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Effective Communication in the Evolving Policy Landscape

Upholding Justice, Human Rights, Fairness, and Dignity



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FOREWORD FROM THE APA CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER

As the climate continues to shift, it becomes increasingly clear that we must explicitly acknowledge a fundamental truth: the evolution of language is not a trend; it is a necessity. Language has always been a living, adaptive force, shaped by the ever-changing realities of our society and our growth as a culture. Today's heightened attention to language reflects not a rupture, but a continuation of this natural progression. As our collective understanding of identity, equity, and justice deepens, so must the words we use to express and uphold those values.

This document is a reaffirmation of APA's enduring commitment to fostering inclusive, culturally responsive, and psychologically safe environments. As outlined in APA's Council Policy Statement on Reaffirming APA's Commitment to Justice, Human Rights, Fairness, and Dignity, psychologists are essential contributors to advancing fairness and inclusion across research, education, industry, clinical practice, and public policy. Their work helps identify and address systemic barriers, while also shaping environments that support equity and access. From reducing disparities to advocating for the rights and well-being of historically marginalized communities — including racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, women, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations — psychologists bring critical insight and leadership to the forefront of social progress. To do this effectively, we must be intentional in how we communicate: honoring individual and community experiences, promoting dignity, and minimizing harm, while staying grounded in APA's mission to advance equity and well-being for all.

This document is not intended to offer prescriptive language substitutions or a rigid checklist of what to say and what not to say. Rather, it is designed as a conceptual tool to help individuals and organizations critically engage with the role of language, particularly in moments when efforts to promote fairness, representation, and belonging are being questioned, distorted, or dismissed. It supports problem-solving approaches to navigate these challenges thoughtfully and confidently.

This is not about conceding — it's about progressing with intention. We are not clinging to outdated paradigms or defending language for its own sake. We are choosing to move forward, intentionally and with resolve, by building new pathways for communication that reflect the complexity of direct experiences and individual realities in a rapidly changing world.

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PURPOSE

This document was developed for the general public. Our purpose is to emphasize the importance of continuing to foster inclusive and culturally responsive environments in light of recent shifts in the sociopolitical climate. Language evolves and shifts rapidly. Therefore, it is important to remain mindful about the meaning of individual intentions behind words, with the goal of providing support, communicating effectively, and respecting the experiences of others. Harmful language has negative psychological consequences, whereas inclusive language promotes the health and well-being of all people. The importance of fostering inclusive and supportive environments is paramount.

INTRODUCTION (CONTEXT AND EVOLVING NATURE OF LANGUAGE)

Language plays an important role in fostering inclusive environments. Language is dynamic, reflecting societal and cultural shifts, which can quickly render terms outdated. Criticisms and challenges to initiatives focused on inclusiveness and diversity often arise from misunderstandings or resistance to the evolving nature of language. However, the core intention behind language remains constant: to communicate effectively and respectfully, treating all people with empathy and dignity.

Whether interacting with colleagues, clients, or peers, the objective should always be to communicate effectively while minimizing harm. Fostering inclusive and supportive environments through a human rights lens is essential to addressing historical injustices, systemic inequalities, and ongoing disparities. These efforts enhance organizational performance, innovation, and overall societal well-being.

This document provides a framework for promoting social justice and human rights through mindful and effective communication. The sections of the guide address the following:

1. The importance of justice, human rights, fairness, and dignity.
2. The general principles for inclusive communication.
3. Addressing criticisms of these efforts.
4. Using psychology to discuss complex issues with respect and empathy.

The Importance of Effective Communication in the Evolving Policy Landscape

The APA's [strategic plan](#) emphasizes the respect and promotion of human rights, equity, and nondiscrimination for all individuals. As a mission-driven, nonpartisan, non-profit organization dedicated to applying the best available psychological science to benefit society and improve lives, we firmly believe that embracing diversity in people, perspectives, and experiences is crucial to our success as well as the success of society more broadly.

