The Power of Language to Reframe a Person’s Identity

“A powerful reframing strategy aimed at shifting how formerly incarcerated students see themselves and how they are seen by others, from the frame of ‘former prisoner’ to that of ‘student and citizen’ strategy ... uses branding through language choices geared to place education at the core of emerging identity as a device.” (Susan Sturm)

Student

Benay Rubenstein, Founder of College Initiative (CI), a re-entry education program helping formerly incarcerated people transition to college, summarizes a practice she has consistently observed. From day one, CI participants become, and are consistently referred to, as students.

Once we started writing to people still in prison, or meeting people coming out of prison, that person became a “student.” Every single communication to our students was an opportunity to reinforce their change of identity. It was a miracle and a profound life-changing experience for many people to see themselves, and be seen, in a new and very positive way. (Benay Rubenstein)

People

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR FRIENDS

NuLeadership Policy Group, led by Eddie Ellis, initiated a campaign to use the word “people” instead of using language such as “inmate,” “convict,” “prisoner.” and “felon.” This campaign is part of a broader effort “to assist our transition from prison to communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves.”

Dear Friends:

One of the primary initiatives of The Riverside Church Metro Prison Ministry is to respond to the negative public perception about people formerly or currently incarcerated as expressed in the language and concepts used to describe us. When we are not called mad dogs, animals, predators, offenders and other derogatory terms, we are referred to as inmates, convicts, prisoners and felons. All terms devoid of humanness which identify us as “things” rather than as people. While these terms have achieved a degree of acceptance, and are the “official” language of the media, law enforcement, the prison industrial complex and public policy agencies, they are no longer acceptable for us and we are asking that you stop using them.

In an effort to assist our transition from prison to our communities as responsible citizens and to create a more positive human image of ourselves, we are asking everyone to stop using these negative terms and to simply refer to us as PEOPLE. PEOPLE currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE. We habitually underestimate the power of language. The bible says, “death and life are in the power of the tongue.” In fact, all of the faith traditions recognize the power of words and, in particular, names that we are given or give ourselves. Ancient traditions considered the
“naming ceremony” one of the most important rites of passage. Your name indicated not only who you were and where you belonged, but also who you could be. The worst part of repeatedly hearing your negative definition of me, is that I begin to believe it myself “for as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” It follows then, that calling me inmate, convict, prisoner, felon, or offender indicates a lack of understanding of who I am, but more importantly what I can be. I can be and am much more than an “ex-con,” or an “ex-offender,” or an “ex-felon.”

The Riverside Church Metro Prison Ministry firmly believes that if we can get progressive publications, organizations and individuals like you to refrain from using the old offensive language and simply refer to us as “people,” we will have achieved a significant step forward in our life giving struggle to be recognized as the human beings we are. We have made our mistakes, yes, but we have also paid or are paying our debts to society. We believe we have the right to be called by a name we choose, rather than one someone else decides to use. We think that by insisting on being called “people” we reaffirm our right to be recognized as human beings, not animals, inmates, prisoners or offenders.


“...labeling people as “felons” is ... fundamentally at war with efforts to reduce the number of people in prison, to facilitate reentry, and to encourage those who have committed a crime, or even many crimes, to become law-abiding and productive citizens.

American ideal of second chances. But our language, like our law, points in the opposite direction. We have schooled ourselves to avoid other stigmatizing labels that in the past were used to distance mainstream society from ethnic and racial mi Social liberals and fiscal conservatives alike pay lip service to the supposed minorities, and those groups from each other, because we understood that labels function to distract and excuse us from the hard work of building community.
The word “felon” (and for that matter other less ugly but still degrading labels like “offender,” with or without the feckless prefix “ex-“) is no less dysfunctional. We can do better.
So, my journalist friend asked, what word can we use instead? What snappy alternative sobriquet can we give the headline writers to describe this class of people with a criminal record?

Perhaps there isn’t a single word, and perhaps that is precisely the point. We can say first that our brothers and sisters are people, then (if relevant) we can also say that they are people who have been convicted of a felony.

Skilled writers can find ways to avoid using words that are toxic. Even headline writers can be weaned from them. Journalists play a key role in advancing the cause of social justice, and they do it through the language they use.