If we are to be leaders in diversity, equity, and inclusion, we must embrace that disability is just another kind of difference, like culture, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. We must recognize that diversity is a valuable source of insight and adaptability, generating better business ideas and high-quality service. Differing abilities are a part of that healthy diversity. It’s our business to promote inclusiveness throughout our firms and workplaces, and to advocate for policies and programs that support it.

Here are six ways never to talk about persons with disabilities:1

1. Never say “a disabled person” or “the disabled.” Say a person or people “with disabilities.”

Put the person first. A disability is what someone has, not what someone is. For instance, “mentally ill” is less respectful than “person with mental-health issues.” “Retarded” is never an appropriate term. Say “person with intellectual disabilities” or “cognitive disabilities.”

2. Never use the term “handicapped” or “handicapped parking.” Use “accessible parking” instead.

The phrase “handicapped parking” is still in use (e.g., when referring to parking placards), though the word “handicapped” is offensive and has been virtually eliminated in most other contexts. Remove it from your firm’s vocabulary completely by using the term “accessible” or “accessible parking.” (It’s also more accurate, as accessible describes the parking and handicapped does not.) And the term “accessible” which replaces “handicap accessible” is an absolute. “Accessible” means in compliance with the Federal accessibility guidelines and standards. Accessible sites and facilities do not contain barriers limiting their use by people with disabilities. There are no shades of accessibility. Something is either accessible or it isn’t.2

3. Never use the term “impaired.” Use terms such as “low vision,” “hard of hearing” or “uses a wheelchair” instead.

Though it may be used in legal contexts, the word “impaired” can be offensive, as it implies damage. Many people with disabilities do not see themselves as damaged, not should they.

4. Never say “hidden” disabilities. Say “non-visible” or “non-apparent.” Many disabilities are not apparent, such as serious illnesses or chronic health conditions, sensory limitations, or mental-health and learning disabilities. When referring to these disabilities,

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1 From the website [www.DiversityInc.com](http://www.DiversityInc.com) which is an excellent reference for articles addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

2 [https://www.fs.fed.us/eng/toolbox/acc/acc02.htm](https://www.fs.fed.us/eng/toolbox/acc/acc02.htm)
avoid using hidden, as it has negative connotations, implying purposeful concealment or shame.

5. Whenever possible, don’t say “accommodations.” Say “adjustments” or “modifications.” This can be tricky, as accommodation has a specific legal meaning and must be used in certain contexts, like policy or government communications. However, accommodation suggests doing a favor for the person who has a disability. An accommodation is a workplace or work-process modification made to enable an employee to be more productive. It is necessary and not a preference or privilege. The terms adjustment and modification capture this idea without suggesting a favor or special treatment, so are preferable whenever specific legal terminology is not required.

6. Never use victim or hero language; describe situations in a straightforward way.

Don’t use language that portrays people with disabilities as victims, such as “suffers from,” “challenged by,” or “struggles with.” Say “someone who uses a wheelchair” or “wheelchair user,” not “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.” On the flip side, don’t use heroic language when people with disabilities complete everyday tasks and responsibilities. People with disabilities don’t see themselves as inspiring simply because they’re going about their daily lives. We all have challenges—working around those challenges is not heroic, it’s just human.

7. When comparing persons with disabilities with persons without disabilities, do not use the term “normal” to describe the person without disabilities.

By shifting our language, we can help shift perceptions and promote the culture of inclusion that is the backbone of healthy diversity in all aspects of life.