Creating Welcoming Environments

Inclusive Communication

Overview

Inclusive communication involves using words, phrases, images, and tones that recognize, respect, and value different groups of people. Consider inclusive communication that aims to reduce bias, prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination to avoid hurting someone and making them feel unwelcome or devalued. Our intentions may be good, but negative impacts can result from the words or phrases we choose. Creating a welcoming environment is a core value to Michigan State University (MSU) Extension programs. Using inclusive communication and being aware of the words, phrases, and images we use can help others to feel more welcomed and valued in our programs.

Inclusion

The MSU Extension anti-discrimination statement says:

> MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity employer, committed to achieving excellence through a diverse workforce and inclusive culture that encourages all people to reach their full potential. Michigan State University Extension programs and materials are open to all without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, religion, age, height, weight, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, marital status, family status or veteran status. (MSU Extension, 2021)

The protected classes listed in the anti-discrimination statement should never be assumed based on appearance. No one should be singled out or asked to represent an entire group of people based on their identity. We must aim to see and accept people for who they say they are and aim to use means of communication that is welcoming and inclusive to all. Allow space – whether through conversation or written forms of communication – for people to provide their own terms of what they feel is most important to share.

Application

When you address someone using their pronouns, allow the person space to use their own pronouns and then mirror their language use (using the pronouns they use to refer to themselves) rather than assuming someone's pronouns based on how you perceive them. The MSU Gender and Sexuality Campus Center (https://gscc.msu.edu/index.html) provides more information on personal pronouns, including what they are and how they are used: https://gscc.msu.edu/education/pronouns.html

Many common sayings or colloquialisms are based on harmful histories intended, at the time, to shame a person or group. Some of the original meanings may have been lost over time, but the pain and impact can still exist for those targeted by the hurtful language. In some cases, we may unintentionally use culturally appropriated words or phrases such as "powwow." We all make mistakes, but it is important to remember our goal of making our attendees and community members feel welcome. For more information on common terms that have a history of cultural appropriation or targeting, marginalizing, or mocking different races, visit the University of Arizona *Antiracist Language Guide* at https://lib.arizona.edu/employees/anti-racist-guide.

To contact an expert in your area, visit extension.msu.edu/experts or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464)

Gender identities and gender roles are another part of language to be aware of. Consider the assumptions made in naming career roles. The terms *fireman* and *salesman* indicate these are roles for males, though that is not the case. More appropriate terms would be *firefighter* and *salesperson*, removing the overt gender connotations of the roles. Similarly, the term *guys* has often been used to address groups of mixed-gender individuals, yet the term *gals* would not be considered in the same way. A male-related term as the default is sexist and should be avoided, as should gender binary language such as *boys and girls*, *ladies and gentlemen*, or similar language. Instead, use any of the infinite welcoming and gender-neutral terms and phrases such as *kids*, *youth*, *participants*, *esteemed guests*, *colleagues*, *peers*, and others.

Additionally, avoid making assumptions about someone's health or physical capabilities, including physical, emotional, and mental health. You don't know everyone's story nor their comfort level. Don't assume the amount or type of assistance someone needs based on appearance. Allow people space to ask for assistance if they want it, or offer, in a nonjudgmental manner, if you can help. Avoid using language that marginalizes mental health, such as *crazy* or *OCD*, or other ableist language such as *lame* or *turning a blind eye*. Statements like these may be harmful even when no harm is meant. Find additional information at the University of Washington's *Ableism in Everyday Language* article: https://www.washington.edu/doit/ableism-everyday-language.

When choosing programming locations, think about the message that location sends to participants. This could include words, images, and accessibility. Host locations may intentionally or unintentionally exclude or marginalize groups of people through environment, beliefs, or signage. This can alienate participants and make them feel unwelcome. Additionally, consider facility design in terms of accessibility, such as the overall size of the facility, the location of elevators, and the presence of audio-visual supports. Reference the MSU Extension *DEI in Action: Developing, Planning, and Facilitating Educational Programs and Events* at https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/dei-in-action-developing-planning-and-facilitating-educational-programs-and-events. It contains additional items to keep in mind when choosing a facility.

Some important tips:

› Create an environment of mutual respect.
› Be open to other cultures and experiences.
› Don't assume. Allow participants to self-identify.
› Ask for input from participants.
› Choose meeting locations that communicate a welcoming and accessible environment.
›   We all make mistakes. Be willing to learn and ACT: Apologize, Correct, and Try again.

Find out more:

We encourage you to continue exploring methods for inclusivity in your volunteer role and invite you to review our other resources for MSU Extension volunteers.

› **Creating Welcoming Environments: The Importance of Inclusivity**
   https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/creating-welcoming-environments-the-importance-of-inclusivity

For additional learning materials, visit MSU Institutional Diversity and Inclusion at https://inclusion.msu.edu/index.html. You will find many inclusive resources (https://inclusion.msu.edu/campus-resources/inclusive-resources.html) and educational opportunities (https://inclusion.msu.edu/education/index.html).

Reference

Michigan State University Extension. (2021). *Appropriate use of the MSU Extension anti-discrimination statement.* https://www.canr.msu.edu/od/uploads/files/Anti_Discrimination_Statement_English_2021-06-03_AA.pdf