

Inclusive Communication and Language

Fostering Inclusive Services Through Communication

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Introduction to the Inclusive Communication and Language Standard

Inclusive communication is fundamental to fostering a supportive and respectful environment for all individuals, particularly those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The Inclusive Communication and Language Standard is designed to guide organizations in the use of language that promotes dignity, inclusivity, and respect in all forms of communication, both internal and external.

This standard draws upon established frameworks like the **CQL Basic Assurances Manual**, specifically Factor 2: *Dignity and Respect*, Indicator 2a, which emphasizes the importance of treating people as individuals first. This principle is central to ensuring respectful interactions and fostering an inclusive culture.

While the broader community may reflect diverse preferences for person-first or identity-first language and varying slang, this standard promotes a **person-first approach** in regulation and standardization. Person-first language, such as "person with autism" instead of "autistic person," highlights the individual over the condition and ensures alignment with best practices in professional and organizational settings.

The goal of this standard is to encourage the adoption of person-centered, respectful language that moves away from harmful or outdated terms and toward communication that highlights the strengths, individuality, and rights of every person.

The structure of this standard is divided into two key parts:

- **Part 1: Ableism We Need to Unlearn**
Unlearning ableism is essential for creating inclusive workplaces, as language significantly impacts how people with disabilities are perceived and treated. This part focuses on identifying and eliminating ableist language that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. It outlines the terms and phrases that shall be avoided to ensure dignity and respect for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).
- **Part 2: Positive Language and Inclusive Terminology**
Language plays a powerful role in shaping perceptions and interactions. This part ensures that all staff and stakeholders use person-centered, respectful language that reflects a commitment to inclusivity for all individuals, regardless of their abilities or conditions. It emphasizes the use of positive, inclusive language that promotes dignity and respect, and provides examples of preferred terminology to create a more inclusive environment.

These lists of terms in **Part 1** and **Part 2** are open and evolving. As practices and understandings of inclusivity and respect continue to develop, new examples may be

By implementing these guidelines, organizations can contribute to a more inclusive society, where everyone, regardless of ability, is treated with the respect and dignity they deserve.

To clarify the implementation of this standard, the following modalities are defined:

- These definitions ensure that the requirements and recommendations within this standard are clear and actionable for all stakeholders involved, facilitating effective communication and alignment across the organization.

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This Fig.1 visualizes the key principles of the **Inclusive Communication and Language Standard**. At the center is the core concept of **Inclusive Communication**, with surrounding circles representing the fundamental principles that contribute to creating an inclusive environment. These principles include:

- **Unlearning Ableism:** Recognizing and removing harmful language that perpetuates negative stereotypes.
- **Promoting Dignity and Respect:** Focusing on the strengths and individuality of people with disabilities, using respectful language.
- **Commitment to Inclusivity:** Ensuring inclusive language is integrated across all forms of communication within the organization.

The connections between these principles represent how they work together to promote a culture of respect, equality, and inclusion. This visualization serves as a guide to understanding the interconnectedness of these key principles and their role in fostering an inclusive environment for all.

2. Part 1: Ableism We Need to Unlearn

2.1 Key Principles

1. **Avoiding Casual Use of 'Crazy' or 'Insane':** These terms trivialize mental health conditions and reinforce negative stereotypes. Employees shall avoid their use in all settings.
2. **Eliminating the Term 'Special' for Disabled People:** Though it may seem positive, this term can be condescending. Employees shall avoid referring to people with disabilities as 'special,' as it reinforces the idea of needing special treatment.
3. **Focusing on Abilities, Not Limitations:** Language should focus on the person's strengths and individuality, avoiding a narrow focus on what they cannot do.
4. **Avoiding the 'Tragedy' Narrative:** Disability shall not be described as inherently tragic, as it reduces the individual to their condition rather than their personhood.
5. **Avoiding 'Normal' as a Comparison:** The term 'normal' implies that individuals with disabilities are abnormal. Employees shall avoid creating a division between 'normal' and 'disabled' individuals.
6. **Avoiding the Phrase 'Suffering from [Condition]':** This phrase assumes all disabled individuals experience their condition as suffering, which is often not the case. Employees shall avoid this language.
7. **Avoiding Phrases Like 'Everyone is a Little Bit [Condition]':** These statements trivialize the experiences of individuals with specific conditions like ADHD or autism. Employees shall avoid using these phrases.

8. **Avoiding Referring to Disabled People as 'Inspirations' for Ordinary Activities:** Referring to disabled people as 'inspirational' for performing everyday tasks should be avoided, as it can be patronizing.
 9. **Avoiding Disability as a 'Personal Shortcoming':** Disability is a natural part of human diversity, not a flaw. Employees shall avoid framing disability as a failure or weakness.
 10. **Avoiding Terms Like 'Brave for Just Existing':** Describing disabled individuals as 'brave' for living their lives diminishes their personhood by treating their existence as extraordinary. Employees shall avoid this language.
 11. **Avoiding Jokes About Disability:** Jokes about disabilities reinforce harmful stereotypes. Employees shall not trivialize the experiences of individuals with disabilities by making them the punchline of jokes.
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2.2 Conclusion for Part 1

By unlearning ableist language, we foster a more respectful, supportive, and inclusive society for people with disabilities. The steps outlined in **Part 1** are vital to creating a culture where individuals with disabilities are respected, valued, and treated as equals.

