

# Words Matter: Speaking up for Inclusion

[Words Matter: Guidelines on using inclusive language in the workplace](#) outlines a general framework for using inclusive language in the BC Public Service.

Inclusive language is free from words, phrases or tones reflecting prejudiced, stereotyped or discriminatory views of particular people or groups. Inclusive language does not deliberately or inadvertently exclude people from feeling accepted. The use of inclusive language plays an important role in promoting higher employee engagement, excellent customer service and increased productivity, which are all important aspects of a positive work culture.

Building and maintaining respectful workplaces is a shared responsibility in the BC Public Service. Paying attention to how language is used in the workplace is a key part of this responsibility.

Language is not always intended to exclude a person or a group, but it may unintentionally have that effect. Becoming conscious of how language impacts others can help prevent feelings of exclusion and discomfort in the workplace.

There are times to stop and listen, but there are other times we need to speak up and say something. Many of us have had a moment where someone says something that excluded another person, either deliberately or inadvertently, and our brain freezes and prevents us from speaking up. Having awareness and some phrases ready can help prepare us for having that conversation next time. The following sections offer some background and guidance on ways to speak up.

## We need to unlearn the habit of staying silent

### Let go of how you appear to others

We tend to remain silent because we don't want to risk losing the admiration of others or attract attention to ourselves. We don't want to seem disagreeable or argumentative because we want to maintain positive working relationships. We owe it to ourselves to speak the truth, to say what we need to say and not worry about how we appear to others.

### Speak up - keeping it in hurts

It's difficult to only to speak up for other people, but also for ourselves. If we're unsure or embarrassed, the last thing we want to do is talk about it, so we allow the words and sometimes, behaviours, to continue. When this happens, we internalize the words and

behaviour, and this can be harmful to us. Speaking up is not only the right thing to do it can also be a healthier choice.

### **Speak up when it will help others**

When we recognize inappropriate words or behaviour and don't speak up about it, we aren't doing our job as an employee, colleague or leader. Others may not be able to speak up for themselves, either because of power dynamics, being too upset, or lacking in self-confidence. That is, unless we speak up.

### **Speak up to enhance trust**

When we remain silent, we risk condoning the behaviour or implicating ourselves. If we fail to speak up, we may seem to be agreeing or allow the behaviour to continue. For example, remaining silent to fit in when someone tells an inappropriate joke or starts to gossip about another person, participation or condoning the behaviour is occurring by saying nothing. Speaking up can build stronger relationships.

### **Speak up to foster change**

When speaking up, we may experience discomfort, surprise and disagreement in the moment. Our goal is to encourage reflection and foster change one conversation at a time.

### **To get you started, here are some ways to interrupt the conversation:**

- Let's be careful of our words. We respect all people here.
- Help me understand your thinking.
- I don't want to put you on the spot, but that comment makes me feel uncomfortable.
- I don't know if you realize the impact of those words.
- How do you think [person] would feel if they heard you say that?
- Think about what you just said. If you really mean that we need to talk.
- What you just said is very serious.
- Can we talk in private? I was concerned with your statement earlier. It comes across as insensitive.

## **An activity to try: Identification**

Reflect on an instance of non-inclusive language, attitude or action that you've seen lately, perhaps at work or in a public setting. While you may not exactly have recognized it in the moment, naming it now will help you to identify and challenge this behaviour more often in the future.

## Responding if you are interrupted

It's normal to feel hurt, upset or embarrassed, and to scramble for a hasty explanation and apology when we've done something to offend someone. However, explanations can quickly become defensive, turning into a rationalization of our own actions and dismissing the other person's perspective. The key thing is not to take the criticism personally. If we interpret it as an attack on our character, we're going to stop listening. Instead, look at it as an opportunity to learn. In lieu of justifying our actions, try putting energy into understanding the other person's perspective. Say something like, "I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to offend you. Could you explain why what I said was wrong?" You're letting them know that you hear them and are open to changing your behaviour.

## Conversations as opportunities

We tend to overlook the small things in life. Conversations are opportunities for improving our individual and collective awareness. To consciously harness the power of words for your benefit, start with the ones you're using. Everyone is doing the best they can at any moment in time with the consciousness they have to work with, including you. Be kind and offer others the same empathy and compassion you'd extend to yourself. One positive and encouraging comment can be just enough to provide a sense of belonging, increase employee engagement, create a healthier workplace culture and a positive difference in an individual's life.

Adapted From:

[https://education.up.edu/files/2018\\_interruptions.pdf](https://education.up.edu/files/2018_interruptions.pdf)

[https://www.ocadsv.org/sites/default/files/resource\\_public/ocadsv\\_toolkit-for-interrupting-oppression\\_web.pdf](https://www.ocadsv.org/sites/default/files/resource_public/ocadsv_toolkit-for-interrupting-oppression_web.pdf)

<https://hbr.org/2020/07/youve-been-called-out-for-a-microaggression-what-do-you-do>