

How to Be an Ally if You Are a Person with Privilege

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One way to work for social justice is as an ally. The gay and lesbian community realized ten or fifteen years ago that, without the help of straight allies, gays and lesbians don't have the clout needed to fight heterosexist and homophobic legislation. Gradually the call for allies has spread to other communities in which discrimination is systemic.

What it means to be an ally varies greatly from person to person. For some, it means building a relationship of love and trust with another; for others, it means intentionally putting one's self in harm's way so that another person remains safe. Each type of alliance has its own parameters, responsibilities, and degree of risk. For example, being an ally to someone who is in a less privileged position than I am requires different work than is necessary if the person has privileges like mine. There are also a variety of styles that an ally can use. Some of us are bold and audacious, others are more reserved. The common bond is that we align ourselves with a person or people in such a way that we "have their backs."

Being an ally is integral to my work for social justice: I align myself with an individual or group for a common cause or purpose. When I use the term "ally," I am not talking about love or friendship, although I grow to love many of the people with whom I align myself. I even see myself as an ally of people whom I don't know, individuals who are members of groups with which I align myself as a matter of principle.

Those of us who have been granted privileges based purely on who we are born (as white, as male, as straight, and so forth) often feel that either we want to give our privileges back, which we can't really do, or we want to use them to improve the experience of those who don't have our access to power and resources. **One of the most effective ways to use our privilege is to become the ally of those on the other side of the privilege seesaw.** This type of alliance requires a great deal of self-examination on our part as well as the willingness to go against the people who share our privilege status and with whom we are expected to group ourselves.

[Note: In the following descriptions of ally behavior, the governmental term "target groups" refers to those who are at greatest risk of being targeted for discrimination, e.g., people of color, women, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and so on.]

1. **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?
- **Closely observing the experiences of people of color in the organization:** how they are listened to, talked about, promoted, and expected to do additional jobs. For example, members of target groups counsel all the people in the organization who look like them even though that is not a part of their job description or have to

Speak for all members of "their" group or serve on a disproportionate number of committees so that there is "racial input." Few of us who are white ever have to be "professional whites," asked to speak for our race, represent our race, or offer support to people purely because their skin color is the same as ours.

2. **Allies** choose to align 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 a person of color is being overrun by someone who looks like you: "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?"
- Speaking out about a situation in which you don't appear to have any vested interest: "Jean, there are no women of color in this pool of candidates. How can we begin to get a broader perspective in our department if we continue to hire people who have similar backgrounds to ours or who look like us?"
- 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."

This is NOT about rescuing or grandstanding, making a show of our support so that we will look good or progressive or liberal.

Other white people may perceive our stepping in as betraying of our same-race relationships. Comments such as "Who made you the political correctness police?" or "Don't you have a sense of humor?" or "Can't Beth [a Native American] take care of herself?" alert you to the fact that you have broken the unspoken code about criticizing another white, broken what Aida Hurtado calls the "unspoken rules of privilege." (*The Color of Privilege*, p. 128.) While we may choose to take this risk ourselves, it is important to work strategically so as not to put the person to whom we have aligned ourselves in greater jeopardy. The example above about the unbalanced pool of candidates is worded to make it clear that it is in the department's interest to interview and hire people who bring different experiences and points of view to the table. The white person could have covered himself by implying that his concern was for the lonely woman of color already present. ("Jean, there are no women of color in this pool of candidates. I know from talking with her that Josephina is sick of being the only Latina in our department.") Instead, he made it clear that a mostly white staff was not in his personal interest or that of the institution.

3. **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:

- Regularly prefacing what I am about to say with, "As a white person, I [think/ feel/ understand/ am not able to understand...]" By identifying one of my primary lenses on the world I let others know that I am clear that being white has an impact on how I perceive everything.
- 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 go as a group to the senior vice president to talk about the harassment we have all be experiencing.

4. **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 you are privileged, uprooting long-held beliefs about the way that the world works will probably be necessary.

What this might look like:

- Recognizing the lack of equitable access to education that I had always been told was present. A brief story. As I was finishing my Master's degree at Bank Street College of Education, I began to look at doctoral programs. My scores on the GRE did not meet minimum requirements for any of the programs I was interested in, and I had no grades because Bank Street used a pass-fail system then. Further, I was clear that the doctoral work I wanted to do was to create anti-racist curriculum. So, not only did I not have grades or scores in my favor, but I was also openly preparing to challenge the current educational system. I did, however, have four aces in my pocket: first, I had gone to Bank Street and that said a lot to the schools to which I was applying. Second, I had a recommendation from one of the most esteemed child development theorists in the country. Third, I was born with class entitlement and, thus, interviewed well. Fourth and I believe most importantly, my whiteness made me more appealing and less threatening to all of the schools. I know that rules were bent on my behalf to admit me to three prestigious schools. I also know that, had I been a person of color proposing to do anti-racist work, the chances of my being accepted into two of those programs would have been slim.

Mine is a clear example that our educational system is not a meritocracy. While I had known intellectually that racism is ingrained in every American institution, this was the first time my privilege was so obvious to me. In order to be clear about the role that white privilege played, and in order to be an ally, I had to give up my belief that we live in a world in which everyone is treated fairly, much less "the same."

- Facing in an on-going way the difficult reality of 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.

5. **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:

- Seeing (as in the story above) how my whiteness opened doors to institutions that most probably would not have opened so easily otherwise.
- Understanding that as white women we are given access to power and resources because of racial similarities and our relationships with white men. In fact, we often receive those privileges at the expense of men and women of color. While we certainly experience systemic discrimination as women, our skin color makes us less threatening to the group which holds systemic power.

