

# Chapter One

## *The Language of Inclusion*

*“Communication provides the legs for bias,  
carrying it from person to person,  
from generation to generation.*

*Eventually, however, communication  
will be the way to end discrimination.”*

– John N. Bailey, Past President,  
International Association of Business Communicators  
*Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communication*

Have you ever heard others make biased, stereotypical, or unfair statements? Chances are the answer is “yes.” If you’ve ever been the target of such statements, you know they sometimes cut deep. They can derail effective communication and relationship building.

We hear others being biased and unfair, yet most of us think we ourselves present information and lead discussions in ways that include everyone and avoid bias, stereotyping, and discounting. But far too often we unintentionally communicate bias and exclusion through words and actions. This adds unnecessary static to the message and makes it harder for listeners to receive the intended meaning.

To get you thinking about your own communication, complete the self-assessment that follows. Concentrate on your written communication at work. Ask yourself...

### Self-Assessment

	Yes	No
Do I check my spelling on written communication?		
Do I have tools to help me do so, such as a dictionary, computer spell check, or friends who are great spellers?		
Do I ever reference a thesaurus to get just the right word?		
Do I keep a thesaurus close by or know where to find one?		
Do I proof my work to look for typos or incorrect grammar?		
Do I ever ask someone else to double check for typos or mistakes?		
Do I ever get irritated at others who send out memos / info with typos or errors?		
Do I have a “red pen” in my mind (or hand) with which I circle the typos?		
Do I complete a “bias check” on my communication?		
Do I have tools to help me check for stereotypes, discounting, and bias?		

Ninety percent of individuals who have taken this informal assessment in business settings have responded “yes” to each question until reaching “*Do I complete a ‘bias check’ on my communication?*” Fewer than ten percent of individuals communicating in the workplace consciously check their written communication for bias, stereotypes, and discounting.

I would suggest that it is equally as important – if not more important – to complete a bias check as it is to look for typos or missing commas or misspelled words. While grammatical errors will distract some readers and may be interpreted as a sign of carelessness, the effects of bias, exclusion, and discounting reach much further. They can distract, hurt, insult, anger or turn off the recipient, and damage your chances of communicating effectively.

This chapter will demonstrate “The Language of Inclusion” – how you can communicate in ways that include and involve everyone and avoid stereotyping, bias, and discounting. You will find tips, guidelines, and resources to help you get your written or verbal message across – effectively and with respect – in a diverse world.

### **“You Know How They Are” – Stereotypes**

We’re all familiar with stereotypes – they are simplified, fixed beliefs about a group of people. Most of us can quickly call to mind stereotypes about lots of groups. Think for a moment about the stereotypes you have heard expressed about older people, teenagers, Jews, Muslims, Christians, women, black men, white men, blondes (blonde women that is), overweight people, welfare recipients, rich people, lawyers, politicians, New Yorkers, or vegetarians. There’s no doubt stereotypes exist in our society.

## The Effects of Stereotyping

Many of the negative stereotypes are brutal. What may surprise you is that even so-called positive stereotypes can have a negative impact.

Consider these...

*“Asians are good in math.”*

*“African Americans are good at sports.”*

*“Men are good leaders.”*

*“Women are good nurturers.”*

Stereotyping affects both the person who holds the stereotype and the person being stereotyped. By seeing all people in a group as the same, you deny people their individuality. If you apply fixed beliefs about a group to an individual, you distort your ability to get a clear view of that person. This may lead you to prejudge or misjudge others.

If you have ever been stereotyped, you know it is often demeaning and offensive. If others treat you as less valuable or limit your opportunities based on negative preconceptions about “your group,” it can have serious consequences on your life.

This is true even with the positive stereotypes. Imagine being the Asian-American student who loves marketing, yet the guidance counselor steers you to accounting, based on the counselor’s beliefs that Asians are good in math.

### **Scenario: Unintended Consequences**

Eight weeks after the birth of her baby, Mary returned to work. On her first day back in the office, she attended the division staff meeting. As the meeting convened, one of Mary's managers, Pat, called out:

*"Wait, Wait! Before we get started, I'd like to welcome Mary back. Mary, congratulations on your new baby! We missed you and we're so happy to have you back...particularly since most women don't come back to work after having children."*

People shifted in their seats. They looked at Mary, Pat, and at one another. Some looked down. No one spoke up. The general manager started the meeting: *"Welcome everyone. Here is our agenda for today..."*

Later, as people were leaving, you could hear their conversations in the hallway:

*"Can you believe what Pat said?"*

*"I bet Mary was embarrassed."*

*"I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say."*

*"So, is that how they feel around this place?"*

*"What about me? I have three children, and I'm here."*

This real-life situation shows how easily stereotypes can slip into conversation and how they undermine communication and relationships. Pat's intended message of warmth and welcome was lost – overshadowed by the stereotypical statement that followed. Everyone present was negatively affected, including Pat. Pat's statement stayed in people's minds throughout the meeting and for weeks after.

