



Pronouns in the Workplace

Resource created by



January 2021



What are pronouns?

Pronouns are the way we refer to one another in the third person. It is often useful to know what pronouns someone uses if talking about them with another person. In these circumstances, it is appropriate to ask someone what pronouns they use. Below is a table of all the forms of the two most common third-person singular pronouns in English (“he” and “she”) as well as all the forms of the singular “they.” There are other gender-neutral pronouns that people use.

Nominative (subject)	Objective (object)	Possessive determiner	Reflexive
She	Her	Her	Herself
He	Him	His	Himself
They	Them	Their	Themselves

In English, one common gender-neutral pronoun is the singular use of “they.” Although it feels new to many people to use “they” to refer to a single person, we often use this pronoun in the singular very naturally in situations where we do not know the gender of the person. For example: “Someone just left **their** wallet here! I hope **they** come back for it soon.”

Here is a sample sentence with use of “they” pronouns for a co-worker: “**Prem loves** their new team at work. **They are** an effective strategist, and their colleagues are impressed by their insights.” Notice that when using the person’s name, it is a singular conjugation of the verb that follows, but when using “they,” it is a plural conjugation (see emphasis).

Most people have one set of pronouns they use. However, there are some people who use two or more sets of pronouns. For example, someone might say: “I use she and they pronouns.” Unless that person provides more details, this usually means that you can choose to use one or both of the pronouns interchangeably. You might choose to only use “they” pronouns to get more practice with the pronoun that you are less familiar with. However, it is natural if people choose to stay with the pronoun provided that results in fewer or no mistakes.

Finally, there are people who do not use any pronouns. That means, you only use their name and no pronouns. Here is the above sentence re-written if Prem did not use any pronouns: “Prem loves the new team at work. Prem is an effective strategist, and colleagues are impressed by insights that Prem comes up with.” This is challenging at first, because the habit of using shortcuts, like pronouns, is very strong and deep for most people. However, with sufficient practice, it is possible to only use that person’s name.



Why are pronouns so important?

For something with so few characters, pronouns are surprisingly central to respectful interactions. The term “misgendering” is used to talk about the act of getting someone’s gender wrong, including incorrect pronouns. The reaction to being misgendered ranges widely from person to person, especially when it happens repeatedly. People may feel frustrated, uncomfortable, invisible, uneasy, overwhelmed, anxious, and/or discouraged. It often leaves people feeling like they are not seen for who they are, or like they do not matter.

When frequent misgendering happens in the context of customer service or employment, the person may feel like the company does not care about them. Some people may be frustrated and raise the issue with a manager, but others will withdraw because they are unsure how to deal with the situation. Without a safe context in which to raise these issues, other employees and managers may never hear about them and reach an incorrect conclusion that all is well.

The importance of pronouns is often invisible to those people who never or rarely get misgendered. However, it only takes a brief test of someone repeatedly using the incorrect pronouns for you to see the resulting anxiety, confusion, and exhaustion that this kind of experience produces.

How does misgendering happen?

Many of us have experienced strangers making incorrect assumptions about our backgrounds, identities, or skills. Sometimes these assumptions are relatively harmless, but sometimes they can have a negative impact. That is, they can lead other people to underestimate our abilities or dismiss our expertise, or they can make us and our perspectives feel unwelcome or unvalued. Even when assumptions are correct, they can make us feel like the person is relying on stereotypes rather than seeing us as an individual and valuing our presence as such. This type of experience also happens to transgender or non-binary people with similar impacts to their wellbeing.

When interacting with someone we do not know, we may instinctively want to know this person’s gender, and often feel unsettled if we cannot easily identify their gender. Without thinking, we frequently rely on gender stereotypes and gender cues to make assumptions about people and their gender. We look to things like name, salutation, voice, physical characteristics, clothing, and gender expression in order to find cues as to what gender a person is. These habits are deeply ingrained, informed by societal expectations, to the point that we often do not realize we are making them, unless we get it wrong and someone points it out.

Anyone can be misgendered, but it happens most frequently to people whose name, voice, physical characteristics and/or gender expression are interpreted as not aligned to societal expectations about gender. For example, a cisgender woman with very short hair may be called ‘sir,’ or a cisgender man with a high-pitched voice may be mistaken for a woman on the phone.

Because there are no societal expectations for what a non-binary person looks or sounds like, we tend to assume everyone is either a man or a woman. This means that non-binary people are especially likely to be misgendered.



Distinctions across Communication Types

Over the Phone

Because we don't have visual information over the phone, we typically use a person's name and the sound of their voice to make assumptions about the person's pronouns.

For example, you might hear a high-pitched voice and read the name "Tanya," which is strongly associated with being a woman's name. Based on voice and name, you might use "she/her" pronouns. However, Tanya could go by other pronouns. We cannot assume someone's gender or pronouns based on name and voice.

