# Supporting Inclusive Communities

## MODULE 9:
## USING LANGUAGE TO CREATE INCLUSION

Language is a powerful tool when it comes to building relationships, which are the foundations of inclusive communities. Depending on the words we choose, coupled with our body language, we can create an environment of inclusion or discrimination. The way we language experiences and communicate with others is a reflection of our values, personality, culture, and society. This week we delve into inclusive language and provide tips and ideas for using language to create open and welcoming League spaces.

**What is inclusive language?**

Queen's University defines inclusive language as language that "respects and promotes all people as valued members of society."  It requires using vocabulary that is free from sexist, racist, ageist and other discriminatory language. Inclusive language is not the same as political correct language because folks from different communities may or may not identify with politically correct descriptors or terms. A good example of this appears when we explore the relationship between Canada and Indigenous peoples. Many of the historical legal or "politically correct" terms used to refer to Indigenous populations were imposed on them by colonizers. As a result, these political terms, when imposed without direct consultation with Indigenous peoples, do not accurately reflect the identity and culture of Indigenous peoples.

**Why does our word choice matter?**

Language is not neutral. The way we describe people and their identities are biased by our own beliefs, values, experiences and knowledge. As a result, the terms we use to describe others and language our experience can represent more than just a word. Words can be a symbol of colonial histories, power dynamics, marginalization and more.  If we aren't mindful, we can unintentionally discriminate, carry on stereotypes, or oppress certain groups in our communities. Hence, being intentional with the words we use is important to building relationships and creating spaces that invite folks into our Community League Movement. In the next few pages, we offer some suggestions for incorporating inclusive language into your Community League Movement.

**\*Activity\* Reflect on the following scenario, what would you do?**

You speak to a person who you think is named Kelly on the phone, confirming they are coming to your board meeting to talk about a new City of Edmonton initiative. You don't have any other information about Kelly. While setting up for the board meeting, you place out name cards for all the board members with their names and pronouns to make it easier for Kelly to interact with your board. Another board member suggests you make one for Kelly so they feel included too, should you?

In this scenario, while the fellow board member had good intentions, you don't know enough about Kelly to make a name card. Consider, there are so many ways to spell the name Kelly. Creating a name card on Kelly's behalf without Kelly specifying their pronounces or name spelling, means your are making assumptions about Kelly with may or may not be true. As we learnt <u>in module 6</u>, incorrect assumptions can cause a break in the relationship between Community Leagues and their members. The best way to handle this scenario would be to get Kelly to fill in a name card when they entered the meeting. This way you're creating space for them to share how they'd like to be referred as.

**Tips for creating space to ask and not assume**

- When it comes to introductions instead of introducing people have them introduce themselves. Saying something like *"Hi everyone let's start with a round of introductions, the person on your left will go next. I'll go first, my name is __ and my pronouns are __."*
- If someone introduces themselves and your forget how to pronounce their name don't be afraid to ask. You can say something like "*Hi there, I just want to make sure I'm pronouncing your name correctly, can you repeat it for me? Thanks.*"
- If you're in a position like an AGM where you have to introduce people ask folks being introduced to write out the pronunciation of words you aren't sure how to say like their name or ethnicity.

**Special considerations when it come to online programming**

With in-person programming you can gesture to folks to introduce themselves or comment. But this becomes quite difficult online. Here are some additional tips to the ones provided above that can help:

- If using a video conferencing software like Zoom, get participants to rename themselves to their preferred name and pronouns. <u>Here's a link</u> on how to do this (the same instructions work on RingCentral-EFCL's video conferencing platform).
- If your League is hosting a big meeting where there isn't time for everyone to introduce themselves, ask folks to introduce themselves when they first speak.
  - If you're facilitating a session you can ask folks to <u>raise their virtual hand</u> when they want to speak and then say something like " *I see a hand is raised, if that's you feel free to introduce yourself and ask your question.*"

**\*Activity\* Reflect on the following scenario.**

A League member approaches you complaining that their neighbour installed a new fountain in their back yard that is very noisy and runs until 12am. What additional information do you need to help your fellow League Member have a restorative conversation with their neighbour? Would a physical descriptor of a neighbour help?

Our society is such that we tend to describe ourselves using personal characteristics (in comparison to more collectivist cultures found in the Eastern parts of the world who place more emphasis on the roles people play within a group). The way we describe ourselves is also the way we describe others, which often includes providing personal or physical characteristics like "Jamie is the upbeat neighbour who always wears glasses and a sun hat." The personal attributes that stick out to us about a person are a reflection of our own biases, culture, values and experiences. So by describing someone through their physical attributes, we are making assumptions about what elements define them. In addition, using physical features to describe someone, especially if it's in the context of a problem or concern, can lead to reiterating hurtful stereotypes about a population that aren't true.

Also, try to not use categories for ethnicity or sexuality as nouns when describing people, like "the Canadians", as this can lead to stereotyping and erases the diversity that is present within these identities.

