Use of Pronouns in External Communications

Background

Historically we have used gendered pronouns such as he/him/his or she/her/hers when referring to individuals in third person.

Although this language has been commonplace, it is not inclusive. There are many individuals who identify as non-binary, gender nonconforming, and/or genderqueer, which means they do not identify as either exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine. People who do not use he/him/she/her pronouns will likely feel excluded when reading materials published by the State of Washington if gendered pronouns are used.

It has become more appropriate to use the pronouns they/them/theirs when referring to a third party, as these pronouns make no assumption about the gender of the intended audience.

Communicating with the Public via Email

When state employees communicate with individuals, they often rely on names and/or voice to determine which pronouns they should use. Names and voice may provide clues about an individual's gender, but they also may not. This gray area could cause state employees to misgender, or use the wrong pronouns, when providing services. Misgendering can be especially harmful for trans, non-binary, and/or genderqueer individuals. If a state worker reaches out to someone via e-mail and they have their pronouns on their signature line, space is created for individuals to share how they would like to be addressed.

Recommendation

The RAIN Best Practices Subcommittee recommends state agencies use non-gendered pronouns and non-gendered language in place of gendered pronouns and gendered language in external communications and when creating public facing web content.

Examples

- Use the prefix Mx. or the person's name instead of Mr./Mrs./Ms.

- Job Applications: Create a space for applicants to include their pronouns.

- Encourage those who feel comfortable to include their pronouns in their e-mail signature line.

Moving Forward

The Best Practices subcommittee recognizes that this change will take time to implement. While it would be ideal to revisit previous content and update existing public communications, we understand it is more feasible to focus on ensuring new content created and published follows this practice.

Use of Pronouns in Internal Communications

Background

Historically we have used gendered pronouns such as he/him/his or she/her/hers when referring to individuals in third person.

Although this language has been commonplace, it is not inclusive. There are many individuals who identify as non-binary, gender nonconforming, and/or genderqueer, which means they do not identify as either exclusively feminine or exclusively masculine. People who do not use he/him/she/her pronouns will likely feel excluded when reading materials published by the State of Washington if gendered pronouns are used.

It has become more appropriate to use the pronouns they/them/theirs when referring to a third party, as these pronouns make no assumption about the gender of the intended audience.

Humanizing the Experience

Using correct pronouns for individuals is a way to show that Washington State wants employees to bring their authentic selves to work. There are many reasons why a person may or may not want to share pronouns. Identity work is a process, and while some people might feel very comfortable identifying and sharing their pronouns, there are also individuals who may not have found pronouns that feel like a good fit or who may be more gender fluid. The important thing is to create an environment that gives employees the opportunity to share if they feel comfortable.

Recommendation

The RAIN Best Practices Subcommittee recommends state agencies use non-gendered pronouns and non-gendered language in place of gendered pronouns and gendered language in internal communications and when creating internal web content.

Examples

- Replace the pronouns he/him and she/her with they/them/theirs.

- Replace words or phrases such as "sons and daughters" or "ladies and gentlemen", with "employees", "children", "people", "everyone", or "person".

- Encourage those who feel comfortable to include their pronouns in their e-mail signature line.

- Create space for sharing pronouns during introductions at meetings.*

Moving Forward

The Best Practices subcommittee recognizes these changes will take time to implement. While it would be ideal to revisit previous content and update existing communications, we understand it is more feasible to focus on ensuring new content created and published follows these practices. Doing this work helps reduce stigma and has the potential to help repair historical damage.