## How to Recognize Stereotypes

In our society stereotyping is prevalent. The key is this – become cognizant of stereotypes when they occur so you can make conscious choices about how to address them.

Some stereotypes are blatant, such as “*They all look the same*” or “*They are all \_\_\_\_\_.*” Most stereotypes surface in more subtle ways. They may be mixed in with other information and passed off as facts. They may be “just a joke.” Regardless of the packaging, stereotypes are all based on the same thought process that clumps individuals together as members of a group, with no acknowledgement of individual differences.

Stereotypes typically have three characteristics:

- 1) They imply that *all* people in the group are the same.

*“You know how men are.”*

- 2) They contain a *judgment*. Notice that the judgment often reveals more about the stereotyper’s beliefs or expectations than it does about the stereotyped individual.

*“Young people today don’t have a good work ethic.”*

This reflects the mindset of the stereotyper – everyone should structure work the same way he or she does. It does not acknowledge that many younger people work very hard, or that there are different ways to accomplish meaningful work.

- 3) Stereotypes are fairly *inflexible*. When we encounter someone who does not fit our stereotype, it’s easier to consider that person the “exception to the rule,” rather than question the validity of the stereotype.

I met an engineer at a large national conference who was a good-looking, dark-skinned man from the Caribbean. In the few minutes that we sat together, two people who were introduced commented: “*You don’t look like an engineer.*”

Even if you personally try to avoid using them, you may still occasionally slip into stereotypes. And you *will* encounter them in the workplace and in society. In order to deal with stereotypes, you must first be able to recognize them when they occur.

Following is a tool that makes recognizing the subtle and not-so-subtle stereotypes easier. The left column identifies common ways stereotypes are packaged. On the right are examples of each type of stereotype. As you scan the list, notice if you have ever heard similar kinds of stereotypes about various groups.

## EIGHT COMMON WAYS STEREOTYPES SURFACE AND ARE PERPETUATED

- |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Jokes                                                                                                          | <i>"Do you know what happens when you get three _____ together?"</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 2) Name-Calling/Labels                                                                                            | <i>"Blue Hair" • "Computer Geek" • "Trailer Trash"</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 3) Oversimplified Statements Applied to ALL People in a Group                                                     | <i>"Young workers today _____."<br/>• "Immigrants don't want to learn English."<br/>• "Latinos are _____." • "You know how Southerners are."</i>                                                                                                                                                     |
| 4) Stereotypical Descriptors                                                                                      | <i>"Crotchety old man" • "Women are very emotional." • "Typical white male"</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 5) Personal Assumptions About Individuals (based on stereotypes held about a group the individual is a member of) | Assuming a woman's career is secondary to family. Therefore, not offering a career opportunity to a woman that would require her to relocate her family. • Assuming front-line employees don't have the skill sets for a special assignment, and therefore not considering any front-line employees. |

6) Spokesperson Syndrome

Viewing one individual as the spokesperson for an entire group. *"Marta, what is the best way to deal with the Hispanic market?"* • *"Glenn, what do black people think about this?"* Identifying an individual from a minority group as a "community leader" if he or she speaks up on an issue (i.e., in the media).

7) Descriptors That Evoke Stereotypes Because They Are the Opposite or a Contradiction to an Existing Stereotype

*"We're looking for qualified minority candidates."* • *"A sensitive man"*

8) "Statistical" Stereotyping

*"Statistics show that most criminals are \_\_\_\_\_."* Then treating an individual based on the "statistic."  
Note: The statistic could be real or perceived.

.....  
**Note:** Stereotypes are so powerful that often we hold on to them even when evidence disproves the stereotype.

.....  
*"You don't look like a(n) \_\_\_\_\_."* •  
*"You're not like most \_\_\_\_\_."* •  
*"She's really articulate for a(n) \_\_\_\_\_."*

**Your Choice: Moving Past Stereotypes**

Moving past stereotypes requires a conscious choice to treat people as individuals rather than as members of a set – to interrupt stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. In a society where stereotypes abound, this takes vigilance to identify and energy to address.

