



A special report on diversity

“LANGUAGE SHOULD DESCRIBE THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE HUMAN RACE IN TERMS OF ALL WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THEM.”

— ROSALIE MAGGIO, *THE NONSEXIST WORD FINDER*

The Language of Diversity

BY CATHERINE M. PETRINI

“Words are what hold society together,” said Stuart Chase, an American economist and author. Unfortunately, the words chosen by many speakers and writers often push people apart. Words make a difference. Trainers and managers who use them well (or badly) can have an enormous influence on employee attitudes.

Language used in business communications should be “inclusive” rather than “exclusive,” say diversity experts. In other words, it should encompass and respect the wide variety of people in the workforce. That workforce includes men and women of all races and ethnic backgrounds, religions, ages, physical and mental characteristics, and sexual orientations.

LANGUAGE THAT RESPECTS DIVERSITY BEGINS WITH AN UNDERSTANDING THAT PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE FIRST. HERE ARE SOME GUIDELINES FOR MAKING SURE YOUR BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF YOUR WORKFORCE AND CUSTOMER BASE.

Language that respects diversity begins with an understanding that people are people first. Employees should be defined by the skills they bring to the workplace, not by physical or cultural characteristics that are irrelevant to their jobs. Of course, changing “the handicapped” to “people with disabilities” in your employee handbook will not transform attitudes. But it can contribute to an atmosphere in which an employee’s job performance is seen as

more important than his or her physical challenges.

Customers are diverse as well. It's just bad business to use sales letters, training manuals, press releases, and presentations that are likely to alienate potential clients. Most of us prefer to do business with firms that show us some respect. In general, people should be called what they want to be called, as long as those terms are accurate and clear.

For example, many people who have AIDS or test positive for HIV say they are offended by the term "AIDS victim," which they find disempowering. An acceptable alternative, "people with AIDS," is objective, accurate, and easily understood.

Some critics of "political correctness" argue that we shouldn't alter the language "just to appease a few extremists." But the number of "non-traditional" workers in the labor force is more than "few." In fact, it's more than half, according to the Hudson Institute's *Workforce 2000*. Besides, the real reason for using bias-free words has more to do with clearness and accuracy. Many traditional, exclusive terms are misleading, confusing, or downright incorrect.

"But when I write 'man,' I mean women, too," is a common argument for retaining terminology that excludes some people. But communication involves more than the writer's intent. If some readers assume that 'man' includes only males, then the intended meaning has not been conveyed. And if some readers have to pause for a moment to determine the intent, then the writer has introduced an unnecessary ambiguity. Why use a term that may confuse or mislead members of your audience, when clearer options (such as "human") are available?

Some of the most useful and appropriate words are those that are the most simple and objective. Here are some guidelines for making sure that the language you choose includes and respects the individuals that make up your diverse workforce.

Gender issues

Women make up 54 percent of the population, but many people (men and women) continue to use lan-

guage that ignores or trivializes them.

Do not use gender-specific nouns and pronouns to refer to "generic" groups or people. For example, "Everyone should turn on his computer," is an inappropriate instruction in a training session that includes men and women.

Some people suggest using the plural pronoun ("they") in all such cases. Sometimes that's an excellent solution, but it should be done carefully. "Everyone should turn on their computer" is ungrammatical; "everyone" requires a singular pronoun. Instead, try "All trainees should turn on their computers," "Each of you should turn on your computer," or "Everyone should turn on his or her computer."

Another common argument against gender-neutral pronouns goes something like this: "I used 'he' because practically all of the workers I was talking about are men." But if even one of the workers was a woman, then the statement was illogical and exclusive.

Many common nouns and verbs are also needlessly sexist. For example, your department's "Manpower Study" might easily be retitled "Staffing Study."

If your company has job titles that specify sex (such as foreman, chairman, or salesman), consider changing them to encompass all qualified applicants. When masculine terms are used for supposedly "gender-free" concepts, studies show that both women and men are much more likely to assume that they target men, says Rosalie Maggio in *The Nonsexist Word Finder* (Beacon Press, 1988). It's best to clear up any ambiguity and avoid giving offense. The solution could be as simple as using "courier" instead of "deliveryman," or "worker" instead of "workman."

Job descriptions bring up another compelling reason to avoid gender-biased language: A job description that uses exclusive language may leave a company vulnerable to EEO lawsuits, according to guidelines published by the Cleveland-based International Writing Institute. And gender-biased language that is infused throughout your organizational culture could leave you open to "environmental" sexual-harassment lawsuits.

