

Advancing Language for Racial Equity and Inclusion

“Language impacts people and workplaces every day. Language can make people feel like they belong, or be used to discriminate and advance divisiveness and inequity. Simply put, language matters” (Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership- To The Point, Genevieve Smith, Alicia Sheares, Ishita Rustagi, and Julia Nee with support from Kellie McElhaney, p. xxx, 2020).

Language Matters: FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Language impacts people’s wellbeing.
- Language can instill harmful stereotypes and biases.
- Languages can signal exclusion or inclusion.

Language Matters: FOR ORGANIZATIONS

- Language can alienate minoritized employees, impact mental health, and erode sense of belonging and psychological safety.
- This can result in higher stress, lower productivity and higher turnover.
- Linguistic discrimination impacts who gets hired and who advances at work resulting in reduced employee diversity with impacts for lower innovation.

Leaders have an important role to play in advancing equitable and inclusive language — through their own communications and through making sure it is institutionalized in their organization.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS

- What we say matters. Words and phrases people use can harm or be discriminatory to individuals or groups (intentionally or not).
- Patterns of language use matter. Repeating the same words or phrases to describe certain groups over time can solidify stereotypes.
- There is no human language variety that is “better” than others from a linguistic perspective, but English (and particular varieties) has been granted more status and power globally.
- The same issues in human language are replicated in artificial intelligence (AI) tools that learn from and use human language data.
- Individuals and organizations have the opportunity to advance racial equity and inclusion in language.
- Addressing language is important, but not sufficient.

Good Language Practices: INDIVIDUALS - REFINE YOUR LANGUAGE TO BE INCLUSIVE...

- Replace harmful terms that have racist histories or connotations with more neutral language that conveys the same message.
- Listen to how people describe themselves and honor their identity. Ex. using personal pronouns.
- Update specific language practices that can reinforce stereotypes. Avoid using unnecessary modifiers (e.g., “female engineers” but not “male engineers”).
- Examine the expectations you have for how people should talk.
- Recognize that communication is a two-way street and work on your own communications skills.
- Keep learning!

Good Language Practices: ORGANIZATIONS - INSTITUTIONALIZE INCLUSION...

- As an organization, get clear on your own terminology approaches (like capitalizing Black and White) and share it with employees.
- Recognize that communication is a two-way street and provide training for all employees on communications skills.
- Develop policies that promote linguistic diversity.
- Share guidance and implement workplace training for employees on language to advance racial equity and inclusion.
- Identify and adjust places in hiring, evaluation, and promotion where preference for “Standard” American English is used.
- When using AI systems for HR (e.g., hiring and promotion), analyze how the AI tool can inadvertently exclude, penalize, and/or hold back Black people and people with other marginalized identities.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Read this playbook and reflect. Ask yourself:

- What are the 2-3 individual practices I want to work on this month? Circle them above.
- What is 1 practice my organization can work on this month? Circle it above.
- What is my language “to be” list? This is NOT a “to do” list. For example, avoid thinking of improving your language as a checklist of things to accomplish. Ask yourselves, how do we want “to be” when it comes to language?
 - “to be” lists could include: be as precise and inclusive as possible, be respectful always, be empathetic in the face of difficult discussions, and be open to learning & having our minds changed. Write 2-3 “to be’s” here:

- Come back once a quarter to identify new practices to work on and reflect on / update your language “to be” list. It’s a journey!

Source: (Center for Equity, Gender & Leadership- To The Point, Genevieve Smith, Alicia Sheares, Ishita Rustagi, and Julia Nee with support from Kellie McElhaney, p. xxx-2, 2020).