

7 Ways to Practice Active Allyship

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November 08, 2022



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Summary. Despite many companies' recent efforts to develop DEI strategies and roadmaps, inequalities in our workplaces are still rampant. Every... [more](#)

Time and time again when I engage on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) matters with employees, managers, and leaders of companies across the world, I'm met with the question: *What can*

I do?

Despite many companies' recent efforts to develop DEI strategies and roadmaps, inequalities in our workplaces are still rampant. The latest World Economic Forum Report states that it will take us 132 years to achieve gender parity, with that number being much higher for some intersectional identities than others. What are we missing, and how do we move the pendulum from where it seems to be stuck toward inclusive environments for everyone?

Here's the thing: We don't experience inclusion through strategies and roadmaps. We experience it through our day-to-day interactions with our colleagues — over lunch, by the coffee machine, during meetings, etc. We can't move the pendulum without each one of us seeing ourselves as key enablers of inclusive workplaces — workplaces where everyone feels valued, respected, appreciated, and enjoys a sense of belonging. Every employee needs to see their role in this, and we need everybody to make efforts to act in a way that nurtures inclusive environments. That's what's missing, but we don't have everybody on board yet. Why? Fear.

Over many years of working with employees, managers, and leaders in the DEI space, I've found that, when it comes to DEI, there is plenty of fear. Those who are well-represented in any context are fearful of the change and loss of power that real inclusion will bring, fearful of getting uncomfortable, and fearful of saying and doing the wrong thing. I've lost count of the number of times I've heard white male CEOs say that they want to support DEI efforts but are afraid of being cancelled. On the other hand, people from marginalized, discriminated, and underrepresented

groups are also fearful: fearful of being the lone voice and being perceived as the token, fearful of addressing biases and discrimination, and fearful of the impact on their careers.

The answer to the question *What can I do?* lies in overcoming these fears through allyship. Allyship is the key to creating inclusive workplaces. According to recent research, employees of organizations that foster strong allyship and inclusion cultures are 50% less likely to leave, 56% more likely to improve their performance, 75% less likely to take a sick day, and up to 167% more likely to recommend their organizations as great places to work.

Allyship is a lifelong process of building and nurturing supportive relationships with underrepresented, marginalized, or discriminated individuals or groups with the aim of advancing inclusion. It is through this process that we overcome our fears of engaging with DEI. Allyship is about progress, not perfection. Allyship is active, not passive. It requires frequent and consistent behaviors. Allyship is not performative. It's about lifting others and creating platforms for them so that their voices are heard. Allyship is not about fixing others.

I believe that what we need to make our workplaces truly inclusive is a clear set of practical behaviors that we can embed into our day-to-day working lives. To address this need, below are the seven allyship behaviors that I explore in my book *The Art of Active Allyship*. Employees at any level can engage in these actions to nurture inclusion in their workplaces.

The first three of the seven allyship behaviors are meant to empower you with information about yourself and the people you work with. In the words of the nineteenth-century American

writer Mary Roberts Reinhart: “When knowledge comes in the door, fear and superstition fly out.” The more we understand something and the more we know what to do, the less fearful we are of it.

1. Deep curiosity

Understanding the issues surrounding DEI starts with a deep curiosity about our own and others’ *diversity thumbprint*: each individual’s intersectional identity of multiple dimensions coexisting at the same time.

To help gain an understanding of your own and others’ experience in the world, explore the wealth of resources out there and make a conscious effort to:

- Identify intersectional dimensions of diversity that are different from your own diversity thumbprint
- Understand the biases and discrimination that people different from you experience
- Understand the historical, political, and social contexts that have led to these biases and discrimination
- Understand the impact of these biases and discrimination on individuals, organizations, and society

2. Honest introspection

Honest introspection begins with understanding our own biases and how they impact what we say and do, the decisions we make, and whom we tend to view as successful in the workplace.

In my book *Diversifying Diversity*, I wrote, “If you have a brain, you are biased.” Our brain receives 11 million bits of information every single second. We consciously process only 40 bits of this

information, with the remaining covered by our unconscious mind. We rely on heuristics and algorithms that we have built through our life experiences to help us make sense of this vast input.

While these heuristics and algorithms can keep us safe, we also use them when we meet someone for the first time, when we look through resumes to decide whom to recruit or promote, and when we design products and services. These biases can also give rise to the “cookie cutters” we see in our workplaces: the prototypes of who we consider to be successful leaders or ideal employees.

Think about the people you work with. How similar are they to each other? These observations will help reveal where biases lie in your organization. To assess where your own unconscious biases may lie, you can use tools like the Harvard Implicit Association Test.

