

Team Activity: “Words Matter”

Purpose: Demonstrate how the language we use can influence how people are perceived, how teams respond, and how participants may experience the system.

Time: 15 minutes

Group size: 8–30

Materials: Printed word cards or a slide

Step 1: The First Impression — 3 minutes

Display these words one at a time:

- Addict
- Offender
- Manipulative
- Noncompliant
- Resistant
- Frequent flyer
- Drug seeker
- Criminal
- Failed treatment
- Difficult

Ask participants:

“What picture comes into your mind when you hear this word?”

Don't discuss the answers yet. Simply ask them to notice their immediate reaction.

Step 2: Change the Language — 5 minutes

Give teams the following phrases and ask them to rewrite each one using **person-first, behavior-specific, neutral language**.

Instead of...

Try...

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| “He's an addict.” | “He has a substance use disorder.” |
| “She's noncompliant.” | “She did not complete the required treatment sessions.” |
| “He's manipulative.” | “He provided different information to different team members.” |
| “She's resistant.” | “She expressed concerns about the recommended treatment.” |
| “He's a frequent flyer.” | “He has had multiple contacts with the justice system.” |
| “She failed treatment.” | “The current treatment approach did not produce the desired outcome.” |
| “He's a drug seeker.” | “He repeatedly requested medication and reported ongoing pain.” |

Instead of...

“He's difficult.”

Try...

“The team has experienced challenges engaging him in services.”

Step 3: The Impact — 4 minutes

Ask:

“If you were the participant, which version would you want written about you?”

Then ask:

1. Does changing the language change how you think about the person?
2. Does it change the possible response of the team?
3. What happens when a label becomes the person's identity?
4. How might our language affect **hope, engagement, and motivation**?
5. What words do we routinely use that may unintentionally create bias?

Step 4: Team Challenge — 3 minutes

Give the team this statement:

“Language should describe behavior—not define the person.”

Ask each person to identify **one word or phrase** they will try to eliminate from their professional vocabulary.

Then have everyone replace it with a more neutral alternative.

Facilitator Callout

Language is not just what we say—it shapes what we see.

When we label someone “noncompliant,” we may stop asking *why* they weren't able to follow through.

When we describe the specific behavior, we create an opportunity to understand the barrier and respond to it.

Strong Closing Question

End with:

“If the language we use about someone influences how the team sees that person, what responsibility do we have to choose our words carefully?”

Treatment court connection:

The goal isn't to avoid accountability or minimize behavior. **It's to hold people accountable for behaviors while avoiding language that reduces a person to their diagnosis, history, or worst moment.**