

Strategies for Inclusive Communication

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will further consider how to communicate in a way that is inclusive of all groups. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Inclusive Internal Communication](#)
2. [Inclusive External Communication](#)

1. Inclusive Internal Communication

As you learned in Unit 1, internal communication includes a broad range of formal and informal communication, from small talk among colleagues to performance reviews to project reports. It can be written, spoken, or nonverbal; analog or digital.

In informal communication, it is important to be mindful of inclusivity and diversity to maintain and build strong relationships with your colleagues. The ability to communicate in diverse teams is a real strength that will also help your personal brand and your career. But as noted above, communication among diverse groups can be more challenging since it takes longer for people with differences to get comfortable communicating openly with one another.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when communicating in diverse teams:

- Practice active listening to make sure everyone feels heard.

People of marginalized groups often feel that people of dominant groups don't listen to them as much or give them credit for their ideas. You can ameliorate this by using your active listening skills to demonstrate that you are giving everyone your full attention as they speak and always being conscientious about giving credit where due.

- Explore and reflect on implicit biases that may skew your own thinking.

Accept that you, like everyone, hold some implicit biases, and your responsibility is not to be perfect, but to continually improve. Critique your own judgments and decisions to make sure you aren't being influenced by

implicit biases. Always question the origin and fairness of “gut feelings,” and encourage teammates to articulate their reasoning when you suspect they might be influenced by implicit bias.

- Invite feedback on your mistakes.

Explicitly invite colleagues to correct and educate each other when they notice examples of biased thinking and action. Provide opportunities for feedback in private or anonymously for sensitive situations. When someone with a marginalized identity gives feedback, listen carefully and thank them for their assistance.

- Take responsibility for your own education.

Don't rely on teammates with marginalized identities to do all the work of identifying and correcting instances of bias. For categories where you are in the dominant group, read up on the experiences and history of the marginalized groups. When another colleague with a dominant identity makes a mistake, be proactive about talking about it with them yourself.

- Rely on the core mission of the organization to guide your decisions.

Having a common purpose can help people with different backgrounds come together and communicate effectively. If you have been in the military, for example, you might have been in a group that was diverse across every factor but had to function as a unit.

- Find ways to build cohesion as a team so that people are more comfortable expressing themselves.

For example, you might start each meeting with an icebreaker question that encourages people to learn about one another. Especially in teams that meet virtually, this will help you find commonalities with each person. Maybe you and a teammate have the same breed of dog, while another teammate shares your enthusiasm for college basketball. These build the initial bonds that help you build a relationship. When internal communication is more formal it is generally less spontaneous—meaning, one hopes, that there is more thought put into the communication. But it also becomes more important to consider the nuances of each communication.

2. Inclusive External Communication

While the importance of being inclusive in internal communication is to form strong relationships, the importance of being inclusive for external communication is to project a professional image for yourself and your organization. The stakes are even higher. Even small organizations might find themselves in the national spotlight if poorly crafted communication reflects bigotry.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** In early 2021, a Midwestern art museum advertised for a new director. In the job description was language about the “core white audience” for art in their city, which many people found dismissive of both artists and patrons of color. It brought national embarrassment to the museum and forced the immediate resignation of the current director.

Offensive communications are rarely done with open intention of doing harm, but they can still be harmful without there being harmful intent. Additionally, offensive communications can make you or your organization look ignorant or clueless. It is not enough to “try and be nice,” but to make yourself aware of the potential pitfalls of communication.

- Avoid using exclusive terminology, such as gendered pronouns (usually male, but the same may be true of female pronouns when referring to teachers, parents, or nurses). Some exclusive terminology is hardwired into American culture, such as the dating terms “BC” and “AD” which are centered on Christian beliefs (“BCE” and “CE” are now preferred). Calling pink or peach “nude” (meaning, the color of skin) is another example, only recently dropped by make-up companies. Cultural standards are so woven into language it’s impossible to name them all, but you can maintain vigilance over using any terms that leave other people out.
- Also know that many colloquial terms have offensive origins, such as “gypped” to mean cheated (derived from a slur for Roma people) or “crippled” as a metaphor. The term “tone-deaf,” which is ironically used to describe these kinds of mistakes, is another good example. If you don’t know how such a word or expression got its meaning, it might be best to avoid it.
- Adjectives describing groups should rarely be used as nouns, such as “females,” or “the blind.” Some words are both (like “American”), but it is best to err on the side of caution and always either use an alternate word that is a noun (like “women”) or follow it with a noun (like “blind people”).
- Finally, don’t mention factors like race, religion, or disability unless it’s necessary. You might wonder if you should describe your colleague as “Black” or “African American” in an email, when the best way to describe her is, “Our new accountant.”



