Gender-sensitive Communication

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are generalised images about people within a society. A gender stereotype is a preconceived idea where women and men are assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender.

Stereotypes about gender often take one of two forms. One assumes all members of a category (such as a profession) share a gender, for example the assumption that all company directors are men and all secretaries are women. The other is assuming that all members of a gender share a characteristic, for example believing that all women love to shop or that ‘boys don’t cry’.

These stereotypes hurt people of all genders by placing expectations on what people should be.

In many cases unconscious cultural stereotypes will be expressed though the language we use, meaning people use these expressions even when they do not hold these assumptions. Repeating these stereotypes reinforces the assumptions at their core, therefore you should actively avoid stereotypes in the language you use.

“I need to speak to the secretary - is she in the office?”
Tip: Professions and occupations are often gender stereotyped. Take special care to avoid stereotypes when talking about people’s occupations!

The following pages highlight some instances where you may come across gender stereotypes in language.

- By using gendered pronouns.
- Adding irrelevant information about gender in a description of an individual.
- Assigning gender to inanimate objects.
- Using gender stereotypes to describe objects or events.
- Describing people of different genders using different adjectives (descriptive words).
- Perpetuating stereotypes in non-verbal communication such as images and symbol.