

Inclusive language at work

A quick guide for HR, D&I and people leaders on talking about disability with respect. Most people who get these words wrong mean well. The words just haven't caught up. Here's what to say, what to drop, and how to show up in the room.

1

Say "person with disability"

The language of the RPwD Act, 2016. It puts the person first. "Disabled person" is also respectful.

2

Ask, don't assume

People describe themselves differently. If you're not sure, ask how they'd like to be referred to, then use it.

3

Describe, don't define

Mention a disability only when it's relevant. "Priya, our finance lead" is how you introduce Priya.

Say this, not that

Instead of	Say
Handicapped, the disabled	Person with disability
Differently abled, specially abled	Person with disability
Divyang, viklang, apahij	Person with disability, or simply their name
Normal person, able-bodied	Person without disability
Suffering from, victim of	Has, lives with
Wheelchair-bound, confined to a wheelchair	Wheelchair user
Deaf and dumb, mute	Deaf person
Mentally retarded, slow	Person with intellectual disability
Mad, crazy, psycho	Person with a mental health condition
Special needs	Access needs, or name the actual need
Langda, andha, behra, pagal	Never, not even as a joke
"So inspiring" for ordinary things	Praise the work, like you would for anyone

In the room

Talk to the person, not the interpreter, parent or companion next to them.

Ask before you help. If they say no, that's the answer.

Hands off the wheelchair, cane or hearing aid. It's personal space.

Sit down for a longer chat with a wheelchair user, so you're at eye level.

Say your name when you walk up to a blind colleague, and before you speak in meetings.

Let people finish. Don't complete their sentences.

Skip "What happened to you?" If someone wants to share, they will.

Make access the default. Captions on, slides shared early, accessible venue booked.

If you get it wrong

You will, at some point. Everyone does. Say sorry once, use the right word next time, and move on. The goal isn't perfect vocabulary. It's a workplace where people with disabilities don't have to spend energy correcting others before they can get on with their work.

Where does your organisation stand on disability inclusion?

Take the free BELONG self-assessment, or book a free call to plan a sensitisation session for your team.

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