

Mind your language!

Simona Scarpaleggia reveals the importance of inclusive language in the workplace and how it helps to attract and retain talent.



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Words matter. The way we speak and the terms we use can influence the understanding and the interpretation of what we are saying and what we really mean much more than we realize.

This, in itself, is not a recent revelation. Scholars have been debating the point for years. Everyone understands the importance of language – and indeed the power of oratory – in all walks of life, from politics to marketing, and every point in between. Language can be intentionally blunt, or unintentionally subtle, and linked directly to our subconscious where meaning and associations are created and become somehow ‘structural’ sources of discrimination or exclusion.

Take hurricanes. When the National Hurricane Center first started ‘naming’ Atlantic tropical storms, they only featured women’s names (even in languages such as Italian, French or German where the word for hurricane is masculine!). It was not until 1979 that men’s names were first introduced, by which time the ‘damage’ had been done; women were forever associated with the catastrophic effect that a storm can bring!

I am sure the association was never intended, nor was any sleight intended in an incident in which I was personally involved many years ago. As deputy country manager of IKEA Italy, I attended an awards ceremony hosted by the Government to receive an honour on the company’s behalf. To celebrate the occasion, I was handed an engraved plate, as well

as a commemorative tie! As if this wasn’t discriminatory enough, rather than making things better, the Government Minister then compounded the issue by saying simply: ‘Never mind, perhaps you can give it to your husband!’

The story serves to show how words, although not intended to insult, can in fact be most insulting and betray one’s own discriminatory tendencies. Conversely, adopting a more inclusive language, and being more thoughtful about what we say and how we say it, can go a long way to creating an environment where people feel safe, included, and respected. Careful use of language can help initiate and facilitate the change towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Inclusive language

So, what do we mean by inclusive language? Simply put, it means words and language that avoid expressions that explicitly or implicitly exclude a particular group of people, be they women, ethnic groups, different age groups etc. A typical example, often quoted, is our use of ‘mankind’ instead of ‘humankind’ or using masculine pronouns or endings to indicate plural subjects. At worst it can mean using words that perpetuate prejudice against a particular group. The good news is that both individuals and organizations can consciously adopt an inclusive language and learn how to use it.

One golden rule of inclusive language is the so-called 'person-first language'. By emphasizing the person, regardless of any specific 'diversity', it becomes the uniqueness of the individual that is of value above all else.

The use of inclusive language is not a fad, neither is it something that should be ignored. Inclusive language is important in organizations to prevent unconscious bias, to make prospective job candidates feel welcome to apply, and for existing employees to feel comfortable to lean in or to pitch their ideas.

The issue has been debated at the United Nations and there are in fact [UN guidelines for gender inclusive language](#).

The UN guidelines highlight three basic principles: the first is to always use non-discriminatory language (i.e. – use forms of address that are consistent with their gender identity); the second is to make gender visible only when it is relevant for communication (e.g. in a job advertisement, it may be relevant to state 'he or she must have five years' experience'); and thirdly, do not make gender visible when it is not relevant for communication (as in the case of mankind, man-made, manpower etc.).

Top tips

So, how can organizations help themselves to adopt or further improve inclusive language, especially when it comes to attracting new staff? Here are some top tips:

1. Use non-discriminatory language

A few examples will help illustrate what using non-discriminatory language means. It is inclusive to say: 'the person living with a mental health condition' instead of 'the mentally ill'. Similarly, 'older adults' instead of 'the elderly' or 'senior citizens'. Perhaps some of the most blatant examples of discriminatory language relate to gender, especially when used in the workplace. It is not inclusive, for example, to use words like 'Chairman'. Neither is it inclusive to start a meeting with 'Hi guys'. Unconsciously, masculine pronouns are used in speeches and conversation most of the time. Some non-inclusive language is even embedded in

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grammatical structure; several European languages distinguish between male and female by ending words with a gender specific desinence.

Simple changes can make a significant difference: appointing a 'Chair' or a 'Chairperson' immediately resolves the issue, as does starting a meeting with a cheery 'Hi folks'. And when it comes to pronouns, 'they', 'his or hers' or 'Ladies and Gentlemen' requires very little effort but can lead to a very great improvement.

2. Eliminate bias of race, religion and national origin

As a simple rule of thumb, never mention an individual's race, religion or heritage. It is completely irrelevant. It is simple enough to champion diversity by showing different ethnicities through your marketing communications, social channels, website etc.

3. Avoid gender bias

Be clear in declaring your commitment to an equal and diverse workplace and do not use gender-specific pronouns. Address prospective candidates by using 'they' or 'you' and use gender-neutral job titles (such as salesperson, sales executive, businessperson etc.). Most important of all is to avoid language that might be perceived (and associated) with a masculine environment, such as talking about meeting 'aggressive targets' or 'dominating a room'. Use more inclusive references to the organization's purpose and values.

4. Avoid age bias

Similar to tip 2, make sure that your organization's brochures, websites and videos feature people of all ages. Do not ask for 'digital natives' or 'young and exuberant', when in doing so you exclude highly proficient, highly-motivated digital experts who may feel unwelcome and disinclined to apply for a role or a promotion on grounds of age.

5. Be inclusive of people with disabilities and neurodiverse workers

Language that proclaims that an individual 'must be able to lift weights up to X kg' will exclude a number of candidates who are perfectly capable of 'operating equipment that allows weights of up to X kg to be lifted'. Also stating that your organization has 'sports and other employee clubs' is more inclusive and more appealing to the majority than 'you will be participating in sporting competitions'. Explaining your approach to remote working and flexible hours also supports a more inclusive culture.

6. Do not overstate the qualifications required

Research proves that women are reluctant to apply for a job unless they feel confident that they meet all (i.e. 100%) of the criteria specified in the job application. Men, on the other hand, will apply if they believe they have 60% of the skills required. Stating, therefore, if a qualification or requirement is a 'must' as opposed to a 'nice to have' is advised.

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7. Talk about your organization's DE&I strategy and policies

By being open about your organization's approach to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) you will go a long way to raising interest in your business to a much wider audience of candidates as well as reinforcing your brand's reputation as an employer.

Words do indeed matter, and perhaps even more so in an age of new technology and science where gender parity is still far from being a reality and where organizations struggle to find female talent.

So, to leave you with another thought: it is the coders, programmers and digital experts of today who will influence how machines will 'learn' and 'think' in the future, which illustrates why a gender balanced digital workforce is so important to our shared future. And something else to consider: this is all to be achieved in the context of an IT industry where the word to end a program or file is perhaps the most non-inclusive of all: 'abort'.

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