Toward Communication Free of Gender Bias

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In July 2019, Berkeley, California’s City Council announced their plan to remove all gendered language from their city code. Gender-specific pronouns like “he” and “she” will be replaced with “they” and “them.” Words like fireman will now be firefighter and “manpower” will be changed to “human effort.” Berkeley City Council member Rigel Robinson, who sponsored the bill, said “Language has power. This matters.”
Since gendered and sexist language was first addressed by early feminists, growing attention has been paid in the media, in schools and academia and in theology to the harmful and often unintentionally negative effects of biased, gendered and non-inclusive language.

More recently, newspapers, magazines and online communication have reexamined their editorial policies so that sexist and gendered language is much less prevalent. In many churches and synagogues, phrases like “God the Father” have become “God the Creator;” and in workplaces, terms like “flight attendant” and “firefighter” have replaced the problematic “stewardess” and “fireman.”

The issues still arise as people continue to address outdated and sexist language. Eliminating subtle and overt messages and replacing them with gender-neutral language can sometimes feel awkward and be confusing or inaccurate. The following guidelines can help in the transition toward a more inclusive and less gender-biased language.

1. Include all people in general references by using gender-neutral words and phrases.

One of the most subtle and potentially damaging forms of sexism is the omission of women in references that take in humanity at large. Instead of “mankind,” one can say “people” or “humankind.” Instead of “guys,” refer to a group of people with a gender neutral term like ”people” or “folks.”

2. Communicate to all reference points.

Phrasing that indicates a male-only perspective or that assumes heterosexual relationships and that people fit into traditional gender norms creates an exclusive environment where many people feel unwelcome and potentially unsafe. For example, instead of saying, “employees and their wives,” which implies that all workers are male and heterosexual, say “employees and their partners or spouses.” In general, using gender neutral terms will be more inclusive.
3. Use collective pronouns.
Whenever possible, reword sentences to eliminate unnecessary gender pronouns. Replace masculine pronouns by rephrasing sentences in the plural or using “one” or “you,” as appropriate. Instead of saying, “Everyone should bring his or her textbook to class,” make the sentence plural and use the word “their,” which is gender neutral: “People should bring their textbooks to class.”

If you are talking about or with people who are transgender or non-binary, ask what their pronouns are. Better yet, to demonstrate an inclusive environment and to model inclusive language, consider asking people to indicate their pronouns on their name tags or when being introduced. For example, an introduction might be: “Hi, My name is Beth and my pronouns are she and her.”

4. Refer to genders equally and make references consistent.
“Mr.” designates all adult males and implies no rank or marital status, whereas “Mrs.” and “Miss” classifies women according to marital status. Such a distinction leads to the implication that marital status determines one’s worth. Refer to women as “Ms.” unless they specify a different preferred title. Also, make sure that when titles are applied, you apply them equally to men and women as well as for same-sex couples: for example, not “Mr. Brown and Julia” but “Mr. Brown and Ms. Smith” or “Ms. Martin and Traci” but Ms. Martin and Ms. Johnson.”

5. Substitute neutral words for “man” and “woman” in job titles.
Words like “policeman,” “chairman,” “mailman,” and “handyman” reinforce assumptions that women and men are restricted to certain roles and professions. They inaccurately identify and present a false image of people and their jobs. Use terms like “police officer,” “chairperson or chair,” “mail carrier,” and “maintenance worker.” Also be aware of other words which preference male perspectives, such as “man the desk.” Substitute neutral terms such as “staff the desk” or “work the booth.”
6. **Use parallel language when referring to persons by sex.**
Females over the age of eighteen are women, not girls (unless the men are referred to as boys). Women should be called “ladies” only when men are called “gentlemen.” More general, non-gendered language is preferable, such as “people,” “folks,” “friends,” or “you all.” With children, address them generally as “children” or “youth/young people” rather than “boys” and “girls” so as not to reinforce the importance of their gender.

7. **Grant equal respect to both women and men.**
Do not trivialize either sex. Don’t describe men by mental aptitudes or professional position while describing women by physical attributes or social position. One example is: “John Simon is a competent executive, and his wife Ann is charming and beautiful.” You might say: “The Simons are an active and involved couple. John is a competent executive and Ann is an advocate for families in her community.”

Avoid sexual innuendos, jokes and puns. If a story can’t be told without these, it shouldn’t be pursued. These jokes often perpetuate gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes include depicting men as feminine or “sissies” when sensitive to feelings. “He cried like a woman” is not only inaccurate but offensive and perpetuates traditional gender norms. Similarly, avoid portraying women as typically weak, helpless or hysterical, or men as typically strong, brave or rational.

8. **Base communication on pertinent qualities, not on gender.**
Most of the time, a person’s gender is not relevant and does not need to be mentioned explicitly in the conversation. Avoid highlighting gender as a defining characteristic when describing a person’s achievements, goals and situation. This also is important because many people’s gender identity and expression do not fit into traditional gender norms. Including gendered language may intensify their discomfort.
9. Avoid labels that limit either sex.

Labels, like clichés, make communicating too simple -- the speaker doesn’t have to think, and neither does the listener. Employing phrases such as “just like a man” or “just like a woman” allows people to apply their own favorite stereotypes and prejudices.

Similarly, using labels which distinguish sex such as “lady manager” or “male nurse” perpetuate a myth that certain jobs or responsibilities are reserved for men and others for women. It singles out the person who deviates from the norm and reinforces traditional gender roles. Rather than relying on stereotypes like “she handled the forklift as well as a man” or “he takes care of his children as well as any woman could,” look beyond words or ideas that label and limit. Look to words without constricting labels and narrow limits, ones which foster achievement for every person.