

How to Respectfully Navigate Tricky DE&I Conversations

Talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion can feel tricky as a coach: You want to get it right, but you're not sure what exactly to say. And it's understandable: The [language used in the DE&I space evolves](#), and you may be worried about getting something wrong. But ignoring the topic entirely can be much more damaging to your team than making an honest mistake about pronouns versus preferred pronouns.

Here, [TrueSport Experts](#) Kevin Chapman, PhD, clinical psychologist and founder of The Kentucky Center for Anxiety and Related Disorder; Nadia Kyba, MSW, President of Now What Facilitation; and Michele LaBotz, sports medicine physician, share how to navigate these potentially tricky conversations and explain a few specific examples of the ways language has changed in recent years.

Language is constantly evolving

We often think of language as static, but the reality is that it's always evolving. Consider the pronoun 'they.' In recent years, 'they' has shifted from being plural to being [grammatically appropriate to use in the singular](#). "People will try to say that using 'they' as a personal pronoun isn't grammatically correct," says Kyba. "But that's not true anymore. And maybe more importantly, if a person is requesting that they be referred to as 'they,' then the respectful course of action is to use that pronoun."

Don't avoid conversations for fear of being wrong

It's tempting to avoid conversations around gender, sexuality, race, ableism, or ethnicity altogether to [avoid using the wrong term or phrase](#), but ignoring these topics isn't the solution. Doing so can make athletes feel less seen and less important. "Conversations around things like pronouns can feel tricky, but they need to be had," says Kyba. "It's important that we welcome these conversations about pronouns or appropriate terminology, even if that feels uncomfortable or you worry about getting something wrong."

Shift how you think about potentially offending athletes

You may be reading this and feeling overwhelmed (or even potentially irritated) that you need to remember so many new terms and phrases. But while it's easy to start thinking that young people today are 'easily offended,' focus instead on the fact that your words—or lack of acknowledgement—can truly wound the young people you care about.

Create an open door policy

As a coach, you likely already have an [open door policy in place for your athletes](#). But make sure that your door is open to discuss anything—and let students know that you appreciate their feedback. "Start the season by telling your athletes that you want to make sure you are saying the correct thing and asking students to call you out if you aren't," Kyba says. "That starts the conversation and lets athletes know that you're open to making change. And it sets you up to learn: People are going to be more inclined to talk to you if they think you're willing to be corrected. If you make that clear to your athletes, you're creating safety for those athletes to be able to come to you."

Ask, don't assume

If you're afraid of getting something wrong, the best way to avoid that happening is asking how to get it right. "From a preventative standpoint, what we always talk about with multiculturalism is the importance of asking, as opposed to assuming," says Chapman. "Don't be afraid to ask, 'What is your preference? What should I say when I address you?' It's the single best thing someone can do to avoid stereotyping and micro-aggressing against people."

Examples

If you're wondering how these best practices might apply to you, here are four examples of language shifts that impact our everyday lives.

1. Pronouns (Not 'Preferred' Pronouns)

A few years ago, the conversation around gender revolved around asking for someone's 'preferred pronouns,' meaning she/her, he/him, they/them. The problem with preferred pronouns, though, is that it suggests a choice. In this case, it's actually a simple correction. Just ask athletes to share their pronouns. "Rather than asking for preferred pronouns, simply ask what pronouns a person uses," says Kyba. "Recognize that it's not a preference or a choice someone is making. Pronouns are part of a person's identity."

2. Native/First Nations/Native American/Indigenous People

This is an incredibly personal choice for every individual and their specific cultural preferences. And it does change constantly, so in this case, the best option is to ask a person how they prefer to be identified. For example, Kyba explains that in Canada, the term 'First Nations' has been widely accepted for years, but it's an inaccurate term that was created by the government, not by the people it refers to. Many people who are typically referred to as First Nation now prefer the term Indigenous people. "However, it should be noted that some groups may have another preference, so if a person tells you they'd prefer the term Native American versus Indigenous American, always default to how the person prefers to be identified," says Kyba.

3. Unhoused versus Homeless

Shifting away from the phrase 'homeless' is incredibly important. "The problem with the phrase 'homeless' is that it puts the responsibility on the person without a home, rather than on society as a whole," says Kyba. "Being homeless indicates a certain sense of failing on the part of the person who is without a home. This is especially important for young people: Is it a teenager's fault if they don't have a home? Absolutely not." Because of this, using the term 'unhoused' is more appropriate. Beyond that, avoid phrases like 'he looks homeless' or 'dressing like a hobo,' since comments like those pass a certain judgment on people who are currently without a home.

4. Not using 'crazy' or 'insane' in casual conversation

You've likely heard about this one already, but it bears repeating since it's still very common to use 'crazy' or 'insane' to indicate something surprising, wild, or huge. It's also common to use either phrase to suggest someone is acting out of character (e.g., 'You're acting crazy.') But using terms like 'crazy,' even outside of the context of mental health, can be triggering to those who are struggling with mental health, says Kyba. Those phrases make light of mental health problems.

What to do if you get it wrong

Even as you work to choose the right words and try to avoid saying the wrong things, there's a good chance that you will get something wrong, especially as language continues to evolve. But there's a graceful way to get something wrong and learn from it, rather than acting defensively and potentially alienating athletes.

"Make sure that your athletes feel comfortable correcting you, so that you can get things right in the future," says Kyba. "And when you are corrected, be grateful for the corrections and apologize. It can be a really awkward moment for you and for the athlete but try to see it as a positive that your athletes trust you."

Chapman agrees and adds that acknowledging you got something wrong is critically important. "It's so important to acknowledge that you got something wrong: too many times people sweep it under the rug," he says. "You can say something like, 'I'm sorry that I made an assumption. I'm not knowledgeable in that area. Can you forgive me for that and help me understand it better?' Own the mistake and ask for help."

And lastly, when you do apologize, make the apology count. And this applies whether you got something wrong out of ignorance, or you got something wrong despite your best efforts to get it right. "Remember that being wrong is still wrong no matter what your intention was," says LaBotz. "The important part is the effect of what you said was, not the intent of what you said. You may have intended one thing, but the effect was totally different."

Why does that matter? Because if you try to remain on the moral high ground of having the 'right' intent, your apology may be hollow. "You'll often hear people say, 'I'm sorry, but...' and then have their excuse. That 'but' negates the apology. A bad apology like that is worse than no apology because the bad apology puts the blame back on the recipient."

Instead, [take ownership for your mistake and the effect you had](#)—no matter what your original intent was. "Admit your misstep and apologize for it," says LaBotz. "Initially, this might feel as though you're giving away power, but admitting your misstep adds to the respect that your athletes have for you."

"Teams that are more inclusive have better outcomes, both in terms of their actual success in competition, but also in terms of the success of individual athletes," LaBotz adds. "There's better camaraderie, and that creates a better atmosphere for athletes to succeed in both life and sport."

Takeaway

It can feel hard to start conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion, but these conversations are important and help athletes to feel safe and seen. Understand that language is constantly evolving and changing, and make an effort to stay current. Tell your athletes that you want to get things right, ask for their corrections, and apologize if you do get things wrong.



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