Having multiple readers of drafted communications can help find all such potential problems, and is another benefit of a diverse workplace.

While it would be great to issue a set of rules for how to communicate for inclusivity, in practice, “rules” of inclusive language are not that clear. Terms can change, or be disputed even within the communities they describe.

- While singular “they” is now most common as a gender-inclusive third person pronoun, (and approved by official style guides) some gender-nonbinary people prefer “ze,” and “zir,” as personal and personal possessive pronouns.
- Some Black people self-identify as “African American” and others do not. Moreover, to use or not use a hyphen in terms like “African American” is also a point of discussion and disagreement, though most style guides now recommend not using a hyphen.
- Meanwhile, some people who have one of those two-term labels resent the use of modifiers. They might protest that they are just as American as anyone else.
- People-first language, the norm of putting people before a disability (such as saying “people with disabilities” instead of “disabled people”) is promoted by some advocacy groups (like the Arc, a group for people with cognitive disabilities) and rejected by other advocacy groups (like the Autism Society of America).

- Many people with ancestral ties to Latin America still self-identify as Hispanic while the broader term Latino (or even Latinx) has become the norm.

If you're describing individuals (and the description is necessary to the communication), you should use their personal preferences, but some uses of language will be non-specific. While style guides and advocacy groups can give you a good nudge in the right direction, there are no "right" answers for some uses of language (although there are definitely wrong answers).



A useful web resource, the [Diversity Style Guide](#), has an alphabetical listing related to terms describing groups and cultural terminology.

Moreover, a term that is currently recommended might soon fall out of favor. Adding to the confusion are otherwise obsolete words that are still used in certain contexts.

- The term "Boomer" to refer to a person of the Baby Boom generation was used for decades without objection, but when it started being used in a dismissive way ("OK, Boomer") it took on an ageist tone.
- The Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and other organizations use their original names even though the groups they represent no longer use those labels.
- Handicapped Parking spaces still exist, but people are never described that way.

It may feel that the rules are arbitrary and ever-changing, but professional communications require sensitivity and empathy. Indeed, what matters most to many groups is not the term itself, but that you took the time to learn and demonstrate that you care.

- Consult an up-to-date style guide. You may have an in-house style guide, but unless it's been revised recently it may not be the best resource on sensitive topics.
- Consult websites representing the group with a stake in the matter. Make sure you further research the group to make sure their website represents the community.
- Ask for one or more readers of your draft across a diverse range of perspectives.

IN CONTEXT

A public library in a metropolitan area is redesigning their youth programs. They have a special interest in improving the diversity of their program participation. The current programs draw more youth from the suburbs than the city itself, and while there is racial diversity it lags behind the actual population of the city. The programmers have been offering book clubs featuring diverse authors, but so far youth has not responded to these programs. The solution to engaging youth is not as easy as staff hoped.

The youth program director for the system decides to begin differently than any previous director. Instead of working with other librarians, she invites people from the community to share their experiences and feedback, for which the library pays a small honorarium. The program director takes

a back seat in these discussions, even inviting another librarian who has special training in facilitating community dialogues.

In these discussions, she discovers the library has largely been ignorant of a lot of barriers to participation. For example, the library's communication for promoting the events does not reach people in the community. The scheduling of the events makes it difficult for many youth to participate; programs have been scheduled in the evening but many of the parents and caregivers work non-traditional hours.

Finally, while the program has been committed to selecting books by diverse authors, the titles are culled from awards lists and feel to youth like "more school" than something fun to do in their spare time. They learn that kids in the community are more excited about entire genres they had not considered, such as manga, comics, books based on video games, and humor. Older teens were most excited about hearing, writing, and performing spoken word poetry.

By inviting and paying community members to share their feedback, the library communicated that they valued their input and learned how to re-engineer the program so it better meets the needs and interests of the community. They begin to schedule after-school activities with more opportunities for kids to pick the books they talk about. They plan teen events around opportunities to write and perform their own spoken-word poetry. They schedule the events after school instead of evenings, and get the word out to after-school programs at schools and parks. Participation drastically increases.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the importance of inclusiveness in all forms of communication—both **internal inclusive communication** and **external inclusive communication**. You also reflected on some practical tips for doing so. While internal inclusiveness is important for functional diverse teams and organizations, external inclusiveness is even more important for both organizational and personal branding as well as public reputation. Inclusive terminology is quite dynamic. Therefore, it is important to remain current on the latest terminology and uses of language intended for an inclusive and healthy workplace.

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