



Cultural



Words At Work

Building **cultural** inclusion through
The power of #WordsAtWork

aurecon



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How to use this guide

People tend to use non-inclusive language unwittingly, often not aware that it can alienate and exclude. This Guide therefore provides a starting point for learning about **culturally-inclusive** language and communication.

We have tried to avoid creating lists of 'good' and 'bad' language – instead, we explain why and how some language can include or exclude, and provide guiding principles and some examples.

The information provided is not meant to cover all situations. For more information DCA recommends contacting organisations who make up and represent Australians from various cultural backgrounds and faiths (such as the African Professionals of Australia, Asian Australian Lawyers Association, Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia etc.)

Inclusive language enables everyone in your organisation to feel valued and respected and able to contribute their talents to drive organisational performance.

Why **culturally-inclusive** language matters

Language is a powerful tool for building inclusion (or exclusion) at work. The way we speak to each other creates a culture in which everyone – people from all cultural backgrounds – can feel valued, respected, and one of the team (included), rather than under-valued, disrespected, and out of place (excluded).

Biases, both conscious and unconscious, are often expressed through language. By thinking about our language, we can dismantle some of the unconscious biases we hold and the prejudices behind them.

Research shows that when organisations include all employees and customers they have a lot to gain, including improved performance, productivity, profit, creativity and innovation, access to diverse markets and opportunities, as well as enhancing brand reputation, and employee engagement, commitment, and wellbeing.¹

Make people visible

Language can make groups of people invisible.

CULTURALLY DIVISIVE OR AWARE?

Terms like *ethnic*, *NESB* & *new Australian* can suggest an 'us & them' mentality. If cultural distinctions are important, try to use specific descriptors such as *Australian-born Chinese*, *Arabic-speaking Australian*, *Jewish Australians* or phrases that refer to a person or group's background or origin e.g. *Australian of Sri Lankan background*

Using generic terms can ignore a large number of very different ethnicities – for example:

- Use of the term 'Asian' overlooks many cultural distinctions within Asian nations and cultures. Generally, it is preferable to refer to particular countries or groups – for example, Thai, Indonesian, or Chinese-Malaysian.
- Similarly calling a person 'African' is almost meaningless as it overlooks the differences between 54 different countries and their diverse languages and cultures.

Be as specific about someone's cultural background as possible. For example, "*Andrew is from a Chinese-Korean background*" or "*Jacqui identifies as Lebanese-Australian.*"

Collecting data? Often, information on a person's cultural background is unnecessary, but if required the best option is to be inclusive and to let people describe their own cultural identity. Ask how they identify in relation to culture, ethnicity and faith. This avoids making assumptions about a person's cultural background based on where they or their family members were born, or their physical appearance, name, or accent.

But not too visible...

As a general rule, if someone's cultural background or faith (or other characteristics such as sexual orientation or gender) is not relevant, then don't mention it.

If it is relevant, then discuss it respectfully.

Including unnecessary references to someone's cultural background creates the idea that the person referred to is somehow an oddity and can reinforce notions that they are a 'special case'. For example, referring to someone as a 'Chinese-Australian business leader', 'Muslim doctor' or 'Indian journalist' can incorrectly suggest that these people are exceptions.

Avoid referring to someone in relation to their immigration status or history unless it is specifically relevant e.g. referring to someone as a 'new arrival', an 'immigrant' or 'refugee' is usually unnecessary.

Even intended compliments such as, "*I love your foreign accent – it's so exotic!*" or "*You speak very good English for a foreigner*" can make the recipient feeling as though they are an 'outsider' and not truly 'Australian'.

Where Are You From...?

The question “*Where are you from?*” is often innocently asked in an effort to show genuine interest in someone.

However, if you ask the question after having just met the person and because you assume their physical appearance, accent, or name suggest they are ‘foreign’, this can lead to the person feeling different to and set apart from other Australians.

Remember, someone’s appearance, accent or name is not a reliable guide to their being ‘Australian’ or not. To learn about the power of this simple question, try viewing Ken Tanaka and David Neptune’s YouTube clip

[What kind of Asian are you?](#)



What’s in a Name?

