridges is welcoming of everyone. All individuals deserve to access Bridges services, and using inappropriate language creates a barrier for some people as they fear discrimination.

### “Volunteers shouldn’t have to worry about this”

Volunteers are representatives of Bridges in the same way staff are. As written in the code of conduct, “paid and volunteer staff are expected to undertake their duties in a professional, responsible, conscientious and ethical manner and to act in the best interests of Bridges”.