3. Part 2: Positive Language and Inclusive Terminology

3.1 Key Principles

1. **Person-First Language:** Individuals shall always be referred to by their preferred names and titles. People shall not be identified by their disability but rather described using person-first language, such as “a person with [condition]” rather than “a [condition] person.”
2. **Promoting Dignity and Respect:** Language used shall recognize and highlight the strengths and capabilities of individuals with disabilities in all communications.
3. **Person-Centered Communication:** Employees should avoid defining individuals solely by their challenges and instead emphasize their unique strengths.
4. **Preferred Language in Professional Communications:** Outdated or offensive terms such as 'special needs' shall not be used. Employees shall instead use preferred terms like 'individuals with disabilities' or 'people with IDD.'
5. **Commitment to Inclusivity:** All internal and external communications shall promote a positive and inclusive image of individuals with disabilities.

3.2 Examples of Positive Language (Open List)

Inappropriate/Outdated Language	Positive Language (Preferred)
Special Needs	Individuals with Disabilities
Handicapped	Person with a Disability
Suffering from [Condition]	Living with [Condition]
Autistic Person	Person with Autism
Wheelchair-Bound	Wheelchair User
Mentally Retarded	Person with an Intellectual Disability
The Disabled	People with Disabilities
Victim of [Condition]	Person with [Condition]
Neurodiverse Person	Neurodivergent Person

3.3 Conclusion for Part 2

By integrating positive, person-centered language in all forms of communication, organizations ensure that individuals with disabilities are recognized for their strengths and abilities, fostering an inclusive and respectful environment that values diversity and promotes dignity for all.

4. Training Modules

To ensure compliance with this standard, employees at all levels will undergo training tailored to their roles:

1. **Direct Support Workers and Other Employees:** Training shall be developed for direct support workers and other employees to help them understand and apply the principles of inclusive language in their interactions with individuals with IDD.

2. **Managers (Including HR, Senior Management, and Program Directors):** Specific training shall focus on ensuring that job postings, public communications, and recruitment processes align with the standard.
 3. **Public Relations and HR Staff:** Training shall be developed for public-facing staff to ensure that communications and hiring practices reflect a commitment to respect and inclusivity.
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Overall Conclusion

Combining the principles of **Ableism We Need to Unlearn** and **Positive Language and Inclusive Terminology** under the 'Inclusive Communication and Language Standard' creates a unified approach that guides employees in avoiding harmful language and promoting a respectful and inclusive workplace.

The lists of terms in **Part 1** and **Part 2** are open and evolving. As practices and understandings of inclusivity and respect continue to develop, new examples may be added to these lists to ensure that the language we use remains current and reflective of the values of inclusion and dignity for all.

Annex 1: Language Review Example – Non-Compliance with Person-Centered Standards




This annex provides a real-world example of commonly used language that does **not comply** with the AMSI Inclusive Communication and Language Standard (ICL1) or with CQL Basic Assurances®. It is intended for use in training and internal communication improvement efforts.

Non-Compliant Example from Practice:

“Great, if I send you a report for him, do you think you can have him sign it?”



This sentence was directed from a manager to a Direct Support Worker (DSW), referring to a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Why This Language Is Not Person-Centered:

-  Refers to the individual as “him” rather than using the person’s name.
 -  Leaves the person out of the conversation—treating them as a task, not a participant.
 -  Suggests the person is being directed, not making a choice or giving informed consent.
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Standards Violated:

CQL Basic Assurances®

- *Indicator 2a (Dignity and Respect)*: “People are treated respectfully.”
-  Requires respectful, individualized communication.
- *Indicator 1c (Rights Protection and Promotion)*: “People are supported to exercise their rights.”
-  Requires that people are involved in their own decision-making.

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- *Part 1: Ableism We Need to Unlearn*
 - Use of impersonal and controlling phrasing reflects ableist assumptions.
 - *Part 2: Positive Language and Inclusive Terminology*
 - Person-centered language requires using names and emphasizing choice and autonomy.
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Recommended Alternatives:

“If I send the report, do you think [Name] would like to review and sign it?”

“Could you check with [Name] if they’re comfortable signing the report after reviewing it?”

These alternatives:

-  Use the person’s name
 -  Emphasize their role in decision-making
 -  Reflect dignity, respect, and self-determination
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Why This Matters:

Clear, person-centered communication:

- Reinforces the autonomy and rights of people receiving support
 - Aligns with CQL and OPWDD expectations
 - Supports a culture of inclusion, dignity, and respect in all daily interaction
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Special Note

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