USING WORDS POSITIVELY

Words not only reflect attitudes, but they reinforce and help define them. Words can be used to treat people with respect, or – consciously or subconsciously – to undermine, patronise or exclude them.

The following are some suggestions for good practice, assuming you and your organisation are concerned about treating people respectfully, regardless of age, gender, physical or mental disability, ethnic origin, religion or sexual orientation. In your organisation, regularly review your guidelines to ensure they keep up-to-date with recommended practice and legal requirements.

If in doubt, ask a person how they wish to be addressed. If you were in their shoes, how would you wish to be addressed or described respectfully?

1. Gender:

Gender has come to refer to the sex of an individual not just the use of masculine, feminine or neutral forms in grammar.

The following usages seek to remove gender distinctions or gender dominance:

Use	Rather than
Chair/Chairperson	Chairman/Madam chairman
Host	Hostess
Doctor	Lady doctor
Cleaner	Cleaning lady
Best person for the job	Best man for the job
Humanity, humankind, people	Man, mankind
Police officer	Policeman
Fire fighter	Fireman
Staffed by …	Manned by …
Instruct readers without lecturing them	Instruct the reader without lecturing him
If you want to upgrade your software …	If anyone wants to upgrade his software …

(Using the plural form or 'you' avoids explicitly referring to him or her. Or you could alternate using 'her' and 'him' when referring to different examples.)

2. Disability:

It is easy, inadvertently, to define people by a disability, rather than recognise that this is only one characteristic of them as a multi-faceted person. In any case, we are all 'differently abled.' It is usually wise to avoid giving the impression that a person might be less fortunate, less happy, or present a 'problem', simply because of their disability.

Use	Rather than
Disability	Handicap
Wheelchair user	Confined to a wheelchair
People with disabilities	The disabled

3. Age:

People of all ages ought to be treated respectfully, rather than assumptions made about their physical or intellectual capacity, or their value to society.

You could use	In place of
Older people	Pensioners, the elderly, senior citizens
Young(er) people	Teenagers, kids

4. Race, culture and religion:

'Ethnic group' refers to a grouping of people within society distinguished from other groups by their racial origin and/or their cultural background.

Some guidelines:
• Do not assume that a person's appearance defines their nationality, or their religious or cultural background e.g. that a British person is white, that a Muslim person is non-white.
• Do not automatically use a person's ethnic origin or religion to describe or define them.
• Where it is appropriate to refer to a person's cultural background, use the term favoured by the individual e.g. Asian, African-American, African-Caribbean, Chinese, and so on.
• Avoid using terms that might offend a person's racial, cultural or religious sensibilities.

Use	Instead of
Forename, personal name	Christian name
Mixed heritage	Half caste

5. Sexual orientation:

Do not assume that everyone has the same sexuality.

Some guidelines:
• Avoid giving the impression that a person might be less fortunate, less happy, or present a 'problem', simply because of their sexual orientation.
• Where it is relevant to refer to a person's sexual orientation, use the term preferred by the individual e.g. gay, lesbian, bisexual, and so on.
• Avoid using terms that might offend a person with a particular sexual orientation.

Use	Instead of
Partner	Spouse (unless you know otherwise)
Gay, lesbian, bisexual (if you know)	Homosexual

Trevor Day would welcome feedback to help ensure that the advice given above does encourage good practice in UK organisations. Thank you.