

How to avoid getting hung up on language at work

There's a whole myth out there (often fostered by the media) about 'PC language' at work. This can often leave workers extremely worried about insulting or offending colleagues and any possible negative consequences that may arise.

It is in this atmosphere of paranoia where things can really start to go wrong and where normal positive human interaction between individuals can get distorted, so creating exactly the situation that so many are trying so hard to avoid.

Sadly it's often senior grade staff who encourage others to become overly self conscious about their vocabulary, especially when in the presence of people from diverse backgrounds. Getting hung up on language in this way can lead organisations to lose sight of the major issues with diverse groups (such as inequality of access/pay/violence/poverty)

Often the group that organisations aim to protect is not consulted about decisions on finer points of language being made on its behalf. Consider the word 'brainstorm' where the UK charity National Society for Epilepsy has made a public statement that 93% of people with epilepsy do not find that word offensive, but yet, across the UK, requests for this term to change to "thought shower" still often arise from senior management.

Five tips to avoid getting hung up on words in your workplace:

- 1) Encourage consensus discussion in the workplace about what is and what is not offensive. There are some terms which are clearly offensive. The watchword with this is common sense.
- 2) Value difference in others by asking colleagues or clients who have names unfamiliar to your home culture how they spell and pronounce them. Don't ask for short or nickname versions – their names are great just as they are given
- 3) People are often afraid to ask for information from people who seem different from them. Don't be afraid and don't assume you know. You'll be sure to make more mistakes if you operate on assumptions about your clients' or colleagues' likes and dislikes, habits, homelife, culture or anything else
- 4) All of us tend to appreciate someone being straight up and admitting what they don't know– so ask for help! Do it in a respectful and polite way and 90% of people will give a warm response. Most people will take any enquiry in the spirit it is meant
- 5) Make sure that your fears about 'saying the wrong thing' to clients or colleagues who are different from you are not causing your colleagues or clients to feel isolated. Would you like to go somewhere where everyone regularly steps round you on eggshells? When deprived of normal warm human interaction we can all (despite how different we are) become deeply unhappy or even depressed.

Key concepts to bear in mind are COMMON SENSE and concentrating on the INTENTION of the person speaking, whilst bearing in mind the effects arising from the words that are spoken.

It's important to create a positive enabling culture at work where everyone can talk and your organisation can thrive.

We can't afford to get hung up on words, the way to address historical inequalities that remain unresolved is to look beyond language and examine the crunch issues concerning fair treatment of diverse groups.