

PRAXIS

How to Respond to Questions or Push Back about Pronouns

Change can be difficult for many of us. We are creatures of habit. Because of this, it is common that when you are instituting changes to make your spaces more inclusive of trans and gender nonconforming people that you may get some pushback from those who are unfamiliar with everything you may have learned in our *Trans Affirming Best Practices* workshop.

First, consider what your goal is.

What outcome would you like to have from your interaction? These questions will help you guide the conversations.

- Are you hoping to change their mind?
- Are you hoping they will change their behavior?
- Are you simply informing them of protocol from your organization/business?

There are dozens of motivations and desired outcomes for why we introduce ourselves with our pronouns. Additionally, you may want to consider:

- Regardless of other people's reactions or investment in behavior change, are you modeling trans-affirming best practices in support of trans people? This is valuable within itself.
- Are you upholding your workplace's stated mission, vision and/or values? You can always fall back on this if someone is upset about your actions. This may sound like "this organization respects every individual's autonomy and therefore we like to ask how they like to be called."

Next, determine if you know their motivation and assess the context you are in.

Along with your goals and desired outcomes, their positionality/stance/feelings and the context of the situation will determine how you can respond. For instance, have they shared their stance? Are they able to internally even name their own feelings?

While we acknowledge that impact weighs more than intention (even if I accidentally step on your foot, I acknowledge and apologize; even though I didn't mean to, the impact is that your foot hurts), it can sometimes be helpful to discern where the person is coming from. There is a difference between confusion or ignorance versus antagonism and hatred. And your response can take this into consideration. They may they be feeling:

- Anger
- Confusion
- Concerned
- Hesitancy
- Ignorance
- "I have a strong stance against this."

There are many, many contexts we could be in:

- Are you alone?
- Are you in public?
- Do you know the person?
- Will you ever see the person again?
- What is the power dynamic? (e.g. supervisor and supervisee)
- Are you standing up for a specific trans person? If so, how would *they* want you to advocate for them?
- Where are you? Are you at work, home, the grocery store, etc? Is it safe?
- Are we giving too much time and energy to antagonistic people?
- Are we centering the feelings of antagonistic people over the lives of trans and gender expansive people?

We also want to remember WHY we introduce ourselves with our pronouns and include them on things like our Zoom names, email signatures and business cards.

Just like we cannot assume anybody's name just by looking at them, we cannot assume anybody's pronouns just by looking at them. Some people think gender/pronouns are obvious, but it isn't always; so in order to avoid making incorrect assumptions, we err on the side of respect.

More reasons:

- We believe in everyone's self-determination and autonomy. To honor people's humanity and authenticity¹, we give them the opportunities to tell us how they want to be called.
- When you model this, you are signaling to trans and gender expansive people that it is probably okay for them to share their authentic selves with you. They may not otherwise disclose their pronouns to you first.
- It is literally a matter of life and death for a lot of trans and gender expansive people, including young people². While we don't believe in binary choices, it can be helpful to contextualize this as affirming someone and saving their life³ versus letting someone who is angry/confused be angry and confused for a moment. In 2022, the Trevor Project reported⁴ that:
 - 45% of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.
 - Nearly 1 in 5 transgender and nonbinary youth attempted suicide and LGBTQ youth of color reported higher rates than their white peers.
 - LGBTQ youth who felt high social support from their family reported attempting suicide at less than half the rate of those who felt low or moderate social support.

What are the downsides? There are various reasons people hesitate to share their pronouns. There are even more reasons to do it anyway that often outweigh the potential downfall.

1. Whoever you are speaking to won't understand what you're saying.
 - It's okay for people to be confused. We all learn new things every day.
 - Do we care more about someone's confusion or protecting TGNC people?
2. Someone may be offended.
 - Do we need to have a moment with them or engage at all?
3. You may experience backlash.
 - Are we centering the most marginalized?
 - Are you physically unsafe or just uncomfortable?
 - Does the other person/people have power over you? Could they retaliate in a way that threatens you, your family, your job?
4. It is private information.
 - Most people use pronouns in everyday language when referring to people.
5. "In my day, we didn't have pronouns."
 - Most groups of people have general expectations that we respect people and call everyone by the name they go by and the pronouns they use.
 - Pronouns have existed for centuries.⁵

¹ "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." - James Baldwin

² Using a Person's Correct Pronouns Saves Lives: www.health.state.mn.us/communities/suicide/documents/pronounssuicideprev.pdf

³ Using Chosen Names Reduces Odds of Depression and Suicide in Transgender Youths:

<https://news.utexas.edu/2018/03/30/name-use-matters-for-transgender-youths-mental-health>

⁴ www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2022

⁵ www.praxischi.com/news/singular-they-them

Potential Scripts/Responses

After you assess your safety and consider your goals and their motivation, and you decide you will engage, here are some options of what you can say. Use whatever is most authentic to you. Mix and match.

We respect everyone here the same, therefore we call everyone by the name they go by and pronouns they use.

This is our company policy.

My boss told me I have to do this.

Documented use of singular they/them pronouns has existed since Shakespeare and it's in most major dictionaries. Regardless, it's the respectful thing to do.

Trans people in my life have asked me to do this and this is how I am an ally.

Just like I don't know your name until you tell me, I don't know your pronouns until you tell me.

Referring to people with pronouns is useful for me so I don't have to keep repeating your name every time I refer to you.

Inclusion is important to me.

Sharing pronouns is optional. You do not have to do it if you don't want to and I can do it if I want to.