6. **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 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 acknowledge to others our mistakes and learn from them.
- Questioning how your perceptions might be different if you were not a member of a privileged group. For example, consider what it might be like to be the only woman of color in a group of senior decision-makers who are all white and male. Would you read situations and conversations differently than one of the white men? What things might you say or how might you make your comments? What kind of support might you want if you were Other than white and male?
- Keeping a filter in your mind through which you run your thoughts or comments. Remarks such as, "If I were you..." or "I know just how you feel..." are never very helpful in opening up communication, but, in conversations in which there is an imbalance of privilege, they take on an air of arrogance. People with privilege can never really know what it is like to be a member of the target group. While I can sympathize with those who are of color, it is not possible for me truly to understand the experience of a person with different skin color because I am never going to be treated as they are. The goal is to show someone you are listening, you care, and you understand that being white causes you to be treated differently in the world. Much more useful comments would be "Because of my white blinders I don't always notice how he or she responds to you" or "Obviously, as a white person, I have never had your experience, but I really want to know how you feel you are being treated."

7. **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 themselves, not to "take care of" the Other.

What this might look like:

- Remembering that we do this work for ourselves is really hard, but it is essential. For example, in a workshop in which I was a participant, we were talking about really painful stuff, and I heard myself say, "I have supported African American women all my life. I wish they would support me now." Luckily for me, a white woman who had done a lot of work on race was present and said, "African American women don't owe you shit. You chose freely to act as their ally." I thought to myself, "Oh, yeah, I have been knowing and saying that for years, but I forgot." I was grateful that there was another white woman to put me back on track, so that no woman of color had to make the effort to remind me.
 - 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.
 - Interrupting less-than-helpful comments and pushing for an inclusive work environment. We do it because we, as well as others, will benefit. We do not step forward because we think we should or because the people of color can't speak for themselves or because we want to look good to the people of color around us. We are allies because we know that it is in our interest.
8. **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 is at least risk to step into a situation and initiate change, conferring with others who are at greater risk about the best strategies, and moving forward. Being an ally is something like dancing in a ballet. Our moves should be carefully designed to have the greatest impact.
 - Understanding that this is not another opportunity to take charge, to ride in on our white horses to fix everything. Ally relationships are just that: relationships. Together with the people who aren't privileged, we choreograph who makes which moves and when they will be made. On many occasions, people of color have looked at me and said, "You help her understand what's going on. She's your white sister." They implied that it is not their job to educate white women and that, because of my privilege, I am less likely to suffer from speaking straightforwardly than they would.
9. **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:

- Recognizing the expectation that people of color will address racism, women will take care of sexism, and gay men and lesbians will "fix" heterosexism in the organization and, in their stead, becoming the point person for organizational change on these issues.

Clues that this assumption is operating: the Diversity Committee is composed predominantly of people of color and white women, while those with greater positional and informal decision-making power are on the "important" committees; the senior manager reroutes all

announcements of "diversity" conferences to a person of color with an attached note that says, "Thought you might be interested," implying that addressing issues of diversity is not his or her concern; men joking on the way to a sexual harassment seminar that they don't know why they have to go since they "already know how to harass;" the majority of people pushing for domestic partner benefits are gay or lesbian.

- 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 work day so that parents have difficulty with childcare.

10. **Allies** with privilege are responsible for taking the lead, along side people of color, in changing the organization, and hold greater responsibility for seeing changes through to their conclusion.

What this might look like:

- Working to build a strategic diversity plan for the organization, tying it to the organization's business plan, and assuring that the plan is implemented.
- Securing funding for scholarships so that an economically and racially diverse student population is guaranteed.
- Assessing current policies and procedures in the organization and changing them so that they don't differentially impact groups of people.

11. **Allies** are able to laugh at themselves as they make mistakes and at the real, but absurd, systems of supremacy in which we all live. As many oppressed people know, humor is a method of survival. Those with privilege must be very careful not to assume that we can join in the humor of those in a target group with whom we are in alliance.

What this might look like:

- Appreciating that there are times when laughing together is the only thing we can do short of throwing ourselves off a bridge. As Cornel West, an African American scholar, asked, "What could be more Theater of the Absurd than being Black in America?"
- Paying attention to the boundaries of who-can-say-what-to-whom: While it may be OK for a person of color to call me his "white sister," it would be presumptuous for me to call him my "Latino brother." In some communities, African Americans call white men "white boys" to lessen the feeling of white men's power. It would be very insensitive, on the other hand, for a white male ally to call African American men "Black boys." This is because of the history of that phrase and the indication that a person with privilege is ignoring the impact of race and believes that we are really all the same under the skin.

12. **Allies** understand that emotional safety is not a realistic expectation if we take our alliance seriously. For those with privilege, the goal is 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.
- Identifying committees, decision-making teams, and departments that are "too white" and working to bring a critical mass of people of color and white allies into the group. We do this not because it will look good but because the current composition is less able to make wise decisions due to its narrow vision. While discomfort is certain to follow, the benefits of inclusiveness far outweigh the discomfort.

13. **Allies** know the consequences of not being clear about the Other's experience. 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 is treated better than I am."

Comments such as these alert a person of color to the fact that we don't have those experiences, we can't imagine other people having them, and therefore put little credence in the stories that people of color share. If we are to be genuine allies to people of color, we must constantly observe the subtleties and nuances of other white people's comments and behaviors just as we observe our own. And we must take the risk of asking, "What if I am wrong about how I think people of color are being treated in my institution? What can I do to seek out the reality of their experiences? How will I feel if I discover that people I know, love, and trust are among the worst offenders? And what will I do?"

- Reminding a colleague who says, "She's always whining about race. This is not about race," that as white people we simply can't know what it is like to be of color. We will never be treated as if we were. While not everything is about race, there is always the possibility that it is an element in any situation. To deny that reality signals people of color and other white people that we can't be trusted as allies or as members of a coalition.