

WATCH YOUR MOUTH

Can't keep up with the latest terminology? Afraid to open your mouth for fear of a back lash? Think the political correctness pendulum has swung too far? You're not alone, but you have little to fear if you just listen to the words people use. A few years ago the government of B.C. rescinded the name of Chinaman Lake after an association of Chinese Canadians petitioned the government. In the papers and over the airwaves people cried: "political correctness run amok" or "what's next? Change the name of English Bay?" But if you ever talk to Chinese Canadians, they'll tell you "chinaman" has always been a derogatory term. Once we find this out, we have a choice of listening to what people have to say or thinking we know better than them.

Respecting workplace human rights doesn't have to include judges, tribunals, or even confrontation. Most employees and customers don't face outrageous human rights issues. Problems usually arise from careless comments or holding onto outdated language that can be changed quite simply. If you listen to the words people use and change your language accordingly, you'll make a big difference in your workplace.

If you get challenged on the words you use, try not to scoff and think "hah, nothing but political correctness." My advice is to leave that thinking to others. Instead, think for yourself and consider why would someone care about certain words? I mean really think about it - very few people want to create a fuss unless there's good reason. Have you ever been told to use "vertically challenged" instead of "short"? Has anyone told you to stop using "man hole cover"? Comedians and political pundits trying to get a laugh, maybe, but not the rest of us. So let's dissect a couple words that get people's attention and perhaps cause some confusion.

Why would someone want to be described as African American instead of Black? Years ago, I asked an African American friend from the States, "So what's the big deal with calling black people black?" He told me to look up the words "black" and "white" in the dictionary, then we'd talk. Here's what my dictionary had to say:

White

The colour of milk, fresh snow, common salt or a swan's plumage

Innocent, unstained, of harmless kind

White-haired or white-headed boy, highly favoured person

White hands, innocent or integrity

White hope, person who is expected to attain renown

White man, person of honourable character and good breeding

White war: war without bloodshed, economic warfare
White witch: uses power for beneficent purposes only

Black

Of hands, clothes dirty

Deadly, sinister, wicked, hateful (black-hearted; black ingratitude; not so black as one is painted, better than one's reputation)

Implying disgrace or condemnation

Presenting tragedy or bitter reality in comic terms (black comedy, humour, joke)

Of goods, etc.: not to be handled by workers on strike

Contravening economic regulations (black market)

In person's black books: out of favour with him

Blacklist (of persons under suspicion, liable to punishment or unfavourable treatment)

Black mail: compel, compulsion, to make payment or action in return for concealment of discreditable secrets, etc.

Black mark (of discredit against one's name)

I got the point. While there are exceptions to the definitions noted above, most people typically use "white" in positive terms and "black" in negative terms. Since that's not going to change for a while, some African American leaders decided it is better to use language that identifies people by heritage rather than by skin colour. White and Black people still use "Black" to describe African Americans, and no one thinks that's a crime, but the above list illuminates why some terms are preferable to others, and why some can make people uncomfortable.

In Canada, both Black Canadian and African Canadian seem to be acceptable terms. There is still going to be confusion about the use of certain words and inconsistencies in our language, hence we may find ourselves in a quandary. Language is constantly changing, however if we are respectful with our terminology, most people will understand if we are willing to learn or when we make mistakes.

Instead of challenging new terminology, try to understand the reasoning behind it. For example, why are we expected to call people "First Nations" instead of "Indian"? Well, when Christopher Columbus stumbled upon North America, he called the people Indians because he was looking for India. I heard one Canadian aboriginal leader say, "Thank goodness Columbus wasn't looking for Turkey." There is still common usage of the words Indian, Native, Aboriginal and First Nations, but the last two are becoming more acceptable than the first two.

Is the business lesson here to never, ever say anything that may bother someone? Of course not. People can handle differences and even

controversies, but they shouldn't have to put up with words that offend. Why let callous words get in the way of a message? If you've got something to say, draw attention to the substance, not to a lack of personal sensitivity. Words are often our first means to connect. Make sure you're making the right connections.

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