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Pronouns 101: Why They Matter and What To Do (and Not Do) If You Misgender Someone



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Kay Martinez (they/them/theirs)

Hi, my name is Kay and I use “they/them/theirs” pronouns. A few years ago I decided to start trying out different names and pronouns that felt right for me. I started this transition in my late twenties and had to navigate changing my name and pronouns in the workplace and the subsequent misgendering and microaggressions that followed, like many Transgender and Gender Variant people do. I have been the first or only

person in many of my workplaces at my level of seniority using they/them/theirs pronouns which meant I was blazing new trails for Queer Trans Black Indigenous People of Color after me.

October is LGBTQ History month and so I am writing this post to educate others on how we can address and mitigate misgendering in the workplace as one of many ways to foster Trans inclusion.

Hold up, isn't "they" a plural pronoun?

One of the most common scenarios I found myself in was engaging in debates with "language purists" and "devil's advocates" who invalidated the use of the singular they as a gender pronoun, and thereby my existence. They have said things to me like, "They? That's not right, you know, I mean in the English language. We can't just do that." I've had to correct "Diversity and Inclusion" leaders who repeatedly misgendered me to have them say things like, "Oh, I don't think they meant to misgender you in a bad way," "They/them pronouns are unusual," "I'm working on it but it is going to take me a long time," "I'm just going to keep making mistakes."

Merriam-Webster's latest action is the textbook definition of Transgender/ Gender Non-Conforming (GNC)/ Non-binary allyship. In September, the dictionary added the singular "they" and put to rest one of the most common infractions given out by self-appointed grammar police regarding using the singular "they" as a gender pronoun. According to Merriam-Webster, they has been in consistent use as a singular pronoun since the late 1300s. Merriam-Webster further supported they as a singular pronoun [in a recent post](#) stating, "the development of singular they mirrors the development of the singular you from the plural you, yet we don't complain that singular you is ungrammatical; and that regardless of what detractors say, nearly everyone uses the singular they in casual conversation and often in formal writing."

As an ally, Merriam-Webster is using their platform and institutional clout to educate others, validate our pronouns as grammatically correct, and point out that detractors are probably already using the singular they. By doing this, they have shifted the burden off of impacted gender variant communities and affirmed our existence in a time when Trans/Non-binary people continue to experience being misgendered in and outside of the workplace.

So what is "misgendering?"

Misgendering is incorrectly referring to a person's gender by incorrectly assuming their gender identity or using incorrect pronouns. Misgendering someone can be done intentionally or unintentionally but it has long lasting harmful impacts.

Is misgendering considered harassment?

New York and California have passed strict laws that prohibit misgendering in the workplace and outline consequences for employees who repeatedly violate this protocol. According to a recent article highlighting Non-Binary folks' experience in the workplace, that level of protection is relatively rare — currently, there are only 21 states that have some form of legal protections for LGBTQ workers. Many of them do not include explicit protection for trans workers.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission states that discrimination on the basis of “sex” is illegal, and under the Obama Administration, the Department of Justice confirmed that “sex” should include gender identity — which would mean that repeated and intentional misgendering should qualify as illegal discrimination.

A quick point of clarification on the difference between Sex and Gender Identity:

when I talk about Sex, I use the phrase Sex Assigned or Designated at Birth instead. It helps illustrate that Sex is something an institution or medical profession determines for us — we do not choose it. In most states, there are only two markers regarding Sex: Male or Female. Thanks to the work of Intersex activists, Intersex is becoming an available marker in some states and medical professionals are becoming more aware of the Intersex community and altering their practices. I like Trans Students Educational Resources' definition of Gender: “A set of cultural constructs describing characteristics that may historically be related to femininity, masculinity, women, men, nonbinary people, or social norms. The term was coined in 1955 by sexologist John Money after noting the difference between gender and sex.” Some folks like me, were assigned a sex at birth that does not reflect our gender. Being Non-Binary is not a Sex Assigned At Birth as it is a Gender Identity for someone who identify as neither male/female nor Man/Woman exclusively.

Under the Trump Administration, however, the DOJ has pivoted its position, arguing that “sex” does not encompass gender. The Supreme Court will soon decide which definition is correct — and the conservative majority does not bode well for trans employee protections.

