

Developing Skills to Be a Better Ally

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No matter who we are or how much we know, chances are good that each of us has some blindspots in areas in which we have privilege—men regarding sexism, whites regarding racism, Christians regarding anti-Semitism or anti-Islamism, heterosexuals regarding heterosexism, temporarily able-bodied or upper middle class folks regarding ableism or classism, and so on. We could all use additional skills in being allies to those who do not have the privileges that we do. What follows are some scenarios come from descriptions of ally behaviors in my article titled “How to Be an Ally If You Are a Person with Privilege.” Together we will develop concrete suggestions for what to do in specific situations when you have an opportunity to intervene as an ally.

Developing an Understanding

Allies work continuously to develop an understanding of the personal and institutional experiences of the person or people with whom they are aligning themselves. If the ally is a member of a privileged group, it is essential that she or he also strives for clarity about the impact of privileges on her or his life.

What this might look like:

- Consistently asking myself what it means to be white in this situation. How would I be experienced now if I were of color? Would I be listened to? Would I be getting the support I am getting now? How would my life in this organization be different if I were not white/male/heterosexual/tenured/a manager?

<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ How else might I find out what it means to be white?➤ If I asked these questions, what responses might I hear in my head?➤ If I asked another white person, what might I hear?	
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Allying Publicly and Privately

Allies choose to ally themselves publicly and privately with members of target groups and respond to their needs. This may mean breaking assumed allegiances with those who have the same privileges as you. It is important *not* to underestimate the consequences of breaking these agreements and to break them in ways that will be most useful to the person or group with whom you are aligning yourself.

What this might look like:

- Stepping into a situation in which someone who looks like you is overrunning a person of color: “John [a white man], I think Eugene [a Filipino] is making an important point. Would you hold your comment for a second so I can hear what Eugene has to say?”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What do I need to know about the context of this situation before I say anything? For example, What is my relationship to Eugene? To John? Why does that matter? ➤ What if there are positional differences among us? ➤ What could I do if I’m shy or an introvert to make my thoughts known? 	
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- Interrupting a comment or joke that is insensitive or stereotypic toward a target group, whether or not a member of that group is present. “Lu, that joke is anti-Semitic. I don’t care if a Jewish person told it to you; it doesn’t contribute to the kind of environment I want to work in.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What other ways might you use to interrupt a joke? ➤ What might you do if someone else in your group who is Jewish says, “I thought the joke was funny!” ➤ What if a comment is made in passing? “My children were acting like wild Indians this morning!” ➤ Or, your friend says, “Oh that is so gay!” 	
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Working in Our Interest

Allies believe that it is in their interest to be allies and are able to talk about why this is the case. Talking clearly about having the privilege to be able to step in is an important educational tool for others with the same privileges.

What this might look like:

- Choosing to make an issue of a situation, acknowledging that our whiteness gives us the privilege to speak with impunity. “As white women, because of our race privilege, our promotions are at far less risk than those of the women of color. Let’s speak to the women of color and follow their instruction about the harassment we have all been experiencing.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What other ways might you raise this issue if you don’t have any power in the group? ➤ And what if the person you want to make this suggestion to is your boss or department chair? ➤ What if the women of color are fearful that they will still be seen as the troublemakers and don’t want you to say anything? 	
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Committing to Personal Growth

Allies are committed to the never-ending personal growth required to be genuinely supportive. If both people are without privilege it means coming to grips with the ways that internalized oppression affects you. If I am privileged, uprooting long-held beliefs about the way that the world works is probably necessary.

What this might look like:

- Facing in an on-going way the intentionality of white people’s treatment of people of color, both historically and currently. In order to be an ally, I must hold in my consciousness what my racial group has done to keep us in positions of power and authority. This is not about blaming myself or feeling guilty. In fact, I think guilt is often self-serving; if I feel terribly guilty about something, I can get mired in those feelings and not take action to change the situation. Staying conscious of our behavior as a group moves me to take responsibility for making changes. It also gives me greater insight into the experiences of those with whom I align myself.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are ways that I can learn about what white people have done historically? ➤ How can I hold an ever-expanding body of information so that it motivates me to action rather than just weighing me down? 	
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Articulating Oppression

Allies are able to articulate how various patterns of oppression have served to keep them in privileged positions or to withhold opportunities they might otherwise have. For many of us, this means exploring and owning our dual roles as oppressor and oppressed, as uncomfortable as that might be.

