

PRONOUNS

Pukapuka mahi mō ngā kaimahi
Workbook for employees

Understanding pronouns

Personal pronouns – how we refer to ourselves and others. We use them every day, although we often don't realise. It can be a daunting subject for trans and cisgender people alike, although the challenges are different. For trans and non-binary people, uncertainty over whether others will correctly use their pronouns can be really challenging, especially if their gender or gender expression does not match binary expectations. Whereas uncertainty over how to sensitively ask someone's pronouns and fears around misgendering (using pronouns that do not match someone's gender), can be uncomfortable.

Today's goal is to understand how to navigate pronoun use and visibility, to support trans and non-binary coworkers.



“By claiming that our words are too hard to understand, the media perpetuates the idea that WE are too hard to understand and suggests that there's no point in trying.”

C.N. Lester, Classical musician

How much do you know about pronouns?

Mark where you are at on the scale below



Why pronouns are important

Personal pronouns are how we refer to others and like or expect to be referred in the third person:

"He enjoys gardening, his favourite flowers are orchids. You will enjoy talking with him."

"She enjoys gardening, her favourite flowers are orchids. You will enjoy talking with her."

For cis people, when others assume their pronouns, they often assume right. This is a privilege that cis people enjoy. This is not always the case for trans and non-binary people. Assumptions based on how men and women look are shaped by our society and culture. It can mean that those who do not fit these assumptions may be misgendered. This is a particular issue for non-binary individuals, as binary gender expectations do not account for their existence. Although it may feel jarring using pronouns that differ from your expectations, using the right pronouns for someone respects and affirms their gender.

What about non-binary pronouns?

Some people who do not fit the gender binary (he/him & she/her), use gender neutral pronouns. The most common example of this is using the singular, 'they/them'. This does not necessarily mean that they have no gender or are neutral, but their gender is not represented in the gender binary. For some, 'they/them' does not fit and so they may use pronouns including, 'xe/hir' or ze/zim.

"Alex said they would be back soon; I can text them to find out where they are."

"Jase has nearly finished hir project. Xe will send it to you, soon."

It's okay not to know every type of personal pronoun but understanding and respecting the right pronouns for an individual is important. If you are not sure of how to use a person's pronoun, it is okay to ask, respectfully:

"Please could you show me how to use 'ze/hir' pronouns?"

Pronoun visibility

For some trans and non-binary employees, having visible pronouns ensures that they get gendered correctly. However, this can also 'out' them, when it is just trans and non-binary employees sharing their pronouns. Sharing your pronouns in introductions or adding them to your email signature (or even business card!) can feel a bit odd at first but is a valuable way to normalise pronoun visibility.

How do I ask someone about their pronouns?

There is not a universally accepted way to ask someone for their pronouns. Some trans and non-binary people are happy to be asked outright, but others find it intrusive or implying they do not 'pass' as their gender. Sometimes, universally using gender neutral pronouns until told otherwise is suggested. However, this can also single people out and can reduce visibility for non-binary people. So, it can be hard to know how to address this in a sensitive way, without assuming.

If you are meeting someone for the first time, a great way to be sure of which pronouns to use is to introduce yourself with yours:

"My name is Clive and my pronouns are he/him. What about you?"

This allows everyone to share their pronouns without being singled out. It can feel clunky at first, especially if sharing pronouns is new to you, but with practice it will feel natural.

What if someone asks why I shared my pronouns?

You can simply say something like:

"I ask everyone as I don't like to make assumptions about people's gender, and I want to be respectful of how people would like to be addressed."

Some people may not want to share their pronouns at that time, and that is okay.

Making mistakes

We are all human and mistakes happen. Sometimes it takes a bit of time to get used to using different pronouns, but practice will make it easier over time.

What if I misgender someone?

A simple and brief, "I'm sorry, I meant __," and moving on acknowledges that you made a mistake and are sorry for any harm caused, while drawing minimal attention to it. Although it can feel embarrassing, try to avoid explaining why you misgendered them.

If your coworker appears noticeably upset, check in with them privately. It can be tempting to focus on your difficulties with using the right pronouns or asking your co-worker why it was upsetting. But this can put your coworker in a difficult position where they prioritise your feelings over their needs. So, it is important to focus your checking on their needs and how you can support them.

