Gender, Racial, and Cultural Sensitivity in Communication

Inquire: Sensitive Communication

Overview

Carefully choosing the words you say is an important skill to learn. It takes experience with speaking to be able to think about the impact your words can have on someone else. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t worry about it in the beginning of your speaking career. Quite the opposite! You should take great care with messages, no matter how seasoned you are at public speaking. This lesson will help you learn about gender and cultural sensitivity and how to be sensitive in your communications.

Big Question: Do you find yourself empathizing with others when speaking to them?

Watch: Sensitivity at Work

Communication is an essential part of our lives. Everywhere you look, you will see or hear some sort of communication. An important part of communication is to respect those partaking in the conversation and those outside the conversation. This lesson focuses on things to be aware of to make sure you’re respectful when you communicate.

First, you will learn about gender sensitivity. Gender sensitivity refers to language and actions that respect the gender identities of others. This can range anywhere from avoiding saying "you guys" when referring to a group of people including women, all the way to using someone’s preferred pronouns. No matter what your personal opinion or feelings are on the issue of gender, you still have an obligation to be respectful of someone else’s decision. One way to do this is through gender-inclusive language. Instead of using phrases like "mailman" that exclude anyone who isn’t a man, use phrases that are more inclusive like “mail carrier.”

Next, you will learn about cultural sensitivity. When talking to people from cultures different from your own, there is a temptation to assume you know how they will behave based on what you know about other members of that culture. This is known as essentializing. Avoid doing this! Treat the person with respect by not assuming their behavior based on a stereotype you might hold.

Next, you will explore the importance of being sensitive with your words and be given ways to achieve that sensitivity. Generally, it all comes down to respect. Respect your audience with the things you say and do, and you will be in a great spot as a speaker.
As you go through this lesson, take some time for self-reflection. Think of how you interact with other people, and think of things you can do to be more respectful. Remember, everyone has things to improve in, and a need to get better isn’t a bad thing.

Read: Being Sensitive to Others

Overview

Sensitivity is something our culture talks about frequently. This lesson focuses on gender and cultural sensitivity, why it is important, and how to be sensitive when crafting communication messages.

What is Gender Sensitivity?

Gender sensitivity refers to language and actions that respect the gender identity of others. When speaking to an audience, it is best not to exclude any audience member(s) with your language. This exclusion can be avoided by using gender-inclusive language. Gender-inclusive language is language that avoids gendered terms such as he, she, or man. When using gendered language, there is a basic assumption that the word you use is describing the real world. So, if you say “fireman,” it implies that people who fight fires are all men. This isn’t true. By being inclusive with the language you use, you avoid erasing people that represent the diversity that exists in the real world.

For example, if a person were giving a training presentation to a group of police officers, the speaker should avoid using the term “policemen.” The female police officers in the audience would feel excluded by that term. There are several examples of gendered language that could easily be switched to gender-inclusive language! Try to use congressperson or representative instead of congressman. When flying in a plane, try flagging down the flight attendant, instead of the stewardess. Servers serve your table in restaurants, not waiters or waitresses.

The second reason to avoid gendered language is the assumption that there is a difference. Sometimes, people refer to doctors and “lady doctors” as different when there is no difference. Both went to medical school. Both are capable of helping you. But, if you talk about doctors and differentiate lady doctors, it implies they are different, or somehow unequal. Avoid assuming that someone is worse at their job because of their gender. Respecting your audience members is important, and the words you choose go a long way in giving them the respect they deserve.

What is Cultural Sensitivity?

Cultural sensitivity refers to language and actions that respect the culture of others. Culture teaches behaviors that we are unaware we do. These passive behaviors are helpful to know when trying to understand a culture. Avoid essentializing people from a culture. Instead of expecting people to act a certain way — such as being loud, proud, and in charge if they are from America — understand that they might have been raised to behave that way, but they might have outgrown it, learned a better way, or may be adapting to the situation the same way you are. Rather than expecting them to behave how you think someone from their culture might, adapt to how they are acting. Acknowledge that they might act some way to try to adapt to what you would expect based on your own culture. Adaptation does, after all, go both ways.

Once you start to think of the person as an individual rather than a piece of the culture they represent, you can ensure you respect their cultural upbringing without essentializing the person you are speaking to. The best way to do this is to remember their cultural norms and treat them with respect, even if the
person does not follow all of those norms. If the culture you are dealing with dislikes physical touch, but the person has already shaken your hand and clasped your shoulder, appreciate the adaptation they have made to your culture. Don’t push it by trying to touch them any more than they are comfortable with.

What is the Importance of Sensitivity in Communication?

