ELECTRONIC GUIDE 4

Issues of language
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... the patterns of language do not just reflect inequality. They also actively contribute towards it.  Coates, J. 1988

The use of inappropriate language in user involvement can be deeply upsetting, offensive and confusing to some people. There are no hard and fast rules about the language we should or should not use. What offends one person might be quite acceptable to another. The issue is not about censoring what people can say. Instead it is about trying to be respectful to people and enabling them to be a full and equal part of things.

There are some general rules for good practice dictates which can help ensure that this can happen. Any organisation wanting to ensure they make progress on inclusion, equality and diversity must be aware that the language it uses can, and does, have a major impact on those who they want to engage with.

Labels

Most service users and disabled people have views about how people should talk about them. What is acceptable to one person with a particular experience and view of being a service user, may not be acceptable to someone else. Most people, whether disabled or not, like to be seen as the person that they are not by their particular characteristics of fatness or baldness or whatever. So the first rule is: Why do you need to label people? So don't if possible. Or, as this service user put it:

"Label jars – not people."

People’s choice

The second rule is 'If a situation arises where you do need to label, say because you want to reach a particular group or make sure people who have previously been excluded are now included, then ask the person concerned what their preference is for how they are described or listen carefully to how they describe themselves. Be aware however, that some service users and disabled people may have internalised a negative self image and use negative terms about themselves and it is not appropriate to reinforce such negative language.
Avoid crude categorisations

Try to avoid talking about people as categories. People are not conditions or symptoms. So talk about people who have cerebral palsy rather than as ‘spastic’ or ‘spastics’. Avoid asking people what condition they have, or services they use, unless it is essential to what you are doing. Many people are more than willing to volunteer that they have multiple sclerosis or that they are an older, or have experience of being homeless. Other are not. If they don’t volunteer, don’t ask. What is relevant is the barriers that a particular person faces, for instance in relation to your efforts to involve them or to your organisation and these demand more attention.

“I heard this person talking about JDs and I wondered what he was talking about. Found out he meant ‘juvenile delinquents’. What a nonsense!”

Judgmental statements

Avoid judgemental statements which frame disabled people and other service users in negative terms. For example, talking in terms of people who ‘suffer from’, ‘are afflicted by’, or ‘are’ victims of a condition or impairment. That may or may not be how they see it. This reinforces ideas of service users as dependant and objects of pity, perpetuating stereotypes of them as frail and pathetic. No wonder some contestants in the 2012 London Paralympics were keen to highlight the strength, skill and rough and tumble of their chosen sports. Use ‘wheelchair user’ rather than saying that someone is ‘confined to a wheelchair’ or is ‘wheelchair bound’. A wheelchair, for many, is simply a tool for mobility, rather than a statement of deficiency, just as a car or a pair of shoes are. It just helps you get to from A to B.

Derogatory words

Some words have come to be used as terms of abuse or in a very negative way. Seldom used now but occasionally heard are terms like ‘deaf-mute’ or ‘dumb’. Preferred terms are ‘deaf’, or ‘deaf without speech’. It is perhaps in the mental health field though that the most abusive and devaluing terms still have common currency and crop up...
in ordinary speech, in the media and even in children’s TV programmes. This includes terms like ‘loony’, ‘nutter’, ‘mentalist’ and so on. Some service users have sought to reappropriate such terms to emphasise their nastiness and challenge their power. Non-service users are well advised to steer clear of them.

Collective nouns
Avoid using collective nouns such as ‘the disabled’, ‘the blind’, ‘the old’ and ‘the infirm’. Collective nouns used in this way suggest that, for example, all disabled people form one homogenous group, sharing the same aspirations, dreams, frustrations and desires.

Don’t use phrases such as ‘blind as a bat’, ‘deaf as a door post’ or ‘nutty as a fruit cake’. They are often used as terms of derision, abuse or as jokes. They should not be used and it is irrelevant if a service user is present or not.

It is OK to use everyday words and phrases such as ‘see you later’, ‘I see what you mean’, even if the person can’t actually see, or ‘I’ll be running along then’, or ‘I don’t know how you stand it’ when the person can’t actually stand – And you suddenly realise this

Finally…
Language is always changing and people’s preferences will change. But don’t get tongue tied when talking with a service user, just because you can’t think of the right words, or you think you may have just said the wrong thing. People understand when they know you are trying to behave in inclusive and equal way. At the same time do remember that words do matter and may make a difference to how effectively you communicate with service users.