Face-to-Face

During in-person interactions, we typically use a blend of input from someone's name, voice, and visual elements to make assumptions about their gender.

For example, you might see someone who appears masculine named "Tom." Based on this information, you might use "he/him" pronouns for this person. However, Tom could use other pronouns. We cannot assume someone's gender or pronouns based on name or how they present or express.

There is also a common myth that people will know who is transgender simply by looking at them. However, 57% of transgender survey respondents said others rarely/never knew they are transgender ([NTCE 2016](#)). As such, looks are not reliable and cannot help you determine if someone is transgender or what their pronouns are. In fact, we do not need to know someone's history to interact with them. If someone thinks it is important, they will tell us. In the next section, we will show you what to do instead of assuming someone's their pronouns. No more guesswork is needed.

What can I do to help?

Whenever you are communicating with someone, avoid making assumptions and instead gather a limited set of gendered information directly from them or listen for context. Typically, this means inquiring about the person's name and/or pronouns. Even if you are curious, there is no need to gather additional information because it is not relevant to respectful interactions (e.g., their gender identity, their name at birth, what bathrooms they use, and what medical procedures they have undergone). The key part of making the workplace culture more inclusive of transgender and non-binary people is to avoid assumptions and instead make space for and develop a consistent practice of giving and receiving of pronouns in the workplace. We share how to do this both with strangers and people you know.



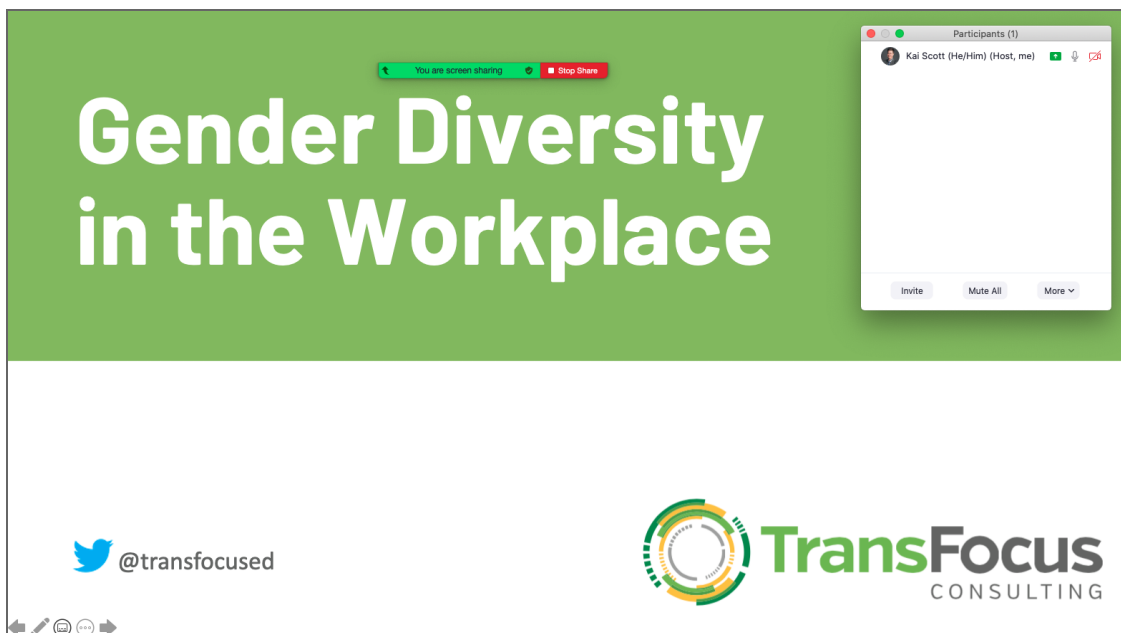
With Strangers

There are a couple ways for how to obtain pronouns from strangers. First, you can ask someone directly for their pronouns by saying: "What pronouns do you use?" It is important to avoid saying "preferred pronouns." They are not a preference - they simply are. Providing pronouns should be voluntary, so if someone declines that is ok. Someone may be puzzled about why you asked them their pronouns and you can explain more by saying: "I try to avoid assuming people's pronouns based on how they look. Instead I like to ask people I'm meeting for the first time, like you, what pronouns they use." Ideally, you ask everyone their pronouns rather than just the people who you are unsure of (usually based on how they look).

Another approach you can take is to model sharing your pronouns when you introduce yourself to a new person: "Hi, I'm Guillaume, and I use the pronouns he and him." In addition to normalizing the sharing of this information, you ensure that other people have the information they need to refer to you respectfully without having to guess. Also, you provide space for the other person to respond with their pronouns, if they choose to. If they do not share their pronouns, then you just use their name or "they/them" pronouns until you get more information.

