

# Respectful Language and Communication Guide

The Tasmanian State Service (TSS) is committed to further developing a workplace where all employees use respectful language and communication. For this to occur, we need to respect the diversity of all our employees and support a culture that sees people as, people – not as a stereotype, attribute or characteristic. By doing so, we seek to create an environment where all our employees feel welcomed, safe and supported to bring their full self to work<sup>1</sup>

This guide provides information on what respectful language and communication is, why it's important, and provides practical guidance to making respectful language and communication part of your work in the TSS.

This guide is not exhaustive in its advice and should be read alongside the other materials for supporting respectful workplaces.

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<sup>1</sup> This commitment is in line with the TSS under the TSS Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Framework  
[http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/329874/FINAL\\_-\\_Diversity\\_and\\_Inclusion\\_Framework\\_2017-2020\\_-\\_March\\_2017.pdf](http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/329874/FINAL_-_Diversity_and_Inclusion_Framework_2017-2020_-_March_2017.pdf)

# What is respectful language and communication

Respectful language, which is sometimes called inclusive language or non-discriminatory language, is about communicating in a way that:

- is respectful and values, includes and empowers everyone; and
- is free from words, phrases or tones that degrade, insult, exclude, stereotype, belittle or trivialise people on the basis of their differences.

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*'Put simply, inclusive language is effective language – it is respectful, accurate and relevant to all.'*

- The Diversity Council Australia

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## VERBAL, NON-VERBAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Respectful language and communication refers to the verbal, non-verbal and written communication we use to ensure everyone is included and respected. This includes how we speak, how we write and how we interact with others. Language both reflects and reinforces the thoughts, attitudes and culture of the people who use it.

Our **verbal communication** is the words that we say. This is important because our words can be heard and interpreted differently by different people. However, it's not just about the language we use.

Even if we feel we speak to people with respect, it doesn't mean it's felt and this can often stem from **non-verbal communication**. The things we don't say can still convey volumes of information, with our body language and facial expressions making up a significant part of our daily non-verbal

Think about how it could impact or affect someone if another team member dominates the conversation or interrupts when they try to speak....now imagine that this is only noticeable when the person speaks to particular team members (be it women, Aboriginal employees or people with disability). Have you ever noticed how some people may raise their voice to speak to a person for whom English is a second language?

communication. Your gestures, body movement, and tone of voice are other examples of non-verbal communication.

Our **written communication** is made up of what we write and how we write it and can also exclude or offend people. Examples include gendered language in emails, policies, job advertisements and surveys.

### Case Study - Written Communication and Gendered Language

An agency found that each time they advertised a certain job a high proportion of applicants were male. When reviewing of the job advertisement and statement of duties, the agency found that there was a high presence of masculine words such as: competitive, assertive, self-reliant and driven. There was also no mention of how an applicant would be supported to work this role flexibly. Research has found these types of words can deter women from applying for jobs. In addition, jobs which are not clearly advertised as being flexible may deter applications from suitable candidates including women, people with disabilities, people return to work after long periods of leave, and people with carer's responsibilities. The agency recognised the impact of the gendered language used and replaced those words with neutral alternatives. The next time the job was advertised the agency was able to attract a larger, more diverse, and more gender-balanced talent pool.

## Why it matters

Respectful language is a way of acknowledging and respecting the diversity of people and their identities

How we speak to and interact with others influences how we treat each other, and in turn how we make people feel. As State Service employees, we have a responsibility to ensure that everyone is valued and respected and able to bring their full self to work.

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*Language is more than just a means to communicate, it . . . plays a central role in our sense of identity. Language also carries meaning beyond the words themselves, and is an important platform within which much cultural knowledge and heritage is passed on.*

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (AIATSIS).

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#### When respectful language and communication is used:

- ✓ We are included, valued and represented.
- ✓ We are happier, productive and engaged at work.
- ✓ Our teams are innovative and encompass a diversity of thought.

Language is extremely powerful and our words have consequences. They can include or exclude, even if we do not intend them to. For example, 'positive stereotyping' (suggesting that a particular race, gender or age group are gifted in a particular area) can be damaging by oversimplifying individual characteristics and ignoring the diversity of individuals.

# Things to consider

The following section outlines some guiding principles to consider when communicating and interacting with others to help build a respectful workplace.

## 1. PUT PEOPLE FIRST

Focus on the person as an individual and not their characteristics.