Race and culture

When dealing with language involving race and ethnic heritage, the watchwords are sensitivity and accuracy. But sometimes the array of choices can be confusing, even to a diversity-minded businessperson.

For example, how do you know whether to use the term "blacks," "African Americans," or "people of color" in your diversity-awareness class?

Several factors could influence that decision.

If you're not a member of the group to which you're referring, the best solution is to find sources who are. Interview staff, ask people about their preferences, and keep up with current trends and research. But remember that people are individuals. One person's opinion isn't necessarily representative of a large group.

In the example above, all three options may be considered acceptable. "Black" is still the preferred term among black Americans, according to a report in a recent issue of *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* (as cited in *Copy Editor*, December 1992/January 1993). But "African American" is gaining in popularity, says the study, and some groups prefer "people of color."

Your choice will depend on the exact meaning you are trying to convey; the three terms are not synonymous. "African American" may not be appropriate if some employees of African descent are not American citizens. (And remember that some people who consider themselves Africans are white). And "people of color" frequently encompasses members of a variety of races. Know your audience and choose a word that will be acceptable to its members—but also make sure that your intended meaning is clear.

The same general principles apply to other cultural groups. For example, some members of Hispanic cultures prefer the term "Latino" over "Hispanic." In general, either or is acceptable, but they are not interchangeable. "Latino" refers only to people from Latin American cultures. It does not apply to European Hispanics. "Hispanic" encompasses both groups.

And remember that both terms actually refer to a variety of distinct cultures. A clearer and more respectful choice of terminology acknowledges a person's country of origin, if it's known. "Peruvian" or "Venezuelan," for instance, may be preferable to "Hispanic" or "Latino."

A similar guideline applies when referring to native Americans. For example, choose "Sioux" or "Cherokee" over "native American," if that information is available.

By the way, opinions differ on "native American" and "American Indian." Both are now in common usage. If your audience prefers one over the other, use it. Again, if you're not part of the group you're referring to, you'll be a more effective communicator if you learn from its members about their preferences.

Physical and mental attributes

The area of personal characteristics—especially physical disabilities—brings up some of the most controversial language issues. Nowhere is it more important to define people first as people (or employees, when appropriate)—not as the bearers of irrelevant personal traits or (worse) the "victims" of those traits.

This issue sparks a lot of disagreement, even among professional business communicators. Consider the recommendations of the newly published editorial style guide to *The Economist* magazine. The guide advises writers that "the *hearing-impaired* are simply *deaf*. It is no disrespect to the *disabled* sometimes to describe them as *crippled*." (Italics are from the original.)

Despite that recommendation, you should avoid referring to people as "deaf" or "blind" in general business communications. For one thing, very few people actually fall into those categories; in most cases, a more accurate choice would be something like this: "with hearing impairments" or "with low vision."

"Crippled" is more offensive. Identifying an employee as, for example, "the crippled accountant," places the disability above the person and the job; it connotes someone who is to be pitied. "The accountant who uses a wheelchair," has no negative connotations. It

simply identifies the person, in the same way that "the accountant who sits in the third cubicle" would.

Many commonly used terms carry similar connotations, even when the writer's or speaker's intended meaning is innocuous.

In most contexts, "people who suffer from cancer" (or any illness or condition) is presumptuous, especially when it comes from a person who does not have cancer. It's also likely to be inaccurate or unverifiable if used to refer to a large group. "Cancer patients," while appropriate in some cases, is frequently misused. Only people who are undergoing treatment can be considered patients. Also, the term defines people only through their status as patients. In business contexts, a better choice might be the more neutral "employees with cancer."

"Retarded" and "senile" are commonly used pejoratively. Don't risk alienating your audience. Refer to the specific condition instead; for example, Alzheimer's or Down's. If the condition is unknown or the usage must encompass a broader range of individuals, "people with mental disabilities" may be appropriate.

You don't have to sacrifice clarity in order to avoid offense. Some people suggest "differently abled" as a substitute for "with disabilities." The intention is admirable, but the meaning is unclear. All of us are differently abled. "Disabilities" carries a meaning that is more likely to be consistently understood by readers or listeners.

If you find yourself reaching for a muddy euphemism to replace an offensive word, stop. Think carefully about your intended meaning. Go back to your network of sources and find another way to express what you want to say. Then say it in a way that is both sensitive and clear. □

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