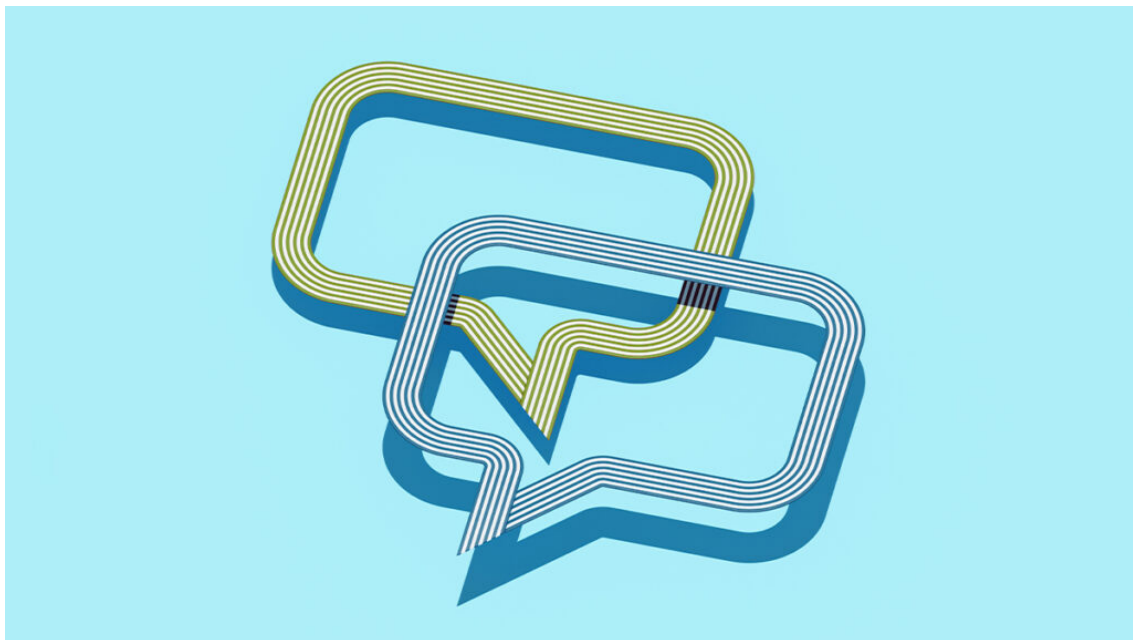**Harvard Business Review**

How to Make Your Organization's Language More Inclusive

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Summary.   Using exclusionary language isn't just about offending others; research has made its harmful effects clear. To create a truly inclusive culture, it's critical that you take a hard look at how people in all areas of your company are using language. The authors present four...   **more**

We've all become increasingly aware of the importance of language in creating inclusive and equitable work cultures. Words matter, and many bygone words and phrases seem antiquated

and even shocking today. Yet the modern-day professional vocabulary is still littered with exclusionary terms. To create a truly inclusive culture, it's critical that you take a hard look at how people in all areas of your company are using language.

Many groups are harmed by exclusionary language. For example, gender-biased terms that favor male involvement and symbolize male dominance are common in the workplace, despite the availability of gender-neutral alternatives. Consider that a board chair is typically identified as a chairman when "chair" would suffice, and that people often make unnecessary distinctions such as "lady boss" instead of just "manager" or "boss."

Our language can also exclude many other groups of workers. Until very recently, few would have raised an eyebrow if "blacklisted" was used to describe a rejection while "whitelisted" was used to describe approval. In a world where people are described as Black or white based on their skin tone, a consistent negative association with the word "black" can act as an unconscious signal that disadvantages Black colleagues. People with mental health challenges also face an uphill battle in addressing the negative connotations of misused descriptors like "mental," "crazy," "OCD," and "psycho" in casual conversation. And colleagues who aren't "digital natives" are left to battle assumptions that they're not tech-savvy and language that disparages their technological adaptability, such as "dino," "senior moment," and "silver surfer."

