



LGBTI+

#

Words At Work

Building inclusion for **LGBTI+**
people through the power
of language

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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 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 LGBTI+ Australians (such as the National LGBTI Health Alliance, Pride in Diversity or other local organisations).

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

Why LGBTI+ 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 people of all ages 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 in terms of performance, productivity, and profit, creativity and innovation, access to diverse markets and opportunities, brand reputation, and employee engagement, commitment, and wellbeing.¹

WORDS TO CHOOSE

Lesbian: A woman sexually attracted to other women

Gay: A man sexually attracted to other men

Bisexual: Someone who may be sexually attracted to men or women

Transgender: Someone whose gender identity is different to their assigned sex at birth

Intersex: Someone who has genetic, hormonal or physical characteristics which are not exclusively 'male' or 'female'

The '+' recognises that LGBTI doesn't include a range of other terms that people identify with – including terms like trans, gender diverse, and queer.

Make people visible

Language can make groups of people invisible. Respectfully talking about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) or who identify with other sexual orientations or gender identities can go a long way to making everyone feel part of the team.

Here are some simple ways to be more inclusive of LGBTI+ people and their families:

- Always using the terms 'husband' and 'wife' can reinforce the idea that people are always in heterosexual relationships (e.g. asking a male employee "*So what does your wife do?*") The words 'partner' or 'spouse' can be used to include everyone
- In the same way, always referring to 'mum and dad' can make many families feel excluded – both families headed by same-sex couples and single parent families. Instead, try referring to 'parents' or 'mum or dad'
- People can also become invisible when universal identifiers are used – for example always using 'he' or 'him' or 'she' and 'her'. For example, "*Ask your partner if she wants to come to our company dinner*". Instead, you could say "*Ask your partner if they would like to come to the company dinner*".

Collecting data on gender? The best option is to be inclusive. Often, gender information is unnecessary, but if required, ask about 'gender identity' rather than 'sex' or 'gender'. As well as 'male' and 'female,' people should be given the option to select 'other' and the ability to specify their preferred alternative. Further information on the collection of gender data is available through the *Australian Government Guidelines on the Recognition of Sex and Gender*.

Collecting data on sexual orientation? Think about why you need to ask. There are a huge number of alternative terms that people may identify with in terms of their gender and sexual orientation, so if you need to ask, the best idea is to offer the most common identities (straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) but also allow individuals to specify their own alternative term.

But not too visible...

As a general rule, if someone's gender identity or sexual orientation is not relevant – and it is unlikely to be relevant in most work situations – then don't mention it.

If it is relevant, then discuss it respectfully.

Including reference to someone's gender unnecessarily can create the idea that the person referred to is somehow an oddity and reinforce notions that they are a 'special case'.

For example, "*well-known commentator, author and activist*" is preferable to describing someone as "*transgender commentator and author*."

And remember, just because someone has identified as LGBTI+ doesn't mean you can ask them inappropriate questions.

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Gay policeman	Police officer
Transgender actor	Actor
Lesbian doctor	Doctor
Same sex couple	Couple
Other dad	Dad



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.

Stereotyping of people on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity is extremely common – for example:

- Making assumptions about individual character traits (e.g. lesbians are all sporty and butch; gay men all love musical theatre)
- People will be naturally attracted to particular jobs (e.g. gay men are all hairdressers or actors; lesbians are prison officers or drive trucks)

- People should avoid certain jobs (e.g. transgender people should not work in customer service roles)
- Gay men can't work in very masculine work environments like construction or defence.

While stereotypes may seem relatively harmless, they 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.

Try not to trivialise

Language that trivialises others and their experiences suggests that the other person is inferior (e.g. *"but you're not really married"*; *"it's just a phase you're going through"*; *"you can't be a real woman unless you've had a sex-change"*; *"but which one of you is really the mother?"*)

Trivialisation is patronising and reinforces differences in power between the 'in-group' and the 'out-group'.

"you can't be a real woman unless you've had a sex-change"

"it's just a phase you're going through"

"but which one of you is really the mother?"

Lay off offensive labels

Being inclusive means using terms that people feel comfortable with.

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

If in doubt, ask what terms someone would prefer and respect their preferences around terms, pronouns and preferred names.

AVOID

*Fag, dyke, homo, poof, queers
trannie, she-male, cross-dresser*

hermaphrodite

"What a waste she's a lesbian"

"All he needs is to find the right woman"

"Bisexuals just can't make up their minds"

"He's not a real woman"

"They're not really married"

"That's so gay!"

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 homophobe)
- ✓ 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 homophobic 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 lesbians – 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:

National LGBTI Health Alliance, *Inclusive Language Guide: Respecting People of Intersex, Trans and Gender Diversity Experience*. Available [here](#).

Queensland University of Technology, *Working with Diversity: A Guide to Inclusive Language and Presentation for Staff and Students*. Available [here](#).

Tasmanian Department of Education, *Guidelines for Inclusive Language*. Available [here](#).

Southern Poverty Law Center, 'Responding to Everyday Bigotry,' January 25, 2015. Available [here](#).

Stop Sexist Remarks: Creating Change One Conversation at a Time, 'Studies of the Impact of Sexist Remarks.' Available [here](#).

University of Melbourne, *Watch Your Language: Guidelines for Non-Discriminatory Language*, 2005. Available [here](#).

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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