

Say the word

Tuesday 21 March 2023 | 1.00 - 2.00 pm GMT

Establishing a common voice to enable all people to understand their accountability for ID&E is essential in moving the agenda forward. Often the biggest stumbling block is knowing what to say, how to phrase a question, or what the right terminology is. Language - like people - evolves and adapts with generations and our deeper understanding of history, movements and experiences of people. During this session, our speakers shared stories of their experience with inclusive and intentional language. They explained the power of language, and how we can evolve with it in order to meaningfully engage and connect with each other.

Does talking about our differences further divide us?

- Nearly two-thirds of allies in the workplace hold back from having conversations about difference because they find it counter-productive to recognise these differences. Colleagues and organisations may take the approach that they see people, and not race, sexual orientation, or disability.
- A good approach to responding to colleagues who do not "see colour" (or any characteristic of one's identity), is to first recognise the progressive intent that underlies their position. We all are indeed striving for a world where skin tone or sexual orientation do not matter, however we are not yet there. The present world is organised in such a way where differences mean various things to various people. For example, disability in itself is not a problem, but ableism is. Therefore, by ignoring the existence of someone's disability, we ignore the problem of ableism and perpetuate the status quo.
- It may also be useful to point out to colleagues that the option to step away from conversations surrounding ID&E is only made possible due to the privilege that comes with being part of the dominant group.

How do we avoid saying something inappropriate or even offensive?

- Up to 85% of allies in the workplace are worried about saying the wrong thing, therefore they do not say anything at all. It is important to realise that getting it wrong is inevitable sometimes.
- When worried about saying the wrong thing, it may be helpful to check what one's intention is before speaking. For example, a question about where someone is from is unlikely to be inappropriate if it comes from a place of wanting to understand where someone calls home. If your intention is different, and you are only willing to accept a certain answer, then this may become inappropriate.
- The most important lesson to keep in mind is to adopt a growth mindset; at both an organisational and individual level since we are all constantly growing and learning. A growth mindset is about accepting discomfort and sometimes getting things wrong. It is about being willing to listen and learn, to welcome being corrected, and to actively try to improve.

How do we keep up with evolving language?

- Language can be rather fluid, and it can sometimes feel like it is changing quicker than one can keep up. Unfortunately, there is no one answer or one resource that can be consulted to ensure one is in tune with the times. However, by adopting a growth mindset, you are encouraged to think about history, recent events, a particular situation etc. You are encouraged to consult experts and people with lived experiences. Sometimes, the best approach is simply accepting that language evolves and that you hope the words you choose are the most appropriate in the given circumstance.
- In global organisations, the nuance of language can sometimes be an obstacle, with some words meaning different things to different audiences, and other words being completely unknown. For example, in the UK we can use 'disabled people' and 'people with disabilities' interchangeably without understanding they can mean very different things, and that some people identify with one term more than the other. 'Disabled people' is rooted in identity-first language and 'people with disabilities' is focused on recognising people first. Having a growth mindset can prove useful here too; we need to remember that context matters and accept that colleagues, acquaintances or family members may not all identify with the same term, despite being in the same location. Listening and accepting that we may have to alternate between acceptable terminology and equally being unafraid to ask someone how they wish to identify, is key to how we engage inclusively, locally and globally.

- Being unsure about which term to use is a common experience. A good approach to navigate this is to think about your intention, then the context in which you are communicating. Take the time to understand what each term you could use means, and assess which one is the most appropriate for what you're trying to convey. If still unsure, simply acknowledge the fact that you are unsure about which term to use, and your audience may be able to help.

How to deal with getting things wrong?

- Instead of calling people out when they get things wrong, we are invited to call people in with grace. This is done in private and with respect, so that someone is actually explained how to "do better" instead of just being demanded to do so. In an organisation, even senior leaders can be called in if the culture that has been promulgated by the management allows it. This is a culture where people actually call in others, and leaders publicly advocate for this, so that more people are comfortable with calling in and being called in. Senior leaders ought to actively try to create a psychological safe space where divergence in all its forms is valued and that people are able to bring their full selves into the workplace.

#WeAreNotNeutral



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