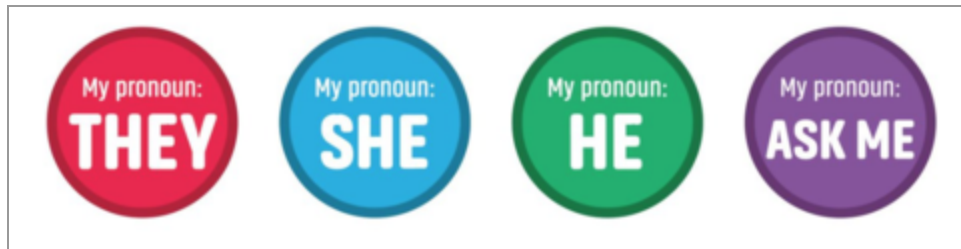
There are other opportunities to normalize the giving and receiving of pronouns in the workplace. For example, adding your pronouns to your email signature next or close to your name and encouraging others to do the same (see example on right). Providing pronouns should always be voluntary in order to avoid forcing people who are not ready for a variety of reasons.

Since the pandemic, there are more people connecting with colleagues on virtual conference platforms (such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams). Within these, there are ways to change your name to add your pronouns in brackets (see example below).





Lastly, if your company hosts events or conferences that use name tags, there are easy and engaging ways to add pronouns to the mix. This can be done by providing stickers that attendees can voluntarily add to their name tags. A brief FAQ page is important to support the introduction and socialization of this new practice. This is especially key for people who are not familiar with the need for exchanging pronouns in the workplace.



With People You Know

Someone you know may share with you that they are transgender or non-binary for the first time and that they will now go by different pronouns going forward. For many, new pronouns are difficult to adopt at first. It feels awkward and challenging and there may be a lot of mistakes. This is normal. It's ok. You may be wondering: "How do I make these changes without hurting or frustrating this person?" Counterintuitively, relaxing is key. Also, it is important to practice. Below are several practices you can adopt to help you learn your colleague's new pronouns:

1. Write the name and the pronouns of your co-worker on a post-it note and put it somewhere highly visible at home where you frequently sit or walk by (e.g., computer screen, mirror, and fridge). Every time you see the post-it note, say their name and pronouns out loud. The reading and hearing new name and pronouns functions as a double reinforcement to encourage learning of new references to someone familiar.
2. If you are about to meet with someone whose pronouns are new or difficult for you to use comfortably, you can visualize them in your mind and say to yourself their name and pronouns several times. This primes the mind for the proper reference with more success.
3. During the interaction, slow down your speech so you can hear yourself talk. You may need to self-monitor your speech for a while as you are learning someone's new pronouns along with accompanying gender inclusive language. As it becomes smoother, there is less and less need for this kind of careful consideration.
4. You can also collaborate with other co-workers to hold each other accountable for using the proper name and pronoun. Others can gently correct you when you accidentally use the old name or pronouns: "I think you meant ___" (either during or after the interaction). Most of the work can and should be done without the transgender or non-binary person in your midst. This makes the stakes of missteps lower. You may want to add a lighthearted element, such as "Quarter Jar", with participating colleagues contributing a quarter to the jar each time they misgender, and then donate the sum to a local charity.



Will people think I'm trans if I share my pronouns?

More people who are not transgender are seeing the importance and value of sharing their pronouns at work. They want to be a key part of positive change. That is, they want to help normalize the giving and receiving of pronouns so it is not as hard or out-of-place for a transgender or non-binary employee to share their pronouns, especially if most people automatically assume them to be another gender. Non-transgender people sharing their pronouns is an important gesture of solidarity towards transgender and non-binary colleagues.

Instead of thinking you are transgender for sharing your pronouns, many people will probably only be confused about why you are sharing your pronouns. This is mainly because their assumption of your pronouns based on how you look is likely correct and they see the sharing of your pronouns as unnecessary as an "obvious fact." So, sharing your pronouns offers an opportunity to talk about pronouns with them. It does not have to be a long lecture. A quick word can often increase awareness and inspire other people to do the same.

What if I make a mistake?

How do you recover from using the wrong pronouns for another person, whether they are a stranger or colleague? First of all, take a deep breath. It is ok to make mistakes. We are all human. The issue is not that you made a mistake, but the difference is what you do **after** making the mistake. If you try to tiptoe past the mistake hoping that nobody noticed or you become defensive, that often makes the situation worse. However, if you acknowledge it and correct yourself, it takes away much of the sting and the person can see you are trying, which makes a big difference.

One-on-One

If you make a mistake with someone one-on-one, it is important to apologize briefly and make the correction. The apology is for the other person, and the correction is for you to practice the new information. If the other person seems really upset by what happened even after your apology and correction, consider following up (where possible) to see how they are doing and if there is anything else you can do.