While trans protections have varied with each new administration, ultimately we shouldn't need to depend on the letter of the law to create an inclusive work environment for trans employees. Whether there is legal protection or not, misgendering causes real harm and we each have the power to ensure our colleagues' pronouns and gender identities are respected.

So what can you do in your workplace to mitigate misgendering?

- **Introduce yourself with pronouns whenever you meet new people:** You can say, “my name is Kay and I use they/them/theirs pronouns.” While I encourage folks to introduce themselves with pronouns, the practice should be optional. I never want to force anyone to share their pronouns. Some people don't use pronouns but rather ask to be referred to by name only and some folks change pronouns very often that being forced to share their pronouns at any given time can be anxiety inducing; However, we want to make sure people know how to offer their pronouns and have this option if they would like to. If folks aren't already doing this where you work, be the first to start it! It is especially helpful when Cisgender folks initiate this in workplaces so that Transgender folks don't have to be the ones to lead this effort alone. Just because you don't have anyone in your office who is Trans or uses they/them pronouns yet, it doesn't mean you can't start doing this now to normalize not making assumptions about others' gender identity.
- **Display your pronouns** on email signatures, company directories, social media profiles like LinkedIn. Have pronoun buttons available at events where name tags are used or have a space on name tags for people to write in their pronouns
- **Host a workshop on pronouns and trans inclusion** to dedicate space to raise awareness, learn, and practice!

What TO do if you misgender someone



Listen and practice
self-management.

Breathe!

Apologize without
leading with your
intention

"I'm so sorry."
"Wow I really messed
that up - sorry!"

Thank them for their
courage for correcting
you

"Thank you so much
for telling me"
"I really appreciate your
feedback"

Actions over promises!
How will you work on
this? Practice out loud?
Write it down?

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Strategies for when you misgender someone

- **Calm your defenses:** If you catch yourself misgendering someone, pause and take a breath.
- **Apologize:** You should apologize as soon as you're able to calmly. Tell the person you just misgendered that you're sorry. Some ways to do this are: "I'm sorry for misgendering you, X", "Oh! I remember your pronouns are Y, sorry about that."
- **Express Gratitude:** If the person you misgendered corrects you, express gratitude for their effort. Similarly, if someone else witnesses the misgendering and corrects you, thank that person for pointing it out to you.
- **Do Better:** After the interaction, you should spend some time asking yourself how you can work to make sure you don't do this again. Everyone learns differently so figure out what will work for you: Do you need to practice out loud? Write it out? Try to refer to the person by their name until you are better about their pronouns.

What NOT to do if you misgender someone

- **Don't make this about you:** While inadvertent, misgendering adversely impacts others so we want to make sure you're able to focus on the person you've misgendered and not make this dynamic about you.
- **Don't draw attention to the mistake:** After misgendering someone, you should try not to draw a lot of attention to what occurred. Whenever I am misgendered, I feel a range of emotions but largely embarrassed so I hope to correct what has happened as quickly as possible. It is additionally mortifying if the person who misgendered me or others spend a lot of time on what just happened and make it the focus of our time together.
- **Don't deflect or trivialize:** As difficult as being misgendered is, it makes it additionally harmful when the person or people deflect accountability by saying

things like, “Oh, I don’t think they meant to misgender you in a bad way,” “They/them pronouns are unusual,” “I’m working on it but it is going to take me a long time,” “I’m just going to keep making mistakes.”

The Williams Institute estimates that over 1 million transgender people are employed in offices across the country. Yet 90% of them said they experienced harassment due to their gender identity or gender expression, according to a survey of tens of thousands of people conducted by the [Center for Transgender Equality](#), while one-third say they have been fired.

One way to honor and support the Transgender/ Gender Variant community is by taking the time to learn people’s pronouns, making the practice more widely known throughout your organization and working together to talk about ways to mitigate misgendering. Mitigating misgendering is a great starting place to create a safer and supportive workplace for everyone and especially the Transgender/ Gender Variant community. Look out for more from me on how we can take additional measures to make our workplaces inclusive for the Transgender/ Gender Variant community!

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