- ✓ Only refer to a person's age, cultural background, gender, physical characteristics etc. if it's relevant, which often it's not.
- ✓ Any group characteristics should always be applied with care and consideration using respectful terms and with an awareness of the diversity of the audience. You can consult with the group to ensure this is achieved.
- ✓ Try not to stereotype or make assumptions about people. For example, don't assume a man has a wife/female partner.

*Instead of saying:*

'Alice, our disability graduate, will be presenting her project today'

*Say:*

'Alice will be presenting her project today'

## 2. CONSIDER OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Always try and see things from other's perspectives

- ✓ Be aware of your audience and adapt accordingly.
- ✓ Consider that people often interpret things differently. Something that may seem one way to you may not be interpreted the same way to someone else. For example, jokes which seem harmless to you can intentionally and unintentional exclude or offend people.
- ✓ Recognise the value in diversity of thought and listen to the ideas and perspectives of other people.
- ✓ Avoid using jargon or acronyms in conversations at work. They may seem natural to you, but exclude employees who may not be familiar with the terms.
- ✓ It is important to remember that growing up, we have all had different experiences in life. While it is natural to assume people have had similar experiences, it may not be the case. Some examples of different experiences can including childhood, growing up, access to education and employment opportunities, family experiences etc.

### Case Study - Perspectives

A presenter at an outdoor event chose to speak without a microphone as they felt confident speaking in public.

There were a number of people at the event who could not hear the presentation, or the questions asked during the session. This excluded them from being able to participate fully in the event.

The event organisers, and the presenter should have thought about the needs of others, not just what they were comfortable with. For guidance on running inclusive and accessible events, speak to your agency's communication unit.

### 3. BE OPEN TO CHANGE

We all face situations that challenge our personal ideas of what's 'normal'. It's important to keep an open mind and recognise that 'normal' means something different to everyone.

- ✓ Be open to learning about different languages, cultures and different ways of working.
- ✓ Create new habits and don't default to words and phrases that may have been used in the past. For example often people refer to a mixed gender group as 'guys'. Instead of saying 'hello guys' or 'hello ladies' say 'hello everyone.'
- ✓ Pay attention to your everyday language and be aware of how your conscious and unconscious bias may affect how you deal with people.
- ✓ Recognise that you will make mistakes, but if you are open to change and willing to continue learning you're on the right path.

### 4. THINK ABOUT CONTEXT

Be aware of the context of the language and communication being used and recognise that its appropriateness may vary depending on your environment.

- ✓ Avoid jokes and comments which highlight specific differences or target certain groups.
- ✓ Some terms are acceptable when used by people as a means of claiming their identity, but can be seen as derogatory when used by others

Language that is ok outside of work can be disrespectful at work. For example saying at work 'there is a boy waiting for you in the meeting room' is non-inclusive, however if talking to a friend outside of work and you ask 'how is your boy doing' that would be more likely to be appropriate.

### 5. IF YOU ARE UNSURE, ASK

You aren't expected to know all the answers. If you're unsure what terminology someone prefers, or the best way to communicate with them, ask them.

- ✓ Always ask in a respectful manner, potentially in a private situation. Be clear that you are asking because you want to know exactly how the other person likes to be referred to/included.
- ✓ As language is constantly evolving, seek advice or more information in situations that are unclear. For example, if you are aware someone identifies as non-binary, ask what their preferred personal pronouns are.
- ✓ When using language about a group of people, it is best practise to defer to people with lived experiences. Organisations who represent a particular group, for example Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, can provide advice on the correct language.

#### SPEAK UP

Disrespectful behaviour can often go unchallenged. By talking to people about their inappropriate language, not only are they less likely to do it again, they are also more likely to change their views on what is appropriate behaviour. You can do this by pulling them aside, or addressing it at another time.

## 6. MISTAKES MAY HAPPEN

It is important to recognise that some mistakes will happen. Sometimes we say things that exclude others without realising.

If you make a mistake:

- ✓ Don't try and justify your actions.
- ✓ Focus on understanding the other person's perspective and learn from it.
- ✓ Apologise and move on.

## More information

This resource can be read alongside the other materials for supporting respectful workplaces.

Information about the State Service Diversity and Inclusion Policy and Framework can be found on the State Service Management Office website [www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/ssmo](http://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/divisions/ssmo).

## Sources

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

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