

# #WorkingTogether2020

## #ABSoLutelyUnited!

### **Respectful Language – Responsible Communication:**

#### **A short guide**

**How to communicate so that not to offend your conversation partner? Where is the border between your own comfort and the comfort of the person you are talking to? How to avoid offence in communication? What is emphatic conversation? How to distinguish between justified criticism and verbal aggression? The answer is – by speaking with respect.**

Respectful language is respectful verbal communication. It covers both pragmatic arguments, or such that aim at effective communication, and axiological arguments, or related to the concept of human beings with their distinct identity, uniqueness and inalienable dignity.

The following are rules to remember. Note that these rules are not a closed set, and language is a living creature that constantly evolves.

#### **1. Observe conversational rules**

Communication can be challenging. Not only words can be problematic, but also the way conversation is run. That's why it's worthwhile to note conversational rules which are the first step to respectful communication.

- Present true information
- Communicate what is essential for the topic
- Avoid ambiguities
- Inform the conversation partner as appropriate for the purpose

#### **2. Respect those you talk to and talk about**

Lack of respect manifests itself in various ways, and this applies not only to unacceptable, vulgar language. Intentions is what matters.

- Respect the identity and multi-dimensional nature of each of us, don't equate a person with a single characteristic or view
- Speak so that our conversation partners feel comfortable and accepted
- Try to understand the arguments of others, because otherwise communication is only apparent and distorted

### **3. Distinguish between criticism and verbal aggression**

Criticizing others sometimes cannot be avoided. But it's important to know the border between constructive criticism and verbal aggression.

- Remember that criticism focuses on actions or their effects
- Avoid negative and emotional judgements about people, because at that point you have already crossed the red line of verbal aggression
- Don't generalize your judgements, don't criticize everything which applies to another person or any sphere of her life
- Remember that insulting and using vulgar language is clearly offensive

### **4. Stick to nonviolent communication**

Nonviolent communication is a method based on conscious communication. According to Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of this approach, exchange of views should be based on careful insight both into your own needs and the needs of your conversation partner. Nonviolent communication is based on attention.

- Distinguish between facts and interpretation
- Observe, so that your starting point is what you see or hear rather than the judgement of what you see or hear

### **5. Watch out ambiguities and indirect statements**

Indirect communication, or oblique statements, can be considered passive-aggressive behaviour. Note that ambiguities and indirect statements are problematic especially in multicultural environments where context and culture code are key to the perception of the content you communicate.

- Talk without ambiguities
- Make sure that a person from a different culture is able to unequivocally understand your message
- Avoid half-truths and implicating

### **6. Be aware of gender in your language**

Awareness of gender in language is important for the perception of equality among people despite that it distinguishes between people. Systematic formation of feminine word endings is not yet sufficiently consolidated in our language custom, being considered "funny", "ridiculous", "disrespectful". But this is only a matter of time. If applicable in your language:

- Try to use feminine names alongside masculine ones
- Use both noun genders
- If reasonable, add feminine endings to verbs
- Use collective numerals that indicate the presence of women
- Use collective nouns
- Use plural forms

- Avoid popular statements that support negative stereotypes on women – e.g. don't say "manly decision" to denote a prompt and resolute decision, or "sissy" to say that you disapprove of a man's behaviour
- Don't perpetuate the disdainful image of women by saying, e.g., "women's logic" or "women's tears"

## **7. Remember that a person with disabilities and disorders is first and foremost a person**

Each of us happened to be a patient. People with disabilities are everywhere among us. Be sensitive in communicating with them and talking about them.

- Avoid terms such as the disabled, the blind, the deaf, the epileptic, which focus our attention on a characteristic rather than a person
- Talk about people in such a way as to emphasize their being a person, e.g. a person with disabilities, blind person, visually impaired person, deaf person, hard of hearing person, person with epilepsy, etc.
- Remember that even the expression "person with disability" is unfortunate, because it suggests that disability is a basic characteristic of such person
- Don't focus on limitations, avoid terms that emphasize one's dependence, such as "afflicted with", "condemned to", "confined to", "suffering from", etc.
- Be tactful and compassionate in talking about people with mental disorders, because these disorders are associated with more social exclusion than for other illness
- Reject apparently neutral terms, such as a schizophrenic, bipolar or depressive
- Denote mental disorders descriptively and combine them with the words such as "person" "man/woman" or "patient": person with bipolar disorder, person diagnosed with schizophrenia
- Don't say "mentally ill" but use instead "person with experience of mental illness", "person with experience of mental health problem", "person with experience of mental crisis"
- Remember that the more words between "person" and descriptors of her condition, the gentler and appropriate is your message
- Don't stigmatize persons experiencing disorders and don't increase their negative perception – avoid judgmental talking about "social paranoia", "schizophrenic behaviour", someone's "anorectic look", or "ADHD" activity of a person, which, in fact, stigmatizes people grappling with these conditions and strengthens their negative perception
- Eliminate judgmental and derogatory terms from your vocabulary, such as: madman, loony, crank, nutcase, and retard.

## **8. Be careful to use vocabulary free from prejudice due to sexual orientation, skin color, ethnic background or age**

It's worth to highlight on every occasion that defining a person by a single trait only diminishes her as a human being. If you need to specify a single characteristic, the basis for respectful communication is neutrality.

- Use neutral terms such as "gay" and "lesbian".
- Remember that the plural: "homosexuals" might suggest that we're talking about men only
- Use LGBTQ+ acronym in pointing to a social group, accompanied always by such words as "group", "community", "people", etc.

- Remember that there is no “LGBT ideology”, because ideology is a set of views, ideas, notions, and LGBT+ are people: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, intersex people
- Be aware that the notion of “LGBT ideology” de-humanizes this social group
- Absolutely avoid judgmental expressions on heterosexual and homosexual relationships or suggesting which are more appropriate
- Use common expressions useful in avoiding judgements, such as: pair, relationship, marriage, family, equality
- Erase from your vocabulary offensive phrases, such as *100 lat za Murzynami* [literally: *One hundred years behind the Blacks*], *Murzyn zrobił swoje – Murzyn może odejść* [literally: *The Black has done it – the Black can go away*]
- Avoid colloquial stigmatizing names of ethnic groups, e.g., use “Romani” instead of “Gypsy”
- Remember that neutral words can in certain contexts take judgmental contours
- Be careful using neutral terms such as “migrant” and remember that notions such as “alien”, “foreigner” are associated with “strange”, “foreign”, which sometimes bring with them stigmatizing content
- Avoid talking about seniors or people older than you using colloquial, infantile, seemingly tender words, which may be considered disrespectful or derogatory, such as “old ladies”

### Why is it worthwhile to embrace respectful language?

Excerpt from the Appeal of the Respectful Language Team, February 2016: - *Anyone who defends language and at the same time cares for speaking with respect, defends human dignity and the very essence of humanity, contributes to harmonious dialogue in public and private life.*

### FleishmanHillard team

This article was prepared by Ms Marta Nowicka, Head of Corporate Communication and Public Affairs teams at Warsaw branch of FleishmanHillard, a PR agency.

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