6 tips for communicating with care

Our words and actions can unintentionally hurt, mock or alienate another person. Words sometimes mean different things to different people in different regions or contexts. Language changes with time. And individuals within groups sometimes use different words to describe or reference themselves. And, yes, it tends to be difficult to identify or admit our own biases, especially the ones we carry subconsciously. But everyone has them.

Understanding this, it’s important to be aware of the weight our words and actions carry, even subtly or inadvertently, so we can genuinely show one another respect. Try these tips to help you communicate with care.

1. **Put the person first.** Choose words with sensitivity, ensuring that the individuality and humanity of people are respected. Keep in mind, a person’s skin color, age, disability, mental health condition, etc., does not define them. So, for example, don’t say she’s bipolar or she’s poor, rather say “she is living with bipolar disorder” or “she is living in poverty”. Also, avoid using words to describe people that are generally used to describe “things.” For example, a person is not “mixed,” but rather biracial or multiracial.

2. **Share only relevant characteristics.** Remove details such as a person’s race, religion or sexual orientation that are not important to the context of what you’re sharing. For example, if you got a deal on a new TV, does it matter if the salesperson was white, Black or Asian? Does the person’s age matter? Probably not. So, why mention it if you got terrible service?

3. **Avoid language that attaches judgment or shame, or forces others to make assumptions.** For example, when referencing a neighborhood, describing it as a “ghetto” implies its residents lack the standards of manners and ethics. Instead, cite the neighborhood, district or area, and — if necessary or relevant — describe its conditions. Remember, precision is preferred, because people have a different understanding of a concept, based on their own point of reference and experience.

4. **Follow the person’s preference.** If you don’t know or are unsure, ask. For example, people from or whose
ancestors were from a Spanish-speaking land or culture might prefer Hispanic, Latino, Latina or Latinx. However, people from Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands generally self-reference by their specific origin, such as Cuban, Puerto Rican or Mexican American.

5. **Beware of your microaggressions.** These are everyday verbal, nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that demean people by suggesting they don’t belong. For example, complimenting an immigrant that they are speaking the native country’s language well can send the message to the co-worker that he is not truly welcome.

6. **Know and face your own biases.** Have you examined your biases? We all have them. Our brains create categories to make sense of the world. But the values we place on different categories are learned. Discrimination often stems from fear and misunderstanding. What are you afraid of? For example, ask yourself if you:
   - See things as simpler if you know less about them
   - Prefer those most like you
   - Favor information that supports your opinions and existing beliefs
   - Hold and/or act on assumptions based only on appearances and first impressions
   - Gravitate toward things and ideas you already know you like and are interested in

If you answered yes, educate yourself. Read books and articles, watch shows and ask questions to learn about the unique perspectives of others.
Help your child be more inclusive

It’s natural for children to form cliques with like-minded peers, even if it’s unintentional. Oftentimes, this behavior results in excluding children who have different backgrounds and beliefs and who look, sound and act different than they do.

Being inclusive at a young age will help your child better understand their peers and lead to positive relationships as they get older. As parents, there’s a lot you can do to help them. Here are six tips to get started.

1. **Consider your own influence.** Children follow their parents’ lead more than we realize. Striving for an inclusive mindset in your life will help teach your child to do the same. Consider getting to know your neighbors and becoming involved in community efforts that include people from different backgrounds.

2. **Support individuality.** Celebrating differences helps your child see themselves and other people as equal. By telling your child that a person’s appearance, personality, beliefs and interests are what make them unique, you help them recognize that no person deserves to feel rejected for being who they are.

3. **Teach compassion.** While your child won’t be friends with everyone, being friendly goes a long way. Encourage your child to talk to classmates who are new or oftentimes alone. Including them will help them feel more empowered to make more friends, and it will help your child understand the importance of community from a young age.

4. **Help your child expand their social circle.** Taking compassion a step further, your child may feel a connection with the other child. You can help them cultivate a relationship by encouraging playdates, homework sessions and inviting them to events like birthday parties. This will help them get to know each other outside of school and support a lasting friendship.

5. **Break down language barriers.** If a child has a language barrier, encourage your child to use an online translation tool or pocket language guide to help with basic conversation. Your child may also want to learn sign language to communicate with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

6. **Read inclusive and diverse children’s books together.** There are many great children’s books available now that focus on diversity and inclusion. Reading them together will educate your child and help you answer any questions they may have. Ask your local librarian or bookseller for recommendations.
Create a diverse, inclusive community

When most people hear the word “diversity,” they think of gender or racial differences. But diversity is much deeper; it touches the very fabric of our lives in today’s society, from our friends to our belief systems. Wherever there are people living and working together, there is diversity: our neighborhoods, schools, stores and places of worship are all different.

Examples of these characteristics include:

- Race
- Gender
- Age
- Sexual orientation
- Physical status
- Ethnic background
- Religious background
- Socioeconomic status
- Marital status
- Pregnancy

Diversity, then, refers to a combination of these characteristics. Each characteristic and experience make a person unique. “Diversity awareness” occurs when we see all these unique characteristics and realize that people are more valuable because of their differences. The collective experiences of all people expand a society’s base of knowledge and provide a framework for community.

Inclusion refers to actions we can take in our professional and everyday lives to embrace diversity and promote a positive community. Here are some strategies to get started.

**Communicate mindfully**

As the saying goes, communication is key. Keeping dialog open, honest and respectful will help ensure a positive outcome and avoid misunderstandings. Get started with these tips:

- Listen first, and don’t interrupt. By focusing on them, you’re showing that you value their knowledge, opinions and experiences.
- Avoid language that’s assertive in nature. Instead, focus on your opinions, experiences and research. Allow room for responses and questions — and don’t lecture.
- Be open to other people’s opinions and experiences. You don’t have to agree, but it’s important to understand where they’re coming from and respect their voice.

**Call out stereotypes**

First impressions often come with stereotypes, which can affect how we interact with others. When meeting someone, be aware of your reactions and inner voice. By recognizing our unconscious biases, we can call them out and do better.
Likewise, it’s just as important to help other people recognize their biases and prejudices. Try using your own biases as examples when educating others so they know you’re coming from a good place and can grow together.

Avoid making assumptions

We often assume that the people we talk to have the same experiences and opinions. Assumptions can result in discomfort or anger. One helpful approach is to not assume a person’s health status based on their appearance. They may have a disability or specific condition. Also, if a person is disabled, don’t assume their capabilities.

Ask the right questions

Asking questions not only shows interest, but it also helps build awareness and understanding. Make sure the person you have questions for feels comfortable answering them, and respect their boundaries. Also, listen carefully to their responses, and don’t interrupt them.

Understand your privilege

Privilege can be an uncomfortable subject, but it’s important to understand yours when building relationships and being inclusive. There are several forms of privilege, such as race, gender, sexual orientation and education. By understanding how your privilege affects not only you but those less privileged, you can build a better understanding of how to work together.

Educate yourself

There’s no shortage of information on diversity and inclusion, including articles, essays and documentaries. You can also follow social media accounts of advocates and educators. Taking the time to educate yourself will help you become a better ally and learn how to better help and support marginalized communities.

Continue to learn and grow

Inclusion doesn’t stop with education and mindfulness. Reflect on where you are and what you can do to broaden your education and impact. Once you feel secure in your knowledge, look to spreading that message to people in your circle and outside of it. By making inclusion a constant priority, you can help strengthen your community and promote real change.