

CAREER CORNER

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Gender Identity—Some Basics

I called her 'he' and she liked it. No, 'they' liked it. 'They' are non-binary. As we conversed I was corrected when I used gender specific pronouns unacceptable to this person. The personally accepted gender pronoun 'them' or 'they' was pushed forth for my use.

"This is hard for me", I said. "I didn't grow up with this. I really appreciate your patience with me." And so we continued. As necessary 'they' corrected me, in a non-threatening, non-flustered, non-judgemental manner.

After our initial meeting I had to seek information to better understand my new young client. I want to demonstrate that I am truly accepting and need the lingo with which to do so. I wondered: What do I say? What do I not say? Are the correct (and incorrect) words acceptable across the spectrum?

I was surprised by how much information I found on gender identity. The entire spectrum of gender identity is becoming increasingly visible and young people in particular are demanding a broader approach to gender. No longer are the two pronouns, "he" and "she" sufficient. They are too exclusive. To live in one is to exclude the other.

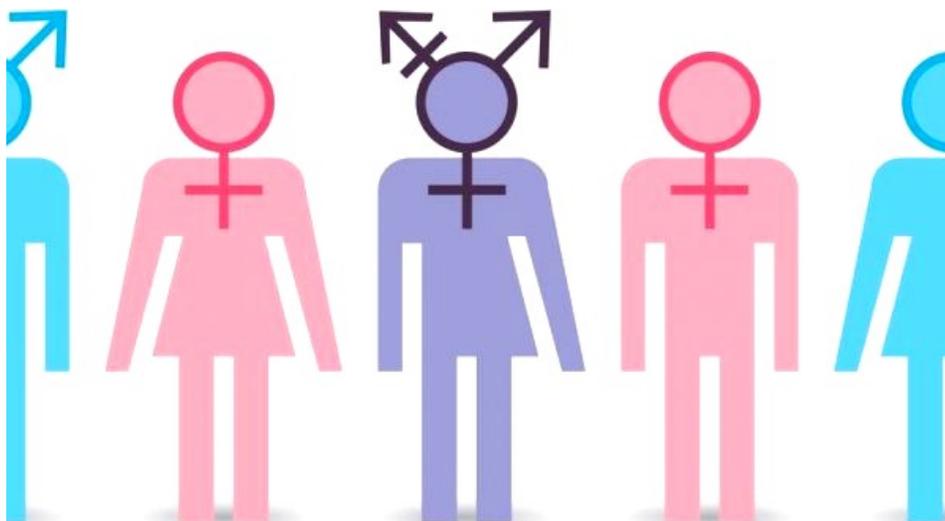
Gender identity is separate from sexual or romantic orientation. And for some individuals this may *add to the* complexity.

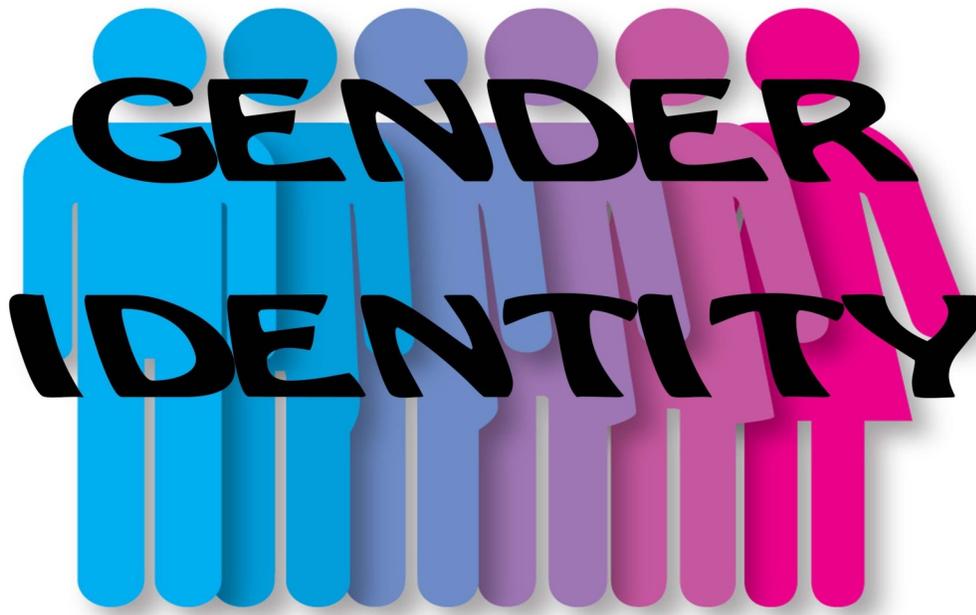
As this thinking emerges into the foreground of society, it requires respect and that respect can be demonstrated in our use of the appropriate pronouns. In addition, to be respectful we must be cautious about the stereotypical words used. Not all Trans or non-binary folks need the validation in our language.