Sometimes names from other cultures are difficult to pronounce for those who are not familiar with them. Apologise if you get names wrong, and work hard to learn how to pronounce names correctly.

Taking the time to learn names demonstrates respect. Sometimes people who are used to others mispronouncing their name will settle for ‘good enough.’ But stress that you don’t want ‘good enough’ – you want to call people by the name they want to be called!

Avoid the use of ‘Christian name’ – ask about ‘first names’ and ‘last name’ or ‘family name’. But remember that in some cultures, a person’s family name is written before their first name. If you are unsure, just ask.

Stop Stereotypes

Inclusion happens when people feel that their whole self is understood, respected, and included at work, and they are not just seen as a one dimensional stereotype.

A stereotype is a generalised image of a person or a particular group. We can all fall victim to stereotyping that over-simplifies us as people – caricatures like larrikin Australians, ‘whinging Poms’, Germans with no sense of humour, thrifty Scots, Indian taxi drivers, and more.

Cultural stereotyping is extremely common and in the workplace can lead to inaccurate ideas that people from particular cultural backgrounds are not capable of taking on certain roles (e.g. people with Asian cultural backgrounds are not natural leaders).



Your English is so good!

While stereotypes may seem relatively harmless or even be attempted compliments (e.g. *"Your English is so good!"*), they can still offend, patronise and over-simplify real life.

Even seemingly 'positive' stereotypes fail to recognise individual differences among members of an entire community or group.

Lay off offensive labels

Being inclusive means using terms that people feel comfortable with.

Remember that context is everything, and sometimes people use terms about themselves or their friends, that are not appropriate for others to use.

For example, some people from South West European cultural backgrounds have reclaimed the term 'wog' which is historically a racial slur, but it is still not a term which is appropriate to use about others in a work context. If in doubt, ask what terms someone would prefer, and then respect their preferences.

Keep calm and respond

Sometimes our unconscious biases mean we can say things that exclude others – even when we do not intend to. If you are called out for not being inclusive, here are some useful ways to respond, especially if you *'didn't mean it like that!'*

- ✓ Getting called out doesn't mean you need to defend yourself – trivialising someone else's feelings (e.g. *"You're over-reacting!"*) doesn't help build inclusion
- ✓ Instead of trying to defend or excuse your actions (e.g. *"I was only joking"*) try focusing on understanding the other person's perspective
- ✓ Say something like, *"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to offend you."* If you are confused about their reaction ask, *"Could you explain why what I said was wrong?"*



The courage to call it

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It can be challenging to confront non-inclusive language, especially when it's coming from powerful or influential people in your organisation. But doing so can increase our confidence and promote inclusion at work for all.

- ✓ **Focus on the behaviour and avoid labelling, name-calling, or the use of loaded terms (e.g. calling someone a racist)**
- ✓ **Try appealing to their better instincts (e.g. *"It doesn't seem like you to say something like that"*)**
- ✓ **Make your views clear and set limits (e.g. *"Perhaps you haven't thought about it before but telling racist jokes can offend people – please don't tell these sorts of jokes around me anymore."*)**
- ✓ **Keep it simple (e.g. *"Do you really think that?"*, *"No, I don't think about it that way"*, *"I don't find that funny"*, *"That comment sounds like a put down of people from Ireland – is that what you meant?"*)**
- ✓ **Try saying something when you are with the person one-on-one (e.g. *"Can we please have a quick chat about the comment you made earlier? It might not have been a big deal to you but..."*)**
- ✓ **Consider the indirect approach (e.g. *"Wow!"* *"Hey, let's keep it professional, ok?"*, *"Now that the biased part of the conversation is over, can we move on?"*)**

Sources

The following sources of information were drawn on to develop this Guide:

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VicHealth, *Bystander Action Toolkit Section 4*, 2014. Available [here](#).

Endnotes

¹ See DCA's *Building Inclusion: An Evidence-Based Model of Inclusive Leadership* full report for a review of this research.



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