## Guidelines for Stereotype-Free Communication

Here are some guidelines for eliminating stereotypes from your communication.

**Individualize:** Treat people as individuals rather than as members of a set.

**Avoid Stereotypical Jokes and Humor:** They are often demeaning and embarrassing to listeners.

**Use Accurate Descriptions:** Replace descriptors, clichés, and labels that rely on stereotypes with specific, accurate, and relevant words. “*She reminds you when work is overdue*” is more specific and less stereotypical than “*She’s a nag.*”

**Depict People Non-Stereotypically in Visuals:** When using graphics or visuals, ensure that the images do not reinforce stereotypes. For example, use photographs depicting role models that include people of different ages, ethnicities, physical abilities, body sizes, and genders.

**Check for Assumptions:** Many assumptions about individuals are based on stereotypes held about a group the individual is part of. Interrupt, question, and examine all assumptions. Instead of assuming that Sondra doesn’t want a job that requires longer hours because of her medical condition, ask her: “*Sondra, here are the requirements of the job... Are you interested?*”

**Solicit Multiple Opinions:** If you are seeking information about a group of people, seek input from multiple sources. Avoid expecting one person to be a “spokesperson” for all members of a group simply because she or he is a member of the group. You could say: “*Marta, Mario, Adriana, what are your opinions of this product? What about you, Carlos?*”

When you are talking with Marta, Mario, Adriana, Carlos, and others, you could also ask questions such as “*How do you think others would feel about this product?*”

Or, more specifically, “I’m trying to better understand how this product might be received in the Hispanic community. What is your perception of how other Latinos might feel about this product?”

**Learn the Hot Spots:** Be sensitive to common negative stereotypes about groups. This will help you understand strong reactions to a seemingly positive description. For instance, a person described as “*poor but hard-working*” may feel the sting of the unspoken stereotype that people are poor because they are lazy. How do you find out what the hot spots are? Listen! Observe! Ask! Friends or coworkers will likely tell you what stereotypes bother them, if you ask.

**Interrupt Stereotypes:** When stereotypes surface in your own or others’ decisions, words, and actions, question them rather than repeat or act on them. How do you interrupt stereotypes? You will find effective and respectful techniques in Chapter Three.

### **Inclusive Language – Who Is Included? Excluded?**

When you are trying to get your message across to a broad audience, you need to use language that includes and demonstrates respect for *everyone*. The words you choose send messages about who is included, and who is not. An obvious example is gender language. Gender-inclusive language seeks to eliminate stereotyping, to promote equitable treatment for men and women, and to include, rather than exclude, listeners based on gender. Consider the following statement:

*“A good leader understands his strengths and weaknesses. This applies to all professions — whether you are a policeman, a fireman, a teacher, a salesman, or even the CEO or Chairman of the Board.”*

What do you think? Does this statement include men? women? both? How do you know? I’ve asked this of thousands of participants in the training room. All easily

agree that men are included. There is confusion and disagreement about whether women are included or not. This is unneeded static in the communication.

There are times that you will want to communicate to men only or women only. Other times you'll want to communicate to *everyone*, with no confusion about whether both men and women are included. When you want to send a message that includes everyone, you have a choice to use language that is inclusive of all people. Here are some helpful guidelines.

### **Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language**

**Use Inclusive Terms:** When you wish to clearly communicate to both men and women, use language that refers to both. Here are four different techniques to make the following phrase more gender-inclusive.

*“When I meet an executive, I wonder what his leadership style is like.”*

- 1) Use both pronouns: *“When I meet an executive, I wonder what his or her leadership style is like.”*
- 2) Use the plural form: *“When I meet executives, I wonder what their leadership styles are like.”*
- 3) Reword: *“I’m interested in the different leadership styles of the executives I meet.”*
- 4) Vary your statements – at times refer to executives as males (he / him) and, at times, as females (she / her).

**Use Inclusive Titles:** Avoid titles that indicate the job is normally performed by one sex (*i.e.*, *Policeman*). Utilize gender-neutral titles (*i.e.*, *Police Officer*) unless you specifically want to emphasize one or both genders (*i.e.*, *“Policemen and Policewomen”*).

**Identify Gender Only When Relevant:** Base communication on pertinent qualities, not on gender. Mention gender only when relevant. Typically there's no need to refer to a doctor as "*a lady doctor*" or to a nurse as "*a male nurse.*" There are times, however, when gender is relevant and should be included, such as when you are describing what a person in a crowd looks like or when discussing men's issues or women's issues.

