

Inclusive Language: Vernon Wall's 5 Things to Ponder

Strategies to Avoid (Some) Language Pitfalls Around Social Identity

www.VernonWall.org; www.sustaineddialogue.org

1. Press Pause! Let others take the lead on how and when to describe their own social identities.

Try: Waiting to build trust with the person and asking yourself why you really need to know.

Avoid: Asking, "What are you? Are you _____?"

Why this is challenging: It's common to ask or assume how others identify. This challenges you to wait to hear how a person identifies and not assume until they actually tell you, which may not be in the first conversation.

Why this is important: This prioritizes others' freedom to label themselves on their own terms or not to prioritize labeling at all. Often, the way we ask doesn't allow others that choice.

2. Show others you care through your language choices, rather than show that you're "politically correct."

Try: Listening for how the person self-describes, and then asking, "Is it alright if I also refer to you that way?"

Avoid: Assuming you know the terms to label others and using them without getting feedback.

Why this is challenging: As good leaders, we often want to be "right." Our brains also prefer shortcuts; we hope somehow to learn the best terms that work for a whole group rather than processing for people individually.

Why this is important: People ARE individuals. Language for one member of a group won't resonate with every other member. This is why we reject being politically correct; there is no single "right" in social identity.

3. Avoid "correcting" language usage that you find "wrong"; instead, address the statement or word choice through "I" statements that share personal impact.

Try: "I am not comfortable with that language, because I experience the impact of it as _____ on me."

Avoid: "It's wrong to say that. You should say _____ instead."

Why this is challenging: It can be difficult to give a person who says something you disagree with the benefit of the doubt. This requires you to be empathetic and able to articulate a personal impact that may be difficult.

Why this is important: Telling someone to stop using language doesn't tell them why. Using "I" statements shows your strong personal investment and moves away from judging or accusing the speaker. Remember: others will remember the way you made them feel, positive or negative.

4. Seek first to understand others' ideas about identity, then to be understood.

Try: Asking more questions to listen for others' ideas on topics that you feel very comfortable with, in order to gain a new understanding, before you share your opinion.

Avoid: Jumping into conversations with ideas that you've stated many times before.

Why this is challenging: It's hard to stay in the "learning" mindset, especially if you are passionate about these topics. Practice listening and asking questions such as "Help me understand...."

Why this is important: Language is always evolving, so a learning posture is the most effective approach.

5. Check your ego at the door.

Try: Remembering that each person, region, and situation requires you to be a beginner again.

Avoid: Thinking that your experience with social identity is "enough."

Why this is challenging: You're brilliant!

Why this is important: The goal is always to be aware and genuine, not to be perfect.