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.

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.
If you have already met the individual, how should I refer to you?”

“Hi, my name is Sarah. I go by she/her.

Ask

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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OUT & EQUAL

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.

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