

How shall I address thee?

The rapid change to society, and the avoidance of offence at this time of good cheer among men

I was at a DIAL meeting recently. DIAL stands for 'Diverse, Inclusive, Aspirational Leaders', and is a newish business providing workshops and supporting online services on Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) for such leaders. DIAL asked me to join their steering committee, and at the meeting we started talking about the correct ways to describe people these days, and the talking briefly became an awkward silence as some of us (probably all of us) suddenly felt embarrassed to speak in case we used an out-of-date or even offensive term. The conversation quickly moved on to another topic.

It is no mistake that I added 'among men' in the subtitle, and yes that is possibly offensive to a number of women; it's certainly not inclusive! I hope that helps me make my point.

Over the past two years we at GPB have increasingly got involved in client discussions around this delicate area, where everyone feels they need to walk on eggshells, or not walk (i.e. talk) at all. How should we describe each other correctly now that we are super sensitive to our differences? Our input has been to advise on how to communicate, when, who to, where and how often. It's an exciting project.

For context, I do hope that one day this is no longer an issue, and instead we do as Martin Luther King said on 28th August 1963 and apply it across the board: *'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.'*

I am going to try to get to the other side of the eggshell minefield here, although with the pace of change, I

suspect this will be out-of-date advice by 2021 and forgive me if this attempt fails and instead offends. Boris Johnson saying it was '*absolutely ridiculous*' women chose to '*go around looking like letterboxes*' when wearing the Burkha, and the accusation of Jeremy Corbyn's anti-Semitism make this a very public and delicate space.

We have one major consulting firm client who are really moving forwards in D&I, which they now call I&D to show that Inclusion is a choice (Diversity is a fact). They have set off well with great intentions. They have created groups of employees to represent different people, such as working mothers, LGBTIQ+, and ex-forces personnel; anyone can join these groups. They are also measuring their progress on the important metrics. Support has been incredible from the top, the whole senior leadership team (huge in a consulting firm), have all had training with specific actions to carry out, and they have done several staff surveys showing they are making good progress.

The goal is simple, perpetuation. This derives from a talented workforce that stays working for you, hiring the best from outside, and having clients who think the same way. Failure results in oblivion.

The challenges our client faced and still faces are on a number of fronts: Getting the culture to change, changing the recruitment metrics that were biased in favour of the stereotypical white male consultant, accurate measurement of the many key metrics, and changing the day-to-day behaviour of everyone.

For most firms, diversity starts with the easiest one to see, increasing the proportion of women to 50/50 whilst staying optimal, meaning to have the most qualified people in the relevant



Ewan Pearson



Diversity and inclusion (Informa PLC, 2019)⁴

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts





How shall I address thee?... (Cont'd)

jobs. The stats are well-known, so I will just say that one problem is the lexicon. Words like 'he' (without 'she'), 'guys' and 'girls' 'man/men' (often as a suffix) have been hard to remove. In part it's cultural or hard-wired into language, so it's no surprise that we have had to re-emphasise and repeat a lot of coaching.

Inclusion has been about race, sexual orientation (which you can't see), physical (dis)ability, culture and gender. There is a keen desire to optimise here, but measurement is hard as many employees are reluctant, e.g. to fill in sexual orientation on a staff form, as there is a concern over security of data. It has been hard to find the best people in the different talent pools, perhaps because they are fishing the wrong way.

The pace of change here is also rapid: think back to when not so long ago we all used the term 'LGB'. That has evolved quickly by addition into many variants². The longest that I found is in the Urban Dictionary, (not always a good source *r e f e r e n c e*). They have LGBTQIADPCNO+^{2,3,5}, meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Demisexual, Pansexual, Closeted, Non-binary, Omnisexual +. The + is there to cover other alternative sexualities (although as far as I know, not Heterosexuals).

Add in wellbeing/mental illness, subconscious exclusion, different ways of working across generations, Greta Thunberg/global warming, bad plastics, fossil fuels, Brexit and a General Election here in the UK and you wonder how anyone would cope!

Here are some ideas on what we think any client could do to communicate in a more Inclusive way:

1. Treat everyone with respect, as an individual and a person
2. Put everyone in your 'ingroup' so that there is no 'outgroup'
3. Coach each other lots, politely
4. Reverse habits. E.g. if you would



It is important to treat one another as equals (pink news, 2019).

normally say 'he' for a CEO, say 'she'; put 'she' first when with 'he'

5. At Monday morning team meetings, avoid questions such as 'what did you guys do this weekend?', or 'what did you do on Saturday evening with your girlfriends/wives?'
6. Stop using words like 'old', 'young', 'guys' (even if you meant to include women), 'girls', and 'lads' and 'attractive' in the workplace. 'Team' and 'group' are better as they avoid the risk of offence
7. Try to use words that talk to who people are and what they do, not to their gender, sexuality, age, skin colour, religion and so on
8. If you don't know how to say someone's gender or ethnicity, ask them, they will appreciate the effort. I did this, and was surprised to get the reply 'Black'. Maybe others would be being offended by that, so ask. The main term currently is 'BAME', for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic.

Even if we don't get this right the whole time, the good news is that we are all trying to be a bit more aware and friendly to each other. No bad thing.

By Ewan Pearson

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEqnklfYs> 13.38 into the video
2. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=LGBTQIADPCNO%2B>
3. <https://acronyms.thefreedictionary.com/LGBTQIAPD> and others.
4. <https://www.nojitter.com/organization-management/eyeing-diversity-inclusion-ec19>
5. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2018/04/16/what-does-lgbtqia-stand-for-the-inclusive-term-which-includes-questioning-intersex-and-asexual-and-allied-people/>

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