The Importance of Concious Word Choice

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Words Matter

- This is not a surprise, we have all been in a situation where somebody (a friend, a colleague, a family member, a stranger) says something in a way that stings, that we find offensive

- Few of us seek to be hurtful, but our choice of a phrase or word can inadvertently cause offense or hurt

- Language and the meaning of words is constantly evolving - word choice is about being conscious and intentional, **perfection is not the expectation**

Evolution of Meaning

- Consider the term 'gay'

- The original primary meaning in English was "joyful" or "carefree", related to gaiety - e.g. the 1890's are still often referred to as "The Gay Nineties"

- Secondary meaning was acquired already in the 17th century - but in relation to prostitution (brothel = "gay house")

- Meaning further evolved to refer to sexual orientation toward the early/mid-20th century

- Word usage continued to evolve and gained a pejorative meaning in the 1970's to present day - now associated as an adjective to mean "boring", "lame", or "rubbish" - implicitly associates a negative attribute with a group of people

- This is a well-known example, and there is really no excuse for not having awareness and using 'gay' in a pejorative manner

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Overt examples of pejorative word usages

Words associated with physical and mental conditions: lame, dumb, gimp, midget, pyscho, insane, OCD, idiotic, crazy …

Use of pejorative stereotypes: "_ like a girl"

Words associated with specific ethnic groups, historical groups, gender groups, etc.: Nazi, gypped, N-word, Hillbilly, redneck

Be Mindful of History

- There are many common phrases with cruel origins, double-meanings or that are examples of cultural appropriation – again, awareness is the key

  - Master / slave
  - Blacklist / whitelist; blackballed, black mark
  - Indian giver, Indian summer
  - Peanut gallery
  - Grandfathered in
  - Sold down the river
  - Low man on the totem pole

  - Off the reservation
  - Lynching or lynch mob
  - Cakewalk
  - Spirit animal
  - "No can do"
  - ...

A Few General Tips

Avoid playing doctor:

- "That's bonkers!" ⟹ "That's irrational!"
- "What a crazy idea!" ⟹ "That idea seems impractical."

Always start from people:

- "The handicapped.." ⟹ "People with disabilities..."
- "The blind, deaf..." ⟹ "People who are blind, deaf..."

Thank you!

Additional information/examples:

- https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/625916/racist-origins-common-phrases

- https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/06/us/racism-words-phrases-slavery-trnd/index.html

- https://www.huffpost.com/entry/common-words-phrases-racist-origins-connotations_l_5efcfb63c5b6ca9709188c83

Remember to get in touch with us if you have any comments, ideas for topics, etc.

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