

## **Language Has Power** **By Carmen Bowman**

I had the privilege of co-authoring a white paper called [\*The Power of Language to Create Culture\*](#) (referenced throughout this article). When you stop to think about it, we all know language has power; I encourage you to think about the truth of this statement and consider applying it to your work. What I have realized with great happiness is that it also costs nothing to change language. So much of what we want to do costs money, but language change does not—we can celebrate that.

We wrote in the paper: “Culture change in nursing homes is incomplete without language change (page 7).”

Hopefully you are interested in a culture change journey *from* institutional practices *to* individualized practices that includes a language change *from* “institution-speak” *to* normal talk. Language culture change leader Karen Schoeneman refers to the language used inside an institution, which is so dramatically different, as “institution-speak.” An undignified language is another way to refer to it.

So, that leads to thinking about the difference of the institutionalized world, including language inside an institution. I find it fascinating that we tend to leave normal, real-life language at the door:

“The world being created by the common language of the institutional nursing home in particular is not a world people are clamoring to live in. It’s our belief that the language of the traditional nursing home represents a culture that needs changing. So, we advocate for changed language. An integral part of any cultural practice is the language used to communicate it (page 8).”

Not surprisingly, experts point out that language reflects beliefs:

“Our beliefs are wrapped up in our identities. Having a belief challenged is ‘a challenge to our sense of self’” (Schulz, Kathryn. [2010]. *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. New York: Harper Collins Books [page 95]).

“A successful journey for language change in nursing homes, like the rest of culture change, has to be sensitive to this idea—namely, that we are asking people to change more than what they say. We want them to change what they believe about people who live there” (Schulz, Kathryn. [2010]. *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. New York: Harper Collins Books [page 8]).

So, why do you suppose we say:

- “Beds” instead of referring to the beautiful people who sleep in those beds/live in the home?
- “Toileting” instead of referring to using the restroom?

- “Frontline staff” instead of the direct care givers providing care to the beautiful people living there?
- “Facility” instead of home or community, where people really live?
- “Departments” instead of teams?
- “Dietary” instead of dining or food service or kitchen?
- “In-service the staff” instead of providing education like most workplaces do?
- “Work the floor” instead of care for the beautiful people who live there?
- “Care” instead of referring to the life the beautiful people are living?

Why are these terms used? Try to really ask yourself why. If you pause and make yourself answer the question, what answer do you come up with? For me, one word shows up in my mind—AGEISM. Let’s face it, we treat older people differently, but we can change. We must simply remember they are adults, as we are. We are equal; thus, the language should be equal as well.

Something we need to be cognizant of is “because we have little traffic from the outside world (in a nursing home or assisted living), we are exposed to disproportionate support for our own ideas of cultural normality,” which sociologist Erving Goffman wrote about in his classic *Asylums* book (Goffman, E. [1961]. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. [1st ed.] Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books [page 92]).

Don’t let that happen to you. Even if no one else says “community” or “home” instead of “facility,” go for it. Be a leader. Don’t let the pressure of common language hold you back from creating a new language. Leaders of language say it is awkward at first, but to push through the awkwardness to create a new normal. We need a new normal.

Resources for changed language:

[http://edu-catering.com/the\\_power\\_of\\_language\\_to\\_create\\_culture](http://edu-catering.com/the_power_of_language_to_create_culture)

<https://www.pioneernetwork.net/resource-library/>

<https://www.edenalt.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/04Eden-Alternative-Dictionary-Full-Continuum-Version-ABFinal.pdf>

A list of common institutional works is available. Please contact Carmen Bowman at [carmen@edu-catering.com](mailto:carmen@edu-catering.com) for more information.