So, here are some definitions, followed by some pointers.

" What matters most is not 'what' you are, but 'who' you are. "

- DaShanne Stokes





Definitions

Transgender: anyone who identifies as male, if designated female at birth; and, anyone who identifies as female, if designated male at birth.

Non-binary: someone who identifies as neither male nor female.

Cisgender: Stereotypical gender identities with which one was born.

Genderqueer: An umbrella term. Sometimes used by non-binary individuals who challenge the distinctiveness of gender categories.

Queer: A term for people of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. This term has a complicated history as a reclaimed slur

They: is a non-binary singular pronoun

Pointers

Ask - Ask everyone their pronouns, not just the person you think might be Trans or non-binary. Make asking pronouns as natural as asking what someone's name is when you meet.

Effort - The only way to get better at using non-binary pronouns, such as 'they' or 'them', is to step outside of your comfort zone. Forget what you think you know about grammar, and make an effort to respect identities by using non-binary pronouns.

Practice - Using the rainbow of gender-neutral pronouns is the only way to build your comfort level with them.

Don't assume - You cannot tell a person's gender identity or pronouns based on how they look. Gender presentation is not the same as gender identity, and neither presentation nor identity is an indicator of what pronouns someone uses. The only way to know what someone's pronouns are is to ask. Also, don't assume that someone's pronouns are fixed. Gender is fluid, and their pronouns may (or may not) change over time.

Include pronouns - In your ice breakers/go-arounds when you start a meeting, include PGP; that is, Preferred Gender Pronouns or Personal Gender Pronouns (the latter being the most inclusive phrasing as does not insinuate respecting someone's pronouns is optional). Are you involved with organizing a conference? Include a place for pronouns on your name tags/badges.

Apologize - Mistakes happen. When you misgender someone say you are sorry, and fix your language moving forward. Don't make a huge deal about your mistake and force the trans/non-binary/genderqueer person to spend a lot of time and energy consoling you for misgendering them.

Non-binary greetings - Instead of saying "ladies" or "guys" to a group of people try to incorporate language that isn't gendered like "folks," "y'all," "friends" etc. into your vocabulary

Correct - When you hear someone use the wrong pronouns for a mutual friend, correct them. Sadly, sometimes the only way to get people to respect non-binary pronouns is if they feel socially shamed into doing so. Part of being a good ally to non-binary, genderqueer, and Trans people in your community is helping other people get the pronouns right.

One size doesn't fit all - As people become more comfortable and familiar with using the non-binary pronoun "they", there seems to be an emerging trend that people will use it as a default pronoun for any non-binary person. "They" is an awesome pronoun, but it does not apply to all and can misgender as much as "he" or "she." It is better to go back to point one and ask.

To sum

Let's all make the effort to be inclusive. No longer assume, but ask: what are your preferred pronouns? We can all do this.

My young client appreciates my effort to address them with their PGPs.

Sources:

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<http://silkroad.pacificu.edu/a-primer-on-non-binary-and-transgender/>

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/non-binary-pronouns-why-they-matter_us_5a03107be4b0230facb8419a#

