# Is Biased Language Undercutting Your Diversity and Equity Efforts?

# 2020 has been a tipping point for conversations around diversity and social justice.

**Corporate leaders including utility CEOs are clear-eyed about the need to root out structural discrimination.**[1,2] A key part of this effort is identifying and eliminating bias in communications that undercut public statements on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As researchers at ILLUME, we like to get specific. Precise, if you will. Language is no exception. Versed in the technical world of evaluation, measurement, and verification, we are accustomed to using specific language to describe the finer details of evaluation. Yet, despite our industry's exacting use of language to describe the effects and impacts of our programs, we fall short when it comes to selecting the right words to describe the customers served by our efforts and speaking directly to them. And just like that, we undermine the good intentions of our work.

**Bias is in the details, so pay attention.** Without careful thought, we can unintentionally introduce and perpetuate bias by failing to choose our words carefully. We are human, and therefore we are biased. Bias lives in our organizational language, practices, and in our visual communication efforts. And while we cannot erase bias completely from our cultures, it is our responsibility to identify when and where it shows up and to correct it.

## Root out bias in your own language.

As a research firm constantly talking with utility customers from across the country, ILLUME knows that language can elevate communities or perpetuate biases against individuals and groups historically marginalized by energy programs. And because language is constantly evolving (what is preferable today will likely shift in the future), we put together this quick start guide for bias-free language for utilities and program administrators speaking to and reporting about marginalized groups in the United States.

**1** Use "person-first" language. In the United States, this is generally considered more dignifying. For example, use "a person living with diabetes" rather than "a diabetic."

**2** Use the language preferred by members of that group. Organizations should defer to the preferences of members of communities they are trying to engage. While "person-first" language is typically the better choice, some groups and communities prefer identity-first language, especially those whose identities are often erased or made invisible in the dominant culture. For example, using the "Deaf community" and "Deaf Culture" is preferred. If it is not possible to directly engage members of the community to clarify word choice, program teams should at minimum research the group's preferences.

**3** Learn the difference between terms that are appropriate for use only within the community. Sometimes reclaimed or re-appropriated terms may still hold derogatory connotations when used by out-group members. The goal should be to promote self-definition without perpetuating harmful power dynamics or reinforcing stereotypes and stigmas.

**4** Be as specific as you need to be. Describe groups and individuals with the specificity necessary to inform. Broader terms tend to be misleading when more specific terms are more appropriate. For example, using the term Black/African American is more appropriate than the broader term People of Color. Broader terms may erase the unique experiences of specific groups that are distinct from the experiences of other People of Color.

**5** Avoid "otherizing" or pointing out differences without cause. Pointing out difference where it is not specifically necessary could be harmful. Unnecessary emphasis on a person's identity implies that the individual or group does not belong and subtly reinforces negative stereotypes.

**6** Acknowledge the reasons behind disparities. Describing disparities without acknowledging the oppressive history that caused them may unintentionally lay blame on the marginalized individuals.

**7** Be sensitive to your readers. In addition to your editing team, get feedback from members of the marginalized group to review and provide feedback. Listen to the people whose expertise is the lived experience, and do not rely on just one individual to speak for their community. Remember, communities are not monolithic. Be prepared to make changes based on this feedback.

**8** Be aware that misrepresentation can be just as harmful as stereotypical representations or lack of representation. Avoid using language that misrepresents or generalizes customers from certain communities as expressing affinity towards ideals like hard work, pride, or family, for example.

**9** Avoid reductive representation. Authentic representation requires addressing the nuance and complexity within communities as well as recognizing the ordinary. Individuals and communities are often multiply-marginalized and multiply-privileged. Be careful not to fall into patterns of storytelling that highlight marginalized experiences in ways that mainly inspire feelings of pity or emphasize that people are an "exception to the norm."

**10** Examine views that impact the stories we tell. For example, people with disabilities are often described as waiting for a cure, implying that there is something to be fixed without acknowledging that often ableism is the main barrier preventing their inclusion and participation.

**11** Avoid making broad statement about what is normal or what "everyone" wants. Recognizing diversity means acknowledging that the needs or wants of the majority are not necessarily the needs or wants of all people. Sweeping statements unintentionally exclude people by sending the message that if something does not resonate with a group or individual, they must be abnormal.

# Want to put these guidelines into practice?

**For further reading:**

American Psychological Association. Bias-Free Language: Racial and Ethnic Identify.

Hamilton College (2015). Writing About Race, Ethnicity, Social Class and Disability.

We asked the ILLUME team to suggest improvements to phrases that may enter our industry's lexicon and refer to people's race, ethnicity, origin, income, or other characteristics. Here we share a few ideas for improving these phrases and creating more dignifying language.

| Harmful Framing | Neutral Framing | Justice-Focused Framing |
|---|---|---|
| [Utility] is an Equal Opportunity Employer | [Utility] is committed to diversity and ensuring our team reflects the communities we serve. | [Utility] encourages members of traditionally underrepresented communities to apply, including women, people of color, LGBTQ people, veterans, and people with disabilities. |
| Customers with disabilities often do not participate in DR offerings. | DR offerings may impact the health and safety of some customers with disabilities, which may explain low participation. | It is important to evaluate customer sentiments on DR offerings and make adjustments so that they do not unjustly exclude customers with disabilities and lead to low participation. |
| Tech companies lack People of Color in leadership roles. | People of Color are underrepresented among tech company employees and leadership; they comprise about x% of employees of Fortune 500 and y% of C-suite executives. | Tech companies must do more to hire Black/African American employees and promote them to leadership and board positions. Only x% of the employees of Fortune 500 tech companies and y% of C-suite executives are Black/African American, compared with z% of the population. |
| Participation rates among Hispanic and Latino customers are low. | Participation among Hispanic and Latino/a customers is lower than among non-Hispanic or Latino/a customers. | Utility programs have not successfully reached Latinx people or communities, which is reflected in low participation rates. |
| Low-income customers are not interested in participating in energy efficiency programs. | A number of customers who qualify for bill pay assistance do not participate in energy efficiency programs. | Relevant programs need to do more to reach and engage income-eligible customers who may have more pressing concerns than seeking out energy efficiency programs. |