Learner Engagement

Question

What do you do when you notice that you accidentally misgender someone? [Circle one]

Response Options

- | | |
|---|--|
| A. Do nothing and hope the other person did not hear your mistake | C. Simple and quick apology and correction: "I'm sorry, I meant 'he'" |
| B. Repeatedly tell the other person that you are really sorry and promise that it will never happen again | D. Wait for the other person to raise the matter and then try to explain how/why it happened |



C is the correct answer.

Explanation for incorrect responses

A. The other person usually hears the mistake and doing nothing leaves the matter unaddressed where it will likely repeat.

B. Apologizing a lot can bring too much attention to the moment, and put the person who was misgendered in an awkward position of having to reassure the person who misgendered them.

D. This puts the burden of response on the person who experienced harm from misgendering. They may choose not to say anything, not because they were not hurt by the mistake, but because they may be too tired to correct you (it is a lot of effort to respond to someone who is reacting defensively trying to explain their position), or because it may feel like too risky to raise the issue.

In Groups

In a group setting, making an unintentional mistake, like misgendering someone, can feel embarrassing or concerning, especially among peers or with people you report to. You are not a bad person for making a mistake. Just like mistakes made with someone one-on-one, it is important to apologize briefly and say the correct pronoun relevant to the person.

What is different about a group compared to one-on-one interaction is that there may be greater ripple effects of misgendering or misnaming someone, especially if you are in a role of leadership. When you make a mistake, sometimes the audience may assume that you know more information than they do, or that you have the correct information. As such, they may follow your example, even though it is incorrect. This makes a visible apology and correction especially important in a group context. You do not need to make a big deal or moment out of it. But the correction is important for you and the audience to know the right information about the misgendered person. This is critical to supporting others to respectfully interact with the person.

Sometimes people may feel self-conscious about making a mistake, because they may think they should already know or seamlessly use the new information, especially if they are leaders. As such, they may want to cover up the mistake or rush past their mistake (and maybe hope nobody heard). While this is an understandable human response, especially in a group setting at work, it is important to correct and apologize. These instances offer powerful opportunities for managers and other employees to model for others how to recover from mistakes in a matter-of-fact way.

What if I witness someone else make a mistake?

Instead of you making the mistake, you may witness someone else misgendering a transgender or non-binary employee. If this happens, you have several options for response to help this person. Everyone has a different style to bring up this kind of issue with their co-workers. Choose an approach that works for you and is comfortable for you. You play an important part in making the workplace more inclusive and respectful, which includes addressing mistakes.



First, you can do a quick name or pronoun correction with the person who made the mistake. Here is a sample exchange you and a co-worker are having about a non-binary employee, Drew, who uses “they/them” pronouns:

Co-worker: “Did you talk to **Drew** today about the new project? **He** said he would lead it.”

You: “I think you mean **‘they’** instead of ‘he’ for **Drew**. Yes, I’m glad **they’re** leading the project. **They** are a strong project manager.”

Co-worker: “Oh, yeah! Thanks for the reminder about Drew’s pronouns. I need to practice that more so it rolls off the tongue.”

Secondly, you can model the correct name and pronouns of the person who was misgendered in front of the person who made the mistake. This a more subtle way to address the issue of mistakes with colleagues.

Lastly, you can offer to practice with the person who made the mistake. Often misgendering happens in situations where people have had little opportunity to repeat the name and pronoun of someone so it sticks. That is why offering to practice can be helpful. Or share tips of things you have done to incorporate the person’s name and pronouns (e.g., using a post-it note at home with the person’s name and pronouns which you repeat every time you see it).

It is important to help others, because we often do not notice when we are making mistakes. You may be able to better hear the mistakes of others better than they can. It is all about teamwork and patience. Together you will get there.

You may also witness someone making a mistake in a group setting. This is a little more complex of a situation, because trans gender and non-binary people have different preferences for how to handle these situations. Some may want others to jump in and help out (especially if the transgender and non-binary person is frequently misgendered and is tired of correcting others). Other transgender and non-binary people may want the flexibility to handle it how they wish each time it happens - sometimes correcting and other times not saying anything.

That is why it is important to reach out to the transgender or non-binary person before a group meeting to see how or if you should do anything to help if someone misgenders them. And then stick to what you agreed upon in your discussion with the transgender or non-binary person. That is, intervene or do not intervene based on what you agreed with the transgender and non-binary employee.

If you witness a lot of misgendering by the group, check in with the transgender and non-binary employee to see if they want to pursue other strategies with your support. It is not ok if someone has shared their pronouns with colleagues and they get continuously misgendered for long periods of time. This could have significant impacts on their mental health.