Gendered language is deeply engrained for many of us and unlearning these habits takes time. Willingness to learn and put the effort in to use the right pronouns for your co-workers shows your intent and support.

What if I overhear someone misgendering another person?

It is important to check in with the person being misgendered about whether they are comfortable with you correcting someone misgendering them. They may be comfortable with this in some situations – e.g. if they are not present but may prefer to address the issue themselves and it is important to respect that.

A simple way to correct someone misgendering is to quickly address this in the conversation:

"By the way, I think Josh uses they/them pronouns."

It brings attention to and corrects the mistake, without drawing too much embarrassment. Directing the conversation back to the original topic moves on from the mistake. If you find someone is deliberately misgendering yourself or a co-worker, it might be time to escalate the situation.



“Early in my transition, it was really affirming for me to see friends and co-workers who had known me for many years as a different gender, putting in the effort to use the right pronouns. There was a bit of an adjustment period, but I could tell everyone was really trying.”

Anonymous

Image: <https://www.out.com/health/2019/11/05/singular-they-pronoun-endorsed-american-psychological-association>

Exercises: *Exercise One*

Pronoun practice

Fill in the pronouns for the sentences below:

Example 1: Riley (he/him)

Riley went shopping, because ___ needed broccoli for ___ dinner.

Example 2: Jane (she/her)

Jane was late to work, because ___ car broke down and the tow truck took a while to get to ___.

Example 2: Harry (he/him)

Harry is a spoken word poet. You should come see ___ at ___ next show.

Example 2: Theo (they/them)

Theo said you needed to borrow ___ laptop. ___ said it to get it from ___ desk and give it back to ___ when you have finished.

Considered responses

For the situation below, choose which option you think is best and why. For the other two options, identify why these responses are not ideal.

You accidentally misgender a co-worker while talking about a recent project you both have been working on.

1. "Alex and I have been updating the client databases. She – sorry, he – has been great to work with."
2. "Alex and I have been updating the client databases. She – sorry, I meant he, I'm just not used to it yet. I've known Alex as a girl for so long, I don't mean anything by it, ah this is embarrassing it's just so new to me. I have really enjoyed working with Alex on this project."
3. "Alex and I have been updating the client databases. She – Sorry he has been great to work with. You cannot get upset with me getting it wrong. It is not intentional; it is just hard for me so don't be offended."

Reflect

A coworker you have worked closely with for a few years has recently come out as trans and has asked you to use she/her pronouns. You are having some difficulty using the right pronouns even though you support her and appreciate how important it is. What are some ways that you could become more familiar and comfortable using her pronouns? If you accidentally misgendered her at work, how would you handle this?

Final words on pronouns

Thinking about personal pronouns can seem like a big hurdle, when we tend to use them without even thinking. But bringing our awareness to pronouns and how we use them makes our workplaces more inclusive for trans and non-binary employees. We can achieve this by:

- Increasing familiarity with different pronouns so we feel more comfortable using them when asked.
- Understanding someone using a non-binary pronoun does not necessarily mean they have no gender. They just might not fall within the gender binary.
- If you accidentally misgender someone, apologise, correct and move on. Check in with them privately if you feel they are hurt.
- Normalising pronoun visibility so that trans and non-binary co-workers can comfortably share their pronouns without being singled out.

Getting others' pronouns right is as important as getting others' names right. If someone doesn't know your name, you're fine with them asking and if they get it wrong we wouldn't think twice about letting them know our correct name. If someone deliberately shortens your name or keeps using your wrong name, you might find that quite offensive.

Further resources:

http://www.napavalley.edu/equity/Documents/20180523TransWebinar/trans_ally_workbook_pdf.pdf

<https://pronouns.minus18.org.au/>

<https://thingofthings.wordpress.com/2016/07/25/etiquette-about-accidentally-misgendering-trans-people/>

<https://www.diversitybestpractices.com/six-pronoun-practices-to-build-trans-affirming-workplaces-why-they-matter>

Set an intention

What's one thing that you are committing to do in regards to pronouns? Write or draw this intention below.