To summarize: Avoid describing people on the basis of their physical attributes, including age, race, disability, gender, and clothing, unless these are necessary in the context or to the narrative. Instead, focus on the action or behaviour (in the scenario it was the noisy fountain).

- For example, mentioning that a Community Member uses a wheelchair would be appropriate if you League was writing a report on how accessible your Community Hall is.

**\*Activity\* Reflect on the following scenario.**
You're driving past your Community League Hall when you see a sign advertising a "Family BBQ" next weekend. What does the term family mean to you?

In our attempt to be inclusive we sometimes use words that we think are inviting, but actually might be read as exclusive to some groups in the community. For example, most folks would assume that a family-friendly barbecue is a bbq where there are activities and events for all ages. However, single folks in your neighbourhood might not see themselves as invited to a family barbecue because their definition of a family might be a household that includes parents and children. As such, be clear when you're advertising events who the target audience is so that folks know they are welcome to come. If your barbecue is open to folks of all ages, promote it as an "all ages barbecue" or "a barbecue where everyone is welcomed."

Another example is the use of the word "couples." If your Community League is running a couples dancing class define what that is. Is it a dancing class for married spouses, or a class where anyone can join as long as they bring a dance partner? It might seem counter-intuitive to define the target group or population, but if you don't, people will make their assumptions about who's invited based on their definitions and knowledge. This can lead to folks in your community unintentionally excluding themselves from events. Also, when you clearly define the target audience, it then becomes easier to keep track of who in the community you are serving, and who is not being served. That information can be useful when your League decides to run a new program or tweak existing ones.

We've only touch the surface in this module when it comes to inclusive language. There are so many other considerations to make, however the most important thing to remember is to always ask people how they'd like to be identified.

When it comes to print or marketing materials, sometimes it's not possible to get a community member of an underrepresented group to proofread or given suggestions before an event. If that happens no worries, below are some resources that can help you tweak your language to be more inclusive. For example, using the term "folks" instead of "guys."

- University of Victoria Inclusive Language Resource
- Queen's University Inclusive Language Tips
- Guidelines on Using Inclusive Language in the Workplace by the BC Government
- Correct terminology to use when referring to Indigenous populations in Canada

**This week's reflection:**

- When it comes to inclusive language, what is one word, phrase or strategy you will try starting today to incorporate into your own vocabulary? It could be getting into the habit of asking people to introduce themselves with their pronouns, or using the term "folks or friends" over "guys or gals." Starting small is the easiest way to make changes to the way we describe and language experiences.
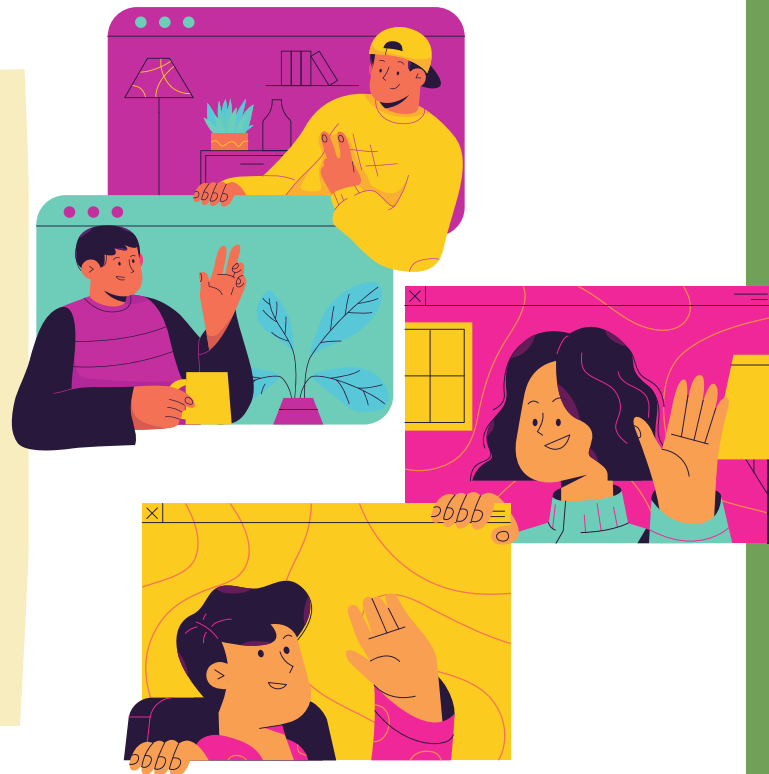
**Note about making a mistake:**

- We're all human and thus we will use the wrong word or phrase from time to time. It's okay if this happens. The most important thing is to recognize that you've made someone feel excluded and to have a restorative (or relationship building) conversation where you acknowledge your mistake and apologize.
- Sometimes we use or phrases that we don't recognize to be harmful because no one else has told us otherwise. Hence it's important to create a culture where people feel invited and empowered to speak up if they feel hurt by the language used so that your League can work towards incorporating more inclusive language in the future.

We'll talk more about having restorative conversations in a future module.