Using exclusionary language isn't just about offending others; research has made its harmful effects clear. For example, gender-loaded language reinforces inaccurate assumptions about the roles that men and women should occupy — and can successfully reach — in the workplace. One recent study revealed a clear connection between how using gendered language reinforces narratives around gender roles, and goes a step further to suggest that the choice to use these specific words could be unconsciously

driven by harmful stereotypes. And nonbinary colleagues struggle to be accepted in workplaces that haven't adopted pronouns and other vocabulary that affirms their identities.

Here are four ways you as leader can encourage the use of inclusive language in your company.

Review job postings to ensure language neutrality.

Job postings often contain non-neutral language that attracts certain types of applicants and repels others. For example, simply using the word "competitive" has been shown to deter more women than men from applying for a job, and gender-biased language may also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in STEM. Terms like "hacker" or "ninja" in job postings are not only hard for many people to identify with, they're also unnecessary because neutral and more widely understood alternatives ("programmer," "software engineer," "developer," etc.) are available. Further, language related to ageist stereotypes in job advertisements, such as "must be a digital native," has been linked to discriminatory practices.

Make sure your recruiters and hiring managers slow down and pay attention to the language they use when drafting job postings, with an eye toward removing non-neutral terms. To help with this review process, new artificial intelligence products are becoming available, and Google is already offering their everyday users help with gender-neutral language by suggesting alternatives to gendered terms.

Create a list of words that are forbidden in product development.

Language used in product branding ultimately funnels down to customers through its many touchpoints, from distribution to marketing to procurement. Global companies are in a privileged position of shaping society — in both positive and negative ways — through the language they use in product development. For example, consider 1992's Teen Talk Barbie doll, which was widely

criticized for its recorded message, "Math class is tough!", and how it was considered an early-life deterrent from young girls pursuing STEM.

To this end, maintain an evolving list of barred words for the product development cycle, including terms like "the elderly," "manhours," "bugger," or "crazy," with consideration also given to catchphrases (like "math class is tough!") that reinforce unhelpful stereotypes. Then, create checkpoints in the product cycle to regularly screen for those terms and phrases to catch them early. We're optimistic that, over time, these lists will ensure that exclusionary language has no place in major firms' product development.

Create a guide to inclusive language.

Adapting to the use of inclusive language offers us a chance to grow and become better communicators. It also helps leaders and employees become better allies. Pair internal company guidance that includes practical, accessible tips that can be put into immediate action (for example, an inclusive vocabulary reference guide) with straightforward tools, such as the "inclusive language" feature available in Microsoft Office, which suggests neutral alternatives to biased language used in professional communications. These guides and tools should be used in tandem with one another, be easily accessible to employees, and allow for input and co-creation across the organization.

Implementing such guidance and tools will have big benefits for leaders. First, it means that employees can enjoy the freedom of going about their workday in a culture that uses respectful language. This reduces cognitive load and lessens psychological strain, which is well known to improve performance. Second, given that non-inclusive language can repel marginalized populations from a company, investing in curating such a guide is an investment in attracting and retaining diverse talent.

Leverage the messenger effect.

Choose ambassadors who are highly visible in the company to support your inclusive language initiatives. These may be colleagues who are at the top of the organization or those who have ample soft power. Having a visible person take an action makes others much more likely to follow suit.

Have these ambassadors keep it simple and focus on small but powerful changes. For example, ask them to normalize the practice of meeting participants introducing themselves with their name, job title, and pronouns. Similarly, coach them on how to call out language misuse when they see it**.** Gentle correction, privately and in the moment, is a powerful way to give feedback. For example, try saying, "Hi John, I know you didn't mean anything by it, but I'd prefer if we said 'Well done, all' instead of 'Well done, guys.'"

As you craft your company's inclusive language plans, be aware that best practices are constantly changing. An approach that is inspired and informed by people across all levels of the organization can help you stay current with the latest language evolutions and preferences. It will also put you on the right foot to get ahead and lead in this important movement.

OH

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Why You Need to Stop Using These Words and Phrases

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