Psychological science informs our task to center the inherent worth of people; develop our awareness of biases and prejudices and strive to mitigate and diminish their impact; ensure that opportunities afforded to some groups are available to all; and cultivate skills to engage and work effectively with all people, including those from diverse and under-represented social identity groups (APA, 2021b; Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Research from psychological science reveals that policies advocating for identity-agnostic approaches often lead to poorer outcomes in inter-group attitudes and behaviors—all essential for effectively harnessing talent and performance within organizations (Follmer et al., 2024). Policies that ignore the unique lived experiences and challenges faced by individuals from diverse backgrounds can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities and hinder the development of a truly inclusive workplace. By acknowledging and valuing diverse identities, employers can create environments where everyone feels psychologically safe, respected, and empowered to contribute their best work. This holistic approach allows individual merit to truly flourish.

Furthermore, extensive research indicates that disparities in environments result in significant adverse health effects, and these inequalities can become more pronounced during crises (Comello et al., 2024). Unequal environments, where certain groups face systemic barriers and discrimination, can lead to increased stress, poorer mental health, and reduced overall well-being. During times of crisis, such as economic downturns, public health emergencies, or natural disasters, these disparities can widen, exacerbating

the negative health impacts on marginalized communities. Addressing these inequities is not only a matter of social justice but it is also essential for promoting the health and well-being of all individuals.

The importance of these principles extends beyond individual well-being to the overall success of organizations. Teams composed of individuals with varied perspectives, experiences, and ideas can drive innovation and improve decision-making. By fostering an inclusive environment where all voices are heard and valued, organizations can better leverage the talents of their workforce and achieve higher levels of performance. Moreover, promoting justice, human rights, fairness, and dignity can enhance employee satisfaction and retention, as individuals are more likely to stay with organizations where they feel respected and supported (de Souza & White, 2024).

The APA's commitment to justice, human rights, fairness, and dignity is rooted in the belief that embracing all individuals and promoting equity is essential for improving lives and creating a better society. By recognizing and addressing biases, advocating for inclusive language and policies, and striving to create psychologically safe work environments, everyone can contribute to building a more just and equitable society.

SECTION 2

General Principles

In addition to carefully selecting specific terminology, it is helpful to keep general principles for inclusive communication at the forefront. Although terminology may change rapidly over time, the general principles endure.

1. Be mindful of individual experiences: Avoid using language that perpetuates stereotypes or generalizes about groups of people. Recognize and respect that everyone's identity is unique and shaped by their personal experiences. Foster psychologically safe environments where everyone feels free to express their views without fear (APA, 2024b).

- **Respect self-identification:** If you are uncertain about how a person identifies, it is recommended that you ask their preference to reduce bias in language.

- » In person-first language (e.g., "person with a disability") the person is emphasized, not the disability.

- » In identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person"), the disability becomes the focus by allowing the individual to claim the disability and choose their identity rather than permitting others to name it or to select terms with negative implications.

- » Both person-first and identity-first language are overall good choices; the best choice will depend on the individual and the community.

- **Avoid deficit-oriented language:** Proactively counter the deficit orientation that is often implicit in the language used to refer to people who may be different from you. Use language that does not discriminate against, demean, infantilize, or marginalize individuals.

2. Enhance recognition of implicit bias and attitude: Question and reflect on learned associations between qualities and social categories, including race, gender, and/or disability to avoid stereotypes or generalizations.

- **Cultural sensitivity:** Commit to demonstrating empathy and humility by actively listening to and learning about the experiences of marginalized groups and recognizing diverse cultural practices, terminologies, and global perspectives.

- **Avoid microaggressions:** Be mindful of comments or behaviors that occur at a person-to-person level that can be perceived as offensive, hostile, or discriminatory toward many groups throughout history.

3. Acknowledge intersectionality: Recognize that people have multiple, intersecting identities that affect their experiences and perspectives (Crenshaw, 1991). Language should account for and reflect this complexity.



SECTION 3

Addressing Criticisms

Recent political discourse has included many criticisms, implying that people from underrepresented groups received their status or opportunities due to their identities rather than merit. It is important to point out that even those who reject equity are, on the face of it, arguing for equal dignity, respect, and individual merit. Critics of equitable outcomes are not advocating for the logical opposites, which would be inequity, uniformity, and exclusion. Consider the following strategies to move the conversation in a productive rather than regressive direction.

