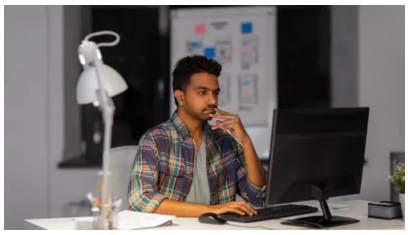
AWARENESS

Diversity Leaders: 6 Things NEVER to Say About Disabilities

Written by DiversityInc Staff on September 10, 2018

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"The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." —Mark Twain

As diversity leaders, we understand that disability is just another kind of difference, like culture, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. We recognize that diversity is a valuable source of insight and adaptability, generating better business ideas and high-quality service. Differing abilities are a part of that healthy diversity. It's our business to promote inclusiveness throughout our organizations and to advocate for policies and programs that support it.

In building an inclusive culture, we're on the front lines and need to be visibly living our organizations' values every day. It's important that we set the tone not only in what we do and say, but *how* we say it—in formal messaging as well as everyday conversation. This is where even diversity leaders can get stuck.

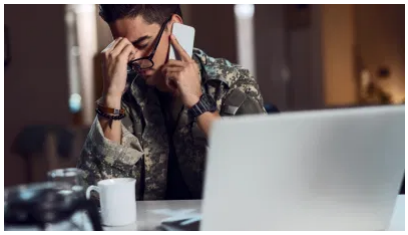
Sometimes inclusive language can seem a bit cumbersome, but with a few simple changes each of us can make a significant difference—helping to promote an inclusive culture while setting an example both inside and outside our organizations.

Here are six ways never to talk about disabilities:

1. Never say "a disabled person" or "the disabled." Say a person or people "with disabilities."

Put the person first. A disability is what someone has, not what someone is. For instance, "mentally ill" is less respectful than "person with mental-health issues." "Retarded" is never an appropriate term. Say "intellectual disabilities" or "cognitive disabilities."

2. Never use the term "handicapped parking." Use "accessible parking" instead.



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Handicapped parking is still in use (e.g., when referring to parking placards), though the word “handicapped” is offensive and has been virtually eliminated in most other contexts. Remove it from your organization’s vocabulary completely by using the term “accessible parking.” (It’s also more accurate, as accessible describes the parking and handicapped does not.)

3. Never use the term “impaired.” Use terms such as “low vision,” “hard of hearing” or “uses a wheelchair” instead.

Though it may be used in legal contexts, the word “impaired” can be offensive, as it implies damage. Many people with disabilities do not see themselves as damaged, but simply as different.

4. Never say “hidden” disabilities. Say “non-visible” or “non-apparent.”Many disabilities are not apparent, such as serious illnesses or chronic health conditions, sensory limitations, or mental-health and learning disabilities. When referring to these disabilities, avoid using hidden, as it has negative connotations, implying purposeful concealment or shame.

5. Whenever possible, don’t say “accommodations.” Say “adjustments” or “modifications.”This can be tricky, as accommodation has a specific legal meaning and must be used in certain contexts, like policy or government communications. However, accommodation suggests doing a favor for the person who has a disability. An accommodation is a workplace or work-process modification made to enable an employee to be more productive. It is necessary and not a preference or privilege. The terms adjustment and modification capture this idea without suggesting a favor or special treatment, so are preferable whenever specific legal terminology is not required.

6. Never use victim or hero language; describe situations in a straightforward way.

Don’t use language that portrays people with disabilities as victims, such as “suffers from,” “challenged by,” or “struggles with.” Say “someone who uses a wheelchair” or “wheelchair user,” not “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.” On the flip side, don’t use heroic language when people with disabilities complete everyday tasks and responsibilities. People with disabilities don’t see themselves as inspiring simply because they’re going about their daily lives. We all have challenges—working around those challenges is not heroic, it’s just human.

What Terminology Should I Use

It’s worth noting that even in the disability community (yes, that is how advocates for inclusion of people with disabilities refer to ourselves), different people are comfortable with different terminology. Some are fine with the descriptor “disabled,” which is in common use in the United Kingdom. Others may freely use “impaired.” However, as diversity leaders, it is our job to promote behaviors that make all people feel valued and included. Knowing that some people are offended by these terms, I feel

strongly that the most inclusive course is to avoid them and adopt a vocabulary that feels respectful to everyone.

As champions of diversity, we have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to set standards for how our people, organizations and society speak and think about people with disabilities. By shifting our language, we can help shift perceptions and promote the culture of inclusion that is the backbone of healthy diversity in all aspects of life.

— *Lori Golden,* EY, Abilities Strategy Leader

Golden leads EY's internal initiatives in the Americas to create an enabling environment and inclusive culture for people working with disabilities.