Understanding Pronouns

Pronouns are the language we use in order to refer to other people. In order to avoid assuming someone's pronouns based on factors like appearance, we should routinely share our pronouns and ask for the pronouns of others.

Common Pronouns

Some common pronouns include:

- she/her/hers
- he/him/his
- they/them/theirs

There are also other nonbinary pronouns. Some folks might be open to a combination of pronouns (for example: he/they), or all pronouns.

Assumptions

Assuming someone's pronouns based on their appearance is harmful because by doing so, you implicitly reinforce harmful stereotypes about gender expression.

For example, if someone dresses in a masculine way, that does not necessarily mean that they use he/him/his pronouns. In order to respect each individual's identity, we must ask, not assume, each other's pronouns.

They/Them/Theirs

If someone is non-binary (or does not identify with any gender), they may ask to be referred to as **they/them/theirs**, a gender-neutral pronoun set. While we might typically think of **they/them/theirs** as a plural pronoun, the singular they has been a part of the English language since the 14th century, and is formally accepted in modern standard English as a personal pronoun.

"I enjoy spending time with Dani, they are so much fun!"

Sharing Your Pronouns

Make it a habit to share your own personal pronouns when introducing yourself to someone for the first time. Routinely sharing your pronouns normalizes the practice and fosters an affirming and inclusive environment for all.

"Hi, my name is Jamie and my pronouns are she/her/hers."

What if I make a mistake?

While we always want to strive to use correct pronouns, mistakes can happen. If you mess up, it is best not to dwell on the mistake. Apologize, use the pronoun you meant to use, and move on. "He- sorry, I meant to say, they are eating dinner with us later."

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Context Matters

Although someone might feel comfortable using certain pronouns in some situations, they might not feel safe using them in other contexts.

For example, someone might be openly transgender with friends, but not at work or with family. Clarifying when it is appropriate to use someone's pronouns allows them to maintain autonomy over where and with whom they share their identity, and keeps them safe from potentially dangerous situations.

Apologizing

Lingering on your error and over-apologizing only draws attention to an awkward situation and can make the other person feel more uncomfortable. They may feel pressured to console you and say, "It's okay," even though it's not, as misgendering someone can be very harmful. If a mistake happens, apologize, correct yourself, and move on.

Practice Makes Perfect

You can practice using pronouns by telling simple stories.

For example, "I gave a presentation today with Jon. They did a great job designing the slides!"

How to Ask for Someone's Pronouns

It is important to ask for someone's pronouns rather than assuming which pronouns they use:

- "What pronouns do you use?"
- "May I ask what pronouns you use?"
- "When I refer to you, what pronouns should I use?"

You should also ask if they are comfortable sharing their pronouns so that you do not pressure someone to "out" themselves.

Pronouns in the Workplace

Sharing pronouns at work is a step toward an inclusive and affirming workplace environment. At the start of meetings, consider going around the room and have each person introduce themselves and their pronouns. If working virtually, add your pronouns next to your screen name.

Include your pronouns in your email signature, and ask internal and external contacts for their pronouns.

Email Signature Template

Adding pronouns to your email signature and business cards are an important way to show you understand the importance of pronouns. Here is an example:

Sam Santo
They/Them/Theirs
Administrator

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