

## 6.1 What are we actually saying?

Step 6. Map      Time: 30-40 min      2-20 participants

### Summary

Language influences how we understand the world and impacts how we think. Words can influence how we think people of different genders should be. It can also affect our expectations of what jobs and roles people of a certain gender can or cannot have. The theme of this exercise is therefore gendered words in working life.

This exercise can be carried out both physically and digitally. If the exercise is carried out digitally, it is advantageous to have a digital meeting tool that allows participants to be divided into digital group rooms. To carry out the exercise in the best possible way, it is preferable to use a whiteboard or flipchart for physical practice or a digital whiteboard (ex. Jamboard or Miro) for digital practice.

### What to do:

- Appoint a moderator. The moderator has the responsibility to read exercises and lead discussions.
- The moderator goes over the guidelines.
- Do the exercises in the order that they appear. Part 1, part 2 and part 3.
- For part 2 the words contained therein should be written down by the moderator so that the right answers are not revealed.

### Conversation guidelines

- Assume that "everyone" is in the room ("those of us who...").
- Remember that we have different prior knowledge and experience of the themes raised, so show respect.
- Think freely and interpret each other kindly.

## Exercise

Does it matter what we say? Words do not hurt, do they? It can be hard to understand how much words actually impact us. Language and words have an effect on us and can shape perceptions and expectations that we have of each other and uphold societal norms. Words express underlying values that can lead to risks such as exclusion and reminders of who is and is not considered to belong.

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Words can also be gendered. For example, this means that we associate some words more with women or with men while other words may be gender-neutral. This changes over time and not everyone thinks the same about one word. Many words that are supposed to be gender-neutral have been questioned. For example, the term "Man of the match" has been used as a neutral term in sports contexts to designate the best player of the game, regardless of gender. The term was challenged and many argued that it might as well be called "Woman of the match". The suggestion was not well received and today the more neutral expression "Player of the match" is often used, which in terms of language can include people of all genders.

The exercise "What are we actually saying?" is divided into three parts. The aim of the exercise is to create an understanding of how we are affected by choice of words. It is divided into three different practical exercises and reflections. The exercise is also about understanding how we, with small means, can open up for a more inclusive language.

## **Part 1**

Also in working life there are a great amount of words that in one way or another are gendered and linked to stereotypes of a particular gender. For example, the term grandfather-interview is used to describe the interview in a recruitment-process where candidates are to meet the manager's boss. It insinuates that only men can be a senior manager. Other examples of gendered words in the workplace are titles and job roles. DeliveryMAN, fireMAN, foreMAN, cameraMAN, midWIFE. All of these words are intended to appear gender-neutral because they may include people of different genders. However, it is not surprising that the view of a classic fireman is a man or that a midwife is a woman in terms of norms.

### **What to do:**

- Divide all participants into two or several teams
- Give the teams 10 minutes to come up with as many gendered words, associated with working life, as possible. The participants should write down the words on a piece of paper. Most words win
- Collect all words that the groups have come up with and write them down on the physical or digital whiteboard or the flipchart. Discuss in the group if you can come up with neutral variations of the words. It is also possible to come up with neutral versions of the words that are included in the description above.

## Part 2

Studies show that male-coded words and phrases in job advertisements discourage women from applying for male-dominated roles or industries. They feel that they do not fit into the environment or the role. Stereotypically male words describe performance-based qualities and female words often focus on social qualities. This is of course linked to a historical view of males and females where one group has characteristics that the other lacks and vice versa. The company TietoEvy brought in experts to review their job advertisements. When they replaced more masculine and traditional wordings and phrasings with more neutral and inclusive wordings, it resulted in 14% of women applying to the traditionally worded ad while 36% of women applied to the more neutrally worded ad.

### What to do:

- Divide the participants into smaller groups
- Some of the more traditional male-coded words that were switched out in TietoEvy's ads were: Competent, Driven and Independent. The groups should now try to exchange these words to more neutrally coded words
- Gather the groups into one and go through their suggestions of neutrally coded words. (You find the right answers in the end of this exercise)

A long list of requirements in the job ad can also lead to unequal and biased recruitments. Research has shown that on average, men apply for roles where they meet 60% of the requirements while women need to meet 100% to do the same. Participants will now try to work on their own job advertisements.

### What to do:

- Divide the participants into smaller groups.
- Have each group take out some of your workplace's advertisements and search for gender-coded words or other expressions they think might have exclusionary effects. Have them also review how long the list of requirements is and whether all requirements are really necessary.
- Gather all groups and have a whole group discussion about your findings and how you could change them.

## Part 3

There are, of course, words and terms that are not coded by gender but by other grounds of discrimination and that have just as much impact on us and society's norms. For example, the opposites black-listed and white-listed or black work and

# MAKE EQUAL

white work. The words beginning with black refer to someone or something that is undesirable or even illegal, and the words beginning with white refer to something more positive. But why is it called black/white listed and black/white work and can it say something about our values and how we view other people? Another example is the word leg-stretcher. What we mean when we say leg-stretcher is to take a short break. The term leg-stretcher means that we expect everyone to use the break to move and stretch their legs. For a person who uses a wheelchair and does not use their legs, it becomes a reminder of who society is adjusted for.

## **What to do:**

- Read the description of examples for the whole group
- Let the participants reflect a while over the examples that has been read. They can reflect for themselves or in groups:
  1. How does these words affect different people?
  2. How can we try to avoid using terms that are not inclusive or that somehow single out certain groups?
  3. Perhaps you can think of other words and concepts that risk being exclusionary?
- Finally, gather the group's thoughts in a whole group discussion

## **\*Right answers from TietoEvry**

- Competent → Knowledgeable
- Driven → Focused
- Independent → Self-driven