- Highlight efforts to expand opportunities for all, including those from varied backgrounds, and increasing access to a broader and deeper pool of talent. Providing avenues for those who are most qualified but otherwise might not be able to access opportunities helps to ensure that those who are most meritorious are successful and recognized.
- Demonstrate how your efforts are working to promote inclusion by creating fair opportunities without disadvantaging any group. This helps to create systems where success is based on merit and capability rather than systemic advantage. Balancing the playing field for all benefits everyone by fostering a more just and productive environment. For example, mentorship programs do not remove opportunities from anyone but rather ensure that talent development is available to all and that all employees have the resources to thrive.
- Demonstrate that programs focused on appreciating differences and inclusivity build bridges and create environments where everyone feels valued and included for being their authentic self. Research shows that when people feel a sense of belonging, they are more engaged, productive, and collaborative (APA, 2023c; Downey et al., 2015).
- Organizations can counter the belief that inclusion efforts distract from productivity by actively integrating equity and inclusion into their core strategies. Engaging diverse perspectives in decision-making leads to better problem-solving, more innovation,

and stronger outcomes. Inclusive workplaces also foster higher employee engagement, which directly boosts productivity. Rather than being a diversion, inclusion is a strategic driver—fueling performance, resilience, and long-term success.



Using Psychology to Address Complex Issues with Respect and Empathy

At times, everyone can find it challenging to engage in meaningful discussions with those who hold differing views on topics surrounding sensitive societal issues. Instead of fostering connections, these conversations often result in interpersonal divisions or tension within organizations and communities. APA wants to make sure everyone is treated fairly in psychology research and publishing. To do this, they encourage researchers, writers, and editors to think in ways that include and respect all kinds of people. Psychology has much to offer to increase people's capacity for engaging in difficult conversations and approaching discussions with curiosity, respect, and empathy.

Drawing from the APA [Summary of the Civil Discourse Project](#) (APA, 2023a), the definitions that follow encompass values that can be used in discussions around complex issues and to support an inclusive mindset. That project defined civil discourse as dialogue on significant yet difficult topics that embodies values such as caring, compassion, kindness, humility, integrity, mutual respect, and the capacity to engage honestly with differing viewpoints.

CIVIL DISCOURSE VALUES

- **Benevolence:** Benevolence is manifest in compassion, kindness, and being helpful to others without expecting any personal gain.
- **Honest perspective-taking:** Honest perspective-taking is the ability to listen, consider, understand, and appreciate other peoples' opinions and values that are different from and sometimes opposed to your own.
- **Humility:** Humility is recognizing your limits, learning from others, and keeping an accurate (not over- or underestimated) sense of your accomplishments and worth. It involves acknowledging your imperfections, mistakes, or gaps in knowledge, without shaming or embarrassing yourself or others. There are multiple categories of humility: cultural (challenging your own biases about different cultures), intellectual (understanding what you can learn from others), moral (recognizing everyone makes mistakes), and personal (recognizing everyone is part of a group or community).
- **Integrity:** Integrity is being honest, being truthful, and acting in ways that are guided by one's personal values and ethical principles.
- **Mutual respect:** Mutual respect is manifested by reciprocity in demonstrating that everyone's contributions are valued (by offering considered feedback, both positive and constructive), by keeping your word, and by holding high expectations for yourself and others.

Conclusion

Language is constantly evolving, with new words and terms emerging to reflect societal changes and cultural shifts. To navigate this evolution thoughtfully, it is important to listen, learn, and adapt. When encountering emerging terms, approach them with curiosity rather than resistance. When using terms, provide clear definitions because clarity is essential for fostering meaningful change—without a shared understanding, efforts to promote inclusivity can be inconsistent and ineffective. Being conscientious in language does not mean policing every word but striving for respectful and informed communication. Ultimately, staying open to change allows people to foster more understanding and meaningful connections in an ever-evolving world.

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