When communicating, you don’t get the opportunity to take words back. Once something is said, it’s out forever. This means the words you say are exceptionally important. When crafting a message, there are three things to keep in mind when trying to be sensitive. Respect is first up. Remember that you are speaking to an audience of people. Because they are people, they deserve respect. Talk to them in a manner that is polite, respectful, and makes every effort to do no harm. Second is inclusivity. When speaking, do your best not to exclude members of the audience from your message. Consider gender-inclusive language when thinking of this issue. Make sure the words you choose represent everyone and don’t arbitrarily cut out entire groups of people. Finally, be accurate. You have a responsibility to be accurate and truthful when you speak. Don’t say anything you can’t verify as true, especially when it deals with others.

How Does a Communicator Tailor Their Message for Sensitivity?

We’ve established the importance of being sensitive when crafting messages. But, how do you do it? There are four ways to do so. First, be polite. Be mindful of how people react to messages, and be willing to apologize if something goes wrong. Keeping jokes and comments calm, and avoid being offensive. Second, be respectful. Acknowledge that you don’t necessarily know everything. Be willing to ask questions and learn from mistakes. Listen and understand what others are saying. Third, be mindful. Think about things from someone else’s perspective. Ask yourself how something might impact another culture or group of people. Finding ways to empathize with different people is key to being a strong public speaker. Finally, be intentional in word choice. Ask yourself why you are saying something a certain way. Figure out what purpose a phrase serves, and see if there’s anything negative that can come from it. If so, choose something else. This is especially important if you have to improvise any part of your speech, or when answering questions. Don’t frivolously say something. Consider your words carefully to make sure you are respectful and polite.

Reflect Poll: Learning Sensitivity

Which sensitivity skill do you practice the most?

- Gender-inclusive language
- Mindfulness
- Empathy

Expand: Stereotypes and Microaggressions

Overview

Sensitive and respectful communication is something we should all strive for. However, sometimes we make mistakes. This section will teach about two common mistakes: stereotypes and microaggressions, as well as what to do if you make those mistakes.
Stereotypes and Microaggressions

When thinking about a culture, one of the first things we do is consider how that group is portrayed on television or in a movie. These oversimplified representations of a group of people are called stereotypes. Stereotypes attempt to make it easier to understand a culture but fall short when they don’t account for the fact that not all people from a particular group are the same. Because each person is unique, stereotypes can be harmful and can eliminate that individuality. When engaging with someone from a culture you are not familiar with, do not assume you know what that person or their culture is like just because you have seen it represented in a movie. Be open and honest about what you do, or do not, know, and be open to learning throughout the conversation.

Microaggressions are subtle things that indirectly or unintentionally discriminate against a group. These often are presented as a compliment or an assumption, but have hidden meanings that are not so polite. Saying to a woman, “Congratulations on the marriage! When are you having kids?” is a not so subtle way of assuming that a woman’s job is to have kids, or that entering into a marriage has an objective of producing offspring. Likewise, being surprised that a man cooks or cleans in his family home makes the assumption that all men are slobs, which they are not.

Fixing Mistakes

Microaggressions and stereotypes can be harmful to those affected by them. If you catch yourself using one or are told you have used one, there are simple steps to take in order to fix the mistake. First, apologize. Don’t make excuses or try to justify what you said. Just apologize and admit that you didn’t know. Second, promise to do better. Third, follow through on that promise by learning why that stereotype or microaggression is wrong and how to avoid using it in the future.

This can be done a few different ways. You can ask the person. However, if you do this, understand it is not their job to teach you. If they do not want to, do not push them. If they do teach you, take what they say to heart and learn from it. If they do not teach you, seek other resources to teach yourself. Search engines are powerful tools when looking for information. The biggest thing to know is that mistakes happen, and the only way to get better is to learn and try to do better.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A publication outlining the importance of gender sensitivity and how to achieve it
- Link to resource: http://www.comminit.com/global/content/principles-gender-sensitive-communication

A publication outlining the importance of cultural sensitivity and how to achieve it

A publication outlining the harms of microaggressions and how to address them
Lesson Glossary

gender sensitivity: language and actions that respect the gender identity of others

gender-inclusive language: language that avoids gendered terms such as he, she, or man

cultural sensitivity: language and actions that respect the culture of others

sterotypes: oversimplified representations of a group of people

microaggressions: subtle things that indirectly or unintentionally discriminate against a group

Check Your Knowledge

1. Gender sensitivity involves being mindful of both thoughts and actions.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Microaggressions are subtle acts that unintentionally discriminate.
   a. True
   b. False

3. The first thing to do to fix a mistake is apologize for the offensive behavior.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:  
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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