**Use Titles Equally:** Use parallel titles and salutations for both genders, such as "*John McCain and Hillary Clinton*" or "*Senator John McCain and Senator Hillary Clinton.*" Avoid disparate treatment such as "*Senators McCain and Hillary.*"

**Broaden References:** Communicate to both male and female reference points. Use a broad range of stories, examples, analogies, and role models that appeal to different interests (e.g., sports, history, gardening, music, dance, literature, parenting). This is more likely to reach a broad audience than using only sports examples.

## **Naming and Describing People – Images Evoked**

Language has power. Based on the way you choose to name and describe people, you send different messages. For instance, what images are evoked in your mind when you hear "*A cancer victim,*" "*A person suffering from cancer,*" or "*A person with cancer*"? Where is your attention drawn in each of these two phrases: "*The disabled employee speaks three languages*" versus "*The employee speaks three languages*"?

Naming, identifying, or describing people can sometimes be awkward. Some communicators are so uncomfortable that they steer away from discussing important topics such as race, gender, religion, disabilities, or sexual orientation. This is unfortunate! We can't be clear and precise in our communication if we're walking on eggshells. Even more importantly, if we want to learn from one another and be respectful of one another we will sometimes need to discuss age, religious practices, gender, or other similarities and differences among us.

So how *can* you describe people without being offensive? You start with good intent. Then you choose language you feel *is most likely* to convey respect and inclusion. The good and bad news is this – there is no one right way. There are, however, guidelines that can help.

### **Guidelines for Naming or Describing People**

**Eliminate Overt Disrespect:** The easiest way to demonstrate respect when describing people is to purge obviously derogatory terms from your vocabulary. There are some descriptors that are clearly considered demeaning by large numbers of people. They are the terms that before saying them, people look around first to see who is in the room. They are the terms that are referred to as letters ... the “N-word,” the “B-word.” They are the terms that are used in anger to berate or humiliate someone. Don’t use these words – even if some have lost their power due to common use or passage of time. Don’t say them, even in jest; Even if you heard them in your favorite song; Even if your best friend uses them. Don’t use them in professional, respectful communication.

**Allow Self-Determination:** People decide what they want to be called. The only “correct” term for individuals or groups of people is that which they choose for themselves. One way to demonstrate respect for others is to refer to them in ways that *they* find meaningful. How do you know how people describe themselves? Listen! Read! Refer to a bias-free word finder or dictionary. Notice the names of associations, chambers, and other organizations. Ask! Of course, not everyone in a group will agree due to individual or regional differences. There may be multiple respectful terms (e.g., *Latino*, *Hispanic*, or more specifically, *Mexican-American*, or *Puerto Rican*). And, some individuals will tell you they prefer to be called by their name, with no descriptors.

**Put People First, Qualifiers Second:** Mention the person *first*, and let qualifiers follow, *only* when they are relevant. For example, there’s no need to point out the

accountant's wheelchair unless the conversation is specifically about his or her disability. In that case, a respectful "people-first" phrase is: "*The accountant uses a wheelchair...*" rather than "*the disabled accountant.*"

**Avoid Patronizing Language:** Don't use terms that diminish individuals, even if you don't personally feel any "charge" from the word (e.g., describing individuals with disabilities or medical conditions as "*pitiful,*" "*helpless,*" or "*suffering,*" or children from single-parent families as coming from "*broken homes*"). Likewise, avoid ascribing "superhuman" characteristics such as "*heroic,*" "*courageous,*" or "*amazing*" to someone with a disability who accomplishes everyday tasks such as arriving at work on time. This is equally condescending – it conveys your surprise that this person is as capable or committed as others are.

**Grant Equal Status:** Use parallel terms when talking about two groups. Try to describe people by who they are, rather than who they are not. Statements like "*White and Non-White*" and "*Management and Non-Management*" position one group as the "norm" and others as the "non-norm." Instead, consider using "*people of all ethnic and racial groups*" and "*Management and Staff.*"

**Recognize Insider / Outsider Dynamics:** Don't use "us versus them" language, such as "*you people.*" It's divisive. Also, even if some people within a group use offensive language about themselves, that doesn't make it OK for you to use. It's demeaning and often even more highly charged if stated by an outsider.

**Use Precise and Specific Descriptors:** Remember, there is no need to point out disability, gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation when it is not pertinent to the conversation. However, when they *are* relevant, don't avoid important descriptors. You have the option between vague, general language and precise, specific language. Choose precise language. This allows people to feel they are being described

accurately and not clumped into large generic groups. It also leads to clearer communication. For example, “*Vietnamese*” is more specific than “*Asian*.” “*He has a visual impairment*” is more informative than “*He has a disability*.”