What this might look like:

- Understanding that as white women we are given access to power and resources because of racial similarities to and our relationships with white men. In fact, we often receive those privileges at the expense of people of color, both male and female. While we certainly experience systemic discrimination as women, our skin color makes us less threatening to the group that holds systemic power.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What are three examples of this phenomenon?➤ What are three resources for finding out more about privileges we received at the expense of people of color?	
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Not Using Mistakes as an Excuse

Allies expect to make some mistakes but do not use that as an excuse for inaction. As a person with privilege, it is important to study and to talk about how your privilege acts as both a shield and as blinders for you. Of necessity, those without privileges in a certain area know more about the specific examples of privilege than those who are privileged.

What this might look like:

- Knowing that each of us, no matter how careful or conscious we are or how long we have been working on issues of social justice, is going to say or do something dumb or insensitive. It isn't possible not to hurt or offend someone at some point. Our best bet is to openly acknowledge our mistakes and learn from them.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What are three examples of insensitive things you have said or done in the last six months?➤ What have you learned from each of those incidents?	
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Taking Responsibility for Change

Allies know that those on each side of an alliance hold responsibility for their own change, whether or not persons on the other side choose to respond or to thank them. They are also clear that they are doing this work for them, not to “take care of” the Other.

What this might look like:

- Examining continually the institutional and personal benefits of hearing a wide diversity of perspectives, articulating those benefits, and building different points of view into the work we do.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How might you begin this examination? ➤ What resources might you use? ➤ How can you build different voices into the job you do? 	
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Initiating Change

Allies know that, in the most empowered and genuine ally relationships, the persons with privilege initiate the change toward personal, institutional, and societal justice and equality.

What this might look like:

- Assessing who will be at least risk when stepping into a situation to initiate change, conferring with others who are at greater risk about the best strategies, and moving forward. Being an ally is like performing in a ballet. Our moves should be carefully designed to have the greatest effect.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What is a situation that has occurred at your school recently? ➤ If you were able to go back and do your response over, how might you use allies differently? 	
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Promoting Inclusiveness and Justice

Allies promote a sense of inclusiveness and justice in the organization, helping to create an environment that is hospitable for all.

What this might look like:

- Paying attention to the days and times meetings are scheduled so that no one group bears the brunt of exclusion. For example, being sure that meetings are not regularly scheduled on Saturdays or other Jewish holidays or before or after the regular workday so that parents have difficulty with childcare.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are some specific examples of your school or department's insensitivity to these issues? ➤ What are two strategies for getting them to take them more seriously? 	
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Understanding that Emotional Security is Not Realistic

Allies understand that emotional safety is not a realistic expectation if we take our alliance seriously. For those with privilege, the goal is, as my friend David Tulin says, to “become comfortable with the uncomfortable and uncomfortable with the too-comfortable” and to act to alter the too comfortable.

What this might look like:

- Being alert to our desire to create a “safe” environment for an interracial conversation. My experience is that when white people ask for safety they mean they don't want to be held accountable for what they say, they want to be able to make mistakes and not have people of color take them personally, and they don't want to be yelled at by people of color. Those of us who are white are almost always safer, freer from institutional retribution, than people of color. That knowledge should help us remain in uncomfortable situations as we work for change.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What words or approaches might you use to help white people better understand the disparity of the availability of “safeness” in a racially mixed group? ➤ How might you influence white people to stay at the table through the more difficult emotional interactions? 	
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Being Clear about the Experience of Being Other

Allies know the consequences of not being clear about the experience of being Other. Some of these are:

- lack of trust
- lack of authentic relationships
- lack of foundation for coalition

For allies with privilege, the consequences of being unclear are even greater. Because our behaviors are rooted in privilege, those who are in our group give greater credence to our actions than they might if we were members of groups without privilege. Part of our task is to be models and educators for *those like us*.

What this might look like:

- Understanding that because *we* don't see a colleague of color being mistreated doesn't mean that daily race-related experiences aren't occurring. I often hear white people make comments such as, "Well, my friend is Black but he's beyond all this race stuff. He is never treated poorly." Or, "I'm sure she doesn't have any problems with white people. You'd hardly know she's Hispanic." Or, "He *is* Black, but he's really like a *white* Black person. He's treated better than I am."

<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ What words might you use to interrupt this kind of thinking?➤ How might you help someone see how discounting a train-of-thought it is?	
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Additional box for other scenarios:

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