



## JUNE IS PRIDE MONTH

# UNDERSTANDING PRONOUNS

**Why these little words can have a BIG IMPACT on workplace inclusivity**

As more companies invest in LGBTQ inclusion and gender-inclusive workplaces, pronouns (he, she, they, etc.) have become a significant focal point. From pronouns listed on email signatures and business cards to pronoun buttons worn by retail employees, the business community has quickly embraced these practices.

People use pronouns in place of an individual's name to avoid repeating the same word over and over again. Pronoun references permeate our everyday conversations, on the phone, in person and over email.

When we share our personal pronouns with others, we are communicating the third-person singular pronouns that we'd like others to use when referring to us in conversation. These pronouns may change over the course of one's life and are not necessarily tied to sex assigned at birth.

Much like our individual names, pronouns are tied to our deepest sense of identity. They articulate who we are and how the outside world should recognize and address us. Consider the feeling you encounter when someone calls you by the wrong name.

Making the wrong assumption about someone's gender identity or expression, and by extension their pronouns, can be insulting, harmful, and, if done repeatedly, constitute workplace bias or harassment.

Unfortunately, many of those who know the importance of correct pronoun usage are often those who have most experienced the pain and discomfort associated with being misgendered.

Utilizing inclusive pronoun practices in the workplace is vital in building organizational cultures of respect and belonging not just for the LGBTQ community, but for anyone who in some way challenges the traditional model of gender identity and expression.

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# TERMS YOU *may not* KNOW

Knowing the right words and phrases to say is an important part of the work toward full LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) equality.

- **CISGENDER:** Refers to those individuals whose internal sense of gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.
- **GENDER EXPRESSION:** Gender expression refers to external characteristics and behaviors that are socially defined as either masculine or feminine, such as dress, grooming, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions. Social or cultural norms can vary widely and some characteristics that may be accepted as masculine, feminine, or neutral in one culture may not be assessed similarly in another.
- **GENDER IDENTITY:** The term “gender identity” – distinct from the term “sexual orientation” – refers to a person’s innate, deeply felt psychological identification of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s sex assigned at birth (the sex originally listed on a person’s birth certificate).
- **GENDER NONCONFORMING:** Someone whose identity and expression of gender does not ascribe to the gender binary, or, rather, traditional male/female expressions.

- **NON-BINARY:** A gender identity which falls outside of the gender binary, meaning an individual does not identify as strictly female or male. A non-binary person can identify as both or neither male and female, or sometimes one or the other.
- **TRANSGENDER:** A person whose gender identity differs from their sex assigned at birth. A transgender man is someone who was assigned female at birth (AFAB) and identifies as a man. A transgender woman is someone who was assigned male at birth (AMAB) and identifies as a woman.
- **TRANSITIONING:** The term “transitioning” refers to the process through which a person modifies their physical characteristics or manner of gender expression to align with their gender identity. This transition may include hormone therapy, gender affirming surgery, or other procedures and is generally conducted under medical supervision based on a set of standards developed by medical professionals.

*Definitions provided by Out & Equal. Learn more at <https://outandequal.org/toolkits-guides/>*

## Pronouns, from page 1

If you don’t know which pronoun to use when referring to someone else, here are a few basic tenants to follow:

### LISTEN

First, listen to the pronouns others use when referring to the individual. People who know the person well may likely use the correct person. While this is not a foolproof mechanism of learning an individual’s pronouns, it can provide useful clues on how to address someone respectfully.

### INTRODUCE YOURSELF

If you have not yet met the individual, be proactive in introducing yourself with your name and pronouns. This gives the other person a space and opportunity to share their own name and pronouns.

### ASK

In introductions, it is also okay to ask the individual how they would like to be addressed. For example, you might say, “Hi, my name is Sarah. I go by she/her pronouns. How should I refer to you?” If you have already met the individual

and asked what pronouns they use, but are still unsure, it is okay to ask again to gain clarity. However, it is better to do so in-private versus a group setting so as not to draw additional attention to the conversation.

In any of these cases, be prepared to provide an explanation as to why sharing pronouns is important, as some people may be less familiar with the concept of sharing personal pronouns. For example, you might say, “Sharing pronouns is an important practice because we often assume an individual’s pronouns based on appearance and behavior. However, these assumptions can be incorrect and limiting – so, the only way to truly know and ensure we are respecting our colleagues is by asking and/or implementing foundational and inclusive practices around pronouns.”

### KEEP IT OPTIONAL

Sharing pronouns should be a voluntary activity as some individuals may not be ready to do so.

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## ALLY GUIDING BEHAVIORS

Out & Equal, a California-based organization that works on LGBTQ workplace equality, outlines these guiding behaviors for those becoming allies to LGBTQ colleagues.

**Find common ground:** When discussing relationships, marriage, parenting, and family, focus conversations on common ground, beliefs, hopes, and dreams.

**Validate when others share:** Hold in confidence and validate another person’s feelings when they share issues around orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

**Refocus conversations:** Tactfully refocus conversations with coworkers in a more accurate, supportive, and inclusive directions.

**Call out humor:** Tactfully call out “humor” or comments aimed at or about someone because they are LGBTQ.

**Acknowledge and ask for help:** When talking with someone who is LGBTQ, acknowledge and ask for help when not certain how to talk about something.