3. Humble acknowledgement

We must humbly acknowledge that we don’t know or fully comprehend how someone else experiences life. Humble acknowledgement requires admitting “I don’t know” and reflecting on our own sources of privilege. Privilege is assuming something is not a problem because it’s not a problem *for you*.

Hearing the word privilege is enough to make many of us cringe, but privilege is something we can use to lift others. Make a list of all the things in your life that you take for granted. How many of the statements below are true for you? These are your sources of privilege. Reflect on these and draw on them to remind you to use your privilege to lift others:

- I am never stopped at immigration queues when traveling for

work because of my nationality.

- I have never had to explain and defend where I am from and/or answer the follow-up question: Where are you *actually* from?
- I have never had to alter my hair to be seen as professional.
- I have never had to make considered choices about what to wear to be taken seriously.
- I have never been refused an opportunity or job because of my age.
- I have never had to hide who I love out of fear of judgement or worse, criminal persecution.
- I have never felt like altering or changing my first or last name.
- I have never had to downplay my invisible disabilities to get an interview.
- I have never had to go through additional rounds of job interviews.
- I have never been declined a job on the basis of “not fitting in.”

4. Empathetic engagement

More often than not, when we address microaggressions — what I refer to in my book as *termite biases* — we’re met with defensiveness: “Oh, come on. I didn’t mean it that way,” “You’re being oversensitive. Can’t you take a joke?,” or, “Don’t make a big deal out of this.” These responses arise from fear: fear of being judged or of being seen as a “bad person.”

Empathetic engagement is about asking the right questions in the right tone to help the person engaging in bias-driven behavior to unpack their biases while preventing their wall of defense from coming up. The next time you witness a termite bias, instead of saying “that was a microaggression” or “you’re being biased,” ask questions like: “How did you get to that decision/conclusion?” or

“I didn’t understand the joke, would you be able to please explain it to me?” or “That’s an interesting way of looking at it, why don’t you tell me more?” Asking the right questions in the right tone can be a powerful way of getting the other person to reflect on their biases without judgement.

Empathetic engagement is also about listening without getting defensive, apologizing without over-apologizing, and reflecting on what you can do better when your own termites biases are pointed out.

5. Authentic conversations

Enabling allyship at work requires honest and open conversations, and those require psychological safety: “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.” In a psychologically safe environment, employees feel safe to address the biases and discrimination they witness — without the fear of professional or social repercussions.

Individuals can nurture psychological safety by making a deliberate effort not to gaslight those from underrepresented, marginalized, or discriminated groups when they experience biased behavior. This involves not denying a colleague’s recollection of events, not dismissing and belittling their experience, and not casting doubts over their feelings, behavior, and state of mind. Instead, engage empathetically in honest and open conversations about what happened, being careful not to dismiss or get defensive. Be sure not to interrupt the person raising the concern and keep focused on what you can learn and do differently.

6. Vulnerable interactions

To help overcome the fear of being uncomfortable or saying the wrong thing, allies need to embrace their own vulnerability and work with others to identify their own biases — especially the unconscious ones.

To do this, form a *bias compass circle*: a trusted, diverse group of colleagues with whom you're comfortable being vulnerable checking your biases. Be intentional about whom you ask to come into this circle. They must be colleagues who are committed to inclusion themselves and keen to support your efforts to become aware of your biases. This group can provide you with constructive and motivational feedback on where your biases may lie in what you're communicating or a decision you're making. If you're being biased, your bias compass circle can help you understand more about a dimension of diversity you may not yet fully comprehend. This bias compass circle provides a safe zone to be vulnerable and helps you become more inclusive.

7. Courageous responsibilities

Taking courageous responsibility is about making the most of your own sphere of influence. Be observant of who tends to get opportunities to be seen and heard — then take steps to include and amplify those who don't.

For example, when developing ideas or making decisions, make it a habit to ask others around you: Whose perspective are we missing? Recommend an underrepresented colleague for the next sought-after project or to present their work to leadership. Ask yourself and your teammates: What common words and phrases

that we use favor some people over others, and what language should we use instead? Take opportunities to mentor colleagues who are different from you.

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Returning to the question: *What can I do?*

It turns out that there's plenty each one of us can do. In order to overcome the fears that perpetuate exclusion, we can start with ourselves — with deep curiosity, honest introspection, and humble acknowledgement. Then we can be deliberate about taking steps to include others through behaviors driven by empathy, authenticity, vulnerability, and courage.

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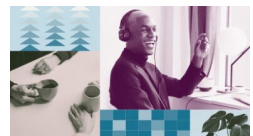
Poornima Luthra, PhD, is associate professor at the Copenhagen Business School and author of the book *Diversifying Diversity: Your Guide to Being an Active Ally of Inclusion in the Workplace*.

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