### **The “Turn-Around Test”**

When in doubt about whether you are being respectful, bias-free, and non-stereotypical in your descriptions of others, apply the “Turn-Around Test.” To use this tool, replace the individual or group you are describing with a different person or group. If your description now sounds absurd, insensitive, or inappropriate, there’s a good chance your original statement was stereotypical or otherwise biased. While this doesn’t work 100% of the time, it causes you to examine your thought process, which is always helpful. Here are some examples.

If you describe a female politician by how well she can (or can’t) cook, would you also describe a male politician by how well he cooks? The Turn-Around Test shows that the cooking reference is probably gender-based, and not relevant to the conversation at hand.

A media headline stated: “*Blacks in America Can’t Agree on a Solution*.” Consider the Turn-Around phrase: “*Whites in America Can’t Agree on a Solution*.” By examining these two statements, you find the stereotypical thinking that all people in a racial group think the same.

You may recall the Native-American author who used the Turn-Around Test in response to the question of why naming sports teams “*Indians*,” “*Redskins*,” or “*Braves*” is considered offensive. He said to imagine naming a team the “*Brooklyn Jews*” or the “*Los Angeles Negroes*” and then creating a mascot for the team. The name choice is insensitive and the mascots can perpetuate stereotypes.

## **Jokes and Humor**

Humor is important! It is a powerful communication tool. It helps us relax, release stress, and enjoy life and work. However, a lot of humor is based on degrading or stereotyping others. To repeat the stereotype, even if it's "just a joke," perpetuates it – gives it legs to walk to the next person.

Destructive humor in the workplace also affects the joke teller. Stereotypical and demeaning jokes are often interpreted by listeners as a sign that the communicator is unprofessional, bigoted, or insensitive. That's definitely not helpful if you are trying to improve your communication skills or your credibility.

### **Guidelines for Inclusive and Respectful Humor**

**Choose Positive Humor:** Laugh at yourself and your own personal foibles. Share funny stories about what happened to you or others – based on the comedy of the situation. Just make sure your jokes, stories, or e-mails don't stereotype or demean individuals or groups based on who they are (e.g., their race, accent, or appearance).

**Cull Your Humor "File":** Keep the funny, non-disparaging jokes, plays on words, cartoons, stories, and images. Pass these on. Delete the ones that demean or debase people.

**Apply the "Humor Test":** Ask yourself: "*Is it professional?*" "*Is it respectful?*" "*Does it avoid perpetuating stereotypes?*" If all three answers are "yes," then it's probably a safe bet for the workplace.

## Nonverbal Messages

We cannot end this chapter without acknowledging nonverbal behavior. Gestures, facial expressions, and voice tone also communicate inclusion or exclusion, respect or disrespect.

A leader standing in front of the meeting hall says, “*We value every member of the team from the CEO (hand held up high), all the way to the customer service rep,*” (while dropping the hand down to thigh level). The leader has given a very powerful message. Some people are valued, and some are at the bottom of the heap.

The colleague who says she values you but only makes eye contact in meetings with higher-ups in the company is giving you two conflicting messages. The words say, “*I value you.*” The nonverbal message says, “*You don’t matter.*” Which do you believe – the words or the actions?

Usually, when spoken and unspoken messages contradict each other, we perceive the nonverbal message as true. So, as you work to eliminate bias from your communication, focus also on what you “say” nonverbally.

## Summary

Speaking the Language of Inclusion is one way to demonstrate respect for your listeners. It means choosing language and nonverbal communication that includes everyone and avoids bias, stereotyping, and discounting. This eliminates unnecessary static from your communication and makes it more likely that your message can get across to a broad range of people.

There is no list of what to say or do that will guarantee you are inclusive and bias-free in your communication. Through respectful intention and positive word choice, however, you can...

- Communicate clearly
- Avoid stereotyping and discounting of others
- Help people feel they are included in your message
- Name and describe people in ways that are accurate, unbiased, and relevant
- Select jokes and humor that celebrate our common humanity rather than demean one another for our differences.

When you consistently demonstrate respect and inclusion, others will be more willing to forgive you if you occasionally “slip up” and mistakenly communicate bias. While bias-free communication takes ongoing effort, it will help you build a foundation of trust with your listeners.

So, next time you reach for a dictionary, thesaurus, or spell check, think about checking for stereotypes and bias as well.



Communication

Recovery is an  
underutilized skill.

The good news is —  
it's not that  
difficult to do,  
and it has  
a big payoff.