

Step 1: Defining allyship

What exactly is an ally?

An ally is someone who is ***“aware of their advantaged position and uses it in a specific domain to actively support and include people in less advantaged positions.”***

How does one become an ally, then? ***“Ultimately, it’s a set of habits that we practice daily. It can involve simple actions if we’re prepared to lean in in the moment.*** But surveys show that all too often, we aren’t (and so we don’t).

One of the core reasons that allyship seems like “a thing we discuss on Instagram but don’t actively work on in organizations” is simply this: many people in those organizations only vaguely know what the word means, and they have little idea how to practice the concept day-to-day, week-to-week, and quarter-to-quarter.

Over the past two years we’ve reviewed the research, and spoken to countless HR heads and other senior decision-makers, and we’ve managed to distil the practice of allyship into three core habits:

The critical habits of allyship

1. Learn about inequity:

Start by doing your own research. Read articles and books, watch videos, and listen to podcasts that help you understand the roots of inequities ingrained in our society, and how they affect those around you.

This can be uncomfortable, however. Research shows that people are more motivated to maintain the status quo when they benefit from it, than they are to challenge the status quo when they stand to gain from change.

In other words, the drive to avoid loss is stronger than the drive to increase reward.

Similar research from 2015, which included in-depth interviews with 116 CEOs at the time, found that the majority of their concerns about work involved losing a position of power, be that from appearing too vulnerable, making politically-poor decisions, being attacked by a rival, etc. Berkeley has called this **“the power paradox.”**

That partially explains why acknowledging one's advantages can feel so threatening; our instinct is to protect our status and maintain the status quo, but it's possible to work through our emotions and persist.

There's an additional point about executive mindset here that can be a challenge: executives tend to view work in a very specific way, which is often about beating rivals, shipping product, growth, bonus culture, and more. For many of them, issues around equity are "nice-to-have" work elements, not "need-to-have." A Q2 strategy in APAC is a "need-to-have," but diversity and equity understanding doesn't fit within the same bucket (for many). And there are only so many hours in a given day to focus on work. Where would you put your attention? On things that are societally relevant, or things that can advance you and your company? Ideally both, but that's not often the reality.

Still: if you want to be an ally, educate yourself on what being an ally would mean and look like.

2. Find small ways to increase equity: To increase equity, you might speak up to acknowledge power dynamics at play, amplify the voices of those whose voices have been minimized or ignored because of their identity, and work to extend equitable opportunities to those in less advantaged positions.

Here's a very common scenario. There are three people on a call: a female leader, her male co-worker, and a client. The female leader is presenting a proposal to the client, but when questions arise, the client asks the man on the call instead of the woman presenting. This is an opportunity to be an ally.

If you were the male co-worker on the call, you could acknowledge the female leader's seniority and expertise, and defer questions to her.

This is a small example, but the bedrock of allyship is built on small instances and habits.

We can identify opportunities to practice allyship by asking two simple questions:

If you don't act, would it be in service of yourself?

If you do act, would it be in service of someone else, the team, or the organization?

If you answer in the affirmative to both, it's an opportunity for allyship.

3. Support systemic change: Do you remember when parental leave used to be called maternity leave? During the era of maternity leave, female employees who were the birth mothers traditionally benefited from maternity leave. Now, some companies offer paid parental leave policies that include fathers, adoptive parents and foster parents, and parents through surrogacy.

Allies in this situation could include female co-workers who have traditionally benefited from parental leave. They can stand with others who have not been afforded the same advantages.

This is just one illustration of how co-workers can act collectively to advocate for equitable and inclusive practices.

By building these habits in individuals and across organizations, we can build cultures of allyship. It's not easy work, and the brain often fights against these cultures because the status quo is so powerful (especially for the already-advantaged), but one small action at a time can become habits, and those habits can emerge into true allyship.

What's Next